



FIRE IN THE LAKE

WRITING FROM NYU'S PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAM, 2019

Lo—a constellation of phoenix lights,
Poetic voices ablaze. Stifling waters can't
Corrode poetry—thriving hearts,
We live in its flame—
Inspired minds full of faith—
Creative flares—*Fire in the Lake!*



*Clockwise from back left: Jonathan Salgado, Tyler M. Purchas,
Andy Lopez, Omar Padilla, and Jose Escobar*



*Clockwise from back left: Levonne Williams, Myke Pagan,
Darion Alls, Aunray Stanford, Harold Williams*

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Printed in West Haven, Connecticut, by GHP Media

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OWN YOUR STORY

I AM

Levonne Williams

I am the cream of the Earth, God's greatest work, gifted with dominion over IT upon birth. I am my own best friend, worst and only true enemy, responsible for my destruction as well as for every personal victory. I am, in essence, pure energy. How can that which has always been ever be destroyed? I am deep, self-loathing depression. I am pure, unadulterated joy. I am of the ether which connects us to the Great Void. I am a hustler, risk taker, wheeler-dealer, the real McCoy. I am an artist, enthusiastic serial creator. I am King, Pharaoh, Caesar, soldier, warrior, ancient Roman gladiator. I am a rebel—just for kicks, or is it because women seem to love it? Nice guy, bad boy, whichever fits the particular moment. I am a great lover, a not-so-great communicator. So much to accomplish in so little time, I am a recovering procrastinator. I am a good listener, an even better talker. I am a square who for my entire life tried fitting into circles. I am now content being socially awkward. I am afraid to be courageous, yet too courageous to succumb to fear. I am a visionary who envisions high-definition clear. I am an offender as well as the offended, for crimes committed against me, for crimes I have committed. I am one stubborn mother ... just ask my mother, she would tell you, had she not gone on to live in the sky. I am determined to keep her memory, her legacy alive. I am a baker, impatiently waiting for the timer to ding on my slice of the American pie. I am a brick mason, building upon the cornerstone of my life. I am eternally grateful for every waking second granted to get it right. I am a teacher, born with the knowledge of existence recorded onto my very DNA. I am a student, hoping to learn to access it someday. I am a father, son, tiny but no less significant portion of the Holy Ghost. I am one who strives for control over lower desires while giving up to my Creator most. I am, on the surface, a Black man, just below, I am like any other. As God's children, how can we be but sisters and brothers? I am confident, yet hover just above the surface of a deep, murky sea of insecurities. Despite these, I push forward, planting seeds that I am resolved to see blossom into wildly fruitful trees. I am a journeyman in the darkened wilderness of adversity. Still

never once did I wince, yield, or scream. I am a thespian on this film set of existence, striving to improve my craft with time. Behind the camera, I am the director of my life. I am a free-spirited, independent thinker. Good with my hands, I am a tinkerer. I am a music connoisseur, some of my favorite songs have such a profound effect, they bring tears to my eyes. I am super-duper fly. I am afraid to be abandoned, which causes me to push people away. I am a true believer in the things I say when I get down on my knees and pray. I am a proud motherfucker, maybe at times to a fault. I am one who may be persuaded but never bought. I am a thirsty seeker of information and knowledge. I am hip that both are passive unless practiced. I am a dreamer and believe in dreams enough to see some of the wildest through to reality. I am slightly uncomfortable revealing so many personal details about me. I am one who sees positive lessons and blessings where others see only heartbreak, failure, and misfortune. These are the catalysts to my future fortune. I am a mind scientist. I am extremely spiritual. I am not at all religious. I am in love with and deeply humbled by the whole of Creation. I am of too short an attention span for meditation. I am adamantly opposed to unnecessary and/or over-prescribed medications. I am a believer in the CONCEPT of the Constitution. I am a revolutionary not particularly looking forward to a revolution.

THE SETBACK OF AMERICANITO

Andy Lopez

Being a first generation American has been a blessing. To be born in the land of dreams has opened a lot of doors for my future, like nowhere else in the world could. But we all know that nothing is free. The cost of being an American is to be disconnected from a way of life I would have known if I was born in the little Caribbean island my family comes from, Quisqueya la Bella, or the Dominican Republic.

The last time I went to this paradise, the land my parents and my four older brothers call their homeland, it felt like Christmas in the summer all around us. I could hear merengue and bachata as soon I stepped out of the plane. Then I saw this tree, a skinny giant with bright olive-green dreadlocks, that told me I was not in New York anymore. A family member came to get us, and I was full of joy to be there, in touch with nature, as he drove us to Abuelo's house on a hill. The closest thing to nature I'd experienced in the concrete jungle of New York was Central Park, where I saw many trees and horses.

As I was getting out of the Jeep and seeing the family members who were waiting to welcome us to this land, I felt like a movie star. I got to put a face to the names I'd heard before. But after a few days in this so-called paradise, I felt out of place. My family even gave me a nickname that showed how lost I was in this land, like a domestic dog in the wild: Americanito, meaning "Little American." I tried to fit in by doing everything other children did, like running barefoot on the hot ground. As soon as my feet touched the ground, it was like stepping on a blazing fire that hit my soul. I had to run to the grass to cool off my feet.

I needed some candy in my life, for I felt it would be the remedy for this headache. I went on a mission, looking around my abuelo's house for candy, and behind the house, I found a bush with shining berries hanging off of it. This was the answer to a want in my heart: I found candy on a bush. The candy was shaped like tiny pears, some were green and others were red. As I kept looking at them, my mouth began to

water, craving to taste them. I asked one of my older brothers, Orlando, if this was candy. Orlando said that they tasted delicious, as he threw some into his mouth. That was all I needed to see to become like Adam and eat from this forbidden plant. Little did I know, I'd thrown hell into my mouth. As I chewed this spicy pepper, my eyes turned bloodshot red, as tears came down like a waterfall. My feet took off on me, looking for a place to put out the flame on my swollen lips. I tried to shout at the top of my lungs for Mama, but the words didn't come out. I was lost in the torture caused by the pepper from hell. I looked like a dog with rabies; my tongue hung out of my mouth. Orlando dropped to the ground, holding his gut and laughing, with tears running down his face. I could hear him saying, "Coño, this Americanito is stupid." Swallowing and in pain, I ran to my abuela's blessing arms, where the secret to stop this burning in my mouth lay. I learned that day that these "candies" were hot peppers, called aji montesino, and I also learned a powerful lesson: Double-check everything. I guess, in the end, I won, because Abuela filled my mouth with pure sugar to stop the burning and swelling. The taste of sugar sent me to the promised land I'd been searching for and put an end to my mission. Before the end of my trip, I did find a sweet plant to chew—sugar cane. It was just a small setback on the way to a great comeback for this Americanito.

Today, my Americanness has become one with my Dominicanness. I grew to love the mixture of cultures, languages, and experiences that makes me a unique American—one who is called to pave the way for a generation of biracial, bicultural Americanitos growing up in a world that tells us that we don't belong. We will always feel in touch with both lands and cultures. We are the hybrids of the American melting pot, where the land of our birth mixes with the ethos of the birthplace of our parents.

MY DAUGHTER'S BIKE

Jose Escobar

It was a regular summer Saturday afternoon, or so I thought. Our block was full of life. We had great neighbors with a good bunch of kids that our kids got along with as soon as we moved in. We all looked out for each other. The block was always full of kids running around, playing, riding bikes, skateboards, and some of the older kids had Razor scooters. Those are two-wheel toys that look like skateboards with a long pole in the front and small handlebars that you could steer with; they were a little challenging to maneuver until you got the hang of it. There were still plenty of kids on their bikes. My daughter, Jillian, was one of those kids who was still on a bike. As a matter of fact, she still had training wheels on it.

I was in the middle of my weekly chores, one of which was mowing the lawn, when my daughter rode right up to the lawnmower and said, “Daddy, you have to take these training wheels off right now; I can’t keep up with the rest of the kids.” Jillian was one of the youngest kids on the block, but that never stopped her from joining in on the fun. She always played with the bigger kids. She didn’t let her size or age stop her. She was somewhat of a tomboy. I told her, “No, baby, I think you need a little more time with the training wheels. Give it a couple more weeks, and I will take them off and work with you.” Jillian was not having it. She would not move her bike from in front of the lawnmower until I took those stupid training wheels off. That’s what she called them.

On that beautiful summer day, I witnessed then what I realize today was one of my proudest moments as a father. I also realize that it was a day that defined my daughter as a person in my eyes. I took off those “stupid” training wheels and worked with her. Up and down the block she rode with me hanging on the back of the bike. Some kids were teasing her—of course, it was some of the older boys—and some were actually cheering her on. I remember her best friend at the time, Myriam, saying, “Don’t worry, Jillian, you got this; don’t give up.” I knew that was the last thing she was going to do—give up. She was tired of getting left behind by all the other kids. They were

mostly older, and they were already riding two-wheelers. She was so frustrated yet so determined to learn how to ride her bike; nothing was going to stop her.

I would hold on to the back of her bike so she wouldn't fall. She was barking at me to let go. She told me, "Dad, how am I supposed to learn if you don't let me go?" At that moment, she taught me a valuable lesson that we as parents must learn: We need to let go of our children and let them travel the path that is set for them. As parents, it is hard to let our kids go and grow out of the safety of our nests. We will always be there if they fall, but we must let them fall to experience life for themselves.

What we think of ourselves and how we feel as a person has a great deal to do with who we are and what we become. We all have strengths and weaknesses. If you are blessed with the proper guidance you can excel at almost anything you are destined to do. This guidance can come from your parents, teachers, counselors, and so on. But let's face it—not everyone grows up to be everything they can be. All the guidance in the world still can fall short of our expectations of our children. As parents, we all want our children to become lawyers, doctors, or astronauts. That might not be in the cards for all of them. We are not all college material. Some of us will go on to follow careers in the skilled labor fields, for example, as plumbers, carpenters, electricians, barbers, and beauticians.

It is up to each of us to exploit our strengths and fortify our weaknesses. It all depends on the drive we have within us; not even a parent can do it for you. College or trade school? White collar or blue collar? This is a hard choice today, not only as young adults entering the workforce but also as parents guiding our children. The world our children are entering is different from when our generation came of age. In *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, Matthew B. Crawford worries that the world is becoming more and more automated. Schools today are pushing for knowledge workers rather than shop workers. The traditional shop class has become antiquated. The table saw has been replaced with a desktop computer. What ordinary people once made they buy, and

what they once fixed themselves they replace or hire experts to repair. It seems that we are getting lazier and lazier as a people. Tradesmen are disappearing at a time when they are needed more than ever, and yet, the new generation doesn't seem interested in those professions. The college graduates of tomorrow are not guaranteed jobs in their fields of study. What do you do if you can't find a job? This is a harsh reality for the youth of the future. What do we advise our children and students to do? The dilemma of choosing between becoming "knowledge workers or shop workers" will face young adults entering the workforce and their parents for years to come.

The tradesman can simply point at the building that he helped build, the car that is now running, the lights that are now on. The craftsman can talk about his work and show evidence of his work. My daughter showed evidence of her hard work by learning how to ride a bike, and that skill will be with her the rest of her life. She is now 26 years old, and she has taken that drive and determination into her adulthood. She went on to become a great student and a star athlete in high school and college, and now she has taken her strength into the workforce. This proves that hard work and determination pay off. My daughter was lucky and landed a job in her prospective field; not everyone gets that lucky. In an ideal world, we all should learn a trade and earn a living while we are pursuing our goals. In the real world, that is much easier said than done. At the end of the day, I still think we need to get that degree to keep us marketable, but we also need that safety net. A trade can be your safety net. Life is hard. The better we are prepared for it, the more successful we will become. These are the decisions that we can't make for our children. They must go on to pursue their own happiness.

So, I let my daughter go. For the next two hours, she went up and down the block, falling and scraping her knees and crying. She cried with aggravation until that magical moment when she got on that bike and didn't fall again the rest of the day. She accomplished what she set out to do. I look at that bike in our garage to this day, and I am still overwhelmed with a sense of pride. I still can't get rid of it.

THE EMOTIONS OF THE CHILD OVERRULE THE THOUGHTS OF THE MAN

William Anderson

Oblivious to the world outside my unconscious state, the aroma of happy times invades my vision, heightening my sense of smell. Now unable to move, I'd tossed and turned from the wee hours of darkness until the heavenly invasion of my nostrils. As I slowly come out of the land of make-believe and fairy tales, I start to adjust my sight using a back and forth motion with my pointer finger, like a child trying to stop the floodgates of sorrow. One by one, my senses return to my once-unconscious mind, bringing me back to the reality of my world. I raise up on my elbows, perplexed about the here and now, questioning whether or not I'm still gone. I pat around the flat surface of my comfort zone, checking for the fluid that seems to awaken with me after a long night of sleep, only to find none.

"Will, Mommy said to get up because breakfast is ready."

At this moment, I'm a pitcher on the mound who just threw a two-out pitch, with two strikes in the pitch count, in the bottom of the ninth. A man on first, with a 1-0 lead. Only to watch it fly over my head, then travel over the wall in center field, giving the home team victory, leaving me feeling like my world has just crumbled. It's the voice of my younger brother, Melvin, which sounds like someone scratching a chalkboard. How annoying.

How can something so evil come from something so beautiful? I think, being that we came out of the womb of the world's most beautiful woman.

This is one of the many questions I had about the world at the tender age of seven. My childhood relationship with Melvin was a battle, which I unwillingly won. Only time would show how we'd eventually become closer, but at this point in time, it was as if we both were looking for someone to lean on. Being only 11 months and three weeks apart brought many competitive battles. I don't know if it was for the fact that

we shared the same age for a week and I was jealous, or he was just being the little annoying brother in the structure of any family with multiple children. Melvin was born December 14, 1981, and I was born December 21, 1980. So when he turned six, I still was six for a week. So you can only imagine the feeling of triumph he had, waking me up on my day of separation. He must have been really crazy. Nothing and no one was going to take away this feeling from me, not Melvin, not even my father.

I jump out of bed, ready to defend my right as big brother, and as soon as I land on my feet—"fuck"—I quickly jump back into my safe haven, after using a word I hear so many adults use, which I would use a lot once I got older, but for now, voicing it in a low tone so my mother won't hear. As I sit in my safe place, rubbing my left foot, being that my right foot landed on the wooden floor of my room, I observe my room, looking for the source of the pain I now feel in my foot. Judging from the toys I keep on the brown bookshelf made out of wood—army men, Transformers, cars, play guns, and (my favorite) ThunderCats—everything seems to be in place on my side of the room. They all sit there just as neat as I left them the night before. I cast an eye over toward the other side of the room. In the right-hand corner sits my red treasure chest, still closed. I look over to the left-hand corner of the other side of the room, noticing Melvin's blue and black treasure chest is open. I quickly look down at the floor by the bed, knowing it could mean one thing, and lo and behold, it's what I thought. A yellow Lego toy that the devil played with is sitting there.

Getting out of bed, being careful this time not to hurt myself, I stand, bend down, pick up the toy, and walk up the ladder to the devil's penthouse, placing the Lego under his blue and black blanket.

"That'll teach him a lesson."

I run out of my room, and passing through the living room, I move with agility, making sure not to bump into the coffee table, which seems to never have coffee on it. The coffee table sits in the living room in front of a tan living room set that's covered

in plastic. As I approach the doorway of the living room that leads into the hallway, I stop. The smell gets even stronger, making my stomach talk.

I step into the hallway of our apartment, which is about 60 feet long and as wide as the wingspan of my uncle, who is six-foot-five and weighs 330 pounds. (Who would have known I'd be bigger than him?) Our apartment is made up of four bedrooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen. Melvin and I share a room, my parents share one, my sister, Keisha, has her own room, and my older brothers, Aaron and Anthony, share the last one. As soon as I enter the hallway, there's a closet on the left, where we put our dirty clothes. The closet doesn't have a door to it, so if there are too many clothes in it, the clothes spill out.

As soon as I pass the closet is my parents' room. All the rooms in our apartment are on the same side of the hallway. As I get closer, my steps become shorter, as thoughts of my father, who's never around even when he is around, come to my attention.

My father always seemed to be out of the family picture, whether it was for the fact that he was in prison or jail (both places seemed to be the same to me back then, an opinion that was sure to change in the years to come, due to my own incarceration). When he was home, it still felt like he was locked up, since all he did was keep himself secured in the penitentiary of his room that he shared with my mother.

I look in the direction of the room as I slowly approach it and notice that the door is closed, which could mean one thing: My father is home.

I guess my mother made my father keep the door closed to protect us from what went on behind them. At the time, I never knew of the things that my father would do behind the door. Nevertheless, every birthday and holiday, this was the routine. He would lock his door, and when you walked by, it smelled like he was burning rubber. As the years went by, I would find out about his addiction to crack cocaine.

I continue on my path toward the kitchen, where the only person in the world who can make me happy when I am feeling sad is at.

Mom was the rock of the family, her ability to make the mountains of our problems seem so small is the main reason that me and my siblings show our love for her to this day. It was also why we didn't like when our father was around, for the reason that he mistreated her. The mental and physical abuse that my mother was given, from the hands and mouth of my father, did something to our home that the airplanes did to the Twin Towers. It not only brought us all down, having a psychological effect on us individually, the aftereffect was everlasting.

I continue to walk down the hallway in the direction of heaven, until I'm finally at the pearly gates. Entering the kitchen, slowly creeping past the refrigerator that's on my left, being careful not to be heard nor bump into the kitchen table and chairs, until at last, I'm standing behind the most beautiful statue I've ever seen. Then suddenly my mother starts to move, placing a pancake into a yellow bowl sitting on the counter, next to the stove. As she makes this motion, I follow her movement with my eyes and notice that next to a stack of pancakes is my favorite food in the world, a bowl of maple brown-sugar sausages. Following my stomach and not my brain, I reach up, trying to achieve success; however, failure at my attempt at thievery brings a stinging sensation on my hand.

"Boy, stop trying to steal a sausage and go brush your teeth."

I look at my mother and notice her smiling face looking down at me, the spatula that she used to defend her meal in her hand.

"Hurry up so I can give you some birthday kisses."

I turn around in disappointment at my attempt at breaking the laws of our home. As I get to the doorway, I stop and turn around to ask my mother a question.

"Mom, do you think this will be a good birthday?"

She faces me, knowing the meaning behind my words, and says, "Son, only time will tell, only time will tell."

As a child, many mornings, I woke up to a world of uncertainty. As an adult, I reflect on an ambiguous past and the people who played a role in shaping my morals and belief system. The constant pain triggered by the absence of my father, as I hoped for his return, felt like the many times that a helium-filled balloon would miraculously escape my adult-sized child hand, as I stood there looking up at the sky, crying and hoping for its return. It was the same with the love of my father.

As adults, we can look back at our childhoods with a clear understanding of how our lives came to be, while in childhood, we can't predict what's to come of our lives, or the impact the things we are going through will have. In George Saunders's "Sticks," the narrator writes about his childhood from the perspective of his adult self, with clear understanding of his emotions that, in the moment, as a child, he wouldn't have understood. He writes about the things his father did and how they stuck with him: "We left home, married, had children of our own, found the seeds of meanness blooming also within us." As adults, we can comprehend the source of the feelings we have deep within, but as children, we can never identify the emotions we're going through. The man has the ability to understand the child in ways that the child would never be able to understand the man. The innocence of the child has the ability to shelter him from the problems of the world. In a way, they don't affect the mental growth of that child; rather, time preserves them in a way that affects the man form of that child. Only when we address the emotions of that child will we be on our path to become who we are destined to be. Holding on to the emotions of that child can become mentally, physically, and emotionally toxic to the adult form of that child.

Many people who had an upbringing similar to mine say things like, "If I grew up differently, I would have been a different person." If we had the ability to go back in time and change the outcome of certain situations in our childhood, would we want to? In the movie *The Butterfly Effect*, the main character would go back in time and change an event that took place in his past, only to find out something worse had happened because of the change.

Why does any of this matter? Let's think of the child within. How he dreamed big as his way of dealing with the unidentified emotions within: *When I grow up, I'm going to do such and such*; or *I'm going to be nothing like so and so*, never letting the moment get the best of him. So why can't the adult form of that child do the same thing? I have this one question that I find hard to answer: Is it that the child is childish or that the man who holds on to the feelings of that child is childish?

Every memorable moment in our life has a lesson, if we just have the knowledge to understand its meaning. As a child, our capability to interpret the world comes from the minds of our loved ones that were here before our existence. As the adult form of that child, our understanding of that interpretation comes from experience. I guess it's true when they say, "You live and you learn."

"The Emotions of the Child Overrule the Thoughts of the Man" was originally written in Professor Tom Jacobs's Spring 2019 course, "Writing I."

NYC

Omar Padilla

The city is filled with lost souls
Drug addicts and assholes
Living day by day without morals or goals
That's why the good die young
Justice for Junior
Young kids strung out, overdosing on K2 and heroin
Adversity is hard to overcome
Children can't raise children
But they know how to raise a gun
It's too common
In the city where I'm from
Too many senseless murders for no reason
That's why it all seems so dumb
Parents, get a hold of your children
If you don't want your child dead at a young age in the slums
Racially profiled by
Racist ass pigs telling him to freeze but he still lets shots off with the gun
I yell out, "That's my son because he shines bright like the sun"
People think racism is over but that shit has just begun
What ever happened to unity and uplifting everyone?
Taking care of the elderly
Those good ol' days are now done!
Coming together to eat bar-be-cue
While listening to good music
And having plain ol' fun
Nowadays
all you see are drive-bys and block shootings

Some innocent young man died by the gun and
Old people are getting abused by people who are mentally gone
Too much gang violence in my city
Are they scared to fight one-on-one?
While mothers are selling their bodies for drugs
Young girls are running around with altered bodies
Equating lust for love
Covering up how they really feel inside
Trying numerous ways to come up with
Getting money from some guy with an expensive ride
The city that never sleeps
I will not deny
Where celebrities are balling out of control
From summer to winter
I love my city even with its flaws
It's where I became a winner

FROM GHETTO TO GREAT

Jonathan Salgado

I used to be ghetto, but now I'm great. I used to smoke loose cigarettes in front of my corner store, but now when I'm offered one I say, "No, thanks, I don't do that anymore." I used to jump the turnstile to avoid the metro fare; now every time I'm invited out, I take my car and say, "I'll meet you there." I used to go to parties and drink straight out the bottle; now I get my drinks poured in glass cups by bartender models. I used to sag my pants to show off my name-brand underwear; now I wear my pants at my waist, with a LV Damier. I used to be the type to say "nigga" after every sentence; now the N-word is something that I rarely ever mention. I used to roll dice with my last few dollars; now when I see the fellas rolling dice, I won't even bother. I used to buy pounds of weed to try and make a profit; now the only advice I have to those selling drugs is simple: Just stop it. I used to want a BIG gold chain, one that'd make my neck hurt; now I'm the type of man to settle for a no-name-brand sweatshirt. I used to stack my money in an old shoebox; now I tuck my Mastercard in my white tube socks. I used to take my girl out on dates for McDonald's french fries; now when I take her out to eat, I dress up nice with a suit and tie. I used to pop pills and come home when the sun came out; now I'm clean and sober—I really just took a new route. So now that I look back at my life, it's clear I made a change, but how do you expect me to do time in prison, and still stay the same? Even though it took me a while to get my head straight, I can look in the mirror and be satisfied—because I was ghetto, but now I'm great.

GET A JOB

Jonathan Salgado

“Get your lazy ass up, and go look for a job,” said my mother, in a serious tone.

“Yeah, maybe one day,” I replied sarcastically. “Hello? Yeah. Yes, I do. Okay, give me 15 minutes. Yes, I’m sure. A’ight, one.”

My phone was ringing off the hook. Why get a job when my phone made more in one day than my parents probably made together in one week? And to think she was oblivious of my drug dealings. My phone WAS my job. It was the only thing that I knew. Because it was so easy for me. So I hopped in my sports car, ignoring my mother’s request, and on I went to go see the customers who were waiting.

“Maria, come outside. I’m pulling up,” I said eagerly as I approached my first stop. My car must have been really shiny because her eyes squinted as she approached me. “DAMN, White, you stay in some new shit,” Shorty said as I served her and continued my route. Arrogance and stubbornness had gotten the best of me; the money was clouding my judgment. The scent of fresh sour diesel surrounded my vehicle. Its potency chased the new car smell away. My dark tinted windows didn’t allow for anyone to see what I was doing. Just how I liked it. I approached my next stop.

“Carl, come outside. Please don’t have me waiting,” I said in an aggressive tone. I reached in my 7 Jeans and grabbed an eighth of the loudest shit in town. My Ferragamo belt scratched my hand as I removed it from my briefs. “Damn, White, this some new shit, huh?” “It sure is,” I replied with a grin.

I hadn’t even been out the house for an hour, and I’d already made \$350. *And to think my mother wants me to get a job—she has some nerve.* My lifestyle itself was arrogant, and no one could have told me nothing I didn’t know. I had different women calling my phone, which had forced me to get a new one. “Come pick me up, Daddy,” Alisha said to me in a smooth tone. But not today. I didn’t want to put up with her sexy ass.

My mind was on this money, and nothing was going to sidetrack me. Sitting at the light like a don, I checked my phones. Texts messages, phone calls, and DMs were flooding me. But I handled it well. My exhaust pipes were purring, and my leather was shiny. I smiled as the light turned green. “I love being me,” I said to myself.

WOOP WOOP—Spoke too soon I guess. *Holy shit*. Black Impala behind me. *Should I step on the gas like I always do? Or should I just pull over?* I had weed stashed in my car and briefs, but for some reason, I pulled over. The officers exited their vehicle holding their weapons. My heart was pounding as I lowered my dark tinted windows to greet their bright red faces.

“Mr. Salgado, step out the car.”

“For what? Fuck did I do?”

He opened my door, and I got the message. They weren’t playing. As soon as I got out, he took out a pair of shiny handcuffs and slapped them on me. “WTF is this for?”

The other officer quickly began to search my car. “You’re under arrest for a sale to an undercover officer. We’ve been on you for a while.”

So I sat in the back of the cop car, looking at my 30K car get torn up, and I thought, *Damn, maybe I should have gotten my lazy ass up to get a job after all.*

AVALON AND CREATIVE EVOLUTION

Myke Pagan

I remember the first day in this nightless exile. I remember being led, like a putrid dog being put to sleep, to a small cell, where I was condemned to reside for the duration of my incarceration; where I would dwindle—dead to the world. To be sure, I've never felt nor may ever feel a stronger sense of loss and lonesomeness than I did at *that* moment. In fact, nothing throughout this experience is comparable to the first impression provoked by the conditions which my scatterbrained decisions reduced me to: a cubbyhole chamber fenced off by corroded bars, surrounded by airy white walls tinged with yellow, crowned by a ceiling constellated with stars of rust, which, collectively, gave it a soiled texture. The cell had a repressive openness because it devoured the very feeling it created, leaving me uneasily closed in. A degrading image of human failure. Essentially, a cell is but a place. A location that inherently represents a deranging distance from all places. What is more, it's a state of minimal privacy and constant visibility. Hence, a nightless exile. In my efforts to transform this place of failure to a space of vision, I've always prioritized my internal growth over my institutional comfort. This means that my cell is not comfortable in a way that makes being incarcerated pleasurable but is peaceable enough to allow me to think of my incarceration as a favorable place to recreate myself. Even though I exist in an excessively regulated environment where all my movements are awkwardly visible and tiresomely controlled, within the minimal darkness of my rooted space of invested energy—my cell—I take root as a seed in native soil.

After a slow and horrid day, I can't wait to retreat to the warm sunset terrain of my room. It's the only area in this barren building conducive to contemplation. It's nearly a seven-by-twelve-foot cell—with no cathedral ceiling, of course. It has, though, a two-by-four-foot window that provides a broad view over an enchantingly green landscape stretching miles ahead. At about 50 yards from this window is an awfully still body of water that moves me—without fail—to wonder about its depth, each

time I look upon its face. *How can I know from looking at its surface if it's deep or shallow?* I visit this sight out of my simmering desire to rise above the smothering realities of prison. It's my breathtaking attempt to connect with a future that's far lovelier than this moment or to reconnect with a deeper part of myself which I may have lost during the course of a trying day. The purity in these visits resembles the Black Forest hut of Heidegger—an ideal spot to crystallize my thinking. Here's a secret: Once I pass the threshold of my cell and my chrysalid door closes, it sneakily transfigures from something stale and uninspiring to something sacred and reviving. My corroding cell is metamorphosed to a niche of transcendence, within which space are built living, reciprocating relationships of images, books, music, and cozy emotions.

On the shelf of my hideous dresser, to the right of my bed, reverentially placed is my miniature library which consists of a collection of my beloved books, the fires of my eyes: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Susan Cain's *Quiet*, and an 1828 edition of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*, to name a few. They add to this space a culture of focus and a discipline of defiant creativity that makes it fit for study and reflection. Above this dresser, laid out resonantly, is a consecrated region, where I carefully hang expressive images to invoke the future I want to realize, to sustain my alignment with personal goals. For example, I have a painting by the Irish poet and artist George W. Russell. It depicts a prince of light upon a white winged horse, motioning forward. I claimed it from a dust-laden book years ago. It represents a triumph I've felt I was always destined for yet was somehow always falling short of. In the golden glow of this painting, I discern a fusion—a sacred marriage of my heart and mind. This image, particularly, instills in me in me a *will to strive* for what I truly want and a *point of view* that shapes my attitude toward patiently and creatively engaging my future's foreseeable chal-

lenges. As I read, reflect, and create in my garden of Avalon, the entralling melodies of Bach spill from my headphones, contributing to the particular charm of this space. I open my scrapbook of poems, *Fourth from the Sun*, to a naked page:

I've known Her—the comeliness of Her shrouding night,
the honey of Her warm-colored hue a delicate
divine consort of floral flames under Her delicious
dusk—I feel my sweet release from occlusive light.

Her heavenly and homeful cuddle opens my life
to the florid kisses of Her paradisiac dew
and the ravishing rhythm of Her song—
kindling my heart with Her candlelit bloom.

Whenever I'm basking in this ardor, my cell metamorphoses to the summery dusk of Avalon. My mind and heart expand, which is an intense sweetness opposed to what I experience plowing through this prison of frigid lights. Because I naturally feel an affinity for fire, I've always perceived a sense of rootedness among anything warm to my essence. Mysteriously, this element, my native soil, invokes my potential. It quickens it. It calls it forth as Jesus called Lazarus. Herein lies the importance of surrounding my mind and heart with things that generate and sustain feelings of warmth. The refining tenderness of the *music*, the burning optimism of the *images*, and the stirring presence of the *books* actually serve as stimuli for a transcendent evolution. Avalon becomes a spiritual homeland of my own creation. A fiery garden, where lusty seeds can bloom to sun-drenched blossoms, where hearty roots can evolve into fruitful trees. *A space I can sow, in any place I inhabit.*

The image features a dark green background. On the left side, there is a stylized, light-colored map of the world's continents. Scattered across the right and bottom-right areas are several abstract, light-colored shapes that resemble water droplets or bubbles. The text "HEAR US!" is centered in the middle of the image.

HEAR US!

GREEN EYES

Andy Lopez

Hey, green eyes,
are you looking at mine?
I can't guess why?

Green Eyes!

Are you trying to see my soul
or read my mind?

Green Eyes!

Is this a lie taking hold of my life,
or is it only living in my mind?

Green Eyes!

Desire drives me to make you mine!

Green Eyes!

A burning green flame—not for power or sexuality, but
for indwelling to a level where you know my deepest fear,
thought, and passion—without the worry of you not seeing
all of who I am.

Green Eyes!

Imagining what my life would be
if in the center of it you lay.

Green Eyes!

Yet I have to oppose these thoughts—my shameful crime—
for a man in ghastly green has no right to cross this line
of race, hate, power to make you mine.

Green Eyes!

Is it fear to live a new life I see in those green eyes,
or a green fire that yearns to ignite a choice
that will move a generation to wrestle
for the right to make you mine?

Green Eyes!

To befriend you is a want of mine
that has to stay mine alone,
so I can't stare at you too long
if I want to keep this secret of mine.

Green Eyes!

Erasing the lies, the hate forbidding us to be one—
a battle to defy culture, power, class, race,
and define a true green light, where you'll be mine.

Green Eyes!

That's why, when I'm in the throes of wandering eyes,
I come back to yours—for they awaken a will to fight
all who say you're not supposed be mine.

Green Eyes!

In a system designed to consume my dream, my life,
the opportunity to be in the elite society of
your green eyes opens a world that has been placed
within my sight yet always beyond my reach.

Green Eyes!

Now these brown eyes see
a future that holds hazel eyes as we create
a new life—can you see this in my eyes?

Green Eyes!

They may ask who or what you are. A woman?
A movement or a will to stand up to injustice?
But most of all, you are the dream of those who ache
to live another life.

Green Eyes!

So—as the green in a gemstone
promises a richly gift, the
hazel of our emerald future reflects
a sacred union—undoing this curse of Tantalus.

Green Eyes

INVISIBLE MAN

Levonne Williams

Am I invisible?

It's as if she sees everyone except me

Am I invisible?

Give up all my cake, look the other way while she eat

Slice after slice, still I patiently await my piece

But I'm the invisible man, and she can't see me

I must be invisible

Like she shuns the one who is right for her

I must be invisible

A sickness for which I am the cure

Ain't concerned with the past, I wanna be her future

But in her world, I'm nothing more than an indistinct blur

Jumpin' up-n-down, wavin' my hands in her face

My methods and efforts seem a complete waste

Friends say I'm crazy how many that lady had

But if lovin' her makes me nuts, I'm absolutely mad

Could it be the thirst for that which I cannot have?

I need her, I mean I want her so bad

Then it hit me like a brick when I began to understand

She can't see me 'cause I'm the invisible man

TRIGGA TY

Aunray Stanford

You don't know the struggle
Writing was my only out. I was broke, sleeping on my homie couch
Dot, I love you
Playing in these streets, Ty died
Before he did, he said, "You smart, this shit ain't for you"
I just play that on repeat
Watch the shit you say and who you say to
When niggers run and say it to police, don't say that I ain't tell you
I be saying to myself: "Nigger, you gon' die rich"
It make a difference when you say and believe ... I won't fail you
I been crying years since they killed Trigg
I even cried asking God not to take my nigger and still did
We only played our cards the way you dealt it
We shared the same dreams, a head-shot tore 'em down before we built it
Look, the shit I say is from the heart
And I keep it on my belt, so you should keep it to yo'self if you don't feel this
I tend to feel at peace among the killers
Had a dream that me and Ls was speed-racing foreign cars without the ceiling
Dirty in reality and fly in all my songs, lying all along
Listen nigger, these are my confessions:
Sipping lean and popping pills
Not because that shit was cool but it was easing my depression
I was dying all along
It's a blessing I'm alive still
Went a year fucking different women
To sleep inside their beds and get a hot meal
Let the devil get inside my head and he would not chill

They wonder why I'm violent and I'm hostile?
Ask about my past, if I regret it, and I laugh
Niggers must've never starved to feed their chick 'cause she was pregnant and I'm glad
I went through all that fucking heartache and that headache on my path
It's far from over but the start this story get off to is sad
. . . Judge me, I encourage you
Had a kid before I made the choice to change but all the same it was a miracle
All my niggers cold and sick, the gang in need of Theraflu
Call me anything aside from fearful
Listen, I am talented!
I ain't lie in so long, I don't
I ain't lie in so long, I won't
I don't trust shit. I ain't sleep in so long, I'm woke!
My voice got a kick, call it So-lange
Hold on . . . I weathered the winter without a coat on, I'm cold!
The devil got a hold on . . . said he got a hold on my soul!
Son of a fighter . . . call me Gohan
Every one of mine on "Go" time and they gon' go on my word
Now I got to smoke, my nerves shot
The game fair: I lost a lot and learned a lot
Look, no I wasn't there, I heard the shots
When you speak on the realest I earned a spot
Trigger dead, that shit be eating me at night
My dreams leaving with my youth, it hurts a lot, it's hard to sleep with me at night
And to watch my son grow on them visits, that cut deepest
Niggers wouldn't know this pain unless they lived through it or seen it

THE DARKNESS IN DAWN

Myke Pagan

i was wounded once; wounded by snow-snakes,
whose sharp frost-nipped fangs
froze the flowing river in my veins—
freezing my pounding heart
to a corpus of ice in its place.

my mother, with her heartless eyes—
would sit there and twiddle, turning away—
-ever here but not here.
-ever reserved as the heatless sun in December.

i was but a boy

then I drowned; drowned by tying
15 boulders around my frostbit feet—
dwindling in the light of a smothering sea,
felt the squeezing waters wring
my numbed heart as i sank.

my father, with his wanderlust eyes—
would stand there, twiddling, turning away—
-ever lost in his endless wandering.
-ever fleeing as the moon in the mornings dawn.

i was alone

INMATE

Jonathan Salgado

After "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid

Bed made by seven; clothes off the line; no covering up with a blanket, use a jacket or robe; make sure you put your pride to the side before you leave your cell; mute your egotistical ways because they won't do you any good; when walking to programs, keep in mind you only have 10 minutes; watch your back on the corridor, you never know how the person behind you feels; always stand up straight, if not, you'll be a target for harsh criticism; walk like a man and not like the scared punk you are known to be; when you return to your housing unit, be prepared for a group of highly inconsiderate people; "but I had next on the phone"; "too bad, not anymore"; if a sergeant arrives, make sure to step to your right, even if you don't want to; first thing you do when you wake up is put on your sneakers; this is the face you make so that no one fucks with you; this is the proper way to deal with the mentally disturbed men around you; and if someone calls you out, this is how you stand to fight them; never chase a woman from prison, if she leaves, let her; when she comes back, treat her like nothing ever happened; wash your hands after the yard, you might get sick; this is how you do a pull-up; this is how you do a chin-up; always eat after a workout; eat the tuna raw for more protein; this is how to be a man under any circumstances; and if a man stares you down, you stare him down right back; you are not a boy, so act like a man; don't trust anyone, especially if they tell you to; who you hang out with is who you'll be labeled as, so be careful; never let another man talk down on you; *but what if I have no choice?*; you mean to say that after all you've been through, you're really going to be the man who has no choice?

REGRETS

Harold Williams

A close friend said to me, “To have regrets is to keep looking back. It will block you from seeing what’s in front of you.” I found something wrong with his statement; I can’t help but look back on my life. I struggle daily with some type of regret—women, money, jobs, education, and so on. I’ve tried to rationalize or make excuses when comparing what I have to what I could’ve had. It doesn’t work too good for me. I try to understand, *Why do I continue to have regrets?* For instance, the great moments of my life are unchangeable. My wife. My kids. I couldn’t dream of life without them. The people I have met are special to me and also have influenced me in good ways. I live to make those near to me happy. So, why regrets?

I want better for my family, that’s natural. But I blame myself for not being able to give more. For example, my sons have told me how proud they are of me. Each of my three boys has brought tears to my eyes when telling me how he felt. They are very genuine with how they’ve come to that conclusion. In my heart, I felt joy, and then sadness from the thought of *should’ve done more*. My struggles deepen with my daughter. She is the youngest. I am a softy, a cream puff, can’t say no, and she is my princess. *More* is amplified by 10.

I am always looking for ways to improve my life. I don’t like to settle. I’m never giving up on trying to fix mistakes. The more I stick to the mission ahead, the more chance I have of finding peace. That point still doesn’t keep me from wondering, *What could life have been like?* I may sound confused, and I might be. It’s not only from the choices I made, but from the results I got or didn’t get. Life seems to have a way of snapping back. In a strange way, I miss what I never had. The dilemma is wanting to change the past to make the present better, without altering the future.

I am trying to reach a goal in life of total alignment. Totally free from guilt or wrongdoing. Achieve confidence, be truthful, and be satisfied. To see myself the way I want

others to see me, as a positive, strong, respected person. That is why I want to deal with drifting back and forward in my life. I hold on to good memories. I do the same with bad ones. Although they give a bitter taste, they also strengthen my resolve not to make the same mistake. In finding a solution to the problem of regrets, I know that my life will simply improve. My thoughts will be adjusted. My sleep will be better. My speech expression will be clear.

My journey in life has been extreme. It's been very good and very bad. I have dealt with near death and been part of beautiful procreation. I have seen the worst in me and the worst in others. I have lived in jail and lived in a beautiful home. I have taken the road to destruction and the road to redemption. I have tried to destroy my body and tried to reach perfect health. It has been turmoil. It has been beautiful. How can I have lived such a ravaged life and claim not to be confused, not to have regrets? I can't.

I constantly bounce back for my family. They give me all the hope in the world. I turn to them for strength to keep going. When I fall apart, they are there to put me together. Everything I will accomplish is to better help them. I see the weight problem as my fault. I see the backache as my fault. The high blood pressure, my fault. Everything that's wrong seems to be my fault. I'm not happy knowing this. By working hard on my faults, I have gotten them to see the results in me. But the reaction I am looking for is for them, not for me. Making them proud to see me do better is not my goal. My goal is to make them proud for themselves. To be proud to see me lead them to a better life. To be proud that I make them feel happiness. To be proud of the father and husband I am.

PROTEST AND DEFIANCE



ALLEGIANCE TO THE FLAG

Omar Padilla

When I hear people recite the Pledge of Allegiance, these are the words I hear coming out of their mouths:

I pledge
Allegiance to oppress
Indigenous people
Who were not created to be equal
To the flag
Of a racist country
The United States of White Nationalism
To kill and imprison people of color
And
To the Republic of Inequality
For which it stands
On slavery and hatred
One nation
Under a Eurocentric indoctrination
Divisible
With coercion and
Injustice for all

EFFECT TRUMP THE

Omar Padilla

To be read from right to left (after Marwa Helal)

redeemer White great The
hatred of leader A
slogan a with
great America make let's
again hate with filled country a
nation hostile a creating
devastation grown-home encouraging
supremacist White
terrorist born-American
occasion the to rising
radicalization and rhetoric the by Empowered
elimination ethnic cause will that
gave you hate The
grave the of out coming racism has
encouraging
racists White
you Thank
Trump Donald
of because all It's
voice a nationalists White the Giving
Boys Proud

realization the to come to going we are When
rotation in Americans keep will Trump
distraction a all it's but
destroy can they so
built we what
country a in
nation great this like
Philly of miracle the with Meddling
Assuming
solution the is that
evolution ending
pollution negative that pumping
panics girly his through
(His)panics stop to
emergency national a declaring by
wall border a about
illusion an creating and lies telling
mess a is administration Your
Rico Puerto to happen to thing worst The
deaths 3000 than more with
don-Con
news fake of King

REAL-IZATION

Omar Padilla

Unlocking a Rubik's Cube

Out comes the gorilla in a mist

The Bermuda Triangle

Lost in a deep abyss

Visualizing

Negative thoughts of cutting my wrist

Darkness

If you're looking into the windows of my soul

Images of pain and fire

With no place to go

I'm unprepared

For the fight of my life

Scared of the truth

I stayed away from the light

Stuck in a corner

That's pitch-black like the night

Gravitating toward negativity

In a struggle to do things right

Brooklyn

A place where my friends lost their lives

For financial liberation

Through injustices and discrimination
Plaguing this nation
The darker your roots
Leads to worldly devastation
The lighter your skin
Leads to social elevation
A Western idealization
It's unfortunate
The misinformation
 From our miseducation
With the lack of communication
 Causes mental deprivation
Which pushes us to desperation
An expectation can cause our expiration
Through the misrepresentation
 Ending procreation
And
The rise and fall of a beautiful civilization

HIP-HOP'S CAUSE AND EFFECT

Darion Alls a.k.a. TOXIC!

In '91, PUBLIC ENEMY put out the album *Apocalypse 91*, which had a track called "By the Time I Get to Arizona." At that time, even though the United States had first recognized Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday as a national holiday in 1986, Arizona's legislature refused to let the holiday move forward in their state. This piece of legendary HIP-HOP shows the appreciation and historical importance of a noble man and the Civil Rights movement. The track itself had layers of acoustics: Guitar with biofeedback bass meshed with CHUCK D'S piercing rage-against-the-machine voice that traveled with the force of a NASA space shuttle taking off, the perpetual bass riding the beats per minute FULL BLAST! PUBLIC ENEMY's sound can make one vision of Armageddon take effect. The technique of Hank Shocklee of The Bomb Squad, the producers of all PUBLIC ENEMY'S albums, was one of a kind. They used a 48-track board, took each instrument and put it on an individual track (FULL BLAST!). This produced a sound of the '90s that was distinctive and original. I remember that year going to Madison Square Garden courtesy of NAUGHTY BY NATURE, who got me backstage access to see them open up for PUBLIC ENEMY. The sounds I remember from that night are so legendary to HIP-HOP'S valleys and peaks. Despite the friction of gentrification, social inequality, and urban renewal, HIP-HOP resisted the cultural imperialism of the Regan/Bush era and stood up to an Arizona without an MLK Day in it. PUBLIC ENEMY's music is a vehicle for social reflection—not only for the struggles of the Civil Rights movement but for fear of adulthood, rituals of a teen hustler, raw anger, and politics; from the streets to da ! stadium to da ! White House. HIP-HOP HURRAY! for MLK DAY. PEACE.

THE WEIGHT OF A WORD

Levonne Williams

Say we fit the description even though we ain't done it
Our communities are over policed and underfunded
They tell us, Hey, get over it already
What is in a WORD that make IT weigh on a people so heavy

Could it be zero compensation for buildin' this superpower
F the hereafter—I wanna be alive to smell my flowers
Or those echoes of stolen souls from the Middle Passage
Black boys and girls strugglin' under someone else's baggage

Dragged IT around since Halloween 1978
Only when I owned IT was I finally able to stand up straight
So-called leaders talkin' down and at but never with us
There's a definite disconnect, 'cause they don't dig us

Turned master's scraps into a delicacy
And though they stole our cultures, religions, and legacy
Deep within our souls we retained our melodies
Hummed them into spirituals, gospel, blues, jazz, rock, hip-hop, and R&B

The laws of physics tell us that resistance builds strength
Still it wasn't right to steal life and/or limb from them
The line has been blurred between color and class
How did such a FICTION come to take on so much mass

“The Weight of a WORD” was originally written in Professor Renée Blake’s Spring 2019 course, “Black English.”

LEAPS OF FAITH

Myke Pagan

each path shall require a risk
some proof of love, a test of faith.
take naught for granted, each price must be paid
nothing for nothing—such is the earner's way.
the bridges are burned, the ships are aflame.
no means of retreat—all the more reason for gain.

here is where the strong show fire
the weak cede their last breath—who
rather than vault with vision,
embrace defeat, dying a living death
SO WE MUST LEAP
'cause in life nothing happens by chance
the lone option is *forward*—

only forward is our dreams' fierce command.

MESS HALL OR STRESS HALL?

Jose Escobar

When entering the mess hall, the last thing you expect to see is someone fall to his death in front of you. Well, that's exactly what happened to me on a cold October day in 2017. I was in Watertown Correctional Facility at the time. We walked in single file as usual. Hamburgers were on the menu, so the mess hall was packed. In Watertown, you have to leave your dorm for everything—chow, sick call, school, vocational, etc. It's not like Wallkill, where everything is in one building. In Watertown, you must bundle up in the wintertime to get around, and believe me, the winters are much colder and much longer six hours farther north. Walking to the mess hall during a snow storm can be very challenging, even though it is only about 50 yards away. That 50 yards feels like 500 yards. As you walk in the mess hall, you must hug the wall, walking the perimeter of the room to get to the front, where the chow line starts.

That day, it took me the normal three to five minutes to get to the front, grab my tray, and get some chow. I was doing the usual, chitchatting with my boys on the line. We were too engrossed in our conversation to notice that the middle-aged, overweight man in front of me was in some sort of distress. It wasn't until he fell directly in front of me that I realized that there was something wrong with him. We immediately stepped back to see what was wrong. I'm no doctor, but it didn't take one to see that he was in respiratory distress. The officers made no immediate moves to see what was wrong with him. It took at least three to five minutes for someone to come over to check him, and when they did, they instructed us to keep the line moving: "Get your food, and go and sit down." I couldn't believe what was going on right in front of my eyes. When one officer did come and check him, he actually kicked him to see if he was still conscious; the man was already turning blue. We sat there in the mess hall until someone from medical arrived to try to revive this man who had obviously had some sort of heart attack. It was at least 10 more minutes before a nurse arrived on the scene. When the nurse arrived is when they began to clear out the mess hall. I could

not believe that not one officer attempted CPR. The man was blue by the time the nurse arrived. We knew he was dead.

The mess hall is where I feel the most incarcerated. I feel the most confined here; not in my cell, not in the bathroom, and not in the dayroom do I feel this way. We eat at the same time every day, and we eat the same slop every day. Wallkill's mess hall is like most state mess halls. It has that cafeteria setup. The biggest difference with state mess halls and outside cafeterias is on the outside, you select your food and then you pay for it. For us on the inside, we have paid for our food long before we get to eat it. There are no money-back guarantees.

We line up like school kids going into class. Your housing block gets called down one at a time. As you are lined up waiting to get into the mess hall, the setting is dim and damp. You get the feeling that you're waiting to get into a low-budget off-Broadway show. You can't quite see the stage, but you know that it's there. The first thing you see when entering is a big cart of plastic food trays. Right above the trays on the wall are a few signs for us to read, which state the rules we must adhere to. "INMATES MUST RETURN ALL PLASTIC SILVERWARE WHEN LEAVING THE MESS HALL"; "ALL SPECIAL DIETS ARE MANDATORY." This means that if you are on the special diet list, you cannot miss a meal. You must come to every meal, even if you do not want to eat what they are serving. That sucks because chow is not mandatory at this facility. If you have food in your locker, you are not obligated to eat the daily slop. But if you have a special diet, if you miss a meal, you will be written up and possibly lose your special-diet privileges.

First you take your tray, follow the line, get your food, and at the end of the line, you must take a fork and a spoon. If you don't have a fork and a spoon when exiting the mess hall, you will be reprimanded and searched. After retrieving your meal, you are directed to where you will be seated. We only have 10 minutes to complete our meals. It always seems to me that if they are serving a halfway decent meal, they cut our time to eat. It's all up to the officers on duty. You must be dressed properly in state greens, shirts tucked in, and shoes laced up. If you are not dressed properly, you will be

pulled off the line. All inmates are dressed in green, all mess-hall workers are dressed in white, all officers are dressed in blue, so we all know our places in the mess hall.

Later, we found out that the man who collapsed in the Watertown mess hall did suffer from heart problems and indeed had a heart attack. My problem with the whole scene was that the corrections officers didn't do a damn thing to help this man. That scares the shit out of me. What is wrong with this system? How can you claim to be a correctional facility when the ones who are on the front lines are not allowed to help someone in distress? We as inmates cannot offer assistance either. It was a little ironic that the overweight man fell to his death in the mess hall. The next day, the superintendent went around the facility talking to the inmates who were in the mess hall at the time of the incident. She informed us that he made it to hospital and was pronounced dead at the hospital. There is no way that that man was alive when he left that mess hall, but I guess it's bad publicity if someone dies in the facility. It is hard to believe you can fall to your death and no one around you can help you. So I say again: Is it the mess hall, or is it the stress hall? There, nothing really changes but the date on the calendar. I guess that's all that matters. We sit at the same tables that go nowhere because they are bolted to the floor. I find myself staring at the same industrial-size wall fans that are never on regardless of the temperature in this god-forsaken mess hall. Are they broken? Am I broken? Is the correctional system broken? Or does the fan—and the system—lack the same power and drive that I do to start working again? Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself is what determines, or rather indicates, his fate. What I think of myself will drive me to succeed in life outside of this stale, empty mess hall and keep me at my own dining room table. Do I have the drive and determination to stay off of these stationary metal tables? Only freedom can answer that question.



**REFLECTION
AND
REDEMPTION**

WHAT MY MIND DREAMS

Myke Pagan

visions of a future worth fighting for—
true challenges with a demand for skill—

by the sweat of my brow, earn my crown
what my mind dreams, my will builds.

dreams full of purpose and virtue, worthy of a leader—
of talents forged in a furnace of struggle—

of heroic deeds fueled with hopes of redemption
what my mind dreams, my will builds.

life is a passage not a destination—
where fortune favors the bold and victory loves preparation—

to ascend the throne in Olympus from the throes of failure—
with fire-eyed focus and a will of true steel—

what my mind dreams, my will builds—

what my mind dreams, my will builds—

a famished wolf in pursuit of a chosen prey—
a mission to validate my claim—

upon this effort my future relies—
reborn to defy incredible odds—

hell-bent without fear, a fresh fate to fulfill—
what my mind dreams, my will builds.

OUR FALL FROM GRACE: THE MIND OF ADDICTION

Tyler M. Purchas

Addiction. Some say it's a disease, a habit that is one of the core problems of mass incarceration. I, however, have been part of this problem, which has led me to masses of the mass incarcerated. I was once inside the core looking out. Now in a sober state mind, I'm on the outside looking in. I'm currently viewing addiction on both sides of the fence. I've come to realize it's the same fence, just one side looks prettier than the other, and that's the side where I wish to reside.

As a child, I was considered what one might call a problem child. I didn't have a father growing up, which I believe was the basis of my mother and me not seeing eye-to-eye during my upbringing. As a child, I would act out in school and commit crimes as a way, I guess you could say, to receive the attention that was absent due to my father's absence. As a result of my long list of transgressions against society and my family members, I moved in with my grandmother.

My grandmother is the woman I respect more than anyone. My grandmother is the kind of individual you can say anything to and she wouldn't even flinch, and trust me, I've told her some pretty outlandish things, with enough substance to possibly write a novel. I moved in with her when I was young. She cared when no one else would. No matter the nature of my crime, she would never give up on me. I suppose I felt I didn't deserve the affection and love that every child in this world deserves. So I would give every reason in the world to be unloved. I did drugs and ran the streets to seal the fate of my unloved desire. Out of love, my grandmother recognized the root of my problematic issues, even though I didn't see it at the time. She knew I needed a male role model, and so she would send me to reside with my uncle. This would be the best thing for me, even though my stubbornness wouldn't see it this way.

My journey took me to Palermo, New York, in the clean, fresh country air. I lived in the big white house, on top of the hill, circumscribed by trees that left a bor-

der-lined feeling of seclusion and concord. My uncle was an exceptional carpenter and handyman. He took me under his wing and taught me everything he knew. You know, it's funny—as a child, I would always find myself complaining about doing chores around the house. This man would teach me a lesson I will never forget: You don't know what hard work is till you've carried bundles of shingles up a ladder on a 95-degree day. My uncle is what you would call your typical beer-drinking redneck, who drives around in a beat-up white pickup truck, always doing something stupid. You can't help but laugh your ass off, to the point of tears rolling down your "cheese!"-grin-struck cheeks, which seems to only further solidify his redneck stereotype. Not someone's first pick, but all in all, the father figure I have always subconsciously desired. I wouldn't trade him for anything in the world. Productive in my childlike wonder, I was free to ascend in my creativity, to build and construct works of art. Perhaps he is the reason for my strong will and drive.

Later on, I eventually moved back with my mother, where we would bump heads once again. My mother always was a hardworking woman. She birthed me when she was the mere age of 17. Such a young age to have your youth stripped away from you, wouldn't you agree? Perhaps she struggled with regrets, never having experienced the leisure of her youth. I am in no way saying she regretted me or my two half-siblings. I am merely stating that a 17-year-old girl was forced to grow up and expected to act beyond her years. Now that I'm older and have kids of my own, I've come to an understanding of why our relationship was so rocky, which I admit, I have never made easy for her, to the extent of my banishment.

Around this time is when I would meet the mother of my children. In the lunch line at Oswego High School is where I would first lay my eyes on her. She truly was a sight for sore eyes. Beautiful with long red hair, alluring as mid-autumn leaves, with her gorgeous blue eyes, which would consume a sailor's ship with every passing wake,

and curves that would freeze time, as if she was the product of an hourglass. I would come to find comfort in the mere presence of her alluring graces. I would come to find myself entangled in her tragic beauty. I always seem to remember the late nights watching movies together, my head quiescently on the warmth of her lap, after a grueling day's work, enumerating a play-by-play of our days.

The start of our relationship was good. Sure, we argued sometimes, but by night's end, we were always inclined to make up, one of us making the other laugh when the other was trying to be mad. We had our moments, like any relationship, but she was my beauty and I her beast. She certainly had a way of suppressing the beast that lay dormant inside of me. She seized the key to my caged heart; for the first time, I had something to live and die for.

Four years later, at the age of 23, after she would us give the miracle of two beautiful children, I would start to witness her gradual fall from grace. Her wings clipped from her tragic descent. As you know, misery loves company. After my early release from probation, her descent only accelerated, conceivably because I was free to join her in her crusade of self-destruction. Her nature, or perhaps our children, whatever the case may be, gave me false hope to hang on, but it would result in me being consumed in a spatial black hole of self-destruction, which was now the mother of my children. I have always been a strong-willed person. When someone tells me I can't do something, it only pushes my drive and ambition to accomplish what was once thought impossible. I would be strong-willed around old friends, defying the temptations that they presented in front of me. For some reason, whenever I'd come in contact with my fallen angel, I would find myself falling from grace, once again, back on the other side of the fence.

Eventually, me and the mother of my children went to rehab. I was kicked out prematurely, as a result of my inadequate choices. This occurred due to me sneaking over to the women's side, to be intimate with my fallen angel. It's one of the last fond memories I have before our separation.

Stripped of our clothing, we would nimbly step in the shower, hailed by the rising steam, which only heartened our lust for each other. I embraced her from behind, kissing and caressing up and down her sodden body. Her hands positioned against the wall as she anticipated my embrace in our moment of intimacy, the cascade falls beating our backs in rhythm to our every breath and thrust of our licentious release. After our moment, we would find ourselves in a sodden embrace. To ratify our moment, she passionately grabbed my face to kiss me. The taste of her lips resonates in my mind; she playfully bites my lip and says she loves me and says her goodbyes.

Perhaps this was the turning point in my story, the universe anticipating our future farewell. When I returned home, it was weird, I didn't have a solitary thought of clouding my cognizance with drugs. I was back in the presence of grace; I felt unstoppable. The mother of my children would return home a month later. Upon her return, her toxic nature started to consume me once again. I was ready to change; she wasn't, clearly. That whole month of our separation, I came to the realization that she was, besides myself, the heart of my addiction. She returned one day from her friends and slipped into the bathroom, where I sadly would catch her with drugs. After a long quarrel in her saddened state of mind, I gave her the ultimatum: me or the drugs. I made the toughest decision I have ever had to make. After seven years, I left the mother of my children. I think it's clear what she decided to choose.

After our separation, I had to pay for my past sins; I still needed to serve my sentencing to three and half years in prison. I was clean for the whole year during my time of freedom. Even during my incarceration, I remained sober. I removed the toxic people in my life who would resurrect that feeling of hopelessness. Sometimes to ascend back to grace, you have to let the things and the people you love go. If they're not going down the same road as you, they potentially will take you down a detour, to a void of darkness that will alienate you from your journey of potential growth.

Reader, you might ask why I am telling you this. It's to give you, as well as other addicts, a clear understanding: Addiction is a state of mind. From experience, I certainly don't believe it's a disease. I believe we do drugs because we're unhappy with

what life's thrown at us. Instead of having faith and a strong will to push ourselves that last couple feet to the peak of the mountain which we seek to ascend, we let go to tragically fall from grace and find ourselves once again on the other side of the fence, looking out, consumed by our self-pity and self-judgment.

It is said that God is the only one who can judge us. It's funny—we tend to take God's job and take it upon ourselves to judge ourselves. Have we created a hell of our own making? I lived in hell on Earth for three years of my own design. *What is the cure to one's addiction?*, you might ask. My state of mind is what ascended me to grace. The cure to addiction, my dear friend, starts with self-realization and self-enlightenment. We must discover the root of our problems and make amends and love ourselves before we can truly return to grace, to that which is our reality. It's always easier to destroy than it is to build. It will take time to earn our majestic wings, which will surely return us to the other side of the fence, to the place we wish to reside.

FIGHT OF MY LIFE

Harold Williams

To maintain a simple diet has been such a difficult part of my adult life. Life is very strange. I started the diet to improve the way I lived. Then I felt like shit when realizing all the foods I loved had to be changed or let go. My cultural background is mixed—Southern, Jamaican, and Spanish. In my house, we enjoyed every bit of the diversity of these cultures' foods. From rice and peas to beans and rice, from brown-stew chicken to fried chicken, it's always a mix of three worlds. The foods I had grown accustomed to are heavy in syrup, oil, and starch.

I am a junk-food king. I can live on ice cream and apple pie, Danishes, and sweet rolls with butter. These are just a few of the snacks I love so much. One of my passions in life is baking. I also love to cook, but baking takes me to another world in another dimension. It's peace and tranquility. It's pure joy. My sweet potato pies, carrot cake with cream-cheese icing, cupcakes, blueberry muffins, and banana loafs are simply delicious. My taste-buds are limitless. Can't say enough about Mom's cooking or my wife's cooking—I'll probably go on forever. So there it is, my saga and dilemma.

To start my diet with no clue about what or how to achieve my goal was a problem. First, let me tell you how I came to the conclusion that I was in an all-time fight. It started out with sly words from family and friends—*I see you enjoy good home cooking*—then jokingly calling me Fat Boy. My weight gain became obvious. Although it crept up slowly over years, at the end, it was like someone had blown up a balloon; I had become a fat dough-boy. Then I had to endure all sympathy and words of wisdom: *It's not that bad, you carry it well; those fit nice, but try on a larger size also.* Then it was, *That jacket and pants look good, but your stomach seems to be the center of attraction.* My picnics, beach days, and pool outings became few and then fewer. The more I looked at myself, the more depressed I became. Anxiety became a factor. I was losing my mind.

Enough. I was sick and tired of being tired. There was no choice in the matter. I hated what I had become and didn't recognize the person I saw in the mirror. My stomach was so large, it was difficult to think that I could ever lose it. It looked like part of my structure. What I had I done? I started my quest to lose weight with the change of habits. That was one of the most difficult things I had to endure. Then I had to set a reasonable goal to reach. I told my family, *By this time next year, I should be at the weight I desire to be.*

It's not like bad habits of cigarettes or alcohol that you completely stop; I have to eat. They say with moderation, but I am a man of extremes. There's no little of anything. I want plenty of it. I'm always going too far with whatever I choose. I like pain. I'm a different animal. There was no little diet; it was full-blown hunger. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone. The notion of not being hungry when dieting is ludicrous. In time, I regained some composure. The hunger became less, and I was able to start picking what foods to eat. My wife use to complain of my hungry anger—*Get something to eat, please.* I didn't count calories or read all the labels for sugar or fat contents. I knew what the hell was killing me, and there was no sugarcoating it. My choice was made and my work had begun.

The cravings were so strong. My folks didn't help one bit with their munching, crunching, and sucking up everything fatty that tastes good. I had to sit and watch them eat all the good things I loved. I might have drooled at times, but my determination was strong; there was no sway. I continued to fight all of the obstacles I came across. Turning around to face a freezer with all my favorite ice cream at Walmart for half price. Smelling the most tantalizing aroma of foods seeping through a restaurant's vent. It took so much dedication to reach my goal. With the routine I set, including daily push-ups and sit-ups, I lost 70 pounds in a year. Two years later, the fight still goes on. It's become part of my life.

STAYING AWAKE

Omar Padilla

America was founded on violence. Its soil is soaked with the blood of its original inhabitants, those who fought to steal their land, and those enslaved who rebuilt it. The sins of the Founding Fathers have continually visited their sons and daughters down through the ages. It is becoming more evident every day. Circumstances will improve only when America admits the crimes of the past and begins to implement sincere policies to honor the lives of all its citizens. Until then, America will continue to reap what it sows.

Certain problems—social and economic forces that this history set into motion—are what cause people to commit crime. Though some would say poor choices is what led us to a “life of crime,” individual actions aren’t the full story. The atrocities committed on American soil in its longest war, the War on Drugs, have claimed the lives of many young Black and Latino men. I almost became a casualty of this political war. Battling over turf and money, we end up dead or in prison; battling for a name, we end up nameless and ignorant.

The urban culture gave me a reason to say fuck life if I wanted to survive. I was a target for physical abuse. I looked completely different—pale skinned and skinny, with a long blond ponytail. I was treated as an other. My otherness was viewed as a weakness in my hood. Peer pressure is what caused my childhood friends to show me how to be ruthless toward my adversaries if I wanted to endure on the mean streets of Brooklyn. I was tired of being bullied. “Too much love would get you killed,” said a friend in my hood by the name of Image, pronounced “I’m-a-gee.” “You must get money; you must be flee; you must be a boss; you must fuck all the women. Life does not get better than this. But ultimately, you must earn a name and respect by inflicting pain on anyone who thinks life is a game, especially those who think they’re your equal.”

Death was meant to consume my body after a few bloody altercations I had, but I escaped the grip of the grim reaper.

I started to sell drugs at the age of 13—crack, cocaine, weed, and heroin—to earn money. I'd become self-centered and selfish in many ways, losing myself in the process. The streets named me O-Dog Da Menace. I preferred O.D. for short, for my mother named me Omar DeJesus. Vigorously pursuing the American dream of material acquisition and status, yet finding the conventional means of attaining it blocked off, I did not yield to defeatism but resorted to illegal methods.

Menace II Society and *Boyz n the Hood* became my favorite movies because of the depictions of the urban culture and the violence that occurred to anyone who violated the “G-code,” rules and regulations people in the streets follow, like “no snitching.” I emulated that lifestyle. I wanted to be accepted and loved by my peers. I just didn't know how to allow anyone into my heart. For I thought pain and destruction were what made men in a society that was fit only for the strongest. The truth is, I did not love myself. Becoming a product of my environment had me chasing a dream that cannot manifest. That dream was to sell drugs and promote violence without ending up dead.

Gangs in my neighborhood started because of the oppressive forces that kept people in poverty, but after a while, they started to oppress their own people. “Absolute power corrupts.” I was a gang member who wasted countless hours doing senseless things. Latinos were always getting physically and verbally abused by someone Black, especially Mexicans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans. I chose to be different. So, I bought a shotgun. The minute I held it in my hands, I felt empowered. For the first time, I thought I could guarantee my own safety. I had no intention of firing it—I knew that its mere presence, reinforced by my hard exterior, created a threat that no one would test. I wouldn't be a victim.

My mean street demeanor and nonchalant attitude is what caused people to fear my every move and also hate me at the same time. *If a person fears you, he will kill you, and if a person respects you, then you have a shot at living your life.*

Shoot-outs with local gangsters gave me a reason to act out. It seemed like the younger generation in my neighborhood only respected violence, and my family was the only Latinos in a predominately Black space, which made us an even bigger target. It was a good thing that my family members were into the street life, so that kept people away from me. Except for those who did not know better. They quickly found out how easy it was to get into trouble messing with the wrong person.

In the process of establishing a reputation for myself, I created enemies, assuming that I would become the “man of the streets.” At the end of the day, it was all for nothing. If I was to die today, no one would know who I am. I would die nameless, leaving a terrible legacy for my children to remember me by. “Living a lie,” dressing in jewelry and nice clothes and buying fancy things, covered up how I really felt inside. My life under this mentality caused my family a lot of suffering, for my parents did not raise me to be a thug. What I failed to realize is my community should have never defined who I was to become in my life, causing division instead of unity among a community of marginalized people. We are all treated equally unjustly, and it’s due to the power structure in an oppressive country that marginalizes and dehumanizes people by forcing us into doing terrible things to each other in order to survive the storm—though some use that as an excuse to inflict violence on others.

I have experienced a lot of painful things, and I would never regret my past. If I had another chance to do it over again, I would not change it for anything. I love the fact that I grew up in the hood. I’ve learned so much from being in the hood—good things and bad alike. Within every disappointment lies a gem of wisdom.

The injustice system sentenced me to be 12 years a slave on a plantation called prison. And though old associates don’t anticipate my return back into society because they’re under the impression that I have not changed, I can honestly say that I am not the

same person—mentally, physically, and spiritually. I took a risk in shedding the hard exterior urban culture encourages for something more human. I had to change my mental diet. I've learned how to identify my antisocial thoughts and behaviors. I replaced them with healthier ones through higher learning while in prison. Thoughts become actions become habits become ... destiny. I'm rewiring my brain not to think or behave negatively so I can create a positive environment for my daughter, Paris Destiny, and my lovely family.

A vision without execution is a hallucination is what I would say to those individuals who are curious about my journey. Who wants to be known for the worst thing they have done in their life? Not me. I may be eternally undeserving of forgiveness. It's something I continue to work toward without expectations. It's how I live with myself. What united me to people from my community was pain and suffering, yet we always find ways to cause our separation—neighborhoods, languages, skin complexion, education, gangs, religion, class, sex, ethnicity, and culture. Our bodies and minds bear amputations and scars, but none of us are alone. We are all in this together. This country was built by us but not for us. Time can never erase the darkest hours in our history. Learning has been my exodus from the mental slavery that holds people of color captive in a world that is detrimental to us.

However, some may say educational systems are designed to control the thinking of people through the manipulation of image and information. We are all a product of the education we have received in school, at home, and in society. But sometimes, traditional education is not enough, particularly if the key elements essential to this education process are omitted.

Education has helped me understand my life. It allowed me to see how I got to the point of incarceration. My view of the world was impaired and blocked. If limits are placed on your thinking, then limits are automatically placed on your ability to view reality and act intelligently. And it is lack of education that limits people of color from succeeding in life. I had to go to prison to learn this. My new view will be endless no matter which direction I turn my head.

The key for me was to think politically, turning the discipline and solidarity of gang politics to better uses. Thinking politically also meant not falling in love with my own story and letting myself imagine that because I had made it to college, when millions of others had not, I was special. I know exactly why I'm here. I was able to take advantage of those opportunities in prison. When someone reads a story about someone who made good—the redemption narrative—it lets society off the hook, because people can say, *Oh, look, it works! The system isn't racist.* It's about us (people) having solidarity—LGBTQ, Latinos, African Americans, Indians, Asians, BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, ex-prisoners/prisoners, ex-gang members/gang members, and anyone who has experienced oppression—to make changes in a broken system that failed us. Too. Many. Times.

No matter the outcome of your reality, never stop dreaming. Dreaming creates a different universe where you can be the superhero. Not like Christopher Columbus who was portrayed as a hero who first discovered America, when people were already living here. Not like Hippocrates, who people assume was the father of medicine, when there were civilizations in Africa who dealt with medicine years before him.

The only person who can stop you from dreaming is you. Like they say, "Teamwork makes the dream work." The lack of specific information denies you the opportunity to make intelligent decisions about your life. This in turn affects your quality of life in this world. Information holds the key to freedom from mental and physical bondage. The quality of your life is determined by how you use this information, so use it wisely. Stay awake, people.

THE DEATH OF A LIAR

Andy Lopez

Have you ever lived with a liar and behaved as if he didn't exist? He wears your clothes, sleeps in your bed, and controls your life. It was like he was the one who made all the choices when my life took a turn for the worst. He has been with me as far back as I can remember. He would take over my personality, mostly when I was mad or frightened at first, as if I was Dr. Bruce Banner and the liar was the Hulk. The liar operated my life so thoroughly that he was given a name of his own: Bullet. I dislike that name so much, but I could not change it. Everybody started to call me Bullet, or everybody who only knew the liar. I felt that I could not beat him, so I let him be part of me. I even tried to give the name Bullet a positive breakdown, "Born to UNITY Loyalty and Love in Every Thug's life." That didn't work. As a result, I decided to face life high, as the liar controlled our world.

A tragedy happened in 2007, at the beginning of spring. That night, David, a childhood friend, attempted to take a sawed-off shotgun out of my hands, and as he did this, it discharged. The accident took his life. The liar was wounded, and now there were only two options: I could either take control of our life by burying the liar by means of death, or I could let the liar end this journey for both of us.

The cries of my mother were answered by Jesus. In this painful and chaotic time, I felt a desire in my heart to know Jesus more and even build a relationship with him. I have always believed in a higher power. However, I didn't know I could just talk to him as a friend or someone who cares about my struggles, or that he sometimes even takes the time to answer me through other people or his own written words that I find in the Bible. The greatest thing is when he speaks to me one-on-one, by my dreams or an inner voice I hear in the deepest part of my spirit. I started to discover that Jesus Christ could carry me every time the liar took over and get us out of the danger the liar got us in. A lot of people who knew Bullet said that I was losing my mind because of the tragedy of David's death. However, the true me was about to be born again.

To fulfill the desire to have a relationship with Jesus, I needed a study Bible, so I asked my younger brother, Dennis, if he could get me one. This Bible ultimately became one of my most valuable possessions. At first, it didn't mean much to me, especially since Dennis didn't get me the study Bible I asked him for but brought me a plain black Bible. This simple-looking book has become my way of life—the place I look for answers and the truth that I stand on. It's also my place of comfort, joy, hope, strength, and confidence. Scripture like John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” has meaning for me now. Yes, the Bible has helped me see the liar and even stand up to him. It has helped me to walk away from situations that, in the past, I would have let the liar take over. The Bible has been my traveling buddy for the last 11 years, and it's the place I keep the addresses of my loved ones. I have also added the contact information of the people I've met in prison who have helped me see my true self and grow into the man I truly am.

The day the liar was caged away was the day I found myself at the crossroads of life. The day of Bullet's death was my sentencing day, when I will plead guilty for possession of a weapon in the second degree. This charge came with 15 years in prison and five years post-release supervision. Yes, my buddy was with me; I was born again by this time, so my relationship with Jesus had grown, too. He talked to me through the Bible. The day I walked into the courtroom, they put me inside of a dirty bullpen with two gray metal benches, a gray floor, a steel toilet in corner that was supposed to be silver but was brown inside, with the smell of urine all around it.

In this place was where the liar tried to take his last stand, and he gave it all he had. We both knew the end of this chapter in our journey was here. If the liar got his way, I would have hanged myself: The liar told me that the world would be better off without me, that the next years of my life would all be in a cell like this one. But thanks to that Bible, Jesus was able to talk to me. I opened my bible to Psalm 27: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” My future was uncertain, and these words gave me a promise that whatever came my way, I would have no reason to fear.

All that I was and shall become is in God's hands; God will light my passageway; and my salvation lay on Jesus Christ dying on the cross, then rising on the third day for me. This truth gave me courage to stand up to the liar and his words of deception. He started to scream at me, saying, "You think you're holy and righteous now! You will never be able to fix what we've done or undo it!" Then I heard that inner voice, and Jesus spoke these words, based on 2 Corinthians 5:17, "So if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation, and everything old has passed away. See, everything has become new!"

In "Nature," Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair." Unlike Emerson, I wasn't in a physical wood, but I relate to the experience of coming back to reasoning and my faith, which carried me through this tragedy. There was nothing that I did in my past that God could not repair. I have a future to live for that will not be defined by shame, by past mistakes, or by ego. I have found my true self in God, just as Emerson found himself in Nature.

The court officer came to get me, and he took me down a long dingy hallway that ended in a door to the courtroom. He handcuffed me behind my back. The walk took forever, and the only sound that I could hear was our breathing with every step we took. Before the officer knocked on the door to allow us into the courtroom, he removed my handcuffs. The courtroom was full on both sides; it was like the audience knew it was time for the burial of Bullet. To make things better, I had on a black shirt with an Ed Hardy logo, gray pants, and black Uptowns. As I walked in, all eyes were on me, and there was so much emotional tension in the air that if you lit up a match, you would have bombed the roof off the courthouse. You could hear people moving in their seats, and every heart played to the same beat of a sad song. I was placed by my lawyer, who looked like a character from a late-1980s mob movie, and just 10 feet away was the District Attorney, who looked like Disco Dave, just four feet taller. I was asked to state my name for the record. My lawyer and the DA did the same. The

judge was a thin, narrow-built African-American male, about five-seven, with a bald head and glasses. He was soft-spoken and asked the family of my friend David if they wished to make a statement.

One of David's cousins stood up and read a statement from David's mother. As she read, in my mind, I was looking at Bullet laying in a coffin. She started off saying everything David was to her. That's when my tears started running down my face—as well as everyone else's in the room. She kept on going, stating that she did not know how she could go on with life. That she would never have her son back. That my family would have me back in 15 years. Then, her next words closed the coffin on the liar and gave me life. Those words are imprinted in my mind and my heart and my soul until this day. She said that she was a Christian, and Jesus Christ taught that you need to forgive. Time stopped for me as I heard those words. They felt like dirt on the coffin of the liar. In my heart, I forgave Bullet and myself at the same time. David's mother forgave me because of Christ. My tears turned into a waterfall because the question in my heart was answered. Then the judge asked me if I wanted to say something to the court, and I did. It was a battle for me to speak the words that I wanted to come out of my mouth. I spoke of how sorry I was, that there was not a day in my life that I did not wish I could take David's place or, better, put Bullet in his place.

In a way, I did Bullet, the liar, to death that day. I have grown to be myself and not be what the world tells me to be. You may want to ask, "Is Bullet really dead?" because whenever I am mad or pushed into a corner, he attempts to rise again. Sometimes I have to put him back into the grave. With all this being said, he's becoming a memory. Rest in peace, Bullet.

"The Death of a Liar" was originally written in Professor Tom Jacobs's Fall 2018 course, "Writing I."



LOVE

LOVE IS

Levonne Williams

Love is a very first kiss
Blowin' candles out after a birthday wish
It's a fresh blank canvas to an artist
It's the innocence of little kids
Love is the reason why we live

Love is beautiful bright blue skies
Can't touch it but you feel it inside
Sometimes can be an emotional roller-coaster ride
Love is impossible to hide
It'll make you laugh, make you cry
Love is why humankind thrives

Love is holdin' hands while strollin' in the park
It's a collaboration between two beatin' hearts
When you can't fathom the idea of bein' apart
Love is gazin' upon the stars
It's a symphony by Bach or Mozart
Love is our most precious gift from God

SEDUCTIVE SKIES

Myke Pagan

softly in the evening's dusk she sings
a sweet solace to my soul as i wallow wingless
in this abyss of languorous light at
the fall of her blue veil—laying
bare the nakedness
of her gloaming grace amid the airy scent
of her beloved breath—the wind
beneath my budding wings through

the tender kisses of her lights' caress—
the amorous calls to my emerging
glow she moves in me a sublime
ache to mount her melodic dusk.

how can i not bewail my wingless ruin?
how can i not dream of flying high?

an undying firefly flying high

in a timeless embrace of her seducing sky
with my softly burning light tearfully
beneath the fading flare
or the sun's descent i wait

FAILANI BATISTA

Aunray Stanford

She asks that I bring food to her in a crazy-folks home. Her hair is disheveled, a ball of frizz. Her eyes are puffy like she'd been crying most of her life. But even this way she's beautiful, and I tell her so. One guy near us mumbles loudly to himself, No, I will absolutely not! Another man, who bears striking resemblance to Chris Rock—except he has dreadlocks—speaks quietly to a wall. Naked beneath his untied hospital gown, he shows his ass to the world.

You okay? I ask.

I mean, I guess ... just want to go home already.

She doesn't belong here with these crackpots. But she doesn't mention why she's here right away, and I don't ask. She rests her head against my shoulder and weeps as Chris Rock yells, Barack Obama is Judith returned to liberate Bethulia!

We aren't just friends, but not exactly a couple either. She has a boyfriend. A dependable schoolboy type with a degree in some shit found impressive by parents.

If you ready to go, why we—you can't just leave with me?

She shakes her head.

It's easy to love her. The type of girl who flosses, and hikes, and rides bikes, and smokes pot out of bongos, and plays guitar, and paints strange things, giving them poetic names like *The Voice without Sound*. The type of girl who your mom doesn't forget and asks you about a decade later when you complain about your baby's mom.

Thanks for coming ... so embarrassing, she says.

Aw hush, I'm just glad you're okay.

She thumbs away my tear.

When we met, she'd been walking Rocky on Fulton Avenue. One of those teacup Yorkies, with a lifespan so short that he died well before she could fully train him to stop peeing beneath *The Starry Night*—the replica Van Gogh in her hallway. It wasn't even her puppy. It was Dalia's, her friend prone to disappearing. Said she was going to the store, and two months later, poor Rocky hadn't been retrieved yet.

Excuse me, I said suavely. She ignored me and continued walking. Her belly shirt revealed a sleek Janet Jackson six-pack, her hips swung haymakers, and her ass ... She was like a centaur. Half woman, half amazing.

Miss, you dropped something.

She spun back, eyes searching the floor.

You're an asshole, she replied, realizing I had lied.

Ouch. Actually, I told myself I'd be an asshole to let you walk past without getting your number.

And how many numbers has that line gotten you?

I really wanted to tell you that you're beautiful, but I'm sure you hear that shit enough. Rocky sniffed around my foot. My name is Aunray, I said, offering my hand for her to shake.

She yanked Rocky's leash, gave me a quick smirk that said Chase me, and walked off.

Wait up, I followed her. You're aware that you will never again meet anyone like me in your life, right?

She scoffed at my arrogance, I think I'll die content.

I'm persistent.

Persistence is harassment. I don't like gangsters anyway.

So you consider every nigger in a pair of Jordans a gangster?

Only the ones who call themselves "niggers" and stand on the block all day harassing women. Oh, she paused like something dawned on her. There is one thing you might help me with.

I don't know. You kind of hurt my feelings.

Shut up, gangsters don't have feelings, she said playfully. Just wondered if you knew where I could find some weed around here.

I stroked my chin hairs. Depends, you a cop?

You're an idiot. Yeah, I'm a cop, she answered sarcastically. You've been in my face long enough for me to see that you're high.

I laughed. I sell.

Figures. Can I have a dime? She removed a crumpled 10 from her bra.

I eyed her suspiciously for a moment before reaching into my pocket and coming up with a small bag of Fulton Avenue's finest. This one's on me, a sample. Let me know how you like it.

She held her money out in protest for a second. Narrowed her eyes at me and shoved the weed and money back into her bra.

You live around the neighborhood? If it's good, I'll be buying more.

Yeah. You just move here?

No. Taking a semester off from school, so I'm just getting back.

Oh, okay. I've never seen her before today. So, you plan to come outside and find me every day, or you going to call me like the rest of my clients?

She shook her head in defeat, and smiled, revealing the most adorable dimples you'd ever seen. Very persistent, she said. Give me your number, *I'll* call you.

I called at her back, Hold up, what's your name?

She looked back over her shoulder, Failani.

I'm schizophrenic, she says. I haven't been taking my medication.

I thought, That explains a lot. Why each time we have sex she says, "This is the last time," and "Fuck me like you hate me." Why she always ditches me afterward and won't answer her phone for a while. Why she sometimes dresses like a boy and does delinquent things like knock traffic cones over; and other times dresses in heels and goes to French restaurants alone. Explains one hell of a lot. She'll be deep and philosophical. Then, she'll be goofy and unpredictable, maybe bite my face. She lies a lot, too. I know for sure that she has a boyfriend. Though we never speak of him. I would like to be her boyfriend. I understand that he's the more responsible choice. I think I know for sure that she's a student at Rochester University. I wonder if she had ever really been pregnant by me like she said, if she had ever really gotten that abortion. I wonder other things.

I'm sure there's something wrong with me too, I just haven't been diagnosed yet, I say.

She forces a smile.

I don't believe it, don't want to. But one has to wonder about her.

She loves to play a drinking game. And the game goes like this: Tell Aunray, “You can’t drink as much as I can,” and get Aunray loaded while Failani sips responsibly. Failani wins.

That’s not even a shot, stop being a pussy, she says, pouring more liquor into my cup. Brugal. She has a cat by now and throws him onto my lap. I forget his name, I don’t like cats much.

You fucking play too much! I knock the cat to the floor by reflex, like flicking a bug.

She laughs, I thought you loved my pussy.

I swig from the shot glass. That’s it, no more.

If you’re not going to drink with me, you might as well head home. That’s another game of hers. She knows that I never want to leave her.

Fuck it, pour me up.

We speak about politics. She hates Donald Trump. We speak about astrology and zodiacs and smoke exotic strands of weed with names like Blue Cheese and Pineapple Express. Toward the end of the bottle, things always get sentimental. The room takes on an almost dungeon-like atmosphere, and I strain to make out her expression.

I stopped by my mom’s earlier, she says.

You don’t sound happy about it, everything okay?

I was happy ... to see my little brothers.

You not getting along with your mom right now or something?

It’s not that we don’t get along. I love my mom, she sighs. It’s really complicated.

I wait for her to continue.

She doesn't.

Daddy's girl not feeling her mom's husband?

Her face flushes pink and she looks fixedly into my eyes. It's like you're inside my head sometimes.

She sighs again. He used to be my dad's best friend. The cat caresses her leg and purrs his empathy. She left my father for him.

Damn. So you resent her for it?

No. She bounces her leg fervently and a single tear slides from her eye. He's done shit ... my mother doesn't know, her voice is shaking. They're married, and have kids together, and my mother doesn't know.

I sit beside her in the hospital, in a wing reserved for the mentally ill, and wonder how much of it was real. If any of it was true.

It's too late, really, to unlove her. And so, crazy or not, I'm stuck with her. I meant what I had told her, too, about there being something wrong with me. One time I sprawled out in the street pretending to be hit by a car and spent two days in the hospital for it. Another time I cut myself. Just enough to bleed and get attention. In this world of ours, who doesn't possess a bit of crazy all their own?

The hospital releases her after a day. We go on like nothing ever happened. Me being in love with her. Her loving me back, but "only as a friend." This is her new thing.

My homeboys see us out going to the deli and they pull me aside. They say, Nice bro. She's bad. You did alright for an ugly nigga. I glow like the fluorescent lettering above the store and slap fives. Never once telling her secret—our secret.

Back at her house she holds up a bottle of gold Don Q. Bets that she can drink me under the table. She doesn't.

My name has the word "fail" in it, and I'll still succeed at dying a better human than Trump, she says.

I tell her that Pisces and Leos belong together. I had seen it in a horoscope. We're drunk now, kissing sloppily.

This is the last time, she says ... Fuck me like you hate me.

DANCING IN THE NIGHT

Myke Pagan

how will it feel
to be free
from light
from the chrysalid
flames emerge
to the sky
take flight
to escape the haze
the stars to
pursue
to rise
from the ash
my past to
outdo—
with the music
in the heavens
dancing in the night?

WANDERER

Jody O'Donoghue

Wander,
When I wander, I rest on love.
Wondering why I think of love or compassion as much as no other man.
Am I not inspired to do so?
For love runs my life.
It is the breath that keeps my lungs full, my heart pumping, and senses aflame.
This is not vanilla,
it is a solid reminder that before my love was intact,
the essences of it were here.

FLWLSS IMPRFCTNZ

Kaleem J. Bey

Perfection is she. As flawed as she is. Her scars are just as graceful as the smooth surface of her skin. She needs no makeup to enhance her beauty. She would rather give you the raw essence of her. Pure ... Uncontaminated ... Broken ... Beautiful. Never is she afraid to expose her imperfections. Turning her body into a canvas depicting the story of her flaws in a form once considered as taboo. She tells you at first glance that she is a NRD (nerd) and will always STY GKD UP (stay geeked up). She will never respect defeat. She does not try to hide the woman she wishes to be. Smart she will always be. No one can take that away from her.

You cannot stuff her into a box. You cannot prevent her beauty from shining as bright as a morning star. She will not allow you to snuff out her raging flame. She is to be heard. She is to be seen. She is to be cherished as she screams, "from that 718 to that 360, best believe I am geeked up where the geeks don't go."

She is not afraid of your rejection. Your approval has never been needed. Yet she demands that her beauty be respected, never to be neglected. For she believes that she is every woman and every woman is she. A NRD who will never respect defeat. Even with all her flwlss imprfctnz.

WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE

Levonne Williams

Love looks like a cloudless mornin' sky
The unlimited potential of another day
It looks like crystal clear starry nights
As viewed across the California bay
Love looks like innocent giddy children
Without a worry in their beautiful little hearts
It looks like the killin' of -isms
Soon after followed by a fresh start

Love looks like mother dotin' on child
What a wonderful mysterious connection
It's animals, mammals, livin', swimmin' wild
Endangered-species protection
Love looks like a beautiful lastin' dream
One in which there's no endin' in sight
It looks like you, looks like me
Knows no difference between Black and White

A stylized world map is centered on the page, rendered in various shades of green. The map is composed of several overlapping, semi-transparent layers, creating a sense of depth and movement. The colors range from a dark forest green to a light, almost white-green. The word "ENLIGHTENMENT" is written across the middle of the map in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font. The text is centered horizontally and vertically, standing out prominently against the green background.

ENLIGHTENMENT

GRAFFITIED CELLS

Tyler M. Purchas

Think to self in graffitied cells
There's no need to pretend, I know you're my only friend
I carry the weight of the mule
The consequences of us bending the rules when the dark world is so cruel
Judge and jury make their verdicts
A resurrection of hell's fury, in courts of limbo
I surely find my life in bondage by the ropes of time
To find relief, I'll look toward the breeze with the dancing leaves
Bliss and serenity, I'll find peace through the pose of a dead man's corpse
In travels through darkness, a state of mind brings to light a change in mine
Surely you are, so be kind, old friend
Mindful awareness is where I'll ascend

NOTHING STAYS THE SAME

Eric Foster a.k.a. Ezzo East Koast

Nothing stays the same,
a four letter word
that only comes to bloom
during one season,
in one particular destination,
for all but eternity.

Nothing that could ever be
duplicated, authenticated, nor anticipated—
how could such a thing
not last forever?

But more importantly,
is it necessary for everything to change?
Are there no other options
for things to get better?

Well, what if the worst to come
was losing all of
what you ever knew?
Would that not be the same?

Autumn, the season of conclusion
leaves and petals begins to fall,
drawing out confusion.

CONCEIVABLE MINDS

Rayvon Gordon

Pain seems way too familiar every waking day
Longing a new take on life to take the breath away
Where do you go inside this “mournful” place?
Where conspirators hope you never find a way—
Never find a trace, to what makes you whole again,
Suffocating memory ... To embitter the soul within,
But here’s this limb ... This reassuring limb
To assist you in your walk
So you won’t have to pretend
Arrogance as intelligence
Weakness as strength
Agitation as cool
Knowledge has broadened a gateway
So that you’ll never lose
Self-wit takes fine grit
Whereas you lease your body,
You’ll hone the mind forever ... as a much better tool

BLACK-CONSCIOUS

Omar Padilla

From the oppressive power structure in America
came the injustices of police killings
came Black Lives Matter

An outcry for Black lives

when police kill someone of color matters
Where are the protests for intra-racial crime when someone dies?
so do Black lives really matter?

And to who

if the political-minded can't get money for your death
we stopped caring for one another
If you're not my brother's keeper
then who would we have left?

Because all lives matter!

Though ignorance can be contagious and
light is the only disinfectant
lacking the knowledge of your own history
we're doomed to contest it

In a free society

where the truth becomes treason
in a vicious cycle that's unbreakable
rather point the finger at

someone else

than admit the blood on your own hands
focusing on and perpetuating hatred for the White man

wondering why we are dying over gangland

destroying the minds of our youth
Why are we sending a terrible message?
How can we be conscious of Black lives

but not live at peace?

Through education, unity, and self-scrutiny
we can uplift our peeps

bringing love back to our communities

so the wars amongst us can cease!

THE BIG GAME

Levonne Williams

You have to quit getting frustrated when things don't go the way you *think* they should. You must learn to adjust to the way things *are*. Life is the big game. Whether or not you participate makes no difference. The game will proceed. Pay close attention. The rules of play are included in your everyday experiences. Be calculating. Objective. The less errant emotions are allowed to interfere, the better player you will become. NOW GO OUT THERE AND PLAY THE BIG GAME!

WINTER-KILL

Myke Pagan

After "Danse Russe" by William Carlos Williams

if i when my enemy is marching
and darkness and winter
is marching.
and the sun becomes an ashen disc
in an ominous mist
beneath tearful stars—
if i in my heart
cache my light
and summer, as a miser hoards his
coin—cowering in a corner, singing sheepishly to myself:

“i am nothing, always nothing.
nothing, nothing.
i deserve this!”

if i disown my voice and warmth to
wallow in a shivering silence—defenseless
against the chill of winter’s breath.

who would ever see there is more to
me than iniquity and crime?

20/20

Levonne Williams

CHARACTERS

OLD MAN: a stern black man in his late 70s

YOUNG MAN: a black man in his early 20s, a slacker

ORDERLY: a large man, imposing and unsmiling

SETTING

The play takes place in an assisted-living facility's common area. Above the stage is a banner proclaiming it to be "FUTURE LIFE ASSISTED LIVING." The YOUNG MAN sits alone at a table center stage as the OLD MAN is escorted by an ORDERLY into the chair opposite him. Several other elderly people sit around the set at different levels of recreation. The two men stare at each other silently for a few moments.

OLD MAN Can I help you with somethin', young man?

YOUNG MAN (*With attitude*) I don't know, can you?

OLD MAN (*Attempting to get up*) I ain't got time for this!

YOUNG MAN Wait! My Grandmother ... she sent me here. Said you might be able to help me ... help me get on the right track.

OLD MAN (*Retakes seat*) She was a good woman. Always try'na help ...

YOUNG MAN (*Perplexed*) Huh?!

OLD MAN She a good woman. Take care of her!

YOUNG MAN Who are you? How you know her?

OLD MAN (*Waves dismissively*) You wouldn't believe me if I told you. I don't know if I'll be able to help.

The OLD MAN shrugs.

OLD MAN But it won't hurt to try. What seems to be your issue?

YOUNG MAN Well ... where should I start? I can't seem to focus in school ... On nothin', really. Except maybe, I can complete video games with no problem. *(Smiles)* And I can focus just fine on anything that got to do with chicks! They said I got ADHD or somethin'.

OLD MAN *(Grinning)* Ain't nothin' wrong with you, boy! But there will be if you keep believin' the stuff them good-for-nothin' doctors tellin' you. You just restless. Some of the greatest minds and achievers this world has ever known exhibited characteristics these so-called professionals would classify as ADHD. They said the same thing about me. Just a restless young man, try'na find his way in a world where certain motherfuckers wanna control when and how you find it.

YOUNG MAN What the hell you sayin', old man?! Speak English!

OLD MAN Shut up and listen! Maybe then you'll be able to grasp the significance of what I'm sayin' to you. Or at least remember it for when your dumb ass get smart enough to put it to use. Young people these days ... think you got it all figured.

The YOUNG MAN's phone rings. He removes it from his pocket and attempts to answer.

YOUNG MAN I'm waitin' on an important call.

The OLD MAN snatches the YOUNG MAN's phone and shoves it deep inside his crotch.

OLD MAN Ain't nothin' that important if your life ain't shit! Only important thing for you to do right now is listen.

YOUNG MAN: What? Give—

The OLD MAN passes gas, long and loud.

OLD MAN Ahhhh! I probably just erased all your contacts! (*Laughing*) I give it back, you leave! Otherwise you'll get it when you leave. Understood?

YOUNG MAN (*Nods reluctantly*) You sure full of advice for a miserable old man in an old-folks home!

OLD MAN Thanks for the compliment ... This places me in the position to tell you exactly what not to do.

YOUNG MAN I know the spiel: Get a job. Work hard. Retire. How hard can it be? I'll get it together eventually. I'm still in my 20s.

OLD MAN I had a job! A good one too. At least by relative standards. Worked 30 long years of my life. Five more than I had to. Traveled a bunch of places. Bought a bunch of shit.

YOUNG MAN Ain't that what everybody want? Sound like the American dream to me!

OLD MAN Fuck what everybody want! Fuck the American dream! You think I like bein' here? Wakin' up every morning, to the smell of shit and industrial cleanin' products? I'm not content, so somewhere along the line, I went wrong. And that was not followin' that voice ... That voice inside of every one of us ... which tells us that we want and deserve more. The voice that says *just go for it!* But instead, like most of us I ignored that voice, and took the so-called ... safe route.

YOUNG MAN That's crazy, I hear the same voice! Not really hear ... but you know what I mean. I never wanna do what everybody else is doin'. What everybody else think I should do.

OLD MAN Heard that shit from Mommy and Daddy since I can remember. (*In mocking voice*) "Gotta take what you can get, son! Gotta work hard to put food on the table!"

YOUNG MAN That's crazy, you sound just like my parents!

OLD MAN So like a good boy, I did as I was taught. Worked 30 years at a job I couldn't stand. 'Bout time I retired, I was half dead already.

The OLD MAN makes a sweeping gesture with his hand.

All these sorry souls worked just as long or longer. And I assure you, they don't wanna be in this shithole neither. Nothin' but a jazzed-up, glamorized prison.

YOUNG MAN Don't look so bad to me!

OLD MAN (*Glares incredulously*) Don't make me kick your teeth down your throat! You like it so much, won't you trade places with me? I promise you this, though: If you don't take control of your life soon, I guarantee you be sitting in my chair when you get my age.

YOUNG MAN So what do you think I should do?

OLD MAN Find a job, start a business, or engage in some kind of creative medium that you have a genuine love for. That way, you won't have to turn your life off and on when you go to and return home from work. Everyone has vision. But not everyone is courageous enough to stake everything on their own vision. Remember this: Each time you punch the clock at work, you are helping to realize someone else's vision.

The OLD MAN pauses for emphasis.

YOUNG MAN Go ahead.

OLD MAN No matter what you decide to do, pay yourself first and pay yourself well! Get at least a workin' knowledge of accounting and the proper handlin' of money. See, it's a reason they don't teach you that shit in school. With knowledge of the proper handlin' of money, and universal principles of buildin' wealth, you could get rich off a child's lemonade stand.

YOUNG MAN Who would want to keep that from people?

OLD MAN A very powerful group of people in this country, for whatever reason, look at you and others that look like you as their enemy. These same people have a

firm grip on the educational system, and what and how people are educated. Now answer me this: Would you teach your enemy how to be as smart, wealthy, and powerful as you? Me? I wouldn't teach my enemy shit but how to shoot a gun backwards!

YOUNG MAN (*Beginning to understand*) So you sayin' they teach us to be workers and consumers while teachin' they own kids to be our bosses?

OLD MAN Ding-ding-ding-ding. That is correct. And what do we have for him, Bob? A new car! (*Makes applause sounds*) You ain't as dull as I thought. You rebel in school because deep down somewhere you sense the bullshit. After the vital shit like learnin' to read and basic math, the rest of it ... the whole curriculum is trash.

YOUNG MAN What about vocational trainin'?

OLD MAN Nothin' wrong with it. I told you, you can find fulfillment in life with any occupation if you learn and practice proper money management. Otherwise you settin' yourself up for a life of misery. Livin' check-to-check. Hand-to-mouth, like you livin' in some kind of third-world country!

YOUNG MAN Havin' money don't guarantee you happiness though.

OLD MAN Yeah but I guarantee you won't be happy without it! Too much shit to worry about. Listen, rich people don't come up with excuses and cheesy cliches to explain why they broke. They secure the bag!

YOUNG MAN Look at he'em, droppin' that five-year-old lingo!

OLD MAN It's 50 years old to me! The point I'm try'na make is that financial independence is the first step toward a fulfilled life. You right! Money can't buy happiness. But it sure buys all happiness' accessories. Tell me, how can you be happy without food in your stomach, a roof over your head, and god forbid one of your kids become college ready?

YOUNG MAN I get the point! Money can't buy happiness but you can't even get the process started without it.

OLD MAN That's a very good way to put it. I ain't sayin' people can't be content with a nine-to-five. What I'm sayin' is don't pretend you are when you ain't. Keep it real with yourself, and go for whatever it is you want with everything you got. Otherwise, you'll end up here in the land of unfulfilled dreams when your family's tired of cleanin' up your shit, and you ain't put up enough money to make them care or pay somebody else to do it.

The OLD MAN passes gas loudly.

OLD MAN Ohh! That one felt wet.

The YOUNG MAN turns up his nose.

YOUNG MAN What about the chicks? I seem to have an insatiable appetite for them.

OLD MAN (*Smiling*) Now you speakin' my language! We got more in common than you know. Every young man goes through this phase. Totally natural. The tragedy is gettin' stuck there. No single act set more men to driftin' through life like tumbleweed across the screen in a bad Western than the want and pursuit of sex. On this subject, all you need to remember is these wise words from a motherfucker whose name escapes me right now: "I saw many men lose money chasin' women, but I never saw a single man lose a woman chasin' money."

YOUNG MAN That's it?

OLD MAN Yup! When you are able to grasp the significance of that statement you will have a tool which can enrich your existence beyond measure. See, God placed us on His earth to enjoy its fruits ... but not to become inundated with desires for them. What happens then is you will have placed those things which are below above! The only thing above you is God!

The ORDERLY approaches the OLD MAN from behind.

ORDERLY Time for your meds and afternoon nap!

OLD MAN (*Addressing the ORDERLY*) I told you 'bout talkin' to me like a puppy, motherfucker! (*Addressing the YOUNG MAN*) Well, that concludes our little powwow. The keys to your best life can be found somewhere in those words.

YOUNG MAN Wait ... How come you got all this wisdom and ain't been able to live it in practice?

OLD MAN (*Chuckles*) Hindsight is 20/20, right? That shouldn't be your concern. Your concern should be usin' my hard-earned and -learned wisdom to get your life on track. Your grandmother gave you a gift when she sent you here. The gift of foresight! You will be wise to use it to climb out that hole you digging for yourself before it cave in around you ... I got a lot ridin' on your success! I'm rootin' for you!

YOUNG MAN What can you possibly have ridin' on me?

OLD MAN Escape from this ... purgatory!

ORDERLY (*Tapping face of wristwatch*) Let's go, Frank. Come on.

The ORDERLY helps the OLD MAN to his feet whereupon they head off stage.

Slack-jawed in astonishment, the YOUNG MAN can only watch as the OLD MAN is escorted from the room. Just before the OLD MAN clears the stage, the cellular phone drops gently to the floor from inside the OLD MAN's pant cuff. The YOUNG MAN walks over and picks up the phone while staring confused at the exit through which the old man just disappeared.

YOUNG MAN Frank?! That's my name ...

The lights are dimmed until the stage is in total darkness.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Darion Alls a.k.a. **TOXIC!**, 48 years of age, was born in Asheville, North Carolina, and raised in Newark, New Jersey, by two remarkable parents. Of his lengthy and layered history with New York City, he writes “When it comes to the cultural diversity of New York City, me as an African American, entrepreneur, and now NYU student, I take the position of a cosmopolitan type of individual who has dwelled with everyone, from the bottom feeders to the elite socialites; my line of work has exposed me to people from all walks of life and has locked me into the greatest city on the planet.”

William Anderson describes himself as a “family-oriented, caring, passionate, and respectful giant who loves to write.” He has four kids, aged 14 (Jayden), 11 (William, Jr.), 10 (Sarayah), and seven (Kaivion), who mean the world to him.

Kaleem J. Bey is a self-taught tattoo artist who dabbles in the world of literature. Originally from Brooklyn, he moved to the suburbs of Oak Harbor, Washington, where he took on the character traits of a suburbanite, hence the term NRD (Never Respect Defeat). No longer fitting into the mold of a kid from the projects, he promotes the need for everyone to be who they are and not who they believe others think they should be. This is why he tells everyone to embrace their imperfections, for they are flawless. From that 718 to that 360, best believe that he will be geeked up where the geeks don't go.

Jose Escobar is a 52-year-old college student who has been inspired by his fellow students and NYU PEP faculty and administration to continue his education. His wife, Lillian, and children, Jillian and Andrew, are all college graduates. This has given him that extra push to continue his education when he gets home. He will leave Wallkill Correctional Facility well on his way to an associate's degree in liberal arts.

Eric Foster a.k.a. **Ezzo East Koast**, born in Jamaica, Queens, is pursuing higher education in order to become effective at deterring at-risk youth from making poor life decisions. He believes that educating and playing active roles in the lives of these children can and will diminish the perpetuation of mass incarceration.

Rayvon Gordon is a writer and aspiring entrepreneur from Queens. His poetry has appeared in *The Gallatin Review*, *The Washington Square News*, *VOICE*, and *Broken Silence*.

Andy Lopez is a man who will not be defined by his mistakes, a voice that will stand up to injustice, and a life lived for Christ. He will let his work speak for him.

Jody O'Donoghue, 28 years old, is from Brooklyn, though he lived on Long Island for a couple years. He is an entrepreneur and is working on building a community.

Omar Padilla is a 37-year-old Puerto Rican who is incarcerated at Wallkill Correctional Facility, soon to be released with more than a decade in prison and an associate's degree in liberal arts. He is a published poet and writer. He would like to become a grassroots activist so he can fight against the oppression, injustices, and discrimination that plague marginalized communities.

Myke Pagan couldn't be more grateful for this opportunity to break into print. As a poet, he is continually fascinated by the evocative power of rhythm and how it invokes, through the unique combination of words and sounds, his deepest light. He is currently working on two collections of poetry, the chapbook *i the hymn that summer sings* and a book of literary riddles, *Open secrets*.

Tyler M. Purchas is a 26-year-old aspiring writer. He was born in Oswego, New York, and raised in surrounding areas of his home county. He enjoys being outdoors, writing poetry, writing songs, and living in the moment. There is no past or future, just now.

Jonathan Salgado, a 24 year old from Queens, writes: "If anyone knows the definition of messing up, I do. Having someone to lean on during tough times is vital. But through it all, I've learned how to use my mistakes to my advantage. I plan to show people that power is not having; it's being able to."

Aunray Stanford is a 25-year-old writer and artist. His art aims to extract the beauty from the painful experiences of Young Black America.

Harold Williams is a 59-year-old Black man who is doing a two-year prison term. Currently attending NYU PEP, he has been preparing to return to his family and live a productive life in society.

Levonne Williams is a Harlem-raised NYU student for an associate's degree in liberal arts who has dedicated his life to the printed word. A screenwriter, songwriter, poet, and essayist, he is a strong believer in the arts as rehabilitative and as a deterrent to antisocial behavior.



