I don’t care

When I say,
What does it take to write a poem? Ask any of the 822 probation clients, their families, friends, probation officers and staff, that do it – and keep at it – through Free Verse, a writing workshop held in the middle of probation center waiting rooms.

Working with the Poet-in-Residence, ideas that come in on scraps of paper, napkins, cell phones, matchbook covers, and paper towels, are turned into verse. You’ll read memories, prayers, dreams, nightmares, mistakes, confessions, demons and truths.

It might seem easy to pick up a pen, type a few key strokes or share your secrets during open mic – but it’s not. It takes guts to unload what’s in your head. Many clients think that what they have to say is so ‘regular’ it doesn’t deserve a poem. “Where’s the poetry in bullets?” a client asked. But it’s these moments, thoughts and everyday snapshots that define an abnormal ‘normal,’ one that shakes us and says, “pay attention.”

Here, you’ll find glimpses into homes, streets, neighborhoods, strangers and situations, you might not encounter as you go about your daily life. In these pages, one gets to know what life is like when your dad gets hauled off to jail in front of you, when a trigger is about to be pulled, when bullets fly and people flail and fall – when death is as likely as living. The lucky ones pick themselves up and start over again – despite their losses, open wounds and scars. It takes strength, willpower, and the support of many to reach hope: caring probation officers, community-based organizations, brothers, mothers, girlfriends and grandmothers.

As the poet and writer Charles Bukowski said in his poem, Gamblers All:

“...it’s been a tough fight worth fighting as we all drive along betting on another day.”

To all of the poets and those reading Free Verse, here’s to betting on another day, a better day, a lot of them. Here, your voice is always welcome.

— The Editors
Calm Suspicion

In East New York,
On New Lots,
On this particular day,
I’m walking home with my mother
From the grocery store.
I see one of my rivals.
I turn back.
He says, Yo, you don’t remember me?
I say, From where?
He says, I’m the one you tried to fight.
You tried to press me.
I say, I remember what happened.
He says, Is there still an issue?
I say, It’s whatever you want it to be.
He says, Are you sure?
I say, Do you want to fight?
He turns to look around. And turns back and pulls out a gun.
My mom screams.
She takes out her phone to call 911.
He says, Put the phone on the ground before I shoot you.
She puts the phone down and backs away.
I say, Why don’t you just fight me?
Why you gotta shoot?
He whispers something and cocks back, looks around again.
He pulls the trigger, but the gun jams.
After two clicks he starts to run.
I pick up my mom’s phone.
And we start to walk home.
Calm. But we look around, suspiciously.

C. J. H.
Greeting the Past

In the middle of the night,
I dreamed about drowning,
in a lake in Georgia.
I was there by myself, crying for help.
It was dark and foggy.
I could see water falling from a tree,
like a tsunami heading my way.
Everything smelled like seawater.
And all I could think was, I am going to die.
But coming from the sky, was my grandfather,
who I had never met.
He passed two years before my birth.
I woke and found myself.

T. K.

Why is it

that when I go to sleep
I feel more alive?
And when I wake-up.
I feel like I died on the inside?

A. B.

What You Don’t Know

New Year’s Eve, 1999,
after breaking off bits of chicken and injera bread
and feeding it to each other,
after that entire Ethiopian dinner,
I excused myself to the ladies room,
shimmied out the window
onto Columbus Avenue,
rushed against traffic to Ray’s Pizza
to really get something to eat.

YASMINE LANCASTER

Dear Future,

I don’t care where you take me,
just make it interesting.
I got a breakup letter from the past
so all I can look forward to
is you.

LIZ PAGAN
Drama in the Hood

One day after school I was with my friends. We were walking to the middle school, and we saw some little kid across the street looking at us. One stuck the middle finger up at me. And I’m like, *Yo, why is this little dude lookin’ at me?* And then my man said, *We better go press him.* And the little kid doesn’t answer when we walk up on him, but he tries to swing on me. So my man jumped him. I was just standing there watching. Eventually, he let him go. But we took his phone and all of that. The next day, we go back by the middle school. We see the same little kid, but this time he’s walking with a group of people. And I’m like, *Yo, this is a set up.* So we posted on the corner because I wasn’t gonna’ run. But the kid starts walking toward us. And then a white Beamer pulls up and a guy gets out of the car. It was the little kid’s dad or something. He told him to beat my ass. So he walked up on me swinging and I just started weaving his punches. Then his dad and some other dudes started fighting us. We were fighting grown men. So, of course, we lost. Then somebody fired a shot, and we scattered. We met up at Wendy’s. One of my mans was missing. Where’s S.? At Ditmas we found him in his long johns and sneakers. He was like, *They took me in an alley and beat me with a bat.* So I made a call and my mans came through with the grip. And the guy’s daddy got shot. When he got out of the hospital, he was like, *Yo, the beef’s done. I got a kid. We can’t be shooting and shit.* And I was like, *Alright. Beef done.*
If I Die Today

“You know the rules, kill them all and keep moving . . .” –Lil’ Wayne, “John”

If I die today, it would not be a holiday.
It’ll just be Tuesday or Thursday or whatever day my body decides to finally get fed up with the way it’s been handled. I hope I don’t die on a Friday. I don’t wanna’ ruin anyone’s weekend. A Sunday wouldn’t be a good day to go either. Or a Monday. Those days are already dreadful enough and I wouldn’t wanna’ give anybody one more thing to worry about. Please, when I die, put me in a nice suit like the one Richard Pryor wore for his special on the Sunset Strip. I think he thought the bright red fabric would make everyone not think about the coke and the alcohol and the match that didn’t light him hot enough. Even a star doesn’t burn fiery enough to make this place seem okay. It looks pretty though even if pretty’s not worth nothin.’

I’ve always wanted to be a tortured celebrity or maybe just a tragedy caught on camera. Not Richard Pryor though. He told the whole world he sucked for crack and I’m not trying to be that honest. I’ll be Ray Charles or Billie Holiday, no, Nina Simone. I’ll be a little Michael Jackson, a dash of ODB, a handful of Basquiat, a sprinkle of Pac, yeah, a pinch of Amy Winehouse, a teaspoon of . . .

All of my heroes are dead. There must be something beautiful about flaunting your demons publicly, even if those taunts are usually accompanied by a casket. I want to be called pretty for not knowing how to save myself.

Justin Danzy


She’s dead.

Who?

Your mother, said the drunk lady with casts on both feet, standing at my front door.

She died in her sleep.

What?

I ran downstairs to see.


You heard I died, too?

Tahara Lilly

My name is Lilly, Tahara.

Tahara Lily. Definition: flower.
Lilly is your first name or last? I get that all the time.

What was my mother thinking? Definition: pure; origin: Hebrew for lucky. Shit, I haven’t felt lucky in over five years. Once, I did find 20 bucks on a deli store floor. Definition: emotional. Yeah, that’s me.

I cried during The Color Purple when Cecil and her sister reunite. Definition: creative. Well, I did throw my daughter an arts and crafts sleep over for her birthday. We painted the floor silver and gold. Definition: cordial and pleasant. That’s me.

But I warn you – don’t rub me the wrong way.

Tahara Lilly
I want the universe
to be my burial ground.

FREE VERSE

Old
I pour out my heart like a drink.
I sink, then float,
breathe, then choke.
I’m about to explode.
I put myself on hold
because even though I’m young,
I’m old.

JOSE PEREZ

Stop!
Let’s all give a moment
to pray that one day death
won’t be from violence.
People, we can’t give up.
Now is the time to get up,
stand up and stay up.
The thunder is the sound of
bullets. But we keep killin
even after the rain has stopped.
And the ground still lives
with the gunpowder that splattered
from the gunfire, scattered.

KIA LYLE

Basta!
Preghiamo che verra’ il giorno
che la morte e la violenza finira’.
Il popolo, non possiamo rinunciare.
Ora è il momento di alzarsi,
alzati in piedi e rimanere.
Il tuono è il suono dei nostri proiettili.
Ma noi continuamente uccidiamo anche
dopo che la pioggia ha smesso.
E la terra vive ancora con la polvere
da sparare che schizzano
dalla sparatoria, sparsi.

TRADUZIONE SIMONE & LIDIA

East New York
2 kids.
1 knife.
The devil playing dice,
left one in critical condition
and took another life.

BERNARD WILSON

Old
I pour out my heart like a drink.
I sink, then float,
breathe, then choke.
I’m about to explode.
I put myself on hold
because even though I’m young,
I’m old.

JOSE PEREZ

Don’t you hate
when gold comes
out of your mouth
and you don’t have pen or paper?

NAPOLEON FELIPE
**When I Say**

Good morning,
but you don’t say it back,
it’s all good.

When I say goodbye, I don’t expect
you to wave back.

When I say please, it is not a form of
begging.

When I say thank you, it is
being polite and humble to others.

When I say I love you,
I mean it from the bottom of my heart.

When I say peace,
it is a universal greeting.

When I say do not give up,
I mean never listen to haters.
You are a foundation. Don’t let anyone
tear you down.

*LAKEISHA CARTER*

---

**Girl Type**

I’m the type of person
that without a girl
life is no good.
But once I get a girl,
I wish I’d never met her.

*WARREN YOUNG*

---

**The living poets**

stab you in the back
with words.

The dead ones
listen.

*ONTARIO SOLOMON*

---

**Crown**

My trust for people
has fallen off the throne.
Trust is royalty.
Trust is gold, more
than you’ll ever know.

*Z. M.*

---

**What’s Chasing Me?**

It’s worse than a shadow.
It’s my history.

*ONTARIO SOLOMON*

---

**He’s Married**

She looks in his blue eyes,
wondering why.
She says, I’m just like you.
I have a family, too.
His lips, so dry, say Sorry,
with not one tear in his eye.

*JESSICA KISHINEVSKY*

---

**SO MI SEE A COUPLE BENZ PASS MI**

AND I START TO WONDER HOW MUCH IT WOULD COST MI

SINCE MI ONLY HAVE SOME DIMES AND CHANGE INNA POCKET

SO MI START TO WRITE A COUPLE OF POEMS FOR A HABIT

THEN I SEE A COUPLE KIDS AT THE RED LIGHT

I WIPE THEIR CAR GLASS FOR A GOOD LIFE

SO THAT MESSAGE SHOWS MI IT’S A ROUGH LIFE

MAKES MI WONDER WHY SOME TURN TO THE GUN LIFE

SEEMS LIKE BECAUSE PEOPLE NEED WORK AND NO ONE GOT IT

SO JUST LIKE A LIGHT BULB LIGHT UP IN THE SOCKET

THAT’S WHY MI WANNA THE YOUNG YOUTHS TO LEARN UP THE KNOWLEDGE

*TAQIV WITTER*

---

**What’s Chasing Me?**

stab you in the back
with words.

The dead ones
listen.

*ONTARIO SOLOMON*

---

**Girl Type**

I’m the type of person
that without a girl
life is no good.
But once I get a girl,
I wish I’d never met her.

*WARREN YOUNG*

---

**The living poets**

stab you in the back
with words.

The dead ones
listen.

*ONTARIO SOLOMON*

---

**Crown**

My trust for people
has fallen off the throne.
Trust is royalty.
Trust is gold, more
than you’ll ever know.

*Z. M.*

---

**What’s Chasing Me?**

It’s worse than a shadow.
It’s my history.

*ONTARIO SOLOMON*
Dear Michael,

The last day I saw you
I told you I love you.

I didn't know
you were gonna’ leave me the next day.

I’d already lost my dad.
To lose you makes me mad.

I still listen for your call:
What’s up Marla?

You, my dear brother,
I will never forget.

April 14, 2013 was the day
that boy took your life away.

It wasn’t right.
Can he sleep at night?

I wait on heaven
to make it right.

MARLA GARRISON

Ignorance

When you don’t know the answer
people make fun of you.
Their ignorance grows like cancer,
spreads like STDS,
like the thought that every kid
was born with ADHD.
And then, silence,
no retaliation for this type of violence.

But it’s the world.
Basketball courts turn into murder scenes.
The same people you thought were with you,
are playing another role behind the screen.
There’s a ying and a yang
to the colors red, white and blue,
that same freedom
that was supposed to be ours
isn’t really true.
So should we sue?

LLOYD JONES

Losing

I’ve lost money,
I’ve lost friends and family.
But I will never lose happiness.

A. LUGO

La Luna Roja

Una vez me levanté como
to las tres de la madrugada y
vi la luna roja.
No sé si era un eclipse ó
un signo de los últimos días.

Pero de luna llena,
hice a mi hijo
que tiene ahora 3 años.

VICTOR ORTIZ

Hold on Son

I had seven seconds.
But I ain’t choose to run.
It’s like I sealed off.
But my stars shifted.
Now the new moon
makes me numb.
I stay in darkness,
give up my happiness.
to feel the sun beat,
outta’ concrete.

L. T.

Red Moon

Once I got up
at three in the morning and
saw a red moon.
I don’t know if it was an eclipse or
a sign of the end of time.

But under that moon,
I made my son
who is now 3 years old.

TRANSLATION DAVE JOHNSON

Train

I used to ride the number 6
to 14th Street every day,
learning my way through the city,
how to switch and transfer,
going up and down all those stairs,
uptown, downtown, uptown, downtown.

In most cars you couldn’t breathe,
the air was so heavy,
no air conditioning, no heat,
platforms, too stifling or too cold.

And tokens were 75 cents, one way.

IVETTE LABOY
Grandmothers

come get us when Mama’s boyfriend
knocks her into a wall, kills her smile
puts his fat fist into her swollen stomach
like he’s at Gleason’s and she’s his sparring partner

come get us when Mama
has not been home
has sold the microwave to buy drugs
smoked crack to hide her horrors

come get us when Mama
stuffs clothes into book bags
walks out, shoulders hunched
checks herself into Bellevue

come get us when Mama
locks her bedroom door
yells, Leave me alone; when we knock
screams, I wish I never had you

come get us when Mama
masculizes her sadness with rum
comes into the kitchen wearing bra and panties
ignores our hunger growls

come get us when Mama
won’t wake up
keeps eyes, lips shut tight
sleeps forever, smiling like an angel

come get us

ANGELI RASBURY
You’ll love me forever?

What about today?

K. M.

Black Spoon Haiku at the Guggenheim

An oval lady.
Open, she holds nourishment
and feeds her youngins.

CHERYL BROWN

Family

Mom always has a smile.
Daddy is always grumpy.
My sister is always on the couch.
My brother is a hyper lil’ boy;
always runnin’ around.
The baby is just happy;
but when there’s no milk, he wails.

E. S.

Wait

I’m waiting
I’m waiting
I’m waiting
I’m waiting
I’m waiting
I’m waiting
I’m waiting
for someone to get me.

J. I.

Outside,

I am fed religion that tastes
Like cardboard,
Generic cereal.
People slap me
Upside the head
For having
The wrong kind
Of hope.

SARAH IQBAL

High-Rise

At this level, there are no obstructions.

RAFAEL COBAN

Black Spoon Haiku at the Guggenheim

An oval lady.
Open, she holds nourishment
and feeds her youngins.

CHERYL BROWN

Family

Mom always has a smile.
Daddy is always grumpy.
My sister is always on the couch.
My brother is a hyper lil’ boy;
always runnin’ around.
The baby is just happy;
but when there’s no milk, he wails.

E. S.

Wait

I’m waiting
I’m waiting
I’m waiting
I’m waiting
I’m waiting
I’m waiting
I’m waiting
for someone to get me.

J. I.
Sitting in the Cafeteria

I watch him waste his money,
making love to the soda machine,
eating its intestines, one dollar at a time.

ABU SILLAH

My brain,

a book and a pen
was all I could carry.

ABU SILLAH

The Boy Next Door

When I saw him last week
he was dressed so well,
looking so good,
in orange and black.
I think it was last Thursday.
He was with his ex-girlfriend.
It was about 5 AM.
The trees were blowing.

SHABORN MILLER

Fallen Soldier

Abandoned by her mother,
cracked out father,
family doesn’t want her.
She looks for love
she doesn’t get at home.
Men, they only want
what’s in her pants.
She’s 15 years old, untouched, but tarnished.
Blames herself, ashamed of her face,
 disgraced body,
slits on her wrist,
bleeds out words
shouted at her.

Bitch, slut, you’ll never amount to nothin’.
Lying in bed, she thinks,
I’m better off dead

TATIANA ROMERO

Marla

Marla is a part of her dad, Lamar.
She is courageous, strong, happy,
outgoing, helpful, and loving.
She tends to get in trouble for others.
Marla had to make some changes.
She removed herself from life’s troubles.
She makes better choices now.
She looks at the whole picture
before she decides what to do or say.
Listen to the sound of her name.
M-A-R-L-A.

Doesn’t that sound rich?

MARLA GARRISON
Lost Cash

That's nothing,
But losing my brother is like taking
a thousand needles straight.

DANASIA WALKER

Court Papers

Yesterday I lost my court papers.
They were somewhere in my closet.
Like my mother said,
the only reason I don’t lose my head
is because it’s stuck to my body.

LAURA SUAREZ

Losing Day-Day

176 University at Andrews Avenue
will never be the same.
I lost a brother, a friend, a soldier.
Since he’s gone and I got older,
my heart disappeared and got colder.

ISAIAH GARNER

My Word(s)

These are the tools
I trust
to shape the world around me
and yet I lack confidence.
I mishear, misuse,
complicate the collage,
formalize the fine print,
turn our relationship
into a business contract.

Am I missing something?
Was I always illiterate?

AZALEA FAIRLEY
My Father Was Never Here

In and out of jail
It’s killing me too, I swear

People always tell me
I’m far from a failure,
But I got so much weight on me
I think I need a scale.

No hugs, no love, no calls
not even any mail.
If I had the money
I would pay your bail.

There’s times dad, when
I wish you went to hell.
I know exactly how it feels
to be locked up in a cell.
With nobody to pick me up
after all the times I fell.

I haven’t seen you for a minute.
Man, I hope you’re really well.
I can’t even cry anymore
You put me through hell.

I never was protected,
a turtle with no shell.
but I swear, these words
are coming from the heart:
I love you dad
and I told you from the start,
You’ll always be my father, even though
you never play your part.

M.S.
Funerals

I’ve gone to too many funerals
in the last few months.
It makes me think.
Why does death bother me so much?
Is it the unknown?
Is there an afterlife?
Or, is it the end?
Coming from a spiritual background,
I believe in a higher power,
and going on to a new existence.
I tell you, I need to see again,
those that went before me.

DARRYL C. WILLIAMS

Genetics

My mother’s nails click clack
Making alien rhythms
Upon my geometrically parted scalp.
Combing,
Brushing,
Plaiting,
Braiding,
Her snug thighs,
Holding me with gentle strength.
Ah, those thighs, those thighs,
Exceptionally warm and moldable,
sized to carry and cradle my future.

AZALEA FAIRLEY

A Story

Mama told me that I better do right,
I didn’t listen, goin’ out every night,
couldn’t break that, ’cause a bone’s too tight
eyes on me, cause you know I’s doing wrong
cops walked in, put the cuffs on
sitting on my knees, I knew I had to pray
I went to court and got remanded
finally came to my head, that a bad boy don’t live
karma is a bitch, so it’s better when you give
my mama lives in stress cause she’s got eight kids
daddy went away on the day fo’ sho’
spirit came out, like water it flows,
that’s it, ain’t no more words I can quote.

S.G.

If waiting

is like being in neutral,
how can I put myself into drive?

ANTOINE SHERMAN

3 Years

On probation, nobody’s perfect.
I learned from my mistakes.
I’m telling you people about my life.
It’s not right. I’m at the bottom of the world,
wishing. When I’m mad
my mom cooks steaks with rice.
I pray to God for a deal.
A million people think I’m a criminal.
But guess what? Ya’ don’t even know me.

My probation officer saved my life.
I see him once a week.
Life is a puzzle.
You just have to find your way out.
I just want the world to understand where
I’m coming from.
I never had anything.
That’s why I’m on the grind.
I swear I don’t want to do crime.
I don’t want to go to jail.
It’s crazy being in a cell full of men.
That’s not the life I want.
People, understand me –
I want to stay out of trouble.

M.C.
Recipe For Bathtub Drowning

Ingredients: bathtub, bath salts, bubble bath, loofah

Sprinkle bath salts
Pour in bubble bath
For the best results, use a lot
Run the water hot
Not too hot
Or you'll burn that lovely skin

Strip off clothes
Step in
Grab loofah
Scrub off the dirt trapped in your pores
Clean off all impurities

At this moment, there are no blemishes or mistakes
You’re simply flawless

Let down your hair
Let it fall over your shoulders

Dive

JEWEL HARRISON

Life

is what you make it. If you keep still, someone will take it.

F. CHISHOLM

Stop texting me!

Sorry I bothered you.
I just thought you were gorgeous.

S. J.

The Wife

Is he ever going to leave the wife?
She’s in love.
She wants to know, does she have a future?
But it doesn’t look like he’s ever going to leave the wife.
She feels like as long as she deals with him
she won’t have a life.
And you know, they never leave the wife.
That’s why, she has to leave the husband.

JENNIFER VALDEZ

My Uncle Samagana

is a wolf in the midst of sheep
is a snake in the green grass
is a thorn in human flesh.

My Uncle Samagana
is King Solomon
is the wisest man on earth
is the adder that appears when the day
is bright.

NAPOLEON SAIGROVO

ImPerfect(ion)

I lost my words, thinking too much.
I lost my mind.
Erased and erased.

SABRINA PENA
Living in a House of Females

And none of them respect me
Trying to make this money
And all of them neglect me
Everything killing me

I was the man since 12
Nobody to protect me
I try ta’ support my mom
And she can’t feel me, yo
My heart beats loud
Like music outta’ radio
Young kid flipping numbers like a ratio

Yeah that shit keeps killing me
Yeah that shit’s still in ta’ me

Every birthday, my pops wasn’t here
We had the same birth-day
But we couldn’t even share
Or repair
Our love,
Trying to make a miracle
Climb to the top
All I had was hope, straight lines
Pulling on a rope
And I ain’t talking about no Coke
I believe in gettin’ rich without selling dope
Body language says it all,
Shorty reads me like a note
Like I said,

Shit keeps killing me,
Yeah, shit’s still in ta’ me.
On His First Visit to Nigeria

he saw the land of plenty, the land he thought inhabited by animals that lived on iroko trees. He was surrounded by kindred who welcomed him home. They dribbled words with him.

Why do you speak through your nose? Why do you talk as if there is water in your mouth? What’s up men? What’s up yo? Do you see the sun during the day over there? How is the sky? Blue, green or white? Do people eat eba and akpu? He mimicked his kindred’s accent by speaking pidgin English.

Wetin’ be dis? Wetin’ una dey call dis?

Since his return, nostalgia overwhelms him.

NAPOLEON SAIGROVO

I lost my teenage ways

and turned them into mother days.

EMELIE REYES

Michael

was gunned down by a desperate man who had no love. It left the family in pain. This is the story I tell when it rains. It gets wetter and wetter. The ground and the sound of my heart tells the real story. It goes on and on and on and on. When you read this story keep it going in your brain. Michael was gunned down by a desperate man who had no love.

MARLA GARRISON

Beaten Heart

Kicked stomped stabbed shot sad toyed with played with unfairly.

When will she see the sun again?

LATASIA FALIAFERO

Crack

One day on the corner of Catherine and William, a snake slipped into the storm drain. I slid through the grate, snagged him behind his head, turned him on his back, sliced him open and saw all my money spill out.

ALYSSA LONG

Sunny days

have to come with a little lightening.

K.G.

The streets

are another place called home. They teach you things. You think the bros out there can hold you down better than your real family can. But it’s your parents that put corners around you. The bros can’t do that. All they can do is help you do bad things. It may be all fun and games while you’re young, but when you’re older, it will be a bad flashback and too late to say, Sorry. Bros may be around for you now, but later on in life, they will be dead.

T.B.

The streets

are another place called home. They teach you things. You think the bros out there can hold you down better than your real family can. But it’s your parents that put corners around you. The bros can’t do that. All they can do is help you do bad things. It may be all fun and games while you’re young, but when you’re older, it will be a bad flashback and too late to say, Sorry. Bros may be around for you now, but later on in life, they will be dead.

T.B.
The Ferry

I dream of a ferry full of people crashing in the backyard of my apartment building. As I look down from the 8th floor, I see people running for their lives, water drowning them as they try to escape. People float by like fish in an aquarium. The images are so real when I wake, they're stuck in my brain. Like my life, I drown to survive.

CHERYL BROWN

When the night exhales

its breath fills the lungs of all those who roam.

RAUL CARRASQUILLO

I am an African-American woman.

Drink from my cup.
Do you see what I see?

DIANE NEALE

I have so many

things on my mind, sometimes I drink to numb what’s inside.

B.A.

I will never go

because you have to be chosen. And I don’t believe.

N.A.P.
Atlantic City, New Jersey

When I got to Atlantic City it felt like Vegas. The beach was beautiful. I fell asleep in the sand. I went to a few casinos just to take pictures. I don’t gamble. I enjoyed the malls, all of them. Then I went to Caesars to eat. Nighttime is the best time to sit by the window in a hotel restaurant and have dinner. I felt special. I felt that life was quiet for a change. In the morning, it was over and it was time to go to the bus. I couldn’t wait to get home to my bed. I can’t wait to go back to Atlantic City, so I can feel extra special, again. Maybe someday, I’ll get a room.

Outlaw:

rebels, Wallace, troublemaker

My life as an Outlaw
Is similar to my life on Crenshaw
I feel like I don’t belong
But I know that I do
The name is six generations long
Rocks-boro, North Carolina, born
I’ve been gone for so long
Coming back feels so wrong
When I think about it
I want to put it in a song
My mind is strong
Like the Outlaw name
My claim to fame
I say that with a frown
Because now, I wear the crown
Brown
I like the sound
So give a pound, to the Outlaws
Because now, they’re in-laws

Marla Garrison

Cheryl Brown
The Story Goes

Me, S. and E. went to the pool. It was a typical hot summer day in downtown Brooklyn. Afterwards, E. said, I need a bike.

Me and S. said, Alright, alright. S. had a bike already. But I didn’t. I needed a bike, too.

So instead of going home we cut down the block. We go grilling the Jewish kids. They were all staring at us, holding their bikes, grilling us, too. They seemed scared. We didn’t find anything. So we just decided to go home. But E. saw a scooter in the garbage. I thought, That thing’s broke. It’s no good. But he took it with him anyway.

So then we cut through someone’s backyard. On the edge of the garage we see a dress flowing in the wind. I’m not even sure there was a person in it. But we thought it might be a person. So we ran away. And we turned the block and saw a black van following us.

But then we saw this guy with a walkie-talkie. So we hid. We thought they were all just Jewish guys, but they were cops. So we ran.

We heard one of them say, Permission to open fire. It sounded like something out of a movie. But it could be for real. So we ran into the deli because we didn’t want to get shot. They came in and cuffed us.

The little scooter in the garbage is what we all got arrested for.

T. B. S.
The words I hear
get me into trouble.
I’d rather have no ears.

JACKLYN RICHARDS

If you just give me a minute
I’ll tell you why I’m valuable
I’ll tell you why you shouldn’t talk to me the way you do
I’ll explain why I’m hurting
I’ll tell you how you can help me
I’ll show you what’s good about me
I’ll prove why I’m worth your time

OLINDA NEVERSON

My Name Is Francis

Francis: from the Latin word for Frenchman.
A generic name for a French citizen, the
generic haunting of lineage, the invasive species in
black bodies that possess the divided burial
plots of my own – the Dominican big house
with its fixed shadow in the field of sugar cane
cut by those who will not taste its future sweetness
in the hot Caribbean sun.

Francis: from the Germanic tribal name for the Franks.
Europe was filled with tribes, too, that is until tribe
was branded on dark skin; that deep burn that masks
the divine harmony with body for the hard icon
of mud huts and bones through the nose.
And don’t forget the cannibalism boiling
in a big black pot.

Francis: Leigh Hunt declared it as one of the most
pleasant sounding of names. A sweet sounding name
like the taste of broken sugar cane cut from its home
in the embrace of dirt. That sweetness that is mined
for gold, that sweetness that masters will try to consume.

Francis: name of a catholic priest. A priest born into wealth,
then marooned from his silk and velvet cloth; a priest
who lost the taste of lofty cotton candy clouds of family
name for the bitter dirt of the same streets of strange
beggars – the opener to visions of truth; this sacrifice,
a path to another world.

Francis: once thought to mean free. Free branded into the skin
of a chosen few like a black mole birthmark. Free as a stigma
of birthright. Free as the stigmata left when free is pierced
from open hands that are forced to close into a fist
to fill the hole. Free has lost its meaning. Free needs
another incarnation. Free must find its rebirth in my name:
Francis.
Dead Business

Caskets cost money.
The wake.
The burial.
The undertaker don’t care.

Mr. Undertaker,
we’re poor, we don’t have the money.

I run a business here, Madam.

So, in the hood
people chip in
to pay for the funeral.
Men cry.
Women wail.

He was a good kid.

HARRY THOMAS

Struggling

I know I should be grateful.
My bills are paid,
yet my heart is heavy.

I know I should be grateful.
I’m in surprisingly good health.
But everyone around me has more.

I know I should be grateful.
I can speak, read, write…… right?
But love still hasn’t come my way.

I know I should be grateful.
I tell myself, calm down.
My fears spring up.

I know I should be grateful.
Stop drowning from regrets,
crying for what could have been.

I know I should be grateful.
I’m living the American dream.
I have a career, health, and family.

Yet, when I roll over, I’m alone.

JUNE COOLEY

Diary

I tell her everything
because she’s trustworthy.
I love her.
She’s family.
She’s my blood.

J. W.

On Memorial Day

We had a barbeque.
Things got hot.
Franks got burnt.
Buns got tossed.
Lines got crossed.
And at the end of the night
it was a mess to clean up.

TAHARA LILLY

The Purpose

I think, therefore I am.
Is this a good remark?
Is it a stupid remark?
Or is it a wise remark?
Or not a remark at all?

If I exist and I do not think,
this makes me a brute.
If I exist and also think;
I am born as a bright star in the universe,
with multicolored flashes
illuminating my outline.

If I do not think I exist,
the creator wasted time and I’ve lost my purpose.
But if I think and do not exist,
I am made immortal.
I’ve discovered the secret of the universe
and the purpose of heavens is fulfilled.

ALDOIR

Il Giorno del Memorial

Noi facemmo un barbeque.
Le cose sono riscaldati.
Gli hot dogs stato bruciato.
I panini vennero butati.
I linee vennero superati.
E alla fine della serata
Fu un disastro pulire.

TRADUZIONE GIOA ONORATI,
DAMIANA LEONE & GIULIA BISINELLA

Shortchange

I feel as if
I will shortchange you
if I don’t give you
this one line.

ANONYMOUS

El Propósito

Pienso, luego existo.
Es éste un buen comentario?
Es un comentario estúpido?
Ó un comentario sabio?
Ó no es ningún comentario?

Si existo y no pienso,
esto me hace un bruto.
Si existo y también pienso;
nací como una estrella brillante en el universo,
con destellos multicolores
que iluminan mi contorno.

Si no pienso que existo,
el creador ha perdido su tiempo y yo mi propósito.
Mas si pienso y no existo,
eso me hace inmortal.
He descubierto el secreto del universo
y el propósito del cielo se ha cumplido.

TRANSLATION ALDOIR
Some of us hustle glamour
Some of us hustle slips and falls
Some of us hustle psychedelic pills
Some of us hustle horses
Some of us hustle magnums and glocks
Some of us hustle fortunes
Some of us hustle credit
Some of us hustle stolen credit
Some of us hustle dreams
Some of us hustle fantasies
Some of us hustle death
Some of us hustle escape
Some of us hustle other people’s hustle
Some of us hustle lighteners
Some of us hustle what we don’t have
Some of us hustle Remy

Some of us hustle nutcrackers
Some of us hustle moods
Some of us hustle prayer
Some of us hustle dance
Some of us hustle candy
Some of us hustle forgiveness
Some of us hustle hugs
Some of us hustle fame
Some of us hustle rooms
Some of us hustle lawsuits
Some of us hustle ecstasy
Some of us hustle whiter teeth
Some of us hustle “younger than we are”
Some of us hustle cellars
Some of us hustle bonds
Some of us hustle good times

ANGELI RASBURY
**The Green Moon**

He has no legs, but he is more than just a rock. He wishes he was a machine or a king. But he is content being a giant island or a cold root vegetable. He is not certain that he is a he at all. He may be a she, who cannot speak, but if she could, she would have a winter voice and pray out loud for hands of her own. Her hands would make shadows in the shapes of ships, as yellow as eggs, warm as if inside them were soft stars ready for their shells to crack open and be reborn as birds.

**ERICA MIRIAM FABRI**

**A plane discovered**

a pair of legs in the forest of a million moons.

**NIRVANA**

**When I Wake Up**

I'm cranky off a lot of stuff. I don't like talking about it ‘cause it's rough.

When I wait for the bus, getting a sandwich is a must. I ask for honey turkey and cheese without the crust.

When I get in school I switch my mood. I get a little rude ‘cause I don't want to be bothered.

When I get to probation I step with hesitation. Sick on the brick, I do meditation ‘cause I don’t want to be in this place.

J. C.

**As I stared**

into the sky, I discovered a point where all I thought to be true was lies and then I suddenly realized my alarm clock was ringing and it was time to wake up, pull myself together, and get my ass to work.

**RAUL CARRASQUILLO**

**Broken**

It’s absurd that heaven had to lose an angel so amazing and our cruel earth had to destroy you with words like "perfection," causing you to rip off your wings, and crush your halo; because you’re seen as “strange” and strange is nowhere near perfection.

**CHERISE JONES**

**Struggle**

I'm a young man going through the struggle. I'm strong, but money doesn't come from muscles. So I just started to hustle. I knew it wasn't right. But seeing my family eat felt right. I would never eat unless I saw my little brother eat. I can't sleep unless my little brother sleeps. I put myself in a hole just to make my family right. But money, it's like a shovel, and I'm using it to make a bigger hole.

**W. G.**
The Tailor

My grandfather said, *If you want to dance you have to…*
And I was never sure if he said, *pay or play.*
When I asked him, he touched his thumb
to his other fingers as if they were strings.
*Money?* I asked. And his eyes smiled that sad way
as blue as the Adriatic.
I never asked him what the sadness was.
Although I know after he left at 16,
he never saw his parents or country again.
I know my grandmother died young
and that he and she knew five of the girls
who died at the Triangle Shirt Factory.
Once I showed him a postcard of Ben Shahn’s
“The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti.”
He held it as if it were a holy card.
I know he lost his foreman’s job
when he translated the Union Organizer’s
words and urged the men to join.
I wondered if the dialect was the sing-song
Barese. Or, was it pure Italian,
the one he used when he recited Dante.
I’ll never know.
Instead, I’ll remember his small store:
the smell of cloth from the steam press,
the whir of the old Singer,
the thin lines of chalk,
the large spools of thread
the tape measure worn like
a scapular.
He closed the store each afternoon
from one o’clock until three
to cook for his paisans.
At seven each evening, he would appear at the house.
It was my job to heat his cold plate of food,
to pour the jelly glass of wine and offer fruit.
With a paring knife he could skin a peach or apple,
leaving one circular ribbon.

LILLIAN ROSSI MAIDA
I was walking around the block

by Flatbush
and a couple of people were walking behind me.
They asked me, What you jackin’?
I told them.
And they were like, Yo, we got an opp on the block.
Then they just started shooting.
I ran as fast as I could.
I was scared.
That night taught me to make better decisions.

J. M.

How to make peace with your father

who abandoned you when you were 3.
Imagine he is a
body bag you got to break in.
Jab it like Pacquiao.
Imagine he is a
rat cowering in the corner.
Stomp on it ten times.
Beat it with a cast iron skillet.
Then
imagine he is a
friend you love.
Write him a letter.
Know you are strong.
Tell him you are
sorry he missed your childhood,
your teen years, graduation, prom,
widening, birth of first child.
Tell him, I’m not mad.
Forgive him.

A N G E L I  R A S B U R Y

I want to go home

but I need a MetroCard
so I don’t get another charge
or a ticket
or get arrested
for hopping the turnstile.

J. C.

Since There is No Escape

The truth stands in place
Where life goes on.
Under mercy and rain
I’ll still sing a song.
Lead through power and sorrow.
We might not see tomorrow.
With aggression I plead
I pray twice on my knees.
My loyalty cannot be questioned.
I’m a human weapon.

L. A.

Intro/Verse

When I say nothing at all
it’s not a judgment on you, or this
conversation between us.
Your words
lodge in my chest
and grow tall, climbing
a mountain in my throat,
barely making it over the ledge
of my tongue.

S H E R E S E  F R A N C I S
Trade

I was born with the rock in my hand.
I got older and put the Glock in my hand.
That’s because my man died.
Now my mom understands why
I brought that gun in the crib
and told her those damn lies.

I never thought I’d see the day
my father’s casket dropped.

RAHMEL SMITH

If Only You Could See Me

I have no direction,
nobody to guide me.
I’m full of passion, but have no support.
I have dreams, but no hope
of fulfilling them.
Life has dealt me an ugly hand,
and I have no idea
how to play it.
I’m never encouraged and often
beaten down.
I believe all the bad things
that have been said about me.
I’ve been judged harshly
for my actions. Second chances have been hard
to come by. I wonder if
you opened your eyes, people, could you see
I’m just a person trying to
be me. How different
life would be, if you could see me.

RAHMEL SMITH

Parent Abuse

Either you’re a neglecter or you’re abusive,
there’s no in-between.
Children can accuse you
of child abuse.
Why can’t parents accuse children of parent abuse?
This is my thing.
You can’t put your hands on them.
You can’t force them to go to school.
But it if you let it go like that
you’re accused of educational neglect.

LYNETTE LAWRENCE

Harsh

words and violent blows
hidden secrets, nobody knows
eyes are open, hands are fisted
depth inside, I’m warped and twisted
so many tricks, so many lies
too many when’s, too many why’s
I’m just me, warped and twisted
sleeping awake, choking on a dream
listening to a silent scream
call my mind, the number’s unlisted
lost in somebody, so warped and twisted
on my knees, alive but dead
look at the invisible blood I’ve bled
I’m not gone, my mind has drifted
don’t expect much, I’m warped and twisted
burnt out, wasted, empty, and hollow
today is just yesterday’s tomorrow
the sun died out, the ashes shifted
I’m still here, warped and twisted

EUSEBIO SOLANO

Last night

I had a dream
about rosé and dice games.
I woke up in a cell.

RAHMEL SMITH

BRENDA DAVIS

Parent Abuse

Either you’re a neglecter or you’re abusive,
there’s no in-between.
Children can accuse you
of child abuse.
Why can’t parents accuse children of parent abuse?
This is my thing.
You can’t put your hands on them.
You can’t force them to go to school.
But it if you let it go like that
you’re accused of educational neglect.

LYNETTE LAWRENCE

Harsh

words and violent blows
hidden secrets, nobody knows
eyes are open, hands are fisted
depth inside, I’m warped and twisted
so many tricks, so many lies
too many when’s, too many why’s
I’m just me, warped and twisted
sleeping awake, choking on a dream
listening to a silent scream
call my mind, the number’s unlisted
lost in somebody, so warped and twisted
on my knees, alive but dead
look at the invisible blood I’ve bled
I’m not gone, my mind has drifted
don’t expect much, I’m warped and twisted
burnt out, wasted, empty, and hollow
today is just yesterday’s tomorrow
the sun died out, the ashes shifted
I’m still here, warped and twisted

EUSEBIO SOLANO

Last night

I had a dream
about rosé and dice games.
I woke up in a cell.

RAHMEL SMITH

BRENDA DAVIS
I’m Here to Explain

Why I act a certain way.

Situations could be worse.

I’m thankful for another day.

Enemies surrounded me.

Friends abandoned me.

Living is the hard part.

Death comes easily.

Love is unconditional,

Made to attract.

It’s hard to separate

When you feel so attached.

Pain is life’s fire.

I told you not to touch.

Loyalty is internal

But the jealousy will burn you.

I ain’t saying this for nothing,

Envy’s in my heart.

Just travel to the brain,

My attitude is…forget it.

Doesn’t mean that I won’t change

My attitude is strange.

How can I be sane

When I got so much drama in my brain.

SHABORN MILLER

Queen and King

First she Queen got up.
She made breakfast.
Next, she woke up the King.
He got his breakfast.
Then she had a baby.

J. V.

Tape

I sealed my mouth, camouflaged
my face, put up a wall to
hide my ache.

J. M.

We’ll Be Moving Shortly

Early on a Monday morning
on the train, already late,
on my way to a job interview
the conductor says, Sorry for the delay.
We’ll be moving shortly.
There is a train in front of this train.
We’ll be moving shortly.
Police activity.
We’ll be moving shortly.
The train is out of service.
We’ll be moving shortly.
Have a nice day.
We’ll be moving shortly.

JUSTIN DANZY

my life as merchandise

i was manufactured :: created on an assembly line :: made from the same instructions as cattle (or chattel) :: imported from west africa :: maybe ghana :: no i meant georgia :: i handcrafted my own uniqueness :: engineered my own cracks to slip through :: i confronted heresy and emerged zealot :: my body was conceived in the dark :: never trusted :: my instructions named me suspicious :: i called myself martyr :: death is profitable :: sell me to the highest bidder :: i am the brainchild of the atlantic :: my dna flutters with the tide :: i was constructed on an auction block :: modified in the ghetto :: disassembled in the penitentiary :: but my body still glows :: transfigured into desirable :: wanted :: dead or alive :: i am a malfunction :: put me on a store shelf :: wrap me in plastic more expensive than my heartbeat

JUSTIN DANZY

I got to learn from my mistakes

We were in Brownsville walking on 95th and Clarkson. I was with five others. Most of them were in gangs. It was around 8 at night. We were talking to some girls. Then we saw some people behind us. They started throwing on masks and gloves and running toward us and we started running away. Two shots were fired and we all ran and separated and went home.

T. R.
Another Day In Clinton Hill

One summer day,
At the park
A boy named M. comes up to us
Saying some female he knows
Will give us sex.
So we’re like, Alright, let’s go.
There are four of us.
We take mad buses.
We look for hours to find the place.
When we do, it’s dirty and small,
Like a brownstone house.
We see this girl there.
She brings us inside.
To what looks like a kitchen.
All my friends are scared.
They’re like, Yo, you go.
Nah, I got a girlfriend.
I’m tired. You go.

So I go and sit on the couch.
And right when she gets ready,
The doorbell rings.
We all hide in a bathroom.
And then we hear footsteps.
We open the door a crack
And peek out.
We see this Indian kid.
He swings the door open and says,
Nah, you can’t disrespect my house.
You gotta leave.

He was a really short kid with a deep voice.
So we all go out on the porch.
Damn, we didn’t get nothin.

But he follows us out,
And says, You want to touch my sister, boy?
And he pulls up his shirt and flashes his knife.
We turn and run.
And just as we make the corner,
He’s already there.
We 180 the other way.
And this Puerto Rican kid with two 40s,
Comes out of the alley.
He clicks the bottles together,
And starts chasing us.
We cut in the street,
Running as hard as we can.
We think we’re in the clear
But he throws one of the 40s
And it rips my leg and rolls down the street.
He throws the other 40 and we duck.
It goes right over our heads
And crashes on the sidewalk.
We jump over the glass and splashed beer,
Leap on a car hood, slide over
And run for the G.
We get lucky. It’s in the station
And we hop on.
The doors close
And they bang on the train window,
With promises and threats.

The next day was back to normal.
Nobody looked for nobody.

T. B. S.
The Cycle of a Depressed Teenager

I make it home from school and
I’m crying in silence.
I wake up for school
and I’m regretting in silence.
I walk through the halls and I am fighting silence.
I make it home and I am preparing in silence.
I lay down and look at the ceiling
and I am screaming in silence.
I wake up in the middle of the night and I am dead.

A. C.

Dear Barbie,

Were you surprised
when you first
saw Ken naked?
Or not really,
being how
Mattel built you?
All I really want
to know is, girl –
what did you
all decide to do
being that
he doesn’t have a
tongue either?
Damn girl.

Dear Case Worker,

I just want you to
know that I
graduated from college
and minored in French
so you know I am
not stupid.
Just hungry.

Dear Sunshine,

I know you –
You favor
Black folks.
You got a special
Thing for our cinnamon
Skin-turned-Arizona
Sly-red-brown once
You bless us.
I don’t burn
Unless I want to.
I don’t burn
When you hold me.
I just
Reflect
Your affection.

Dear Lady in Front of Me in Whole Foods,

It’s red. The line says
red. Can you go please?
It’s not rocket
science – seriously.
You are holding up
the line, making
me mad and
screwing up
my chi.

When

I am
happy
my
whole
body
sings
like
a
hummingbird.

N. E.
Malachi, The Great

Ten years ago
I was incarcerated
and I had my son
while I was inside.
He was three months premature
and the doctor said
he wasn’t gonna make it.
It was a women’s prison
in Niantic, Connecticut.
Last Thursday, I got in touch
with the nurses
from the hospital.
They made so much stuff for him
when he was first born.
Soon I’m going to take him up there
so they can witness my miracle.

M. JOHNSON

Time’s Up

My verses are crimes.
I’m killing poems
one at a time.
One by one
I do my time.

K. B.

Caribbean Mother

I’m a woman.
I’m a parent.
I provide security, safety, and unconditional love.
I work full time, 24 hours
without any form of payment,
no insurance, no union.

TESHA DAVIS

I used to want

to be your only girl.
I used to want you around for comfort
and protection.
The day you finally came around,
(I remember like it was yesterday),
we talked, laughed, and made plans.
And then you disappeared again,
left me with no direction,
like a GPS with no connection.
Lost and unloved,
I still dream of being your only girl.

QUANDISHA GERMAN

The Way We Grew Up

In Coney Island the giggles are loud
and the rides are always running.
Kids go to MCU Park
where the homer-runners bat.
People look out for each other,
you see future basketball stars
and the birds are annoying all day long.

E. B.

Close Call

My brother was 9
and I was 10.
We were walking
to my grandmother’s
when a car approached
and the driver rolled
down the window waving
dollar bills,
asking us to get in.
We ran until
we got home,
vowing never
to go out again.

CYNTHIA FINLEY

Bad Day

I’ve had some bad days, like getting arrested
and getting grounded by my mom. She yelled at me.
I get angry when she tells me to come home early.
When I’m really angry,
my mom tells me to go to sleep.

K. V.
Finding My Way

I put my best foot forward
They say a picture’s worth 1000 words
Then my life is a portrait
I’d rather be on earth than in a coffin
So I take one day at a time and use precaution
Clinics are packed with children getting abortions
While the boy is chasing a fortune
Slices of the Devil’s pie, I don’t have my portion
I’m on my knees
Praying for no more losses
I’m physically, mentally, willing, and able
I’m motivated, but I’m financially unstable
So I gotta find my seat at the roundtable
And I don’t care if I’m judged, categorized, or labeled
I’m a do it my way
I don’t care what they say or do
I start from a Honda and turn it into an H2
Kiss my daughter and tell her goodbye, Boo
And go cheese this money
in this hell bound world, true

I’ve been tryna’ find my way–my way
But it ain’t easy, it ain’t easy
Cause everywhere I turn–Everywhere
The Devil’s out to deceive me

BIGGER BREAD
**When I say, I don't care**

the real Celene

Every day I tell my mom, I don't care.
She always says,
You'll care one day
It's crazy because she believes everything I say.
I know I care, even when I say I don't.
Little does anybody know when I say,
I don't care, the real Celene

disappears.

C. M.

**Gun Violence**

People remain silent against their will.
Authority kills.
Parents die,
their kids cry.
The government lies,
while bullets fly.
No trials apply.
The situation goes by.
Guess anybody could die.

Think, before you let it fly.

**You Have No Idea**

What it's like coming to probation.
Buy at least it's not every day.
It'll be over soon, if I just be patient.
It's better than jail, so I appreciate it.
When I'm done, I'll be 18.
These days will be so ancient.
I'll probably look back like, what was I thinking?
I'd rather be on probation than six feet under.

J. C.

**I am a young black female**

growing up in society.
I am a black male living in a white man's world.
I am you. I am me. I'm everyone & everything.
The only difference between us: where we lay our heads.
I am the 4yr old child who's at home with no food or clothes.
I am the crackhead who can't stop using.
I am the prostitute who leaves their child at home alone.
I am the girl who you just raped and left for dead.
I am the fetus that a girl just aborted.
I am my father's daughter and my mother's, maybe . . .
I am the convict in jail who is innocent.
I am the stray bullet that hit the 6yr old girl in the park.
I am the slave running from his master for her freedom.
I am hell on earth.
I am the unexpected baby in your wife's stomach.
I am the one F on your report card you are scared to bring home.
I am the music you listen to.
I am the wall the drunk driver crashed into.
I am the diploma you have yet to receive.
I am the joy that wakes you up in the morning.

I am who you say I am.

JADE COACHMAN
The Rain King
quickly fell
from the ground.
Notice the fish
in the sky.
THOMAS FUCALORO

Surface
I stood up
above the water
when they thought
I was gone.
GILFORD ADDO

Money and material
quickly develop
the wrong type of love.
LETTICE LANE

Not at the moment
With the current civil unrest
it’s plain to see
that more progress is required
for social equality.
Hashtags, sit-ins, and emotional
protests. Through the camera lens,
a prayer for peace passes my lips.
STEVE EXANTUS

I Live
when I think of ice.
It’s a cold thought,
but it makes you think.
E.B.

Shake
Since there’s no escape
I try to cope. Sometimes
without hope. I shake.
I panic. Then I just have to
stop.
KAREN HORSFORD

Speak the Truth
I’m sitting in the
kitchen to cook something
with no ingredients.
It’s just like life,
the way you plant
your footsteps,
but have no feet.
Z.M.
**Ways to Love a Woman with a Broken Brain**

*after William James*

1. Do not ask about her past. When it spills out at the worst times—crowded train stations, anniversary dinners, while separating the whites at the laundromat—do not try to stuff it back in. She will confess like the floor dropping out, so learn to walk tightrope, to appreciate the ground; you will crave gravity the way she grabs for a prescription bottle.

2. Do not ask about the prescription bottles, how they brick the room closed, how she clings to them like the saints of bad manners. Do not reprimand her when she falls “off schedule.” Understand why drying out of this fog is necessary, even if it means a weekend of uncontrolled emotions. Do not stuff her back into these bottles; there will be days when you will have to coax her out of them.

3. Do not trust any emotion you have to coax out of her. She was raised on drunk confessions. She is at her most honest when she is white hot and out of control, a fountain of emotion and erupting truths. No amount of pleading can pull this honesty out of her. Silence is a measured practice.

4. Do not trust the silence. When she falls into the darkest nights and still can’t seem to sleep, when the daytime drinking starts, when she cuts off her own hair, ask why. This is not the time for reflection. Smother her in attentive concern.

5. Do not ask about the bruises, the scars, the razor. This is a personal hell she is fighting her way out of, and it will be like trying to put out fire with rubbing alcohol—you will burn any bridge you had hopes of crossing. Her body is a war zone and she signed up for the long haul. None of it has been a mistake; they are all stops along the path that has made her.

6. Do not assume the scars are a want for dying. Do not ask about any of her apocalypse, it is not a burning. She will break and rebuild herself before the end. Do not call her phoenix; she is not a flight risk or bonfire beauty. She is tempered. She knows the trick to swallowing swords. You just open wide.

*Saraeve Fermin*
Domestic Violence

There’s a lot of males out here who are straight out chumps.

SHAI

My mind is so open

it turns buildings into prairies.

Life is

not handsome and neither is my poetry.

If

I fall asleep, give death a ransom note.

J. S.

My Life

I’m on the block now/I’m on my grind now/I lost my mind ‘til my bros got shot down/This is a bad place/This is a sad case/ I try my best to stay away from Yellow tapes

RICO

Numero Uno

Distant flowers, south of the Mason-Dixon line, mindful of questions that imagine anything finished with instruments which strike against possibility, words written with razors that route common energy.

NODEAN SCOTT

Lil’ Bobby

I’m the Man
With gold chains
And a big name
I’m in it for the bank
And not the change
Pick up the stock
And burn it into flames.
ImaFlyBeauxDoubleBeWhy?
’Cause Bob be touchin’ the limit of the sky
A super guy just to get by
Rollin’ triple 6 with dice so evil
Not even the devil will be
By my side
I pray heaven’s gates
Will open
When it comes my time.

R. G.

ImaFlyBeauxDoubleBeWhy?

Ima Fly Beaux Double Be Why?

Lil’ Bobby

I’m the Man
With gold chains
And a big name
I’m in it for the bank
And not the change
Pick up the stock
And burn it into flames.
So Much

I had to put my dog to sleep on Memorial Day. The next day someone else died, then someone else, and then someone else. I’m okay though, really, I am. Let’s give a hand for little white lies that help us remain on standby.

T. Nicholson

On the Street of my Block

We’re surrounded by cops
On the street of my block
No one lives but we’re stopped
On the street of my block
I see nothing but hell
On the street of my block
They’ll get mad if you tell
On the street of my block
There’s no mercy to show
On the street of my block
If you grind you will glow
On the street of my block
All I feel is hate
On the street of my block
There’s no open gates
On the street of my block
I walk strong with no fear

L.A.
The world is full

of lies
that everyone buys.
A loved 1 always dies.

J. F.

1995

20 years ago the gates of heaven opened wide
For you to take a ride
Pain and suffering you would feel no more
Welcoming you to the golden door
Earlier you were heavily on my mind
I didn't realize you were leaving me behind
All I kept thinking was go buy him a car
When I came home I had a big cry
And prepared to say goodbye
Remembering the time you made cough syrup
Out of honey rock candy and peppermint gin
I know one day I will see you again
The last of the last and what a memory
That was the day I lost you, granddaddy.

L. Reid

Mercury Retrograde

This afternoon I went to the Y for my usual exercise.
I finished the Precor and the Fitlinx
And submitted myself to the tortures
of the steam room and sauna.
While baking, I saw through the window
People rushing in from the swimming pool
Carrying a rescue raft.
They went around the corner toward the Jacuzzi.
A man was lying on the edge.
Someone asked, 'Is he breathing?'
Oxygen tanks and towels were brought out.
I took my shower and headed back to the main room
While the pool filled with police and rescue workers
Hovering over the man strapped to a gurney.
They took him to a waiting ambulance.
I dressed and went down to the parking lot,
Got in my car and headed out to the street.
I took my time because you never can trust
Who will back out of one of the spaces.
Suddenly, just ahead, a grey coupe raced by,
Going the wrong way on a clearly marked one-way section,
Careening down the bank,
Zipping between two large trees,
Over the sidewalk,
Leaping across the street
Landing upright in the playing field to the south of the tennis courts.
Plastic parts of the car lay in the street.
Crowds rushed over to what was left.
I didn't go since I didn't want to complicate things.
A little shaken by a close call
Since I had been only seconds from being hit broadside,
I headed home without incident.

Harold Tedford

The world is full

of lies
that everyone buys.
A loved 1 always dies.

J. F.
On the corner of St. Lawrence and Westchester, 
at four in the afternoon, 
it's sunny and 54 degrees.

Day Day sees his cousin Jo Jo walking out of a store, 
eating a sandwich. 

What’s up, Day Day? 

You a clown, says Jo Jo. How’d you get suspended? 

Day Day says, I got suspended. 

Let’s go to granddaddy’s house! 

Jo Jo says, Alright. We out. 

When they get there, Day Day goes upstairs 
and knocks on the door three times. 

Granddaddy opens it. 

Like always, he says, What you want? 

Day Day says, I need some money. 

Do I look like a bank? says granddaddy. 

What’s it for? 

For the train to Brooklyn to see 
my probation officer, says Day Day. 

Alright, but you not getting more than ten dollars. 

Granddaddy hands over the money. 

Day Day says bye and walks out. 

How much you get? asks Jo Jo. 

Day Day says, He gave me ten. 

Five is for me to go see my probation officer. 

But I might come back after I see her. 

Jo Jo says, You not gonna’ come back. 

I might, but Day Day knows he’s not coming back. 

He walks away and Jo Jo, like always, is still on his phone. 

Day Day walks to the train, 
listening to his music and lips the words: 

Daddy got… 

I got… 

…mac up 

Bullets…police… 

…backup.
FREE VERSE

Blank

All my thoughts are wicked and stink.
I just need more time to think.
I know my thoughts won’t always be gloomy and shrink.

I’m just a little warped.

CHARLES WHEELER

When I Get to the Train Station Late

I feel discouraged.
When I stand there and wait
I think of suffrage.

J.G.

I might be looked at differently

for the way I refract.
You might not understand it all,
like signatures in chicken scratch.
You gave your word,
so it’s time I give mine back.
The lives of millions taken, so I ask,
Can you live with that?
You have power, right? Then empower!
Or are you a puppet orchestrated by cowards,
hoeing land that keeps us behind,
keeping drugs and guns in the street,
viewer discretion advised.
Open your eyes. It’s not illegal yet.
Stop selling half-truths, brush off the lies.
You have all the dollars, but no kind of sense.
All quarters are shaped the same,
So why don’t you have common cents?
You are only envied by the ones
with no level of consciousness.

ANDREW DELEONARDIS

I Don’t Have Anything to Say

I don’t have anything to say
Because no one understands my language.
I don’t have anything to say
Because I don’t feel like being bothered.
I don’t have anything to say because life is difficult.
I don’t have anything to say
Because it’s not meant for my mind to be shared.
I don’t have anything to say
Because it’s the end of the day.
I don’t have anything to say, I gave it all away yesterday.
I don’t have anything to say because no one is listening.

FRENCHTRESS OLIVER, JUNE COOLEY & THE GIRLS GROUP

Germ

Not in a bacterial way,
but a name created from a name.
I am who I am, still expecting change,
living day by day, no matter if it rains.
A man’s power is created by pain.
German is my real name.
And I wear it proudly like a gold medal chain.

G.S.G.

When I Get to the Train Station Late

I feel discouraged.
When I stand there and wait
I think of suffrage.

J.G.
If somebody asked you,

Name 100 things you love.
How long would it take you
To mention yourself?

HENRY LABORIEL
Free Verse Staff

Editor-in-Chief
Dave Johnson

Managing Editor
Lonni Tanner
Office of Public Imagination
Fellow, NYC Department of Probation

Associate Editor
Thomas Fucaloro
Justin Danzy

Writing Apprentices
Cheryl Brown
Napoleon Felipe
Yasmine Lancaster
Tahara Lilly
Taqiy Witter

Design
Delcan & Company

Illustrations
Carin Goldberg (cover)
Brian Rea (p. 61)
Claudia de Almeida (p. 6)
Pablo Delcan (pp. 1, 9, 16, 23, 29, 58, 48, 55, 68, 76, 80, 82)

With Great Appreciation
South Bronx Neighborhood Opportunity Network (NeON) Team
South Bronx Family Court Team
Brooklyn Family Court Team
New York City Department of Probation (DOP)

Gratitude
NYC Department of Education,
Division of Family and Community Engagement

Special Thanks
New York City Department of Design and Construction (DDC)
New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS)

Praise
Biber Architects: James Biber, Suzanne Holt; Carin Goldberg Design;
James Victore Design; Office of Paul Sahre; David Weeks Studio;
Jon Burgerman; ESTO; Albert Vecerka; David Sundberg;
The Painter's Union, DCOM, Lutron, FLOR, Kamco; Solid Color;
Armstrong Flooring; Nontraditional Employment for Woman (NEW),
and, Brooklyn Woods – all without whom a waiting room would
be just another waiting room.

Kindness
Poets House
Teachers & Writers Collaborative
The New School MFA Writing Program
Poetry Foundation
National Endowment for the Arts

Hats Off
Cheryl Brown, Lakeisha Carter, June Cooley, Marilta Dalton, Btrace
Davis, Michael Forre, Sharron Goodwin, Gineen Gray, Myra Radden,
Esteban Rivera, Napoleon Saigbovo, Tim Salyer, Antoine Sherman,
Rodney Smith, Rick Ward, Darryl C. Williams

Applause
NeON Arts is a program of the New York City Department of Probation
in partnership with Carnegie Hall’s Weill Music Institute.
Funding provided by the Open Society Foundations through a grant
to the Mayor’s Fund to Advance New York City in support of the
New York City Young Men’s Initiative.

For more information about Free Verse writing workshops, public
readings, and open mic programs, e-mail freeversepoems@gmail.com.

©2016 The City of New York. All rights reserved.

Printer: Linco Printing