You got a poem for me? Nine hundred and ninety-seven poets (997!) answered that call in New York City Probation Center waiting rooms this year.

Clients, staff, friends, family, neighbors, security guards and seasoned, local poets come to our free weekly writing classes, spoken word afternoons, translation events, story exchanges and to birth their first books. And we have a jobs component too. Many clients come when they don’t even have to report. Not your typical Probation center, right? That’s the point.

Everyone is equal. What might seem like a poem by a client’s mom might be that of a Probation Officer. What might seem like a poem by a client’s Probation Officer could be written by a client. Some poems are hopeful, some are filled with regret, and some are tough and don’t go down easy. But neither do these poets. They are survivors with the grit and courage to move forward.

To every contributor and every reader of Free Verse, you will always have a safe space to be heard here – and we’re listening.

— The Editors

DAAVE JOHNSON
Editor-In-Chief
Poet-In-Residence

LONNI TANNER
Managing Editor

LONNI TANNER
Editor-In-Chief
Poet-In-Residence

LONNI TANNER
Managing Editor
Thing

I lost the woman that I love to this thing.
I lost my childhood to this thing.
When I was a kid, I caught my mom in the bathroom
给 over her willpower to this thing.
I looked at her and said, Mom, please stop!
She said, I can’t. You don’t understand, I’m hooked to this thing.
The way we were living, this thing had me thinking
life was real whacked.
Now that I look back, I love my mother
but I will always hate the man that created this thing
called crack.
Mama Sings

When the rent is due
When the chicken’s done
When papa comes home after being gone for so long

Mama sings
when the cake rises, after I shut the door
when the baby sleeps through the night
when papa comes home after being gone for so long

Softly Mama sings...
when my feet lay flat against my shoes
when sister says, God is always on time

Mama sings
every time
papa comes home after being gone for so long

YASMINE LANCASTER

If you forget me, I want you to know

I added extra sugar
in your coffee sometimes when you sent me out in the mornings.

NAPOLEON FELIPE

My mind is cluttered with stuff right now:

Kids
Doctor appointments
Financial issues
Housing
Food
Clean water
Happiness
Loneliness

I have so much on me.

Every day I wonder, is it ever going to get better or end.

NYKETA PALMER

Too Much

Over and over you’ve apologized.
You’ve even apologized for that time when…

Never mind, it doesn’t really matter.
They weren’t from your heart.
They were empty, cold,
a poor display of Black Arts.

Empty apologies burning strong, lifelong,
have become your drinking song.

TAKIMA NICHOLSON
I walk into my cell and I look in the mirror to watch the door behind me lock. It clicks and as the sound moves around it reminds me that I reside in a world that is not my own. I steady, try to live my life vicariously through these poems but in this world, this is what happens everything starts stopping and your hope starts dropping so your shit starts slacking and the shit people’s popping makes you forget that you want to go home and what’s it to you when the world that was for you was taken away by you now it passes by you too, so your heart turns cold you forget about love and the words from above and the song of the doves because you are concentratin’ on the I have nowhere to go state of mind, and the kind things you used to do no longer seem to be like you, now your judge thinks these are your true colors and that summer you got arrested, seems like a faraway cloud and now you’re stuck in the now and the why you got sentenced

DARIANI SERRANO
We meet
in summer,
on a hot afternoon.
We meet at night,
on the edge of darkness.
We meet in morning,
light disappearing.

CHERYL BROWN

Destroy and Rebuild

Angry like an earthquake.
Love leaks like blood.
Murder case never solved.
The heartbreak crime of never letting go.
Time ticks while I try to heal on.

EMILY ALVAREZ

It’s 5:30 pm

Adams Street.
Mary is in her office ready to leave for the day.
Dave walks by and says, Come to poetry.
Mary leaves through the back door.

MARGARET BARILLAS

Mama Knows Best

Mama, please love my music.
No, it’s not foolish.
I was born to do this.
My creativity, you
don’t notice. Every word has
emotion, causing lyrical explosion.
I’ve chosen to chase my
dream mission, made
my career decision.
Please, just listen. Like
delicious smells in the
kitchen, you singing
Yolanda Adams.
Mama, your food makes my taste buds
melt, cooking for an army
all by yourself. When you sing
I hear you for miles.

DEVONTE RHODES

Mama Lo Sa

Mamma, per favore amore mio musica.
No mai è una cosa da patti.
Sono nato per fare questo.
La mia creatività, tu
non la comprendi. Ogni parola ha
emozione provocando esplosione lirica,
scelto di seguire
il mio sogno. Ho
deciso cosa fare della vita.
Ti prego, ascolta. Come
quando tra gli odore dolce
della cugina, Mamma canta
Yolanda Adams.
Mamma, il tuo cibo si scioglie
in bocca, poi cucinare per un esercito
e tutto da sola. Quando gridi
in gli sento a miglia di distanza. ...e dici vivo.
Devi assolutamente avere Dio
tra I tuoi preferiti. Io sono nato per perderti
orgoglioso.

KAIROS ITALY THEATRE
ITALIAN TRANSLATION
Listen to Me, Escúchame

Escúchame, desde el momento que te vi, eres tan bella como una rosa. Que te veo, cada día, te quiero más.

ROBERTO MARTINEZ

What I Do Know

I want you to know one thing. Your love means everything. You’re tough, but it feels like I’m dying. Mom, you have shown me you didn’t even know me. But it was worth the wait, now I know why you protected, why you rejected, it was all for me. The courage, the strength to be me, with the honor of you. How to write, how to talk, how to become the image of you. But the one thing you didn’t teach me was how to live without you.

UNEEKA BAISDEN

Think Twice

Every gangbanger wants to be a gangster. Everyone wants to make it to the top.

They will send their own man out there to die before they go out there themselves.

They’d rather put their brother’s life at risk than sit down and tell them, Chill, it’s not worth it.

People, I understand in this street life the next day is never promised. That’s what I’m going through right now. I lost my brother to this shit. It hurts.

I’ll never see him again, never speak to him again. I look at his kid’s face and know, he won’t see him again. I just want to cry.

Man, this violence has to end. Black lives matter. Spanish lives matter. All lives matter. Period. Before you even think about joining a gang, think twice, think three times. Life. Is it worth it?

My brother. Tomorrow will be a week since he got shot five times in the chest.

RASHAD CAMACHO

Poet in the Bronx

That night he went looking for a poem, like he was looking for a home. He made a plan that he was so sure was going to work. He tattooed it on his hand. And kept repeating it as his Master Plan.

JOEL GUTIERREZ

Listen to Me, Escúchame

Escúchame, desde el momento que te vi, me enamoré de ti, eres tan bella como una rosa. Que te veo, cada día, te quiero más.

Listen to me, from the first moment I saw you, your beauty was like a rose. I fell in love with you, each day, I love you more.

ROBERTO MARTINEZ
Damn mom,

I’m sorry I really apologize since u left
it got messed up and I’m traumatized
all the disrespect I did I think and I wonder why
all the times u cried u believed me when I lied
I prayed to God to switch it up ‘cause u know me I’d rather die
than be in a room full of hurt watching all my siblings cry
my grandmother aunts my cousins and even I
u said it, see u later ‘cause u know it’s never bye
‘cause that’s gone forever, and u had faith that it’d get better
but it’s only gonna get better the day we come together
in jail, all alone u comforted me with them letters
to always give a fight and to never ever
let up I thank u for the meals I thank u for the bed
I appreciate all the wisdom
that u filled up in my head these thank yous won’t stop
I thank u for a lot
I thank u when u cooled me down whenever I was hot
I thank u for the kisses I thank u for the hugs
lovely lady up above I thank u for ya love
I thank u for my siblings and I thank u for my life
it’s really a blessing u and my daughter look alike
I just can’t forget that I love u with all my might
mama ya I love u rest in peace sleep tight
Refuse

When you refuse me
you confuse me.
What makes you think
I’ll let you in again?

CHASTITY ROLLE

In the night

silence comes,
I only hear cars passing,
I take a deep breath and
hope for better days.

CHASTITY ROLLE

Butt Phat
for Tahara Lilly

Girls talk about making changes.
They gonna change this,
tuck that.
Fill this, balloon that.
But I say fill your mind with knowledge,
your soul with temperance,
your heart with forgiveness.
No matter the change,
you stay a queen,
as long as you stand
straight enough
to wear the crown.

JONATHAN SYPHAX

Fare Jump

Think before you don’t pay
because if you hop
It could ruin your day.

JONATHAN ANTONIO

My sister never forgave

my father for telling her
he didn’t want her.

JONATHAN SYPHAX

FROM THE HOOD 2 MANHOOD

THE HOOD DIDN’T RAISE ME

BUT NEITHER DID MY DADDY

THE HOOD LOVED ME BAD OR GOOD

I DON’T KNOW IF MY DADDY DID

WHEN I HAD A QUESTION, I ASKED THE HOOD AND
GOT AN ANSWER

WHEN I HAD A QUESTION, I ASKED MY DADDY, HE
NEVER ANSWERED

NOW I’M ON MY OWN, STRUGGLING, ‘CUZ I OWE
THE HOOD

I WISH I HAD MY DADDY, I WOULD NEVER OWE HIM

MY PAIN, MY SUFFERING, IS NOW MY SON’S DNA

THANKS TO MY HOOD

THANK YOU, DADDY, FOR EVERYTHING

ABDUL MALIK
Gomorrah Bx

They bring us into this life and the only thing promised is death. Running the streets and boulevards, seeking the almighty dollar, following orders to raise in the ranks, away from hookers, dope fiends and even skanks. The Capo says shoot, we fire our guns. Then we hide out for days, again on the run. Gomorrah, in the Bronx.

GW

Gomorrah Bx


MASSIMO GARRITANO
ITALIAN TRANSLATION
How could I

live beside you
for six years and never say hello?

You got pregnant on our block
without even showing.

On the street of not knowing
You never know where you're going.

FRANZE WILLIAMS

Lafayette Gardens

When you look out the window
You always see problems.
(I ain’t tryna’ solve ‘em).
Guys out there got the heat to
dissolve ‘em.
Remember all the days
we couldn’t eat
so we were starvin’?
I don’t want no problems.
(I ain’t tryna’ solve ‘em).

FRANZE WILLIAMS

Wedding Nights

belong
to the congregations
of rumors.
They look like grandmother’s
bones.
Wedding nights
should belong
to grooms and brides,
but they never do;
bedrooms full of ghosts.

YASMIN LANCASTER

Un-Happy Valentine’s Day!

I’m not in love.
I can’t find love.
And I’m mad at people
that are in love.
I don’t want to see any love stories.
I don’t want to turn on the TV
and see people making love.

JO DECI

Lot

It’s crazy ‘cause
Avery killed Tony
and then
they killed Avery
the day after.

SCHOLANDA MILLER

Babylon System

Why does the system
make things so hard?
Only a few are chosen
and so many called.

So many suffer
and only a few have it all.

So many are weak,
only a few are strong.

Only a few rise
and so many fall.

Open up your eyes
if you like to see
what’s going on.
Give thanks & praises to the
King of Kings
& Lord of Lords.

TAQY WITTER

Lot

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if you like to see
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& Lord of Lords.

TAQY WITTER
There’s no beauty,
unless you have a brain.

JACHE BORDEN

I came from nowhere
and it’s only getting harder.
So I go to school,
hit the books, to get even smarter.

DARNELL UNDERWOOD

I am writing to keep me
from being alone
I am going through a lot a lot a lot a lot a lot a lot a lot a lot
I don’t want to pick up and just leave
and be mean
to my friends and family

JASON MASON

Now and Later

Mecca and Jessica
are on the phone.
Mecca says, Let’s go out.
Jessica says, I’m broke.
Mecca starts laughing and leaves her.

DEVONTE ANDREWS

Midnight on The Corner of Adams And Smith

John and Moquan
are playing 2K.
John loses.
He asks for a rematch.
Moquan says, Naaaa. I won already.
A fire truck passes.
The sirens are loud and catch their attention.

DEVONTE ANDREWS

Put away the gun.

Did you forget he’s a son?
Black Lives Matter, all this shooting ain’t fun.
Turn around, run, throw your gun in the water.
If you shoot, looks like you’re going to jail for manslaughter.
How about you don’t pull the trigger, leave him alone.
Let him live and you live and go home.
Shoot him, you’ll make his family sad, and each day they’ll get sadder.
We’re already worried about cops, no more of this. Black Lives Matter.

MICHAEL GOMEZ
Baby La La

The Twenty-Third Pound

My appetite is my shepherd,
I always want.
It maketh me to sit down and stuff myself.
It leadeth me in the path of Burger King
For a Whopper.
It destroyeth my shape.
Yea, though I knoweth, I gaineth.
I will not stop eating.
For the food tastes so good.
The ice cream and cookies,
They comfort me.
When the table is spread before me,
It exciteth me.
As I filleth my pail continuously,
My clothes runneth over.
Surely bulges, and weight, shall follow me
All the days of my life.

SIR GEORGE W. WILLIAMS

That somebody who I miss,

that somebody
who passed
away,
that somebody was my grandma.
That somebody
held my hand.
That somebody
was light-skinned.
I might be brown,
but as far as I’m concerned
I’m not racist.
Love is beauty and
revenge is cruel.
But I gotta’ say
my great grand-
dad was so
cool.

KAWAN BELL

Life

can be good and life can be trouble
we are an open book and some live in a bubble
love is free and hate comes with a price

SHARON PAUL
What would I do  
for Ms. Cheryl Brown

If I never met you
I’d be sitting here waiting, wondering what to do
Mad, sad and anxious, all kinds of feelings running through
Listening to my iPod, thinking about my crew
Here, you make it more like family
So, here’s a few lines to impress

Lies

I’m glad I’m not stupid enough to go back to you.
You hurt me.
You played me.
You lied to me.
But sometimes I wish I was stupid enough to go back to you.
You made me fall for you.
You made me happy.
You let me be myself.
You let me fall in love.
But you didn’t catch me.
Yeah, I’m glad I’m not stupid enough to go back to you.
I’m much smarter than that.

I wish you to

see
t i lucked up
and pulled my way up
from the ground up
all i had was faith
to get my confidence up
i was in a bad place
but now i’m in a good space
my past, i can’t erase
sometimes i was high as space
gonna’ hit the light feet
so women’ll try and chase me
but i’m just making money ’cause of God’s grace

CARLOS DELGADO

Dishwashing at Dallas BBQ on Flatbush

The work load is a 12 hour day.
Five to closing.
On Saturday night people are still eating at 1 o’clock in the morning.
And then it all comes to us:
the rotisseries, the rice pots, the soup pots, the fryers
all have to be washed by hand
before they can go through the dishwasher.
The silverware has to be washed three times
and then put away.
All the plates have to be washed and put away.
They are stacked as far as you can see.
And the glasses,
4 kinds of glasses:
water
drinking
champagne and those stupid Bahama Mama’s.
They’re so big and goofy.
And you gotta stack them.
Then we have to wash all the rubber mats,
and the floors and the walls where the food has splashed.
Sometimes we don’t get out of there till 4 o’clock in the morning.
It’s money, but it’s hard work.

ISAIAH ELLIS

RODNEY TURNER
Poetry Pimp

A New Smooth Player Done Hit The Town
You Won’t Hear Him Coming,
His Suede Shoes Don’t Make A Sound
He’ll Just Ask You For A Few Words
That’s All, At First

Here He Comes Again,
Write More Words, He Says It With That Thirst

He Needs It, Now, Whenever You’re Alone,
You Better Get That Poem
Hey Guy, I Don’t Have No Words, I Don’t Care, I Just Reply
He Says, Get To Writing That’s A Poem Right There

(Chorus)
He Just Haiku Slapped Me
I Jotted Down These Lines
He Said, Write Free Verse Until The Day You Die
He Said, Get Me Ten More Poems
But My Hand Just Went Limp
Metaphon Slapped Again
By The Poetry Pimp

He Just Sonnet Slapped Me
I Jotted Down These Lines
He Said, Write Free Verse Until The Day You Die
He Said, Get Me Ten More Poems
But My Hand Just Went Limp
I’ve just been Poetry Slapped Again
By The Poetry Pimp

LA LA AKBAR
**Declaration of Questions**

What is race, really?  
Why hate when there is opportunity?  
Who am I to judge?  
Why are we always defined by our past?

LASHAWN WILKERSON

**Pardon Me**

I didn’t know I loved you, until I lost you.  
I didn’t know how hurt you were, until your silence told me so.  
I’m sorry, on my knees, I’m so, so, so, sorry. Pardon my ego. He didn’t consider you. He felt inclined to put you down. Pardon his words, for they betray what my heart is really saying. I didn’t know how much I loved holding your hands until I had to put mine together in prayer at night. I asked the creator to forgive me. I asked to turn back time. I never knew how much I loved running my fingers through your hair, the scent of strawberry melon, your hymns of enjoyment. I miss your smile, big, wide and genuine. I didn’t know the cost of losing, the ability to stare at you when you weren’t looking. I’d steal glances. I am guilty of that crime. Pardon me. I never knew, but I’m learning. Isn’t that what love is?

NAPOLEON FELIPE

**Develop a Life, Not a Page**

You have 7K plus on the Gram  
You have 5K plus on Facebook  
You have 4 email accounts  
You have 2 phones  
1 for the girl  
1 for the club.

People believe what you show  
Until they meet you  
But if you get locked up  
Or shot up  
Where will your 12K followers be?

Develop a life, not a page.

ANTOINE SHERMAN
Story Number One

I can tell you stories
And I swear they never end.
Life is all about the wins
And losing all your friends.
If you live in the hood
You're pushed to sell
Dope or coke to pay the rent,
The bills and taxes,
All, just to make a dent.
And our housing makes it worse.
Since I was seven,
My mother was paralyzed.
Her body didn't work.
If I die today
Just tell my brother
To watch over my mother.
And tell both of my brothers
To watch out for each other,
Because nobody ever wonders,
Is there a bullet in a gun.

Ms. Fish Hooked Them

Lubna's first day of high school,
She walked into class and saw a girl in a dress.
She gave her a smile.
The girl threw a murderous look
At her. A new friendship began.

Uzma looked around the cafeteria
With a lunch tray in her hand, saw a girl in
A hijab eating by herself. She walked over to the girl.
May I sit here? She asked.
The girl smiled and said. Be my guest.

Bina was pleased to make a friend
On the first day of school.
And it helped that the girl was nice.
She didn't like to eat alone.
The food tasted bad.

Jasmin wanted people to leave her alone.
She didn't want to make any friends.
She just wanted to get through school,
Mind her own business,
And she wanted everyone to do the same.

Ms. Fish was the ELS teacher.
All four girls were in her class.
They were paired up to work in a group.
Even if one didn't want to
They were secretly glad Ms. Fish made them.

For success,
I’ll patiently wait.

DAVID JONES

Why
does she hate me so bad
when I’m so good to her?

RICKY HARRIS

Empty Apology

I will not accept an empty apology. I can appreciate honesty. It's honorable when you speak your truth, but not from that place of fear you use to justify resistance to change.

I will never forgive you when you make a mistake and then allow it to define you.
When you're courageous, and take hold of your destiny, and sit with me to talk about what you desire to do after the mistake is over, then and only then, will I accept your apology.

That's when you'll earn my respect. That's the moment when you are who you say you are.
That's when I will believe your words and stand with you as we pursue our purpose as brothers.

Only then, will I say, I am My Brother's Keeper.
I RESPECT YOU.

ABDUL MALIK
Lost Son

Where have all the kings gone
buried beneath the rubble
of broken tenements,
halls that no longer
scream the words
of Malcolm,
the strong will of Martin,
the fight of Medgar Evers,
the sonnets of Richard Wright,
the freedom chants of Fredrick Douglas,
the blood of Huey P. Newton.
Silenced by their rage,
they have not heard the words.
They have not heard the words.
They have lost their crown.
One day they might see.
Their ears may hear
before death follows,
before their legacy
disappears.

JONATHAN SYPHAX
Soul to Soul Poetry

Is it wrong for you to be angry when you just don’t understand
Is it wrong for you to be angry when God has a master plan
Is it wrong for you to be angry when it seems like a dream may die
Is it wrong for you to be angry when all you want to do is cry
Is it wrong for you to be angry when you’re filled with mistrust and doubt
Is it wrong for you to be angry when you feel completely left out
Is it wrong for you to be angry when your thoughts are filled with fear
Is it wrong for you to be angry if you find out they are no longer here
Is it wrong for you to be angry that the relationship is no longer thick
Not because of a fight or disagreement but simply because they’re very sick
Is it wrong for you to be angry when you’re sad and blue
Some reading this may wonder is this fiction or is it true
Is this piece written about me or am I talking about you

LALISA REID

Money Is the Root

but family is what I live for.

JOSEPH NACMIAS

Word to Your Mother

I done starved a lot
When you sitting in the dark
It gets hard to plot
But that’s how you find out
Whether you’re a shark or not
That hair on their chest
It’s due to Rogaine
You see, the same thing they claim to be
It’s insane to see
Thugs claiming to be
Sweating, they in the same lane as me
Something you must be trained to be

KIING CHEF

Beauty

slips out of the
world
almost unnoticed.

D. P.

Last night I woke up

And realized I need you here.
We hit rock bottom
And the floor caved,
Fluttering palpitations
Went through my anatomy
Allowing me to believe I was alive
Even without you.
The glow covered my exterior like a pericardium.
I washed my body to remove your touch,
Cleaned my clothes to remove your scent.
And here I sit in the corner,
In an old chair,
Rockin’ back and forth
With a half-gallon of booze on my lap.

ELANDIS KELLEY

When my brother

got locked up,
he made the biggest mistake.
I want him to learn from it.
I wouldn’t want to see myself going through something like that.

AMAYRANCE CRESCENTE

Jonathan Q. & Mom

Son: Mom, you’re in my personal space.
Mom: You came out of my personal space.

ELANDIS KELLEY
Midnight on 95th

Friday, Coney Island, Rayquan and Michelle are sleeping in the house on the 9th floor and they wake to the sound of gunshots. They look out the window to see what’s going on. Everybody’s running. Michelle says, We better stay in the house. Rayquan laughs. Michelle goes back to bed. Rayquan goes outside. He hears shots again, this time, buzzing his head. He runs back upstairs to his room and closes the door.

JOHNELLE HINTON

Why I Write Poetry

I have more patience for paper than I do for people.

DEJA JONES

NYNY

If you’re gonna love New York, you have to love the weather.

INGRID RAYSOR

Honey,

don’t give away something that you ain’t buy.

CHERYL BROWN

Secrets

I got a story, but I don’t want to talk about it.

JAMES JONES
As I fly in the sky
I see birds going by
with little ones close by:
I try and try
to get little ones, sigh.
Why doesn’t God bless me (why)?
As a rainbow rises,
a light flashes before my eyes
and a baby falls,
then another one
and another one
till my eyes fill
and I cry.

After years in the nest,
my babies are all grown up.
But now they won’t leave
and I don’t know why.

CHERYL BROWN
Men

are stealing
their girlfriends’ head-wraps
because they’re fed up
with their hoodies being stolen.

VICTORIA SANUSI

Homecoming

I just did one year of my life in upstate prison.
Came home, racked up in the game, ‘bout to get back on
My Kobe suit, foreign sneakers, Y3 Adidas on my feet.
Like Tom Cruise, I don’t brag, far from cocky,
But friends try to ice my potential like hockey.

D’NELL FAIRMAN CAMPBELL

Daytime, Sunday, Forest Hills, Queens

Walking to the bus stop,
it’s raining. The puddles
tip to overflow.
The bus drives through.
A huge wave
covers the lonely walker.

COURTNEY CROSS

Poems and Championship Jackets

I used to write poems for my ex-girl.
When I was away in college
I wrote her poems every day
and gave her my two basketball championship jackets.
When we broke up,
she didn’t want to give up the poems or the jackets.
She said, I cheered for you so hard
I earned those jackets.
It is true. In one of the championship games,
it got so dramatic,
she and her sister were in the stands crying.
We were down by 7,
4 minutes and 39 seconds left to play.
My father whispered to the coach,
Put Sean in the game.
When I checked in,
the other team had the ball.
They were passing it back and forth,
trying to run down the clock.
And all that time,
I’m running back and forth,
timing their passes.
The rest of my guys were standing back in a zone defense
and I was chasing the ball like a guinea pig.
But I lulled them to sleep.
They didn’t know I was keeping track
of the arc of the ball.
So I faked,
and when they passed it
I smacked it toward their basket.
They couldn’t do anything but grab me.
So, I’m shooting the foul shots.
I made the first one
and missed the second one.

SEAN BENTLEY
Hialeah

Drinking Cuban coffee, café con leche.

Eating Cuban sandwiches, with maduros on the side.

Watching the machismo, entertaining the females.

Looking around and wondering, is Hialeah in America?

Am I the immigrant in this land?

Is Border Patrol going to deport me?

Rice and black beans, better than pasta.

Being part Italian makes me Latin at heart.

Dear Madeleine,

It’s been 3 months since I’ve heard from you. I hope everything is ok. Since your sister-in-law’s funeral I know you’ve been depressed and missing her. I miss you. I remember when I used to live in Jersey. On your days off we went to the beach and your favorite seafood restaurant. Do you remember when I taught you how to drive? You hugged me and gave me my first kiss. Every morning after that I brought you a “Dunkin’ Donut” coffee and a bagel twist. When I was lonely you suddenly texted and visited and we rented a DVD and watched some funny movie. Oh, Madeleine! Missing you everyday--

Your Best Friend,

GUYTO CHERY
On the Streets of Not Knowing

On the streets of not knowing
walk the souls of those whose lives were stolen,
snatched like the thick girl waist training,
gunned down because of the set
they were supposed to be claiming.

On the streets of not knowing
Shorty’s pants sagging,
grandma’s wigs wagging,
‘lil kids dabbing,
preachers praying,
moms slaying,
junkies swaying.

On the streets of not knowing
tears of grief flood the gutters
as Coy, Tony, and Avery’s heartbeats flutter,
flutter away, flutter away
as the pierced lead flows through their plasma,
grasping for that last breath
like they have asthma.

On the streets of not knowing
every corner has a DOA stamp,
a yellow tape ramp,
a staircase that is bloodied and damp.

On the streets of not knowing
we will never know why:
Why you took them?
Why are they gone?
Your friends, your bros.
They know, we will never know
on the streets of not knowing.

SCHOLANDA MILLER
You start off by getting locked up by NYPD, placed in a bullpen on one hard bench along with more brothers. You find yourself with no place to sleep or even sit, except on the floor because everybody can’t fit on that one bench. You stay in that pen between two and six hours, lucky if you get anything to eat, before you're transported to Central Booking. And Central Booking is worse. There's nowhere to sleep. Everyone's on the floor. You have to step over people to move around. There's only one filthy toilet and one filthy sink. And everyone can see you use it. No privacy at all.

Between six and eight hours go by, before you're moved from one pen to another and another and another, until you finally get to the pen where you wait to see the judge. And the food is awful. Breakfast is one small box of cereal and one pint of milk. No bowl, no spoon. Lunch is peanut butter and honey sandwiches. These days, cheese sandwiches are a delicacy. They used to give you both. And baloney.

To get to the judge can take one and half to two days. And if you don't get released, after seeing the judge, you're headed straight for Rikers Island. On Rikers, it may take a day or two before you see a bed. You're still sleeping on the floor for those two days. Each pen, filled with 25 to 50 inmates, has one phone. The gang clicks take over the phone. So, you may never get to use it to call your loved ones. Before you get your bed you have to clear medical. When you finally get your bed, you're housed with 50 inmates and 50 beds, each bed about a foot apart. Lying there, you can reach out and touch the next inmate.

The officers wake you up for a 7 a.m. count. You're allowed to get up anytime you want. You can even go in the dayroom and watch TV. But the only way you can control the TV is if you get there early in the morning. There's always a click controlling the set. Most of the time you're subject to watch stuff you don't want to watch. The phones come on at 7 a.m. and go off at 8 a.m. Lunch is anywhere between 10:30 and 12:30. You have to line up in the hallway, like you're in a public school. There is no talking allowed. In the mess hall, you get five minutes to eat your food. No food is allowed out of the mess hall. If you get caught, you get written up.

The bathrooms are horrible: eight toilet bowls divided by four feet high partitions with no doors. When you sit in the toilet everybody can see you. No privacy. The showers: eight shower heads, eight shower stalls (if you want to be in the shower with eight men). To get a razor to shave, you have to give your I.D. To get toilet paper, toothpaste, and soap, you have to ask. If you have money in your account, you're allowed to use the phone for 21 minute calls, three times over the day. No money, then you're allowed three six-minute phone calls for the week.

You're allowed to take a job like cleaning the dorm, working in the kitchen, mopping the hallways, washing clothes, doing yard work. The highest paying job is loading and unloading. That pays $40 a week. All the other jobs pay $10-20 a week.

You're allowed to go to the commissary, provided you have money in your account.

Most of the food you buy is junk food: packs of rice, Oodles of Noodles, packs of tuna, mackerel, or chicken. No bowls are allowed. No forks. You have to sneak a fork from the mess hall. They sell you peanut butter with no bread. You have to sneak the bread from the mess hall. If you get caught sneaking, you get written up. Bowls are usually made from empty two-liter bottles. You cut the plastic bottle in half with a rope by shifting it back and forth. The bottle heats up and then you can rip it. At any time, they can come in and yell, Search. And everyone must stand by their bed and then are moved to the day room. The officers go through everybody's personals: their food, their toiletries and their bed. Everything: thrown on the floor. The whole dorm is a mess. Usually, no weapons or drugs are found. They just do this to aggravate the inmates. Then you have to clean it up. It's like cleaning up a garbage dump. After hearing all this, do you think what you're planning to do tonight is worth going to jail?

RODNEY TURNER

Jail is Not Where It’s At

You know

what time I ate lunch?
Five o’clock.
What else can I say?
The struggle is real.

JENNIAN JOSEPH
**Fear**

Grips in the middle of the night  
Those fingers that hold your eyelids down  
That weight sitting on your chest  
That feeling of hate  
 Shackles on your ankles  
Chains on your neck  
Choke when you speak  
No empathy  
No ability to cry

NICHOLAS PATTERTON

**All Lives Should Matter**

We live in a world where  
All lives are getting sadder  
The knife and the gun now hold the power  
Under the sun our kids shouldn’t have to run  
From bullies on a playground  
But lives get lost everyday  
Lives get born everyday  
When I wake or before I go to bed  
I find time to pray  
So my kids can walk the streets  
With their heads held high  
But they wonder, *Mama, how does it feel To fly?*  
See now, that’s advice I can’t give them  
’Cause mama’s never flown  
As they get older  
I need them to see eye to eye  
Black or White  
Color shouldn’t matter  
In the world we live in  
All lives should matter

GENEVA ELMORE

**Espresso!**

in the morning  
wakes me up  
I stretch my body out cuz I’m craving that cup,  
looking forward to a day of smiles, no grey.

MELISSA PÉREZ

**Spring’s Emotions**

April evenings, full of love and joy  
Nice weather, nice enough for a light sweater  
But plans are hard to decide  
Summer youth jobs, time to apply  
The laws of the city get hard to comply  
Arrests being made off temptations  
Kids get hungry and lose their patience  
Sounds of mufflers from cars racing  
I thought I wouldn’t make it, I thought I wouldn’t make it  
In the month of April, I swear no fakin’  
Rikers Island left me vacant

MARKCUS SANTANA

**Montego Bay**

One morning in Jamaica, I was shopping and I saw this precious black doll.  
She looked like the little girls in Montego Bay. I knew I had to take her back to New York City  
for this little girl that lives in the Bronx. I couldn’t wait to see her.  
Her face lit up, Is it a gift for me?  
I said, When I saw this doll, I thought of you.  
In a quiet and serious voice, she said,  
I want to give this doll a Jamaican name.

INGRID RAYSOR

**Love,**

I never knew I loved learning  
& being smart makes you cool.

ARMANI MILLER
Libertad

Hoy quisiera ser libre
como el ruiseñor al amanecer,
con su lindo canto,
enamora a las demás aves.

Libertad que linda eres
hoy quisiera llegar a tí,
hoy quisiera estrecharte Libertad
y llevarte conmigo Libertad.

Ven aquí, Libertad
que hoy me siento solo.
La soledad me enloquece.
Ven aquí Libertad.

Desde el fondo del alma
te digo que te extraño
hoy quisiera abrazarte
y gritar: LIBERTAD.

---

Freedom

I would like to be free today
like the nightingale at dawn,
with his beautiful song,
enamoring the other birds.

Freedom, how beautiful you are
today. I would like to reach you
today. I would like to extend you, Freedom,
and take you with me.

Come here, Freedom.
I feel so alone today.
This loneliness drives me crazy.
Come here, Freedom.

From the bottom of my soul,
I say, I miss you.
I’d like to hug you
and shout your name, FREEDOM.

TELLY SANTOS - ORIGINAL
AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Different

It started because she was having a baby as a teen. She was forced to get on welfare because welfare was the thing. She had hopes and dreams to be on movie screens. She dropped out of school. She didn’t know what to do. She was 14, a baby having a baby. Life is crazy. Her mama, only maybe, could be there to help. But sometimes, her mama, be acting shady.

DEKUAN RICHARDSON

12

my whole life changed when I turned 12
no childhood
no support
no motivation
everybody always saw the bad in me
all I ever wanted
was to keep my mama from crying
and my siblings from witnessing
I didn’t want them
to take the same path
the one I was forced to take
only god knows how much I can deal with
and when to stop
giving me obstacles
I wanna do the opposite
of what everybody is expecting
which is
for me to fail.

MARKCUS SANTANA

Black is Beautiful

It’s time we own our knowledge so no one can take it.
It’s important we learn our history.
We need to know who killed Martin and Malcolm.
It seems to be a mystery.

Historically, we were slaves and then sent with our children to early graves.

My question is: What does Black mean to you?
As for me, Black is Beautiful!

BRUCE KIRKLAND

Tree Paradox

I plant a seed that grows a tree only to burn it down.

OMAR MOEVETE

Lost Love

Mama shouldn’t be surprised I had a son out of wedlock and a daughter to follow. Alone in my own head. Lost in life. Late bloomer, they say. Bad memories like a mental movie.

Wait till marriage. What’s the point? Your husband already took that away. A friend said, I had the best childhood. I wish I could say that. Growing up molested and raped. You’d be surprised, it’s common. Feeling devoid of life, only babies can fulfill. Without them, what identity do I have? Love of my life, getting married, knife to my gut, life crumbling further beneath my feet. I knew who I was when we were inseparable.

AMANDA HEINZ
Edgewater Crew

Casey is very pretty with her long brown hair, a ponytail and diamond studs in her ears, and a bright white smile.

Lily has blue eyes that captivate your soul and speak volumes about her moods and demeanor, posing smartly in her Daisy Dukes.

Caitlin has blonde hair, fashioned in cornrows like a plowed field on her head. The piercing in her nose shines in the sunlight, blinding my eyes.

Brianna, the less obtrusive of a twin, studious in her spectacles, we wonder what she’s thinking. Loyal to her identical twin, Caitlin.

Juliana is the one with an attitude like little Miss Perfection. Her aquiline nose and classic features are a remnant of a Roman heritage.

Alyssa, as tall as a bean pole, is a natural athlete and plays a mean game of basketball. Competitive to a fault, I pity her opponents.

Haylee is a very dark brunette with a quick smile. Seemingly friendly, one wonders what’s behind her engaging inclination.

Alexis glows without really trying. Her natural beauty and brown skin contrasts with the whiteness of the others. All friends, they’re thick as thieves.

Love, Maybe

After our worst wars,
We lay down
And forget about
Our bloodiest battles.

Amor Tal Vez

Después de nuestras peores guerras,
Nos acostamos
Y nos olvidamos de
Nuestras batallas más sangrientas.

Yoelin Gomez - Original
And Spanish Translation

The Chocolate You Can’t Throw Away

I can’t quite grasp your intentions.
I can’t crack the code of why me?
Because there is no why me?
There is no code to break.
As you ran your fingers down the miles and miles of my melanin, what were you thinking?
Was I just another one of your dips into the chocolate fountain?
You seem to swim there a lot.
In the fountain of sweet sacrifice other chocolate bars like me don’t understand why butterfingers like you don’t realize how much richer we are without your peanut butter touch. It’s too sticky for us to unstick.

I caught you swimming in this fountain plenty of times, more times without me than with.
I just happened to be that chocolate bar you’d take a bite of when you wanted some, then throw in the back of the freezer to save for later.
You’re always taking your pieces home.
I’m the only one who seemed to linger.
Why is it me, you choose to nibble on?
What’s so special about me that I get to be the chocolate that you can’t throw away?

Deja Jones
Stones pass through the river,
snails through the sea.
In my arms I bring,
bunches of bunches of flowers.

DAVE JOHNSON
SPANISH TRANSLATION

Por el río pasan piedras
por el mar caracoles.
En mis brazos trago yo,
muchos ramos de flores

YONATHAN GONZÁLEZ
It’s April,
We’re out & about.
The sun beats down
Off the top of St. Patrick’s.
The streets are
Busy & the baby screams.
She can’t seem to find shade
to separate her from the mean sun.

OLIVIA TROY

me, you, daddy, and baby boo

you killed me and now i’m drunk
on the juice you left in my jug
this thing is swellin’ and
my body is tellin’
that any day i’m gonna pop
and what will i do then?
ask your daddy for help!
don’t make me go back to him
do you really want our lovely sin
to get mixed up with your close kin?
you know he’ll claim this baby too
just like he did the other two
and if this keeps up
we won’t ever have anything
to call our own

D. P.

Your Voice
for Maceo

when you sing
you bring back
my mother
and the song she used to sing
in my room at night
when we were alone

ELIZABETH SAXTON

Valorar El Amor

El amor no es para todo el mundo.
por que mucho
no lo saben
valorar, igual que
me paso a mi perdi:
mi amor de mi vida.

JOSE BALBUENA

Love Appreciated

Love is not for all the world.
Not many know how
to embrace it, similar
to my experience when
I lost the love of my life

BAUL CARRASQUILLO JR.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Melo In the Making

Take us to the playoffs, Carmelo Anthony.
Step back while you make
a magnificent three.
Take it to the cup
and fill it to the rim, Yellow Melo.

DESMOND MARTINEZ

Haiku (translation of Basho)

Hey, ancient pond.
Pay attention to the frog
leaping into water. Splash!

G. W.

Furu ike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto

BASHO (17TH CENTURY)

Good Time for Paris

My daughter is my life.
Every time I go and visit her, she smiles.
She’s so happy, but she hates when it’s time for me to
leave.

Don’t worry, Paris, we will be back together
soon.

KATRINA HARRIS

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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and the song she used to sing
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We’re out & about.
The sun beats down
Off the top of St. Patrick’s.
The streets are
Busy & the baby screams.
She can’t seem to find shade
To separate her from the mean sun.

OLIVIA TROY
G-Money, 2 Mama

I'm chasing this money
doi ng these shows
just tryna' make it
out of Bed Stuy.

If mama could see
mama would know
when you been in the dirt
it's time to grow.

GERALD ANDERSON

Spiritual Warfare

My life is a timeline of love
falling from above, descending on me like a dove,
fighting evil spirits daily, they try to fence me in,
push and shove like groupies, the government's pleased to
see them poof me, nah, mean, so
spooky, but heaven came into my life to boost me
now my life is like a movie. I'm not picky, but
choosy, the mean things you say to me don't move me,
matter of fact, give me a pen and loose leaf
and recite some free verses. We're going to the crown
like a Christmas star at the top of the tree. I'm single like
a number one hit record. I'm a musical instrument: piano, drum,
saxophones, talk to me.

BRUCE KIRKLAND

I'm young & I'm black

Y'all my brothers
and that's a fact
I care for my ppl
I might never get them back
so listen to this
tell me how u feeling 'bout that
in the back of that car
hearing that sound click clack
straight to that pen
ain't no time to relax
with that metal bench bed
more like a mat
can't even go to a store
and cop a Kit Kat
lost all freedom
wish I never did that
and mom stressing
like
where's my kid at

IRA ALLEN
Love,

I can be an angel
or a monster, but
I will always love
you from the bottom
of my feet.

AMANDA PETERS

Home at Last

My mom loves me.
My sister hugs me.
I sit in the living room.
I hear a broom.
Swish, swish, I wish
my mom would just
stop cleaning, but I
know she won’t. She
loves her ways.
She smiles and says,
I’m here.

JAH-KEIFF MYRICK

Kid Thoughts

Today, I’m thinking about my kids and what remains.
I can see the past doesn’t
last. All the fun and games, and the life I was living
is now about my kids
and how we’re going to last.

DESMOND MARTINEZ

True Love

You know it when you have it
&
you miss it when you don’t.

S. A. R.

I’m free

I’m free
versing, no rehearsing.
I’m a car reversing.
At Probation, for a situation.
Post bail, no jail.
Drive, pay the meter.
Ride, no fare beater.

PAUL LEUFROY

The Year I Turned 30

was the worst birthday of my life.
I should have been grateful to have lived
to celebrate another year.
Instead of counting my blessings,
instead of being grateful that I was healthy,
instead of appreciating that I had
a husband and a beautiful child,
a good job,
shelter,
food,
love,
peace of mind,
I spent precious time
being upset that I was
never going to be twenty-something
ever again.

Never live in the past.
Have an attitude of gratitude.

BRENDA DAVIS

I want to say

I love you,
but I am not sure of the
definition.
I will keep pretending to
love you, till I actually
do.

ABU TAHIRU SILLAH

Home at Last

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but I am not sure of the
definition.
I will keep pretending to
love you, till I actually
do.

ABU TAHIRU SILLAH
HAUNGRY AND BROKE!!!

When you’re walking home
And you’re broke,
Everything smells soooooooo good.
Popeyes,
Wendy’s,
Burger King.
Your stomach starts growling.
You don’t want the homemade sandwich
in your book bag.
Your mouth is watering,
wishing you could just find one dollar.

TAHARA LILLY
Dreaming

So, I am not a citizen of this land of opportunity. You call me an ILLEGAL ALIEN. In this great hour of destiny, I stand tall, surrounded by friends, foes, and everything in between. Born into action, I must win. While my brethren fight for this country with their lives, I am fighting for my existence. I am a dreamer.
I think of fire-lit homes, marches, and futile demonstrations. Because my future is being decided by fear and intimidation I see them in their fancy suits, but they do not see me. And the more scared I become, the more I hide, the more invisible I become, dreaming of things I want, but I know I cannot have. Another one is taken away. I want to stand up and say something. But I am mocked by hopelessness.
I am silent for fear that the next one they take away will be me.

— Esteban Rivera

Question

How can a man go without seeing his own kid?

— Erica Abel

4pm

on a summer afternoon, Drake and Josh sit on the porch waiting for sunset. Drake says, Look at that.

— Jesus Jimenez

Victims

Camera crews with different angles Views of the battered and bruised Yet people still get the story confused Switched up and misconstrued Watch the media tell lies On the victims, too The victim is who? The victim is you Youth and minorities Misguided and misjudged No handouts, nor hugs Shrugs from cold shoulders Cold streets with no love

— Halotheartist

Who Will Cherish Me Now?

Call me stupid, but he was my best friend. They took him right in front of me. When all was said and done, it felt like they stuck the knife in me. I lost my boyfriend. So who will Cherish me now?

— Cherish Cupid
I wish you the best.

I found a wallet. My lucky day.
Not so lucky for the person who lost it.
How unfortunate, someone lost their pocket purse.
I look around, trying not to be noticed. Tucked away in a corner,
I anticipate what’s inside. Vanishing sounds good right now!

But what I hoped would be a thousand dollars was only three dollars,
adorable photos of children,
some old receipts, and a note. Maybe a love letter?
It was written, hastily, in red ink.

Dear Tom,
Where you go, I cannot follow.
I was there for you.
I was there for your drug problem.
You say you’re changing, but your words fail to produce results.
I held you at your worst.
Tom, I tried.
I wish you the best.

Poor fella.
Tom, it looks like we hit rock bottom. Eh?
I found your wallet.
I tip my hat to you.
I wish you the best.

NAPOLEON FELIPE

Catfish Story:
in Matawan, New Jersey

In my preteen years I spent
Summers with my grandparents.
Their home was surrounded by water.
There were hundreds of catfish in the lake.
I would go with my grandfather fishing.
We would sit up high on the ledge.
My grandfather had all the equipment:
rods, reels, cane poles, and bait.
When I was with him, there could never be any talking.
It was known, if the fish heard noises, they would not bite.

One day, he and I caught hundreds of fish.
When we finished, my grandmother dumped them into
a large bucket with hot, steamy water.
And then we had the most delicious dinner
of fried catfish and vegetables.
We invited everyone.
This story went on for years.

INGRID RAYSOR
Want
for your brother
what you want
for yourself
or you’ll find yourself
by yourself
with nothing.

SEKOU ALI

Don’t Shoot
I don’t wanna die young,
I wanna grow old and have a daughter or a son.
Or maybe both.
To live a full life, is my hope.
But the bullet in your gun is the noose around my throat.

Don’t shoot.
I wanna live.
I wanna show the world everything I have to give.
And it’s a lot. Yeah, I might smoke a little pot,
But so did Bill Clinton and he didn’t get shot.

While You Sleep
I study you
like if at any moment
my eyes will desert me
leaving me to imagine
your smile on dusty
gray mornings
before sirens stir
up the anxiety of city life.

YASMINÉ LANCASTER

If mama could
mama would
stay another 50 years
to make sure we’re all okay.

ANTOINE SHERMAN

Draw
birds against the white page
The ash of pencil scratching into the surface like an echo
Ripples soothe your broken mines
Small reminders of one need: safe space.

NICOLE GOODWIN

Her
I shiver when
I hear your name.
I won’t be satisfied until
I’m under your skin.

CHASTITY ROLLE

If mama could
mama would
stay another 50 years
to make sure we’re all okay.

ANTOINE SHERMAN

Landlord
means you are just lord of the land.
It says power means more than office.
Control over the nobodies.
The officials need supervision over themselves.
Padding the bill to cushion themselves.
Service men sent to survey your
pockets.
You turn to them for repair, but are left with uncovered sockets.
They give crumbs on their first approach.
Broken down appliances, no running water.
Don’t stop breathing, just breathe in that mold.

LA LA AKBAR

A Game
It started off as a game
and it ended up as
pain. When you spoke I
listened. I trusted and
accepted. But now that I
know the truth,
I don’t want to listen. I just
want to know, Why?

YAHIRA CASTILLO

Bathe
in self-love,
so you won’t
seek love from
a thief in reckless pursuit
to bruise your ripened fruit.

J. BRIGHT JR.
Buried Motherhood

Back then I never knew how to tell the truth. But now I’m not afraid to speak. My old bones ache with the pain I had forgotten. Your body was so tiny. I wrapped the whitest, warmest, and softest blanket around you. I thought you smiled, but at the end of the night, it was too dark to see. I ran out of the house, fell in some vines, and broke my wrist. But I secured you to my chest. Muffled under dirt and leaves, I entombed my shame. My motherhood is still buried under that henna tree.
Grace

You thought I would be nothing, but who were you to label me?

I was dragged, beaten, torn and scared, but I have risen.

You thought my days were numbered, but instead I was fulfilling my destiny.

Some people consider my past a lesson learned, but I call it an abundance of knowledge.

Once I sat down to question and ask, Why me, why us, why now? But now I no longer question.

Instead, I reply, Oh yes. Now I know why me, why us, why now. So, next time you look at me and seek to judge, hate, or envy, stop and ask how I overcame the struggles which are now called my blessings.

And I will reply, I have walked through the valley of darkness, into the storms and waves of what others consider regrets.

It all leads me into the beaming light to give birth, full of grace.

YAHIRA CASTILLO

The Ring

Every time the phone rings, why does my heart begin to sing? It sings that tune that I don’t want to hear. God, somebody, please help me with this fear. I can’t erase the nightmare of that death call. Since that night, I’ve continued to fall. I cry, Lord, somebody help me, please. Turn off that phone. I don’t want to hear it ring.

PEARL DICKSON
If I gave my mother pen and paper and told her to write a poem, it would sound something like this...

“Today I woke up, got out of bed, and was immediately attacked by my youngest son asking for Honey Bunnies. All I do is get attacked by my kids, my job, strangers, even the one friend I have. Everybody attacks me. What did I do to deserve all these attacks? Why am I the bad guy?”

DEJA JONES

I am the air you suck through your teeth. The whistling whimper caught in your throat. I am the cloud in the sky that loves to block the sun. Like a bad hair day, I come and go.

NICOLE GOODWIN
At the Gun Range

I told you, *When I shoot,*
Don’t come close, you might lose a tooth.
*Healthcare won’t cover you.*
But the Fixodent came through.
Sorry it had to be you,
I’ll never forget the noise it made,
*ping ping ping.*
Too bad, you didn’t have the
*ching ching ching!*

**D. O.**

Smile,

*for Cheryl*

Simple, yet lovely
Kind and soothing
A smile that melts
All troubles away
Dimples that make
You want more...

**KENNETH WILSON**

Forgiveness

Last summer, back in Jamaica, I was chilling with my family.
I got to see my baby nieces and nephews,
my brother-in-laws and my sisters.
One day, a random lady came to the house
and said she had a dream
that somebody was going to die right there.
And she started doing holy rites,
reading scriptures from the Bible,
and praying over a bucket of water.
And then she threw it all of over the yard.
A week after I got back to New York, Boom!
My brother-in-law died,
shot seven times in the chest.
He was holding my baby niece
and the minute he handed her to my oldest sister,
that’s when they rolled up on him, and shot him, and drove off.

**JUNIOR ROSHANE JOHNSON**

Temper, ticking
Arising like a
Hot
Air balloon,
Respected always,
Ain’t scared to lose.

**TAHARA LILLY**

Butterfly Mythology

Last night, I walked into my house
and saw a tiny butterfly
going around in circles.
It came right after me
and then flew away.
It meant something good was about
to happen.

**YOELIN GOMEZ**
Central Park Man

I saw a man sitting on an old broken bench, his toes pushing through the front of each shoe, his hair, a natty patch of string, his eyes bloodshot red from last night’s bourbon. This is not the first night he’s been here. No one speaks to him, but the slight nod of his head suggests that he welcomes conversation. There is a story in his eyes, one that I am drawn to from the distance of his stare. I sit beside him, pretending I’m waiting for the bus. I shave him sideways but he doesn’t respond. His eyes fade, close, and his chin falls, pinned to his chest. He doesn’t move and I realize he is gone; I sat down too late. But what I learned is that stories are told and kept by the best of men, even when the world loses its focus.

JONATHAN SYPHAX

Uomo di Central Park

Ho visto un uomo che sedeva su una vecchia panchina rotta, le dita dei piedi spingevano attraverso fronte di ogni scarpa, i suoi capelli, stringhe usate, i suoi occhi rosso sangue dal Bourbon delle ultime notti. Questo non è la prima notte che è stato qui. Nessuno gli parla, ma il lieve cenno che il suo capo suggerisce invita alla conversazione. C’è una storia nei suoi occhi, una a cui io sono attratto, quella nella distanza del suo sguardo. Conosco il suo essere e miiedo accanto a lui, fingendo di aspettare l’autobus. Lo guardo di traverso, ma lui non risponde. I suoi occhi si chiudono piano e il mento cade, appuntato al petto. Lui non si muove e mi rendo conto che non c’è più; Mi sono seduto troppo tardi. Ma quello che ho imparato è che le storie sono raccontate e conservate dai migliori uomini, anche quando il mondo perde il suo punto di riferimento.

KAIBOS ITALY THEATRE
ITALIAN TRANSLATION
The rooster

that crows
the loudest in the barnyard
makes the cow’s milk curdle.

YASMINE LANCASTER

Guac

I’ll give you a guacamole
for a poem.

ASHLEY EVANS

Imperfection is Her Beauty

She does whatever it takes to make it through one more day. She is not a sinner or a saint. She is a woman, a warrior, with the soul of a survivor and a heart that is in search of peace and love.

S.B.

Another early morning coffee

and on my way back
the police come running
to my building
and yell,
_Open the door._
I say, _I don’t have the key._
One officer, looking up, says,
_Forget it._
It’s too late.
He’s coming down.

There’s a big pile of snow.
A thud.
A splash in my face.
I keep seeing death.

TAHARA LILLY

Ode to Money

Money, you make me smile.
Every time I see you in my thick, black wallet,
I just shiver with delight.
You weren’t always there for me.
But now, on the lonely, cold, rainy nights, you fill me with joy.
It breaks my heart to hand you to another,
not knowing what they’re going to do with you next.
Your green texture across my smooth, black skin and the way each one of your dead presidents looks deeply into my eyes,
I don’t want to let you go. But I have to.
When I’m hungry, you make my stomach full.
When I want something, you are who I look to.
Money, say you’re all mine.
You won’t ever leave me,
Will you?

ARABIA FRANCIS

Oda a la Cebolla

La cebolla es como el amor
a la vez es tan rica y te hace llorar.

Ode to the Onion

The onion is how love is, at once so deliciously rich and it makes you cry.

MIGUELINA GARCIA - ORIGINAL AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION

All Aboard

I remember my first experience with marijuana. I was in my college dorm and my roommates and I decided to try it. I found myself walking on the ledge of our 3rd floor dorm. I swore against drugs after that. Sounds easy, right? But my wall fell. Next came the cocaine express, handed to me on a platter by my oldest brother, only to be saved by the angel of my life, my mother.

PEARL DICKSON
Driving

At twelve years old
my dad taught me
how to drive.
It was the best gift
he ever gave me.
This privilege
made my life so easy.
I get to places quickly.
Long distance driving
is my favorite hobby.
I've driven twice from
New York to Florida.
At night, under the full
moon, with the stars on the
horizon shining in the
black sky,
my girlfriend sits
next to me, silently contemplating
this marvelous view.

Shades

My pain is hidden behind
These lenses
I sometimes wonder where
My friends are
You can't see the demons I face
If only you knew about my case
I've got a story I'd like to tell
but it's kinda hard not to dwell
PTSD is not a joke
Wish I could just
Toke, toke, toke
I only ask, see me
through these frames

Patience

I write poems with no hesitation
Every time I perform it's a celebration
I don't support hate I support motivation
I'm not the type to talk no need for conversation
I'm trying to turn my friends into a huge organization
– all I need is patience

Oh, my God,

why are we
being taken away in such
savage ways?
The pain repeats itself from
generation to generation.
What the F_ _ _ is wrong with
this B.S. Nation?
Even my sister knows the pain.
Her daughter, at the tender age of 19,
threw her life from
a rooftop.
I pray her spirit escaped like
a tender dove.

Hole

My heart is like a black hole.
I can't even talk to the man above.
Can someone please explain
why my baby had to go?
I look at all the men walking around
And ask you Lord, Why him?

Pearl Dickson

GUYTO CHERY

Patience

I write poems with no hesitation
Every time I perform it's a celebration
I don't support hate I support motivation
I'm not the type to talk no need for conversation
I'm trying to turn my friends into a huge organization
– all I need is patience

Michael Gomez

John Quiles

Pearl Dickson

GUYTO CHERY

John Quiles
Change,

You will surpass your past. Consider all the possibilities. *Feel* the feeling of accomplishment, Of things on the right track, No one can ever take back.

Tyiece Barclay