

FREE WRITE

ARTS & LITERACY





EVIDENCE

with an introduction by

Reginald Dwayne Betts

FREE WRITE ANTHOLOGY

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PREFACE

The poems and art herein are culled from approximately three years of work, and do not represent all that can be said, or even half of what you ought to hear and see from these young people. We never know how much time we will have with each student, so every moment is of the utmost importance. Often, the rules governing the incarceration of young people mitigate how we can show their work and which work gets shown. Indeed, some of the most brilliant work has been struck from the final manuscript, and some of the most important of what they have to say hasn't even made it to paper. Charge it to our inability to frame for them a way in which to convey their genius that this work didn't make it to page, to manuscript. As such, in this volume, we chose to visibly redact those poems. The idea is to honor the rhythm of the work, their visions, their (re)visions; to convey the sadness and to resist the ways in which the youth are rendered invisible. These young people are vast. They are eager to tell you the entire truth; the one that informs the larger experience of their childhoods, and the one that informs their time locked up. It is imperative to our growth as a community, and our survival, that we listen to these stories and contemplate, as a result, our own. The evidence that is uncovered in our own stories and theirs will astound you.

**The Free Write Team,
Roger Bonair-Agard, Mathilda de Dios, Ryan Keesling, Elgin-Bokari T. Smith**

INTRODUCTION

After nearly a decade in prison and two decades of investing myself in the work of becoming a poet and becoming an educator, I committed to becoming a lawyer. Yale Law School, if you ask the wrong person, shifted my narrative: made me unicorn and respectable.

Yet, what I was reminded of, during my three years in law school learning what I cannot accurately describe as anything but another language, is the importance of the artist. Freedom, justice, the invention of a narrative that does not so frequently end with black and brown bodies locked in cages, must, necessarily, begin with the writers. This is what visiting Free Write this past winter brought back to mind.

I walked into a room where those with whom I most connected with wore the garb of confinement. I look into their eyes. Twenty years ago, I was them. Facing a life sentence. Known as the kid who carjacked the guy, wild with a pistol in hand. Unlike them, I lacked the language to begin to recast that narrative. Not to deny that fact, but to paint a world for those who would settle on a few incidents to define my present and future.

Evidence is a peculiar part of law. There is a rumor that I once confessed to hating evidence in a fit of honesty during my second year of law school. The truth is, I love evidence.

The legal concept reminds you of what the law deems important. The rules are narrowly concerned with what can be admitted before the court to make it more or less likely that something did occur. But years ago, someone gave me a better way to understand evidence. It is, simply, a narrative device. In determining what can be admitted, the judge, relying on the rules of evidence, determines when the story begins. This is the kind of power that alters lives forever, cabining all that matters in a young person's life to the brief time before or after some tragedy occurred, as if their childhood, their future, should not factor into what we imagine as possible, as needed. Mitigating evidence is the place that subverts this practice. In presenting mitigating evidence, a person is allowed to cast their narrative where they might. To include more than the chaos and wild nights.

Statistics have never been mitigating evidence, which is to say that statistics have never sought to peel back the layers, to imagine who a young person is when you view them outside of the context of whatever conviction landed them in a prison cell.

The statistics that I would cite falter before the memories that inspire them. They lack the force of staring at a young man who knows that he will be counting his next dozen Christmases from inside the dank spaces of prisons. The numbers don't mitigate. Don't take into account the complexity. If they are evidence, it is only of disaster.

I am reluctant to speak, to write, about hope. But I like reminding those who I might have been, that if they think about all of the evidence, it will be obvious that I was once them. I stood before the students of Free Write and tried to remind them that two decades ago when a court of law, including the prosecutor, the judge, and even my defense attorney, would have thought to begin my narrative with the night a pistol was my false talisman – I thought otherwise.

The most pressing questions in a room like that are always about freedom. The beauty of it all is that I know that those students are learning a vital truth: freedom is not a narrative that someone else can write for them. Worth is not a narrative that someone else can write for them.


Tomorrow, even, is not a narrative that someone else can write for them. Mitigating evidence is an idea to capture this fact. But the truth is that the lives of those students, the fragments of those lives captured in their work, in their writing, their art – that has always been the gateway to their tomorrows. And, while it all sounds ephemeral, this kind of belief – I know I tried to tell those students that this is the thing that sustained me for a decade in prison. The prison cells, jail cells, dark spaces of juvenile detention centers, none of them can hold what we create when we believe our narratives are more expansive, more meaningful and worthy to be signified on, than our darkest moments.

-Reginald Dwayne Betts





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I

Free
in the
Wild



Wolf (2014) oil pastel on paper April L.

Keshawn H.

I was born

(after Gregory Pardlo)

I was born listening to horses yap.
I was born with a monkey to protect
me. I was born floating off my feet
and hands. I was born with bodies
and skeletons around me. I was
born trapped in the darkness with no
one to help. I was born without
a spirit to take care of me. I was
born with a hole in my stomach.
I was born surrounded by sticks
with tools. I was born going
to the light.





Mountains (2015) oil pastel on paper Jeremy M.

Dreyana G.

Ancestors

I'm locked up
Where my ancestors at?
What happen to my ancestors
when I was out on the block.
My ancestors said "Hey Dre
let's get off the dope." But I didn't
want any smoke. I just wanted
to be like them tho. But now
they ghost as a ghost and now
I can't take no mo, so now I'm left
with the ashes of my ancestors

Seville M.

I was Born by a River

(after Gregory Pardlo)

I was born yesterday
I was born in a hospital built by my uncle jeffery
I was born by a river which flowed 13 different directions
underneath the boiling sun
I was born in a violent city which condoned murder
a city where people serve little consequences
I was born under the boiling sun right next to the cooling river
which flowed 13 different directions each direction leading
to a violent city which I will soon become a citizen of
I was born in chicago where the bears cubs sox rule
the city where there is no mercy no pity

Jeremiah G.

I was Born

(after Gregory Pardlo)

I was born July 29, 1996
I was born in the summertime. On the good Friday
I was born in 96. Tupac died. Michael Jordan won
a championship
I was born in Mercy Hospital- Downtown where the city don't sleep. I came out crying. I
guess the light
hurt my eyes, I even heard
my mother cry.
I was born at night.



Destine P.

#BlackGirlsMatter

My name is Destine P.
I'm a black bird without wings
I'm misunderstood and a young trendsetter
I'm misunderstood because no one
understands me and I'm a trendsetter
because everyone follows me.
I worry about Black teenage girls
I wonder how long would black girls
get treated without respect.
I dream about changing the world.
I hope my wings grow and I fly back home.
I feel myself lonely, hurt, and lost.



Brandon J.

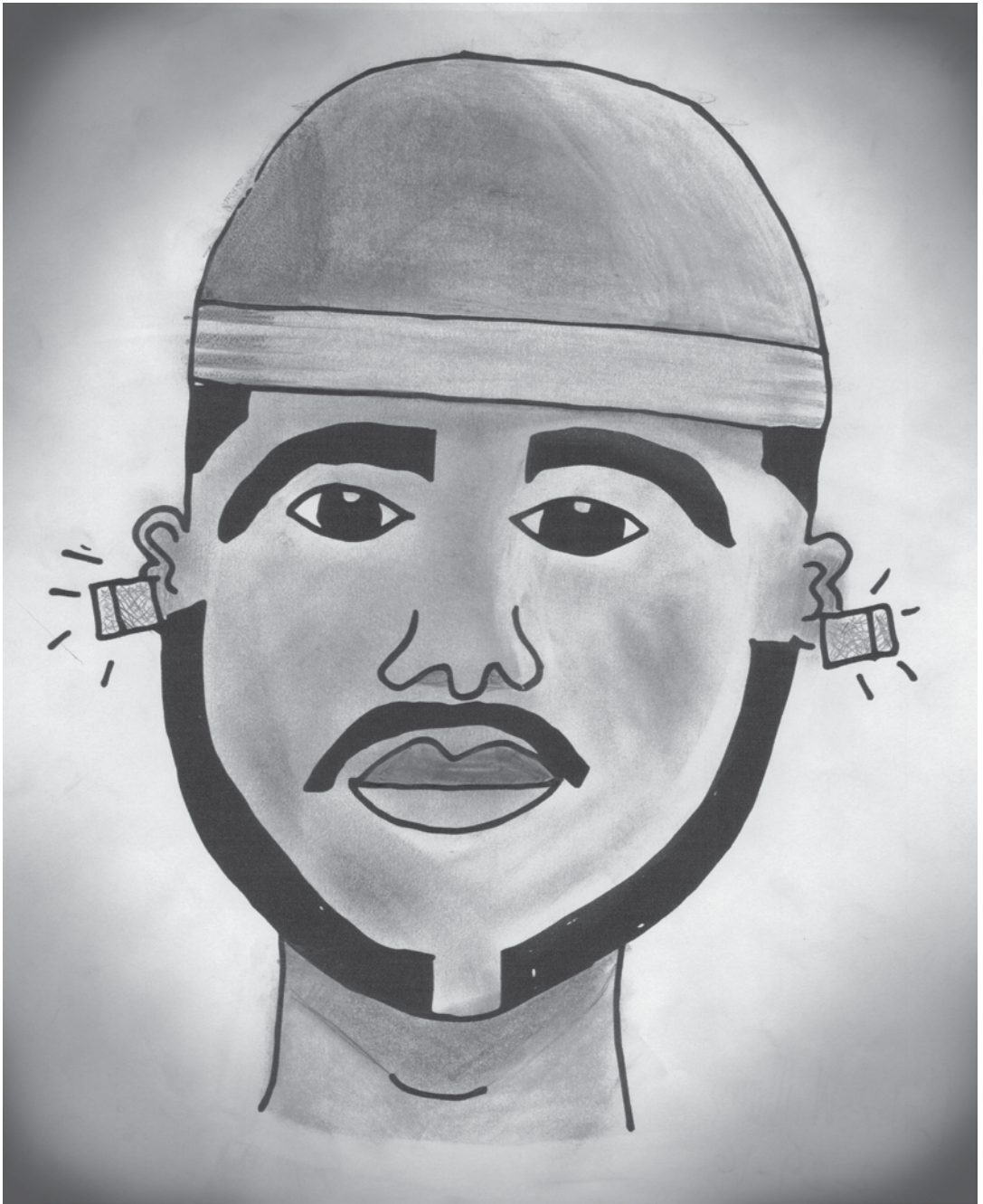
nicknames

Brandon got the nickname BJ from his first tattoos that he ever got on his forearms during his 7th grade year which he thought was cool to have at such a age an people that he hang around seen them and just started calling him BJ

ShortyB from his big cousin dad who because Brandon was very short with a baby face and his first name start with a letter B

Sunshine from one of his staff that he had when he was locked up for a crime that he didn't commit because he always was mad at the world. Every time he woke up in the morning he was always cursing out the staff and peers so a staff would wake him up saying "hey sunshine"

which would make him happy
in the morning
in a good mood.



Self-Portrait (2016) pencil on paper Cortez W.



Javon B.

My LIFE

I am an only child.
People say when I was born
every Thing was mild.
But if you ask me I say it was wild.
I witnessed violence at an early age,
seein' my father charge at my mom in an angry rage.

I saw a dead body at the age of five,
seen his family cry as his wife ask
the Lord why did he take his life.
Throughout the years I felt I was different.
Childish kids laughin' and acting all gigglish.
There were times that I felt I was the devil's child!

I felt that I was weird and not from this Earth, people fillin' my head.
I didn't repent, didn't shed a tear or feel any regret.
I see how much talent God filled and willed me with,
but havn' people labeling me - naming me names.
And they are the same.
But don't trip I've also so-called people. Who cares?

They're all the same, but don't trip.
I'll also give them a name.
I can go on and on about my life but if you ask me who I am,
I'd ask you the same question!
Hopin' that one I'll have an answer to
give my life.

Frankey L.

My Name

Frankey Ray L_____. That is the name my mother calls me and the name that my father has forced upon me to live with for the rest of my life. Frankey, that name was given to me in honor and shadow of my father. My father's real name, Frank L____, differs from my name which is Frankey, but is still a name to live up to. I wanted to be more than Frank L_____, the guy who got locked up for 8 years and comes home to a child he doesn't even know, more than a shadow of the thug who had the whole neighborhood terrified. More than Frank L_____. But the pressure of living up to this name always haunts me and taunts me. Everybody always saying that I was going to be just like my father and that being gangsta was in my blood. I wanted to be more than that.

Dejuanye J.

arms of a stranger holding

(after Gregory Pardlo)

I was born cut out
my mother's stomach in a hospital surrounded
by white people with dangerous tools.
I was born to a life
where I can live eternity; I was born
in arms of a stranger holding
me feet from the ground.
As days passed, my head, arms, legs
and heart grew bigger & bigger as my mind
got stronger. My life is filled
with joy and happiness. I was born
with a special talent that can take me
a long way but my mind reminisces
on my old life. I was born
in a crib around my crazy family
that argues and fights, drinks and smokes
that crack jokes





Night Sky (2015) oil pastel on paper Jeremy M.

Antoine G.

Birth

(after Gregory Pardlo)

I was born shot out of a cannon that was made by my mother. The people that held me, I never knew. But as I flew through the room, I could see the man that I would soon be. The man that I'll look up to and the woman that will teach me the ways of life. The doors that will open as I fly through life with no worries. The eyes that will be opened as I walk in the room to tell the world, I'm born.

Marco M.

Who am I?

to the state i'm nothing but a number
and money for they pockets

to my family I am the smile
that will never get old, the child
who never kept quiet, the kid who had everyone
laughing

to myself worthless but with a purpose
trying to prove everyone who doubted
me that I'm capable of doing something
and not expecting a pat on the back
but contributing accomplishment for myself.

Who am I? I've asked myself
that question too much, and still
can't find the answer.



Raymond D.

Born

(after Gregory Pardlo)

I was born ten years ago

I was born on a hot sunny day at the park

I was born on Tuesday
wearing all black
looking like a devil

I was born to run
fast like the wind
and never stop
until I reached the top

I was born free
in the wild.

||

Down
the
Street

Javier O.

Untitled

They who hold guns and stand
on the block risking
their lives for one another.
Doesn't make sense what they're fighting
for, but I am not one to judge.
I was in their shoes once.
They have nothing to lose.
You feel the world ganging up
on you; when you hear shots
on the block you better shoot
back and defend yourself. Don't let
yourself get killed. You have
to survive in these cold streets
'cause when you die, your homies
will continue as if you were
locked up how we are now.
But you leave your mom
in pain forever



Timmis H.

My Block

Early morning crackheads pushing shopping carts with cans. Drug dealers up at it tryna get paid. Little kids running around inna hot sun waiting for the next water balloon fight. At noon you walk over a dice game that at the next minute turns into a fight. Down the street you got the potheads smoking all the weed they supposed to sell. Police riding around in cars and on bikes, waiting for something to take place. Grandma's onna porch watching everything and constantly yelling. Teenagers chasing the girls. They like squirrels tryna get a nut. Gunshot ring in the summer air. Bloodshed. Momma crying. RIP shirts made. Police searching. Gang violence increase. Women going crazy for young boys. Young boys chasing dollars, serving packs, shooting over turf wars. Sons being made grown up without their dads. Teens locked up calling home knowing they want to get out the gang activity thinking that they shoulda listened to Mom when she said don't go right there.

Darian G.

The New Homes

I come from the village

a.k.a. The New Homes

about 13 years ago I moved there from Gary, Indiana.

I come from a hardwood floor two rims and a net
around both, hearing shoes squeak and nets go swish.

I come from a place where you had to be tough
or you will get tried or even beat down.

I adapted very quickly. I come from a final four game,
a game before the championship just to get cheated and put out.

I come from a loving household and inspiring family
to do and try my best at everything.

I come from a place that no one else came from.

I come from the village - The New Homes.

Kenneth T.

The 8

Red tape on poles
Bullets holes that show hard times

Young youth like to play
But this block isn't safe

Broken glass. It will hurt
No grass all dirt

I grew up here. Ain't much changed.
Same people around. I know everyone's name.

Spray tagging from the gang
remember our brothers' names

We live on the 8. I love that block.
Even though it's where I got shot.



Kenneth T.

Quiet on the set

[REDACTED]

Shaun W.

I come from

[REDACTED]



Directions (2016) *graphic illustration* Pedro C.

Chante H.

Bossville!

This block is a one way street, only one way in only one way out. Going into this block you will see a liquor store on one side of the street. On the other side you will see about 13 apartment buildings. On the outside there will be lots of men, all family to one another and all grown up on this block just like me. It's never a piece of silence at any moment and there's always going to be somebody out, looking out. This block is like 6 blocks long but still there's only one way in and one way out so once you come in what you will see on one end you will see on the other. On the other end there is another liquor store and there's people out on that end as well, all family to one another. All these people left home at a young age and made this block their home so that's really why there's only one way in and one way out.



Destine P.

Chiraq

It's not easy living in Chiraq
where there's gangbanging on every
block, drug dealers on every
corner, shoot outs every
other month. There's not a day
that goes by you not gone
hear about another youth
getting her life taken by gun
violence. Sometimes I wonder
where all this comes from?
We didn't just start doing it.
Maybe it's our ancestors.
As we grow up day by day
we watch our elders and follow
their footsteps.

Then everybody wants to say
it's not my fault, it's his/her
fault why we do what we do
we do what we see you do
we watch what we see
you watch, we say what we
see you say. Is that okay?
Is that why our generation
is messed up? It's not easy
living in Chiraq.





Held
Freely

Kevin P.

██████████ / bars

██████, █████ true.

██████ █████ too.

██████ █████ real

██████ you.

How you say you real
but ain't in a cell too?

Mashari J.

My sister

I'm so proud that you
graduated grammar school.
You chose to listen to me
and turn your life around.
Now you're in high school
learning, experiencing,
getting your life in order.
You're going to make your
mark on this turf.



Jose A.

Held Her Freely

I remember the day with my daughter just 3 days before I got locked up.

That was the last time I held her freely.

I was sittin' on the couch with her wrapped up in my arms and her mother's legs wrapped around mine. She looked at me and said "look at my two babies, what can be better than this?" and I told her, "Shidd some chicken wings and milk, 'cuz me and the baby hungry." She laughed and said "alright I'll handle that," she kissed me then kissed our daughter and she looked at me smiled and said "Dah Dah."

I was so surprised because she never said "Dah Dah" before, only "MahMah" and "Gammah". I got so excited I hugged her so hard I don't know if she stopped breathing, I could smell the baby lotion through her Ralph Lauren baby T-shirt. I called my daughter's mother and she came in like something was wrong. I told her to calm down because some real sh** just happened, she said, "What?" I told her, "Don't be mad at me." She said, "What - tell me what happened?" I told her, "My baby not no goddamn Mama's girl no more, she said 'Dah Dah.'" And my daughter's mom laughed and hit me in the arm and said, "She always gone be a Mama's girl." I said "Yea okay and Wesley Snipes gonna be light skinned one day."

Jeremy M.

No love

(after Patrick Rosal)

I wanted to write a poem about you – all that we’ve been through. But then I went away and felt, and found out the truth about you. I thought that I loved you when I was out and went through a lot for you, just to find out that once I was nowhere near you to talk to you, hold you, or even look at you in your eyes, that you would just up and leave me. But now that I think about it, I was ignoring all the clues; you saying something you didn’t mean, making promises you didn’t keep, wanting to go out to some parties that you knew I didn’t want to go to. There’s so much I have to tell you, but I just can’t. I can’t even say if I love you. As a matter of fact I don’t think love can even be in my vocabulary for all the pain I’ve been through, all the trust and “love” washed right away that you caused. No man/human is capable of loving someone, or to even use the word. The meaning behind love is just too strong to sit here and keep writing this for you, because I have no love for you.

Shaderal S.

To My Unborn Daughter

To my daughter,

In this world dangerous people will try to hurt you and do all types of things to you, but as a father I’m here to protect you. But I’m not always gonna be around forever. So you have to learn how to protect yourself physically and mentally. Because people will always try to bring you down no matter what and I don’t want to see you fail in life. Because you a piece of me and I made a lot of mistakes in life so I want you to grow older and be better than me. And don’t fall in the devil’s trap he has for you, and don’t get in the system because it’s hard to get out. And be a smarter women ‘cause they will try to fail you and bring you down. I want the best for you future daughter ...



Marshawn K.

Marshawn's Story

I look up to the skies everyday and I stare
Wishing that I had a father
but he never wasn't there !!
Only 12 years old thinking why my life is not fair?
I'm so used to the pain I don't even shed a tear
Searching for some help but it's clear that they don't care
R.I.P to the people that never seen the next year
For those who don't know
"Death is my biggest fear"
It's like I'm living in a jungle and I'm fighting for some deer
Problems weighted on my heart it's like bricks on top of bricks
And I made some mistakes but them mistakes I got to fix
Half these people ain't
go' learn until they end up on news clips
Because the devil caught you lacking turnt your back and then you slipped
Yea he got up in your head
and made sure you was convinced
so you thinking in your head like yea this makes sense
But little did you know you was next up on the list
Momma couldn't say goodbye
or even give her son a kiss
now the momma on the floor nervous wiping off her sweat
Seen her son on the ground blood dripping from his neck
She don't know what to do or know what coming up next
started beating on her daughter like she living in a vet
Early in the morning put the 9 to her chest
But she just trying play crazy to get another check
But little did she know she became another threat
Everything that she done man I bet she go' regret
Next day she in the streets putting needles in her veins
Overwhelmed with the tears everyday she feeling pain
People use her most her life like she nothing but a game
smoking blunts everyday but situations was the same
I always wondered how my life would be
If I was 6ft deep, Or in that cell 23
'Cause I got homies down state, That will kill for that steak
People lurking for a meal just to get a full plate

And these people want me dead
and I'm like sorry for the wait
I'm just on a paper chase
I just want to get a deal I just want to get a taste
But it's a lot I have to face
And my brother said he changed
but he caught another case
I was walking down town
When I Heard some gun sounds
Everybody looked around so I looked to the ground
my brother didn't make a sound
Now I'm so confused, Thinking
Why I've been hurt and abused



Taveon W.

Ode to my Mother

I remember
when you used to wake
me up in the morning
with your cooking to show
me that it was time for school.
I miss your holiday cooking.
I miss your speeches
you used to give me when
I did something wrong.
When I hear your voice it feels
like music to my ears and now I feel
like I am lost without you. I wish
I could give you something
for Mother's Day this year
but I can't because I am
locked up, and I know
you are lost without me

Demonte C.

Letter To Mom

I am the son of Cynthia W.
I love my mom so much that I would die for her.
She makes me feel better when she tells me I'll be home soon.
Me and my mother have a connection that I have with nobody.
I wonder what my mother thought I was going to be when I was born.
When I was out we spent a lot of time together.
I wish I didn't have to come in here to realize how much she means to me.
I sometimes have bad thoughts about what's going on in my life right now,
but every time I say something like that she brings me back up.



Eyes of tears (2013) *graphic illustration* Zamani S.





Work Of Art (2016) *non-photo blue pencil on paper* Jared M.

Joshua S.

Gordy

Ever since you passed it feels like a part of me died. Life will never be the same without you. It could be 30 years from now, I'm still going to feel this pain. Our family always been based on love, and together we were unbreakable, but since God took you so soon, we damn near fell apart. *Trying to heal my dying son with kisses* – if only this was true a lot of our loved ones would be here with us today; especially my brother.

Taveon W.

Untitled

I got up this morning, thought about how much time we used to spend together, like the time we both got locked up for being drunk, because we was underage drinking, but I couldn't get the thought out of my head that this was going to be the last time seeing you, and how I have nothing but our good memories of each other; so I put on my best outfit just to show my respect to you this evening. But the thing I'm going to miss most is how we used to turn up together – when we was so high that you pass out and hit your head. I'm going to miss you, Ted.



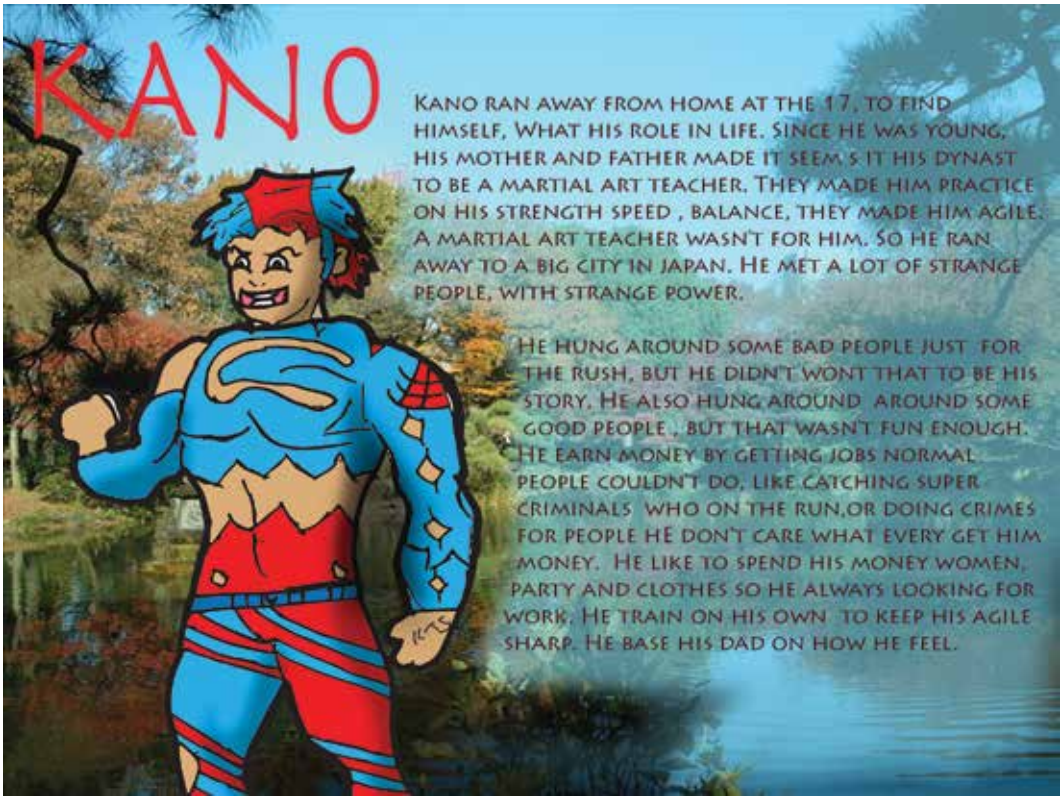
Hakeem C.

Freedom is Free

Moms always told me it don't
cost nothing to be free.
It's free to wake up in your own
bed in your own room.
It only starts to become a price
when you flip on your lights.
It doesn't cost much to leave
the crib and walk down your block
every step touching the concrete
and you look down to see shoes
that don't come from the county.
It's free to sit around your family
even if your family sits around
a rusted-ass garbage can spitting
out flames to keep warm. My moms
always told me common sense don't cost
a thing, but you might get paid
if you use it. I always wondered
what she meant. Now I know.

There's no price tag on freedom.
Things like that are from experience,
either too expensive for a price or too cheap
to cost anything. But from Moms I know
freedom is just free. We were born
that way and hopefully we will die
that way. But when I watch Moms struggle
to pay bills I wonder how free
is freedom? So I put mine
on the line to put a few more meals
on the table. Though I'm chained,
i'm free in my mind, but physical
freedom ain't free no more Moms
cuz now I'm paying my time.





Kano (2015) graphic illustration Thomas

Nelson K.

Claim

I claim my son's body and spirit.

He is in my bloodline.

I claim him my seed.

The color that comes from the color people skin is from the dirt
from constantly being kicked down by others,
the number of innocent people bloodshed.

I claim my life, chose to live it how I want.

I demand a stronger foundation for education.

Every dollar I earned should be spent how I wanted.



Darryl H.

Home

It was Wednesday.
My Mom came to visit me.
She smelled like some good candy.
She sat down and said *I miss you*
I said *I miss you too. I can't wait*
to come home. She just looked at me
and smiled and said *I love you.*
I almost cried cuz I know I can't
go home with her.

Deontay P.

My Belt

One day I was in my house
when my beautiful mother told me like,
“Son, you need to pull your pants up.”
I responded to her like, “Mother, I don't have a belt.”
Then she looked at me I started to run away
But then she told me, “You better go find one.”
So I start lookin' everywhere and still didn't find one.
So I start thinkin' I have a lot of shoes.
I got my shoes lace out my shoe and
I start putting it around my pants.
So I had a shoe lace belt
but then I thought, “What will my mother say to me?”
so I walked up on her and asked her, “Mom I have a shoe lace.”
then she say, “Let me see.”
then she looked at me and said, “Son, you look so much better.”
then I told her, “I love you

Seville M.

Smiley

Smiley wants to be around his brother because we are both in the streets and one of us could die any minute because life is short. I want to be around my sister so she doesn't have to cry about me not being around. I want to be free so I don't stress my family out anymore. I want to be free so I can go back to school. I don't want to miss out on life because time is priceless. I guess that's why they always say time is money. I want to be out because a lot of people I loved have died since I been locked up. I just want one more I love you. My homie keylo my greatgrandmother. I want to be free to show the world my talent

Andrew Z.

Gwala Gwala Men: An Anthem

(after Patrick Rosal's Halo Halo Men)

Patrick taught me about the halo halo men
now I wanna teach about the gwala gwala men
the stay up 3am drinking Hennessy men
the show up at your doorstep because you got a nice Benz men
the keep it on my hip so I don't get robbed for my new 10's men
the stay over at your friend's house because you never had your own bed men
growing up in a hood full of now a whole bunch of dead men
the hate inside that feels like it's never gonna end men
those keep going on this paper until the ink run out my pen men
the 10 henchmen patrolling the block 'til the day ends men
the out south no sleep eyes red drink until there's no thoughts left in your head men
those facing 45 to life in a state pen men
so I guess you can say I'm one of the average 2016 Chicago young men.



Mashari J.

Love

you are what I think of
when I think about love.
You're beautiful, you are sweet,
you are what I need
to stay strong and stay focused.
As long as I know you,
you will always be by my side
no matter what
I know I will always be protected.
When I'm down you help me up
you're my step stool
so I would make it to the top
without any confusion or misleading
that's why no matter what I go through
I always think and remember how much you gave me your love
to the best of your ability.
That's why you will always be
what I think of
when I think about love.

IV

Claim

Raekwon F.

I Claim

to go home and make peace,
that I am not a criminal
that I am talented,
that I am wise,
that I will not respect a person that disrespect me,
that I am a great songwriter,
that I love my family,
that when I am free, I'll make a positive, but strong change in me and my community,
that I'm not supposed to be in jail,
that I am a great artist,
that my name is King for having a lot of people that look up to me,
to be a better influence for others,
this is what I claim.

Demonte C.

Black Man

I am a black man that wonders...
I wonder about my life.
I hear that it's hard.
I see violence I want things to be better.
I am a strong man.
I pretend to be trustworthy.
I feel that I have a lot of things going on.
I touch 10,000 dollars.
I worry about this case.
I cry when I see young people die.
I am a proud man.
I understand that life is full of games.
I dream that I will be rich.
I try to be as good as I can.
I hope that I get out soon.
I am a strong black man.



Rubin T.

I'm a Black Man

I'm a black man who can't have dreads or wear white shirts
'cause I'll be labeled a gang member.

I gotta make sure I don't make wrong move
when police stop me

I ask everyday why white man don't get judged like me!

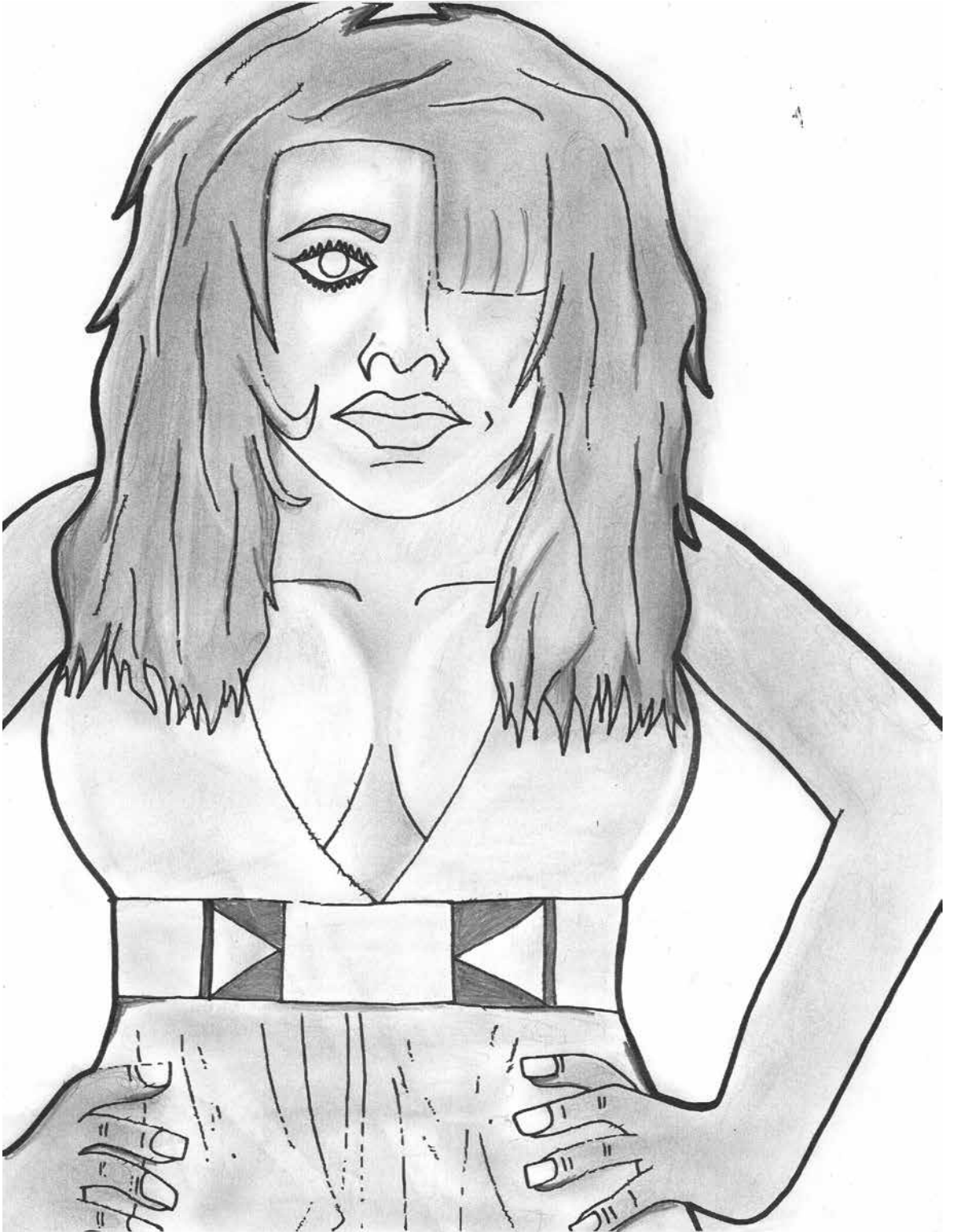
I'm a Black Man

Anonymous

Hands

(after Patrick Rosal)

Hands to write my raps and poems
Hands to chat on Facebook
Hands to shoot my AK-47 in the middle of war in Iraq
Hands to help build furniture with mom and screwing nails into where they belong
Hands to hold my brother when he was a baby
Hands to draw graffiti on the walls having tag-off battles with another graffiti crew
Hands just to use daily
My hands are my hands
Hands to cook a snack that I created called Choco-loco
Harm's Way



Ebony (2016) pencil and ink on paper Jarrod M.



Mark K.

My Body

(after Yusef Komunyakaa)

My limbs are as long and blocky
as those of trees in the forest.
At the top of my head appears to be burning
extinguished by the deep ocean green and blue eyes
that lie below (I miss the ocean).
My body is the same structure
as a light pole. On top is bright and is leading
the way through the lights but it's being held
high by a strong but slim
foundation all the way down to my concrete
feet through so much work constantly
supporting a massive load upon it.
Day in, day out but still trained
as need to be as light as a feather
falling off a bird drifting into the ocean.
My body is light but powerful
with the heart of a lion. My body's
been through 100 wars and I'm built
for a million more.



Jovany S.

Claim

I claim the streets of Little Village
I claim the block where I live at
I claim my son's body
my freedom

Antonio W.

Black

(After Kerry James Marshall's School of Beauty, School of Culture)

black is what I see, black is what they want me to be, black nothing compared to me,
born with stripes on my back because of black, sometimes black feels a little whack,
But hey I can't change it is stuck to me like a tack, decisions I face everyday because of
black, lives that is taken because of black, people hates black hate me, It's sad to say but
I'm turning black on the outside and in, sometimes it's hard to keep a smile on my face
so I give a slight grin, Black this, Black that, BLACK@ that' what people see when they
look at me. Not a young kid who is facing football #'s and might not be free, A kid they
see smiling back when they Pree, I'm shackled still, with no wish or dream I never want
fulfilled, Being black is not a thrill, when I see black I see black.

Dejuanye J.

Body

(after Yusef Komunyakaa)

I love how my hands
are made to damage things
I love how my body is
solid and can't nothing break it down.
My mind is self-made, and my elbow
is a killing machine!
My legs are made of various colors
and my heart is made of money
and that's a valid point. My skin is bulwark
that protects what's inside. My
soul is a vest that can never
get damaged and my back
is glass but still glaze.



Yulanda F.

I am strong

A strong black woman
who hides behind a mask
with a deep story to tell. Sometimes
I struggle with life to tell. My secrets
are lies and my lies are secret. I navigate
to find the true meaning of tears
my tears of course

I am my story, a story
that will strengthen, brighten and give
me power.

I am me – a strong
phenomenal, independent woman.

Stephon H.

I Claim

I claim
the life I was given from my mother,
I claim
all my shoes that were bought from the store by me and my mother,
I claim
the hood I go to every day I'm outside because of all the time I spent over there,
I claim
the school I go to every time I wake up because of the love I get from the teachers,
I claim
life still because my life is depended on by 3 females I love so much.



Black Jesus (2016) pencil on paper Diasee S.



Jesus C.

Blessed

I am blessed because I got a beautiful baby boy that looks just like me,

I'm blessed because I got to wake up and see another beautiful day,

I'm blessed because I got a great mother that really cares about me even after all I done put her thru and will never ever let me down.

I'm blessed because I got a family that cares about me and will always be there for me when I need them that's

why I will always love them to death,

I'm blessed because after all the bullets that flew past me, not one hit me and I thank God that every day that I wake up I'm supposed to be in a wheelchair or dead right now after all I been thru, I am blessed because I am still walking, still talking, and still standing up for my self and my son.

I am blessed because after every thing I put my mother and family thru they still don't let me down they still don't turn their back on me when I need them the most. When I am locked up my mother grandmother or aunt come sign me out and talk stuff saying next time they won't sign me out but they still come because they love me and they know one day I'm going to learn from my mistakes.

I am blessed



JFK (2016) *graphic illustration* Andrew Z.





Beauty in me (2013) oil pastel on paper Sergio F.

Keshawn H.

No one

No one should go to hell
my friends and family being locked
down with chains on their feet
and hands. No one should sit
in a cell. My grandmother enjoys
listening to the church's bell
while young men on the corner making
sales. No one should sit under a video
when there's a family member that cares for you.

Destine P.

Hey Black Child

(after Countee Cullen)

I said hey black child
do you know who you are?
I mean, do you know who you really are?

See you were raised to be Kings and Queens
but instead you are living in the streets
mad at your mama 'cause she a fiend
looking for your possible daddy,
being raised by your granny.

Hey black child, do you know you can be what
you want to be?
I'm talking about judges, lawyers, doctors,
entrepreneurs.
Not sitting up answering to being called
a thot or what not.

You can go to school, finish, get an education
hang with your friends, take a REAL vacation.
Hey black child do you know you are smart,
I mean really smart?
See it takes a lot of math to flip your work
and sell a bag, but it's easy to go to school
and not act like a fool.
We say we all wanna make it out the hood
but all I hear is the shoulda, woulda, could.

It's time for us to wake up, step up,
and focus on each other. We are so self-absorbed
that we don't even realize the world is for us.

Hey black child.
I said, hey black child.
Do you know who you are?
I mean do you know who you really are?



Shmaur B.

Claim

I claim the right to have my own thoughts
and the right to know my ancestor
fought to have me live a better way.

I claim the right to have my lil brother
play and to pay attention to what's going on
so that he don't get put away.

I claim that I wake up on a different day than today and have the power to
say that I'm glad I have the power to say I'm glad I have the chance to live
to see today.

v

There
Are a lot
of Us

Pedro C.

Chased Many Things

(after Tim Seibles)

None of them ran
They were far but nothing
I wouldn't reach.

Got to where I wanted
to be and today I realized
I'm at my peak.

Locked up and chasing God
Like he on the run

The life, The Money, The Dream
chased it all
Not one ran.

Mark K.

The Moon Shines Brightly

but only during the Night (or mid-night)
Morning time the sun & Moon fight

Morning time sun & Moon fight

The Moon shines Brightly
Morning time sun and moon fight

Sun wins the battle



Hakeem C.

The Dark Era

Dark Work

Dark Bullets

Dark shirt with faces of those hurt

Dark faces plastered on the screen

facing more years than they've been alive

Dark hearts get the opposite of light

sentences seeing dark time

Dark president

still a dark world

Dark state of mind from which we see
our existence

Dark thoughts thinking of how and why
we do what we do

Born out of darkness into darkness
but given dark light to see through

Dark shells loaded into a dark

30 poppa for any other dark man that want drama

Dark state of being

from dark fists to dark clips to bodies

droppin – that's the era we live

in – The Darkest Era.





Nelson's Smile (2016) pencil and ink on paper Cody L.

Jeremiah G.

Alone

When you look around and you alone,
stuck a cell, when you want to be home,
even when u were on the streets on your own,
you never wanted to be alone.

Watching your back because you think someone's there.
But when you turn around your shadow disappears.
Searching for answers that aren't there,
just because you're alone and scared.



Shaderal S.

First Chapter

First chapter of my life story
starts when I was young and couldn't always get what I wanted.
And could go to the school I wanted
but back at home it was very small.
We had holes in the wall
and roaches running and crawling everywhere.
Our water was turned off
and we had to go across the street to take a shower.
But my mother always talked
about moving out of state to her dream house.
And I always asked her questions about this house like
Where is it?
How do it look?
When are we moving there?
Does it have hot water?
And she use to say,
Yes it has everything
and then would put her head down in silence.
Then I use to ask her
What's wrong?
She would say nothing
but I knew it was something.
Now I understand we don't have it all.

Francisco M.

Ran

(after Tim Seibles)

I ran for my life when I was getting chased
maybe to get killed

I ran from my moms when I was a shorty
'cause of my grades or ditching school getting
High or coming Home drunk

I ran like a crazy lost person when the cops
are behind me trying to get Home before

I get put at Audy Home

I ran like a Race car tryna make a
family

I run like and with the
clock tryna make my time go faster



Christopher S.

People

(after Tim Seibles)

We run like wrong doers, gang bangers, scared people, rats, sport players. We run like a person who's late for work, blood dripping down yo' shirt, the tears falling down yo' eyes, the sweat dripping off yo face, somebody jogging exercising, a person who be scared to fight. We run like a person when they see the feds, Football players, basketball players, money chasers. We run like young kids in the park, lil kids in the dark, a person with a broken heart, people when they cross the street, a person running from the heat, somebody trying to leave the streets.

Destine P.

Time

Time is ticking and there's no time to waste being locked up in these cells. Makes me think about how my freedom has gone to waste. Being locked up makes me feel depressed as each day goes by it makes me feel I missed out on a million dollars, but maybe I need to wake up to reality because life ain't really what it seems to be. You really find out who your homie is when things like this goes down (jail). People ain't really who they say they is. My best friend died when I was here 9 months R.I.P. My Daddy; he's in heaven now. But life still goes and time don't wait on no one. Time is ticking and there's no time to waste.





Beyoncé (2016) pencil and ink on paper Juwan P.



Andrew Z.

My life...

Nothing to lose, nothing
to gain, a drifter in life, circling
my fate, seeking the day
I arrive at hell's gates with the halo
of an angel, but past of a prison mate.
Now only if they knew he's hated
by many, accepted by few, only a fool
would try to walk one block in his shoes,
fight his way through the struggle,
make his way to the front, ask himself
everyday, for what purpose, if he was just
gonna die on the block

Joshua S.

Bread

a lot of people
change
when they get Bread.

Hakeem C.

Life Without Mirrors

How does one define life, with no mirrors?

-James Baldwin

Life without mirrors

I must live each day without knowing
how I look or what I've done
to myself, or what the world
has done to me.
I could look at glass
or in a puddle
but it would be none to see

How many times do we wonder
how the world works?

Works like a man is stationed
over the skies pulling strings to make
things happen

But the question is, why are mirrors used?

Because you could ask your brother how
something looks, and question whether he's told the truth
Maybe because our brain makes
our eyes lie to lessen the weight
of existence, but at the end of the day
we try to sleep and those problems
cause insomniatic visions

Listen to the cry of the man
who can't make out his face
from his friends because we can't look
through the mirror to remember the beginning
or predict the end



Jaren H.

Modern Day Slavery

They don't want to give a young Black man a job
And they wonder why we sell crack, weed, and rob
And all these young Black females selling sex for jobs
then get diagnosed with AIDS and commit suicide
A sad story ends shortly and it turns out she was pregnant
All God's children are important
Her son could have been the next Michael Jordan
but it was all cut short
she killed herself and her child
and all these people saying, "wow"
and they labeled her as wild
but it really posed a threat
because all this really was a test
it was all cause and effect
to show that racism is still in effect
and it's a fact, I promise that
when I spit this verse
it sends chills down your back
it will make the hair stand up on the back of your neck
because they know I expose the truth but I just turned the page
all these inmates in jail are just the new forms of slaves

Slavery still exists
it's modern day slavery
I am not a monster
so please don't be afraid of me
he felt like a man
with that gun in his hand
it was dead or in jail
and I was raised in the field

Well let's talk about the city that I'm from, Chiraq
Kids rob and steal then get whipped on their back
But it's in a form of discipline and the families are mostly Black
and instead of getting hung we got Blacks killing Blacks
Fifteen he was toting .30's
Fourteen he was toting Macs

no child left behind but kids drop out a lot
instead of being in class he rather be on the block
can't even walk to the store
without the fear of being robbed
can't even wear a hoodie
without the fear of being shot
police never been the hero
adding charge after charge
that's why he keep it on him
catch a opp and he gon' spark
kids killed in crossfire
they were playing at the park
no matter who he killed it was still a life
no more being on that block he can't even sleep at night
first step outside he got booked by blue and whites
now the judge sentenced him and took away his life

Slavery still exists
it's modern day slavery
I am not a monster
so please don't be afraid of me
he felt like a man
with that gun in his hand
it was dead or in jail
and I was raised in the field

Now I'm locked up, yeah I'm caged in
but these walls are starting to cave in
as I get up off my knees and say amen
I pray for you to pray for me that I behavin'
I gave in to temptation
with these words mixed in these verses that I be creatin'
Locked in this cell and I'm far away from civilization
Carvin' symbols in the wall kinda got me feeling like a caveman
Exclusive, yeah I been waitin'
but I'm honestly tired of waiting
I'm tired of being tempted by Satan
so you can slow it down, fast forward, or replay this
just listen to the words that I'm saying

Slavery still exists
it's modern day slavery



I am not a monster
so please don't be afraid of me
he felt like a man
with that gun in his hand
it was dead or in jail
and I was raised in the field

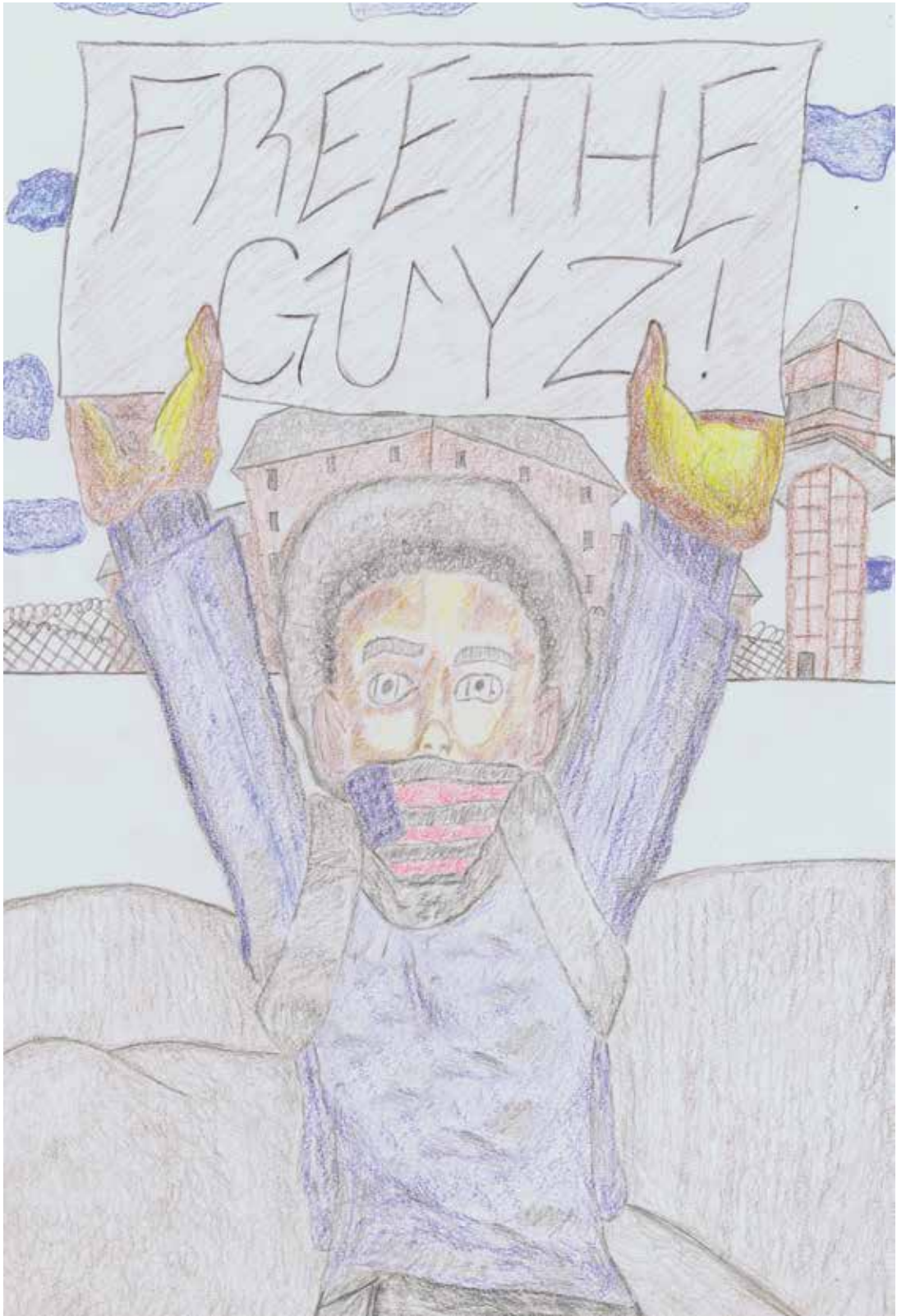
But I remember that
everything is temporary, nothing lasts forever
patience is the key to everything getting better
everything is temporary, forever nothing lasts
I was moving too fast, I was moving too fast...

Slavery still exists
it's modern day slavery
I am not a monster
so please don't be afraid of me
he felt like a man
with that gun in his hand
it was dead or in jail
and I was raised in the field

In this city where I'm from
people want to move and run
don't even want to call the police
because of what's been going on
they might pull up, kill me, then say I had a gun
they promise my family money, but it's just a refund
they'r making films about my city
but they not in these streets
it's entertainment to them
but it's real life to me
and it's real like to him, him, and maybe her
they don't know what we've seen
I lost my homie to these streets
I lost money in these streets
I was hungry in these streets
and I was lonely in these streets
genocide in my eyes
people getting killed over pride
murder rate so high
whole country saying, "Why?"

So how dare you criticize
the loss of people's lives
always talking about the crime
but you ain't even spent a dime
to open up new rec centers
or even school funding
all the gang leaders locked up
probably ain't never coming
back to these streets, so they can't tell us nothing
like why would I listen to you
if you ain't getting' no money
and I think it's funny how Obama from Chicago
so it got me wondering
like if y'all ain't give me nothing
how I'm gonna make it to something
but my ambition, my grind, and loyalty gon' make me shine
they think I lost my mind
but I'm just taking my time
my Grandma told me, "Boy, just be patient."
but how long have I been waiting?
With these dreads in my head
their perception of me is Satan
but I'm God-fearing, Lord knows I'm gon' make a billion
these streets already showed me you can lose your life in a flash
and be the next pack in the blunt that somebody 'bout to pass.





Free the Guys (2016) colored pencil Adrian W.

Jeremiah S.

10 things the bullet sees

The bullet inside was calm at first when I got shot, then like the second day I guess the bullet was mad because the whole left side of my body started to hurt.

Until the bullet seen my heart and seen all my feelings when I had to leave my family, the bullet had a connection because he left his family he left his home, the gun, and his family, the five other bullets.

It's kinda like I adopted the bullet like it's my own child or something.

It's like I show the bullet how to behave by showing him my feelings.

I think I would be afraid of the bullet leaving my body because I showed the bullet a lot and I showed it my life. Basically if it was to leave it would probably show people what I showed it.

If I take the bullet out it would hurt the inside of me then it would be on the outside.

I guess the bullet is nice. Whatever I do it does, so if I get high, it gets high.

The bullet acts like my dad because it made me stop gang banging.

The bullet name is Lil Santana.



Malik J.

Dear Inner Self,

Pain.....

Why do I have to keep going through so much pain?

Especially when it's no one to blame

but myself

for putting myself through so much pain. I mean....

All the stressing I done been through or seen

I close my eyes, and have nightmares when others have dreams.

and it seems

that it was meant to be the way that it is

ain't nothing changed but the game

i been this way since I was a kid.

and it's sad

Jeremiah G.

Glasses

I can see things that look apart,
I see the light traveling thru the dark
I see things that close but look so far
The stars shine brighter, the moon is lighter
And God has my future. I'm just trying to be a survivor.

Kaylee S.

Image

Blue and dark with stars
I'll keep my word
I'll give away the date
the twin towers fell
I'll go back to my lovely house

Remember the letter K
add lee to it
 The sky is blue with clouds
look above you and you see the sky



Devonte M.

I Wish

I wish I had
another chance
to start over
ever since I got locked up.

I wish I had hundreds of trillions of dollars.

I wish I had the ability to see things coming
before they happen.

I wish for my family could never get hurt.

I wish death wasn't here.

Adrian W.

A Good Luck Gesture

September 12, 2016 as I walk in the courtroom
the guards greet me, I wave
knowing my life could be froze during this time period
as I sit my head starts to hurt and my arms are sweating.

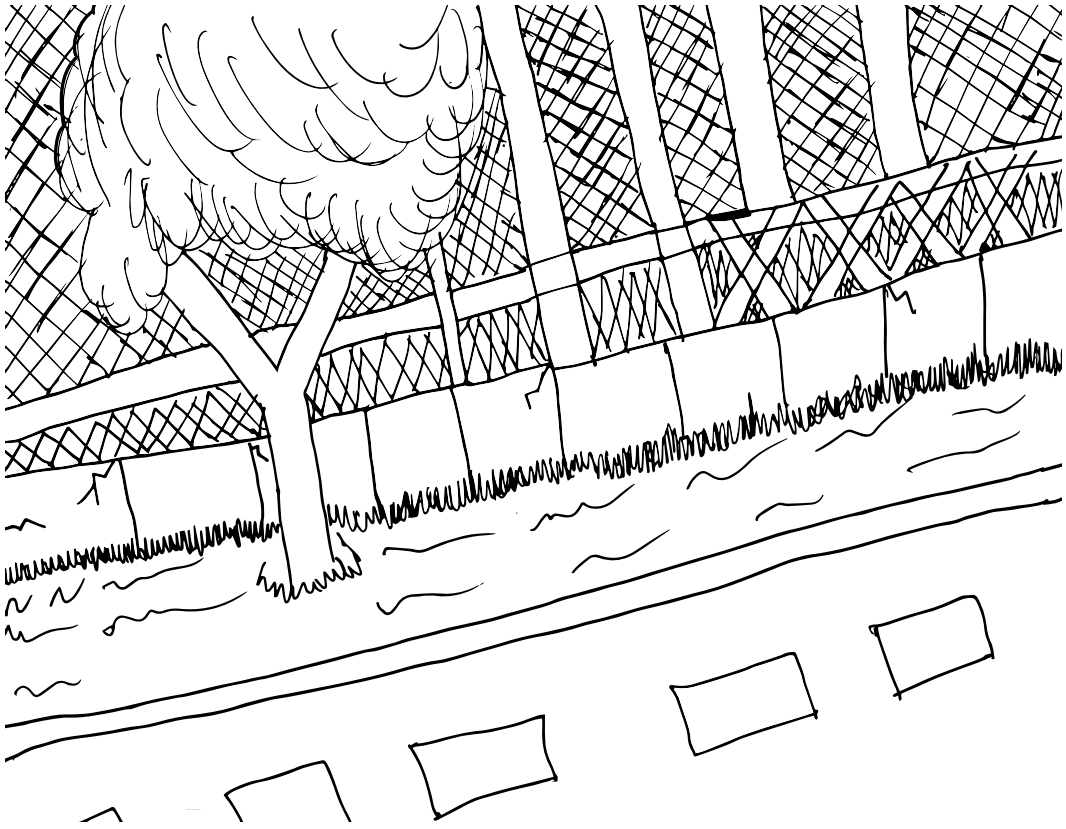
Hearing my public defender go back and forth with the State
is just making it worse,
in my mind as I look to my mother she smiling
which means in my head she's giving me a good luck gesture,
my sister quiet as usual and my older brother just look as though
he never knew who I was.

As Day 2 came on I wondered like
"how I look could this be? Why me? Would I ever see my brothers again?"
So my attorney went on and this time
it felt like they were going to fight over whether I was guilty or not.

Looking at the judge's face explain everything
he was positioned in a way like "why are we here"?
"Object your Honor!" the State yells
but the judge overrules his statement.

Now I'm sweating gallons in my seat
hoping that when I get up
that the seat would be wet
full with water vapor.





Background (2016) ink on paper Pedro C.

Kenneth T.

Untitled

(ekphrastic after Devin Allen)

Little black boy in a white tee
standing there looking like me
running around having fun
enjoying the hot heat and sun
trying to stay away from the violence
while my cities doing nothing but riot

Damian C.

Running

(after Tim Seibles)

Sometimes I feel like I'm running
through a maze.
I'm losing my breath -
a lot of breath

But I'm getting sick of running away
because I never know what I'm running from.
But I know I'm not running because I'm scared.

I think I'm running from myself;
my true self.
I was always afraid
to be myself.
But now as I get older,
I'm learning who I am
and I'm not so scared anymore.

I want to be a good man.
I want to be a loyal man.
No more gangbanging.
I didn't appreciate my family before.
I guess it took getting shot and being locked up
to know how valuable they are.
I feel like I can stop running now.



Angel J.

dream

It was windy. The trees were breezy, dark. It was as silent as I can imagine. Everything seemed normal at that point, but something inside of me felt different at some point. This thing just went through me. One missed the right side of my face. The other went right past my pant leg. There was this adrenaline rush I felt. I just kept on running, running until I felt safe. This burning pain just came outta nowhere. It was like someone just kicked me in the stomach and lit it on fire. The whole world just went blurry. Wall to wall I hung on trying not to fall; keeping myself from hitting the ground. Then everything just went dark. It's like I had gone somewhere. I really can't say where. I just went someplace. Everything felt like a dream – a dream that was just so explainable, but as much as I wanna remember, I just can't.

Henry J.

Get Money

Everywhere I go I spend
them stacks. I gotta get
this money. My life
ain't none, without it.
I claim all the money
I ever made, no matter how
I got it.
Everywhere I go, I spend
them stacks, spend
them stacks, and get 'em
back.



Che Guevara (2016) pencil and ink on paper Jeremy M.



Kenneth T.

I Am Not Ready To Die Yet

If I go I'll be alone,
it's hard to adapt on your own

This is the longest I've been away from home
I can come back, my life ain't gone

& when I go or you go
let me see you again somewhere
or you see me

Melshyia D.

When I become President

The land will be smooth – more justice, more confrontation. More peace. More love. Less hate. More formation. Less dead people to gun violence. More kings and queens. Less victims. More strength in black communities. More help. Less taxes. More wealth. When I become president the land will be great, the greatest world it could ever be when people can come together without fight but with loving minds. When I become President the land will be the greatest place to step foot on.

Dreyana G.

Pledge

Drive a car. Be Free.
Finish High School.
Go to college.
Get a job.
Find a partner.
Take risk.
Ride a horse.
Take control.
Help others.
Give back.
Learn the law.
Go to church more often.
Start a program.
Climb a mountain.
Travel.
Learn new languages.
Focus more on me.
Go boxing.
Learn the true meaning of love.
Make friends.
Acknowledge my enemies.
Get tatted.
Play guitar.



Leroy M.

In 2015

Try my best
get let free
see my mama
meet the lord
never come back
make new raps
ride a bike
smoke a blunt
drive a car
get some money

Deven S.

Elegy for Lake Shore Drive

wake up, refresh, clean up
eat, rest outside.

The smell of air, cars
people walking.

Grocery store
Laundry mat, Foot Locker, Game Stop,

streets, lights, cameras,
bike trails, bridges.

Highways, cars
speeding, grass fields.

Trees, Birds, Plants,
big rocks, smell of water.

The sand, splash of water.
Sunlight beaming into eyelids.



Javon B.

LIFE A B

Ever since i was a shorty running
the streets, life never meant nothing to me.
Mother didn't care, so why should I?

Pour alcohol on my hands just to see the flames rise,
Look death in the face every day of my life.
Played 'Russian Roulette'
one bullet in the chamber nothing but anger,
sadness and pain, ready to die.
Only if someone know what I feel inside.
Seeing Mother getting high and the nightmares
still chasing =me,
slammed my mind.
I'm just being real.
I feel like dying.
There's nothing in the world for me but more pain
and misery, and a mother who love drugs more than she loves me
RUDEBOY, _SCOOP4LIFE, and a father who left me to die in the street.
I'd rather be dead, so Lord, please take me.

Life a B



MLK (2016) *graphic illustration* Jose A.



Kevin P.

Baltimore

(ekphrastic after Devin Allen)

I see a lot of angry people,

I see people with posters holding them in the air.

They are protesting about racism in their town.

It's raining out there also.

This means they dedicated to what they are protesting about.

People are taking pictures of things, and recording them. People have their hands in the air.

They have umbrellas for the rain. They have hats on with their hands in the air.

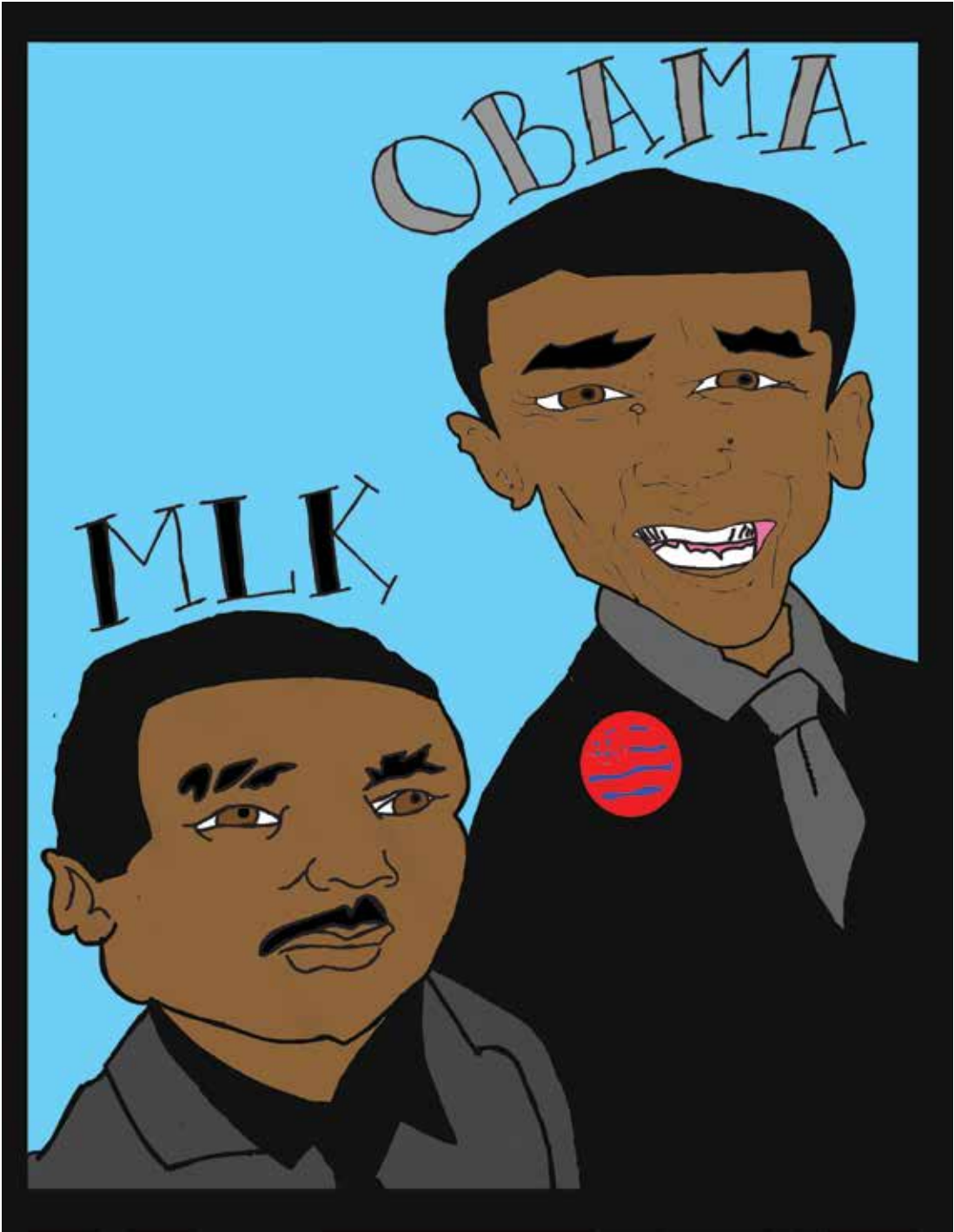
They have their fists up.

There are a lot of them.

Henry J.
Untitled (photo)
(ekphrastic after Devin Allen)

Nice women
holding balloons
in the air. Reflection
off a woman's glasses.
Aunties, cousins, friends,
a purse a woman is
wearing. I see a bunch
of women coming together
to try and stop racism
by protesting and showing
they care about what's
happening. I see necklaces
around women's necks. They
all got on white t-shirts. A woman
with an afro. A woman
with long hair.





Obama & MLK (2015) *graphic illustration* DaMarckus D.

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This collection of writing and art is dedicated to the memory of Alex Elson and Bertram Cohler. May their legacy continue to inspire us all to be creative, build community, and speak our truths.





EVIDENCE

with an introduction by

Reginald Dwayne Betts