

# PUNCHING THE AIR

"NOTHING SHORT  
OF A MASTERWORK  
OF HUMANITY."  
—JASON REYNOLDS



NATIONAL BOOK  
AWARD FINALIST **IBI ZOBOI** AND  
**YUSEF SALAAM**  
OF THE EXONERATED FIVE



# PUNCHING THE AIR

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WITH **YUSEF SALAAM**

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BALZER + BRAY

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# Dedication

*For Joseph, and the many lives  
you've touched with your art, including mine  
—I. Z.*

*For my mother, Sharonne Salaam, my super shero  
—Y. S.*

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*A Note from the Authors*  
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## **Part I**

# Birth

Umi gave birth to me

at home  
She has a video  
and every birthday  
she makes me watch

When I was little  
I would run away

Umi would laugh and say  
*Come here, boy*  
*You gotta remember*  
*where you came from!*

She'd chase me around  
that small apartment  
and I'd cover my eyes and  
pretend to be gagging  
*That's nasty, Mama, I'd say*

*That's life, Amal*  
*You have to respect it*  
she'd say

Umi was in this inflatable pool  
in the middle of our living room  
with the midwife next to her

My father was holding the camera

She was taking deep fire breaths  
eyes closed tight, not even screaming  
almost praying

Then the midwife plunged  
both her hands into the pool

And then  
there I was rising out of water  
Squirming little brown thing

barely crying  
big eyes wide  
as if I'd already done this before  
as if I'd already been here before

Umi says  
I was born with an  
old, old soul

# Old Soul

The thing about being born  
with an old soul  
is that

an old soul can't tell you  
all the things you weren't supposed to do  
all the things that went wrong  
all the things that will make it right again

The thing about having an old soul  
is that  
no one can see that it's there  
hunched over with wrinkly brown skin  
thick gray hair, deep cloudy eyes  
that have already seen the past, present, and future  
all balled up into a small universe

right here, right now  
in this courtroom

# Courtroom

I know the courtroom ain't  
the set of a music video, ain't  
Coachella or the BET Awards, ain't  
MTV, VH1, or the Grammys

But still

there's an audience  
of fans, experts, and judges

Eyes watching through filtered screens  
seeing every lie, reading every made-up word  
like a black hoodie counts as a mask  
like some shit I do with my fingers  
counts as gang signs  
like a few fights counts as uncontrollable rage  
like failing three classes  
counts as being dumb as fuck  
like everything that I am, that I've ever been  
counts as being

guilty

# Character Witness

We're in the courtroom  
to hear the jury's verdict  
after only a few hours of  
deliberation

and Ms. Rinaldi, my art teacher  
was a character witness  
It was the first time  
she saw me

in a suit and tie  
like the one I was supposed to wear

to the art opening at the museum

Or the one I was supposed to wear  
to my first solo show in the school's gym

The suit I was supposed to wear  
to prom, to my cousin's graduation  
to mosque with Umi

is the suit I wear to my first trial





It's as if this event in my life  
was something that was  
supposed to happen all along

# Gray Suit

Umi told me to wear a gray suit  
because optics

But that gray didn't make me any less black  
My white lawyer didn't make me any less black

And words can paint black-and-white pictures, too

Maybe ideas have their own eyes  
separating black from white as if the world  
is some old, old TV show

Maybe ideas segregate like in the days of  
Dr. King, and no matter how many marches  
or Twitter hashtags or Justice for So-and-So

our mind's eyes and our eyes' minds  
see the world as they want to  
Everything already illustrated  
in black and white

# Anger Management

*Did you ever see Amal get angry?*  
the prosecutor asked Ms. Rinaldi

It's the most important question in my trial  
Am I angry Am I violent Am I—

*Objection*, Clyde said

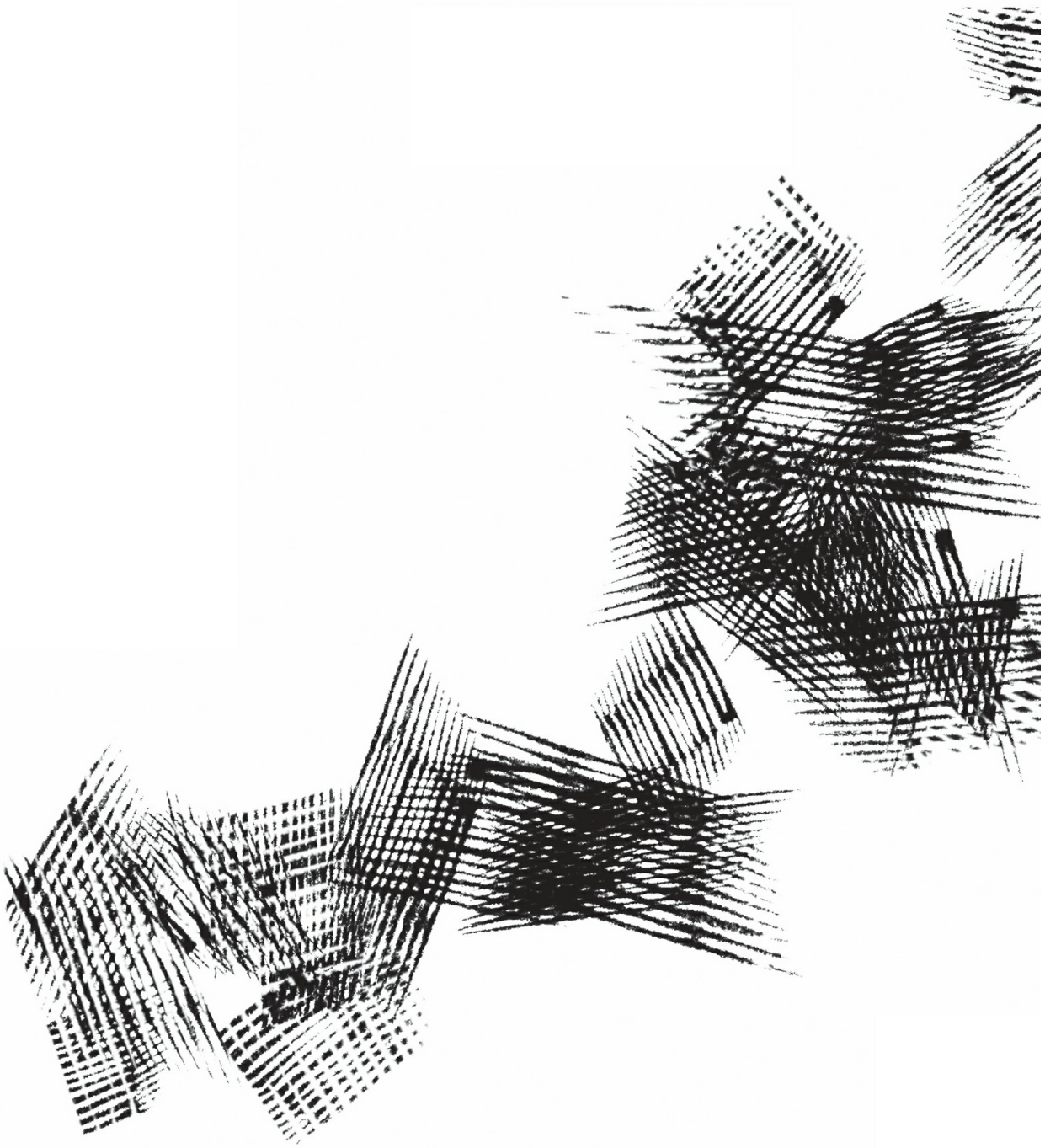
*Sustained*, the judge said

*Did Amal ever display emotions that were—*

Yes, Ms. Rinaldi said  
*That's why I work so hard with Amal*  
*To channel his anger into his art*

And I know, I know  
that right then and there  
she didn't even have to look my way  
because she won't see me  
She's never seen me  
She only sees my paintings and drawings  
as if me and what I create  
are two different worlds

There's a stone in my throat  
and a brick on my chest



# White Space

In art class  
Ms. Rinaldi had said that  
the white space on the page  
  
is also part of our illustration  
The white space on the page  
  
also tells a story, is part of the big picture  
I didn't get what she was saying at first  
  
Then she showed us this painting  
An optical illusion, she called it  
  
There was a white face  
with eyes, a nose, and a mouth  
  
against a black background  
But when I looked sideways  
  
or backward or upside down  
there was a black face with  
  
eyes, nose, and a mouth  
against a white background  
  
And it was wild how my eyes  
played tricks on me like that

but it was my mind that  
made sense of it all

It's wild how our minds  
can play tricks on us like that



# White Space II

There were more witnesses  
from East Hills  
than from my side of the hood  
    of the tracks  
    of the border  
    of that invisible line  
we weren't supposed to cross

The couple who just moved in with the baby  
who said  
*We tried so hard to build community*

The kindergarten teacher who said  
*I've always been good to those  
neighborhood kids*

And the college kid who  
recorded the whole thing  
and said  
*I knew something was gonna go down  
so I just picked up my phone*

*To call the police?* Clyde asked  
*Nah, for social,* the kid said  
*It was like a mob  
an ambush  
So I went live  
And no, I've never seen them before*



Then when Clyde asked  
*How long have you been in the neighborhood?*

*Just the weekend, visiting friends*  
the college kid said  
*I didn't think it would blow up like this*

*That video made you pretty famous, huh?*

The college kid laughed  
and all I wanted to do was  
drag him off that witness stand  
But that would've looked bad  
Really bad

# The Thinker

I replay everybody's testimonies  
in my head  
like a song on loop

Their words and what they thought  
to be their truth  
were like a scalpel

shaping me into  
the monster  
they want me to be

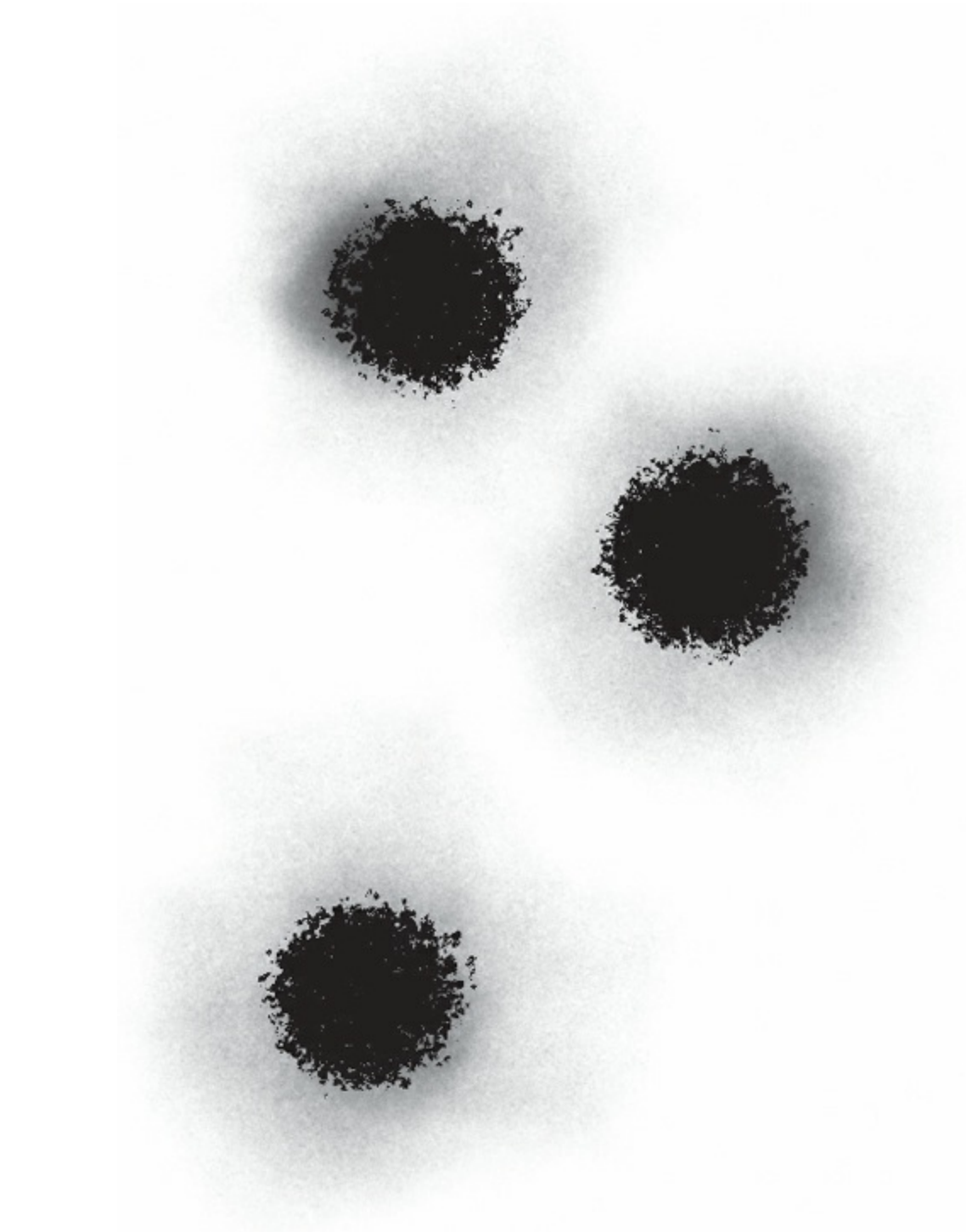
I'm supposed to be  
like a statue  
in this courtroom

Chiseled bronze  
perfectly frozen in time  
like some god  
stripped of his power  
or a fallen angel  
cast into this hell

And every lie  
they say about me  
    every stone  
they throw at me  
is supposed to bounce off

like tiny pellets

Here I have to be bulletproof



# Two Mouths

*What happens if I'm found guilty?* I ask Clyde  
before the deliberation

He taps his pen on his yellow notepad  
as if beating out the rhythm to some rhyme  
some party anthem for when for when  
he wins this case

And I want so bad  
to grab that pen and notepad  
and draw me a victory  
a whole scene with dancing shapes  
and hard lines turned to joy

*That's not going to happen,* he says

Umi said English requires two mouths to speak  
and four ears to understand

Clyde spoke with two mouths  
One for me and one for the court

# Blank Page

Mr. Clyde Richter, my defense attorney  
is supposed to save my life  
is supposed to create reasonable doubt  
is supposed to let that judge and jury know  
the truth

But he is part of the white space  
on my page  
where the charcoal and ink  
only graze the edges of his world

of Ms. Rinaldi's world  
of Jeremy Mathis's world  
the white boy whose entire life  
is a whole blank page of  
this sketchbook  
where this story begins

# Black Ink

So  
I am ink  
He is paper

I am pencil  
He is notebook

I am text  
He is screen

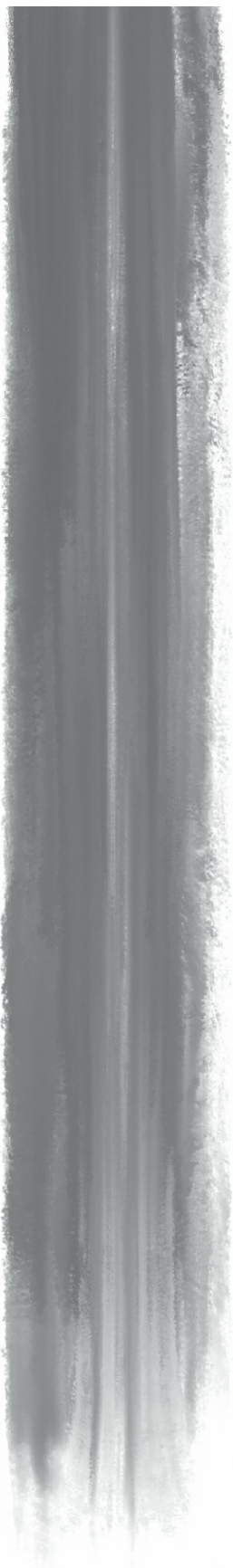
I am paint  
He is canvas

I am man  
He is boy

I am criminal  
He is victim

I am alive  
He is almost dead

I am black  
He is white



# Face Painting

Ms. Rinaldi left the courtroom  
after the prosecutor showed pictures  
of Jeremy Mathis's face after the fight

In school, she said I had talent, a gift  
She said my lines were soft  
    my subjects were tender  
She said I had a lot of beauty  
    inside me waiting to bloom

My art teacher of all people should know  
I could never make a painting  
with the colors of mangled flesh  
of broken bone, of bruised skin

out of someone's face



# Movie Star

The people who know me  
    really know me  
are not the ones  
the judge and jury want to hear from

It's as if they wanted to hear a story about  
some other kid  
It's as if they wanted to watch a movie about  
some other kid

The prosecutor, with his fancy words  
    his hard evidence  
wrote the script, directed the scene  
    cast just the right actor  
to play this kid from the hood  
who beat up a white kid really bad  
    so bad  
    that he can't wake up  
    to tell the truth

# Fan Club

And the truth is  
nothing else matters except this moment  
right now  
when I get to turn around to

look into Umi's eyes  
to remind her to remind me  
that she believes me

And I want Grandma to know that  
I'm good I'm good  
on the inside

Uncle Rashon knew what went down  
even before he saw the news  
even before he saw the video  
even before he saw the picture of Jeremy Mathis's face

He tried to tell me He tried to tell me  
not to go over to East Hills

My cousins Shay and Dionne tell me  
even without saying a word

*We got your back, 'Mat We got your back*

The other faces are  
from the block from the hood

from my school    from my past

I don't know if they're watching  
this movie with the boy who is playing me  
or the real me in this real life

But still, they're here    They're here

My best friend Lucas  
    ghosted me  
ever since this whole shit went down



# Black Mona Lisa

My umi's face is  
the most beautiful in the world

Skin  
like sleeping in on snow days  
beneath thick blankets  
black

Smile  
like an eighty-degree  
summer day in April  
bright

Eyes  
like long subway rides  
looking out windows watching  
nothing and everything go by in the dark  
and letting my thoughts swim  
deep

# Picasso Face

My face must be  
the ugliest in the world

Monster Predator Animal  
*You walk on two legs, not four*, Umi said

And since that night  
I haven't heard anyone call me boy like she does  
call me little man

Always man  
born full-grown, full-bearded  
full of a life not even lived yet  
as if  
I've never toddled along the sofa  
like in the videos on Umi's phone

I've never eaten mashed-up food and  
spit up and babbled with a mouth full of pink gums

I've never cried for a teddy bear or  
laughed at Elmo on *Sesame Street*

I've never worn mismatched shoes  
and splashed in a puddle

I've never hidden from thunder and fireworks  
and angry shouts and gunshots and sirens

as if  
I've never been afraid of monsters and  
predators and animals and  
my own face



# Cacophony

The judge takes his seat  
on the bench and lets us know  
that the jury has reached a verdict

And I can hear everyone behind me  
shifting in their seats  
whispering  
mumbling  
crying  
as if they know  
They already know

*Order!* the judge shouts  
and bangs his gavel

But all I hear is chaos  
All I know is chaos

The disorder of things, places  
and people that have no end  
no aim, no destiny, no Allah

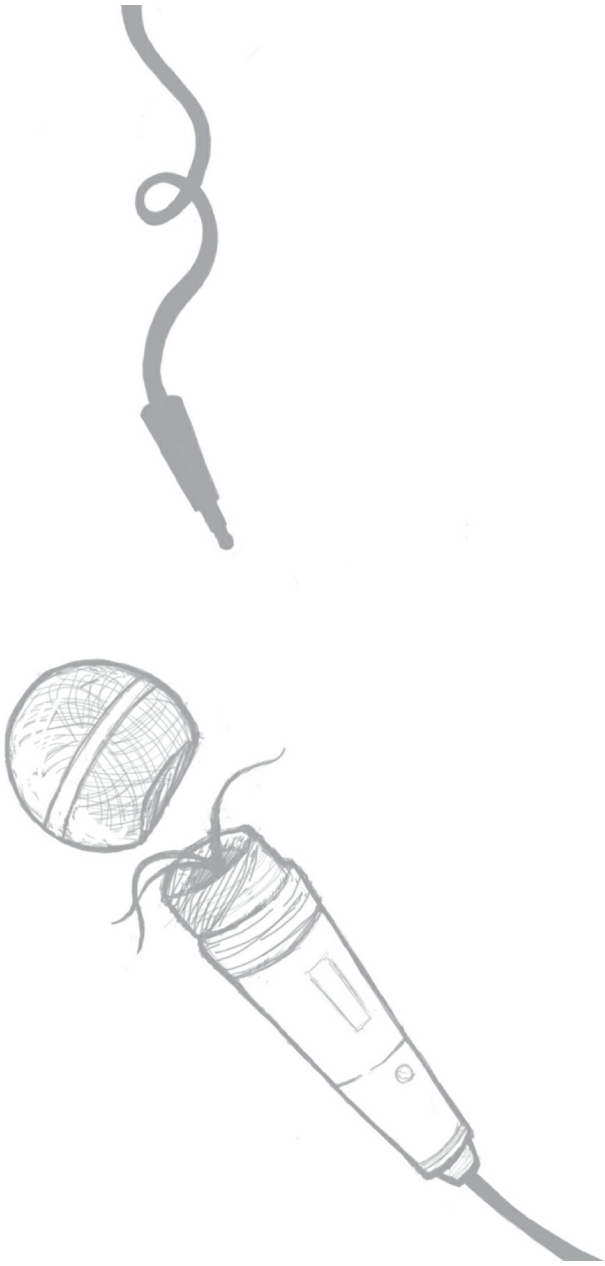
Godless like hell  
Umi tells me to pray, head bowed  
submitting to that higher power who  
holds the puppet strings

And sometimes I feel like a toy soldier



and I want to beat my chest  
to check my bulletproof vest  
in this made-up war  
like some rap battle  
with no mic, no beat, no sound

It's so quiet now  
I hold my own hands  
My leg is shaking  
My heart is a drum  
My body—  
    I wish I could float into the air  
    I wish I could disappear



# The Last Judgment

*In the case of the People*, the juror says  
And I wish I had eyes in the back of my head  
so I could see the people behind me  
so they can see me

Not the version of me they see in those drawings—  
eyes like dead spaces on my face, mouth turned down  
nose wide like my father's  
cheekbones high like my grandma's

Not the version of me they see on TV—  
head down, arms pulled back  
wrists cuffed  
mean-mugged  
name in mud

But the real me, like, past my face, past my story  
and into my eyes so they'd know  
what really happened that night

I'd let each one of them step into my soul  
and walk those city streets  
walk through that building's door  
walk through that school's halls

sit in those classes  
sit on those front stoops  
sit on those trains

stand in those lines  
stand on those corners  
stand in front of this judge

And maybe my whole soul  
my whole life  
will be like a mirror  
And instead of me  
here in this courtroom  
it would be

the People versus the People

. . . *versus Amal Dawud Shahid*, she says

Keep my name out your mouth, lady, I say  
But she don't hear me, though  
No one hears me  
My lips are sealed  
but my words have a life of their own

Even if they're locked up  
they'll bounce off three walls and slip between  
metal bars  
They'll say *what's up* to the inmates  
mean-mug the COs  
walk out of the security-tight doors  
fly out of this place  
aim for the sky, kiss the clouds  
and shout to that stale wind  
that my name is Amal  
and  
Amal means hope



*The jury finds, she says*

As if this is a game of hide-and-seek  
and I'm curled up under some table  
my body balled up like a fist

like in my mom's belly

Or in some closet, behind her dresses  
smelling like perfume

like home

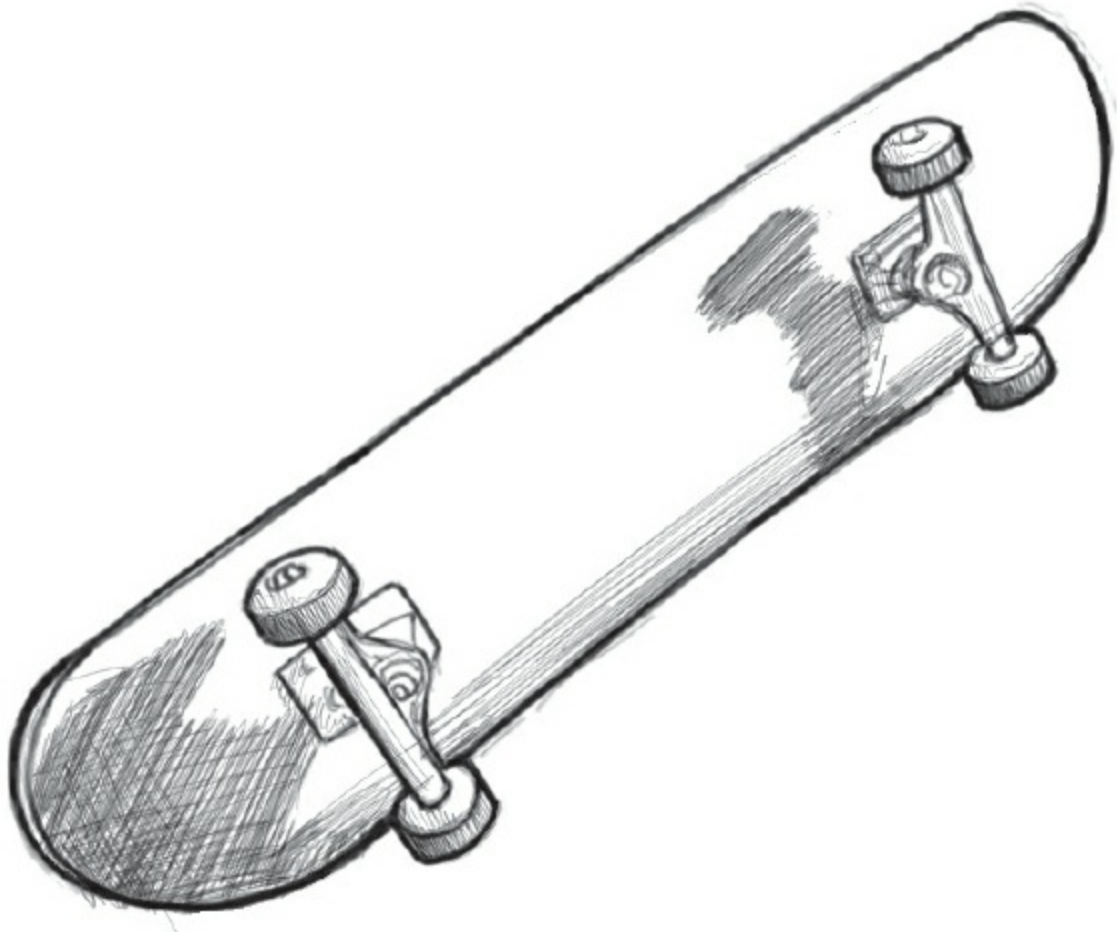
like cooked food

like plans for the future

like maybe-somedays

like see-you-tomorrows

. . . *the defendant*, she says  
As if it's my name  
As if I came into the world  
with fists blocking  
boxing gloves like  
Holyfield, Louis, Frazier  
Tyson, Rocky, and Ali



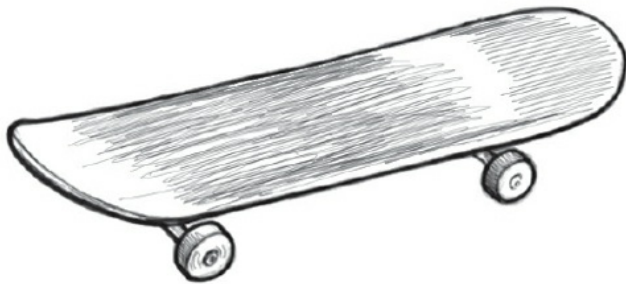
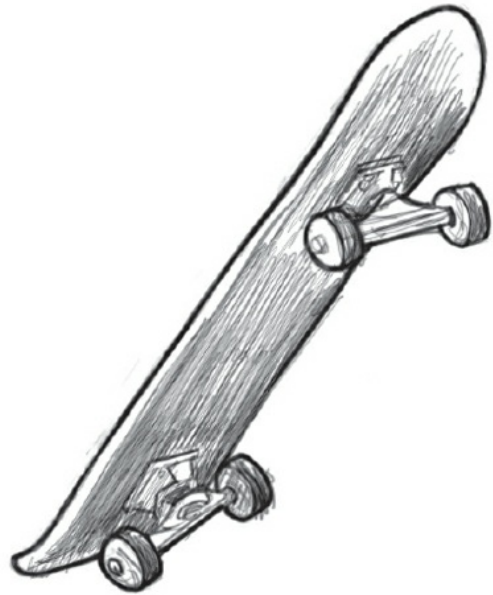
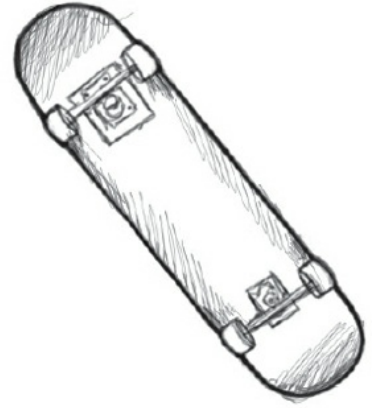
# Counting Game

One count of  
attempted murder with a deadly weapon  
The prosecutor had to prove  
that I grabbed my skateboard  
and swung it at his head  
and tried to kill him  
But Clyde got that first charge reduced to

aggravated assault and battery with a deadly weapon  
The prosecutor had to prove  
that I grabbed my skateboard  
and swung it at his head  
when his DNA wasn't even on it  
so Clyde got it reduced to

one count of  
aggravated assault and battery





# Knockout Game

Shay would punch me on the arm whenever  
he spotted a Volkswagen Beetle  
That was the rule of the punch buggy game

And I'd punch Shay back really hard because  
Umi always said, *Somebody hit you, you hit 'em back*  
That was the rule of that game

So I turned down the plea deal  
and pleaded not guilty

Because Clyde said it was self-defense

Jeremy Mathis's mother must've  
told him the same thing

*Somebody hit you, you hit 'em back*  
Because I threw the first punch

# Ball Game

I really learned about  
self-defense  
while playing basketball

full court, five-on-five  
When the ball  
is on their side  
and you trying to block  
that three-point shot  
And they know their turf  
better than you do  
but you know your  
whole team

But still  
it's their court  
it's their hood

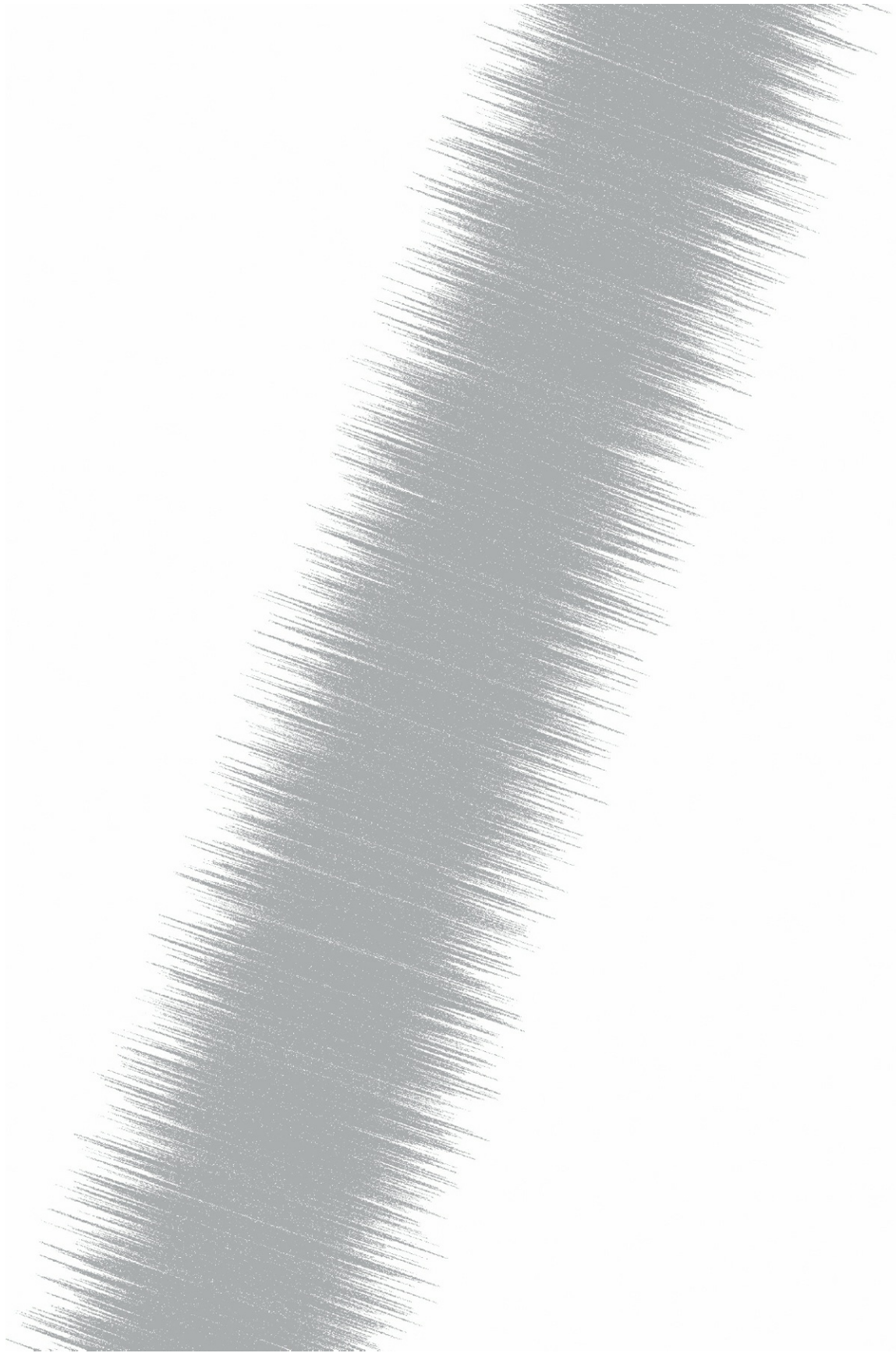
And all you trying to do is  
steal the ball, intercept, block  
and go home  
go home

Go home  
is what those people  
in East Hills were saying to us

So it wasn't about

who threw the first punch

It was about courts, turf, space  
Me and them other boys  
were just trying to go home



# Counting Game II

*On  
the  
count  
of  
aggravated  
assault and battery—*

*the jury finds the defendant*

*guilty*

the juror says

There's a stone in my throat  
There's a brick on my chest

The stone turns into a mountain  
The brick turns into a building

And it feels like a giant, heavy thing  
    like the whole world  
is pressing down on me

# The Scream

Rage is a deadly feeling, Umi once said    It doesn't move anything    It just makes you wanna punch a wall or a face It just sits there, this heavy, dark thing in front of your eyes making you feel nothing but hunger beating in your empty belly    So you're forced to face it and open your mouth wide to swallow it whole, thinking that it will go down smooth like warm milk    But rage is a thing with bones and blood and screams that turn into flames, so you have to chew on it    Take in all the sharp bitterness that makes your tongue and mouth and words go numb    You don't even know when it reaches your throat because it's already there in your belly    Heavy thing not moving like a heart stopped



# The Scream II

I turn around to see Umi  
and the stones fall out of my mouth

*But he was still—  
I didn't—  
Umi—*

More stones clog my throat  
and I am choking on my words  
I am choking on my tears  
I am choking  
I am  
I am choking  
I am choking on my tears  
and I am choking on my words  
More stones clog my throat

*Umi—  
I didn't—  
But he was still—*

and the stones fall out of my mouth  
I turn around to see Umi

# Refrain

What was I supposed to say?  
That I didn't do it, over and over again  
like it's a number-one hit single?  
The platinum record of the summer  
with a dope beat by some DJ?

That little kids make up dances in viral videos to—

*I didn't do it*

That white girls strum guitars on YouTube to—

*I didn't do it*

That church choirs sing the gospel remix to—

*I didn't do it*

That Ellen does her two-step dance routine to—

*I didn't do it*

And I'm over here  
shouting to the judge, jury, cops, reporters  
his moms, my moms, that  
I threw the first punch but not the last—

*I didn't do it*

# Blind Justice

His mom thinks it's justice for her son

But I know that me and him  
both walked down the path  
that was already planned for us

And we stepped onto  
the tipping scales of Lady Justice  
with her eyes blindfolded, peeking through slits  
because that rag is so fucking old  
worn-out, stretched thin, barely even there

Amal Shahid to the left      Jeremy Mathis to the right  
perfectly imbalanced

because where I come from  
jail or death  
were the two options she handed to us  
because where he comes from  
the American Dream  
was the one option she handed to them

So here we are, blind Lady Justice  
I see you, too

# Thoughts & Prayers

There is nothing left to do now  
but to think about God

my country's Money  
my mother's Allah  
my grandmother's Jesus  
my father's American Dream  
my uncle's Foreign Cars  
my teacher's College Education  
my lawyer's Time

When Umi asked for thoughts and prayers  
each one of them bowed their heads  
to their version of the higher power  
and maybe never, ever even once  
thinking of Hope

thinking of me

# Slave Ship

*What happened?*  
I try to ask Clyde

But the other voices  
in the courtroom  
drown out my words

And it's like water  
is slowly rising  
from the floor

reaching my feet  
climbing up my legs  
as if this courtroom

is a sinking ship  
but everybody else  
with their freedom

can swim up to the  
surface for some air  
to safe shores

and I'm the only one  
with an anchor  
tied to my ankles

Heavy metal

pulling me down  
until I drown

So I turn around  
to see the freedom  
I'm leaving behind  
to see the home  
I'm leaving behind  
I want so bad  
to paint this picture  
to crop out all the noise  
and zoom in on the people  
who love me

# Family Portrait

Umi's eyes, framed by her blue hijab, are like home

I know the Quran is on her lap  
with my baby pictures between its pages

Uncle Rashon's furrowed brows are like trips to that  
book vendor on the corner

I know he has conspiracy theories  
about this whole thing

Shay's crooked smile is like when he's losing to me  
in a long chess game

There's fear on his face, like  
this might happen to him, too

Dionne's smirk is like a college brochure  
slipped under my door

There's hope in her eyes, like she really believes  
everything will be okay

Grandma's presence is a whole wide, warm hug

She's tired, so tired

I want her to go home and lay down

# The Watch

The first time I was ever handcuffed  
was when I was arrested and charged

with this crime, I thought about  
watches and other things I wear on my wrist

In kindergarten Umi got me a waterproof watch  
with a Velcro strap, I was always checking it like

I had places to go and people to see and  
in second grade I wore those Silly Bandz

on my wrist as if they were status symbols

In fifth grade, the prettiest girl  
Tanesha, made me a friendship bracelet

strands of string linked together like chains  
That shit never came off, but when we broke up

I tried to snag it loose with my teeth right there  
in the schoolyard so everyone could see

that we were done and I'm not about to cry  
over no girl, but there go Shawn with his

big mouth talking about, *She dumped you, ha ha!*  
So I told him to shut the fuck up right there



in the schoolyard so everyone could see  
that I'm not about to cry over no girl

But he kept saying, *She dumped you, she dumped you!*  
'Cause Tanesha was the prettiest girl in the fifth grade

and when she was my girl I was the coolest kid in the  
fifth grade and you know when you have a girl

all the other girls wanna be your girl, so Shawn  
with his big mouth was messing up my game

was trying to make me cry, make me mad, make me fight  
and he came to my face one more time with

*She dumped your ugly ass!* and the only thing left to do  
was to deck him in the face, punch after punch

And we were right there in the schoolyard fighting  
like we wanted to kill each other but all I was trying to do

was not lose 'cause everybody was right there in the  
schoolyard watching, cheering, until until

the principal came, the gym teacher came  
my teachers came to stop us from trying

to kill each other 'cause that's what it looked like  
after I was done with Shawn's face

*We have a zero-tolerance policy*, Mr. Figueroa  
said when my mother came up to the school

after I had to sit in the office for a long-ass time  
and I knew I was in big trouble 'cause they sent

Shawn to the nurse's office and called his mother  
and everything, and I thought I won, I had a rep

for being this hard little kid that nobody could mess with  
and I didn't even know how I was supposed to feel—

happy or sad, proud or guilty, like I won or lost—  
because Umi's eyes were red when she came to the office

She stared down at me like she was sending lasers  
from her eyes, but right behind her was my boy Lucas

smiling big and giving me a thumbs-up, but Umi's  
face was sad, angry, confused, so I didn't know

what to do with my own eyes when both Ms. Samuel and  
Mr. Figueroa called us into the office to say again

that *We have a zero-tolerance policy!* Zero tolerance  
*What does that even mean?* Umi asked

*It means that Amal will have to be suspended for  
three days and it will have to go on his record*

*We laid out the rules at the beginning of the school year  
No fighting, no bullying, no cursing, no acting out*

*Zero tolerance*

*Scholars are learning that our actions always have*

*consequences and we have to think about  
our choices,* Ms. Samuel said, sounding like she's a

fucking robot, and Umi was looking at her like she is  
and said, *Is the other boy getting suspended?*

And Mr. Figueroa said, *The other boy was sent to  
the nurse's office He was badly hurt*

And then And then Umi looked over at me  
as if I did the worst thing in the world and

her face her face looked like it was slowly  
slowly turning into honey falling off a spoon

Sadness moved down from her forehead to her lips  
Drooping and dripping

*I'm so disappointed in you, Amal*, Umi said  
And my my heart was like her face

Drooping and dripping  
Then she asked, *Does it have to go on his record?*

*Boys fight all the time, right, I mean he's always  
fighting with his cousins, kids get hurt kids*

*They make stupid mistakes  
What's three days' suspension supposed*

*to teach him? He'll be home  
all alone I can't take off work to watch him*

Umi's eyes were begging for something Mr. Figueroa  
wasn't about to give

Ms. Samuel wants us to spread our wings and fly  
wants us to reach our full potential

College, it was all about college, so of course  
she repeated, *We have a zero-tolerance policy*

and Umi looking at me like I did the worst thing  
in the world and Lucas peeking into the office

looking at me like I did the best thing in the world  
and Tanesha walking in and looking at me

just looking at me and me looking at her  
and wishing so bad that I never

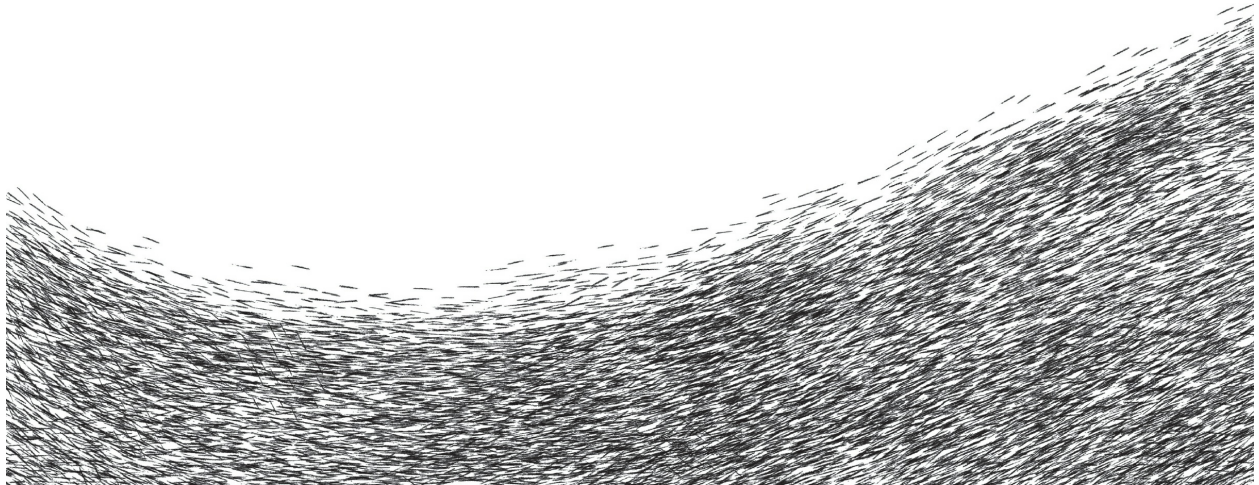
got into that fight with Shawn

# Ocean

Ever since that day in the fifth grade when  
I got suspended for three days  
for fighting

Umi watched me so hard, her rules were so strict  
that it felt like I've been trying to  
breathe underwater

Every dumb shit I've ever done was me  
fighting my way to the top  
for some air



# Clone

Ever since that day in the fifth grade

my teachers watched me so hard, so close  
that I felt like I was trying to break out of prison  
even though it was just school

Every dumb shit I did  
they thought it was because of

trouble at home  
an absent father  
a tired mother  
not enough books  
not enough vegetables  
not enough sleep

They believed those lies about me

and made themselves  
a whole other boy  
in their minds  
and replaced me with him

# Conversations with God

*Why are you not on their side?* I had asked Clyde  
I never called him Mr. Richter

I ain't a slave and he's not my Mister  
Master

Grandma calls me *Master Amal*  
because she says  
I am the master of my own destiny  
I am the master of my own fate  
I am the master of my body, mind, and spirit

So there was only room for one master  
and Clyde ain't it

(I never tell Grandma that on most days  
I don't feel like a master  
I don't feel like I'm the one in control)

These things that Grandma tells me  
are like  
a pan of mac and cheese on Sunday  
a pair of socks for my birthday

a whisper in my ear that she'll steal me away  
to take me to her church  
a tight hug around my waist and a kiss on my chin  
because I'm way taller than her

These things that Grandma gives me are like  
a butterscotch or peppermint candy from her purse

Sweet promises  
that make me feel special  
only for a little while  
Then she goes home  
to her church, to her Bible, to her knitting  
to her bargain shopping at dollar stores

to her own  
sweet  
promises



*I work for you, Amal*  
*Only you, Clyde had said*

*So you're in this for the money, I said*

*Amal— Umi interrupted*

*He gets to ask me all the questions*  
*and I don't get to ask him none? I said*

*Then he said, I'm in it for justice*

*And that's when I knew for sure that*  
*my lawyer speaks with two mouths*

*So when Clyde says, I'm sorry, Amal*  
*We did all we could*  
*after the officers handcuff me*

*I remember that he never really told me*  
*he was on my side*

# African American

When I turned thirteen  
Grandma told me she'd take me to  
Africa

I told her Africa's not a country  
and she slapped my shoulder and  
said I'm too smart for my own good

Umi said I should go to connect with my  
Muslim brothers and sisters on the continent  
and Grandma looked at her sideways

She said her church was organizing  
a trip to Senegal and we'd go to someplace  
called Goré Island and there'd be something  
called the Door of No Return

It's where slaves had to go through  
to get on a ship sailing to America  
It's where African people lost everything  
and stepped out into a future they didn't know

So when the officers hold that door open  
leading out of the courtroom



I think of that trip that never happened  
and the Door of No Return

My life, my whole damn life  
before that courtroom  
before that trial  
before that night  
was like Africa

And this door leads to a slave ship  
And maybe jail            maybe jail  
is                                is America

# Coming to America

The officer holding my arm  
digs his nails into my skin  
squeezing so tight  
it feels as if he got hold  
of a blood vessel  
or something  
because my heart my heart  
is suffocating

I clench my jaw and tighten every  
muscle in my body

I want to be like steel, like iron  
and I'm hoping  
that I'm superhuman

# The Entombment

The county jail behind the courtroom  
is called the tombs  
because it's where the system  
buries their dead

Clyde told me I won't have a life sentence  
and I won't have a death sentence either

I guess this will be somewhere in between  
like Jeremy Mathis

hanging in the middle

Dead to the world  
but somewhere in our souls  
we are both scratching at the walls  
yelling to the sky  
punching the air  
to let everyone and everything know  
that we are in here  
still alive

The tombs is where we  
wait for space in jail

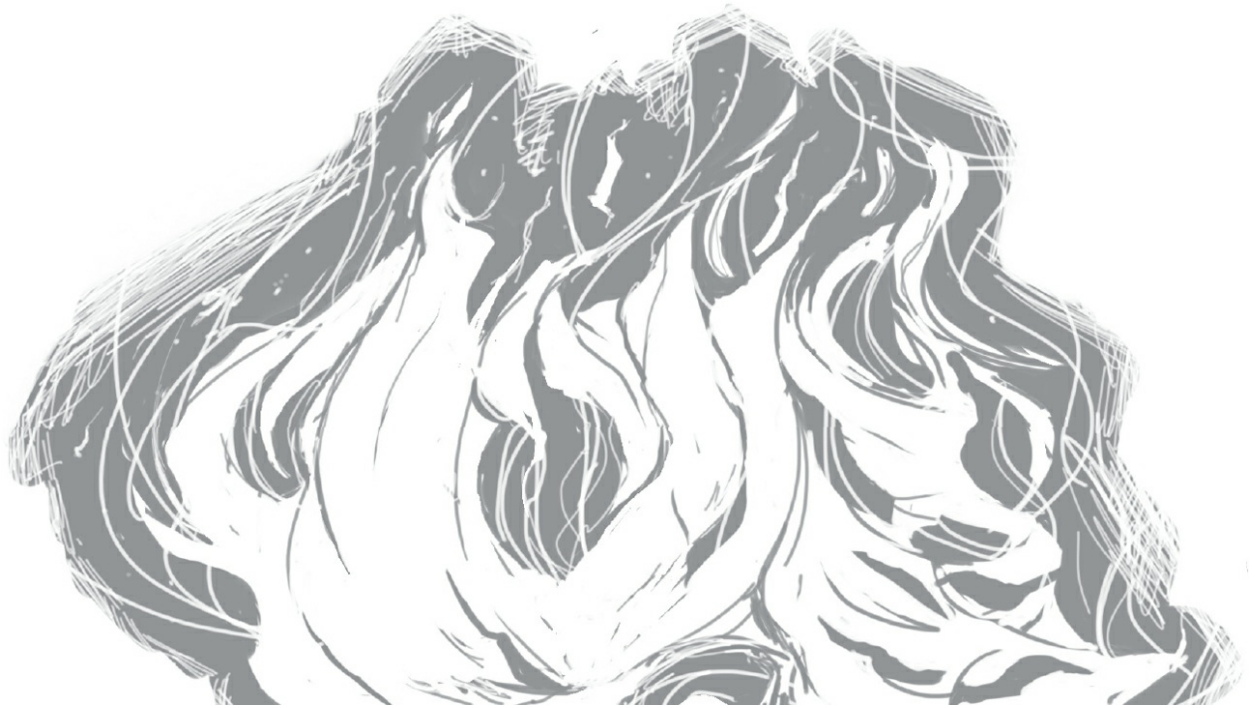
hell

I'm sure I'm sure

The tombs is where we leave

our bodies so that our souls  
can burn in an inferno  
I'm sure I'm sure

This is what Jeremy Mathis's mother  
wants to believe  
She said it herself  
*I hope he goes to hell  
for what he did to my son*



# Inferno

There are other brothers  
in here with me  
Some my age  
some older, some very old

And it's as if all our roads  
led to this point  
not even crossing  
a dead end  
with nothing but  
concrete walls  
and metal bars  
boxing us in

We nod at each other  
It's our way of saying  
*I see you, bro*  
*We in here*

And that's where the  
conversation ends

But we speak with  
our hands  
our eyes  
our bodies

Head back



chin up  
eyes wandering  
but never landing

We take up space  
without stepping over  
invisible boundaries

We move around each other  
without ever bumping shoulders

Some of us put up more walls  
Some of us look as if  
    we will break down all the walls  
Most of us become the walls

I find a spot to sit  
because it feels as if  
everything that is alive inside of me  
is floating away  
I'm not in my body

*It's shock, that's all . . . Shock*  
Grandma had said on the night of my arrest  
when I stared out into a void  
not here, somewhere over there

I remember that feeling  
of being in a dream  
or a nightmare  
as if this life isn't mine  
as if I've stepped into the flesh and bones  
of someone else pretending to be me  
and I'm waiting for an opening  
in the universe to pull me out of  
this dream state  
this smoky haze  
this ghost of a body

that is not me

Sleep is trying to come at me  
like a giant ocean wave  
pulling me deep deep

Maybe I can touch the ocean floor  
and the ancestors of the Middle Passage  
tug at my feet call me home

Maybe this is the only time  
I can breathe  
underwater

*Shahid!*

Who knew that voices  
could be so loud  
under the ocean

*Amal Shahid!*

Who even knows my name  
under the ocean

And I'm going up for air  
floating to the surface  
my face staring up

at a sunless, dark concrete sky  
*Is there an Amal Shahid in here?*  
Air comes to me in one big gulp

and I almost choke on my own breath  
*Here . . . here! I'm here!*

They laugh at me  
And it's the first time

I feel I feel

## Exposed

They're clownin' me  
for being asleep

when the world    the whole world  
has peeled back our eyelids  
and robbed us of any  
                         peaceful rest

*Shahid!* they call out one more time  
*You're up next*

# Processed

It's like I'm meat or wheat  
Made into a burger or deli slices  
Made into pasta or bread  
    Processed  
Not the boy I was before the machine  
Before the breaking down and pulling apart  
Before the adding and taking away

I was made for easy, fast consumption  
Like food chains in the hood  
    Umi said don't go there  
    That you are what you eat

Those jails    that system  
has swallowed me whole

# Rights

On the night of my arrest  
I thought it was the end of my life  
It didn't matter that some dude  
named Miranda told me my rights  
to remain silent to have an attorney  
that anything I say will be used against me

I was silent and Umi got an attorney  
I liked Clyde at first because he gave me books to read

*To take your mind off things for a little while, he said*

# Books

The first book  
he gave me was  
*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

And I thought he was  
trying to tell me something  
because Malcolm was Muslim

Malcolm was a thug  
Malcolm was in jail  
Malcolm was all about the people

Malcolm went to Mecca  
Malcolm said some shit  
Malcolm was shot dead

The only book  
I gave Clyde was  
*The Rose That Grew from Concrete*

I was definitely  
trying to tell him something  
because Tupac was a poet

Tupac was a thug  
Tupac went to jail  
Tupac was all about the people

Tupac went everywhere  
Tupac said some shit  
Tupac was shot dead

Clyde didn't know  
that Umi made me read  
all about Malcolm in the eighth grade

Clyde didn't know  
that I read about Martin Luther King  
and Nelson Mandela, too

Clyde didn't know  
that I read big books  
and watched documentaries on my own

Clyde didn't know  
that I'd reread that book in five days  
because after two months

He asked me if I was done  
And by that point  
I had gotten through twelve books

*To take my mind off things for a little while, I said*

# Booked

Getting arrested and being  
processed is called *booked*  
and that place downtown  
is called *Central Bookings*

If Jeremy Mathis  
ends up dying  
the judge will  
*throw the book* at me

It's as if all the books I've read  
will prepare me for all the  
*books* that are coming to me

And Umi worked as a bookkeeper

for small businesses like  
Mahmoud's fabric store  
Fatima's hair-braiding shop  
Mr. Kingston's plumbing services  
and they all came to my trial

Umi didn't have time to read books  
There wasn't enough bookkeeping  
for bail money, though



# Money

Bail money is freedom  
but it's not free

Bail money means going home  
but it's like renting time

Bail money made me feel as if  
there was justice

Bail money let me know that  
people believed me

Bail money was Umi's friends  
and family giving everything they could

Bail money was envelopes  
in our mailbox

Bail money became online petitions  
and a GoFundMe page

Bail money was  
invisible handcuffs

Bail money was a promise  
to put back on real handcuffs

Bail money is not going to

save me now

# New ID

On the day of my conviction

I memorize

my inmate number

my crime

my time

On the day of my conviction

I forget

my school ID number

my top three colleges

my class schedule

# DNA

Before some of us leave  
the county jail  
the officers chain us—

And I am shackled  
again— Maybe these are the  
same chains that bind me

to my ancestors—  
Maybe these are the same  
chains that bind me to

my father and my  
father's father and all the  
men that came before

him— Linked together  
like those DNA strands that  
I learned about in

biology— And  
maybe I'm not supposed  
to break free from them—



This

is

the

first

time

my

feet

are

bound

Where

the

fuck

am

I

supposed

to

run

to

anyway

# Middle Passage

There was no  
in-between time  
to say goodbye

I went from  
kid to criminal to felon  
to prisoner to inmate

We're moved from  
the county jail  
and onto a bus  
and from the bus  
we're going to the  
juvenile detention facility  
There's not enough of us  
on this bus  
to fill every seat

So I take one by the window  
And it's a relief that my hands  
are cuffed in front of me  
instead of behind me

I look out and the sky is a slab of concrete  
above us  
I look for the moon

There are two guards on the bus

one in the front, one in the back  
And this almost feels like a field trip  
almost

Except Except  
the quiet is choking my ears

The absence of voices  
is like cold hands wrapping  
their icy fingers around sound

And

maybe there was never  
this much room on  
slave ships

I wanna lay down so bad  
I wanna close my eyes so bad  
I wanna dream and sleep deep so bad

There's another guy opposite from me  
and he looks out his side of the window  
just like I'm pretending to be

And if this was another time and place  
I imagine the conversation would start like this:

*What up, man, I'm Amal— And you?*

But he turns to me as if  
he felt my eyes on the  
back of his head  
and says  
*What the fuck are you looking at?*

I go back to my  
dark-gray sky



And I feel the heat seconds before  
he aims for the back of my head  
with his handcuffed fists

It's too late to duck  
The blow makes me hit the glass window

It should've shattered  
I should've shattered

And I ball up  
My head cradled in the crook of my arms

I fold into myself  
and I wait for more pain

And that's when I know the story  
that really isn't my story  
hasn't made it past the courtroom  
yet

The story that I thought  
was my life  
didn't start on the day  
I was born

The story that I thought  
was this life  
didn't start on the day  
I went to that park

The story that I think  
will be my life  
starts today

Anything that happened  
before today  
is only the prequel

the backstory

the story behind the story

Nothing before today matters

It doesn't even matter  
that I wasn't supposed to be  
with Omari that night

It doesn't even matter  
that Umi wanted me home by ten  
and I knew that she was still out  
getting her hair done or something  
and she wouldn't even know  
probably wouldn't even care  
because I was with Lucas

Except I wasn't

Lucas was with his girl  
and I was with Omari  
who brought his boy Antwon  
who said he had a whole crew  
down by the courts waiting for him  
for a two-on-two game  
and if we came with him  
it would be a three-on-three

But I'm not a baller

So I told Omari that I'd rather go  
to the skate park  
'cause I don't like basketball like that

But he wasn't about to leave his boy  
Antwon hanging like that  
And I wasn't about to leave my boy

Omari hanging like that

Even though Lucas left me hanging

for some girl

and I wished                      I wished so bad

that I had a girl, too

but Zenobia

Zenobia is her name

doesn't even know

who I am

I bet she does now

Zenobia knows my name

That matters

I tried to tell Omari

that I'm not messing with those

white boys from East Hills

who *been* telling us

they don't want us on their block

like they own that shit

They do    They do

He said, *You with me*

*so you good*

And I said, *I got my peoples*

*waiting for me in the skate park*

It was a lie

so he said, *You need to relax 'Mal*

*They not gonna fuck with you*

And I didn't say

that out here on these streets

on these courts    in these parks

they gotta know you

or know somebody who know you

Out here on these  
streets courts parks  
they will either  
speak for you  
or  
speak against you

And I catch one of these guys  
on the bus looking back at me  
staring daring  
for me to say something

So this bus this bus  
is the streets the courts the park  
on wheels engine roaring  
A ship headed for the new world  
and we're all in here in shackles  
on our wrists around our minds  
around our hearts

So I just let him stare

# Coming to America II

We're going West  
where the sun is  
an orange-blue world  
a whole colorful star by itself  
    falling  
        down  
            down  
                down

And under my breath  
the words swim  
beneath the surface of my thoughts

Under my breath  
my rhymes flow like water  
And then, and then

They rush to the shore like waves  
And then, and then

I overflow  
I can't hold it in  
I won't hold them in  
my rhymes  
my words  
my truth  
are like a tsunami

*Will we ever figure this out  
Shackling the mind with our consent  
Stolen from the natural order of this universe  
Shackling the mind with our consent*

*What do you see when you see me?*

*The enemy? The inner me?*

*How did they trick the untrickable ones?  
How did they bewitch the natural mystics?*

*Yo shut the fuck up! somebody shouts  
But I don't give a fuck*

*I'll tell you I'll tell you  
I'll tell you of a time when I looked back  
The lash on my back  
The ax on my feet  
Making it hard for me to walk a straight line  
And with my mouth agape I vibrate  
Instead of scream I can't cry  
Wishing to die  
My tongue is gone  
Last seen on the sand  
Near the shores of this land  
My eyes lie My eyes lie  
How did they trick the untrickable ones?  
How did they bewitch the natural mystics?  
I'll tell you  
I'll tell you  
It was sick*

*SHUT THE FUCK UP! somebody else says*

*No! I shout back  
Never  
I will not shut the fuck up*

# Hope

I hope  
that they don't kill me in there

I hope  
I can handle the pain

I hope  
I have time to heal

I hope  
I am stronger than I think

I hope  
all the books I've read will save my life

I hope  
my brain is a muscle

I hope  
I have superpowers

I hope I am superhuman



## **Part II**



# America

We're here  
and it's like Allah has closed his  
eyes and gone to sleep on me

Night here is dead  
Godless almost

But all I see is lights  
Not sunlight  
or the lights at the end of a tunnel

It's flashing lights on a cop car  
It's a flashlight in my face

It's light that makes me want to  
curl into myself  
like nappy hair in water  
getting closer to skin  
finding that warm safe place  
to hide away from this world

Officer Stanford is what's on his badge  
A black dude with a smooth face  
who helps the other guys off the bus

I watch how he holds elbows  
puts his hand on backs  
gentle almost, like a teacher

We're quiet as hell, too  
because the only sound that  
could come from there

is the hissing of flames  
No crying, no yelling, no cursing  
just the thick silence of waiting for pain

Stanford meets my eyes  
and I look down

It's my turn to step off the bus  
and he lends his hand  
and I have to be careful not  
to step too wide or too far  
or else

So I lean on him like he's a handrail  
Except    Except

He pulls his hand back real quick  
and my step is too wide  
the chain is too short

And I see the ground coming  
like

a  
Mack  
truck  
at  
full  
speed

And I swear  
I swear  
that this time

I  
shatter  
into  
a  
million  
pieces



I can't hold back the cry  
because  
I swear I swear

my face is broken in half

because it's as if I've been  
sliced all the way  
down  
the  
middle

Stanford helps me up and  
I swear  
I left my face on the ground

Wet runs down my lips  
and I can't even wipe it off  
because maybe what's left  
will end up on my cuffed hands

*Be careful there, Shahid*  
he hisses

And I'm still crying like a  
fucking baby  
because everything hurts

And I feel like punching him  
in the face so bad so bad

But I  
only had one fight  
before that night with Omari

I didn't always have to throw hands  
block fists, dodge punches

before that night with Omari

And I'm ready so ready  
to deck this grown-ass man  
right in the face

if my hands my body my life  
weren't in shackles right now

*Let me tell you something, little nigga*  
he hisses in my ear

And the memory the memory  
comes back to me—

Umi grabbed and twisted my lips  
when she heard me say  
nigga  
for the first time

I was five  
and I thought it was just a word  
like any other word  
like my ABCs and 123s  
like the old heads on the corner  
my cousins from around the way  
my friends at the park  
calling me  
little nigga  
little nigga  
little nigga  
like it's my name

*Don't you ever, ever let me hear you say  
that word again, you hear me?  
You're not a nigger and neither are the boys  
you hang around with, nor any boy for that matter  
Do you hear me, Amal?*

I just never let Umi hear me say it  
because at school  
on those streets courts parks  
nigga was like brother  
nigga was like homie  
nigga was like enemy  
nigga was like  
    everything that we are, were, will ever be  
    ain't nothing but shit  
    like Umi had said

Stanford whispers hard like a dull blade  
against thick skin

*Ain't no movie stars in here  
Ain't no fucking celebrities  
Ain't no rappers, ballers  
none of that shit*

Maybe this is what drowning is like  
wet (blood & tears)  
covering whatever is left of my face

And inside that giant gray building  
the juvenile detention facility—  
with its bright shining lights  
is the bottom of the ocean

I won't be able to breathe down there

# Auction Block

*Shoelaces and belt!*

the lady behind the desk in the intake office says  
She looks like every other lady back in my hood  
but I don't stare too long  
because the lights here  
the walls here  
the glass windows and locks everywhere here  
force me to stay alert

And I look down at my wingtips  
The ones Umi just bought me

*Shoelaces and belt!* the lady yells this time

And I unbuckle and pull off the leather  
My heart races because these pants  
will slip down and I'll have to keep  
pulling them up pulling them up

I always hated it Sagging

draws showing ass exposed  
I wore mine high, right at the waist  
sweatpants cinched at the ankles  
with Adidas or Vans

More skater than baller  
More blerd than thug



More dreads than fade  
More Kendrick Lamar than Blueface  
More me than them

None of that will matter here  
because I am being stripped naked

I'm dressed exactly like how I imagined  
                  exactly like how I'd seen in movies  
Orange jumpsuit

bootleg sneakers with Velcro straps

And if I squint only a little bit  
this place even looks like school, too  
with those gray walls and fluorescent lights  
It's too clean here  
cleaner than my school  
and a bunch of other places in my hood

And it smells like nothing  
Maybe smelling nothing is like hell

There's even a fading mural of cartoons  
Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mouse, a laughing sun  
smiling birds and clouds  
like this is supposed to be Disney World or something  
It's a mix of kindergarten and high school in here

As if bad paintings of smiling birds will  
remind us that we're still kids and  
the metal doors will remind us  
that we're prisoners

and

there are rules  
that  
force  
us  
into  
straight  
lines  
like  
toy  
soldiers  
like  
robots  
like  
worker  
ants  
marching  
as  
if  
we  
don't  
have  
brains

I don't think  
I don't dream  
I don't write poems  
along the cracks in my mind

And I don't spit  
rhymes out loud

My face hurts    My body hurts  
but I've pushed pain deep down  
until it's at the bottom of these  
cheap shoes

I walk all over my own feelings  
crushing them until

they are  
nothing  
but dust

*Shahid*, a guard says  
when we reach a giant room  
with a bunch of blue doors

The doors have slots in the middle  
like for hands and food trays  
There's also a glass window  
big enough for a face to look out or look in

*This is your cell*  
he says, pointing to one of the doors  
*This is your cell number*  
*Remember it like your life*  
*depends on it*

So I try to forget everything  
as soon as I step into  
this cell  
and the metal door slams shut

I want to be a blank canvas now

It's not the blank walls  
that make me remember  
where I am and what I did

It's not the metal door  
or the narrow platform  
that extends out from the wall  
with its thin mattress  
    like padding in sneakers  
or the silver toilet that's attached  
to a small sink  
    like I'm supposed to wash  
    my face where I shit  
    (And I remember Umi always saying  
    don't eat where you shit)  
or the row of hooks instead of a closet

like my new drip  
is ten versions of this orange jumpsuit

It's the loud quiet  
It's the voices that I don't recognize  
It's the random screams and shouts  
It's that buzzing followed by locking metal  
over and over and over again

like each time those doors close  
I sink deeper and deeper into hell  
I feel it in my stomach now  
the stone that was in my throat  
the brick that was on my chest

The mountain in my throat  
the building on my chest  
are now an entire country and city  
in my stomach

A heavy, crowded, broken place  
right there in the middle of me

So I sit on that thin mattress  
and hold my head in hand  
I listen to my breath  
the only thing I can trust right now

I listen to my heart  
And it's the memories that stay with me  
hours after seeing my family

Their faces are still there  
behind my eyelids  
Their voices speak to me  
inside my head

And home calls my name, too

*Amal*

I don't forget the sound of the city  
cars honking, sirens blaring  
the homies on the block talking shit

music blasting

Home has a bass, a rhythm, a groove  
so it was always easy  
to rhyme to it, to sing to it, to dance to it  
to draw to it, to paint to it

Here, there's no music  
the silence and the closing of metal doors  
and that buzzer like at the end of  
a quarter in a basketball game  
An alarm telling us that the game is over  
again and again over and over







# Lights Out

# God, The Artist

Allah is the only artist here  
And He prefers the darkest night to be his canvas

He paints the past in broad strokes, bright hues  
And the memories dance all over my mind  
in living color

He paints in words and voices, rhymes and rhythm  
And every whisper, every conversation beats a drum  
in my mind  
at full blast

He paints in wrong choices, regrets, and broken dreams  
And every acquaintance, friend, and enemy laughs at me  
in my mind  
really, really loud





# Lights On

# Wallflower

The sun is up  
It shines through a tiny window  
above my narrow bed  
The mattress can't even  
be called a mattress  
There's a small desk and stool  
that extends out from the wall  
and everything in here is  
attached to a fucking wall  
and I wonder how long it'll be  
before I'm attached to the walls, too

I don't even want to get up  
because it's only now  
that sleep is finally  
pulling at my eyelids

And I wonder I wonder  
if Jeremy Mathis has woken up, too

# Sunrise

Someone slips a tray  
through the slot in my door

Not food  
but close enough  
A rolled-up towel, toothpaste  
a small bar of soap, a toothbrush  
and a pair of black flip-flops

Slow Slow Slowly  
I do what I'm supposed to do  
The things that make me  
still human

The door opens  
It's a lady officer  
Good morning!  
*Shower Breakfast*  
*in the mess hall*  
*Meeting with your officer*  
*and the social worker*  
*Then you start your program*  
she says





She wears makeup  
Glitter eyeshadow  
and shiny lips  
Her braids are pulled back  
like Dionne's    like Zenobia's  
She smiles  
and something warm rises  
in my belly  
in that broken place  
like sunshine, maybe

# Pipeline

We walk one behind the other  
with our hands clasped behind us  
Our towels rolled up in our fists

I used to line up like this  
in kindergarten  
except with a finger on my lips  
walking buddy next to me  
If I turned around  
or spoke or  
stepped out of line

I got in trouble  
I always got in trouble  
because I always had a friend  
in front, in back, and next to me  
There was always something  
to say to ask  
There was always a joke to tell  
to laugh at

But here and now  
it's not a classroom, it's a cell block  
it's not a restroom, it's open stalls and showers  
it's not a lunchroom, it's the mess hall  
it's not friends, it's inmates, felons, and delinquents

If I squint  
I almost can't tell the difference

## Conversations with God II

I know his face  
but I don't dare look at it

Stanford sits behind a desk in an office  
like he's in charge

The offices here  
are like the principal's office  
or the nurse's office at school  
Places that are supposed to  
help

He motions for me to sit  
as he stares at a computer screen  
typing stuff about me, I'm sure

*Face is looking better*  
he says

*That's not always a good thing here*  
*Don't mess with it*  
*Don't try to heal it*  
*It lets people know not to mess*  
*with you for a while*  
*Somebody already did the job*

Still, he doesn't look at me  
and I'm starting to not mind

being visible and invisible at the same time

*I'm gonna ask you a few questions  
Be honest Don't bullshit me  
he says*

*I got all your basic info  
but don't get too deep  
I'm not a psychologist  
I'm not your doctor  
I'm not your daddy  
I'm just putting in the data  
and someone else will  
figure it out*

I keep my head up  
like Uncle Rashon told me to  
I keep my eyes on an empty space  
like Uncle Rashon told me to  
even though he never had to  
sit in front of somebody  
who wanted to destroy him

*On a scale of one to ten  
how happy are you?  
Stanford asks*

And I don't have an answer for him  
That question—  
I don't even have words for  
Zero, I say

*On a scale of one to ten  
how angry are you?*

Eleven, I say

*Have you ever tried  
to harm yourself?*

*Have you ever had thoughts*

*of harming yourself?*

*Are you having thoughts  
of harming yourself now?*

*On a scale of one to ten  
how likely are you to harm yourself now?*

And I wonder if these questions  
are really  
suggestions

# Conversations with God III

*How are you feeling today, Amal?*

This feels like the principal's office  
except it isn't  
the plaque on her desk says she's the  
SUPERINTENDENT OF JUVENILE  
PROBATION AND DETENTION  
and her name is Cheryl-Ann Buford

I keep my mouth shut, head down

*Okay, then I want you to know that you're not  
any different from the other boys who come  
through my office Quiet, scared, nervous  
I get it and I'm here for you  
she says*

*White lady with her  
hair pulled up, dark-red lipstick, gold earrings*

*This is your program It's like a class schedule  
You have the option of taking classes for credit  
and receiving your high school diploma or  
wasting time, not doing anything to improve your skills  
while you're in here It's your choice  
just like all the other choices you had  
but if you abstain from going to class  
you have to stay in your cell for the entire day*

so I say, *I'll take the classes*

*Good, excellent choice, Amal*

She gives me a handbook

*Read every single word, every single page  
Don't worry, you have all the time you need  
If you have any questions, let me know  
We're here to help you, Amal*

I don't believe she can really help me

# Pipeline II

In middle school  
I wanted to be a hallway monitor  
so bad but there were rules

You had to have at least an eighty-five average  
barely absent from school  
perfect uniform every single day  
and a mom who brings cookies to PTA meetings

I didn't check off any of those boxes  
so me and my boys  
clowned all the hallway monitors  
even the girls  
We threw balled-up paper at them  
smacked the backs of their heads  
threatened them if they snitched

So when one of them did tell on us  
we got suspended for a week  
and were assigned our own monitors  
for another week because we were on  
probation

*You have to learn to respect authority  
even if that authority is your peer*  
the principal, Mr. Johnson, said with that deep voice

Umi thought this was a good school



and she tried so hard to get me in—  
But I'm thinking it should've been called

Zero Tolerance Academy

or

No Second Chances Charter School

or

Prison Prep

# Schooled

*Ay man, who messed you up like that?*

We're in a classroom, or a room  
that looks like a classroom and  
there are desks like we're at school

*Ay, I'm talking to you*

Dude sits right next to me—  
short and skinny with a bad  
haircut—  
and asks this loud enough for  
everybody to hear  
One of the officers who's standing  
by the door  
glances back at us and I know  
this is a test

*I don't know, I say*

*How the fuck you don't know?  
It's your face*

I swallow hard and look him dead  
in the face  
and say, *Nobody Nobody did it*

This class is math

Stuff I learned in the sixth grade  
One of the officers puts a  
blank notebook  
on my desk

The teacher  
is a short black man with thick  
glasses  
I never had a black man math  
teacher  
ever

*Mr. Shahid, is it?* he asks  
*I'm Mr. Bradley*    *Hopefully*  
*you can catch up*    *We're*  
*preparing for the GED*  
*or you can work toward*  
*credits for your last school*

I nod    quiet    still    blank

## Schooled II

Last summer  
Ms. Rinaldi helped me  
with my art portfolio to get into  
a fancy fine arts summer program

That fine arts program  
was supposed to help me  
work on my art portfolio  
for college

An art college

*Why can't I just do a mural  
snap a pic and send it to them?*  
I had asked her

*You dream big, Amal  
Don't ever stop dreaming big  
But for now, put that dream on paper  
It's easier to carry around  
she said*

So I made art on small canvases  
She gave me acrylic paints  
and drawing pencils that came in wooden boxes  
and paper that looked like it was made by hand

I never showed her my poetry, though

I paint with words, too

I got into that summer program

I'm not going to that summer program

## Schooled III

Ms. Rinaldi taught AP Art History  
and for whatever reason  
Advanced Placement seemed to be  
only for the white kids at my school

But there I was in my only AP class  
    the only black kid in the room  
looking at slides of old paintings  
and it was boring as fuck  
Muted and dull colors  
Sad and pale rich white people  
doing nothing but looking sad

So I'd pull up my hoodie  
and put my head down  
There, behind my closed lids  
I could paint me a world  
that made sense

And there was that one time  
Ms. Rinaldi yanked my hoodie  
from off my head

*If you cannot pay attention in my class  
then you don't deserve to be here*  
she said through clenched teeth

So I picked up my bag

and walked out

I failed the class

She failed me



## Schooled IV

No one helped me get into  
East Hills High School for the Arts though

Umi bought me  
watercolor paint and one big canvas

*What if I mess up?* I had asked

*Let it come the way it comes, Amal*  
she said

And I drew and painted  
painted and drew  
that whole summer before eighth grade

The day I had to go in for the interview  
I carried my painting under my arm  
It was almost my size, my height  
and it rained

All those curved and straight lines  
all those colors  
all those truths  
looked like they were crying

I still got into that school, though



# Schooled V

Mr. Bradley is trying so hard  
to make this like school  
Lecturing and solving problems on the board  
Asking us questions and expecting answers

But one of the guys—  
the one who was asking me all those questions—  
starts laughing and cracking jokes

Kadon is his name  
and in seconds, two officers come in  
and grab him by the arms  
and drag him out of that classroom

We get out of the way  
when Kadon starts kicking the chairs and tables  
and yelling, *Get the fuck off me!*

The other guys laugh  
I'm trying not to look shook  
And in that moment  
I'm glad I have the bruises on my face  
It's my mask for now

I wish I had a hoodie to hide under, too  
So I slide in my seat  
the same way I used to do in  
Ms. Rinaldi's class

Invisible

# Free Time

The dayroom  
is the wide-open space  
outside the cells  
with chairs and tables attached  
to the floors  
in our cell block

There's a big desk  
that sits on a platform  
and that's where an officer  
watches us  
This time it's Stanford

Decks of cards,  
cheap, broken crayons  
paper, board games  
sit in the middle of each table  
like this is playtime

They call it free time  
and it's the biggest lie  
because we are  
still in here

# Blank Canvas

I  
have a  
crayon and paper  
I didn't know that  
I could hold this little  
bit of freedom in my hands

A blank page  
know where  
draw myself  
door and then  
where I walk  
my freedom  
Wind blowing  
day on the  
when me and  
on top and  
there staring  
world and  
like ants like  
just bring our fingers together and grab them one by one  
and maybe throw them up in the air We felt like God

I don't even  
to start so I  
a wide-open  
maybe this is  
out and into  
toward free air  
wild like that  
Ferris wheel  
Lucas got stuck  
we just sat  
down at the  
people looking  
we could

And then

somebody grabs the notebook  
from right under me  
and I'm left holding this weapon  
                                this crayon  
                                like a weapon

Kadon is back—  
and this is how he lets me know that  
he's trying to test me

*Shahid!*  
an officer calls out

I don't look up  
I don't look around

The officer walks over  
His shadow like storm clouds

*What are you gonna do with that, buddy?*

I look up  
It's one of the white officers  
who stares down at me  
with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up

He leans on the table  
His arms close to my face  
close enough for me to glance down  
at his tattoos

and I stare and stare  
and I see what he wants me to see

A black baby  
A black baby

with a rope                      a rope  
around its neck      around its neck

My eyes are glued to that tattoo  
I stare  
at the details, the lines on the rope  
the baby's eyes closed, with tears  
coming down its cheeks  
Its skin made blacker  
against his pale arm

It makes me want to  
scream

There's a stone in my throat  
There's a brick on my chest  
The stone turns into a mountain in my throat  
The brick turns into a building on my chest

There's a rumbling in my bones  
So I get up and push the table away  
wanting that officer to get crushed under its weight  
or fly into the air and bang his whole body against a wall  
and die and die and die

I don't even know when it happens  
He grabs me, and in seconds  
four officers are on me  
pressing my head against the cold, hard floor  
a knee is on my throat  
my jaw, my face, my head  
are being crushed      crushed

This country and city on my chest  
splits down the middle  
The already broken pieces  
shatter and crush  
until there is

nothing  
but  
dust







# Lights Out

# Cubism

Umi never made me  
lock myself away  
stay in my room when  
I disappointed her

When the world spins  
I shut out the voices  
All she would say is  
the sun will still rise

no matter how dark  
it gets in here  
no matter how lonely  
I start to feel

I can still be the light  
no matter how scared  
I get in here  
I start to remember



my name is Amal  
and Amal means  
hope means there  
is still a tomorrow

But there's no future in these  
four walls four walls  
boxing me in boxing me in  
so I punch the air

shadowbox with God  
spar with all four of these  
corners as if they are all  
different versions of me

Ninety-degree angles  
of Amal—sharp lines like  
a barber fade, except  
I will never fade

I'm still here    still breathing  
heart still beating like drums  
in some faraway place called  
home home home home

# Conversations with God IV

Visiting Day goes by last name  
in alphabetical order  
and happens every other week

S for Shahid  
so Clyde and Umi come at the end  
of the month  
And for a whole week  
I counted down  
There's enough time here  
to keep track of the seconds

There's another big room  
outside all the locked doors

It's where the world waits  
to meet us for an hour

As soon as I see her  
I know Umi is trying so hard  
to keep it together  
Her eyes are like thick glass  
holding in a tsunami of tears  
She doesn't cry

She gets up from her seat  
and hugs me  
I let her hold me

but I don't close my eyes  
because maybe I will melt in her arms  
and she'll have to carry me home  
in her cupped hands

Clyde's voice is like chains  
from the other side of the round table  
reminding me of where I am  
and how I got here

*We can appeal but it will take  
a long time, Amal*  
Clyde says  
*Jeremy Mathis is stable  
but he's still under*

*and I wish I had more news*

*Amal*

*Amal, I'm gonna do everything I can  
to get you out of here  
Everything in my power  
Inshallah*  
Umi says from the other side  
of the round table

The tables in the visiting room  
are some of the few round things  
in here  
so many squares  
so many corners  
so many boxes

It's like when white folks  
say things like  
trying to fit a square peg  
into a round hole



this is what they mean  
But I'm no square peg

More like a round world  
to myself  
being forced into  
so many boxes

## Wallflower II

I'm not attached to the walls yet  
but I'm forcing my body to attach itself  
to this bed

It's Stanford who comes into my cell  
and shouts  
*Shahid! Come on, let's go!*

I hold my breath under the thin covers  
Maybe they will think I'm dead and—

*Shahid!* he yells out one more time  
He doesn't come to pull me off  
He doesn't come to fight me and destroy me  
He closes the door

And I know I know  
that they won't ever force me  
out of this cage



## Conversations with God V

*You can't stay in your room for  
days at a time, Amal—  
And I suggest you take full  
advantage of the hour you have  
for Visiting Day—  
You're gonna need those memories  
of that time with your loved ones  
the people who care about you*  
Cheryl-Ann Buford says

What I want to say:  
Leave me alone  
Don't talk to me  
Seeing my mother makes me feel like  
                  there's a hole in my heart  
Seeing my lawyer makes me feel like  
                  he put that hole there

What I actually say:  
Nothing

# The Open Window

Maybe it's been one long day  
and somebody else's god  
has been switching the lights  
on and off  
so light and dark  
black and white

are like strobe lights in a club  
but it's quiet NO MUSIC  
no soul CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP

My door is always locked and I watch  
through the small window  
the guys gathering in the dayroom

taking seats like it's about to be  
a meeting or something

and I'm stuck in this box  
staring behind the glass

and there's some other dude  
in a box banging and telling the guards

to get him the fuck out  
They run to his door and

I can't see what they're doing

to him but I hear him cursing  
shouting kicking fighting and then  
quiet quiet and the other guys  
are sitting in the dayroom  
waiting for something to start and  
that's when I see her gliding  
holding something in her arms—  
a poster board and markers  
She's smiling and the guys sit up  
smooth out their sweatshirts  
smooth down their eyebrows  
smooth out all their wrinkles  
their mistakes, their mean mugs  
and I think I see them smiling, too  
and she looks over at the guards



dragging that other dude  
through the dayroom and he's

like a wet sock    subdued  
and I wonder for a second if

he's even still alive but that  
doesn't matter because she looks

at my door and I make sure  
that I'm in that small window so

she can see my face and maybe  
she can ask the guards why I'm

stuck in here like that    She can  
ask the guards to let me out so

I can see what everybody's  
smiling about but she stops

She doesn't smile anymore and she  
looks down and she sets up her things

like she's starting the meeting  
and I know    I feel as if

she's about to teach something I don't  
already know and I know    I feel it

that those guys are not even gonna care  
They're just looking at her    just staring

like I am right now    behind the tiny window  
in a box                    in a box  
in a box                    in a box

## Conversations with God VI

It's only when Cheryl-Ann Buford  
comes to my cell  
that I at least sit up in bed

Then she says  
*Is this your way of telling us  
that you prefer solitary?  
Because we can arrange it*

*I prefer to be in the class that lady  
was teaching, I mumble*

*Poetry? Oh, that's a perk, Mr. Shahid  
A treat for those who do  
what they're supposed to  
It's not part of your regular program  
You can only participate in  
special activities after demonstrating  
good behavior, Amal  
I'm sorry but you'll have to earn  
your way into that poetry class  
Cheryl-Ann Buford says*

*Then she hands me some envelopes  
mail from Umi and—*

*Tell you what, she continues  
You can start back with your classes*



*on Monday and we'll see how it goes  
I hope these letters will lift your spirits, Amal  
You have to make the best of your time here*

What I want to say:  
I don't want to do the program  
That lady was teaching poetry  
and I'd be the only one in there  
who would even care and  
who would listen  
to every word she says  
every word

What I actually say:  
Nothing

*My dear Amal—  
The only way to survive hell  
is to walk through*

*Amal—  
You have to meditate  
study your Quran  
do your daily prayers  
ask for forgiveness  
courage and strength*

*Amal—*

Umi's letters are too soft for this place  
They force me into a bubble  
make me float into thick air  
and then with just one shout  
one slamming of a metal door  
one guard yelling my name  
or my inmate number  
I will burst

The first time I feel something  
other than stones and bricks  
on my chest  
is when I see the name  
on one of the envelopes  
I read it over and over again  
to make sure that  
the arrangement of letters  
the handwriting  
the words  
are what I think they say  
are who I think it is

Zenobia  
Zenobia  
Zenobia

Part of me wants to  
wait to open it  
Part of me wants to  
tear it open  
So I place it under the mattress  
like cash  
and save it for when the day comes  
when I can't take it no more  
and I feel like my heart is  
about to split open

This letter from Zenobia  
will be here waiting for me  
like glue  
like Grandma's needle and thread  
to fix me and put me back together again

But but  
what if she's waiting for me  
Time is different for her

So I open it slow    slow  
slowly  
and—

*Dear Amal,*

*I'm not into writing letters and all. People don't even write letters anymore, but anyway. I hope you don't mind my handwriting. You probably don't remember me. I know you have a lot on your mind and some girl from your school is the last thing you'll be thinking about. You probably don't even know I exist. At least that's what I thought, until Lucas told me the other day that you've been checking for me since freshman year. I don't know if it's true or not, but why would he say that if it wasn't?*

*I guess you want to know why this random girl is writing you. Amal, I'm so sorry for everything that happened to you. And in case anything happens to you in there, I wanted to let you know that I believed you the whole time. I'm here if you want to write back.*

*Zenobia Angel Garrett  
(The girl with the blue braids)*

# The Bridge in the Rain

Now she tells me this?  
When I can't even see her?  
When I can't even talk to her?

If I cry  
right here  
in my cell

with no one  
to see me

It'll be like  
a rainstorm  
over that broken  
country and city  
on my chest

It'll be like  
a hurricane  
leveling a whole  
city and country  
and I would have  
to build new ones  
on my chest

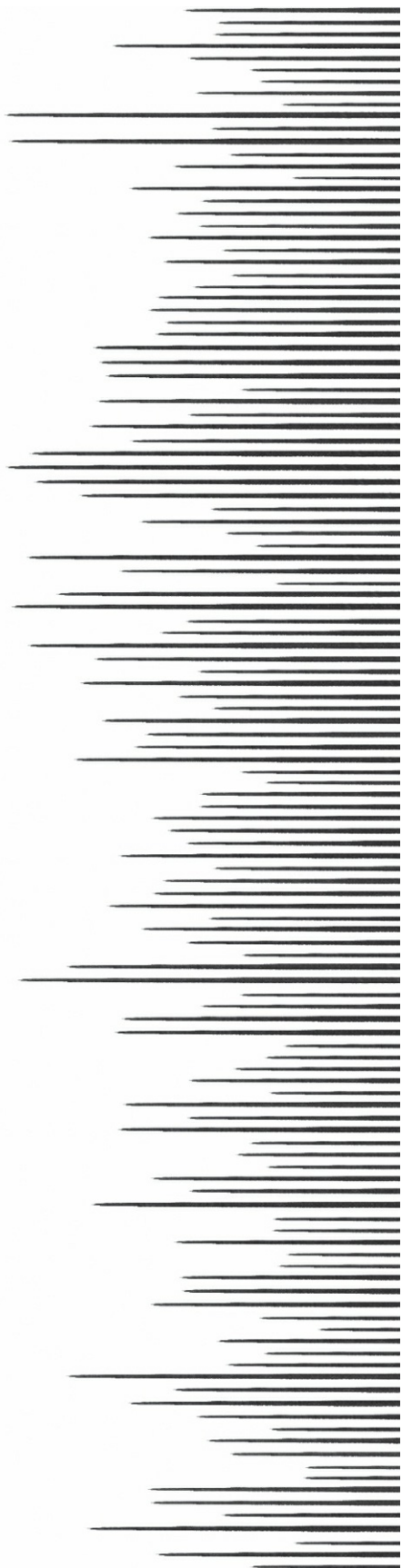
# Microphone

Instead I bang out a rhythm  
make the door a drum

make my fist a mic  
make my words a bullhorn  
make my truth the air

*Stop killing, brother  
you are already marked  
because of your color  
So why not put us all in jail?  
Chance we'll become like snails  
Chance we won't rebel  
On me, they left indelible scars  
I'm over here spitting rhymes behind bars  
They thought the box would get me  
like Kunta in captivity  
but I'm still free*

*Up north I come from down south  
with the greatest tool  
my mouth my words my rhymes  
dark in skin tone like the dapperest of Dan*



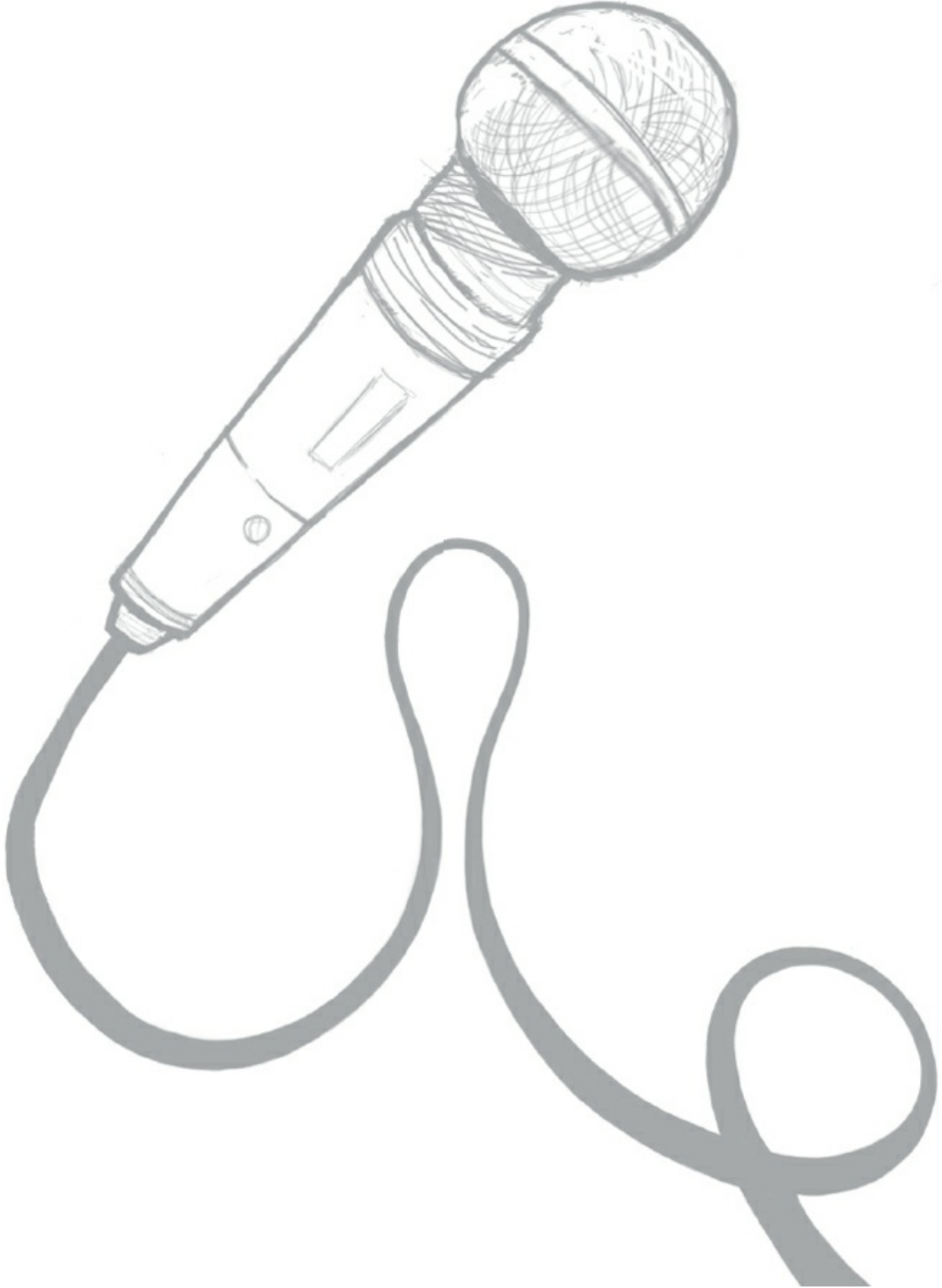
*talking about history  
too many young folks  
living in mystery*

*things I have read  
and talked about  
all this bloodshed  
all this death  
but neither hurt my ears  
nor left my eyes in tears*

*I overcame fears  
not afraid to take a chance  
'cause pain grips my heart  
as I look to the motherland  
I am here in captivity*

*Who is more free  
you or me?*





# Hype Man

Somebody claps from the empty dayroom  
and his face shows up in the window on my door

Kadon So I step up to face him  
and he smiles white teeth showing eyes bright

A test So I keep a straight face, straight back  
there's only this metal door between us

but I'll be on the other side of that door soon  
and he'll be waiting for me  
and I'll be waiting for  
pain

but

*Yo that shit was fire*, he says  
still smiling eyes still bright

*When they let you out your cell*  
*we gonna connect*, he says

And we do  
in the mess hall

they let me out for lunch

but I have to see Ms. Buford again

and Kadon comes over  
with his tray as if this is high school

He holds out his fist for a pound  
I take it to show him respect

even though I don't know  
what this is all about because  
this ain't high school

And he makes the table a drum  
He makes the air a mic  
He makes his words the air

*Material things  
selling drugs for  
blue or red colors  
Flipping has me turning  
against my own brother*

*The unwise are at the mercy  
of the wise  
They did not realize  
until a family member died*

*Now tell me why  
you want to be in the belly of the beast?  
A dumb man sings a dumb man song  
The devil's advocate is trying  
to make you his feast*

Somebody says  
*Yo shut the fuck up, man!*

*Ain't nobody wanna hear that shit!*

Two guys walk up to us  
An army starts to form  
behind them  
And I know this scene

This is when I'd leave  
the skate park  
The wheels  
under my skateboard  
like wings

This is when  
I didn't leave  
East Hills  
that night with Omari

And this is when  
I can't skate away  
I can't walk away  
I'm stuck here  
like that night  
with Omari

Kadon shuts up  
lowers his head  
and turns away

I do the same  
I'm not stupid  
but—

*Ain't you that kid?*  
one of them asks

*Yeah, I say*  
turning

and looking him dead in the eye

He nods  
chin up, eyes down  
like  
*I see you*  
Almost like respect, I think  
I'm not sure  
But the guys behind him  
won't stop staring  
and—  
I'm like Kadon again

Head down  
back turned  
Defeated

When those guys leave us alone  
it's like dark clouds parting  
Still, there's no sun  
Just a little bit of light  
for me to see Kadon's face  
    Black eye  
    Swollen and busted lips  
    Eyes moving way too fast  
    He keeps cracking his knuckles

*We heard you was coming, he says  
They don't let us watch the news  
but we still get the news in here  
But be careful, though  
They're watching you*

## Conversations with God VII

Cheryl-Ann Buford asks  
*Are you ready to start your  
program again?  
I see you made a new alliance?*

*Kadon? I ask*

*Yes, Kadon  
and all that rapping  
you two are doing—  
Being here isn't the set  
for your music video, Amal  
she says, leaning over her desk*

*What I want to say:  
So you're telling me to shut the fuck up  
just like everyone else*

*Listen, Amal—  
You're not going to get a record deal  
out of this—  
What you do and say here will not  
be part of your mixtape—  
This is serious and this is your life—  
Your life, Amal—  
Do you understand me, young man?*



# Meditation

I had folded a piece of blank paper  
and slid it behind the elastic waist of my pants  
I took two pencils with me into my cell

And I have a few minutes before it's lights-out  
so I start with her name    Zenobia

The words don't come  
I doodle along the corners  
curlicues and flowers and pretty shapes  
and I start with a letter    I

But the words still don't come  
So I write out her name  
over and over and over again  
Z

    Zen

        Zenobia

And then  
the letters in her name  
become  
light and dark lines  
that become the  
curved lines of a pretty face  
that become

    Zenobia



This is what I send her  
to let her know that  
I saw her  
I see her  
I remember her

**Zenith**, you are the highest point in the sky  
where one day I hope we will meet again

**Everything** about you is from heaven, angel

**Nothing** about you is from this earth, this planet  
you are from a whole other world

**Optimistic**, you give me hope for the next day  
and for when I can see your smile again

**Beautiful**, I can draw you a million different ways  
and the lines and curves of your face will always be  
shaped into a masterpiece

**Intelligent** black girl, book smart with a bright future

**Always** keep me in your heart, Zenobia, even if time  
moves you away from me— I will always remember  
you remembering me





# Lights Out

# Guernica

Today is Friday

I'm standing in line  
waiting for a shower  
Soap in one hand  
towel in the other

I've learned to be fast  
the same way Umi taught me  
to do on cold, busy mornings  
before school  
but like I said  
this ain't high school

So when I'm pulled out of the line  
by two of the guys  
who had stepped to me and Kadon

I drop my soap and towel  
make my body an earthquake  
but they are mountains  
and they drag me to some dark room  
and close the door

I take  
blow after blow  
after blow after blow  
until my breath is a dragon

hot flames  
ignite in my soul

The taste of copper  
rises out of my belly  
and pools in my mouth  
I know better than to wipe it off  
I know better than to cry

And they leave  
my body limp and heavy  
The cold floor  
against my skin  
is an ice pack

What if hell is a frozen place  
I'm there I'm there  
and I might die here

# Dust

*They can't kill you in here  
but they will try, Umi says  
from across the round table*

*That's the point  
Locking you up isn't enough  
for them        They will try  
to crush your spirit until  
you're nothing but—*

*Dust  
we both say together*

*And what does dust do, Amal?  
What did Maya Angelou say about dust?  
Umi asks*

*It rises, I whisper*

*You gotta say it loud enough  
for me to hear it, baby—  
Loud enough for you to believe it*

*Dust rises, I say  
loud enough for it to  
ring in my own ears*

*She takes both my hands*



and squeezes them  
but I pull away from her

*Don't call me baby  
not here, not now*  
I say, loud enough for her to hear

Those guys didn't touch my face  
so she doesn't know how my  
insides have already  
turned to dust  
and it can't rise  
because it's trapped here  
in my belly

*Amal—  
No matter how tall you grow  
No matter how thick your beard  
No matter how deep the bass in your voice*

*You were first my baby boy  
grown into a young man  
growing into a man  
becoming an elder  
transitioning into an ancestor  
evolving into spirit  
turning into breath  
easing into life*

*You are my life  
and you are life itself*  
*Amal—*

What I don't say:  
Umi, you gave me life  
You  
And these words are stuck  
in my throat like stone

Everything I don't say to Umi  
becomes a mountain  
becomes a country of  
unspoken things

What I actually say:  
*You don't have to come  
here so often, Umi  
I know it's hard  
I know it's a long trip*

*How dare you say such a thing, Amal?  
You are not alone in this fight  
I'm here with you, always  
Your struggle is my struggle  
Your hurt is my hurt  
I'm hurting because you're hurting, Amal—*

## Family Portrait II

I look up and around  
at all the other guys  
with their people

Their mothers their sisters  
their brothers their uncles  
and maybe, maybe their fathers  
with their smiles, frowns, worries  
fears, joys, pains, heartbreaks  
written all over their faces like poetry

Their bodies—  
how they lean across the tables  
holding hands  
how they cross their arms  
protecting everything  
how they pull out stuff  
from bags like it's Christmas—  
If only they could be still for long enough

I would paint this whole scene  
for the world to see

And Kadon, my hype man  
is with an older and taller version of him  
Same eyes, same small nerdy frame

and I wonder I wonder

how he ended up in here  
with a pops like that

So I ask Umi  
*Where's Uncle Rashon?*

And she says  
*It's gonna take him a little while*  
*This This really hurt him*  
*He wants to see you, Amal*  
*He really does*

# Expressionism

*Those white boys are gonna  
body you in here, Kadon says*

*Or they'll die trying*

*They know about East Hills?  
I ask*

He looks at me like  
I just asked the dumbest question

We're in the mess hall for  
breakfast and word got around  
that they got me, they got me  
for Jeremy Mathis  
They got me for all the things  
they heard about me  
all the things  
they think they know  
but I can't say that I didn't do  
what they think I did

*They can try, I say  
keeping my head down  
eyes up, looking around  
but never at or through anyone  
just around aware alert*

at how they all put themselves  
into groups, squads, teams, gangs

Back at East Hills High School for the Arts  
we were like a paint palette

blending into each other  
in swirls of color, shade, hair

size, height, values, souls  
memories, intelligence, beliefs

Here, we're not even paint  
We're a box of cheap markers

that don't even blend well  
The shit that forces you

to stay in the lines or else  
the colors will bleed

The colors will bleed

## Conversations with God VIII

She's not God, really  
But she acts like it  
and they put her in charge  
of us here  
She asks questions  
says stuff  
and she writes down  
what we do and say into her little computer  
And all that gets sent to the real God here  
The judge

So I sit up in the chair  
across from Cheryl-Ann Buford  
and say

*I write poetry and I paint, too  
That's all I wanna do  
I just wanna do my time and—  
I don't know if y'all give a fuck about  
that, but—if I write and draw and paint  
maybe I'll get out of here alive  
My voice cracks and my throat is dry*

She looks at me as if I have two heads  
and says  
*What on earth makes you think that  
you won't get out of here alive, Amal?  
Think about the fact that we offer*

*a creative writing class  
And yes, if you want to paint or draw  
you can do that, too  
But there are rules, young man  
With all the officers we've got around here  
do you think we need more?*

*No, I say, swallowing hard*

*She leans over her table  
like I'm about to snitch*

*Did something happen to you  
to make you feel unsafe, Amal?  
Because if something did happen  
to you, we'll have to report it*

*No, I say really fast  
Nothing happened*



# White Space III

I felt safe  
at East Hills High School for the Arts

Nobody was trying to mess  
with some art kids  
carrying around portfolios

Kids with piercings and tats  
boys wearing nail polish  
and girls wearing bow ties

Black kids who listen to metal  
and white kids who listen to trap

We were weird and free—  
a bubble in the world  
that would burst open  
at the end of the school  
when we all walked out of its doors

But still

Ms. Rinaldi gave me hell  
because I didn't fit  
into her definition of weird  
I was a different kind of weird

my hair too wild

my skin too dark  
my voice too deep  
my paintings too colorful  
my art too free

*Amal is disruptive*  
she wrote on my report card  
*Amal needs to focus*  
*Amal is not prepared for an*  
*advanced-level class*

She failed me  
over and over again  
until—  
She thought she could  
save me





# Lights Out

# The Persistence of Memory

In my cell at night  
the worst thoughts swim around

my mind when I'm locked up  
in a box with nothing but the  
quiet darkness as my hype man  
my producer, my DJ  
and just the memory of making music  
the memory of hearing some new joint  
for the first time

So I try to make my own  
Pull a rhythm, a bass, a beat  
from out of the stillness  
and I wonder I wonder

If I'll die right this second  
or tomorrow or the next day

Umi doesn't know that they  
can kill me in here  
and say I deserved it

They will make me pay for  
what I did to Jeremy Mathis

Promising college student  
they called him

as if the life he was expected to live  
wasn't a guarantee

Quiet kid with no problems  
they said  
as if his yearbook picture painted  
his whole life story

They don't know they don't know  
that it all started with him

starting with me

Starting with the moment  
I decided to go with Omari to the courts

There were some guys I've never seen before  
and when I spotted them I knew

that they were from the other side  
of the park—not where the projects are

not where people know me and know my name  
and Umi's name and know my face and my voice

They were from where the big houses are—  
McMansions we call them—and those houses

were filling up with new faces Those white boys  
were from where Mr. George and the Kingstons

got their houses sold and bought from right under them  
I've heard the word before—gentrification

But we lived in the same building I was born in  
and paid the same rent my whole life, so we were good

But on the other side, the big houses  
(some painted in bright colors, others run-down)

got fixed up nice and painted over in grays and beiges  
making that part of our hood look like a futuristic suburb

and soon there was this invisible line we couldn't cross  
like we can't go where the nice places are

Can't touch the nice things because everything about us  
our skin, our faces, our hair, our words, our music

will break things  
will ruin things  
will make things ugly

just by us being there

But those white boys  
didn't care about no lines

The world belonged to them  
including our hood

So when we saw them  
using the courts as their own

little skate park, of course  
we were like *get the fuck out!*

Not me, but Omari and his boys  
because I was too busy

checking out their tricks  
their ollies, their kickflips,

their heelflips, their no complies  
and this one dude skated

right past us with his  
middle finger up and I



laughed but Omari and his boys  
didn't They got heated

and said  
all kinds of shit to that dude

and that second I knew I had  
to make a move because  
I thought of Grandma and  
her prayer for me her promises for me

That I am a master  
of my own destiny

The worst thoughts swim around  
your mind when you're locked up  
in a box with nothing but the  
quiet darkness as your hype man

and I was definitely Omari's hype man  
that dark night but it was far from quiet

I've never been to a club, really  
never been to a good party

where the music is so dope  
that you feel it in your bones

I've never been anywhere that  
made me feel like I was losing control

of my body, my mind, my actions  
until that night

There were five of us

Four took a plea deal  
and were sent straight  
to a juvenile detention facility

I went to trial and was found guilty  
and I'm sent straight  
to a juvenile detention facility

# Blind Justice II

All because

we were in the wrong place  
we were in the wrong skins  
we were in the wrong time  
we were in the wrong bodies  
we were in the wrong country  
we were in the wrong  
were in the wrong  
in the wrong  
the wrong  
wrong

All because

they were in the right place  
they were in the right skins  
they were in the right time  
they were in the right bodies  
they were in the right country  
they were in the right  
were in the right  
in the right  
the right  
right

We were  
a mob  
a gang  
ghetto  
a pack of wolves  
animals  
thugs  
hoodlums  
men

They were  
kids  
having fun  
home  
loved  
supported  
protected  
full of potential  
boys





# Lights On



wake up  
fix bed  
brush teeth  
shower  
breakfast

PROGRAM

Math

English

LUNCH

Free Time/Recreation

Poetry?

## Schooled VI

Being in classes here  
feels like being in regular school  
And it's wild how I can't even  
tell the difference  
except we're all wearing the same  
orange jumpsuit  
But we still have to learn shit  
that keeps even our minds in cages

That's what Uncle Rashon always says  
That school teaches you *what* to think  
not *how* to think and nobody raises  
their hands except to give  
the right answer  
The teacher only  
asks questions to hear  
the right answer

So I do  
the same way I used to do  
in Ms. Rinaldi's class  
I ask questions  
*If we're convicted felons*  
*what's the sense of learning this*  
*if we won't be able to get a job*  
*when we're out?*

The other guys shift in their seats

and mumble under their breath  
the same way the kids in art history class  
used to do

# Pipeline III

I remember that time  
when we had a final  
and Ms. Rinaldi  
was showing slides of old paintings  
we learned about

We had to memorize  
the artist's name and the year  
    it was painted  
Extra credit for naming the style and country  
like Michelangelo and the Renaissance in Italy  
Monet and Impressionism in France  
Picasso and Cubism in Spain

Halfway through the slides  
I raised my hand and asked  
*Did other people around the world paint  
or just old white men from Europe?*

Everybody laughed  
She sent me out of her class  
and failed me for being disruptive  
I was supposed to go to the principal again  
But I just walked out of the building  
and didn't come back for a week  
    I suspended myself

But then the school called Umi

and she was tired so tired

of yelling at me  
of trying to get me to focus  
of trying to get me to try

Umi said  
I had big dreams  
I had huge talent

but I fucked up my grades  
in school or maybe  
school fucked up  
my life It's hard to tell

But I'm sure about one thing  
I'm not dumb  
I know my math, my science  
my English all that shit

I especially know my  
art and words  
How to bend and twist  
them into  
truth

I know  
it's hard to tell  
just by looking at me

# Brotherhood

We have assigned seats  
in the classrooms, but  
Kadon still ends up next  
to me as if he's watching me

During free time in the dayroom  
he drops a deck of cards  
on the square table  
where I finally finally  
have a notebook to myself

and I'm careful not to write  
not to draw anything yet  
So I sit there staring at the  
blank pages

*Ay man, you gotta make sure  
you keep up with the work  
Once you get outta here, you'll  
have all or most of your credits*  
Kadon says, while shuffling the deck

*Amal—my name's Amal  
I say*

*Nigga I know what your name is*

*I'm not a nigga*

*Oh you one of them niggas*

Some other guy comes to sit next  
to Kadon, and then another, and  
another, and soon I'm surrounded

At least these aren't the  
white boys who beat up on me  
but still

*What, you think you the shit  
just 'cause you been on TV?*  
one of the guys says

This is juvie but that dude  
looks like a whole-ass adult  
so I don't look him in the eye  
I don't look up from my blank  
notebook at all

*You a high-class criminal?  
You a bougie gangsta?*

*I'm neither, I say*

*I'm neither, he repeats*

*That white boy was your homie  
Y'all got into a lovers' quarrel  
or some shit He end up half dead*

I don't even think about it  
but I raise my hand to put  
pencil to paper  
finally finally I'm drawing  
I start with a curved line  
some shading  
eyes, nose, mouth mangled  
all this to keep me from  
spilling words  
that will make me want to swallow  
them back Say things that I'll  
regret  
So I draw and draw

And he pulls the notebook from  
right under me

Before I can even throw a punch  
Kadon and some other guy hold  
me back even while  
I turn into a storm Rage  
brewing in the pit of my belly

*You really need to calm the fuck down  
I was talking to you and you should've  
been listening—  
What I was trying to say is*

*You one of us now  
You one of us*



# Brotherhood II

*I'm  
not trying  
to be part of no  
gang or crew, that's the  
shit that got me in this mess  
in the first place, I tell Kadon dead-ass  
knowing that here, I don't have a choice*

# Cubism II

Kadon says I need them  
Kadon says they got my back  
Kadon calls them homies

I call them  
more corners

boxing me in    boxing me in  
boxing me in    boxing me in

# Art School

Today is Friday

and I did everything right this week  
I followed the program  
like I'm a robot, no brain  
except when I had to pretend to use  
it in class, dumb shit I already learned

Filling out worksheets and taking practice tests  
but in my notebook, I drew myself another world  
another opening to other places, other dimensions  
and Kadon was right  
I needed a crew to sit next to me  
to be my four corners so that I'm not cornered

There's Amir with the locs down his back  
Quiet like air, like there's a heavy secret  
behind that silence

There's Smoke who wears that name  
like a bulletproof vest I swear  
he can see through people

There's Rahmarley with the braids  
that stick up like antennas and  
he thinks he could read people's minds

and Kadon

I get it now  
those white boys don't see me  
and I don't see them

But I get to see her, though  
finally

And she comes into the dayroom  
gliding holding something  
in her arms—a poster board and markers

I see her smiling

and I sit up in my seat  
smooth out my sweatshirt  
smooth down my eyebrows  
smooth out all my wrinkles  
my mistakes, my mean mug

*I'm happy to see you here*  
she says

even though she doesn't look happy  
Her face is serious, like  
she means business  
even though she's teaching poetry  
*My name is Imani Dawson*  
*and I'm a poet, educator*  
*and activist—*  
*I like to call myself*  
*a prison abolitionist*

*Prison abolitionist?*  
I ask  
*Like in slavery?*  
*So you're here to free us?*  
*Okay, then So my name is*  
*Amal and*

*I don't like to call myself a slave  
but here we fucking are—*

And they laugh at me

*Unacceptable, Imani says  
Let's try this again  
By calling myself a  
prison abolitionist  
I mean that I'm part of  
a movement  
that is fighting to abolish  
the prison industrial complex  
as we know it  
And no, Amal  
you are not a slave  
None of you are  
I'm here to help you  
remember that*

*Amal, inmate  
is all I say*

*Who are you, Amal?  
What is your truth?  
she asks*

*I look around, no one has their  
eyes on me so I shrug*

*Everybody was  
stumped by that question  
when I first asked it to the group  
It's okay, Amal  
You have time to think about it*

*What is your truth?  
She turns away*

and writes on her poster board  
with a blue marker

## MISTAKES & MISGIVINGS

*Take a sheet of paper out  
of your notebook and  
fold it in half, she says  
without looking back at us  
On one side you write  
“Mistakes,” on the other side  
you write “Misgivings”*

My page is still blank  
I don't do what she says  
This shit is for kindergarten  
Too many questions  
too many directions

*Where's your work?* she asks

*I thought we were just gonna write, I say*

*You are writing, you have to start  
somewhere, Amal*

*I'm not trying to make  
origami I just wanna write*

*Oh, so you're a serious writer*

*Not like essays or stories, but  
just the truth*

*Truth— Well, let me see what you got  
Follow the directions and take it  
one word at a time— One word at  
a time, Amal—*

*Mistakes and Misgivings*

What I want to say:  
What does that even mean?  
Why can't we just write?  
Why does everything have to have  
rules directions order?  
We're already trapped in boxes  
why can't we just be free with this?

What I do:  
Crumple the paper and walk  
out of the dayroom and toward  
my door  
The officer with the tattoo—  
his name is Beale, but I call him  
Tattoo  
so that I remember—  
tells me to get back  
to the dayroom, but I don't move

*Where the fuck do you think you're going?*  
he hisses

I stand there in front of my door  
waiting for him to pull out the keys  
He holds his arm in front of me  
and I see that tattoo again  
that tattoo again

*You go in there, you'll stay in there*  
*Forty-eight hours minimum*  
he says, opening the door

and I walk in

# The Entombment II

The metal door slamming shut  
behind me  
makes my insides sink  
to the bottom of my feet  
to the bottom of these  
cheap sneakers  
to the cold concrete floor  
to the basement of this place  
to the soil, to the bedrock  
to the middle of the earth  
and I bury myself  
way more than six feet deep

This cell is a tomb

I left my notebook up there  
I left my pencil up there

Down here in the dungeon  
of my mind

I write anyway  
I draw anyway

The pen and pencil  
are my thoughts and memories

The paper is my soul



and Imani's voice echoes and  
bounces off the bedrock  
lingers in the heat  
repeating    repeating

MISTAKES & MISGIVINGS  
MISTAKES & MISGIVINGS  
MISTAKES & MISGIVINGS

I learned about this thing  
called the butterfly effect—  
not in school  
but from the guys on the block

It was this one dude  
who said that's why we're always  
fucking up, we're always making mistakes  
because ain't no butterflies in the hood

See, if there were butterflies  
we would have what's called  
the butterfly effect

A butterfly's wings can  
change the path of a storm

Something so small  
can change  
one big thing in the world  
one big thing in the universe

*If there are no butterflies here  
no pretty little wings flapping in the hood  
then we can't change a thing, he said*

*It's a metaphor, I said*

*Ain't nobody ask you, he said*

*We're the butterflies, I said  
and the things we do are like wings*

*We do shit every day, he said  
How come shit ain't changed*

*Nah, I said  
Everything is changing something*

*every day, even this conversation*

I draw a vertical line on the wall with my finger  
I can't see it, but it's there

To the left I outline the word  
MISTAKE

To the right I outline the word  
MISGIVINGS

## MISTAKES

I should've stayed with Omari  
that night

I should've just went home  
that night

I should've just went on the PS4  
that night

Umi should've been home  
that night

I should've never met Omari  
that day

I should've shooted my shot with Zenobia  
that day

I should've went with Lucas  
that day

I should've just walked away  
that second

## MISGIVINGS

Something wasn't right about those  
guys on the basketball courts  
I felt it in my gut

So I turned back and left  
Omari with his boys  
to deal with it

Something wasn't right about  
that night, the way  
the air felt

around my body as if it was  
trying to warn me, trying  
to keep me away

but I skated all the way  
to the other park  
where I knew

it was safe, where people  
knew my name  
and my face

But by the time I got there  
they were leaving and  
skating out of

that park and onto the streets  
like we usually do  
We were home

We knew the twists and turns  
of every block in our hood  
We knew the faces

the music, the grandmothers  
calling out of windows  
We knew the kids

and we knew the lines  
but that night the air  
was just right

and just wrong at the same time  
One of them said there's this  
hill over on the other side

There's these steps with a handrail  
where we could skate and where we  
knew there was a line

and we didn't even know that  
they were following us  
No, chasing us

out of that part of town where the  
hood stopped being the hood  
and became a town

They came on bikes and skateboards  
and we didn't run, we stopped  
I stopped and waited

This time, this time  
I stayed and it  
wasn't even

for anybody  
for no friend  
for no homie

I stayed to defend myself  
even though everything

about that night  
that moment  
was telling  
me what  
they  
told  
us  
GET THE FUCK OUT

In my cell  
I crack  
I break  
I split in half  
down the middle  
I shatter into pieces

and BANG and BANG and BANG and BANG and  
BANG and BANG and BANG and BANG

on that door on those four walls at those four corners  
yelling  
shouting  
screaming  
clawing  
to

GET THE FUCK OUT  
THE FUCK  
FUCK THE  
OUT FUCK THE GET



## **Part III**



## Hope II

Maybe    Maybe  
she wrote me back  
or drew me her world

When we get letters from the outside  
we line up and collect the envelopes  
like it's payday

We can't buy anything with these words  
Empty, sweet promises from people  
whose love was not enough to keep us free

I don't open the ones from Umi  
I don't open the ones from Grandma  
but seeing her name again sends a wave  
over me like hearing new music  
for the first time

I hold the one from Zenobia  
close to my chest  
and save it for later  
It'll be there waiting for me  
for when I need a cool drink of water  
after another war

I can't believe she wrote me back

## Hope III

*Jeremy Mathis is showing  
signs that he might  
wake up soon  
Clyde says from across  
the round table  
He'll have to make a statement  
and hopefully he'll remember  
what happened that night  
But you have to follow the rules  
and do what you're told  
Follow your program  
get your class credits  
and before you know it  
time will go by fast  
and this will all be behind you*

*If he wakes up and tells the truth  
and you've been on good behavior  
There's hope, Amal—*

*Shay and Dionne are coming  
to see you  
Umi says from across  
the round table  
I need you I need them  
to know that you're gonna  
make it through*

*You're gonna make it through, Amal  
Just keep going One foot in front  
of the other Keep walking*



# Lost-and-Found

And I do  
I walk through the program  
I walk to the showers

I walk to the mess hall  
I walk around my cell  
I walk to each of the corners  
    with more corners surrounding me  
    Kadon, Amir, Smoke, and Rah

I have to put in time  
in the mess hall  
cleaning tables and washing dishes  
Here, they punish you  
while punishing you

Then one day  
Kadon says  
*Ay man, come to the library*

*Library?* I ask

*Maybe I'm wrong, but you  
look like you know what a library is*  
he says  
He's my shadow  
always there   quiet  
then he asks

*And how come you don't rhyme no more?*

*'Cause I don't have shit to say  
no more*

*Come on, man  
There's always some shit to say  
We in here    Look, man  
it's 'cause you in the mess hall  
cleaning up  
You gotta earn back some of  
that free time so you could  
come to that poetry class  
Stay on that straight and narrow*

*Don't fuck up like those  
other times*

*Kadon says  
eyes still wandering*

*Everything he says  
makes sense  
but the way he's acting  
like some shit is ready to pop off  
any minute now  
doesn't make sense*

*How do you do it, bro? I ask  
How do you  
not lose your mind in here?*

*Kadon laughs  
Every day I lose my mind  
Every fucking day  
But you know what?  
I find it again  
That's the thing about being*

*locked up  
Whatever you lose  
you'll find it again  
over and over  
You know, like the*

*lost-and-found at school  
Some cardboard box  
that all the shit gets dumped into  
The shit that people forget  
Yeah, we're that box—  
a fucking lost-and-found*

*I laugh a little for the first time  
And whatever stone and brick  
that's been inside of me  
weighing me down  
turns into bubble turns into air  
and floats up and up—  
I feel you, man, is all I say*

## Booked II

Even though it's quiet in the library  
Things move like  
a ticking time bomb  
because any minute, some shit will go down  
and it always does

The shelves are half empty  
and some of the books are so old  
just opening them up will make the pages  
fall out

I take five books at a time  
to a desk, flip open the pages  
and wait for my mind  
to stop racing  
to quiet down  
so I can hear the words

I look for an answer  
between those pages  
I wanna know how I got here  
I mean, *really* got here  
Like, all the things Uncle Rashon  
was telling me about The System

Real talk  
I wish Uncle Rashon was here  
to give me the right books



Kadon has his head down  
and his face in a manga novel

The bookshelves here  
are not walls  
They're closed windows  
and all I have to do  
is pull out one book  
to make these windows  
wide open

## Family Portrait III

Shay and Dionne  
make a sandwich out of me  
They hug me so tight and for so long  
that I could've easily slipped  
into one of their bags or pockets  
and gone home with them

*Dang you got skinny, son*  
Shay says

*Oh my god, Amal*  
*You're like a different person*  
Dionne says

And it's the first time in a long while  
that my eyes get wet  
I can't hold back the tears

I knew I knew  
that seeing Shay and Dionne  
would make me like a rainstorm

*Amal, you're not about to make me*  
*cry in no jail*  
Shay says

Dionne just lets it all out

Umi is always a quiet rainstorm  
by herself

*How's college?* I ask Dionne

*A lot of work, she says  
You know, studying, adjusting to  
a new city, trying to  
hold down this part-time job*

She takes my hand and holds it  
because she knew she knew  
that her school was in my top three

*We can't get Lucas up here 'cause he's not family  
But he wants to see you, Shay says  
I know I know  
he's lying*

Lucas's mom kept him away from me  
kept him away from my trial  
told him not to text or call me

*Thanks for taking the bus all  
the way up here, is all I say*

*Best road trip of my life, Shay says  
All we did was talk about you*

*I know y'all were cracking jokes about me  
I say*

Dionne looks like she's smiling  
and crying at the same time

There's an officer with a camera  
in front of the kiddie mural  
The one with the smiling birds

rainbows and hopping bunnies

There's a short line of guys  
with their moms and cousins  
and grandmas waiting to take  
pictures in front of that mural  
like it's picture day in kindergarten

It's the only way they allow photos in here  
So Umi, Shay, Dionne, and me  
pose in front of the  
fading and chipping  
mural

I only smile  
because I'm with them  
and they're here with me

Not for nothing else

When it's time to leave  
Umi hugs me so hard and for so long  
that I think I'll disappear into her arms

She whispers a line  
from her favorite song into my ear  
And I have to swallow back  
the stone in my throat

When I was little  
Umi used to blast Nas  
her favorite rapper  
and say, *Whose world is this?*  
and she would make me sing  
*It's mine, it's mine, it's mine!*

Then she'd play the one with Lauryn Hill  
and I'd shout into that musty apartment air

*If I ruled the world—  
and she'd follow with*

*I'd free all my sons!*

## Blank Page II

When I come back to my cell  
from the visiting room  
there's a notebook  
and a box of pencils  
on my desk in my cell

There's a juice box  
and a bag of potato chips  
on my desk in my cell

There's a letter  
from Zenobia  
on my desk in my cell

I sit on my bed  
and stare at those things  
as if it's a trick  
as if they're poison

but I want them so bad  
so bad

So I start with the letter

*Dear Amal,*

*Thanks for the drawing. It's really good. I mean, everybody at school knew you were a dope artist. You forgot to sign your drawing. It'll be worth a lot of money one day. For real. But I'm not going to sell this. I'm framing it and hanging it up in my room.*

*I heard what they said about you at your trial. People are talking about what Ms. Rinaldi did and it's really messed up. They should've asked one of your friends to be a character witness. I would have done it. I know your character.*

*You probably don't want to write about what it's like in there and what you're going through. But if you do, I'm here. I'll always write back. Keep your head up.*

*Zenobia*

*PS I'm glad you remember me, too. . . .*

I fold the letter and  
hold it against my chest  
where the brick is  
where the building is  
where the city is

These letters from Zenobia  
are putting me back  
together again

I slip the letter between the  
pages of the notebook  
and grab a few pencils  
and wait to be let out  
for free time in the dayroom

Kadon and the other corners are  
at another table  
and I don't sit with them on purpose  
I want to be alone here

I don't even get a chance to open my notebook  
when Officer Stanford comes to look over my shoulder

*Shahid*, is all he says  
I start with a line  
*Amal Shahid*, he says  
I draw another line, then a box

I don't look up  
but he's hovering  
like a shadow  
like Tattoo  
except his arms are clean

*You been quiet*, he says  
*Staying out of trouble*  
*It's almost like*



*you ain't supposed to be here*

*I'm not, I mumble*

*It's not up to me, he says  
But for now, I see you, Shahid  
Keep your head up and head down  
at the same time, feel me?*

I look up at him  
I look into his eyes this time  
and maybe  
he's trying to play me  
like when I was getting off the bus  
So I stare back at him  
and wait for  
pain

But  
*Stay low, stay cool, he says*  
and walks away

and I wonder    I wonder  
if anybody else sees what he sees



# Guernica II

Maybe it was because I'd jumped into  
the pages of my sketchbook  
drawing boxes around myself  
(soundproof steel walls built  
with a number two pencil)

that I didn't hear the cursing  
the arguing  
the fuck-you-niggas  
over and over again

By the time I look up  
the dayroom  
where we play cards  
where we bang out beats  
on the table  
where we eat out of tiny bags  
of cookies and potato chips

is a war zone

I get up from my seat  
and make my body like steel  
eyes watching, jaws clenched  
fists ready for any and everything

Then I see Kadon  
A guy is beating up

on him so hard and so fast  
that I run  
leap  
jump  
and start pulling him off

For each punch, for each blow  
I get ten more  
on my head  
on my back  
and my mind shuts down

There's no  
thinking in war  
I remember  
that's how  
I got here

The officers run in with their batons  
one by one two by two  
we're pulled off  
from each other  
I'm the first to stop fighting  
I keep my hands up

just like that other time  
with Omari  
But this time in here  
I won't let them say  
I threw the last punch  
I surrendered

I'm frozen  
where I stand

innocent





# **Lockdown**

# The Entombment III

I left my notebook out there  
I left my pencils out there  
I left Zenobia's letter out there

and even though  
it's not nighttime yet

it's lights-out for me

I lay on the cold floor  
and curl into myself

like how I was  
in Umi's

belly

and slowly slowly  
this tomb  
becomes a womb

Here  
the darkest night is my canvas  
I paint the past in broad strokes, bright hues  
And the memories dance all over my mind  
in living color

The guys I was skating with



(wearing blue, gray, black, red)  
were not trying to get the fuck out

This was our hood, too  
even though there  
was this invisible line  
that separated rich from poor

We were all shades of black  
and they were white  
no grays  
no blurred lines

and ready to deck anybody  
who crossed that line  
between us and them

and me just standing there  
frozen  
until until

I became the color red  
boiling-hot lava  
rising to the surface

I became a dragon  
and the planet Mars

I became  
war

I became  
rage and revenge

As soon as the first punch went flying  
hitting face  
hitting belly

as soon as the first soldier went down  
hitting pavement  
hitting ground

I jumped in

and we were all red  
hot bubbling war  
We were all a volcano  
spilling lava  
all over their side of our hood

I paint in words and voices, rhymes and rhythm  
and every whisper, every conversation beats a drum  
in my mind  
at full blast

Black and white  
bodies  
turned against each other  
lost in the world  
thinking it's about money and turf

Light-up in the hood  
the tenements and mansions  
look pretty now  
Bright orange, red, and blue  
over a cloud of thick dust  
and red-hot heat  
Now  
this onyx skin  
soul made of gold  
beautiful and bright  
sits in a corner  
in a body  
trembling and rag-cloaked

I paint in wrong choices, regrets, and broken dreams

and every acquaintance, friend, and enemy laughs at me  
in my mind  
really, really loud

After that fight with Shawn in the fifth grade  
Umi put me in martial arts class

not to learn how to fight  
but to learn discipline  
and to control my temper

I told her I didn't have a temper  
she said, *You will, Amal you will*

So every Tuesday and Friday  
I took the bus to Master John's  
basement studio

and I never knew never knew  
that I'd have to use  
a karate move  
in real life  
so close to home  
on the other side  
of an invisible  
line

On a white boy  
who said  
who said  
to my face

*Get  
the  
fuck  
off  
our  
block*

*nigger*

Kadon was beat up real bad in that fight I don't see him

around

the

corners

Smoke

want

They

alone

new

I draw

more

and a

black baby

like the one on that officer's arm    Except free, inside a box

and

other

Amir

and Rah

revenge

leave me

So with a

notebook

myself

boxes

little

inside

# Saint Peter in Prison

I've been programmed  
I get it now

When we know  
what we're supposed to do  
and when we're supposed to do it  
there's no room  
for memories  
for regret  
for fear  
for dreams  
to slip in

Every single minute of our time  
is scheduled  
except free time, which isn't free

Except time in our cell  
which isn't time  
it's hell  
when we're left alone  
with just our thoughts  
our memories  
our regret  
our fears  
our dreams  
to slip in  
like a sliver of light

So I read and read and read  
when there is no blank paper  
no blank canvas  
to tell this story

I return the books to the library  
and I freeze where I'm standing  
when I see who's in there

Imani  
is standing next to a table  
where three other guys are sitting  
reading

*Hey, Amal*  
she says

And the sun rises  
over the city on my chest

*What you been reading?*  
*Let me see*

She takes the books from me  
one by one  
reading the front and back covers  
*You have good taste, Amal*

I nod  
and keep my eye on the other guys

*They let me use the library today  
for some small-group work  
These young men are submitting their  
writing to a website  
Their words will be read by  
thousands of people*

*That's cool, right?*  
she says with only her eyes smiling

And I glance at those guys

heads down  
typing words into a laptop

I take my books from her  
and keep it moving  
Hoping that those guys  
will leave

so I can ask  
if this is something I can do, too

or is this something just  
for good behavior



## Art School II

Today is Tuesday  
and we're back in Imani's poetry class

I have a pad  
full of drawings and poems  
but I won't show her

unless she asks to see them  
I hope she asks to see them

We're sitting in a circle  
and Imani is across from me  
Some other people who are in charge  
wearing suits, serious faces, and badges  
stand outside the circle, watching  
including Cheryl-Ann Buford

A man walks in behind them  
wearing jeans and a dashiki  
A shiny chain and medallion hangs  
from his neck  
He has on a bunch of rings and bracelets, too  
and I wonder I wonder

why on earth did they let him walk in here  
with all that ice

The other people look as if they're parting

a sea for him  
and he glides, almost like Imani  
to the front of the dayroom

smiling as if we're all his sons  
and he's seeing us  
for the first time

Then Imani says  
*I am so excited for you to meet  
our very special guest today*

Everybody shifts in their seat  
I sit up and inhale

*It is a tremendous honor  
to introduce Dr. Kwesi Bennu*

We clap only because we're supposed to  
I've never heard of him before

He steps in front of us  
and says

*Over thirty years ago  
I was exactly where you are now  
Accused, tried, and convicted  
spending six years in jail  
for a crime I did not commit*

I sit up taller  
because everything—  
time the air and maybe my heart—  
stops for a moment  
as we listen to his story

*It was summertime  
and like most of you*

*I didn't want to be  
stuck in the house*

*I rolled with my boys  
like most of you do  
And I don't ever  
want you to think  
there's something  
wrong with that*

*Your boys are  
like family out on  
these streets*

*But you gotta understand  
when one of you fall  
everybody falls  
or takes the fall  
You know what I'm saying?*

*I didn't rob that grocery store  
I didn't have a weapon on me*

*But it was a matter of  
wrong time, wrong place*

*But wrong time, wrong place  
doesn't make you  
automatically guilty*

*I'm sure you all know  
the rule of law—  
Innocent until proven guilty*

*But with us, it's  
guilty until proven innocent*

*I served six years*

*before I was proven innocent*

# Harmony

We don't write  
instead, we tell our stories  
out loud  
for everyone to hear

Our voices bounce off the walls  
and it almost sounds like a rap battle  
and maybe if there was some dope beat  
behind all our truths  
it would be the dopest collaboration  
in hip-hop history

If only somebody would listen  
and Dr. Bennu and Imani  
and those people in suits  
listen to us

*I took a plea deal*

*They told me I was  
going back home, too*

*We couldn't afford a lawyer*

*I was there, I did it  
but I didn't know it was going  
to end up like that*

*They said I'd serve less time  
if I said I did it*

*Sometimes I get so mad and  
I don't know how to fucking  
calm down*

*If I didn't do it, they'd kill me*

*It was gonna be me or him*

*I needed the money*

*I wasn't even there*

*I didn't think I'd get caught*

*It's the only life I know*

*I didn't do it*

# African American II

While we talk    shout    whisper  
Imani writes on her poster board

## THE 13TH AMENDMENT

Then she writes some more words

Dr. Bennu nods  
*Y'all should know this*, he says  
*Y'all should really understand this*

# **Constitution of the United States of America**

## **Thirteenth Amendment**

### **Section 1**

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

### **Section 2**

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.



Dr. Bennu tells us to  
read each word out loud

We bitch and moan  
moan and bitch  
Nobody wants to  
but I do

*So we're like slaves?*  
I ask

*Is that what it says?*  
Dr. Bennu asks

*Basically, if we've been  
convicted of a crime  
we're slaves*

*So when you did whatever you did  
or whatever they think you did  
Your life your whole damn life  
belongs to them*

*Now read what it says  
on those orange jumpsuits  
You've been branded  
labeled boxed in  
You've become property  
of the state*

*Tell us something we don't know!*  
I blurt out

Some of the guys laugh  
but Dr. Bennu and Imani  
and all the other  
important people in suits  
stare at me

*You're right, youngblood  
Dr. Bennu says  
You don't belong to anyone  
while you're in here  
Not even to yourself  
And you already know that*

He's about to leave  
and the words are  
caught in my throat  
stuck there  
like stone

*Excuse me, Dr. Bennu, I say  
standing from my seat*

I swallow back  
the stone  
and make my fist a mic

I make truth out of the air  
out of the room  
out of this place

*Saying down with the blacks but uplift the white race  
Raising the banner to the sun in haste  
Mobbed deep, hoods and capes  
Sun-dried and bloodstained  
Saying down with the blacks but uplift the white race*

*Unjustly tried an indelible conviction  
the usual result of five shades of darker skin  
Justice unjust, black robes and pale face*

*Didn't have a chance, they called us apes  
I wish I would have known the false smiles  
Evil intentions fulfilling their taste  
Why me? Why us?*

*Justice unjust, black robes and pale face*

# Butterflies

*Do you know why you're in here?*  
Dr. Bennu asks, stepping closer to me  
*I mean, why you're really in here?*

He steps back to look at everyone else

All those stories you just told me  
is a truth your truth  
but it's not the whole truth

Of course, you're here to take  
responsibility for your actions, but—

*But what if we didn't do it?*  
*What if we have no actions to be*  
*responsible for? I ask*

*What if we took a fucking plea deal?*  
somebody else asks

Dr. Bennu pauses  
looks at us for a long minute  
then asks  
*Is there any paper here?*

Imani hands him a stack  
of loose-leaf paper  
and I'm thinking I could use

some myself

Then Dr. Bennu takes some sheets  
and tears them into big pieces

*Each of you, he says  
Take a piece of paper  
and write down one thing  
you are guilty of  
one thing you regret*

*A mistake, Imani reminds us*

*That's right A mistake  
It could be anything, he says  
Including the thing you did  
or didn't do to get here*

We shift in our seats again  
We bitch and moan some more

*Why you wanna know?  
You're gonna use this  
against us  
I need my lawyer*

And then we write anyway  
one by one two by two  
we all start writing something  
down on paper  
slowly  
as if each word is a secret

Mine is:

I  
threw  
the

first  
punch

Dr. Bennu looks around the dayroom  
and grabs an empty trash can  
*Take that piece of paper*  
*fold it up real small*  
*and throw it into this bin*

We all do what he says

*Now I'll go around and you*  
*have to pick out one piece of paper*  
We complain some more

I remember what Kadon had said  
In here, we are a lost-and-found

We try to forget something  
throw it away  
but we can always dig it back up  
when we're ready  
because it's still here   trapped  
just like us

And something hits me deep in my belly  
Kadon isn't here

*Put it back in if you pick your own paper*  
Dr. Bennu says

My piece of paper  
which isn't my piece of paper  
which isn't my mistake  
says

*Being born*

He tells us all  
to read the mistake out loud

He calls it our mistake  
but it isn't our mistake  
it's someone else's mistake

But holding it in our hands like this  
seeing the words on paper like this  
reading it out loud like this

it becomes our mistake

How can being born  
be a mistake?

How can your whole life  
be something you wish didn't happen?

Imani writes our mistakes  
down on her poster board  
for everyone to read  
for everyone to see

Mine is there  
naked exposed raw

*I threw the first punch*

The one I read is there, too

*Being born*

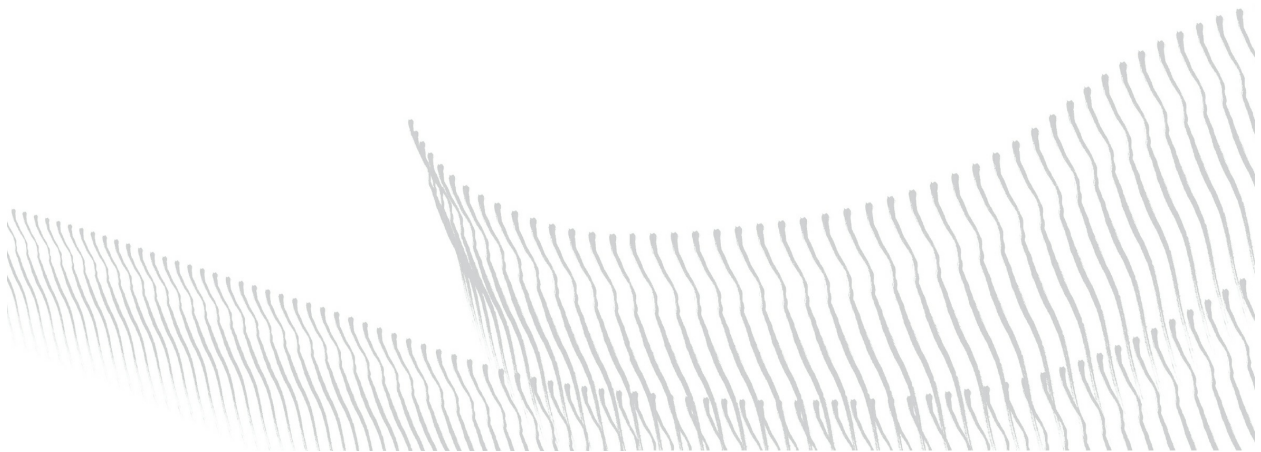
I look around wondering which one of us  
thinks believes that they are a mistake



## DNA II

Dr. Bennu tells us to get up from our chairs—  
—and stand next to each other—  
—Then he tells us to lock arms at the elbows—  
—and we look like we're chained to each other—  
—in a circle arm in arm—  
—He walks outside of our circle, then—  
—one by one and two by two—  
—he starts to push each one of us forward—  
—He keeps pushing and pushing until—  
—we hold on to each other so tight that—  
—when he pushes again, we don't fall—  
—we don't stumble—  
—We are a chain link like DNA strands—

-U-N-B-R-E-A-K-A-B-L-E-



# Conversations with God IX

Dr. Bennu doesn't come every day  
Imani doesn't come every day

So as soon as those metal doors shut  
as soon as the buzzer goes off  
as soon as it's lights-out

and lights on  
and program begins

it's the same shit  
over and over again  
day in day out

We forget all about the lessons  
or maybe  
the lessons don't stick  
don't land  
don't sink to the bottom of our souls

Dr. Bennu's words  
only skim the surface of our skins  
So with the markers  
I copped from Imani

I write down his words  
to remember—

When she had asked me  
to help her put away her stuff

When she turned her back  
the markers were  
just sitting there on a table

I grabbed all of them  
and stuffed them into  
my jumpsuit

I felt them drop to the bottom  
almost slipping out  
over the top of my sneakers

*So you're a poet*, she asked  
I nodded  
I wanted to say more  
I wanted to spit some more rhymes  
I wanted to tell her that I  
paint and draw, too

but the markers—

*What you did there  
was fire  
I like your metaphors  
and similes and imagery*  
she said

and all I did was shrug  
because the markers—

She turned away again  
digging in her bag for something  
and I bent over to tuck the bottom  
of my jumpsuit into my sneakers  
keeping the markers in place





# Lights Out

## Blank Canvas II

The best thoughts swim around  
your mind when you're locked up  
in a box with nothing but the  
quiet darkness and cool concrete walls  
as your canvas

I'm thinking about Zenobia

so the first thing I draw  
is a butterfly

the curved lines of its wings  
in flight  
fluttering in the air  
changing the movement  
of atoms and molecules  
shifting the tiniest cells  
the smallest, most irrelevant truths  
so that one big thing can happen  
way on the other side of this wall  
of this cell  
of this prison

Then I write

***I THREW THE FIRST PUNCH***

It was me who stepped to him first

It was me who balled up my fist  
and hit him so hard he went

stumbling but not falling  
he caught himself  
and came back for me

The look in his eyes  
I knew I knew  
he wanted to destroy me

And the other guys around me  
were going to war

People started  
coming out of their houses  
somebody had a bat  
somebody yelled  
*I'm calling the cops!*  
Somebody threw that word

around again  
nigger  
nigger  
nigger  
like it's the fucking 1950s

It echoed  
bounced off the houses  
reached the sky  
landed on the pavement

and it wasn't even the word  
that made us run for our lives  
made me leave my skateboard

made me climb over a gate  
almost fall flat on my face



mess up my hands and knees

made me double over  
trying hard to catch my breath  
made me sit on a curb

when I wasn't even home yet  
so that those cops  
pull up right in front of me

lights blazing  
guns drawn  
rushing to me as if

I was about to make them chase me  
when all I was doing was

catching my breath  
catching my breath  
catching my breath

Even while they pushed  
me to the ground and  
shoved my face  
against the pavement  
pulled my hands behind  
my back

handcuffed  
handcuffed  
handcuffed

and threw me into the back seat  
threw me into a room  
with a table and chair  
as I whispered  
as I said  
as I shouted

*It was a fight!*  
*It was a fight!*

## ***IT WAS JUST A FUCKING FIGHT***

I write this  
on the wall  
in giant letters

It's so dark  
I can't even see  
where my words land

I don't even know  
who is hearing this drawing  
through the silence

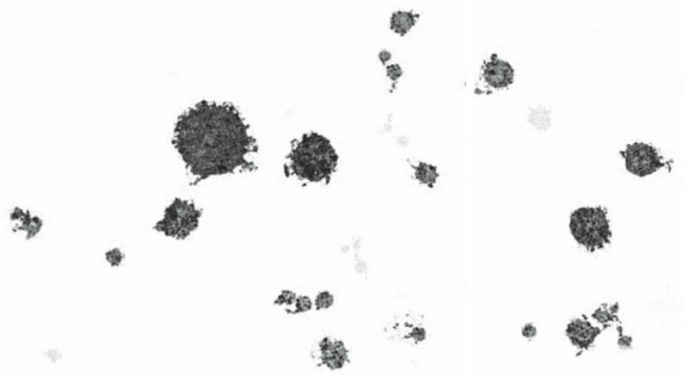




# Lights On

The walls  
the floor  
the desk  
my sheets  
my hands

are all covered in  
red, black, and green  
ink



Tattoo  
is the first one  
to come to my door  
and see what I've done

Tattoo  
grabs me from  
off my bed  
throws me to  
the ground  
handcuffs me  
and hisses in my ear

*What did Stanford tell you  
when you first got here?  
No celebrities in here  
No fucking special treatment  
or else  
we can arrange that*

*Get off me!  
I shout  
Get the fuck off me!*



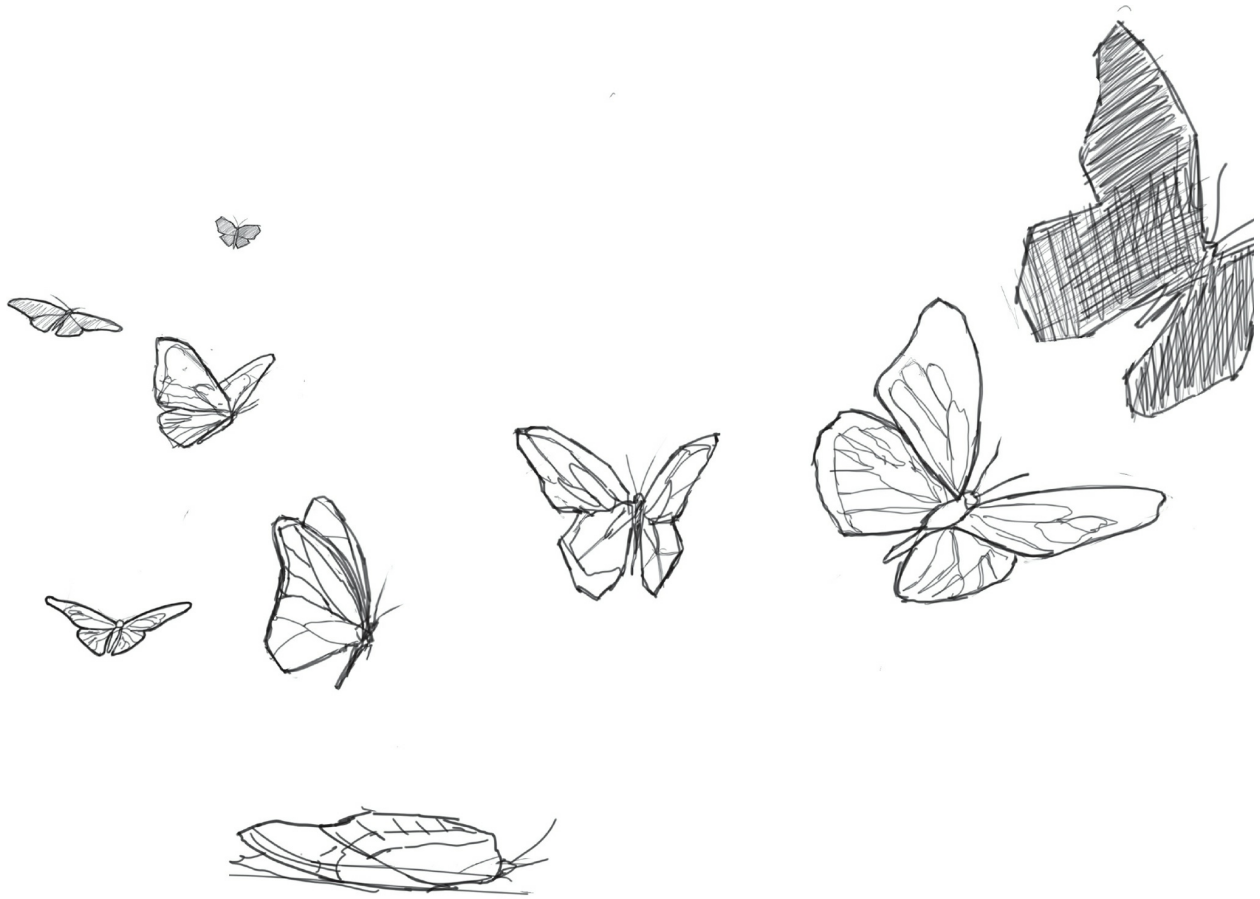




# **Solitary: The Box**

# Surrealism

I ball myself up  
At least in here  
no one will hear  
me cry for Umi



At least in here  
I can spit rhymes

as loud as I want  
I can curse the air

At least in here  
I can see the butterfly  
I drew on my wall  
make its way into this box

fluttering around my head  
as if telling me a secret  
as if affecting something  
way on the other side of this box

If I could change one thing  
about that night  
I wouldn't even know where  
to start and where to end

Maybe all the decisions  
all the mistakes  
I've made were supposed  
to lead me right to this moment

Butterfly, you mean to tell me  
that everything I've ever done  
in all my sixteen years of living  
were just so I could end up here?

Butterfly  
what about my dreams  
what about all that work  
I did just to stay alive?

Butterfly, why are you even in here?  
What are you supposed to be changing?  
Maybe there's already a shift  
Us and them

I don't know if I'll change  
I've been so broken  
too many times that I  
have turned to dust

Butterfly, you'd have to promise me  
you'll change them out there, too

It can't be just me  
They gotta be different, too

They gotta listen this time  
when I say that I didn't  
throw the last punch  
It wasn't me  
It wasn't me  
who left  
Jeremy Mathis  
for dead  
It wasn't me  
who threw that last  
fatal blow  
to the head  
making him lose  
consciousness  
making him fall into  
an in-between space  
where he can't even  
tell the truth  
about what happened that night

I threw the first punch  
but I didn't throw the last  
It wasn't me

## ***IT WASN'T ME!***

Butterfly, if you could do just one thing for me

listen to us  
listen to all of us

When we say  
When I say  
that I was tired  
of them

acting like  
they own that block  
that side of our hood  
our city  
our country  
our world

When we say  
When I say  
that maybe  
I was punching  
all the walls  
they put up around me  
around us

I was punching  
the air  
the clouds  
the sun

for pressing  
down on me  
on us  
so hard  
that the weight  
of the world  
made us crack  
split in half  
break into pieces

and Jeremy Mathis

and all those white boys  
that night  
were like the air

Just by them standing there  
being there



living there  
claiming what's not theirs

We couldn't breathe  
I couldn't breathe

Butterfly, if what they say is true about you  
change something BIG out there

Butterfly, remind me again what happens to dust  
Butterfly, if you're in here with me  
then you have to go back out there  
and change the world

I made you, butterfly

The butterfly swirls and swirls  
down to the cold concrete floor

It flutters its wings faster and faster  
so fast that two wings become four

and a second butterfly joins it  
Four wings become eight wings

Eight wings become sixteen  
become thirty-two fluttering wings

And right here in this box  
right in front of my eyes

butterflies fill this space and  
circle around each other until

a pair of old sneakers appears in  
the middle of their butterfly dance

In the middle of their cypher  
a pair of legs comes out of the sneakers

jeans, a shirt, arms, shoulders, a head  
A whole man appears just as the

butterflies disappear  
I rub my eyes, close and open them

to make sure that what I'm seeing  
is what I'm seeing

*Baba?* I say

*Assalaamu alaikum*

I stand to face him  
and he's smiling the same way

he did for my elementary school  
graduation—proud and happy

*Amal, my son—  
Wa alaikum assalaam  
my baba says*

and his voice fills the room  
and pushes against the walls  
as if it's too big for this place  
like man-sized feet in kid-sized shoes

There's not even enough room for my voice  
and I can't find the right words

to say all the things I wanted to say  
but all I can ask is

*Baba, do you know what happened?  
Do you know what happened to me?*

*Did somebody call you?  
Did you see me on the news?  
Did you, Baba, did you?*

*Amal, he says  
I want you to know that not  
a day goes by  
that I don't regret not telling  
you something  
not showing you something—  
Amal, I want you to know  
that there's just so much  
so so much in the world that  
you don't know  
that you need to know  
and I don't know I didn't  
know  
where to even start—*

*And I shouldn't have blinked  
I shouldn't have taken a breath  
because in that small moment  
when it's dark  
when I'm exhaling  
when I'm breathing*

*he's gone again*





# Lights On

# Brotherhood III

I don't even have to  
read the name  
on the envelope

to know who it's from  
The handwriting is a  
dead giveaway

We're both juniors  
and his handwriting  
hasn't changed since

kindergarten Lucas  
is no artist He  
was never good at

drawing But  
he was good with  
the girls We

called him Pretty Boy  
Luc 'cause that's all  
he cared about

His drip, his swag, his girls

And part of me  
doesn't even want to

open the envelope

Reading anything  
from him will make me  
want to be home

But it's already been open  
The guards search these  
envelopes and even though

they're not supposed to  
read our letters  
I think they do

And I wonder  
what Lucas has to say  
after all this time



*For Amal's eyes only!!!*

*Yo I can't believe you got me writing letters!!! I don't even do that for my girl.*

*Well this ain't a fucking letter, this is a fucking note. Just pretend I passed you this note in class or something. And all I gotta say is my mom was tripping. If it wasn't for her, I would've been there. She was just worried, that's all. This whole shit is fucked up. I mean, from day one. I can't come see you 'cause we're not blood and that shit is fucked up, too. If I could, I would. That's my word. But I know you're good in there. You're probably drawing and reciting poetry. Don't let them stop you, though. Your shit is nice. I told you that. Keep your head up. I know that when this whole shit blows over, AND IT WILL, you're gonna be mad famous. I'm gonna see your name in lights, homie. Just keep doing your thing.*

*Luc*

*PS That girl Zenobia was asking about you. I told her she should just write you.*

I fold his letter  
really small  
and hold it  
in my hand

Smiling and remembering  
all the dumb shit  
me and Lucas used to do

Like that one time  
he just showed up at my  
school even though

he wasn't a student there  
all because he wanted  
to shoot his shot with some girl

He came to my classes  
and everything and just  
sat there answering questions

and doing the work  
and I couldn't stop laughing  
Yo that shit was mad funny

And I was the one  
to get in trouble  
for laughing Not him

I still couldn't stop  
laughing even while sitting  
in the principal's office

and he poked his head in  
talking about, *You're good, homie?*

Yo! I wanted to blurt

*Nigga, you don't even  
go to this school!*  
But I didn't

I wanted to hang  
with him that night  
But I didn't

Lucas wouldn't have gone  
to that park that night  
But I did

# Brotherhood IV

I press my face  
against the glass  
on the door to my cell

looking out into  
the dayroom  
for a pencil  
a pen, a marker

anything  
so I can  
write Lucas back

and Zenobia  
and Umi  
and Grandma  
and Shay and Dionne

And that's when I see him  
Kadon

His back turned to me  
hunched over  
head down

as if they forced all the life  
out of him

He's handcuffed  
and Tattoo is holding his arm  
and my stomach sinks

I wanna see Kadon's face  
I wanna see if it's still there  
the same crooked smile  
eyes bright  
looking as if this is not  
the worst thing that's ever  
happened to him

A smile  
that says that it could be worse  
it could all be much worse

So I  
BANG and BANG and BANG and BANG

Tattoo turns to face my door  
but Kadon doesn't

It's Stanford who shows up  
in my door's window

and asks  
*What you need, Shahid?*

I lick my lips  
thinking of something to say

or to ask so that he could let me out  
to talk to Kadon  
before Tattoo walks away with him

So I just ask  
*What's up with my man Kadon?*

*Ay, yo, Williams!*  
Stanford calls out  
to Kadon

But Tattoo pulls him away

but I  
BANG and BANG and BANG and BANG

*Yo, chill!*  
Stanford says

*Kadon!* I call out  
through the closed metal door  
I need to see his face  
I need to see what they did to him  
*Kadon!*

And finally finally  
he looks up  
even as Tattoo pulls him  
and just about drags  
him out of the dayroom  
He looks up and toward my door  
and I see his face

like  
a pink balloon ready to burst

his bottom lip hangs so low  
that it almost touches his chin

and  
one eye is sealed shut  
swollen glossy

and  
I wonder I wonder  
if there's even an eye there  
anymore

Kadon trips and Tattoo drags him  
Kadon doesn't fight

So I  
BANG and BANG and BANG and BANG

*There's nothing you can do*  
*Shahid*  
Stanford says  
and walks away

And I scream  
through that small  
glass window  
hoping  
hoping that  
it will  
shatter

# Brotherhood V

Questions not to ask while in juvie:

What you in here for?

Do I know you?

Who did that to you?

*You a'ight, man?* I ask Kadon  
a few days later when I see him  
in the mess hall

He's smaller now  
as if whatever happened to him—  
whatever they did to him—  
pressed down on him so hard  
that he's half the boy he used to be

I sit up taller for both of us  
until I have to leave him there  
but it feels like I lost him  
and I won't be able to find him anymore

Kadon was wrong  
You can lose something, everything, in here





# Conversations with God X

*Care to tell me why you were  
screaming in your cell  
the other day, Amal?  
Cheryl-Ann Buford asks*

Being in her office  
is like going to see the  
principal, the guidance counselor  
the social worker, the teacher  
all at once

*Keep thinking this is a game  
and you'll be doubling your  
sentence  
Before you know it, you'll  
spend half your  
life in the system  
I know your type, Amal  
You think the world owes you  
something  
You think you're innocent  
and you don't deserve to be  
here  
But guess what?  
You're here now  
and you're not going  
anywhere*

*anytime soon, so do what  
you need to do—*

*She says those last words  
like she's my mother  
She's not She's not*

*I let her hear the sound of her own  
voice echo for a second before I ask  
What happened to Kadon?*

*Worry about yourself  
she says  
as she types on her  
keyboard  
and fills out another form  
like it's her actual job—  
writing report cards for us*

*Who brought that man here—  
Dr. Bennu?  
I ask  
He made us write our mistakes down  
and then we had to read  
somebody else's mistake  
That meant something, right?  
We were doing something  
that made us think differently—  
at least I know I did*

*But you're over here  
being the judge and jury  
when that's not even your job—*

*Excuse me?  
Who do you think you're  
talking to?*

*What are you gonna tell*

*Kadon's mother and father  
about what happened to him?*

She folds her hands across  
her desk and leans in

But before she can say anything  
I get up to leave

## Butterflies II

I need to  
make it to  
Tuesday  
for poetry

so I turn  
myself into  
a wall

and become  
brick  
metal  
concrete  
and sharp  
corners

Here walls don't break  
Someone someone  
returned Zenobia's second letter  
and my notebook  
and one pencil  
I open to a blank page  
and for the first time  
I don't know what words  
to write

I don't know what lines  
to bend into curves and shapes

so I start with her name

Zenobia Angel Garrett

and even as the lights go out

I draw myself a girlfriend

I start with what I remember the most

Zenobia's eyes

then her long blue braids

then

her angel wings

and I wish I wish

she would come alive from off my page

just like my father did

from off the wall

And she does

There's a breeze in the room

all of a sudden

It's an angel's wings

come to wrap around me like warm arms

Her eyes light up the darkness

and we hold hands

Then I hug her and pull her close, close

and it's just me and my angel girlfriend

made of soft charcoal lines

curved and rounded

at just

the right

places

## Art School III

We don't write  
during Imani's poetry class

I missed the last few days  
when they had an open mic

I was stuck in the mess hall  
for what I did to the wall

and I notice that a bunch of guys  
I hadn't seen before are in here

Poetry class is voluntary

but only the black and brown kids  
were here    And now  
we're like colorful markers

bleeding over the lines

Still, everybody sits on their side of the dayroom  
but Imani keeps going as if she doesn't see  
the white boys sneering at her  
She hands out loose-leaf and pencils  
and this is when—  
while we're waiting for directions  
while we're waiting for her to tell us  
      where the pencil point should land

where the first word should leave its mark  
how our truth should look on the page  
how our memories should sound off the page—  
that the words want to pour out of me so bad so bad  
that I start to write





*Dear Zenobia,*

*I wanted to shoot my shot so many times, but I didn't want to look stupid. I didn't want you to diss me. I thought you thought I was ugly. I know this will sound corny, but whoever named you Angel—*

*Amal—  
would you like to share your writing?  
Imani asks*

I'm caught off guard  
I read the words I just  
wrote over to myself—

*I don't want to force you  
but  
I know you like to share  
your rhymes  
And I want all of you to know  
that there's no failing in art  
There is no wrong art  
There is no bad art  
Just art  
Just your truth—  
she says*

I pause for a second  
thinking of Ms. Rinaldi  
who failed me  
over and over again  
*No failing in art, huh?* I say  
A'ight then  
I lick my lips, swallow hard  
and  
read the words that were  
supposed to be  
for Zenobia's eyes only  
to these guys out loud

and they laugh  
and they say

*You sound too desperate—  
Tell her to send some nudes—  
Can you write me a letter to send to my girl?*

and they laugh  
and I laugh—

Imani laughs, too

# Brotherhood VI

And maybe  
there are small  
cracks in our walls  
and we start to see  
a sliver of light  
shine through  
  
in each other

*Some of you wrote down your mistakes  
when Dr. Bennu was here*

*Imani says*

*Now, let's write down our misgivings  
our gut feelings, our deep intuitions  
Those whispers you hear in*

*the back of your mind  
but ignore  
before your mistakes happen—  
Misgivings*

*My paper stays blank  
Misgivings don't matter, I say*

*Well, did you have any? she asks  
Forewarnings, premonitions?  
A moral compass trying  
to point you in the right direction?*

*Yeah—that's why they don't  
matter  
I'm still here*

*But, still  
some of us write them down  
put them into the trash  
where we dig them back up  
and read each other's words  
out loud  
as if they're our own*

*My mother told me to come right home—*

*My next-door neighbor said to stay away  
from those guys—*

*My older brother told me not to fuck with them*

*niggas—*

*I stopped to get one more  
thing from the store—*

*Something wasn't right about how they were looking at us—*

*I was supposed to pick my little sister up  
from school—*

*I was supposed to be somewhere else, with someone  
else, doing something else—*

*I wanted to be here, so I followed my gut  
I didn't misgive nothing—*

Imani grabs a chair and sits close to us  
She folds her hands over her lap  
and this is the first time I'm seeing her  
really seeing her

Her face holds secrets  
Her eyes could be both young and old  
and she's dead serious right now

*I learned so much from you  
all, she says*

and I sit up in my seat because  
the way she says this—

*Brothers, this is my last day  
here, but  
I'm just getting started—  
I'm so inspired to go out there  
and do the work  
of talking to those young  
brothers and sisters out*

*there—  
of tearing down this system  
from the top—  
So what should I tell them?  
How should I talk to your  
brothers and sisters  
so we can end this cycle?  
What should I say to  
policy makers, heads of  
corporations  
anybody who's making a  
dime off you being here?*

*What do you mean? I ask  
What do you want us to do?*

*Give me something to take  
back out there—*

*But we need you in here  
I say*

*And they need me out there  
too, she says*

*And it hits me like  
a punch to my gut*

## Art School IV

*You said you wanted to see my poetry  
well here it is—*

*You said you would give me feedback  
tell me if my words matter in here—*

*You said that we are each other's  
mistakes and misgivings—*

*Tell me why when you leave  
it's like you were never here—*

*Tell me why they bring you in here  
and take you away so fast—*

The other guys are gone  
and Imani asked the officer  
who was supposed to take me  
back to my cell  
if I could help her pack

She only has a few spare notebooks  
and some markers

She sees me eyeing them

*I know how you feel, Amal—  
I love this work, trust*



*But a five-hour bus ride from  
the city  
is hard for me  
And I don't even know if I'm  
making a difference  
But the fact that you're here  
asking all these questions  
I know that  
I mattered to you—*

There's nothing more she can  
say to me now  
so I start to leave

*Wait, she says  
I really don't want you  
getting me  
in trouble again for leaving  
markers out  
So come with me to Ms.  
Buford's office  
I got something I want you  
to see*

Cheryl-Ann Buford isn't in her office  
but Imani has the keys

She opens up the door and pulls  
out a taped-up box that was sitting by her desk

She picks it up but I rush to help her

*We're taking this to the  
Visiting Room  
she says*

Tattoo appears in the doorway  
and my stomach sinks

He keeps his eyes on me without helping

I peep Imani glancing at him  
Then she rolls her eyes  
as if she knows  
Maybe she's seen it  
that tattoo

We stand in front of that mural—  
the one with the chipping paint  
and happy, singing birds

The one that's supposed to remind us  
that we are juveniles  
kids  
children  
even though everything else  
lets us know that they think we are fully grown  
that we've already become everything we're  
supposed to be



Imani opens the box  
and in it are cans of paint  
six colors in all  
with paintbrushes in different sizes

*I had put in an order for  
these supplies  
months ago, but they're just  
getting here  
now that I'm leaving  
That's why I hate this  
bureaucratic bullshit*

*Y'all were supposed to  
repaint that mural  
It was supposed to be a  
group project  
I had to jump through all  
kinds of hoops  
to get this approved  
I guess this was  
their way of saying no  
without saying no  
to my face Feel me?  
Listen, Amal  
I saw what you drew on  
your wall  
and what it meant to you  
I don't want that talent  
that gift  
to go to waste in here  
I want you to paint over that  
ugly-ass mural  
Paint your truth, Amal—  
And get those guys to  
help you*

This feels like  
    like growing wings  
    like flying

I look at Imani  
She looks at me waiting  
for an answer  
and  
there's nothing left to do  
but to drop down next to that box  
and break out of myself  
    open the doors to myself  
    wide open  
    and fly and fly  
    and paint

and I know I know  
that this time  
my punches will land on a wall  
my punches will be paintbrushes

The largest canvas  
Ms. Rinaldi  
ever let me paint on  
was a six by nine—

And even then—  
    when I'd studied  
    the Sistine Chapel  
    and all of Michelangelo's paintings  
    and dreamed of having my work  
    in some fancy place  
    like the Louvre in Paris  
    and dreamed of painting  
    the ceiling of a giant mosque  
    and memorized all the works  
    of Picasso and Salvador Dalí  
    Rembrandt and Van Gogh

Monet, da Vinci, and Matisse—  
my art was wrong, according to her

Even though my subjects were soft and tender  
she didn't think it was my truth

*Be honest with yourself*, she said

I was  
I was being honest  
I was telling the truth

No one had ever given me  
a whole wall for a canvas  
to tell my truth

# American Graffiti

So instead of following the program  
I get Kadon  
Amir, Smoke, and Rah  
to help me sketch out the mural

Imani made sure to get approval  
from Cheryl-Ann Buford  
It's the least she could do  
since the supplies arrived so late

Stanford  
will be the officer  
in charge

Still  
the next morning  
I start prepping the wall  
while the Four Corners  
are in the mess hall

No one is here to watch me  
for now  
and in this moment

I am free

I should've been painting that night

or sketching or thinking or reading

but my home was starting to feel like a box  
My room was starting to feel like a box

The home that I've known all my life  
was squeezing in around me

forcing me to be small, small  
when all I was doing was growing tall

Growing too wide for all the boxes around me  
Umi couldn't contain me anymore

I wanted to get the fuck out  
push back walls

so that I could

punch the air  
make an opening  
wide and tall enough  
for me to step in  
and fly  
and soar

I draw myself  
I draw Kadon  
I draw Imani  
I draw Dr. Bennu  
I draw Amir, Smoke, and Rah  
I draw wings

All of us with wings

we fly we fly we fly

Above all the chaos  
below

is a remix of my  
favorite painting

*Guernica*, by Pablo Picasso

with its distorted faces and bodies

in war            in war            in war

But like dust

we rise

we rise

we rise



# Brotherhood VII

Kadon, Amir, Smoke, and Rah  
help me paint

We crack jokes  
and clown each other  
and the wings I drew  
them are actually there  
on their backs

We paint  
and we fly

Even Stanford  
who's standing guard  
    clowns us  
talking about  
    *Y'all can't even stay in the lines  
    on a fucking drawing  
    No wonder y'all can't even walk  
    in a straight line*

The other guys clown us  
for not being in class  
talking about  
    *Y'all niggas get to do  
    a fucking art project?*

But still

they leave us alone

Even when we have  
to leave the mural unfinished  
for the next day  
they leave it alone

It takes us a whole week  
to finish

but I'm left alone  
to add some final touches  
here and there  
and I stand back  
to look at my work

our work—



## Young Basquiat

At some point  
I stopped caring about Ms. Rinaldi's  
Advanced Placement Art History class

But Umi got on me for  
cutting class

*Amal, you love art  
You know this stuff  
Why are you being so  
so defeatist?*

Umi didn't know  
that I had cut school  
to visit the art museum downtown  
I had cut school  
to sit in the park  
on a bench with my sketch pad

drawing trees and leaves  
and sky and birds

just to get my skills up  
just to understand the rules  
of line and texture  
and shading

and  
black and white

Just so I can break those rules

And I didn't need Ms. Rinaldi  
to tell me that I wasn't advanced  
or I didn't have history

There, outside of my arts high school  
the internet was my teacher  
and  
I discovered  
Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden  
Faith Ringgold and Kerry James Marshall  
Alma Thomas and Norman Lewis

So when  
the mural is  
finally done  
and it's Visitors Day  
and the guys start  
coming to the dayroom



and the families  
start lining up to take  
pictures in front of it

Kadon says  
with the widest smile  
I've seen on him  
in weeks

*That's fire, son!*  
*Young Basquiat, for real!*

The heavy thing in my throat  
falls out onto the floor and disappears

The heavy thing on my chest  
rises out of my body and disappears

I get applause when the guys see it  
I get pats on the back, daps, handshakes  
I get respect because I did something  
that I wanted to do even while trapped

in this box

# The Persistence of Memory II

It's my turn  
to see Umi  
on Visitors Day

The walls here  
are pushed back farther  
The lights here  
shine brighter

Me and some of the others guys  
I don't know  
start cracking jokes  
and we're laughing more

I'm laughing more

Umi gets to see what I've done  
and we'll take a picture

The families of the other  
inmates will take pictures  
in front of my masterpiece, too

but

my name isn't called  
to go into the Visiting Room

Umi can't be late  
She's never been late  
or else  
she won't get to see me

She won't get to see my wall  
and  
I'm called into the room  
with the pay phones instead  
and  
it's not like Umi to call  
when she's supposed to be here  
    She's supposed to be here

and

*He's out of the coma, Amal*  
Umi says on the other line  
without explaining why she isn't here  
*Jeremy Mathis is awake—*

*Jeremy Mathis is awake?*  
I repeat  
just to make sure that I  
    heard her right  
*Did he start talking?*  
*Did he remember what*  
    *happened?*

*Amal—*  
*I have to be here in case*  
*he starts talking*  
*I have to make sure that*  
*they record the truth*  
*If his words are the key*  
*that will unlock the door*  
*to your freedom*

*Amal—*



I hang up the phone  
and freeze where I'm standing  
like a statue  
Time stands still  
and in this moment  
only Jeremy Mathis's words  
will turn me from stone  
to human

*Let's go, Shahid!*  
an officer's words  
force me to move

I join the line

walking back to our cells

I look into the Visiting Room  
to get a glance at my mural  
and  
that's when I see him

Tattoo

standing there  
with his arms crossed  
head tilted back  
checking out  
my mural



# Meditation II

A letter on my desk  
in my cell  
lets me know that  
I am human  
lets me know that

I feel I feel I feel

*Dear Amal,*

*Please don't laugh at my drawing of you. I didn't go online to find a picture or nothing. I drew you from memory, from how I saw you at school. You. The real you.*

*Zenobia*

# Brotherhood VIII

In the mess hall  
Kadon comes to sit next to me

The bandages on his face are off  
The swelling has gone down

But there's something else written on his face  
and I stare at him trying to read his eyes

He's shaking mad

*Who?* I ask

*It's gone, he whispers*  
*The whole thing is gone*

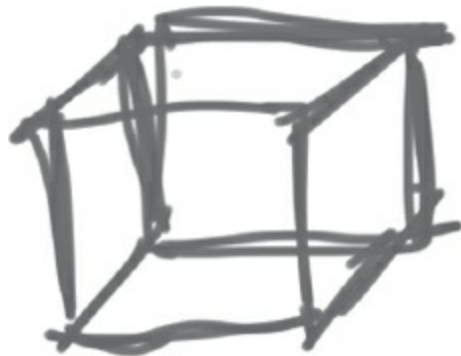
# American Graffiti II

My mural  
with its sharp angles and straight lines  
turned into  
black curved and rounded lines  
turned into  
black curved and rounded  
wings and faces

is painted over

in white  
in white  
in white

~~MURAL~~





## Young Basquiat II

So I make myself a world  
I make myself a border  
I make myself a people

and become war  
and become hate  
and become oppression  
and become a box  
and become a wall

and—

Kadon comes over to me  
wraps his arms around me  
in a bear hug  
*Calm down, Young Basquiat*  
*Calm the fuck down—*  
*There are more walls here*  
*We got nothing but fucking walls here—*

I b r e a k



They said my mural  
was against the facility's guidelines

No gang colors, signs, or symbols

and all I could do  
was hold my head  
in my hands  
and whisper under my breath

*Fuck you!*

*What the fuck were we  
supposed to do with that paint then?  
Draw more cartoons?  
More smiling birds and a winking sun?  
Paint more lies?*



# Father Figure

Umi's face was never  
a mirror for me

If she cried when she saw me  
during Visitors Day

I knew that her tears  
told me nothing about how

messed up my face is  
how skinny I got

how dirty or depressed or angry I look

But it's Uncle Rashon's eyes  
that hold a mirror up to me  
when he finally visits  
and I finally walk up to him  
that almost break me  
into smaller pieces

Right there in front of my uncle  
the man who tried to take my father's place  
I become dust and almost get blown away  
only to land right back where I am  
because  
this is a box

*I'm not here to feel sorry for you, Amal—*  
Uncle Rashon says

He's wearing a kufi and dashiki  
as if my being here has woken him up  
to the injustices in the world

*I don't want you to feel sorry  
for me  
I say*

*That's not what I mean, Amal—  
I mean, your mother will do that for you  
and your grandmother and Dionne  
But when you see me walk up in here  
after driving for five hours  
know that I had a lot to think about—*

He reaches into his bag and pulls out  
a stack of books  
*They can't lock down your mind, Amal—  
only if you let them  
Your mind is free  
Your thoughts are free  
Your creativity is free—*

Behind him is the white wall  
where my mural used to be  
I didn't even take a picture of it

*I know, I say  
But, why are you  
showing your face now?  
You had all this time  
to bring me books*

*If I didn't take all that time, Amal  
I would've I would've—*

he swallows hard as if  
there's a stone in his throat, too

Then I just say  
*Thanks for coming, Unc*

The first book in his stack  
is called  
*The Mis-Education  
of the Negro*  
and it's by Carter G. Woodson

The next books are by  
James Baldwin  
Richard Wright  
Toni Morrison  
Octavia Butler  
Ibram X. Kendi  
Michelle Alexander  
and Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Next time I come*  
*we'll discuss what you've read—*  
he says before leaving

and it's the first time Uncle Rashon  
has ever hugged me

## Brotherhood IX

Kadon is with me in the library  
and he grabs  
a James Baldwin book from my pile

Me and Kadon—  
who is quiet, pensive, drained—  
start with one book  
    one page  
    one word

as if each idea is a link on a chain  
that we are breaking  
    one by one  
    and two by two

I slide a blank paper and a pencil to Kadon  
    He reads, then he draws  
    straight lines at first   He makes himself a grid

I take a paper and copy entire paragraphs from the books  
so that piece of truth can carve its way into my soul  
one word at a time  
I read, then I draw  
curved lines at first  
rounding out the dark, sharp corners  
bending the straight lines  
    until I make myself a circle and  
    another and another

and like from a round belly  
I push myself out  
eyes bright  
barely crying

I am born again  
into this old old soul



# Wallflower III

It's Tattoo  
who comes to my cell  
to tell me to get out

*Shahid! You got a phone call*  
*Let's go!*  
he shouts purposely into my ear  
as I walk past him and out of my cell

I can't even look at his face  
But he is like the walls here  
    like the metal and bars  
He and everything he stands for  
is part of The System—

## Hope IV

Umi says  
on the other side  
of that phone line

*Amal—  
I fired Mr. Richter  
He did the best he could  
But I don't think his best  
was good enough for you for us  
I decided it was time*

*for a new attorney  
Someone who gets it  
who gets us, you know?*

*Her name is  
Tarana Hudson*

I wasn't performing Salat  
like Umi told me to  
I wasn't praying five times a day  
to ask Allah to show me a way  
But this this  
this is a wall crumbling down  
*Why? I ask her*

*Amal, I'm in her office now  
and I'll let her tell you*

*Mr. Shahid*  
Tarana Hudson  
says on the other side  
of that phone line

*I've been following your case  
since the very beginning and  
I've been getting to know you  
Amal  
through your mother  
I know you're a good kid  
and it's an honor  
to work with you and  
your family  
Amal, I want you to  
know that*

*Jeremy Mathis  
is ready to talk—*



## Butterflies III

Kadon is sitting  
across from me  
in the dayroom

Amir, Smoke, and Rah  
are there, too—  
Corners

Snacks are thrown  
all over the tables  
but I don't care  
because  
I miss Umi's  
lamb and rice

No one has come  
to replace Imani  
and her poetry workshops

No one has come  
to inspire us  
like Dr. Bennu

But someone put  
construction paper  
and crayons on the tables

like this is kindergarten

The Four Corners  
start playing cards

and I'm a fifth wheel  
Not even a corner in a box  
Just me

Amal

taking up space in the  
middle of nowhere

Hope  
taking up space in the  
middle of nowhere  
The crayons are even more broken  
as if someone knew  
that I'm the only one  
in here  
who uses them like that

I try to find a whole one  
enough to hold  
between my long fingers

I see Stanford looking  
at me from across the room

I keep drawing  
even as the crayon  
crumbles between my fingers





## Young Basquiat III

We're walking back  
from the mess hall  
    straight line  
    hands behind our backs  
when I see Stanford

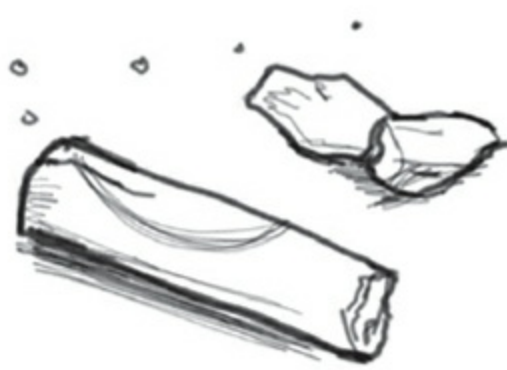
coming out of my cell  
I pause and he sees me  
seeing him

He unlocks my door  
and waits for me  
to get in

There, on my desk  
is more paper  
and a small watercolor set

like the ones  
they give to kids

He nods without  
looking at me and  
closes the door



# Hope V

Kadon is the first one to start sitting with me

Then Smoke and Rah started coming, too  
I'm not a teacher, but they watch me mix colors

and turn shapes into people, spaces, and ideas  
And I ask them  
*Y'all ever heard of the butterfly effect?*

They keep cracking jokes  
and talking shit  
Clowning me about  
my little paint set

And I remember myself  
before the dream  
before the colors and shapes  
before the old paintings  
    by white artists  
before the art history

when it was just me  
in our apartment  
on the floor

while the TV was on  
Umi in the kitchen  
making lamb and rice

Construction paper everywhere  
Broken crayons everywhere  
Coloring books everywhere

And me, small enough to fit  
in the space between  
the couch and coffee table

I colored outside the lines  
I colored outside the boxes  
like freedom

So I take a sheet  
of white construction paper  
and the watercolor set  
and make me a box  
make me some blurred lines

curved and smudged  
smooth and rounded  
and make me a butterfly





This week  
the district attorney  
the prosecutor  
and my new attorney, Tarana  
will meet with Jeremy Mathis  
who will be giving a statement

and as I tell the Corners  
about how a butterfly can change  
a big thing out there in the world

butterflies are fluttering in my belly

Delicate wings flapping  
so fast  
I can't even breathe right

I cover the page in butterflies  
wondering if these butterflies  
inside of me  
will be the ones to  
change the world

or maybe

Jeremy Mathis's  
truth is the real butterflies  
Whatever his words will be  
they will come fluttering out of him

small things  
that will change  
one big thing in the world

My life  
My whole damn life—

I spread my paintings out across all the tables

and the Corners make sure that no one  
messes with them Four small paintings

Watercolor on paper

Like Picasso's *Guernica*—butterflies with distorted wings  
at war at war at war

like Dalí's *Persistence of Memory*—a watch  
with pretty little wings trapped in its box

like da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*—a black mother  
sitting still hands on her lap with no mouth

I remix all these famous paintings  
with the supplies that I have

and put them into a yellow envelope  
from Ms. Buford's office

I address it to Imani Dawson  
and I write her a note

This is what I want the world  
to know about me  
My art—

***My truth***

## A Note from the Authors

Yusef Salaam was fifteen years old when he followed a few of his friends into Central Park on a warm April evening in 1989. He'd been doing what he'd always done as a teen growing up in New York City. We both remember what us kids used to call just hanging out and fooling around: "Wilin' out." It's not a phrase that's meant to be written. So it's easy to misconstrue. It was easy for the media to misinterpret what was part of our vernacular as "Wilding," and turn it into something sinister in association with the infamous "Central Park jogger" case.

When Yusef first started writing, it was because, like many young brothers, he wanted to be a hip-hop artist. He'd been writing rhymes since he was eleven or twelve years old. The "Central Park Five" case, as it was known, happened during an era in music when message-driven hip-hop songs were popular. *Self Destruction*, KRS-One's *Love's Gonna Get'cha*, and especially Public Enemy were some of the artists and songs that shaped both of us as budding writers and were essentially the soundtrack to our young lives. We gravitated toward Public Enemy, who came out with a flow that sounded less like rap, and more like a truth-telling speech.

So when Yusef and four other teen boys were tried and convicted of a crime they did not commit, he and so many other young people, including myself, were awakened to the injustices of their country and of the world.

The "Central Park jogger" case was my earliest memory of bearing witness to injustice. All throughout my high school and college years, there were more violent acts committed against Black men and boys, including Yusef Hawkins, who at sixteen was fatally shot in a predominantly white neighborhood in Brooklyn; Michael Griffith, who was chased out of a white neighborhood by a group of white teens and as a result, was fatally hit by a car; and the unarmed West African immigrant Amadou Diallo, who was shot

forty-one times by cops just as he was entering his Harlem apartment. All these stories were why I wanted to become a journalist. I was so angry with the world that I had to find a way to speak truth to power.

So when Yusef and I met at Hunter College in 1999, just two years after he'd been released from prison and had not yet been exonerated, and ten years after the fateful night that changed his life forever, I wanted to be one of the few college reporters to investigate the truth about the "Central Park jogger" case, because so many of us believed those five teens were innocent. By sharing this story, I had hoped to expose the ongoing disparities in the criminal justice system and how the media continually portrays an imbalanced view of Black children.

When Yusef was convicted, it was the start of him realizing that he needed to speak his truth. He realized that this art form he'd been honing since childhood, hip-hop, was going to allow him to get his message across at this most critical point in his life.

While waiting for his sentence, Yusef was told that he should throw himself at the mercy of the court; that he should plead for the least amount of time possible. But he had been reading about Malcolm X and others who were in the struggle. He had been inspired by hip-hop artists who were using their platforms to spread powerful messages about our experiences, and he started writing instead. So when his sentence was handed down and Yusef was given the stage to speak his truth, he read a poem entitled, "I Stand Accused."

While *Punching the Air* is not Yusef's story, Amal's character is inspired by him as an artist and as an incarcerated teen who had the support of his family, read lots of books, and made art to keep his mind free. This book is infused with some of the poetry Yusef wrote while he was incarcerated. When we started to discuss what kind of story we wanted to tell, we started with a name—Amal, which means "hope" in Arabic. It was important that whatever this teen boy was going through, he should always have hope and we should write a story that instills hope for the reader. Yusef and I wanted people to know that when you find yourself in dark places, there's always a light somewhere in that darkness, and even if that light is inside of you, you can illuminate your own darkness by shedding that light on the world.

After meeting Yusef in college, we were reunited while I was touring for my debut novel, *American Street*. Yusef expressed his interest in speaking to more teens because his tragedy happened to him as a teen boy. He'd been

mostly addressing law students and social justice and community organizations. A few days later, I approached him with the idea of telling his story in the form of a young adult book. We knew that young people needed to hear this story.

At the center of Amal's story is the cycle of racial violence that continues to plague this country. But this is not just a story about a crime or race. *Punching the Air* is about the power of art, faith, and transcendence in the most debilitating circumstances. It's our hope that all readers will experience the journey of a boy who finds himself in a heated moment where one wrong move threatens his future, and how he uses his art to express his truth, the truth.

—Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam

# Acknowledgments

I am still amazed by how this book came together. I never set out to write about and from the perspective of an incarcerated teen. However, everything in the universe seemed to have made this such a smooth and serendipitous journey, and there are so many people to thank. First, I am beyond grateful to Yusef Salaam who has become like a brother and who trusted me from day one—from our chance meeting at Hunter College to our many conversations about how to share our truth with the world. It has been a tremendous honor to work with you on this book. You are one of the most compassionate, gracious, and insightful people I know. I am so grateful to our professor, Dr. Marimba Ani, who invited Yusef to join her class that day. The most magical moment when Yusef and I reunited was realizing that we both retained much of what we learned from Mama Marimba. This was a testament that we truly share a similar worldview. Shout-out to my Hunter crew, Daughters of Afrika, who are still my closest and dearest friends. My husband, Joseph, artist extraordinaire, another inspiration for this book. Thank you for your unwavering support and love.

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Beyond grateful to our first readers, attorney Kenneth Montgomery, and award-winning playwright and prison reform activist Liza Jessie Peterson. Thank you for the work you do with our young people and for providing essential feedback for this book.

A huge heartfelt thanks to Jacqueline Woodson, Jason Reynolds, and Ibram X. Kendi. Your love for us is palpable, and I am because we are.

This book, all my books, my heart, and my love goes out to Black children all over the world whose genius is often stifled, muted, and blotted out before it can ever reach the stars. And to Black boys—my first crushes, my first dates, my homies, my little brothers, my son, my students—I prayed and continue to pray for your safety and I wish for your joy, your bliss. My freedom is your freedom is my freedom. We are links on a chain, bound to each other.

To the ancestors of the Middle Passage, whose shoulders we all stand on—each time we honor you, we stand a little bit taller.

—Ibi Zoboi

I don't believe in coincidences. The blessing of being able to run into someone from my past who knew me as a fearful, shy young man to the person that I am now, lets me know that everything happens on purpose and for a purpose. This collaboration was in the works before Ibi and I realized it was something we were going to do. We have a shared connection in Dr. Marimba Ani's class, where it was my introduction to African consciousness. It was a necessary addition to my experience, and then fast-forward to the present, someone from that class is a published author, and with her skills and talents, is able to help me tell my truth. I am so grateful for Ibi and thank you, God, for allowing our paths to cross in such a beautiful way.

To my umi, Sharonne Salaam, thank you for standing by me and raising me up in a world where there is a disdain for blackness and for providing me with the wherewithal to understand my place in it; for your tireless tenacity in boldly making sure the world never forgot "Yusef is Innocent"; and for being my rock and compass in times of darkness and light. Words cannot describe the depths of my love for you. We are taught that paradise lies at the feet of our mothers and I am thankful to have a mother that loves me and cares for me the way that you do.

A very special thanks and appreciation goes out to my wife, Sanovia, and our blended family (in order): Nahtique, Dimani, Rain, Winter, Aaliyah, Poetry, Onaya, Ameerah, Assata, and baby Yusef Amir. Thank you for being patient with me and for being my sounding board to this work. To my sister, Aisha, for listening to much of my early work and encouraging me to continue on, and to my brother, Shareef, for his constant guidance and encouragement to dream bigger and plan better.

To the sacred brotherhood that became known as the Exonerated Five—Korey, Raymond, Antron, Kevin—thank you for being my companions on our collective journey. Having someone who knows exactly what you've gone through makes the road a little bit smoother. Thank you to Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and Dave McMahon, and the *Central Park Five* documentary for giving us our voices back. To Ava Duvernay for her vision with *When They See Us*, thank you for giving us a bullhorn and a global platform to be able to speak truth to power about the injustices we faced.

To my team Frank Harris and Travis Linton, thank you for providing amazing guidance and direction in my professional life, and my team at CAA for being in my corner every step of the way.

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HarperCollins, I am so grateful for this opportunity to tell my truth with Ibi, and thank you for believing in me and our story.

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What we are doing is sacred work. This is about breaking generational curses and adding to the greater good in hearts and minds. Thank you to the ancestors for passing down to us the legacy of resilience and grace. I am grateful for eyes that can see, a mouth that can speak, ears that can hear, and a heart full of faith.

—Dr. Yusef Salaam

## About the Authors



PHOTO BY JOSEPH ZOBOI

**IBI ZOBOI**'s novel *American Street* was a National Book Award finalist and a *New York Times* Notable Book. She is also the author of *Pride and My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich*, a *New York Times* bestseller. She is the editor of the anthology *Black Enough*. Born in Haiti and raised in New York City, she now lives in New Jersey with her husband and their three children. You can find her online at [www.ibizoboi.net](http://www.ibizoboi.net).



**PHOTO BY STACI NURSE (STACI MARIE STUDIO)**

**DR. YUSEF SALAAM** was just fifteen years old when his life was upended after being wrongly convicted with four other boys in the “Central Park jogger” case. In 2002, after the young men spent years of their lives behind bars, their sentences were overturned. They are now known as the Exonerated Five. Their story has been documented in the award-winning film *The Central Park Five* by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon and in Ava DuVernay’s highly acclaimed series *When They See Us*, one of Netflix’s most-watched original series of all time. Yusef is now a poet, activist, and inspirational speaker. He is the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from President Barack Obama, among other honors. You can find him online at [www.yusefspeaks.com](http://www.yusefspeaks.com).

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