**Notes of Two of Rochester’s Native Sons**

**The New York State Literary Center’s Community Engagement Seminar**

**Monroe Correctional Facility**

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is commonplace.

But this does not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one’s own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one’s strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart and it has now been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair. This intimation made my heart heavy and, now that my father was irrecoverable, I wished that he had been inside me so that I could have searched his face for the answers which only the future would give me now.

James Baldwin. “Notes of a Native Son.” *The Price of The Ticket*. New York: St. Martin’s / Marek, 1985.

**NOTES OF A NATIVE SON**

**By Ronald Warnick**

***A Testament: My Journey***

**“Through me tell the story”**

**Homer, *The Odyssey*, Translated by Robert Fitzgerald**

**I am reflecting. Many things come into my mind on how history sheds light on today’s Black pain, and it reflects my life.**

**I, too,**

**was swallowed whole**

**by**

**the streets**

**and**

**this nightmare repeats.**

**Black youth continue to be swallowed by the streets. Every night on the Rochester news mothers weep.**

**They say**

**Black Lives Matter,**

**but**

**the price is cheap.**

**On the news every night throughout the world,**

**Black lives are taken in the streets.**

**Sometimes I am invisible when I am in plain view.**

**In my mind**

**no one, not even me, can see inside.**

**Sometimes**

**I cry right before your eyes**

**and you can’t see a tear trickle down my eyes.**

**My tears are all inside,**

**transparent to the physical eye.**

**I’ve become a master of how to hide,**

**a broken man, depressed, ready to die.**

**Look right at me**

**you can’t see I died right before your very eyes.**

**You never took a deep look into my eyes.**

**Sometimes**

**it’s my pride.**

**A man is not supposed to cry.**

**It’s a sign of weakness.**

**Hell no!**

**They are not going to see me cry!**

**I’ll hide my shame and pride from those who see only my outside**

**with drugs and alcohol.**

**I will never let you see me cry.**

**Only when I dig deep inside**

**is it obvious to me I cannot hide**

**from myself.**

**Black history, where does it begin?**

**Is it yours, is it mine,**

**was it ever mine?**

**Did we ever exist in the passage of time**

**or do we exist only on the 6 o’clock news**

**connected to crime?**

**400 years of blood, sweat, and tears,**

**a pimp.**

**a hoe,**

**a dopeman selling dreams,**

**the crack head,**

**the dope fiend with a needle in an arm**

**draining**

**draining all of us, draining our dreams.**

**In His-Story, were we ever?**

**I dig it.**

**I see where we were right there**

**killing each other in the streets**

**or getting gunned down by the police.**

**Don’t believe all that you see**

**because that is all we will ever be**

**in His-Story.**

**Pharaohs, kings, queens,**

**I guess we just dropped in this country in 1619.**

**It could have been you or me.**

**Is His-Story what, the sickness of superiority,**

**same as the media pictures of you killing me.**

**Was it colonialism?**

**Was it capitalism?**

**Put down the blunts.**

**Put down the dope.**

**Put down the Hennessy.**

**Black history, where does it begin?**

**It begins with our children knowing what Black history is.**

**I am up early in the morning with my fiancé. We are sharing our thoughts and dreams, our realities and our responsibilities. She is having coffee, and I am having tea before she is off to work.**

**Lights on!**

**I wake up to a familiar reality as it dawns on me here, once again, another man holds the key.**

**No!**

**What happened, how could it be, jail, the last place I want to be. I am tired of this sick and crazy reality.**

**Where I am is**

**in**

**the home of broken dreams**

**and thoughts**

**of what could be**

**or**

**what could have been.**

**I am surrounded by broken women and men. You want to know where I am mentally? Where I am has beaten the Hell out of me. I am doing the same things, expecting a different reality. I guess I really do need recovery because this is what’s called insanity. If I keep it up right here is where I will always be. It’s a damn shame. I am a victim of my own insanity. I am ashamed of the example I must have been. My two sons locked within as men, three generations, myself, their grandfather, now them. And this journey, God willing, will make better men.**

**Here I am today.**

**I**

**can’t**

**do**

**this**

**again.**

**I shed tears thinking how my children grew up visiting me in the pen. This insanity can never happen again. My grandchildren deserve a better example of a man.**

**Stop!**

**I have brought pain to my fiancé, the mother of my children, to family and friends.**

**This**

**insanity**

**must**

**end**

**where I’m at, where I’m going, where I’ve been.**

**If only I could have seen the journey ahead of me when I was a child, the pain of my childhood imprisonment, addiction, the pain that made me hide what was inside and cry with tears no one could see.**

**I choose a journey that brought me to highs and lows. I am a living testament to going down the road I choose. I did not know it would turn my soul cold. Why did I choose this road? I give you my testimony served as it should be bold and cold, this road where nickels, dimes, and twenties were sold.**

**My journey is my testament of where I have been and where I am at now.**

**I believe in change,**

**the type of change that will not only change the world**

**but will change my community.**

**I believe for the world to change**

**it must start in my community.**

**Since my childhood my community has been plagued by drugs, crime, poverty, minority incarceration in masses, and broken homes and broken families.**

* *In Rochester, 16.2 percent of people live in extreme poverty, compared to 15.1 percent in Buffalo.*
* *The city's overall poverty rate rose from 2011 to 2013, from 31 percent to 33 percent.*
* *Among the cities that anchor the top 75 major metropolitan areas in the nation, Rochester ranks fifth poorest.*
* *Rochester ranks second only to Hartford, Connecticut, among similarly-sized cities for its poverty rate among families headed by women, or 36.5 percent.*
* *Poverty in Rochester is high for all racial and ethnic groups, but more prevalent among African-Americans, at 40 percent, and Hispanics, at 44 percent, when compared to whites, at 23 percent.*
* David Riley. “Rochester Tops Extreme Poverty List.” *Democrat and Chronicle*, January 9, 2015.

I was eleven years old in 1981 and my life was already moving in the wrong direction. Columbia and Jefferson Avenues, the breakfast spot Lopez is on the corner of Hawley Street and Jefferson Avenue. Next door was Jefferson Manor, a shabby, dingy blue apartment complex, aka “the shooting gallery.” I come here, go next door, and up the stairs.

Inside, as soon as I walk in, the hallway is covered with used syringe needles, burnt cotton, and beverage tops. You got works! Spikes is a name used by the junkies for needles. “Yes, three dollars, two for five,” was my response as I walked out of the building watching junkies lean over with needles still in their arms.

I remember thinking why were they always tired talking to me and nodding. At eleven the big picture never dawned on me. But like all-star athletes, I looked up to and admired the pushers and the hustlers in my hood. Fancy cars and beautiful women and jewelry shined and twinkled in my eyes. At eleven years old I wanted to shine. There were no lawyers or doctors to look up to, no successful people of honest means. My world was hustlers and dope fiends and the street number men. In my world everything was a hustle.

My mother did her best. God bless her soul! There were five of us, four her own. My first cousin’s mother passed so my mom took him and raised him like her own. She tried to raise five children in the jungle all on her own. My father was murdered when I was twelve, and my mom worked swing shifts, A, B, C, which left us a lot of time to get mixed up in the streets.

Growing up the notorious housing projects, FIGHT Square, West Main Street, was called “The Hoe’s Stroll,” street prostitutes, pimps, pushers, and fiends ruled women with violence and addiction. 64 FIGHT Square was my address, a front row seat to the streets.

[*In the 1960s, the FIGHT Square apartment complex was built in response to efforts of a grassroots civil rights organization of the same name that worked for “Freedom-Integration-God-Honor-Today”. More recently, FIGHT Square was replaced by Anthony Square, a showcase of attractive affordable housing that consists of some 45 apartments and 30 single-family houses.*

<http://www.cityofrochester.gov/article.aspx?id=8589943724>]

In 1982 my father was murdered. I can remember feeling like I didn’t want to be a burden on my mom as I watched her struggle to provide for me and my brothers and sister. It was a hopeless effort to keep us out of the streets. It was impossible when the streets were right outside our door.

Before my dad’s death he was a hustler. His brother, my uncle, taught me everything. My dad’s brother, my older cousin, and then me. It was hard for this life to miss me. By the time I was thirteen I graduated to dealing marijuana and cocaine power in the era of freebase. From needles to crack pipes, I watched my world transform from nodding junkies to zombie base heads. At thirteen this was my world. It was hard for me to imagine that any other world existed. In my world I was overshadowed in misery.

*“1.5 Million Missing Black Men” – showed that more than one in every six black men in the 24 to 54 age group has disappeared from civic life, mainly because they died young or are locked away in prison. This means that there are only 893 black men living outside of jail for every 100 black women – in striking contrast to the white population, where men and women are about equal in numbers.*

*This astounding shortfall in black men translates into lower marriage rates, more out of wedlock births, a greater risk of poverty for families and, by extension, less stable communities.*

“Editorial.” *The New York Times*, April 25, 2016.

The little light for me was my poetry.

My poetry

was my way

to make sense

of the world in front of me.

When my dad died, I sort of became the man of the house or I felt the need to be the man of the house. I thought having my own money would ease the burden on my mom. When she punished me, it gave me more time to write my poetry. My mom read my poetry from time to time. She asked me why it was so dark and black. She said, “Baby, there is more to the world than what you see.” I told her there was no more to the world for me. Now I understand why she took us on trips, travelled a lot herself, and always encouraged us to see as much of the world as we could.

Even though I ended up consumed by the streets, I always had the ability to imagine another reality. My poetry was my vision of what that reality could be.

**NOTES OF A NATIVE SON**

*By Herman Brown*

**My favorite toy when I was younger was Legos. I, also, loved blocks. I always wanted both of them for my birthday. Every Christmas I was looking to get them.**

*The LEGO Group was founded in 1932 by Ole Kirk Kristiansen. The company has passed from father to son and is now owned by Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, a grandchild of the founder.*

*It has come a long way over the past almost 80 years - from a small carpenter’s workshop to a modern, global enterprise that is now one of the world’s largest manufacturer of toys.*

*The brick in its present form was launched in 1958. The interlocking principle with its tubes makes it unique, and offers unlimited building possibilities. It's just a matter of getting the imagination going – and letting a wealth of creative ideas emerge through play.*

<http://www.lego.com/en-us/aboutus/lego-group/the_lego_history>

**When I started to do wrong,**

**I let myself fall back from my dreams**

**and let all of my goals**

**run away from me.**

**I am a shy, scared young man, searching to find the inner me. I am trying to look for myself in my childhood and see if there was a different person inside. I am a follower, a pretender, a faker and a lost and angry young man who thinks he knows which way to go but who doesn’t. I am covering myself with everything because I am afraid to take off my mask.**

**I believe**

**I am that mask**

**I wear, and**

**I am so afraid to show my real self.**

**I got so comfortable wearing my mask without taking it off. How can I face the world without that mask? I have worn it for so long. I believe the answer is deep down inside with a young boy against a wall with no way out, with no guides, and despair.**

**Can I dismiss the mask**

**and all of its desires**

**and fight the world in front of me,**

**showing the inner me**

**I try to keep**

**from everyone?**

**The world is a huge place, but I feel caged in everyday. I walk to try to explore the world, but I end up in the same surroundings.**

**I ask myself**

**why I am so lost**

**while I am finding my way around**

**the same place.**

**I ask friends how can I enjoy the world. They shake their heads. They do not understand my question.**

**The world is a huge place, but my mind is stuck in one, plain place. Why can’t I understand the question? The question is clear as day. My mind is not strong enough to explore a world that is so huge.**

***To My Children***

***My thoughts are for you. I think there is an image of me, and you are as confused as I was when I was young. I understand that life is going to be tough for you, and you will fall as well.***

***My son, you are going to be adventurous, outgoing, and also not know which way to go and how to stay on track until you get older and wiser.***

***My daughter, you are mysterious. It is hard for me to be able to know you, but you will have a good life as well as having ups and down.***

***My children, I want you to know life will never be the way you want it to be. You must work hard and always help each other because your mother and I will not be here forever. You must stick together no matter what happens. I will never leave you no matter what. Family comes first. Always look out for each other.***

**To walk away or not to walk away,**

**to leave everything behind,**

**changing my mindset, my body, myself,**

**or put my life on the line**

**repeatedly running into everything face first**

**only hurting myself**

**and the ones I love the most.**

**It is easier to feed myself into trouble.**

**It is less work and less energy,**

**but I am killing myself**

**from all of the different ways I know are wrong,**

**twisting everything like a tornado,**

**running through everything with unanswered questions.**

**I need to walk away**

**to free myself from the chains I have had for so many years.**