i used to love to dream
i used to love to dream is the third in a series of mixtape/essays titled sleepwalking. the title of the series is borrowed from the narrator of ralph ellison’s invisible man, who, in the course of describing his acceptance of his “invisible” identity observes, “you’re constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. or again, you often doubt if you really exist” (4).

the narrator continues, “you wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. it’s when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back” (4).

he later states: “i remember that i am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers. i learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it” (5).

the previous two sleepwalking projects focus on local events following my dissertation album, owning my masters: the rhetorics of rhymes & revolutions, which is a response to & reflections on living in clemson, south carolina as a graduate student in the university’s rhetorics, communication, & information design phd program. i wrote & recorded sleepwalking, volume 1: a mixtape during the transition from doctoral student to assistant professor of hip-hop at the university of virginia in charlottesville, va immediately after graduation. the summer of 2017 – filled with white nationalist protests & local resistance thereto – has been called “the summer of hate.” i wrote & recorded sleepwalking 2 in the spring semester of 2018 & released it at the end of my first year at uva.
despite what might be viewed externally as success. &
that’s really an evasive way to hone in on a feeling akin to
what some people might call “selling out” or “buying in,”
depending on how we might choose to frame it, & i think
those feelings are ... or can be ... separate from the moral,
philosophical, & ethical dimensions undergirding any
internal debate about authenticity or staying true to
oneself or to any city or neighborhood. the loneliness &
alienation you might attribute to being away & trying to
remember relationships to home can make a person feel
they’ve betrayed a trust & therefore deserve those feelings.

i wrote the album to try to more accurately describe that
particular loneliness & alienation that exists in my mind
between where i’m from & where i’m at currently.
I used to love to dream.
when they ask me what i'm trying to preach, i pause.
i tell 'em “i dunno—the difference from a demagogue &
demigod.”

king size, but serving minibars,
but i assume if you consume too many
then they'll hit you plenty hard.

they'll say my whole demeanor's been a fraud,
an intricate façade.

won't offer no rebuttals, this is part
of where my newfound vision starts:
a written art comparable to living hard
avoiding prison bars.

framing pain
[beat by vintage | 82 bpm]
yes, yes.

just another day in a pretty boring life ...
i write, perform like, ignoring hype.
polite like i was born nice.

soar at heights where i don't need to see.
i'm easily the type you peep at night,
& you don't need to squint, the heat from me is bright.

when i breathe on mics it's like i'm heaving, i
won't ever even odds,
i'd rather tweet or blog than be like steven jobs.

i'd rather stay & laugh than leave & sob.

i'd rather break the whole machine
than try to limit me & be a cog.

when they ask me what i'm trying to preach, i pause.
i tell 'em “i dunno—the difference from a demagogue &
demigod.”

king size, but serving minibars,
but i assume if you consume too many
then they'll hit you plenty hard.

they'll say my whole demeanor's been a fraud,
an intricate façade.

won't offer no rebuttals, this is part
of where my newfound vision starts:
a written art comparable to living hard
avoiding prison bars.
collected thoughts, it’s like a mini mart,
& don’t want any part
of trendy, artificial, little pity parties
celebrating how i made it
out of unimaginable trauma.
it’s the drama that they want,
& so i honor
what i’ve come to do & what i’ve come into & what i want to
do.
so what i’ve brung to you has sprung into a kind of
comfortable
existence i’ll call wonderful

if, after i wander through this new terrain,
i’ve found the way to frame the pain as something new.

[applause]

… here, close to the center of the united states, the sign
on the highway reads “decatur, illinois: population 59,305.”
from a distance it looks like any other town of its size. its
people make their living from factories, stores, offices, railroads, & surrounding farms just as in many other american communities. when you meet them on main street they look as familiar as anyone’s neighbors anywhere in the united states. but go out with them & you’ll begin to sense a difference …
ampersand [beat by truth | 83 bpm]

yes, yes.

[I] where i'm from, the celebrations are devastating.

change gon’ come, but it feels like forever waiting for that dime & nickel to make a dollar a lot of it never makes sense. being easy to b&e, hope a king never leaves prints.

invented a different life where i take what i see, put it on a line, then make it rhyme. time never makes it easier. leave it & let it go. but it’s there when i close my eyes, even more than it was before, so i lie.

i be awake on most nights, work in the mornings,

rehearsing purpose; convert it to verses, merciless warnings. it hurts, & i feel i’m torn, even worse when it’s in a song. & the difference between the then & the now is it feels so wrong that i’m here.

yet, here i am—narrator, illustrator, pro & antagonist you’ll see a difference later if you wait to hear me out.

if the mantra’s “get the paper,” & your dogs be playing fetch, but catchers call that misbehavior, the paradox is apparent. i

be wondering the meaning.

meeting me through metaphor i be humble when i see him
still never smile for cameras,
try to keep the hunger of an amateur,
ampersand
ample ammunition, handle business,
then get little, plan, plot &
strategize,
& look out for watching eyes,
occupy the lane i’m in, & know that even if
i signal
it’ll only change what i see in the
rearview.

[2] where i’m at
i don’t be knowing the difference between my foes & my friends.
i don’t pretend, & i’m cool with not fitting in.
a little more than ten years of sobriety,
plus i try to be healthier.
might as well be aware how they coincide, if it’s better.
i be engaging with people, anxious, abstaining, &,

mumbling my greetings,
staring at my feet like i be nervous.
most evenings
i be staring at a beat & seeing murder.
i was gifted as a child.
granny listened & said it.
told me to never bury my talents.
give it & spread it.

learned from her bible lessons much more than i
give ‘em credit.
so, really my synesthesia is more like a sin
aesthetic.

[hook] i be knowing i be on some shit i shouldn’t.
lord forgive me,
but if i could change a thing i probably
wouldn’t.
i be putting on a mask,
some days i really hate i chose therapy over jameson. the polar opposite of myself. feel like i'm barely him. but he ain't die, & i ain't bury him.

the thing they call success is real elusive. used to boast about “exclusive” shit.

truthfully, i wasn’t used to shit. still ain’t, & still can’t decide if i be bragging cause i’m proud or ashamed. alcohol would chase a doubt when it came.

but now my frame of reference, checking what’s a lesson worth the stress, or if what i used to call hate was just depression with inflections. i externalized, accepted, then projected on competitors.

& actually, i ain’t too sure i’m better, cause i be knowing.

[hook] i be knowing i be on some shit i shouldn’t. lord forgive me, but if i could change a thing i probably wouldn’t.

i be putting on a mask, still never smile for cameras, try to keep the hunger of an amateur, ampersand ample ammunition, handle business, then get little, plan, plot & strategize, & look out for watching eyes, occupy the lane i’m in, & know that even if i signal it’ll only change what i see in the rearview.

in decatur they say, “the family that plays together stays together.” out in the city’s playfields …
... you have whole generations of black folks who are in prison, & their families have been destroyed. then we have young men & young women who are grown folks who have suffered through generations of dysfunction because they were targeted by drug policies ... 

[1] the setting is crack, united states in the 80’s & in the 90’s. 

find me under streetlights, these nights, behind me is a gang of angry lookalikes who look just like my pops & me. my ma was kind of hooked on rolling stones, so who was watching me but me myself & them? 

building with what they called broke.
like battle scars were proof that we deserved them.

[hook] there's no place like home.
not where i be living.

soon as it get hot, we out the kitchen.
because there's a war going on outside. we ain't safe.
behind enemy lines it ain't called friendly fire.

so, when it's hot, we don't call it friendly fire.
you hear shots, but it's never friendly fire.

it's going on outside. nobody's safe
behind enemy lines it ain't called friendly fire.

... from a criminal justice point of view, uh, we're seeing
such a different reaction, um, & it is much more
empathetic, and, we can protect the victims...


you never will win a street fight playing them by rules.
so, question number one is, “where you from?”
but we already there.
& question number two was, “who you knew?”
so, when the news
about the rise on the horizon, & surprising as it may be,
that all those men women & babies
were taken with the tides
if they couldn’t fly,
swim, or stay afloat.

products of our environment. that’s why we say we dope.
& it’s still potent,
fitting every description

of the prescriptions that are gripping,
pillaging their communities with impunity.

& they are eagerly targeted.
what was marketed

& sold to them by us.
by “us” i mean u.s., & lest i be unclear,
objects in the mirror may be nearer than they appear.

if god made sheep to be sheared,
& they were slaughtered,
then the thought of sons & daughters in this crisis
was a conclusion worthy of fighting.

[hook] there’s no place like home.

not where i be living.
nigga, i know you don’t like poetry, but i’m gonna read it to you anyway.

i ain’t never read my poetry for nobody, not even my momma. can’t see a damn thing.

it goes …

soon as it get hot, we out the kitchen.

but there’s a war going on outside. we ain’t safe. behind enemy lines it ain’t called friendly fire.

so, when it’s hot, we don’t call it friendly fire. you hear shots, but it’s never friendly fire.

it’s going on outside. nobody’s safe behind enemy lines. it ain’t called friendly fire.

... these reforms will also support our response to the terrible crisis of opioid & drug addiction. never before has it been like it is now. it is terrible …

[liquid pouring]

... for the dudes who ain’t here. man, i had so much to tell you. i wrote a poem for you.
i know they’re armed with everything from pepper spray to tasers
and, taking that into consideration, anything that would
make me move suddenly or do anything to escalate their use of force to my own final destination in that moment is less likely than what you’ll find to be true.

if they tell you how bad i was before then,
please remain vigilant because none of my past behaviors should justify me leaving an interaction with law enforcement with the ultimate penalty enacted without the due process afforded others in courts of law.

in fact,

just in case [music by vintage]

if i die

in police custody, please ask questions because,

though i sometimes speak out of turn & ask “why?” more often than some folks care to entertain,

i don’t see me leaving an exchange with an officer so depressed & disconcerted that it would make me take me away from you.

if you’re told i resisted, please ask for evidence because you & i know
if law enforcement forces those who
laws enforced impact,
whose backs & torsos act as source code
– hacked –
& more so lack the morals tacked to moral acts,
then go & ask if my blasting or maiming was
more a result of semi-factual blaming
than poor tactical training,
& whoever’s tasked with staffing
& claiming credit for a job well-done
should be person number one to whom this query is posed.

what i’m asking
is for you to ask,
& keep asking,
if those sworn to protect & serve say to you
that, in order to properly execute their duties, it was
necessary to execute me,
& the truth as you know it doesn’t match up with the truth
you know to be,
it’s likely because the truth that’s in between the two is too inconvenient for those who have the power to speak it.

& the way to honor me isn’t to turn the other cheek,
it’s to ask,
again & again,
again & again…
why?

& i’m telling you,
now,
to ask these questions,
then,
because it seems to be happening far too frequently &
the trend is forcing me to err on the side of suspicion,
& my only true defense against what may be inevitable,
unconscionable as it should be to us all,
is to hold whoever’s at fault responsible,
even if who’s responsible is considered the law.

stage fright | beat by vintage | 86 bpm |
fear is not real. [yes, yes] the only place that fear can exist
is in our thoughts [sometimes …] of the future. it is a
product of our imagination [... sometimes, you just—you
just try to get a feeling back.] causing us to fear things that
do not, at present, & may [like now.] not ever, exist.

you are now witnessing
a tamer version of my sickest sins.

there is not a box that i will fit within.

live within the complicated, complex
storm after the calm. it’s

further explanation of my thicker skin.

listening to nonsense.

this is what my charm gets.
but i can only hear it
‘cause i keep it at an arm’s length.

knew they wanted me gone before i came
but i came still.

nothing prepare you for being pressed more than pain will.

game, skill,
preparation, extra patience,
aim, kill,
less debating, check my face & see
that it ain’t changed still.

cold heart.
old art. arthritic pain pills.

show starts.
i can feel the same as when i made real

music.

shame. feel foolish
when i stay still doing
what i used to.
try to keep my mind in what i
choose to.

i won’t be defined by what confuse you.

even though i am, if i can plan it,
i can shoot through

space like
take flight,
organize, & plot like it’s a stage i

stand on.
act accordingly, & then i brake like
breaks might surely lead to brake lights.

filaments & sentences
with sentiments i fill 'em with:
stage fright.

that is near insanity. [i know.] now do not misunderstand
me, danger
is very real, but fear is a choice.

so, turn the music ... [hands up. hands up.
hands up. hands up.]
& keep it up ... [hands up. hands up.]

we are all telling ourselves a story.

now put your hands ... [hands up. hands up.
hands up. hands up.]
& keep 'em up ... [hands up. hands up.]
yes, yes.

... a few enthusiasts banded together, then they
opened their circle to anyone in town who showed an
interest in their
particular activity.

it was by this means that decatur's people developed one
of the finest gun clubs in the country.
[1] back when jay was telling me, “niggas gon' hate us because they jealous.”

i never thought to connect that to how them people would jail us.

they was coming for us all, them public speeches had failed us, just like them teachers that held us in classes & tried to tell us bout the red, white, blue.

looping heads right through sentences we was reading, being led by noose, to the gallows pistols & bibles, lead-like, too.

aftermath of the scene leave a red bright hue

nword gem [beat by vintage | 85 bpm]

[hook] they say that you should be the change you wanna see.

i’m looking in the mirror, can’t even say if who i see is me.

& who can tell if that image is what i want or what i’ve been told, what i have bought or what i’ve been sold?

so, i can’t really even tell you if it’s mine. no, i can only speak to what i find

& lose along the way, & seeing i might move differently & decide if history don’t repeat then it rhymes.

yes, yes.
on the trees & the ground, 
in the breeze is the sound 
of the screams. this account 
is a means to announce 

allegory to the story that would lead to my route 
& can maybe, sort of, explain the degrees of 
my doubt.

i wasn’t even around when they kicked the door to the 
ground, 

search, then seized, whatever it is they found 
i wanted to try & ask him the reason he 
didn’t break, 
then i remembered … he told me it was hate.

[hook] they 
say that you should be the change you wanna see.

i’m looking in the mirror, 
can’t even say if who i see is me. 

& who can tell if that image is what i want 
or what i’ve been told, 
what i have bought or what i’ve been sold? 

so, i can’t really even tell you if it’s 
mine. 
no, i can only speak to what i find 
& lose along the way, & seeing i 
might move differently & decide 
if history don’t repeat then it rhymes. 

[2] when he was writing me letters ‘bout how it’s gon’ all get 
better, 

i was still drinking liquor & wishing that
that could help me drown.

feeling it can’t be right.
inspired me through the wire,
hearing this can’t be life,
knowing better than trust what i haven’t known to be true,
questioning if a lesson is less if it’s not a bruise.

who’d have known a disaster was brewing?
i’m teaching school
while trying to make me a master of arts,
& my compositions start getting some recognition.

linking with preme,
thinking through things,
but really skipping ahead.
before that happened, i put my foot on that gas,

then i pressed it,
& when i woke i was living,
& i was mad.

or that’s the way i would choose to remember
losing & given another shot,
so, i learned to aim with precision,
gained me some vision,
& told myself that i should learn to listen.

[hook] they say that you should be the change you wanna see.

i’m looking in the mirror,
can’t even say if who i see is me.

& who can tell if that image is what i want
or what i’ve been told, what i have bought or what i’ve been sold?
so, i can’t really even tell you if it’s mine.
no, i can only speak to what i find & lose along the way, & seeing i might move differently & decide if history don’t repeat then it rhymes.

[laughter]

… there’s a lively spirit in decatur that makes decatur people worth knowing. for, their town is a town where everybody plays.

[i told my nephew, “they hate you because they jealous.”] & wondered if he would ever really understand what i’m saying.

[laughter]

… there’s a lively spirit in decatur that makes decatur people worth knowing. for, their town is a town where everybody plays.

[3] after he was released, & i was out speaking to people asking ‘bout how my rapping had turned from a passion to an action analogous to my crafting a future after my crash, & i used it as a way to not lose me,

what did i gain?
ready (featuring truth) [beat by truth | 85 bpm]

[1: truth] yeah

uh. break away the chains. we don’t need charms.

with our love, with our knowledge, we don’t need arms.

welcome brothers home. we don’t need lawns.

keep the uncles in the house. we don’t need toms.

at the lab in virginia. all we need: drums,

couple basses & a sample.

finish it in ample.

heavy in our hearts, make it difficult to handle.

not saying shit is the breeze against the candle.

so, i chopped it up with dilla – pianos & the sample.

middle of the winter, but the booth is like orlando in the middle of the summer.

the visit was an honor.

i met a couple game-changing folks on the come-up, like,
well-versed in history & fiction.
i’m sitting back thinking, like,
this what we been missing.

this should be the mission:

to cash in on the pain.

from laughter & shame,
the passion remains, cause

[hook: truth] we ready.

we gon’ take it.
we gon’ make it,
cause we ready.

we gon’ scream it.
we gon’ play it
in our chevies.

not a building.
not a body
or a levee.

joe, we ready.

[hook: a.d.] yo, we ready

we gon’ rip it,
or we’ll tip it
if it’s steady.

we gon’ lift it
even if the shit
is heavy.

keep the mission
with the vision
on the deadly.
it was worth it to share it,  
i mean, i purposely cherish  
the very thought of a practice,  
creating habits  
to challenge the way to sharpen the  
steel that’ll need itself  
to be better at doing what it does.  

huh. it's what it always was.  
& what it will be will,  
& if we still be still  
then there ain't no way  
that we'll be killed. huh.  

so, i say let's be  
& if i can, let me.
there's much more than what the world let see. huh.

so, i say let's be 
& if i can, let me. 
there's much more than what the world let see. 
& we ready.

[hook: truth] we ready. 
we gon’ take it. 
we gon’ make it, 
cause we ready.

we gon’ scream it. 
we gon’ play it from our chevies.

not a building.

not a body 
or a levee.

joe, we ready. uh.

[hook: a.d.] yo, we ready
we gon’ rip it, 
or we'll tip it 
if it's steady.

we gon’ lift it 
even if the shit is heavy.

keep the mission with the vision on the deadly.
yeah, we ready.

huh. yes, yes.


yeah.

so, you thinking that i’m here ‘cause you let me.

it’s the system, not the person, that upset me.

let me interject—
when you say that you accept,

i don’t care if it’s a yes or a no, you gonna get me. uh.

thought it so i said it.
want it, so i go & get it.
went it got it,
now it’s all around us.

talked to truth about it
when it was a dream
& when it started happening
we seen.


we gon’ take it.
we gon’ make it,
cause we ready.

we gon’ scream it.
we gon’ play it
from our chevies.
not a building.
not a body
or a levee.

joe, we ready.

[hook: a.d.] yo, we ready

we gon' rip it,
or we'll tip it
if it's steady.

we gon' lift it
even if the shit
is heavy.

keep the mission

with the vision
on the deadly.

yeah, we ready.
yo, we ready.
still insisting that they tried. memories of them late nights never make it to daylight.

they like
the idea of a nigga saying “fuck it. i’m gone” but never think that wasn’t what i was on.

that’s what i say to me ’cause i don’t really talk to people often.

& it’s for you—
for me, too.

yes, yes.

[1] it’s hard to focus.
i know that i should know this, but that don’t really matter, so i wrote this.

& i quote, “it’s better to learn it than leave it all to hope since the game you playing now don’t come with tokens.”

some of my folks went by the wayside,

& what you understand will be the cost is something to consider when you off inventing the life you wanna live, then the life you gonna live, & the life you used to live

naw, & it ain’t even therapy.
it’s not even close.
huh.

but it’s what i got …

& it’s for you—

for me, too.

yes, yes.

[1] it’s hard to focus.
i know that i should know this, but that don’t really matter, so i wrote this.

& i quote, “it’s better to learn it than leave it all to hope since the game you playing now don’t come with tokens.”

some of my folks went by the wayside,
you only say that to yourself.

[2] i don’t remember the last night i slept right.

i used to love to dream about the future i would make for myself & other things would make it seem impossible to arrive ‘cause many folks ain’t make it there, ain’t even see twenty-five before they died. surviving ain’t like we was living at war, but tell that story to the me i was at age twenty-four, on that hospital bed, not even scared that i was thought to be dead. just prepared with all them “nots” in my head. like, “you not ‘bout to live.

will be incongruent. it’s different when you do it than when you thought you knew it.

& saying who’s to blame is different than asking who is.

[hook] is it really a win when your team ain’t there?

try to get you sleep & your dreams ain’t there.

all you want is to make a little something out of nothing you was given, & you know it ain’t enough to just be living, & you feeling like you going through the motions, & it’s hitting you like rowing through an ocean, & though you probably need a little help,
might as well get it out ‘fore you gone.”

& i can’t say i’m happy that i was wrong.

that’s what i think to me, ‘cause i don’t really talk to people often.

an asterisk i’ll add to all my losses.

where you wanna be

& what you understand will be the cost is something to consider when you off inventing the life you wanna live, then the life you gonna live, & the life you used to live will be incongruent

with now.

[hook] is it really a win when your team ain’t there? try to get you sleep & your dreams ain’t there.

all you want is to make a little something out of nothing you was given, & you know it ain’t enough to just be living,

& you feeling like you going through the motions, & it’s hitting you like rowing through an ocean, & though you probably need a little help, you only say that to yourself.

is it really a win when your team ain’t there? try to get you sleep & your dreams ain’t there.
all you want is to make a little something out of nothing you was given, & you know it ain't enough to just be living,

& you feeling like you going through the motions,

it’s hitting you like rowing through an ocean,

& though you probably need a little help, you only say that to yourself.

… that’s what decatur people did. with careful planning & good spirit, they have worked together to make day-to-day living pleasant, helpful, & constructive. yes, there is a difference deep inside decatur. from a distance, it looks like any other american town.

it could be your town.
i used to love to dream


Playtown U.S.A. Produced by Film Studios of Chicago and the Athletic Institute of America, New York University Film Library, 1946.


know i always sent it from the place that’s sincere,
and since there’s no other way, then i’ll reiterate it here.

thanks for your patience while i been making my shift from
where i was to where i still want
to go.

and many thanks for the motivation that made the
waiting worth it.
i can’t relate to perfect.

but i can state these words with a certainty
that verses versus me
have me virtually free
from the version i’m afraid of

acknowledgements
they say to give
people they flowers while they can smell ‘em,
and say the things you want ‘em to hear
while you can tell ‘em.

so, if you ever
listened to a song, came to see a live show,
took a class, read a poem,
bought a book, you might know

i appreciate your time,
and thanks for your attention.

i maybe never said it,
but know i always meant it.

they say to give
people they flowers while they can smell ‘em,
and say the things you want ‘em to hear
while you can tell ‘em.

so, if you ever
listened to a song, came to see a live show,
took a class, read a poem,
bought a book, you might know

i appreciate your time,
and thanks for your attention.

i maybe never said it,
but know i always meant it.

DECATUR
and gratitude really matters to
form the habits of
the person i’m a be
from the person i was made from.

with sincere appreciation,
i just wanted to write this to say thank you.

gratitude is my attitude.
i don’t always say a lot,
but i ain’t mad at you.

i not only want to say it.
i wanted you to have it and to play it.

so,
with sincere appreciation,
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i used to love to dream

052 framing pain
053 decatur, illinois ...
054 ampersand
055 playfields ...
056 crack, usa
057 for you ...
058 just in case
059 stage fright
060 particular activity ...
061 nword gem
062 worth knowing ...
063 ready (feat. truth)
064 asterisk
065 american town ...

beats: 052, 058, 059, & 061 by vintage. 054, 056, & 063 by marcus “truth” fitzgerald. 064 by deiontrae lawrence.
mastered by mike moxham.

[a mixtape/essay]

photo by kyle petrozza