

The Bronx Lexicon

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My words are heavy, carrying
a necessary sternness
from witnessing the stop and frisk of a hooded teenage boy
that wasn't warranted, his rejection leading to force.
The police forget that my brothers are innocent until proven guilty.

Everything I say is loud
in an effort to resist the teachers
telling Malik he's never going to make it
because of the lifestyle he chose, as if he wanted
his mother to get beat every night by his doped up father
and the responsibility of the bills falling on him alone.

I say ain't instead of not,
and nothing in place of anything because
the girl who uses proper English
makes those around her feel like she's better than them
when slang is her mother tongue
and she can never forget that the streets raised her.

Half of my language is profanity because
section 8 is frozen and food stamps are being cut,
so homes become shelters where your roommates
are drug dealers and hitmen,
not because they're bad people,
but because they're desperate to do anything to survive.

Some of my words are mispronounced because
all my teachers are immigrants
who will never be American enough.
They thought they would be achieving the American Dream,
not chasing the facade of one.

I may not enunciate my words enough.
They all come out rushed because I was told
action is better than words, so when I babysit

my cousin alone and hear gunshots outside
the barred project windows, I shout a quick warning
and run to get my uncle's gun,
hidden behind the radiator
that never heats in the winter.