

# We Have Never Asked Permission To Sing

*Poetry celebrating trans resilience*



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Curated by Forward Together's Trans Day of Resilience art project.

[www.tdor.co](http://www.tdor.co)

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## About

Forward Together's Trans Day of Resilience art project is an offering to trans people of color everywhere. In 2017 and 2019, visual artists and poets came together to imagine our uncompromised freedom and seed our future world. This collection features all ten poems created for the project — a choir of voices singing freedom.

Trans communities of color face epidemic levels of discrimination and violence, and this violence overwhelmingly targets Black trans women and femmes. While we mourn, we also honor the resilience of our trans family. Let these words be our spells, prayers and protest songs. Let them conjure bolder dreams and louder demands. May we celebrate ourselves, claiming freedom as our birthright. May we never ask permission to sing.



Founded with the Audre Lorde Project in 2014, the Trans Day of Resilience art project is an annual culture shift campaign led by Forward Together. Its current name and spirit emerged from a 2015 call from New Orleans trans justice organization BreakOUT! to celebrate the power of our trans family.

Forward Together transforms culture and policy to work for all of us nationwide. We build courage and foster connection among our multiracial community of changemakers to secure the rights, recognition and resources all people need to thrive.



To listen to these poems read by the authors, download posters of the cover art and learn more about the project, visit [www.tdor.co](http://www.tdor.co).

# Layleen's Bill (With Revisions)

by Benji Hart

*for Layleen Cubilette-Polanco Xtravaganza*

The New York City Council ~~will pass a package of legislation,~~  
~~expanding services for transgender, gender-nonconforming,~~  
~~non-binary, and intersex inmates~~     *will turn out its pockets,*  
*never sign another ransom note*

All officers with trans inmates in their custody ~~will undergo~~  
~~a competency training~~     *will have their badge numbers*  
*etched off with diamond-tipped acrylics, aquamarine*

New beds ~~will be added to the transgender housing unit~~  
      *beds of wildflowers will erupt from lots that were not*  
*vacant, just holding their breath*

Counselors ~~will be made available to all trans inmates~~     *we*  
*are each our sister's counsel*

The Board of Correction ~~will convene a task force~~     *will*  
*be tasked with something useful, like beekeeping, or collecting*  
*rainwater*

Sex workers ~~will have their cases diverted to Human Sex~~  
~~Trafficking Intervention Court~~     *will spray paint the words*  
*"we are the intervention" on the courthouse rubble*

The Rikers Island compound ~~will be replaced by a series of~~  
~~smaller, borough-based facilities~~     *will slip into the rising*  
*Atlantic, the ribs of our dead prepared to cage it*

~~Trans elders will be held in solitary confinement for their~~  
~~own safety~~     *will have their charcoal locs retwisted in*  
*chosen hands*

~~This legislation will take effect in the summer of 2020~~  
*we have never asked permission to sing*

# An Offering

by SA Smythe

Stop me if you've heard this one before  
So that I can tell it again, and savor it.  
I am here, yet they think of me as a relic.  
Not forgotten, but unglorified  
A rough beast with a hashtagged accent of defeat,  
A weak heart, and a Bethlehem slouch.

I often find myself both sought after and shunned—  
Unable to speak my own name if I wanted—eternally emptied,  
Made to mourn the loss of any meaning I might yet make  
Like a silenced clap of thunder, technicolor turned to ashes.  
It seems that so many I've loved have wanted me dead,  
Ground down into the ancestral mosaic of past and present gods.

Earthly siblings, sweet apparitions: can we sanctify ourselves into new life?  
I cannot warn the others of the coming storm alone,  
Cannot take shelter from storms already here, and look! Just look.  
Everywhere blood clings to the leaves, soot gnaws at the lungs  
There's no water for miles, and soon all you can say is:  
Well, we should've listened for the thunder.

Still, I was not the first to dream another world,  
To crave the teeming darkness of the ocean floor,  
Stories I would never fully know. With this I exalt myself,  
Shapeshift into my harbinger skin. We have always been on the move.  
Lithe and wild and dangerous, we grow new lungs,  
Spread our palms across the dirt and tend to new leaves.

But I can never forget the body that came before.  
Acidic grief dries out along the cracks in this new flesh,  
Phantom bruises from when they did hush up the clap, thief the color.  
I divine myself as Ochumaré, a messenger with an offering  
That you may call me rainbow serpent,



Sibling, lover, or freedom traveler

That in case language doesn't express desire, but hides it,  
You must remember to reach only for the neither thing,  
To be righteously unashamed of this grief until the otherwise comes  
Until that time when we may name ourselves whole, if not holy,  
And stop eulogizing the project of living long enough to see  
That it has yet to come, and so can never die.

# A Dream Come True

by Vita E.

We are the wildest dreams of our Transcestors come to life.  
The beating of ancient drum, now transformed to the snap of fingers,  
Clap of hand, spit of sickening syllables.  
The full weight of bodies, spinning magick into the air,  
Appearing weightless on descent, landing fiercely without effort.  
Vibrant hair, bald heads, boss braids, lit wigs,  
Tits out, clit, click, and dick out-hedonistic liberation.  
Authenticity sourced from bloodlines of deities,  
Brown skin perpetually creating euphoria,  
Trans truth, Afro-tenacity.  
Revolt beating in pulse with the heartbeats of Black Trans Elders,  
Black Trans Futures learning and evolving the pace,  
While we, the present, give and receive the lessons as we learn them.

We are the wildest dreams of our Trancestors come to life.  
Warriors who refuse to let silence or submission be our melody.  
We prove that shit with our feet, our canes, our wheels, our signs and  
our voices,  
Taking the streets before ignorance finishes its evening commute.  
Rattling the earth, cracking the sky in two.  
Streets know Black Trans rage,  
Stronger than they know the red of our blood,  
Though the streets still know it well.  
Now the world knows history books with our names actually in them,  
Immortalized in Black ink, leaving the red behind.  
Like no more being error, more like icon.  
More Marsha P. to Andy Warhol,  
Jennicet to Obama's opportunism,  
Miss Major to the whole country,  
And your most recent Emmy winning Netflix search.

We are the wildest dreams of our Transcestors come to life.  
We love ourselves out loud, we love each other.  
I've shaken the hand of a child,  
Clad in melanin, love, truth of identity and expression,  
And "Black Trans Lives Matter" patched on their back.

The smiles of who no longer search for love in words kept in shadow,  
Now the sunlight that makes shades of earth, stone, sand, and root grow.  
Makes our love pop like our skin, like our hearts.  
That love, more viral than any campaign against us.  
Our agency over our minds and bodies as fluid as the waves inside us,  
Sorcery beyond the range of closed minds,  
Conjuring outside the realms of hate and death.

We are the wildest dreams of our Trancestors come to life.  
Once deemed more target than human,  
Now clapping back at presidential proportions.  
Every election will know that "president" cannot exist without the T.  
Neither can ancesTry, wiTchery, resisTance,  
Even culTure itself owes us for the bite in its articulation.  
We carry our ratchet with our Black feminist theory and unmatched aesthetic.  
Holding our trauma and our dreams as armor.  
Serpentine shade hand in hand with steel spirit as we Transform the world.  
They have been reminded of the ways we Transcend,  
Transporting between the human, and the divine.  
Living beyond the lies, into our power, into our magick.  
annoinTed.  
immorTal.  
eTernal.

We are the wildest dreams of our Trancestors come to life.  
And our dreams are wilder because of it.

# Girls

by xoài phạm

Remember when she drifted along the surface  
of the ocean, hair like kelp  
reflecting the surface of the sun.  
The whales extending their foreheads  
to graze her shoulder.  
Her gaze rests on the gray cloud miles away, inching  
towards her Sāmoa. A few moments later,  
the sky opens with a hot downpour.  
She submerges her brown head  
into the Pacific, becomes ocean.  
Gives baby whales wet kisses.  
Peels back layers of coastline  
to reveal the volcanic rock  
that whispers a secret:  
*I'm not going anywhere.*

✦

She is alive. Lights flash bright red.  
Then blue. What did she know  
about saving lives? She was someone's  
baby girl, pumpkin, angel,  
love dumpling, little one.  
Here she is on Atlantic Ave.,  
at the house with the fig tree  
that reminds her of Cameroon. The police car  
that she hijacked sits idly outside,  
the sirens no longer work.  
She packs her powder pink duffel  
with playing cards, rope, a teddy bear  
named Raven, sour patch kids,

castor oil, and a red canvas notebook.  
She walks past the painting on the wall  
of a full-circle rainbow glittering  
around a white sun. Outside the door,  
is a family of maybe five hundred.  
Their bellies so accustomed  
to the pain of uncontrollable laughter.



The best part about being a trans girl  
is keeping the world's secret in your chest.  
We are shards of seaglass.  
You see yourself in us:  
Big and wide. Spines  
long enough to play with purple clouds.  
In the beginning there was us.  
In the end, here we are. Here I am,  
made of the same stuff  
as my grandmother. And her grandmother.  
And the mushrooms that sprouted before her.  
Lift your head, close your eyes,  
do you hear yourself  
breathing?

# STRATIGRAPHY.

by Mia S. Willis

*for the THEM!HOOD.*

*“Stratigraphy – The study of the layers (strata) of sediments, soils, and material culture at an archaeological site[.]” — The Archaeological Institute of America*

## V. MODERN LAYER

and each time the boy dies                          pour one out for ‘em.  
the black word is left to the air again              cry            whole hailstorms.  
new kindling in every mouth /           love harder               than thunder.  
new dances for all the dust.                             all the living done together.

#### IV. 2013 – 2017

their fingertips cartographers of the land                      play the dozens with the devil.  
meet red clay in the jaw /                      flame death                      mans be for everybody.  
slate lining the ribcage /                      funny box run right over.  
anoint altars with honest touch.

### III. 2006 – 2012

throat a cavern of infinity                      water                      to a whale.  
hair of pitch-pine smoke                      nappy as a briar patch.  
and hands content with emptiness                      an appetite                      for every breath  
the black word became the boi                      ayyyyyye.

## II. 1995 – 2005

and so this black word spoke itself anew.  
declared itself a body / a beating fire /  
a burning heart /  
a brown skin etiology.

aw shit.  
go off, nigga.  
yo, that's lit.

I. 1994

in the beginning there was the word.

and that word was black.

but this primordial black lacked a glyph;

a phoneme with no flesh equivalent./

oh word?

ayyyyyyye.

damn, that's cold.

# litany in which you are still here

kiki nicole

today you think about fear

& fear it

but you do not die

today your black ass walks to the corner store

or makes it out of bed

& where are the bells?

where is the city on fire for you?

where the chorus of nigga,

you made it?

& yes, of course you did

today

your black ass walks to the corner store

& you pour one out with each step

& your block becomes ancestor too

drunk on the living, which is you

today

you inspire

today

your black ass conjure spirit

like perennials in concrete

& yes

you did that shit



for to water is to love  
is to feed  
& you have been over/flowing

of course you have  
you care & you love  
& you love & you love

so much you hold  
both a hot thing & nature's milk  
for to stay is to carry

so much your black back be water & bridge  
so much your black ass be cargo

& like any goddexx  
you are scorned  
& become the fire anyway

let it be okay  
to burn  
without signal flare

let it be known  
the first brick thrown  
was meant to strike

yesterday  
your black ache swelled  
but today  
you are here

& what is resilience if not vengeance  
a heavy stream of salt  
poured down the throat  
of all that should oppose your daily bloom

those who deserve it  
    who never deserved you

for this you feel  
    lighter

& for this,  
    endless libation

for this,  
    gardens wherever you roam

& this block be yours  
    & this world, now  
yours

yea tho you walk  
    yea tho you rise  
tho bitch you are here

& this,  
    too,  
is a form of resurrection

today  
    you are  
& you are not afraid

& what mistake  
    what divine miracle

*\*note:*

*“black ache” inspired by the work of artist Blache Marie  
“a hot thing” a line from Toni Morrison’s Beloved*

by jayy dodd

[Goal] is the solution / for the revolution | [pronoun] say

- |                 |             |
|-----------------|-------------|
| • Wide Smiles   | • she say   |
| • Strong Hearts | • they say  |
| • Safe Homes    | • xe say    |
| • Deep Laughs   | • dey say   |
| • Worthy Coin   | • ze say    |
| • Radical Care  | • he say    |
| • Open Streets  | • we say    |
| • Our Truth     | • y'all say |

## Imprecatory Prayer to the Transestors

*To The Trans Ancestors & Elders who have guided us here:*

*We honor your legacy with new celebrations.*

May our bodies persist, let them shine whole & well.

May our minds calibrate to the call of the universe.

Let our protest songs transfigure to peace hymns.

Let our cultural knowledge produce nourishment.

May our homes bustle warm with abundant love.

May our communities flourish despite borders.

Let our love quake open any lingering shackle.

Let our joy obliterate any festering contempt.

As we bind each other closer,

we manifest futures more possible.

# In the Name Of

Niko Shahbazian

Dear You, dear  
border, and  
hye-phen, and good  
boi and tranny faggot,  
and most divine, dear  
Say Their Name

I am learning to love  
the things about me  
they call foreign  
The way my name  
dances on ten letters  
and how I  
carry a border  
on two backs

I thought home was  
supposed to taste sweet  
prunes that make  
a mouth curl into itself  
and rosewater  
for exhaling hands  
In Iran, my mom says,  
it is custom  
to give breath to hands

In America, everything  
is the name of redemption  
Like the way the officer  
says Iran and then takes  
my father aside

for extra questioning  
Like the way they say ma'am  
and I think they mean me

What is the name we give  
for sacrifice,  
for a rhythm of  
boundaries or  
the inhabiting of a  
space not made  
Border between  
what is there and  
what is not

I am beautiful because I sacrificed  
what was there for  
what is (not)

What is resilient  
If not the way I tremble  
before God  
before Allah  
before Marsha  
before Say Their Name  
before The Next One Dead  
before those more divine  
than the blood of our illusions

# The Limits of Language

Benji Hart

When Sylvia Rivera, a “Boricua” (from the Arawak “Borinquen,” name for the island pre-colonization) “trans woman,” and Marsha P. Johnson,

a “Black” (from the European caste system, signifying “nadir,” “most depraved”) “trans woman,” founded “Street Transvestite

Action Revolutionaries” (or “STAR,” 1970), they took on a word now considered offensive. They were out all night at the bars, in the street,

before some scholar coined the term “transgender,” and needed nothing bestowed on them to know what ought to be done and do it.

(They would later inaugurate a makeshift shelter, infamously dropping an old refrigerator from the second story window on a murder of officers

attempting to evict them.) This is to say we are each a new symbol, requiring (should we long for it) its own definition: To choose “Blackness”

knowing “Blackness” was chosen to keep you quiet; To worship again that which was made profane for the very fact of its holiness;

To get up, to dress oneself, walk outside, all without needing a name for any of it; To be subversion’s mascot long before being its lover;

To inhabit futures in a bedroom of ghosts; To acknowledge language as another “border.” What is the word for “belonging to the land?”

What is the word for “ancestor moving in my throat?” (To know what one is celebrating one must also know what one is mourning.)

The sign for “everything not yet imagined?” Back teeth biting  
down on a tongue before it formed the phrase. (I share this with you

because you are even now a part of it.) Lips curled into the sound for  
“world after this one.” What letter can stand in for a jail cell left open,

empty and ringing as a speechless mouth?

# Prayer

xoài phạm

*After Mark Aguhar*

My knees kiss the bathroom floor,  
my ancestors' blood  
hugging the edges of my body.  
I've been murdered by a man

afraid of his own heart.  
My body splayed like a shadow  
at dusk. Have you ever seen  
a trans girl whole?

Stabbed, maimed, shot,  
strangled, drowned,  
set on fire. I was  
next on the list.

As I lay swallowed by red,  
my sisters arrive in a blanket of rain,  
their eyes wet. Soft smiles  
strung along their brown faces.

They lift my arms gently, like wind  
cradling branches,  
kiss my cheeks like butterflies.  
We swim through rays of sun,

clouds turn into oceans.  
The people below me are so small  
they don't even move.  
My arms and legs



become blades of light, I  
am a whisper.

As we approach, the smell of Bà Ngoai's  
pepper-seared beef fills the air.

I see the blessed ones—  
the hot fat girls, the hookers,  
the power bitches. The gender  
illusionists, the disabled and dis-identifiers—

my family. Floating around me  
like leaves—the girls  
I had yet to meet: Ava, Kiwi,  
Jaquarrius, and Jamie Lee.

Ciara, Chyna, and Gwynevere.  
There are so many I have yet to name.  
Whose names I will learn  
and cherish. This time,

there are no goodbyes.  
We sing whale-songs,  
share laughs our skin  
can barely hold. Our throats

are mountains of lost words.  
We learn the lines of each other's  
hands, the folds of skin,  
the tickle of hair.

This is our final prayer. This time,  
we, the blessed ones,  
are stretched across the horizon.  
This time,

you  
are here.

## About the Poets and Artists

**Amir Khadar** is a Non-binary (they/them) West African multidisciplinary artist from Minneapolis/Baltimore, who works in poetry, fibers, and digital art. For them, art functions as a space to rationalize their feelings as a marginalized individual, address oppressive systems and ultimately facilitate healing. Afro futurism, beauty, bitterness, hair, and spirituality are recurring themes in their work. Amir created the front cover art.

**Asharah Saraswati**, a.k.a “Art Twink”, grew up drawing critters they thought up to comfort themselves and their friends, and that mission continues to this very day. For Art Twink, art is for creating community and safety in a world that offers very little of either. After 6 years of working in graphic apparel design, Art Twink is well versed in the technical and commercial world of visual art. However, at heart Art Twink is a storyteller, carrying on the tradition of telling stories that inspire, validate, and comfort people and creatures in hard times. Art Twink created the back cover art.

**Benji Hart** is an author, artist, and educator from Amherst, MA, living in Chicago. The writer behind the blog Radical Faggot, their commentary has been published at Teen Vogue, Them, The Advocate, and others. Their solo performance piece *Dancer As Insurgent*, which explores voguing as a practice of Black queer resistance, was featured at CA2M (Madrid), and the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum (Chicago). Their current project, *World After This One*, examining the myriad ways Black art forms rely on the materials of the present to construct liberated futures, premiered at BRIC (New York), and is still in progress. They have held residencies with the Rauschenberg Foundation, the Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership, the Amsterdam University of the Arts, and are the recipient of the 3Arts Award in the Teaching Arts.

**jayy dodd** is a blxk trans womxn from los angeles, california— now based in Portland,OR. she is a literary & performance artist. her work has appeared / will appear in *Broadly*, *The Establishment*, *Entropy*, *LitHub*, *BOAAT Press*, *Duende*, & *Poetry Foundation* among others. she is the Executive Director for

Dovesong Labs (a development of Winter Tangerine), editor of *A Portrait in Blues* (Platypus Press 2017), author of *Mannish Tongues* (Platypus Press 2017) & *The Black Condition* ft. Narcissus (Nightboat Books 2019). she has been a Pushcart Prize nominee, co-editor of *Bettering American Poetry*. her visual & written work has been featured in West Hollywood, Portland's Institute of Contemporary Art, Teen Vogue & Entropy. she is also a volunteer gender-terrorist & artificial intellectual. find her talking trash online or taking a selfie.

**kemi alabi** is a free blk shape shifter. Author of *The Lion Tamer's Daughter* (YesYes Books, 2020), their poetry and essays have many homes including *Guernica*, *The Rumpus*, *Catapult*, *The Guardian*, *The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 2* (Haymarket Press, 2018) and *Best New Poets 2019* (University of Virginia Press, 2020). With *Forward Together*, they lead *Echoing Ida*, a community of Black women and nonbinary writers, and serve as Writing Director for the *Trans Day of Resilience* art project. They live in Chicago, IL.

**kiki nicole** (they/them) is an agender Blk femme based in Charlotte, NC. They are a Pink Door Fellow, a 2018 Winter Tangerine Fellow, & a Sophomore Fellow with *The Watering Hole*. they hope to lend a voice for the void in which Blk femmes thrive. Find them at [kikinicole.com](http://kikinicole.com).

**Mia S. Willis** is a Black performance poet from Charlotte, North Carolina. Their work has been featured by or is forthcoming in *Under the Belly of the Beast* (Dissonance Press), *FreezeRay*, *Curating Alexandria*, *WORDPEACE*, *Peculiar*, *Foothill*, *Button Poetry*, and *Slamfind*. Mia's poem "hecatomb." won the 2018 Foothill Editors' Prize, earning nominations for a Pushcart Prize and for inclusion in *Best New Poets*. In 2019, Mia has been named the first two-time *Capturing Fire Slam Champion*, a *Lambda Literary Fellow* in Poetry, the *Young Artist Fellow* at Chashama's ChaNorth residency, and a performing artist on *RADAR Productions' Sister Spit 2020 Tour*. Their debut poetry collection, *monster house.*, was the 2018 winner of the *Cave Canem Foundation's Toi Derricotte & Cornelius Eady Chapbook Prize* and is available with *Jai-Alai Books*.

**Niko Shahbazian** Niko has a background in Anthropology and writes about diasporic longing, the mythos of homeland, and changing conceptions of

queerness through back and forth interactions between host and home lands. They enjoy weaving mini carpets and other forms of art as a way of grounding and connecting to their ancestral histories.

**SA Smythe** is a Black trans nonbinary writer currently living on Tongva land, constantly scheming up new ways to get free. They are a professor of Black European studies and Black trans poetics at UCLA. As a translator, editor, and performance collaborator, SA has worked with/in six languages and organized in Black queer feminist & trans abolitionist writing collectives across various geographies. They are currently completing a book about Black belonging, Black diaspora and Italian postcolonial literature called *Where Blackness Meets the Sea: On Crisis, Culture, and the Black Mediterranean* as well as their first full poetry collection, after hiraeth, titled *proclivity*, which is about a familial history of Black migration (between Britain, Costa Rica, and Jamaica), trans nonbinary embodiment, and emancipation.

Originally from Cleveland, OH., **Vita E.** has been surrounded by the power of art since childhood. From then on, they made a pledge that they would use the art that inspired them to influence thought, change, and freedom to exist without apology. This pledge would lead to her life as a percussionist, educator, poet, vocalist, and activist.

Vita's passion as a Black Trans Femme artist has led to many milestones. She's recently finished a summer-long role as percussionist, mentor, and vocalist for the Creede Repertory Theatre and drummer for the full-stage debut of the hip-hop musical *Once Upon a Rhyme*. Their response track to Janelle Monae's "Hell You Talmbout" was included in Source Magazine's "10 Songs Soundtracking the #BlackLivesMatter Movement."

**xoài phạm** is a Vietnamese trans person who has a complicated relationship with womanhood. She comes from a long legacy of warriors, healers, fishers, and swimmers. Her family arrived in California as refugees after the U.S. destroyed Southeast Asian land and communities. She is a writer, thinker, and collaborative educator on issues of gender, imperialism, sex work, and intimacy. Above all, she enjoys eating fruits on the beach with her loved ones.

[illegible]