

FREE VER

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THREE



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Darryl C. Williams

I am not sure how we died
Abu Tahiru Sillah

I wish I could
Cherise Jones

It takes guts to join a poetry workshop in the middle of a probation center waiting room. But this is Free Verse. There are no judgments. Once you participate, expect your life to change. Some people find calm, others relief. Many find freedom. A seat at this table means you've said goodbye to waiting, hello to moving forward. It's a commitment with a payoff. You'll become a better writer and a deeper thinker. At the open mic, you will polish your public speaking skills, let go of some demons, learn to take criticism, and hear applause.

Free Verse gives you the space to tell it like it is. It gives a home to anger and joy, fear and sorrow. It can lead to hope, or get you back in school, land you a job, or earn you a spot as a paid apprentice on our staff. It's not easy to reveal what's in your head, what hurts and hides, but here you'll find supporters who want you to succeed.

DAVE JOHNSON
Editor-In-Chief
Poet-In-Residence

LONNI TANNER
Managing Editor

CONGRATULATIONS ON THE THIRD ISSUE of Free Verse! The compelling work in this edition brings to life our mission of strengthening communities, creating opportunity, and changing lives by showcasing the voices of Probation Officers and department staff alongside those of probation clients and community members. This is collaboration at its best.

In all my years working with youth and within the justice system, I've seen firsthand the transformative power of creative opportunities. Having an outlet to express what's in one's head and in one's heart is invaluable in developing an identity based on beauty and creation, rather than on guilt and blame.

Free Verse has transformed this waiting room into a meeting place for the entire community. Our third issue features writing from many first-timers. Our journal's staff, made up of probation clients and community members, comb the waiting room – filled with wives and children, girlfriends and boyfriends, family and friends – to find new poems from undiscovered talent. Probation Officers, clients and staff, security guards, professional writers, and visiting community members – all contributed work. This time our apprentices collected over 500 poems – from over 200 poets. You'll even read the seeds of some first books here. And some of our poets are now performing their work at literary events throughout the city.

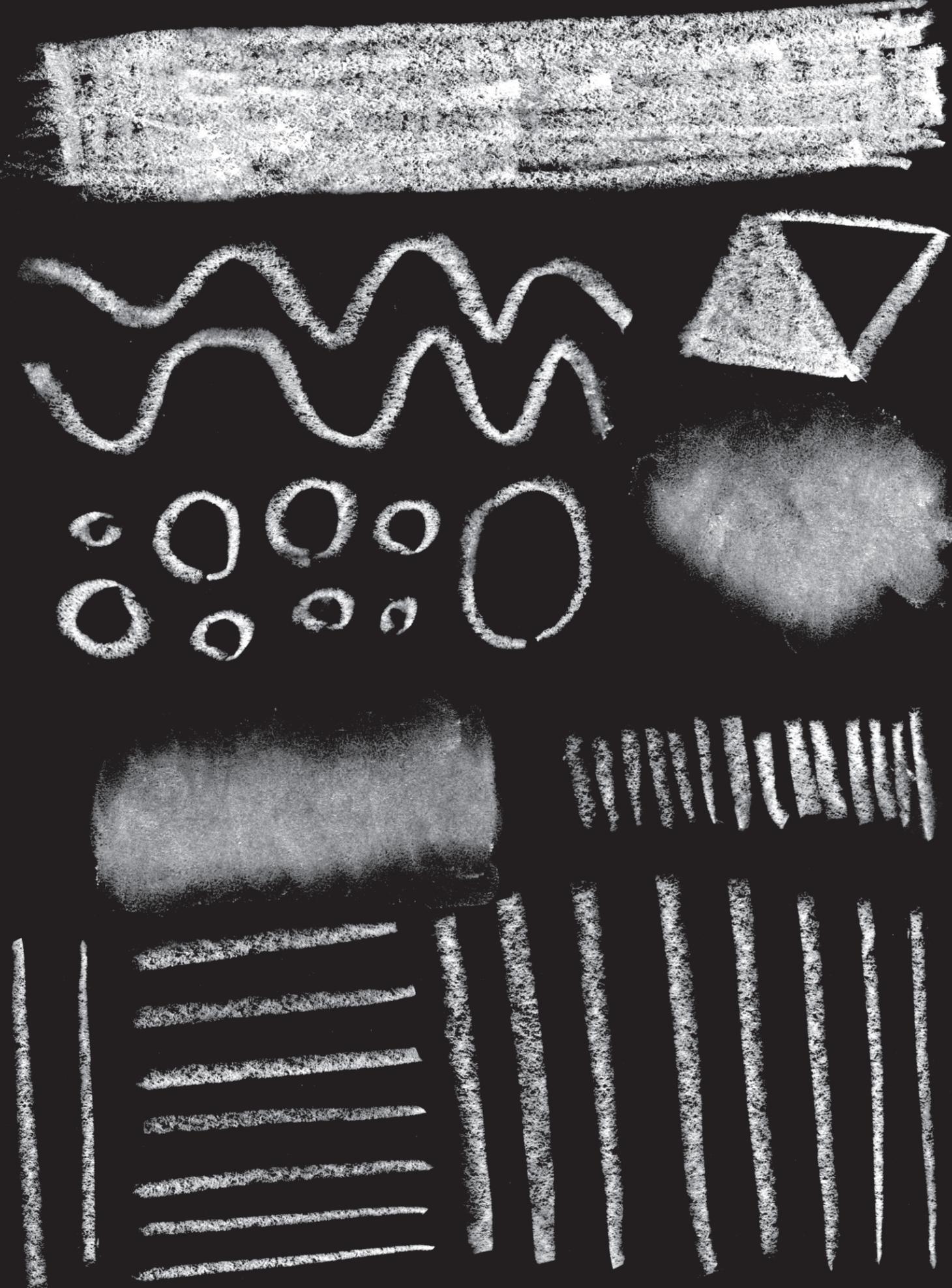
Join us. It's time to turn the page.

– The Editors

And that change in identity often changes a person's life trajectory for the better.

I believe that all the authors in this edition have committed an act of bravery by baring their souls, and our collective lives are richer for it. To everyone who has been part of this amazing literary undertaking, thank you for another outstanding publication that is sure to inspire everyone who comes in contact with it. All my best to all of you and may you continue to build on this foundation of positive self-expression.

ANA BERMUDEZ
Commissioner
Department of Probation



There's a boy who lives next door

With eyes so cold
He'd freeze your soul
Neglected and led astray
He wasn't always this way
His eyes once warm
A coffee brown
And a smile so wide
It would melt you
But that was way back
In the days when
We'd play in green and dirt
Kicking soccer balls until it hurt
Gambled with marbles and chips
Held hands on long school trips
We'd even share secrets
But that ended
He found gangs and fights
And we drifted apart
The streets became his home
Looking for somewhere to belong
Which led him to crime
And doing time
I became a stranger
Just the girl that lives next door
Another face in his messed up world
Maybe it's too late
But I'd like to show him what it's like
To be embraced show him it's not too late
To change his ways I'd like to help him
Through the maze
And through his wrathful phase
I'd like to be his friend once more
The boy who lives next door.

SHEILA NAHOMI

Silly Soliloquy

Sometimes I want to "do the right thing."
And other days, I'm ready to throw a trash can.
It's like that, man.
I behave, but deep down,
I really don't know how to act.
If I did half of what I thought, my rep would be through.
The stifled one is only the mask I wear.
But I've convinced many it's my real face.
Now ain't that a twist.
Now you see why I need help?
Just your quintessential late bloomer,
Who couldn't ask for help a day sooner.

M. POLITE

I am art

I'm not meant to look pretty
I'm meant to work your mind
And make you feel.

SHEILA NAHOMI

My Heart

Is an audience
listening to painful
stories.

ABU TAHIRU SILLAH

Unsung heroes,

unappreciated, never celebrated, they go unnoticed.

But they lift my spirit when I think I will never
get back up.

Unsung heroes wake up every day and go to work for their
families.

They might just compliment you with a smile or kind eyes,
tell you to be strong.

They are elders, family, friends

They give you a reason to live.

They're the ones who talk you off a ledge.

They give you protection, when the last thing you feel,
is safe.

ESTABAN DANIEL RIVERA

Last week

I looked at my mom

In a casket

Cancer caused this tragedy

Keep your composure

I still have to practice

The world is at war

She's missing in action

But look at the passion

Tears

Fall as I acknowledge

Her passing

Time

Stops

For no one

This is what happens

Death is inevitable

The afterlife is what we imagine

Her smile is captured

Before the burying

Verses from the Bible

Deciphered by pastors

There are so many questions

I still have to ask her

But I'll save that for after – life

ANDREW DELEONARDIS

Rushing

When we first moved in
We pretended
To be artists.
You taught me how to play the guitar and I taught
you how to write.
We posted clippings on the walls.
We acted out scenes from Hamlet.

And one day, I woke up to find you gone.
I waited all day expecting a call, something.
You didn't even leave a note
Saying you never loved me.
Instead, I was left to wonder why
You stayed so long.

At dinner, my family
Asked me questions.
I didn't have answers.

KEYSI HIRALDO

I take a job

as a night baker, just to dip myself up to my elbows in flour. The dough sticks to my arms. I am used to these hours, after so many nights listening for my mother to die, but it's hard to get a good perspective with your arms in the oven. The boss is speaking German, September, ja, ja. On the other side of the counter, the lady with the baguettes in the baby carriage says, biscotti — the universal signal for let's get out of here. I drop the dough and run.

LONNI TANNER

Kimberly

One night on Tremont and Harrison
I got the terrifying news.
Kimberly took her life.
I was so shocked and confused.
Why you, Kim?
I was with her a week before she died.
Maybe it was my fault.
She loved me so much,
but I always put her to the side,
treated her like shit.
I was never the caring and loving type.
This opened my eyes.

Sleep in peace, Kimberly.
See you soon.

RYAN ROSARIO

I'm missing

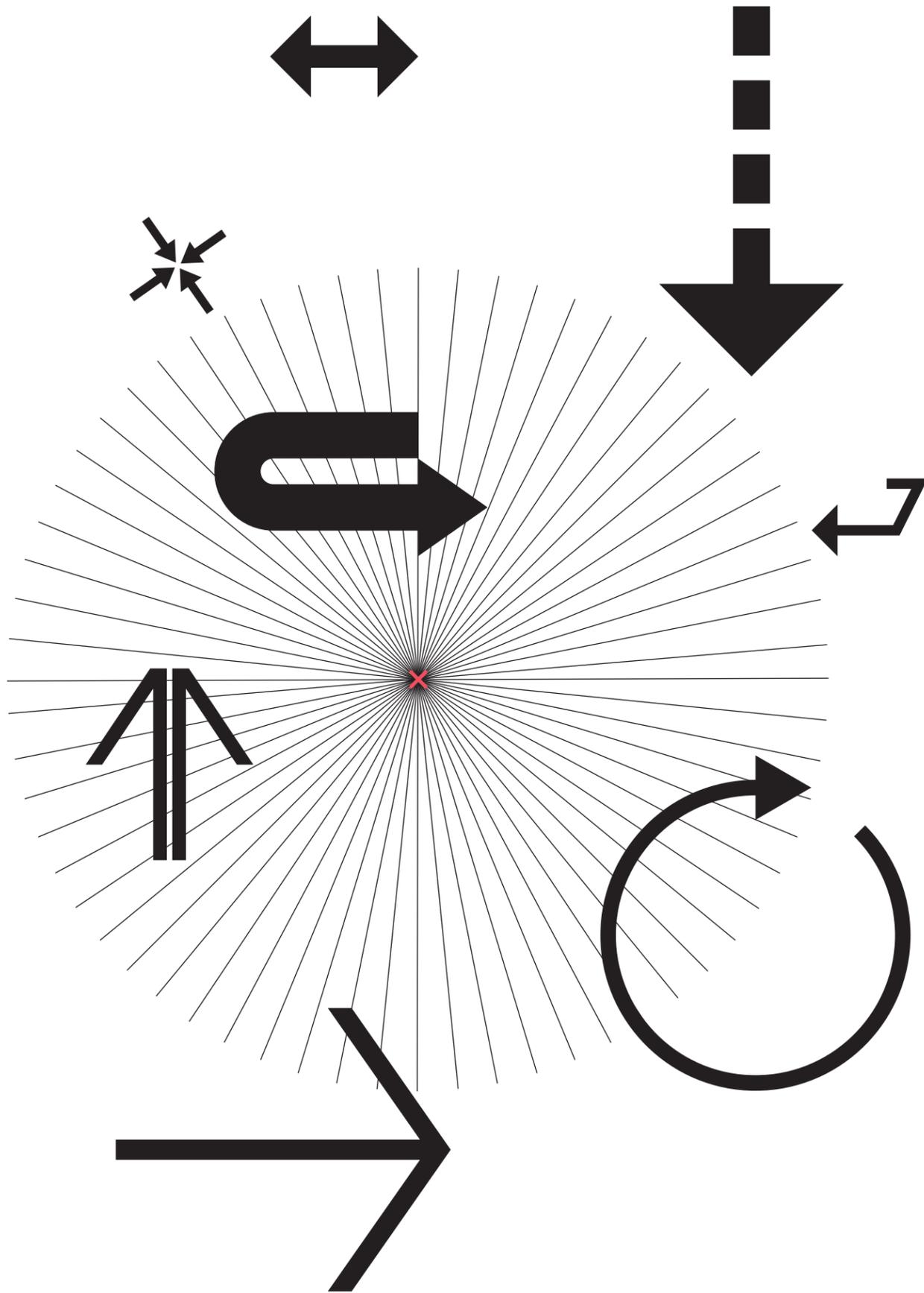
The time
When the world was all mine
Moments turn to memories
The same children I lived with are now my enemies
The life I'm living filled with land mines
If I step too hard, I'll lose soul, body and mind
Impatient, the paranoia's growing
I don't think I can tame it
I don't know how to explain it.

LLOYD JONES

poet hero

i am a superhero
my poem will save
the day
you didn't know
existed

LIZ PAGAN



My Birth Places

I was born in a small island,
called THE GAMBIA.

I was born in Senegal,
on a journey.

I was born in London,
on a vacation.

I was born in Qatar,
in transit.

I was born in Malaysia,
on a tour.

I was born in Thailand,
during a family reunion.

I was born in Ghana,
in school.

I was born on a plane,
flying to the USA.

I was born in the Bronx,
starting a new life.

I was born in Manhattan,
eating at McDonald's.

I was born in Yankee Stadium,
playing soccer in the summer.

I was born in COSTCO,
shopping.

I was born in my kitchen,
cooking my favorite meal.

I was born at the open mic,
showing off my poems.

I was born with some words,
but I don't know what they are.

If you like, you can call them poetry.

ABU TAHIRU SILLAH

Monroe

is a country place.
The town is small.
The houses are patched up
and the trees are many.
The roads are dirt.
Dogs live under the houses
and people are treated like family.
Monroe
is a place where you make up your own games.
I was one of the kids
that played on a hill,
rolled down it
inside a truck tire, stopped by a tree.
On that same tree, I swung on a rope over a pond and fell
into the water, where my aunt's horses and cows drank
from the same pond.

JOHN HAMILTON

The Big Fish

It was a sunny day in June.
Dad gave me a fishing rod.
He took me to the lake.
I threw the line into the water
and waited
for the big one.
As I reeled, I prayed.

But all I caught
was a tree trunk.

CYNTHIA FINLEY

Am I built

out of something more than
graphite residue? How much does it take
to pull me out of water?
How many dead flowers do I have to swallow
before air becomes a formula
and I'm just a living coincidence?

SARAH IQBAL

Digging Out The Honey Pot

The only lies for which we are truly punished are those we tell
ourselves. -V.S. Naipaul, In a Free State

We love like children.
What I mean to say is,
we love without
consequence.
We love when
no one is looking,
tell ourselves this is truth.

It isn't.
It's pulling rabbits out of a hat,
the type of easy magic
children love.
What I mean to say is,
we're better tugging at wool
than telling the truth.

We hide behind the guise of
poetry. Metaphors are easy lies.
We are painters of our own
stupid futures. We are not getting
any younger.
What I mean to say is,
we have been playing this game
for endless years and my arms
hurt from reaching,
my knuckles
hurt from lack of contact,
my teeth hurt from swallowing
you back in small bites,
trying to assimilate to your apathy.

This kind of love gives
poetry a bad name, this kind of love
is too many mosquito bites and no
salve, it is the thick roof of August
heat that settles on your lungs and
makes walking away difficult. It is
the kind of love that comes with a
pocketful of good excuses.

What I mean to say is, I will never
be a good liar, but you bring out
the magician in me. Truth is,
I've got a backyard full of dead rabbits
and all my hats have holes in them.

SARAEVE FERMIN

Dr. Wisdom

I've fallen in love with my surgeon and we are going to run away

far, far away to a place where I don't have to work and he doesn't have to spend his weekend playing tennis with his Fascist father-in-law and one of his petty, twenty year-old girlfriends.

His wife, well, she's not a bad woman. She's just crawled up his ass, bored, an Adderall addict, who doesn't know how to please her man – or herself – if that matters.

His kids are going to understand. He says, *Eventually they could move in with us, don't you think?*

And I say, *Yes.*

I could be a good stepmom.

I can see the four of us, running on the beach. I'm wearing short, denim shorts. I'm young, oh so young, my teeth are whiter than ever, and we laugh. I'm the cool mother they never had, and they make me look great in photos.

We'll move to an island where he can fix poor kids' teeth, maybe even deliver some babies once in a while.

He's strong, he doesn't settle. He drives a Jeep and has learned the mother tongue of the local tribe.

Sometimes he's tired. He's seen so much horror and injustice during his day. *It's almost unbearable,* he confesses.

He has a conscience, that's why I love him.

Under the heat of our tent, by candlelight, I'll remind him that life is more meaningful, now that we are together.

That's all that matters.

Do you miss your kids? Is that it? We can bring your kids here, I say. I kiss him and take off his button-down, white doctor shirt (he's been wearing the same one since the beginning of the story) and I make sweet love to him.

After a cold glass of water, while we stare at the white, shiny stars filtering through the holes of our tent,

I say to him, *Tell me again the story of how we met.*

And he smiles, clears his throat and begins.

Well, you came in on a rainy Thursday afternoon and had the biggest wisdom tooth I had ever seen!

Because I'm Fat

I want to play with the rest of the kids outside, but I won't

Because I'm Fat

I'd like to play baseball, but they pick on me

Because I'm Fat

I hear *nice try* and *keep it up*

Because I'm Fat

People are surprised I eat healthy

Because I'm Fat

We will be best friends and I will listen to him complain about her, instead of her dating me

Because I'm Fat

I'm afraid to be naked and have sex

Because I'm Fat

The skinny girl at work will get the promotion before me

Because I'm Fat

I get sent to special clothing stores

Because I'm Fat

I get charged more for a few extra inches of cloth

Because I'm Fat

The doctor blames me for all my aches and pains

Because I'm Fat

people think I'm lazy

Because I'm Fat

I hate clothes shopping

BECAUSE I'M FAT BECAUSE I'M FAT BECAUSE

NAPOLEON FELIPE

Broken Angel

It's absurd that heaven had to lose
an angel so amazing and our cruel earth
had to destroy him with words like *perfection*
causing him to rip off his wings, and crush his halo because
he was seen as strange and *strange* is nowhere near
perfection in the eyes of humankind.

CHERISE JONES

Pain

But when I look at my daughter
I know there's hope

KHAMARI MATTHEWS

Born

I was born in a car bound
for Texas
just before breakfast.

The morning was hot and sticky.
Driving the back roads, tricky
I came out of the weeds.

That was the start of my need
to feed my endless greed.

CHERYL BROWN

Thursday

at probation.
Be patient, wait.
Don't walk out.
Write.

ALGERNON MARTIN

It's not about fitting in, it's about finding out

The acorn lost

its tree

we all forget where we come from

sometimes

we are listening

we are pierced

with new lives
new lessons
sprung.

The branch

needn't worry
for shelled nuts
are just
evenings spent
inside yourself

talking yourself
out of windows

and into them.

THOMAS FUCALORO



Fly

on my window
caught in the cold
summer's not here yet
he wonders where to go
should i let him in
and keep him warm
feeling kind of sad for him
he got his seasons wrong.

NOEL CUADRADO

Tree

rust brown bark
like skin, tanned
how much this tree has seen
the bruises, like the skin on my feet
peeling away

NOEL CUADRADO

Dust

The gray dust runs on the ground like a mouse
Over the doorstep and into the house
Under the beds, table and chairs
Up to the room at the top of the stairs
Down to the cellar across the brick floor-
There! It's off again through the back door
Never a mousetrap can catch the grey mouse
That keeps the broom busy all over this house.

NOEL CUADRADO



I look around

and see humans
but no humanity

greedy corpses with no shame
live life as a game
they make the world their throne
walking on red carpets
neglecting their wrongs
they steal to get rich
steal from the poor

from the people who struggle to live
drenched in blood and sweat
working day and night to keep their families safe
to make sure no one sleeps on an empty stomach
they dream their pay comes on time
to keep a roof over their heads

they live in fear of being discarded like yesterday's
trash
of drugs and violence
gangs recruiting kids off the streets
gangs spitting out lies about family, about unity

I look around
and see humans
but no humanity

kids laying in corners getting faded
to ease the pain of hunger
kids prostituting themselves for filthy dollars
that these trashy men wipe their asses with

I look around
and see humans
but no humanity

veterans sleeping on trains
no food to eat, no place to call home
they risked their lives
not knowing if they'll ever come back
just to be outcasts
while celebrities are getting stoned
in their million dollar mansions
being of no use to the world
only feeding their egos
promoting vanity and
degrading humanity

now you look around, what do you see?

SHEILA NAHOMI

My Mama's Upset

I don't like when she is
I'm trying to be good, mama
I know you're wondering
What's wrong with my kid
You spoil me
But I got greedy
I know you feel pain
This poem is for you
I'm going to end it off
With Lord knows
I'm trying

ALGERNON MARTIN

Didn't Think Twice

I cut him with a fish knife
He was scared for his life

I threw the coat
Now my life is afloat

Coat, cut, robbery, jail
And that brings us to today
I got probation
It ain't the greatest situation

JAFARI JONES

Pain

came to me
and drove me back down
to where the sun is mute.

MARIA NAPOLEONIS

Circumstance

That morning
she took for granted
she'd live.

She didn't expect him to arrive that day,
angry, speaking with a knife, not words.

They found her body in the bathtub,

her toddler asleep in the bedroom
on the pile of dirty laundry
she'd laid out
that morning.

REBECCA SANTASCOY

My father

said, *Boy, you better become a man,*
with a video game in his hands.

MARK D. LILLY

Balance

my mind
is deep
my heart
shallow,
I am higher
than the trees
but real familiar with the dirt.

DANIEL T.

Today and Tomorrow Poem

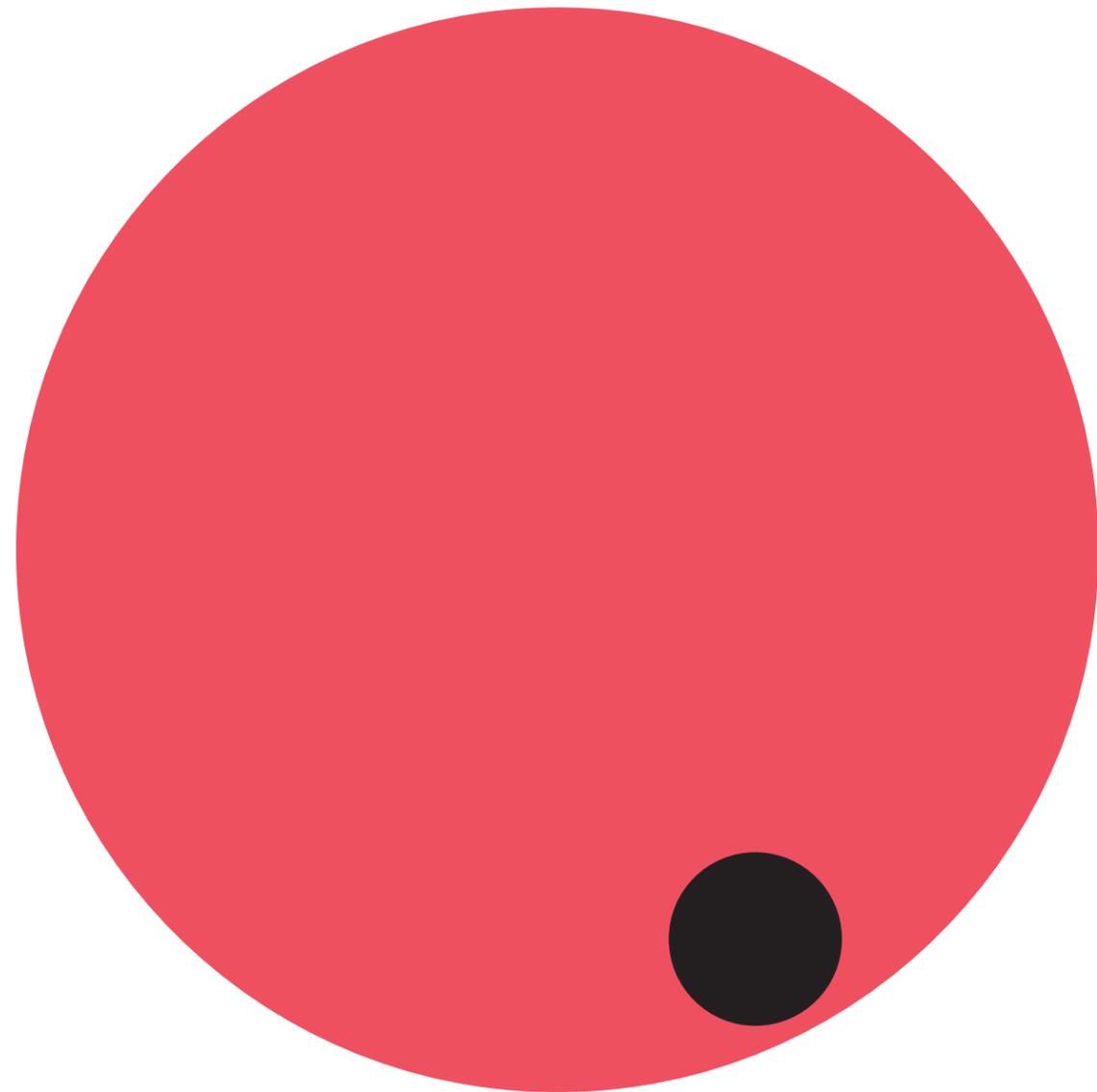
for Lonni

let's not languish
leisurely on loose moments
like broken
tea leaves
left behind

the world demands
we move forward
we must not fall
and scatter like salt
tossed over left shoulders

we are bigger than charms
and superstitions

YASMINE LANCASTER



My headache

wants a chocolate chip frappe
gelato.

ELIJAH NAPOLEONIS

Oranges

Are sweet
Wish they were meat
If I had a whole bunch
I would eat them for lunch
Grapes are great
With so many mates
They have a good taste
Not like toothpaste
I like to eat cherries, not more than berries
Blackberries are sour
And give me lots of power
But they make my mouth taste like lime

TAMYA LILLY

People love black

in material things,
but can't accept it in people.

LEROY JACKSON

A Few Thoughts

destruction and pain, followers
of constant fame

infecting our brains, visions of cash,
girls and rings

let's step out of the lines, inside the box
we call our minds

KENNETH GRIFFIN

27

On The 5

One day
I was on the 5,
saw some old guy
trying to speak
to a young lady.
She turned him down flat.
He kept trying.
The car was packed.
Can I get your number?
I don't know you like that, she said.
Looked like her stop was next.
She was with one of her friends.
She said, *Don't talk to me, talk to her.*
They left the train together, laughing.
And when the doors closed,
The old guy just dropped his head.

DANIEL BARNWELL

Running

170th street
a man asked me for the time

but I was in a rush

I
had
a
long
busy
day

on loud
long busy streets

it's Monday

I tell myself
keep moving forward
no time for

interruptions

KESHON GEORGE

28

Why I Write

I do not need money to write.
I close my eyes and think whatever I want.
Go back in years, look at today, imagine the
future,
look in my soul.

Close your eyes,
imitate me.

IVETTE LABOY

Battered

Don't beat me,
is what I cried
as he punched,
slapped, kicked, choked
and whipped me with that
thick brown belt.

Don't beat me,
mommy, daddy, love of
my life, is what I,
we, us screamed.

Don't you dare put
another one of your stress
marks on me.

Don't you dare
put the scars of your
pain, hurt, and bad
memories
on my back.

I'll be damned
if I'll be
your burden.

When the cuts, gashes, stitches and
broken bones heal
—and I become stronger,
I won't forget
but I, we, us will find a way
to forgive you.

KIM MUMFORD

Impatience

I'm trying to get out of this in-patient program.
I don't belong here.
I belong with my family,
and my girlfriend who is pregnant.

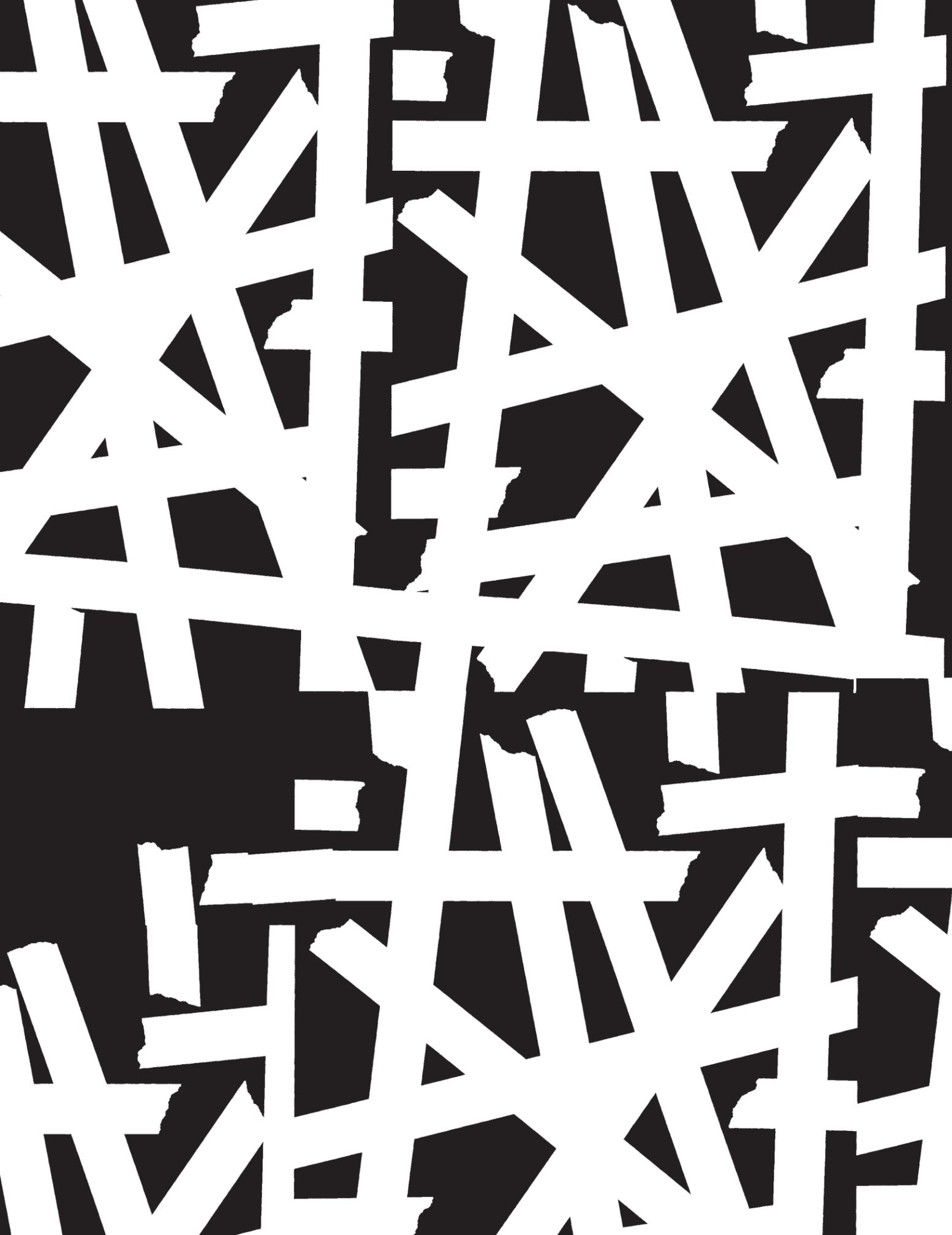
Missed two months of her pregnancy,
spent my birthday here,
I'm about to go crazy.

ROGER REYES

I woke up

thinking 'bout how to improve my life, how to find the money to feed my kids and wife.
So many of the decisions I made ain't right. Most of them lead me to fight. I know
where to hit to bring someone down to my height. But if I do, I'm just showing my kids,
that's right. So I changed my approach, now I'm flying first class in coach, but I ain't trying to
boast. I'm just trying to show, there's a better way in life than just holding the toast.

CHARLES MEJIAS



the sound

of 22 trains
passengers riding
click clack, click clack, click clang

LOUISE WILLIAMS

Madness

Don't be afraid
I'll hold your hand

HARRY THOMAS

In a sea of cement

I swim the hard streets
gasping for air
dirt under my skin
my arms tired
the ugly thick beauty of New York City
like a Van Gogh
but no stars here
just the corner bodega and the drumbeat
a rhythm that swallowed nature

LOUISA MCBEE

Enlightened

My soul developed a
new language
in a jungle of iron
where the heart
pumps water.

RYZIEL WYLIE

Near

Gotta get ready
Release date getting near
Like coffee, cream and sugar
Sweet to the ear
Hope those streets don't get me
And put me back on the grind
Please, no more problems
No more probation, no more time

NOEL CUADRADO

First

The first time they put me away
I thought I'd never meet the day.

Mama always said I was hard-headed
and one day I would find out the hard way.

I found out the hard way, alright.
I caught a case, a real case.

A day hanging with the boys
and now it's jail time.

I was used to getting released
but when that judge said, *remanded*.

Man, I couldn't believe it.
Mama was right.

KHALIEM TURNER

I'm an Artist

Con artist
I swindle
Got caught selling fake tickets
On craigslist
Thought I was slick
That ain't the case, it seems

GILBERT CASTILLO

Ex-girlfriend

She says she listens but she doesn't believe me.
She says she wants me but she doesn't need me.
She says she loves me but then she leaves me.

TAQIY WITTER

poverty

is lurking
if you give in

ONTARIO SOLOMON

Swimming in Blood

black eyes and a broken nose and the water around me polluted by mushrooms of blood,
my brothers and I playing in the pool, pushing off from opposite ends. Each time he sped past me, I could
feel his swimming trunks rub against my thigh.

This time, his left hand, curled into a fist, torpedoed toward my face.

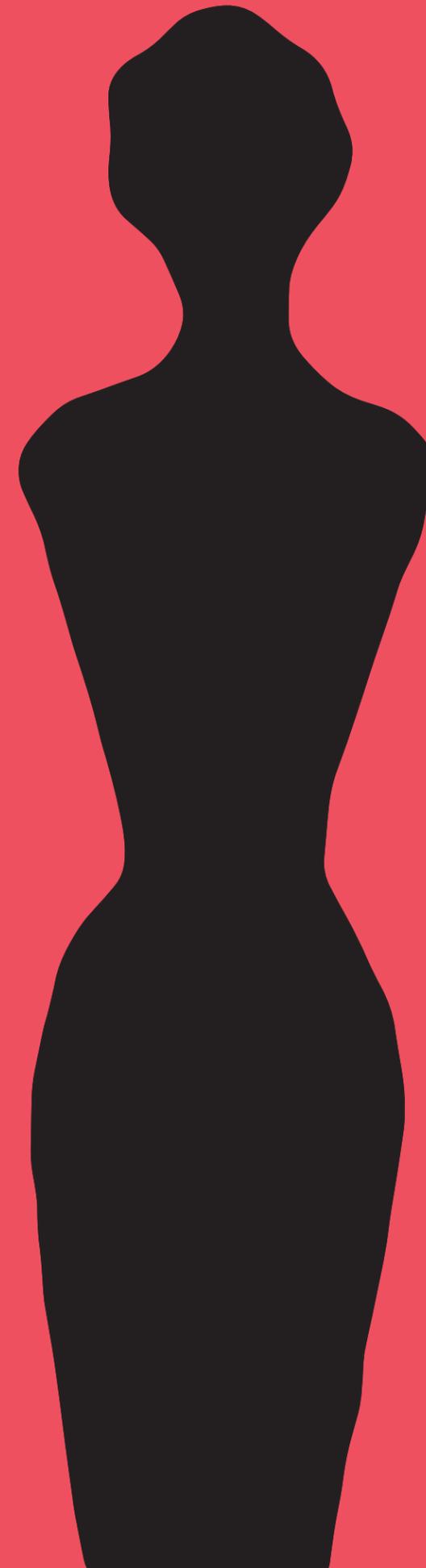
Knuckles met nose. And when I came up for air, the wind was gone from
my lungs. My face was warm and wet with blood,

dripping into the water, down the vinyl sides of the pool, making little crimson dew
drops on the blades of grass,

the sweet taste of lemonade and wide-eyed looks,

and the sterile air of the ER waiting room. All I wanted to do was sleep, but there was
blood in my nose and my hair and blue crescents under my eyes.

EMMA COSTA



Tahara Lilly, Born April 6, 1981

Born and raised in the Projects, nothing is a secret. Everybody knows everybody's business. I was always hearing stuff they said about my mother. When I walked past, everybody would say, *Aint you Tina's daughter?* It used to make me proud until one day, one of my friends screamed, *Your mother's a crackhead so you can't come to my birthday party.*

In the Projects

in the Bronx, we were never scared. Even the roaches were bold. They would come out when mama set out her fancy Thanksgiving dishes. She would Raid their asses to death, spray a whole can of air freshener afterward. Our apartment smelled like a dirty mop in bleach water. I think of her cooking, hitting the roaches with her spoon, *Y'all don't have no respect coming out while I am about to have company*, she would yell. She still made sure she washed the spoon before putting it back in the stew. She grew up down south and would never go back, even though her grandfather left her land. She couldn't stand the countryside, picking beans, growing greens, all the dead flowers. She preferred the stink of piss in the elevator.

Fancy Doll Remix

When I first had her, all I did was play house,
change her clothes two or three times a day.
Grandmother would come in the room saying, *Girl, if you don't put that baby down you going to spoil her.*
I felt bad, nobody to love her,
feed her, bathe her, kiss her, but me.
She loved me and I felt it.
I loved her because she loved me first.

Grandma Threat

You will not do what your mother did to me.
Girl, what's wrong with you?
Why you sleep so much?
Your ass better not be pregnant.
Little did she know, I was. The day she found out, it was snowing.
February 7, 1996. She dragged me all the way to park med, where
they give you hot chocolate, tea, crackers and
let you lay down for almost two hours before they snatch out your insides.
Girl, you will not do what your mother done to me.

Pebble Beach

my first love and i used to go up to the roof to make love.
man, oh man, we had some good times up there. every time i went outside my grandmother would
say, *Girl you better not be going to no boys house getting' yourself pregnant.* i would just mumble under my
breath, *Lady, please i'm just going to the roof.*
all the couples were up there making babies, drinking beer, daydreaming under the stars without
a clue about the future. but our hangout got hot when regina got pushed off the roof by a boyfriend.
it was september 15th and i cried myself to sleep, scared for regina, scared that she was looking
down on me saying, *You should have never hooked me up with that boy.* he was no good.

Who did I have to look up to?

My first teacher became a crackhead.
My second teacher shot dope so often his veins burst while writing on the chalkboard,
say no to drugs.
My third teacher sniffed coke right in front of class. We laughed, thinking she was goofing off,
putting chalk on her nose.

When you have kids, you become their first teacher.
What are you going to do?

TAHARA LILLY

My first kiss

fireworks,
but only for me

JAMEL WARD

I don't

know where I'd be
if my mother didn't guide me.

ALIYYAH RAHMAN

look to the cloud clumps,

shape your own ceiling

CYRUS BANDALI

Bad Child

I put my mother through hell.
She had about 12 ACS cases because of me.
I grew up in a bad neighborhood and I
made bad choices.
I got arrested about six times.
I had a son.
He's three now.
And that changed me.

JENNIFER DE LA CRUZ

I went nuts,

bananas, slicing fruits
throwing orange peels
stomping grapes
pineapple juice flying
knowing my husband was about to leave
I had to clean up my act
and let him toss my fruit salad

TAHARA LILLY

life

does not begin or end
with a flicker of light

CYNTHIA FINLEY

In and out of time

In my own lane, only one
mission with a gun of peace, reload
with bullets of ambition.

BERNARD WILSON

Electricity

the jolt

of your thumb along

the inlet of

my wrist

the echoing timbre

of

your voice

shivers

cartwheel

down

my vertebrae

EMMA COSTA

My Baby

That's my baby, but they're all our babies, babies having babies, liking babies, killing babies, I want to help these babies, babies that can't raise babies, babies that can't provide for themselves, who's gonna' love these babies, our babies that don't think they're babies, but are babies, damn these babies, but baby, it takes a village to raise all these babies.

SHAMECCA JACKSON

us folks

both into
each other
push aside
our feelings
and shout
all sorts
of crazy

schemes
in
an
attempt
to
protect
that
translucent heart

YASMINE LANCASTER

Sorry

I'm supposed to say, *sorry*
after I make a mistake,
and take my punishment.

Aren't tears enough?

You're not the only one
whose life is rough.

But I can't give up on you,
even though we've
had bad luck.

My time is wasted,
let's face it.

So am I supposed to say, *sorry*?

CHERYL BROWN

Greed

His gut ate his heart, his kidney, his testicles every time he passed her, a teen by the C train with three children and no place to go. He thought of Sundays at home down south and all the food. No one he knew was rich. But they ate. And ate. He thought of the whole fryer chicken grandma deep fixed every Sunday and how the boys fought over eating the innards. And the Sunday his cousin choked on the gizzard during the preacher's blessing. When everyone closed their eyes he gulped down the fried vital organ. He tried to swallow it before, Amen. When everyone looked up, he was face flat in his plate. His uncle pried him open, yanked it out and kissed him mouth to mouth to keep him from dying. *I'm dying*, she said, into her cell phone. With her hand rubbing the bump of her belly, she pled out loud for a cup of milk. *That's all I can do, Mama, I can't ask a stranger for money, they have their own problems.*

DAVE JOHNSON

Image

In the attic of my mother's house
I stumbled on a photo,

a little boy and his daddy
sitting on a '65 Oldsmobile.
Would that little boy
become me?
Or would that child become
someone else?

Daddy's gone to another place now.
And I've become the product of my own projection.
Somehow, I hope that photo,
is more than just an image,
much more.

CLINTON LACEY

nighttime walks

when I was a child,
the mica in the cement,
I believed were fallen stars

and I clearly was a giant of a girl,
I not only knew their secrets,
but I skipped over their edges.

YASMINE LANCASTER

Dolled Up,

she painted her lips
dread.

ABU TAHIRU SILLAH

Talking to Ghosts

I always pick up when she calls.
She knows this. It's why she refuses
to call after noon.

With her it's
all rules and I am always breaking
them, always breaking plates,

always breaking inside. I grew up in
the quietest house on the block. We
are all secrets here. I am best

at keeping them, have never called
the cops, have never called
Social Services, have never really

told the truth. I learned early on
the authorities had no authority over
her empire. Three children are easy

to raise if you have all the right
fixings. I'm still not fixed, still can't
get over the fact that I am in love with

rusted things. I can feel the secrets
beneath the peeling metal, bubbling to
the surface, once smooth structures

giving way to fine lines, cracking with age.
I have learned to crack so quietly,
you never even hear the skin pop.

She always calls in the morning.
I always answer.
Even if it's just her ghost.

SARAEVE FERMIN

Like cows

devouring grass just to chew on later.
We pump ourselves full of darkness and grave thoughts.
Until somehow it all comes back into our mouths as
prayers and meditations.

NICOLE GOODWIN

Morning Whispers

Sitting on the steps
peeping with my sister
as dad's hands creep around
mom's neck
both whisper their rhetoric
of angry passion,
voices carrying
fumes,
delicate,
we pretend we're in
our beds asleep.
It was funny how quiet
they thought they were,
whispers escalating
into voices,
until one says,
You'll wake the kids.
For us it was routine
morning fury,
then acts of
alright.
The same subtle voices
dancing to wake
still bodies,
acts of being pulled
from a hoax, dreams
of morning light.
Sometimes I'd cry,
my sister reminding me
to *suck it up,*
they were in love,
and sometimes love
gets a little messed up.
She leaves me to watch,
the steps creek
and neither of them notice.

ALEX BROWN

the struggle as an immigrant

the floor of a tenement.
no friends, no love, nowhere to go.
like living in a cell.

ANONYMOUS



Damaged Goods

Your slap knocked me off my feet.
The words rolled off your lips, the same lips that kissed me softly now say the words
that pin me against the wall. They pound, pound, and pound. Stop, please.
I cannot take what you say into my existence.
As you lean forward speaking softer, the sting of the words is the same.
It doesn't soften the blow because you say them low.
I can no longer listen. I must tune you out. I sing a song and remember dancing in the coolness
of night when this was new. I didn't think it through. I would have never embarked on a
journey knowing it would lead to this.
Your lips taint all.
Your hands on both sides of my face bring me back to the present, force me to look at you.
I see clearly the conviction in your eyes. I hear the pure emotion in your voice.
I try to stay calm in this pivotal moment that lingers.
Why do you echo the same words over and over and over and over?
You wipe my face with your thumbs as blades on a windshield in torrential rain.
You say, Babe, do you hear me? I shake my head, hoping that my confirmation is enough.
My body weak, I give in. I deserve this. This is what I asked for.
I see your lips part and say the words once more...I love you.

MARLITA DALTON

I love myself but sometimes I feel like I'm wrong,

wrong person, wrong place, wrong time. Let me tell you guys a little bit about myself. I used to go to church and straight home. I have 7 brothers. 2 got killed, 1 at a party, and the other 1 on the same corner where I chill. One got stabbed 12 times and the other got shot 7 times in the face. That changed everything. I was staying out, working with my goons, selling drugs, robbing cars, and we had guns. I wanted respect and power and a little bit of cash. One day I visited my mom and she told me her bag got snatched. I was so mad that I spent 3 days looking for that man. When I found him I just pulled out my piece and started shooting at him, like 6 or 7 times. Then I ran to my cousin's house. A week later I got caught and sentenced 3-5. And now, I'm on probation. I'm doing better. I'm doing good and I hope it stays this way, forever.

ERIBERTO VASQUEZ

First

The first time I was sent away
I was 8. No mother or father.
Everything just seemed to fade, wondering
if I'd ever be able to find my mother's
grave. That's a thought in my head
that never went away.

JOEL TORRES

Rich and Lazy

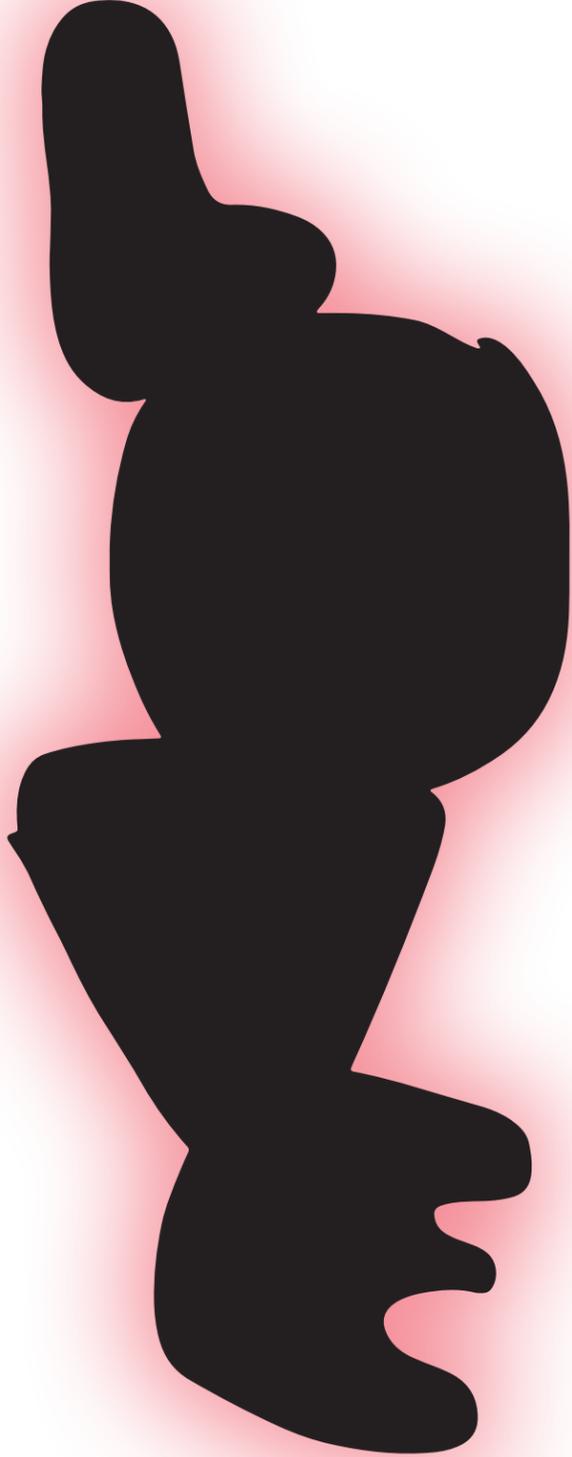
I tell you
Sister
It's a lot of work being broke
Brother you don't even know
How much effort
It takes being poor
Mama you have no idea
How much time is wasted
Sitting in broken Crayola Puke Green chairs

I see you Sister
Counting pennies
Clipping coupons
Jumping turnstiles
Doing hair
Credit at the bodega
Loosies for five
Ketchup for spaghetti
Frank's instead of meat
Drink instead of juice
Kool-Aid every day

Rice again
Rice again
GOD damn rice again

I know...
I know...
This poor thing, is not work for the rich and lazy.

YASMINE LANCASTER



Glisten

I love him 'cause
he's so tough but gentle
and can be so rough with his touch
well-groomed down to the fade
his skin and his nails glisten, damn
he's fine, like a glass of wine,
spilled.

SHAMECCA JACKSON

Drugs

Your rain is over

ONTARIO SOLOMON

Lonely Nights

I walk to her grave
And lean against her tomb,
Share my thoughts,
But as quiet as a cemetery
I get no response.

ABU TAHIRU SILLAH

Overheard Conversation

Do you love me?
I told you I do, what more do you want?
I love being in love with you.
Cool. Just don't break my heart.
I won't, I hope you don't break mine.
The last time I said that to someone,
they did.
Ok, well, just respect me enough
that if you cheat on me, you'll tell me,
as soon as it happens. If you really love me,
well, don't tell me, if you do cheat on me.
Why?
If it don't happen, you won't have to tell me.
Ok, well, when I get off the plane,
I'll tell you.

CASSANDRA O'NEAL

5 AM

She came in creeping, quiet as a mouse.
A big stinky mouse, she reeked of booze.
You got no shame woman.
Five in the morning!
You come in here shuffling, crawling.
Your children missed you.
Practically cried themselves to sleep worried!
Have you no shame?
Have you no common sense?
I got half a mind to thrash you!
But it looks like the streets did that for me.
Modern day Jezebel.
What you got to say for yourself?

And she says, *Are you hungry?*
Want any breakfast?

NAPOLEON FELIPE

Toussaint Louverture

The Black Napoleon, leader of the Haitian Revolution

Black flower
you are
the sand
the desert
the Sahara
Africa
Arradas
Saint-Domingue
coup d'etat
you are a tree trunk
deep roots
liberty
Haiti's cultural garden.

HARRY THOMAS

I have some poems for Thursday

Who cares what I'm thinking
So many things going on in my head
Gotta tell someone
Who will listen
Man, this is tough
Maybe I will tell them
No, they'll laugh
Them over there, won't understand
Man I need to speak
But do I want people to really know me
Maybe I should say what I truly mean
Do I actually know
Now, I'm confused

DARRYL C. WILLIAMS

I am not sure how we died

and who buried us.
I woke up beside so many bodies.
My mouth
filled with sand,
a narrow place,
I could barely move,
screaming, *Please! Somebody! Help!*
Give me a hand.
The last thing I remember,
four men in uniform came to my house
and had a conversation with my family.
After downing cups of coffee,
my mother packed my bag:
a pair of socks, a toothbrush, a blanket, a sandwich.
I got to my destination,
miles away,
surrounded by a tall fence.
It smelled like a jungle
and all these young boys my age
and we hadn't had enough
sleep, when a loud explosion
woke everyone up.
And someone shouted, *It has started!*
I didn't know what was going on,
but I'm sure the other boys did.
They were happily celebrating, jubilating, and singing,

We are at war.
We will fight 'til the very end.
My country, I will die for.

I didn't know how to use a real gun,
though I grew up
playing with toy guns.
Standing in the battlefield, feeling all stupid and dumb,
something
fell from the sky,
hit the ground
and we all fell apart.
I was only
16.

ABU TAHIRU SILLAH

I wish I could

say beautiful words that flow like a poet's, but I can't. Once they escape my lips they vanish into wisps of smoke before meeting your ears. They can't compare to yours. Yes, you are odd, but that makes you far too beautiful, for any words I can stumble upon.

CHERISE JONES



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