



FREE VERSE

2018

### Free Verse Staff

#### Editor-in-Chief Poet-in-Residence

Dave Johnson

#### Managing Editor

Lonni Tanner  
Chief, Civic Innovation  
NYC Department of Probation

#### Lead Writing Apprentices

Napoleon Felipe  
Sherese Francis  
George Warwick

#### Writing Apprentices

Rowana Abbensetts  
Garrie Edwards  
Michael Gomez  
Denzel Jones  
Bruce Kirkland  
Tiffany Martin  
Omar Ovalle  
Janet G. Robinson  
Franze Williams  
Taqiy Witter

#### Design

Delcan & Company

#### Design Consultant

Carin Goldberg

#### Illustrations

Delcan & Company (Cover,  
pp. 8, 14, 29, 33, 48, 80)  
Edel Rodriguez (pp. 1, 54)  
Annie Jen (p. 19)  
Cristiana Couceiro (pp. 26, 66)  
Alvaro Dominguez (p. 40)  
Javier Jaen (p. 59)  
Adam Maida (pp. 72, 85)

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### With Great Appreciation

NYC Department of Probation  
Ana M. Bermudez, Commissioner

### With Deep Respect

NYC Department of Probation  
Michael Forte, Deputy Commissioner

### Praise

Brooklyn Opportunities Café, Brownsville NeOn Team, East New York NeOn Team, Queens NeOn Team, South Bronx NeOn Team, Staten Island NeOn Team

### Hats Off

Tyiece Barclay, Lee Briccetti, Cheryl Brown, Laura Caparrotti, Yahira Castillo, Tiesha Cobb, Ayanna Cole, June Cooley, Marlita Dalton, Brenda Davis, Alan Dorvil, Sandra Estrada, Laura Fantini, Sharun Goodwin, Ann Gregg, Rhonda Hughes, Elizabeth Keifer, Paul Leufroy, Jeannine Iorio, Zelzah Martin, Catrina Prileau, Donald Raysor, Esteban Rivera, Angel Ruiz, Cindy Ruiz, Michelle Rugel, Tim Salyer, Antoine Sherman, Jasmine Sims, Arlene Smith, Rodney Smith, Amy Swauger, Yulia Tikhonova, Jade Triton, Aline Vartanian

### Kindness

Kairos Italy Theatre, Poets House, Teachers & Writers, St. John's University, St. John's University Art Gallery, St. John's University Italian Studies, Visions Senior Center

### Gratitude

NYC Department of Cultural Affairs

### Applause

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**NeON** Arts **NYC Cultural Affairs**

A program of the NYC Department of Probation  
in partnership with Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute

### Join Us!

For more information about Free Verse writing workshops,  
public readings, and programmatic materials, write to:  
freeversepoems@gmail.com.

**Turbulent times are impossible to ignore. So are the voices of probation clients, their families, friends, neighbors, and the probation staff, all who recognize the world is in need of repair.**

**Born from this need and the need to be *heard*, Free Verse is a place to speak your *peace*. More than 2,200 submissions poured in this year – double from last year. Rooted in five probation center waiting rooms, graduates of our writing program – now paid client apprentices at each center – serve as lead instructors, gathering the voices of new poets and encouraging them to speak out at open mic Thursdays, contribute to the giant 10-word story wall, or write a piece for *Moving Stories* that will travel the city.**

**In these pages, the poets share hard reality and the determination to keep life moving forward – despite the odds. At Free Verse, we believe the only thing that separates any of us in this world is opportunity.**

**Read these works. Share them with others. It's a start.**

## – The Editors

DAVE JOHNSON  
Editor-In-Chief

LONNI TANNER  
Managing Editor

### WHAT MAKES ME PROUD?

Our staff embracing this vital poetry program. People on probation coming to write on days they don't even have to report. The community participating in our free writing workshops and events. Listening to our poets perform. Publishing the first book written by a Free Verser. Our poets traveling the city – and the world – to share their work. Writing program graduates earning paid positions as apprentices. Poets getting jobs as working artists at New York City non-profits. This magazine.

### ANA M. BERMUDEZ

Commissioner  
NYC Department of Probation

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## Broken America

I wish I knew how to heal  
The growing rifts  
Or even if they are healable.  
I try and it feels as if I'm meddling  
In something I shouldn't.  
I'm still figuring it out,  
Hands through the dark.  
I've been told to be quiet  
When I want to scream  
About the wounds  
Of a country more worried about  
Upgrades for the latest  
iPhone or app.  
Where are the repairs  
To refurbish broken souls;  
Not looking for  
Medals, not looking for  
Awards, just looking for  
Reasons to keep being here.

SHERESE FRANCIS

# My pen isn't a poem.

MARGARET GAYLE

## I'd rather be in the circus

than be like this.  
Their tricks come in handy,  
melts you like cotton candy.  
At least they're being themselves  
and not forced to be someone else.  
The way they turn a frown upside down,  
they deserve a crown.  
I'd rather be in a circus than be like this.

TIFFANY BARNES

## What if?

What if I decide to do this?  
What if I decide not to do that?  
What if I love this woman?  
What if I look in her eyes and she doesn't look back?  
What if I decide to tell her how I feel?  
What if by then she's long gone, hair blowing in the wind, with her shades on?  
What if I blow it just by being me?  
What if I just put it in a poem?

TYRONE JOHNSON

## February: Black History

Why is February the shortest month of the year?  
My past legacy, which I revere, with my *brothermen*  
just to get February.  
And it's the shortest month of the year.  
As cops look at me and peer,  
making me want to hide and disappear.  
Where can I go to tackle this frontier?  
It goes back in time  
to those years that my fear blended  
into my heritage of being a different nationality,  
looking in the mirror and having no reality.  
*February* is when I come alive.  
For 28 days  
I see myself in everyone's eyes.

CHERYL BROWN

## I was thinking how ungrateful I am.

It manifests itself gravely  
in absurd situations that life in New York proposes.  
Ah!  
I miss the drums of my land,  
the heat of the savanna.  
I feel hopeless, taken away from everything that it means to live.  
And the cold.  
So elusive.  
I want it to be extinguished.  
Like my despair.  
Rescued from this hole.

ANA CARMELA RAMIREZ CONTRAMAESTRE

## First thought in the morning:

How much money am I capable of earning today?  
And the day after.  
Imagine this:  
fingers caressing grubby paper,  
disgusting, huh?  
Sniffing for a fragrance hundreds of miles away from  
me.  
Sweat.  
Ink.  
Skin.  
I patiently hold up my body,  
a narcotic resolution.  
Sometimes I ask myself,  
Where is your smile?

ANA CARMELA RAMIREZ CONTRAMAESTRE

**Justice,**

I'm tired  
of being  
an *anonymous*  
target.

ANONYMOUS

### **Mentiras Verdadera**

La mentira, la mentira necesaria?  
Solo cuando la verdad  
es muy difícil  
de creer.

RAMÓN HERRERA

### **True Lies**

The lie, the necessary lie?  
Only when the truth  
is too difficult  
to believe.

D.J. - ENGLISH TRANSLATION

### **Cold World**

where jackets don't  
help a bit, where people  
would rather struggle than  
drown in a pool of regret, where  
the word happy  
is a different five letters  
(**m-o-n-e-y**),

where  
the word hot  
doesn't refer to the weather,  
where people would rather practice  
doing worse than getting better.  
It's a cold world,  
but some may beg to differ.

STEPHAN CARNEGIE

**Those**

who died yesterday

had plans

for this morning.

And those who died this morning

had plans

for tonight.

DIONNE DEY



## Questions my five-year-old daughter asked me:

Why was I born?

Where is the sky blue?

Who do people go to when they die?

What is life?

What is love?

Why do people hate?

S. A. R.

**I only feel Hispanic** when you tell me how loud I am around my family. You assume we're arguing. My accent gets activated when my mother talks to me. My words suddenly no longer make sense to an ear that isn't well-versed in Spanish. Now I understand the meaning of culture shock when you ask me, *What are you?* Like it's the first time you've seen this creature, an alien that just appeared from an unidentified boat. I simply reply with a smile, *I'm human*, letting you know I wasn't offended by your question or curiosity. You seem to enjoy the food I make. And you say my music makes your hips sway. And you begin to lose control, almost possessed by the rhythmic hymns of guitar strings. You should see the look on your face. You giggle as I twirl you around! You transform into this beautiful Goddess Unique. With no equal! I love the way you look at me like, who I am matters, in a world where being Hispanic is always second to Gringo.

NAPOLEON FELIPE

## Light Show (song lyrics)

They don't want to see me-----at the light show.  
Every time I see you-----I'm on go mode.  
Crazy-----you'll be on me like a-----psy cho.  
If I ever see you, it's so-----psych----- i-i-i-i-----cho!  
You always give me bad advice, o, o!  
And trippin on me-----that's a no-no.  
See me in the streets-----respect my vibes, bo.  
I say,  
Yea, they don't want to see me at the light show.  
Every time I see you-----I'm on----go mode.  
It's so psych i-i-i-i- cho. It's so psych----- i-i-i-i-----cho!

KIARA DIAZ

## Today

I live in hurt.  
Promise me  
tomorrow I will heal.

XIOMARA GUTIERREZ

## integration

*you know, my suitemate said*

*what, I replied*

*you know any black girls  
we could hook up with,  
but not real black,  
Barbie black?  
like black on the outside only?*

YASMINE LANCASTER

## 100 voices, 100 stories.

Dislike me?  
You don't know me.  
I may laugh,  
but I'm never joking.  
I don't write poems.

HOLLI JOHNSON

## HVAC

I can't wait for summer.  
I'm going to train  
for a job in heating  
and air conditioning.  
Summer is when my life changes  
for the better,  
conditioning with new air.

JEREMY M.

## My Mother

My mother spit in my face.  
My mother was busy fighting with my dad.  
My mother said men would only want me for sex *because you are fat*.  
But she has selective memory and doesn't remember any of that.

RACHEL BERGER

**all the black girls have brown eyes**

She kept pouring her maple syrup  
till the blueberry pancake pushed off the  
circumstance of her plate  
and moved towards the center  
floating secure in the thickness of sugar.

We were growing thick  
and so were they  
children we were  
surrounded by maple trees.

Where I am from Aunt Jemima  
had a headscarf and cost 3.49 a bottle  
we did not pour until our cup runneth over.

Late one night I stumbled in and watched  
fascinated as the others  
showed the boys how to wine- and wine-  
while their backsides moved against their pelvis'  
careful not to let the sap spill.

YASMINE LANCASTER

PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK.COM/ALEXEY\_DS



## Why Tone Die

Why Tone die and not come back

Why Tone die when I told him to chill not lack

Why Ty left home with that scrap

Ty should've left home with his backpack

Why Tay had a fight with her baby-father

Why Tay baby-father shot his own daughter

Why Tim had to take that last hit

He should've got to the program and quit

But hold up I'm not finished

Let's stay on topic

Keep it straight business

I don't care who did this

This could go on forever

God, can I get a witness

ISAIAH ELLIS

## Staten Island

In the early 70s, I moved to Staten Island from Queens Village. I knew nothing about Staten Island. A friend helped me get an apartment in Fox Hills at 350 Vanderbilt Avenue, Apartment 4B. Me and my three children lived there. They went to the local private school and I got involved. I also began babysitting local children, taking them on trips (on the Ferry) off the Island, teaching them their history. As Staten Islanders, we had to go to Harlem for our history. I taught the children what they should know before they even went to school. Living on Staten Island has been an ongoing trip. I am still traveling!

JANET G. ROBINSON

Note:

Janet G. Robinson is a well-known proponent of civil rights and equality for the underprivileged on Staten Island. She volunteers to watch children for parents while they navigate the judicial system. She also introduced Kwanzaa to Staten Island and holds fundraisers to support Kwanzaa celebrations for children. Her energy and insight are legendary.

16

**B**oldly **L**oving **A** **C**elestial **K**in

|  
|

YASMINE LANCASTER

## The Drug War Dialogues

So, before we start, can we just talk about your never-ending status?

Let me say, right now, that I can't stop, won't stop. I'm in the trillions, and I'm still on the come up. What took you so long? Your number was called last week. Late then, later now.

Well, why are we here?

Tell us, what's going on up there?

You mean down there.

Yeah, right here.

False claims, fake news, old blues, blood & feathers, gold & water, bad weather, black bodies, brown detentions, low retentions, you know, same ole, same ole.

Well, shit, let's celebrate.

But we're free now.

Ya'll were free then.

Well that part is over. But maybe it's better this way, struggling to live, learning to love.

Nah, that's a game for the played, my brother. How long you bean clean?

This can't be the end. Where all my people?

Don't waste my morning, man.

Why all those guns all up in my face like that?

Well, how many ways did you choose to be alive? Unplugged, less a signal, the virtuous time is here. Revolution, say amen. Every fight should request a repeat. When you only have one direction, you need to be saying the same thing. You ask, you answer. That's the way it is down here.

You mean up here.

You think I'm joking right now.

I'm saying, though, why you smiling.

And here we were, right in the middle of building a pill free of time, a day to sleep for not one, but two breakthroughs; opening those narrative windows, belly singing into the ambrosial hour. Who are all these women wearing white and smoking cigars? Why are they looking at the sun, why are they looking at me?

All is fair in love and drug wars. You ain't the only one taking pictures.

WILLIE PERDOMO

## Black Women are Best Loved as Martyrs

*"This shit is not a coincidence."*

-Justin Woo

I

In the real world there are Black women's bodies. some dead, some dead.

*Some dead by force!*

all their fates resemble mines. In silence, the deep black American quiet, we hold these truths as evident.

We Black women (of the Ghetto) are taught these realities quickly.

II

Is it a sin for me to throw in the towel early? Is it a sin for me to throw in the towel early? Is it a sin for me to throw in the towel early? To choose suicide—by my own black hands,

Or

become the latest hashtag...

III

God, how I hate this society...  
America, you are why Jesus wept.

NICOLE GOODWIN



## rehearsal

he dropped his candy cigarettes  
we were pretending to be Bad smoking cigarettes on Columbus Avenue  
4 white boys and me  
children  
until we crossed the street  
and 3 Black boys stopped us angrily  
and asked for our cigarettes

and when I say asked, I mean they pushed  
their hands against, my friend's chest,  
use your words not your fists  
but right before they punched Fred

he dropped the chalky fruit cigarettes  
onto the concrete,  
one of them looked at me and  
this time, using his words and not his fists,  
you-are Black like us,  
so I am not going to hit you  
and I thought it was because I was the only girl among them

YASMINE LANCASTER

## Pretty Gang

War paint on her face  
Plastic smile gets food on her plate  
Her heartbeat real, her love fake  
She doesn't know how to give thanks

She's part of the Pretty Gang  
She's mean for money because money means *so, so, so* much  
She never knew  
She too could feel sad-blue

She's part of the Pretty Gang  
Doing her thing  
For whips and chains  
In school, teachers tell her, *slavery's over*.

TAQIY WITTER

## Long Nights, Short Days

Dry throat, empty stomach,  
broken hearts, broken locks  
and where is my happiness?

TII TII FAYSON

## Such sorrow

bestowed on me  
prevents me from loving or living,  
my sanity slipping,  
despair corrupting,  
rage is all I believe in.

CHARDAE SALTERS

## Clues

I love you eyes your vibestoo Believed your  
lies were too blind to see the truth You broke  
my small heart I felt like I saw the blues but  
still got love for you hope you see the clues  
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got love for you hope you see the clues. I lov  
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heart I felt like I saw the blues but still got love fo  
r you hope you see the clues. I love you eyes your  
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see the truth You broke my small heart I felt like I  
saw the blues but still got love for you hope you  
see the clues. I love you eyes your vibestoo Be  
lieved your lies were too blind to see the truth Y  
ou broke my small heart I felt like I saw the blues  
but still got love for you hope you see the clue.

LAMALL KINSEY

Can I ask

who created this world?

TINY

## Never Love Again

I prolly never love again  
Never love again  
Unless it's less rahshea or sin  
Here we go again  
Still see we wit the beats goin in  
Can't no longer hold it in  
They say just let it out but I keep it all in  
And see thru gangstas tryna keep all friends  
I don't keep no more friends  
Prolly never love again  
Never love again  
Unless it's rahshea or sin  
I'm so Brooklyn wit the pen  
I'm so Bed-Stuy  
Lemme take you where I been  
All the way thru hell  
But lemme take it back  
My moms was smokin' crack  
That's why I be spittin that  
She would beat us like Ye  
I let it flow like Jay  
When I turn 5 she died I said yeh  
Wish I could take it back

Way back in the days  
Born in Harlem  
Mommy had a problem  
Daddy was a ghost  
So you know the crib was haunted  
Gangstas I can't call it  
5 brothers, couple cousins my mother,  
Grandmother, a couple others, 3 bedrooms too  
Cluttered  
Gotta find a way to vacate out that house  
I'm from where only one'll make it out, 1 sister  
We don't kick it she be trippin, standin' still  
Swallowed my pride and I realized that I can't  
Stand her still

I prolly never love again  
Never love again  
Unless it's less rahshea or sin  
Here we go again  
Still see we wit the beats goin in  
Can't no longer hold it in  
They say just let it out, but I keep it all in  
And see thru gangstas tryna keep all friends  
I don't keep no more friends  
Prolly never love again  
Never love again  
Unless it's rahshea or sin

LUVA AH

## Laugh at my Poem

When I was growing up we were poor.  
Sometimes we went to bed with no dinner.  
I used to have wild dreams.  
I would talk in my sleep.  
Once my mother said, *Wake up!*  
*What wuz you dreaming about?*  
And I said, *I was dreaming that I was eating*  
*steak and mashed potatoes.*  
My mother smacked me, *You selfish bastard.*  
*You couldn't share that dream with your brother?*

I remember we had no clothes  
and my sister and brother wore Twister game mats,  
shower curtains, and tablecloths to school.  
We used dish detergent as bubble bath.  
If it rained we would put buckets  
in the living room to catch the raindrops.  
I remember my parents getting lucky  
and I would bust in the door and see them.  
My mother would yell, *Close the door, Bruce.*

I remember my grandmother told me  
she killed her dog  
because it rolled its eyes at her.  
I remember my mother told me *You're retarded,*  
but I grew out of it.  
I used to take the little yellow bus.  
That was embarrassing stuff.  
We had to sit on little chairs,  
no desk, round tables.  
I was in a class with a boy  
who wore a football helmet.  
Other kids used to tease me, too.  
Sincerely, I say, just laugh at my poem.

BRUCE KIRKLAND



## Gotta watch

who's around you.  
They could be trying to level you down,  
instead of  
leveling  
you up.

MOS

## 2nd Chance

Fresh home from jail  
rebirth from hell,  
another chance to build.  
Please,  
more food,  
I need another meal!

OMAR DOOLITTLE

## Two summers back

in Brooklyn, I moved  
on Schenck,  
and found out  
I was pregnant.  
I had the baby.  
She's beautiful.  
Hell yes, she's beautiful!  
Being a mother is  
*inexplicable.*

DARLENE MERCEDES

## Only

sober people

get to eat.

P.I.

## I'm tired, tired, tired. Damn, damn, damn.

How we gonna fix this?  
I need to go away  
for a couple of months  
to get my head straight.  
I might find myself  
a better person again.  
You can blame it on the crack  
or drink,  
and stuff like that.  
I gotta, I'm gonna  
get back on the right track.

STUDDA'LOVE (KENNETH)

## Love

It's easy to fall in,  
but hard to get out.  
And there's in-between  
days bright as the sun  
and nights go cold  
as a December midnight.

ERNESTO VALENTINE

## one thing.

your love means everything.

you're tough,  
but I'm dying.

MICHELLE GAYLE

## A Battered Woman

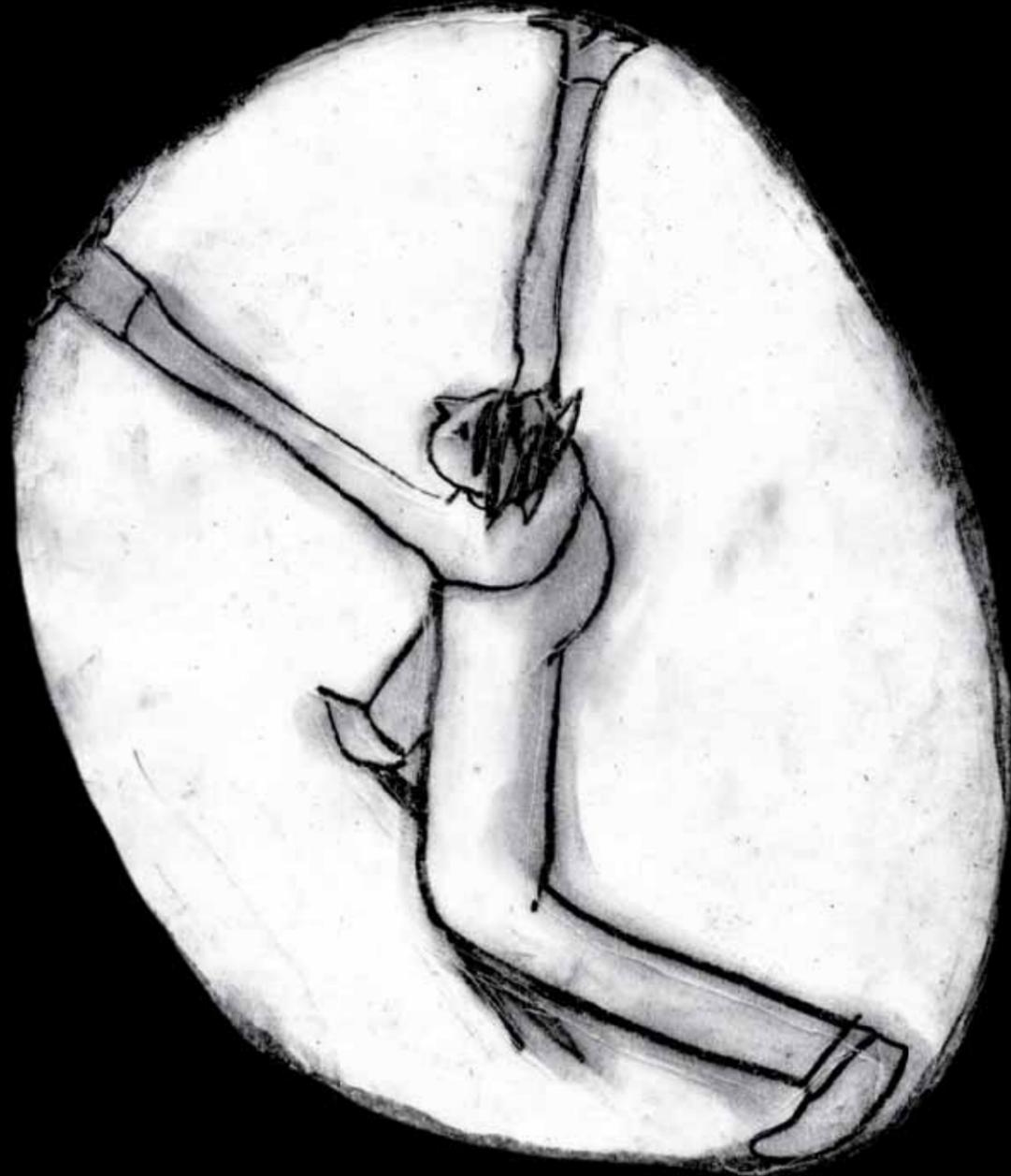
The pain eats up my mind,  
crimps my body and I bleed.  
How can hurt, hurt so much?

JEANETTE PETERSON

## Rain

The rain makes me sluggish. I want to stay in bed. But that's in my head. I was a Marine and they taught me the rain was an advantage. As a college football player I can remember some of my best games were played in the rain. I made tackle after tackle. The rain made it hard for the running back to run the ball. You know, poor traction. But the rain feels good, the water splashing on my face in the cool wind. And we need rain for the plants and trees and drinking water. I look forward to the rain.

ALAN DORVIL



## Unexpected

I had every single excuse to be angry, depressed and f%#!! mad with the world.

But when I think about you, I get the feeling of happiness.

I don't know anything about you.

What a beautiful gift, your presence and energy shows me that this is not the end.

I like the feeling of silliness I get when I see you, when I'm close to you.

Quietly, I made the decision to isolate myself completely from the world.

But I've found a very profound sense of joy after meeting you.

The unexpected gave me a reason not to give up. And it's getting even better.

OMAR OVALLE

## Stuck

sitting in probation  
lacking motivation

wanna do more  
but I'm hesitant

it's hard not to be  
a pessimist

stuck in my ways  
but tryna better it

AARON RAMOS

31

## Stuck In A Cage

no way to get out  
Stuck in a cage  
all alone, no spouse  
Stuck in a cage  
for the cheese like a mouse  
Stuck in a cage  
for not following the rules  
in the Lord's house

ANDREW ROSE

## Life is too short to drown

swim in passion  
be grateful for the *wave*.

STEPHAN CARNEGIE

## Far From

Far from perfect  
But perfectly imperfect  
Far from mean  
But boldly blunt  
Far from your average everyday  
But definitely been around the block  
Far from the standout bitch  
But uniquely designed  
Far from your wish upon a star  
But definitely your dream come true  
Far from your ivy league status  
But educated with honors  
Far from washed up  
But experienced beyond measure  
My shortcomings are my up rises  
My downfalls have become my stepping-stones  
My heartaches have transpired into turning points  
Your nonsense has become my laxatives  
As I refrain, release and rebuild  
This life here, not done, #Farfrom...

SCHOLANDA MILLER

32



PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK.COM/ MICHAEL BURRELL

### Scene of the Crime

I  
Today they almost **dragggggggeeedd**  
to jail!  
Said I was a nuisance,  
Said I was irate;  
Said I was irrational—me  
My bared Black breasts & skin, too much  
made in America. Public enemy #1...  
Unruly cops come in packs of pairs.

me  
Me  
me  
me  
Me

II  
He would have Snatched the Black off my head,  
Had the universe let him.  
Black body on the frontline...  
I am told that white pity is safer for Black skin  
Than sunscreen.

III  
“We were all prayed up before we got  
here!” My companions said.  
Somewhere God was lookin’  
And with a merciful wink Came salvation.

listenin’

NICOLE GOODWIN

Dear Kali Hope,

When you were born  
I was so excited. I told  
everybody, *She's here.*  
And Down syndrome  
doesn't change the fact  
that you're soooooo  
beautiful. I will never  
turn my back on  
you. I will never be  
ashamed to walk the  
streets with you. I will  
love you forever, my  
grandbaby, Kali Hope.

KEISHA HAYDEN

## Anguish

Is it worth it  
or should I just end it  
via knife?  
Drugs, depression, disassociation  
is how my misery is spent  
in this endless pit.  
Not sure if I have an answer  
to this constant version  
of the same event.  
No magic bullet,  
but there's always hope.  
Just hope you're not caught  
waiting to get hit  
by a magic asteroid.

RYAN HOLMES

## The Right Way

We're all in trouble  
living in their bubble.  
It's a catastrophe  
living in their fantasy.  
How do they come up with policy?  
It's all a fallacy.

JOSÉ ESPINAL

## Roses

are red  
violets are blue  
I want to get  
the hell

outta here!

OLIVER IRELAND

## Mixed Emotions

it's like my brain is  
on shuffle,  
I stay in my duffle  
bag, once my mind is straight everybody's  
in trouble,  
if you talked  
behind my back,  
just know  
I still love you.

MG THERAPPER

**Why try** to make it

when your supporters try to bring you  
down?

DEVON WARREN

**When you have money**

why do haters come around?

DEVON WARREN

**Why am I** on the beach, but I see no ocean?

RODNEY HUFF

**Why is** the sun black?

RODNEY HUFF

**Why am I**

me  
and  
not  
you?

RICKABABY

## Sintomas Del Amor

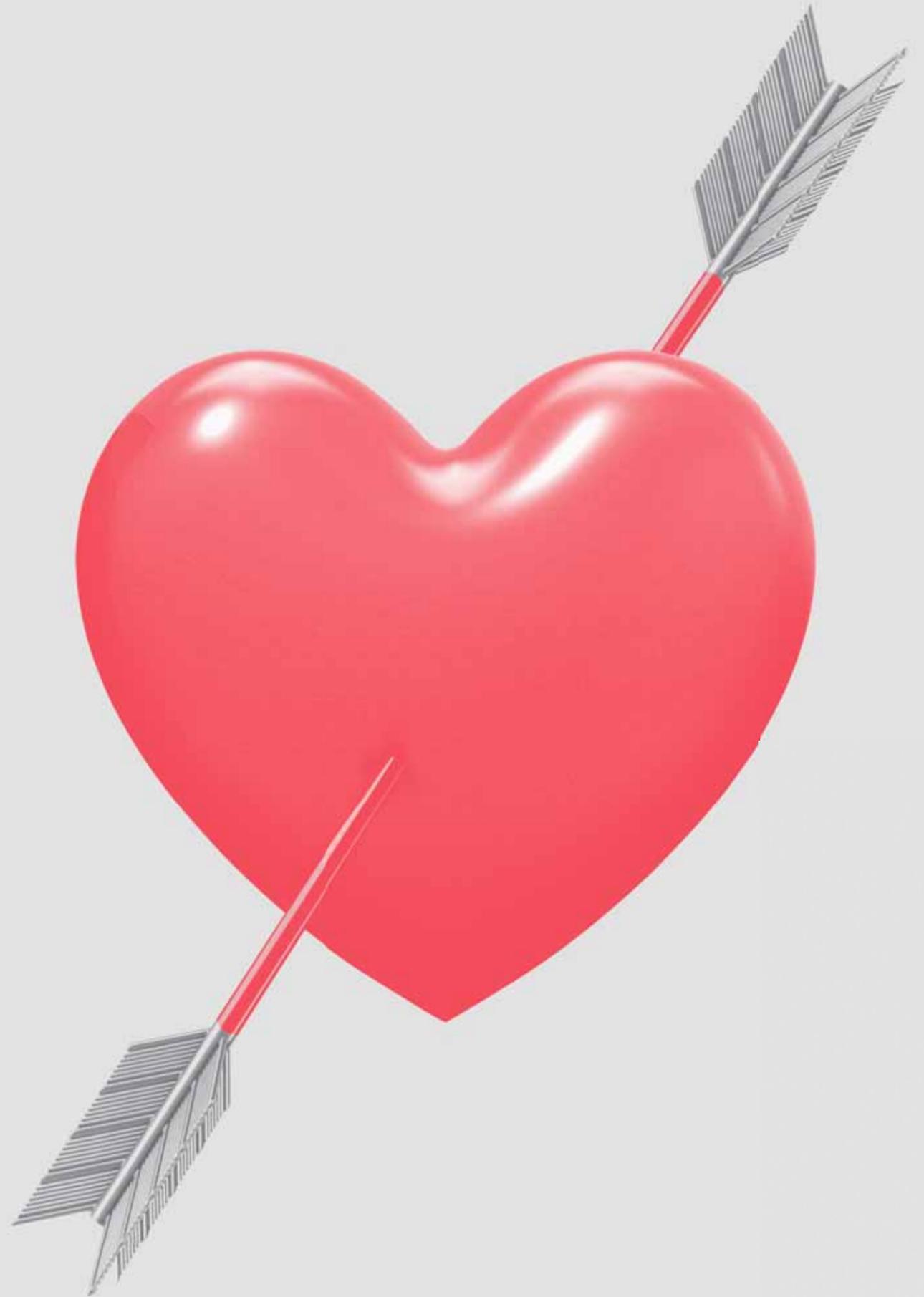
El amor, en momento, es bello  
y te sube al cielo,  
pero vuelve tonto,  
sordo, y ciego,  
si en verdad tu ama.

RAMÓN HERRERA

## Symptoms of Love

Love, in the moment, is beautiful  
and it takes you to the sky,  
but you get stupid,  
you go deaf, you go blind,  
if in truth, you love.

D.M. - ENGLISH TRANSLATION



Delicious and cheesy,  
Fresh baked crust,  
Close your eyes  
& take a bite!  
In **Pizza** we must.

STEVEN CRUZ

### **You are!**

a coffee bean with a weave.  
Your fine brown complexion magnifies  
your infectious smile and diabolical  
attitude like strong espresso.  
Your lankiness, hypnotic eyes  
and G style make you bewitching,  
enigmatic as a capuchin secret!  
You are self-consciously skeptical,  
at odds with reality, with a misbelief  
of certain truths. You are so old school,  
yet you cut a fresh foam figure  
like a caramel latte. It's nice to know  
there are still things you haven't seen  
while waiting for your wafting aroma.  
I can tell you my secrets. I trust you.  
Like a coffee bean, you convert water  
to a hot shot of dark caffeine.

G. W.

Tough on the outside  
sweet on the in-  
standing tall  
and proud,  
crown in the clouds,  
yellow  
as the sun's skin  
when I eat you  
I think to myself,  
**Pineapple,**  
you prickle like a pin.

SADIE FELDER



OMAR OVALLE

## Is my hair ok?

Why am I addicted to a life of lust,  
money, and drugs?  
Is there a life for the wicked?

TY BECKETT

## The Four-Leaf Circus

Life is a clown car.  
School is a circus.  
Work is a circus.  
Debt is the ringleader.  
Balancing acts.  
Sidewalk cracks.  
Look at these clowns.  
Sad, happy, slappy clowns.  
Circus Hound.  
They found him at the pound.  
His tummy round.  
Crying on the inside.  
Laughing on the outside.  
He never made a sound.  
Circus Frown.

NAPOLEON FELIPE

## Countdown

10 families  
9 personalities  
8 rivalries  
7 deaths a week  
6 by gun  
5 by assault  
4 children dead  
3 from one family  
2 parents fight  
1 stands victorious

MG THERAPPER

## Regina

Diamonds in both ears,  
A ring in her nose,  
Tattoos on her neck,  
A smile that kills,  
Eyes that glow,  
A Queen with her own demeanor,

Red Bull's to make her go,  
Sharp as a knife, boldly  
Facing all strife, her hair  
Has a mind of its own.

A Queen with her own realm  
Needing no subjects,  
As she proudly strides by  
As her admirers genuflect.

Her beauty is evident  
In the way she is present.  
And Queenly by name as  
She holds court and smiles.

Attitude in abundance,  
Strangely attractive  
Dark brunette tresses are  
Like a crown on her head.

Unforgettable once you see her,  
Relish in her presence, of a Queen  
In her magnificence.

G. W.

## Ravishing All Consuming Effort

YASMINE LANCASTER

### To Women of Generations Before Me

Expect my apology  
From me and men around the world  
Who have been programmed to believe  
There's a divide between us as genders  
I know the way you feel can't be easily forgotten,  
But nowadays there are so many distractions  
Forgetting becomes simpler  
To independent women of today, let your voices ring with  
Confidence  
Now that we're listening  
Teach the next generation of young men how to  
Co-exist with the co-creators of their existence.

HALOTHEARTIST

## Amor de Hijo

Madrecita linda aún recuerdo tu  
Cariño y cuando me proteja  
Mientras yo me divertía con  
Papalote de colores, trompos  
Y Pepsi-Cola.

Madrecita linda y si tu muere  
Primero le diré al sepulturero  
Que haga fosa para dos.

RAMÓN HERRERA

## Love's Son

Beautiful mommy, I still remember  
Your love and when you protected me,  
Amused me with colorful kites, spinning tops,  
And Pepsi-Cola.

Beautiful mommy, if you die first  
I will tell the gravedigger  
To make a pit for two.

D.J. - ENGLISH TRANSLATION



## Distance

I know that you don't  
understand  
how this distance  
could be part of my plan.  
I can feel you  
reaching.  
I can't reach  
your hands.  
But I'm not raising  
a boy,  
you see, I'm raising a man  
and yeah, it  
hurts me to see  
the pain in your eyes.  
When you're looking  
at me  
or when you're trapped  
in your closet  
crying  
when you call me  
and I'm working so mommy can't  
speak.  
So yeah, the  
plan wasn't perfect,  
but I'm seeing it  
through  
cause I know that

it's worth it.  
See, I almost  
can give you  
the life you  
deserve and  
the life that  
we fought for,  
you know,  
the one that we  
earned and  
so I won't  
give up  
this fight.  
I won't  
quit till it's  
done.  
I will work throughout  
the night.  
I will give you  
everything I promised.  
I won't listen to fright  
and I know I won't fail  
because you are my light.

DARIANNY SERRANO

## Giving

is good for your soul.  
There is nothing like helping someone.  
Seeing gratitude  
in someone's face or  
hearing it  
in their voice is priceless.  
The best way to give  
is to do it and not expect  
anything  
back.  
It's the absolute best feeling  
you could ever experience.

BRENDA DAVIS

## Growth

Defeat comes in many forms  
&  
trials & tribulations  
take us down a path  
that require action.

Maintain. You will find  
your road.

TYIECE BARCLAY

## The Art of Spilling Coffee

Our reflex is to jump  
the moment we see it spill,  
2 dollars, 50 cents  
of coffee rushing down the seat;  
what a waste. The nurse next  
to me shows me the burn  
on her finger. She laughs it off;  
I've got good reflexes,  
she tells me, but some spilled  
on my uniform; my only one.  
The train stops; the announcer  
apologizes for the train ahead,  
its emergency brake is on.  
The nurse assumes someone  
must have jumped, that must be it;  
she works with them, patients on  
suicide watch, she knows  
one who jumped.  
His face had to be  
stitched back on, ear to ear. He wanted  
to see the video after.

She tells me that back home  
people don't commit suicide  
like they do here. I tell her  
people get lonely. I just want  
my day to go smooth, she replies,  
showing me pics of her daughter's  
first day of school, the staff welcoming  
students; this helps her fight  
the goosebumps growing on her skin.  
I think of visions of the unimaginable,  
of watching parts of yourself hanging;  
I think of thoughts unimaginable,  
of no longer existing. They feel  
it is an easy way out, she says. I  
tell myself people get lonely. I smile  
at her, hoping her day goes well  
and I hear my words jumping in my chest.  
I wonder if she did too.

SHERESE FRANCIS

## Problem

Gun is a dirty word, synonymous with death,  
synonymous with bars, metallic, clinking, unyielding,  
an irreversible twitch of the hand, promise silenced.

With a collective sigh,  
the ancestors shrug.

Schools on shut down, fear breathes  
under desks and in coat closets.  
They say he is ill and had no friends,  
anti-social behavior and divorce at home,  
a victim himself.  
Black gun purified by white hands.  
Tragedy. Change skins, change melanin.  
This gun does not belong to him,  
turn the barrel to his temple,  
the natural order of things.

With a collective sigh,  
The ancestors shrug.

Mother cries into her pillow, her firstborn stolen.  
Flowers pile up, brown and sour.  
No one can stomach the gravelly grief in her voice.  
No one can find the balm to soothe her.  
Now her nephew's teacher has a gun.

ROWANA ABBENSETTS



## Our love

is you, our love  
is me, our love is like a newborn  
baby.

Our love is joy, our love is  
pain.  
Our love feels like dancing  
rain.  
Nothing feels the same.

So hold on to (y)our love  
because it was granted from above.

DONNA OXLEY

## Twists & Turns

You try to do right.  
Bridges may burn.

You go to college.  
You hope to learn.

You find a job.  
You hope to earn.

Books contain knowledge.  
But what's important?

Is it how we apply it?

PAUL LEUFROY

## Everything

I feel like everything I do is  
never good enough.  
No matter what accomplishments  
or downfalls I go through  
no one seems to care.  
I'm always helping everyone.  
Who is going to be my help?  
Whose shoulder am I able to  
cry on?  
When I'm hurt, who's going  
to hold my hand?

BECAME BROKEN

**I am surrounded** by angels,  
so I know I am truly blessed.

ANTHONY FAUNTLEROY

## Trenches

We made it through the trenches  
Handouts were never given  
My mama telling me, *Boy, just get up for school*  
But I ain't ever listen  
Got my degree the hard way  
But you can say my minor was tripping  
Put the pieces to the puzzle, treating cities like rentals  
I always was switch-y  
Went to Cali had to get it  
Imagine slums on a beach  
Are you from the east or the west  
Choose your side then you rep with your chest  
Feds was looking 4 and O hittas get swept  
Wrong place, wrong time, ain't selling no dimes  
Young kid, he got a future  
Jakes crushing back blocks, didn't  
See a thing, got done with looking and started choosing  
Then got the frame  
The youngin was chilling, he didn't do it  
Caught a degree in the first, felony, went  
And changed his life into a movie.

ESPERO VOLTARE

## O

Call me O,  
Offshoot,  
Opening for  
Oneness or  
Ownership,  
Oranges or  
Obsidian,  
Oil of olives,  
Oceans from  
Origins.  
Our time  
O'clock.  
O, love odes  
Offered  
Over and  
Over until  
Observed.

ROWANA ABBENSETTS

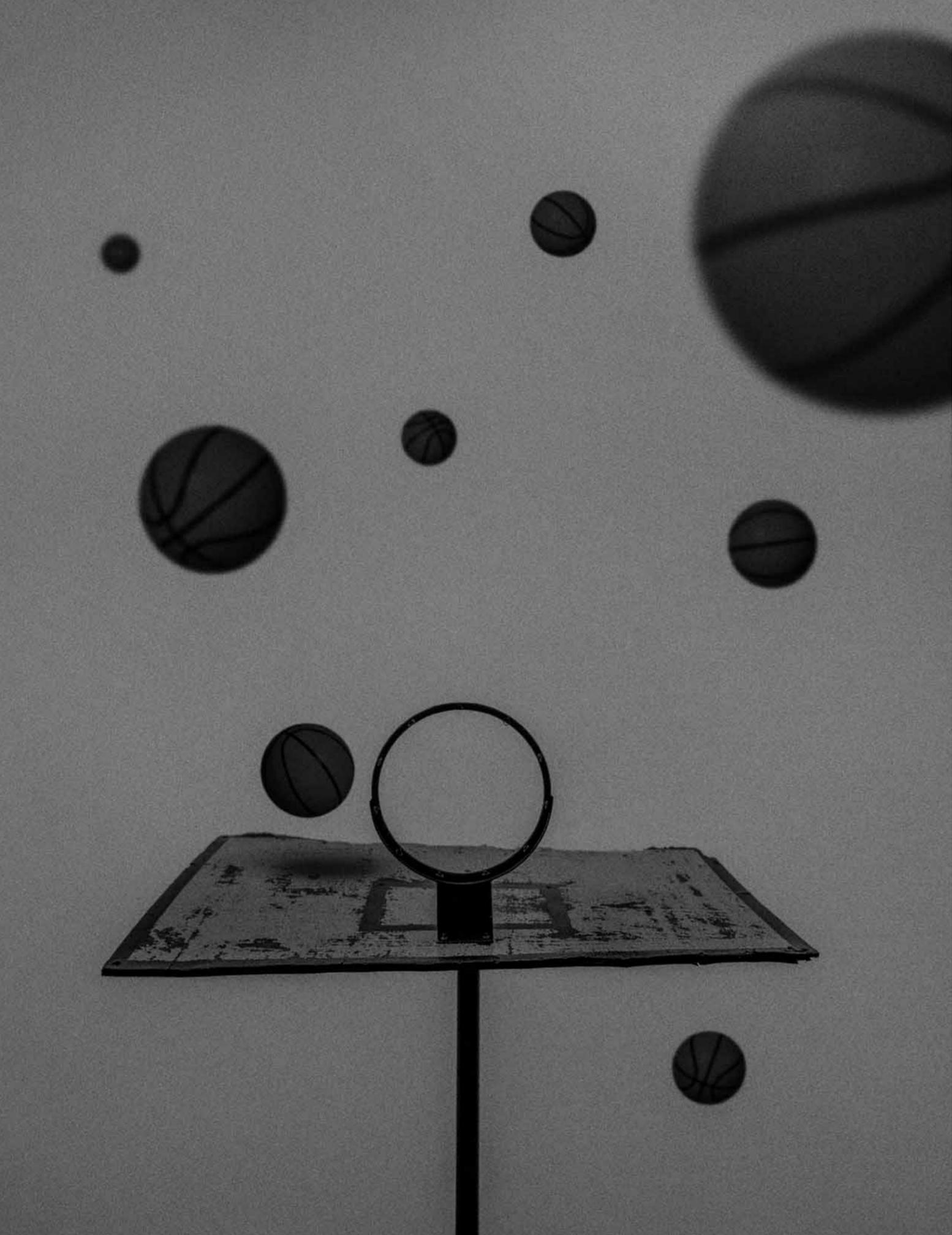
## Back at Home

I'm stuck on Earth  
They tried to lock me  
They tried to stop me  
I'm from the star-stream  
I need a rocket  
I gotta go  
They want me down  
I miss my home  
I found a road  
I found my goal  
They told me no  
They see me low  
They see me slow  
Next thing you know  
I'm back at home  
Now I'm gone

JUSTIN KIRLEW

**We are** shadows of our thoughts,  
Our emotions are our keepers.

RACHEL BERGER



## Ritual

Practice practice  
Practice practice

## Eventual

NICOLE GOODWIN

makes habit  
Makes habit

**Take Care: From A to Z**

**A**spiring for health  
**B**ecause if not a  
**C**ancer will  
**D**issect you from beginning to  
**E**nd  
**F**orget wealth, money will never befriend you  
**G**ive your spirit & mind to a friend  
**H**ave not waste not  
**I**f you want to do so  
**J**ust be free to be  
**K**inder to yourself  
**L**ove life  
**M**ake your body a temple

**N**ever regret it's simple  
**O**r just wait for your body to be crippled  
**P**ossess only yourself  
**Q**uiet down any waves  
**R**esulting in your goals  
**S**afe to say you will get old  
**T**omorrow is not promised I've been told  
**U**nder God & halt  
**V**ending dreams of living  
**W**ay above your means  
**X**-out all mess  
**Y**et bless this holy  
**Z**one...the healthy scene.

## When

you are hurting it makes you let go  
of the things deep inside that you truly know

when you are hurting you want to break free  
from the pain in your heart & scream, leave me

when you are hurting you're filled with such doubt and those who  
should know can't figure you out

when you are hurting you'd rather be alone than be in the presence  
of others or talk on the phone

when you are hurting you can't think straight  
if you're usually an on-time person  
now you're showing up late

when you are hurting life becomes a haze, turns into darkness and  
a deep complex maze

when you are hurting your mind begins to dwell  
on a time when things were simple  
and all of your life was well

L. REID

**Even our kisses** are spoken word.

L.K.M./WOLF POET

## Mess

My favorite fruit is not easy to share.  
It is a matter of intimacy,  
Paring slices of mango  
Peeled from tropical rainbow skin.  
Sweet stickiness slips  
From my finger tips  
As I taste the first candy  
Of a country girl.

ROWANA ABBENSETTS

## Sometimes I feel

on fire  
like my skin is stuck to the sun  
like a little kid having fun  
sometimes I feel lost  
sometimes I feel like a Boss  
sometimes I feel mugged  
I feel loved  
I feel gone  
I feel alive  
sometimes I feel strong  
sometimes I feel wrong.

C. MCDUFFY

## When it's dark out

everything's clear.  
When it's dark out,  
ain't no one there.  
But when it's bright,  
all seems alright.  
That's when friends give fake smiles.  
Ladies give fake hugs.  
When it's foggy,  
that's when people tell the truth.  
I like when it's dark out,  
because when it's dark out,  
ain't no one there, everything's clear.

LATHAN ROGERS

## My pride and joy

are my 2 children.  
One of my son's, Anthony,  
is a sophomore  
at Susan Wagner High.  
And my oldest is autistic.  
He makes me happy  
because I see a change in him every day.

RENEE WILKINSON

## 600 Thread Count

Basking in the comfort of my truth  
 Covered in a quilt of his fraud  
 Wrapped in a duvet of deceit  
 Masked by curtains of hurt  
 Shaded behind blinds, draped with guilt  
 Laying in my 600 thread count reality of lies.  
 Paired with shams of shame. We both did wrong,  
 But only one got filthy!  
 Nevertheless, I'm still comforted by his comforter of inconsistency.  
 Clamped tightly by his tuck-in of DISRESPECT.  
 Although, my heart is sometimes rhythmless like a flat sheet...  
 I still lay here in my 600 thread count reality of lies!!!  
 As we make luv to beats of the hearts that yearn for others,  
 We close our eyes and escape in this satin instant gratification.  
 Tender to touch, smooth as a baby's bottom,  
 Perplexed on this Tempur-Pedic California King.  
 Still in rhythm, but out of harmony, so out of sync, like a king size pillow,  
 With a medium case on it.  
 Gasping to be released, as we lay here  
 In this 600 thread count reality of lies.

SCHOLANDA MILLER



## The Same Dance

*Will call tomorrow.*

*Call you tomorrow.*

*I will call you tomorrow.*

Tomorrow is today.

I call you today.  
I leave a message.  
— *call anytime,*  
*but not before tomorrow.*

You call today,  
but I return tomorrow.

We go around the week!  
Or until you forget.

I've done that a lot.  
I'm not an angel.  
I don't call tomorrow.

I'm here.  
You visit.  
Night is done.  
You rush out with the morning light.  
I give you the prize.  
I send you away with homemade biryani.  
*Don't call until tomorrow* (smiling!)

Today is tomorrow.  
You call today.  
I call tomorrow.

I've done this dance before.

Tomorrow is not today.  
*Will call tomorrow.*

Tomorrow never comes.

ZAHURA AKTER

## Cooking Up the Buried

Some women hide their names  
from the world, seal them off  
in cooking pots, grind them  
with pestle and mortar  
until unrecognizable  
until dust, mix them into gravy  
sweetened with burnt sugar.

Some women hope you never  
taste those names: too much poison,  
too much medicine; they know those  
names would be spit out the moment  
they enter some mouths, would be  
looked at with disgust. This is the way  
to get them down some throats; the only  
way for some bodies to absorb them  
into their cells.

Some women want to see their names  
in others, to know that they grew  
because of those names, that lives were  
dependent on them to live, that lives  
nursed on them, the spoons in mouths  
like nipples.

Some women forget their names,  
their looks, their sounds; so busy trying  
to feed others, so busy being  
emptied, so busy trying to give  
life by passing those names down,  
hoping those names will continue to live  
without them.

SHERESE FRANCIS

## Blocks

All my poetry is crossed out.  
All my chakras are blocked.  
All my songs are unsung.  
All words snatched from my tongue.

ROWANA ABBENSETTS

## I'm so busy

taking care of 2 people  
that I don't even have time to think,  
*Don't forget about yourself!*

SANTIA TAYLOR

**The first time** I got a tattoo  
my arm was so sore  
I couldn't sleep.

JASMINE FAULKNER

I just want to say, **LIFE is a privilege.**  
**LIFE is a privilege,** I just want to say.

LEVOY DUPREE

## My Sex

Somebody's *done* changed my sex.  
I should have been a boy,  
but I'm stuck in this female body  
I'm wearing so well.  
When I talk the thug comes out.  
My hands are hard.  
I can fix everything in my apartment.  
I even change the tires on my car.  
There's nothing girly about me  
except the way I dress.  
No need for makeup.  
You got to look deep for my beauty.  
Gaze into my big, brown eyes  
and you will see something  
like a man  
in deep thought.  
That's why I say,  
*Somebody's done run off with my sex,  
but I'm still looking for my lip gloss.*

TAHARA LILLY

## Public Radio Announcement

NPR calmly explains,  
*The government has fallen.*  
Now a word from Brian Lehrer  
Live from Trump Tower in New York,  
Where all is well within police barricades  
Guarded by guys with guns  
As peanut vendors and yoga moms run  
For their lives and brown nannies abandon  
Blond babies who will be better off alone.

Now, for a jazz interlude  
From a hip new band,  
And later catch, *Wait Wait---Don't Tell Me!*  
More chaos explained in quiet voices.

The House is debating its existence  
And in a small Oklahoma town  
A woman has collected over 100 frog statues.  
Democracy is a concept, after all,  
And discerning minds should know,  
Phillip Roth is dead. America's complaint, next on NPR.

ROWANA ABBENSETTS

## Monday

I heard the worst news  
that changed  
my fate.

I looked up in the sky  
to say to God, *It's not true.*  
So sunny out, a sky so blue.  
They took his life.  
And all I could see  
was them trying to take me, too.

MOISES MARTINEZ



## Blessings in Disguise

Probation: a blessing on the low.  
Angels in disguise,  
our POs.

FRANZE WILLIAMS

## Benedizione travestita

Probation: una benedizione dal basso.  
Angeli travestiti,  
Le nostre guardie.

KAIROS ITALY THEATRE – ITALIAN TRANSLATION

## You've been there before,

it should be easier  
the second time around.

FRANZE WILLIAMS

## Sei stato già qui,

dovrebbe essere più facile  
la seconda volta.

KAIROS ITALY THEATRE – ITALIAN TRANSLATION

## Line of Life

Being a young *colored* man  
you have to understand, I  
completely know the struggle.  
I used to be the young boy  
worried about the hustle.  
But I had to humble  
myself, dog with a muzzle.  
God helped me see clear.  
At first I didn't believe  
He would take the time  
To help the likes of me.  
But I'm thankful cuz He  
showed me, if I ain't change,  
He would punish me.  
And I ain't trying  
to be a dead man.

MITCHEL CRUZ

## We Got You

You don't have anything to do.  
Pull up to me and the crew.  
    We got you.  
Deep poetry, I spot you  
being a gangster  
is not you.  
We got you, like BET,  
love and support is what  
we have for you.  
Don't be ashamed of art  
in the form of words.  
We got you like the Angel Gabriel  
talking to the birds.  
No need to hold back your love.  
*Free Verse*, we got you!!

BRUCE KIRKLAND

## Freezing Cold

Winter storm,  
the sleeping city  
hibernates.

G. W.

## Freddo Polare

La tempesta invernale,  
la città addormentata  
manda in letargo.

KAIROS ITALY THEATRE  
– ITALIAN TRANSLATION

## “They”

talk about WMDs and invading Iraq, but no one's really winning the wars / “they” talk about homeland security protecting us all, but no one's really locking the doors / “they” talk about drug trafficking / “they” supply it as well / the government's the real reason why this fiery hell is burning us all / “they” criticize us as individuals and put us in a place where society births criminals / I'll tell you exactly / “they” created the crack pheens/ “they” created the misery / “they” created the history / “they're” the reason why Big and 2Pac's murders are a mystery / if you don't know money, then you don't know the history / so while “they” tell us, *Stop the violence* / “they're” creating the terrorists / the whole world is sick / “they” got us fighting for enemies / can't get the cure for what ails me, unless I'm a celebrity?!?! / or stacking dough like one/ but I fear no one / I'm a samurai sword swinging shogun.

LEARNZ

## My feet were so light

I took flight  
above the clouds  
and I could touch  
the stars and  
below me, the red lights from  
taillights of cars  
streaked by  
on the highway, and I flew  
to my house and looked down on  
the streets where my friends  
stood on corners and played ball  
in the park, and I felt so free until I forgot  
to ask how  
it was I was flying.  
A loud bang on the prison bars.  
And a rough voice shouted,  
ON THE COUNT!!!

It was all a dream.

S . A . R .

## Guilty as Charged

I am guilty  
for the wrong  
I've done, my  
life has  
become my wife.  
I'm not in a great  
mood. I thought  
my loyalty  
wouldn't make me  
lonely. But  
I made it  
happen, no  
accident of  
fate, no drug  
or drink.  
I did this.  
That's why  
I feel guilty.

DEVONTE RHODES

## Shoot!

Shoot me.  
Shoot them.  
Did you get him?  
Did you get them?  
Yeah, I got all I could.  
There's so much going on I need to shoot.  
That's the life  
of a photographer.

G'DAE

## Dream March

During the 60s I lived in Queens Village. There was a White Castle on Hollis Ave., where only white people worked. So the local community protested against them. They marched in front of the place for about a month. Things changed! Most of the time I only saw change on TV.

My brother took part in the March on Washington D.C., when Martin Luther King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. My brother had been misbehaving at home. He was in the doghouse. And my mother said that the March was going to be in the history books. She wanted one of her children to be a part of it. So she gave my brother a round trip ticket to Washington, D.C. on a Greyhound. She made him a shoebox lunch (fried chicken, a sandwich, fruit, cookies, and juice). My brother made the trip and he returned home with many stories.

JANET G. ROBINSON

## March Twenty-Two: The Woman I Once Knew

The woman I once knew was not always sweet but she appeared to be whole and not incomplete.

The woman I once knew was not always nice, but at times, she'd give great advice.

The woman I once knew took pride in her living space, now it seems like she's existing in an empty place.

The woman I once knew walked with a lot of pride, now it feels like something inside her has died.

The woman I once knew has been replaced by a meaner, angrier, older, version of you.

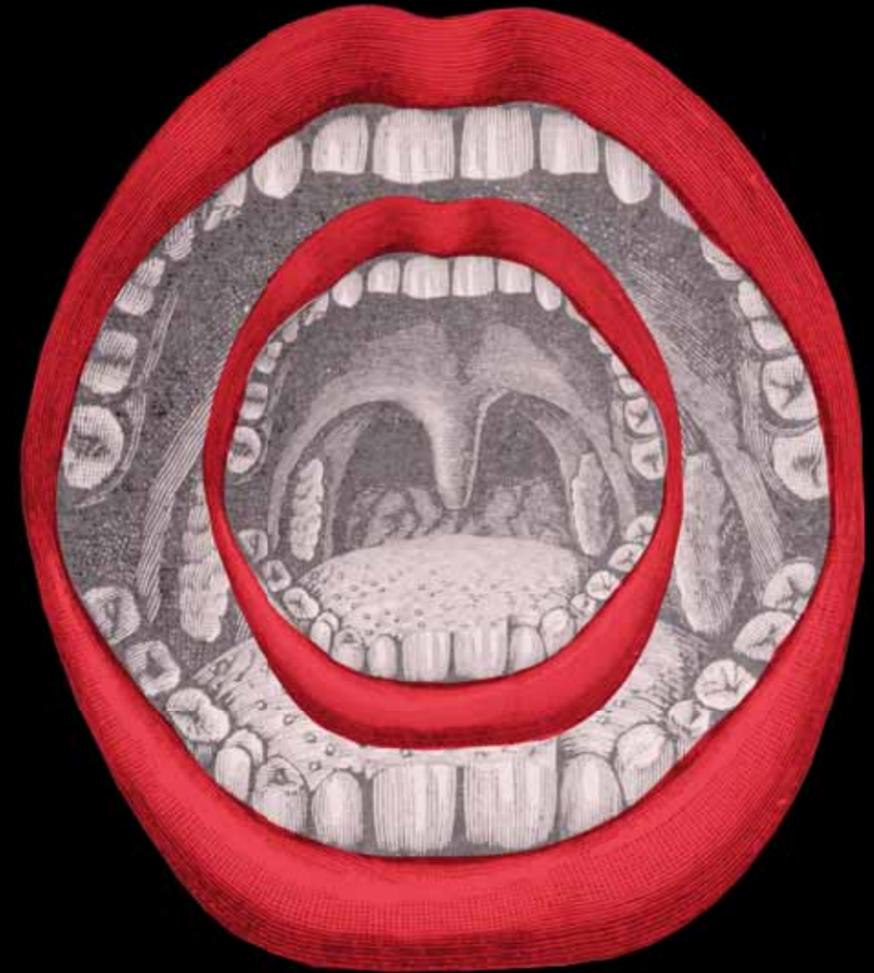
I don't like her; don't know what to do.  
The new woman makes me sad & blue.

L. REID

## Two Mouths Speaking Obscenities

No love. No compliments.  
Just Spanish words dipped  
in spices. I can't imagine  
their mouths tasting flavor.  
What should be two feet shuffling  
in rhythm to a tune  
becomes two elephants  
stomping, four arms  
waving, like wicked tree  
branches on fire,  
and I'm a helpless meat bag  
caught in the middle  
with a spoon  
filled with honey.

NAPOLEON FELIPE



## The Life and Death of Raymond Stein

I was only in sixth grade when I decided to invite my childhood boyfriend to my house. Raymond was very mature for his age. He had a full beard. When Raymond arrived, my grandparents and I were sitting on the front porch. They looked in amazement as he approached. I explained that Raymond was my friend from school and that I had invited him over. My grandfather politely asked if I would go with him inside the house.

Out of earshot, he asked, *Who told you that you could invite someone over? You're only in the sixth grade. I will let you know when you can start dating.*

Then he asked, *How old is this boy?*

I said, *He's in sixth grade, too.*

That was the first and last of Raymond Stein. That is possibly why, even today, I'm attracted to well-groomed men with a beard.

BRENDA DAVIS

## Why must I carry the burden

Walking around heart hurting  
Then I think about what I do  
And what I did  
Things we did for fun  
Things I did for money  
Awake all night  
Resting my head when it's sunny  
Killing people slowly  
And you reap  
What you're sowing  
Wanted to be hard when I was young  
Looking back I seemed soft and dumb  
Too tough to run  
Ten slob and one folk  
Stabbed six times face back throat  
Tried being hard  
Every day in the mirror I see the scar

DENZEL JONES

## Apollo

My experience at the Apollo was amazing.  
The lights and theme gave off a great vibe.  
When we first walked in my daughter was like, *Mommy where are we?*  
I'm like, *Baby girl, we at the Apollo.*  
She like, *Mommy, what's the Apollo?*  
So I explain to her that the Apollo is where all the famous start from  
Before they get famous.  
So she asks me, *Mommy, who is famous we going to see?*  
(I start laughing) I'm like, *They are famous, but they are poetry famous.*  
All the poems were great, but two touched me.  
They showed me that I don't have to always hide behind  
My pain or my anger.  
And my days will get better, once I let myself blossom!  
Me and my baby girl really enjoyed ourselves.  
My baby really had fun. She went home and went to sleep.

TIFFANY MARTIN

## Music is in my DNA.

I was born to dance.  
There is no other description  
of my stance. Believe  
my DNA makes a musical trance.

VERONA WAITE

## My trombone is a work of art.

It gives me a way  
to share my love, my soul.  
My trombone sound is my gift  
to those that need  
a beautiful tune.

MAQUESHA GILLETT

## Past Dreams

You think, once in a while,  
of dreams from the past  
and it's like a friendly reminder  
of all the things you went through.  
It's good to know what you thought would kill you,  
didn't.

LYNN CHEUNG

## Where are you from?

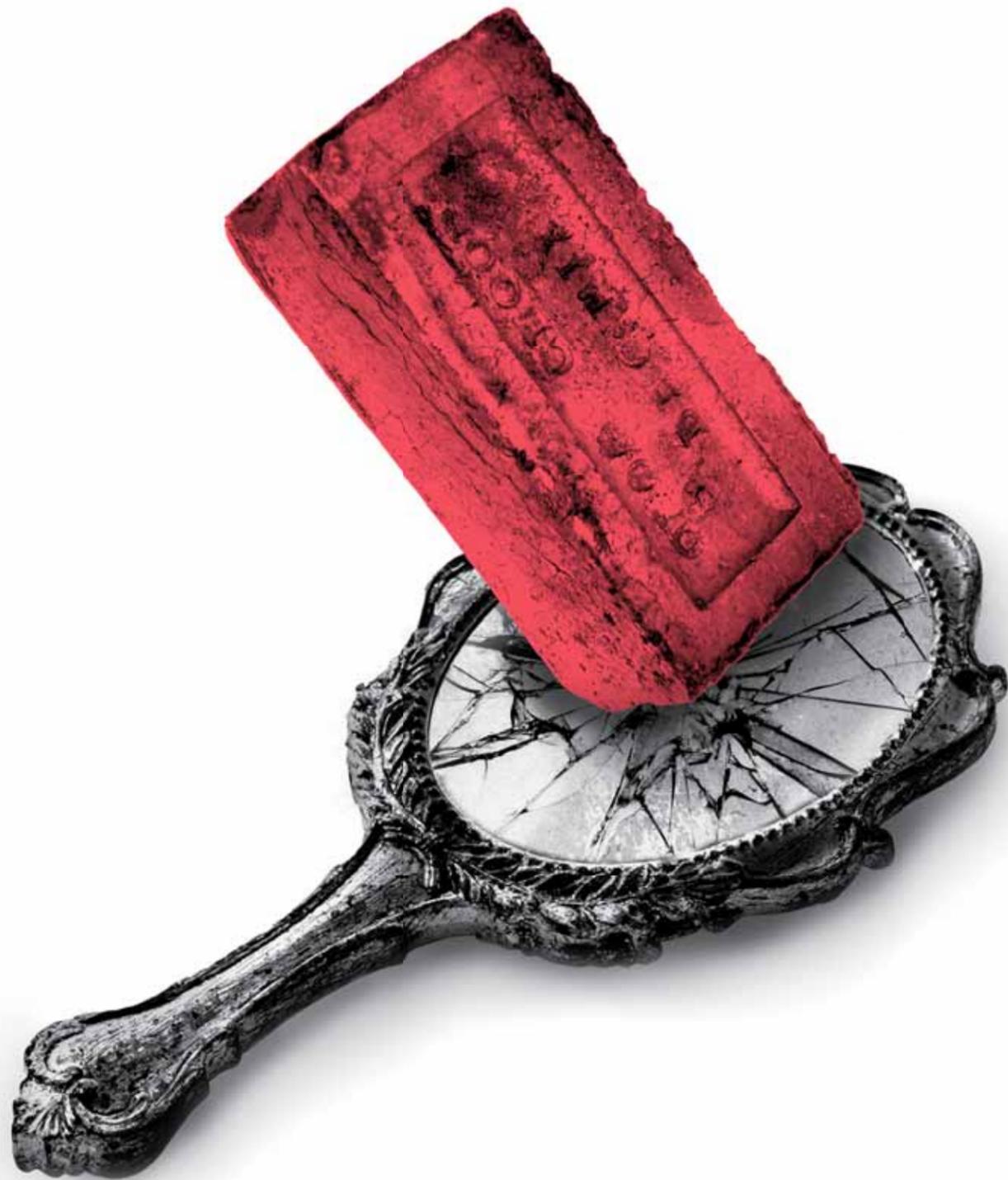
I am from a chair where I sit  
instead of stand.  
You can take it  
with you  
wherever you go.

ZINA DEVINE

## What I Know

take your L  
make it a lesson  
count your blessings  
& never take family  
or friends for granted  
people can be gone  
in less than a second.

DENZEL JONES



Change.

Execute

*the words*

from your

moUth.

FRANZE WILLIAMS

