

Bronx Masquerade by Nikki Grimes

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Wesley “Bad Boy” Boone

I ain’t particular about doing homework, you understand. My teachers practically faint whenever I turn something in. Matter of fact, I probably got the longest list of excuses for missing homework of anyone alive. Except for my homey Tyrone. He tries to act like he’s not even interested in school, like there’s no point in studying hard, or dreaming about tomorrow, or bothering to graduate. He’s got his reasons. I keep on him about going to school, though, saying I need the company. Besides, I tell him, if he drops out and gets a J.O.B., he won’t have any time to work on his songs. That always gets to him. Tyrone might convince everybody else that he’s all through with dreaming, but I know he wants to be a big hip-hop star. He’s just afraid he won’t live long enough to do it. Me, I hardly ever think about checking out. I’m more worried about figuring what I want to do if I live.

Anyway, I haven’t had to drag Tyrone off to school lately, or make excuses for not having my homework done, because I’ve been doing it. It’s the Harlem Renaissance stuff that’s got us both going.

We spent a month reading poetry from the Harlem Renaissance in our English class. Then Mr. Ward—that’s our teacher—asked us to write an essay about it. Make sense to you? Me neither. I mean, what’s the point of studying poetry and then writing essays? So I wrote a bunch of poems in stead. They weren’t too shabby, considering I’d only done a few rap pieces before. My favorite was about Langston Hughes. How was I to know Teach would ask me to read it out loud? But I did. Knees knocking like a skeleton on Halloween, embarrassment bleaching my black cheeks red, eyes stapled to the page in front of me. But I did it, I read my poem.

Guess what. Nobody laughed. In fact, everybody thought it was cool. By the time I got back to my seat, other kids were

shouting out: “Mr. Ward, I got a poem too. Can I bring it in to read?”

Teach cocked his head to the side, like he was hearing something nobody else did.

“How many people here have poems they’d like to read?” he asked. Three hands shot up. Mr. Ward rubbed his chin for a minute. “Okay,” he said. “Bring them with you tomorrow.”

After class Teach came over to my desk. “Great poem,” said Mr. Ward. “But I still expect to see an essay from you. I’ll give you another week.” So much for creative expression.

Long Live Langston By Wesley Boone

*Trumpeter of Lenox and 7th
through Jesse B. Semple,
you simply celebrated
Blues and Be-Bop
and being Black before
it was considered hip.
You dipped into
the muddy waters
of the Harlem River
and shouted “taste and see”
that we Black folk be good
at fanning hope
and stoking the fires
of dreams deferred.
You made sure
the world heard
about the beauty of
maple sugar children, and the
artfully tattooed backs of Black*

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*sailors venturing out
to foreign places.
Your Sweet Flypaper of Life
led us past the Apollo and on
through 125th and all the other
Harlem streets you knew like
the black of your hand.
You were a pied-piper, brother man
with poetry as your flute.
It's my honor and pleasure to salute
You, a true Renaissance man
of Harlem.*

Tyrone Bittings

School ain't nothin' but a joke. My moms don't want to hear that, but if it weren't for Wesley and my other homeys, I wouldn't even be here, aight? These white folk talking 'bout some future, telling me I need to be planning for some future—like I got one! And Raynard agreeing, like he's smart enough to know. From what I hear, that boy can't hardly read! Anyway, it's them white folk that get me with this future mess. Like Steve, all hopped up about working on Broadway and telling me I should think about getting with it too. Asked me if I ever thought about writing plays. "Fool! What kinda question is that?" I said. He threw his hands up and backed off a few steps. "All I'm saying is, you're a walking drama, man. You got that down pat, so maybe you should think about putting it on paper." When that boy dyed his hair, I b'lieve some of that bleach must've seeped right into his brain. I grind my teeth and lower my voice. "Boy, get out my face," I tell him. He finally gets the message and splits. I'm ticked off that he even got me *thinking* about such nonsense as Broadway.

White folk! Who they think they kidding? They might as well go blow smoke up somebody else's you-know-what, 'cause a

Black man's got no chance in this country. I be lucky if I make it to twenty-one with all these fools running round with AK-47s. Here I am one of the few kids I know whose daddy didn't skip out on him, and he didn't even make it to thirty. He was doing okay 'til he got blown away on a Saturday. Blam! Another statistic in a long line of drive-bys. Life is cold. Future? What I get is right now, right here, spending time with my homeys. Wish there was some future to talk about. I could use me some future.

I'm just about ready to sleep off the whole year when this teacher starts talking about poetry. And he rattles off a poem by some white guy named Dylan Thomas that sounds an awful lot like rap. Now, I know me some rap, and I start to thinking I should show Mr. Ward what rap is really all about. So I tell him I've got a poem I'd like to read. "Bring it on Friday," he says. "As a matter of fact, from now on, I'll leave time for poetry readings at the end of every month. We'll call them Open Mike Fridays." Next thing I know, I'm digging my old rap poems out of my dresser drawer and bringing them to school. I'm thinking it can't hurt to share them, even if there's no chance I'll ever get to be a songwriter. After all, it's the one thing I could see myself doing if there really was a future. And I'm thinking that maybe there could be if I wanted it bad enough. And all of a sudden, I realize I do.

OPEN MIKE: Attendance By Tyrone Bittings

*We are all here,
Leslie and Bad Boy, Lupe and Raul,
Here, here and here.
Dear Mr. Ward
with his wards and wardettes.
Let's have a show of hands today.
Is Porscha here? Is Diondra here?*

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*Where oh where is Sheila?
It's me, Tyrone,
up here all alone
rapping into a microphone
'cause I've got something to say:
MTV is here, Mir and
morning space-walks are here,
terrorism is here
lurking at the bus stop.
Can't hop on the subway
without thinkin' of Tokyo—
we all know poison gas
does not discriminate.
It's too late to worry
about my innocence
since fear is here.
Why is it a weekend visit
to your local Mickey D's
may be deadly?
Why hasn't somebody
censored death?
Don't hold your breath waiting.
Still you can chill and celebrate
all that's great about life, like music
and the tick-tick-tick of time
which is equal parts yours and mine
to make of the world what we will.
But first, say no to coke, and smoke.
Say no to police brutality
and causing fatality.
Say no to race hate.
Don't underestimate
the power of love.*

*But most of all
take two poems
and call me
in the morning.*

Chankara Troupe

I am not in the mood for Tyrone's sorry "Baby, gimme some loving" routine, so when I see him in the hall, I storm past as if he's not even there. Eventually, he'll figure out why.

I come to school sporting shades and a Johnny-print across my left cheek, Johnny being the name of the idiot who smacked me last night. Naturally, Porscha is the first person who notices my new tattoo. She walks straight up to me and says, "You deserve better, girlfriend. And you know it." No hello. No how are you. Just: "You deserve better." Then she turns away and walks into the classroom. Typical Porscha. No nonsense. That's why we get along.

Then here comes Sheila Gamberoni. The minute she sees me, she demands to know the name of the guy who gave me my shiner, like she's gonna send her brothers after him or something. I keep his name to myself, just in case. She commences to call the guy everything but a child of God, which makes her feel better, I think, then gives me a hug and says she'll see me later. Sheila is a bit over the top with this sister act, as if she's trying to make up for being white, but she means well. I can do without some of the other girls who stare at me, though. I know they're just looking for something to talk about, so I rip off my sunglasses, let them get a better look. *Might as well stare all you want. This is the first and last time you'll ever see me like this.*

Of course, that's what they all say. Nobody knows that better than me. My sister's boyfriends have been beating on her for years. I made up my mind a long time ago, I'm not having none of that.

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Last night I tried telling this to Johnny, who seems to be hard of hearing. He'd brought me home from a movie. He came in for a while, got comfortable since Mom was working overtime and we had the apartment to ourselves. We locked lips for a few minutes. Next thing I know, he's fingering my shirt buttons. I push him away, gently at first. "I think we better slow down," I say. "No, no," he says, voice all husky. "It's just getting good." This time, his hand shoots up my skirt. Bad move. I jump off the sofa like it's on fire. "Maybe it's time for you to go." He grabbed my skirt and tried pulling me back down, which is right about when I hauled off and smacked him. He leaped up and smacked me back.

My jaw dropped from shock, and I looked in his eyes and saw my sister's reflection.

I turned away, strode to the door, unlocked it, and held it open for him.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself," I said, "'cause that's the last time you'll ever lay a hand on me. Now get out!" He actually looked like he was studying on staying, so I stepped out into the hall and screamed at the top of my lungs, "I said get out!" Fearing trouble, he left.

Now I've got this ugly tattoo on my cheek. I thought about skipping school today, but I hate to miss English. Besides, the bruise is temporary and so is the pain. Still, I'd rather not have kids gawking at me all period, so I park myself in the back of the room and wait for Mr. Ward to call our English class to attention.

Mr. Ward is funny. Sometimes he asks us a question with no warning, and tells us to answer quick, without stopping to think about it. The truth is always right on the tip of your tongue, he says. It's the fabrications that take a lot of time. Yesterday he asked us: "What do you know?" Yesterday I said my name, but today would be different. Today I'd tell him a woman ain't no punching bag. That's what I know.

OPEN MIKE: Bruised Love By Chankara Troupe

*A midnight thirst sent me
padding to the kitchen
for a jelly-jar of water
and an accidental run-in
with my sister.*

*She tiptoed in, late
and limping, her cheek
raw as red-brown meat.*

*I caught a quick glance
in the chilly glow*

of the refrigerator

before she had

a chance to hide

the latest souvenir

her boyfriend gave her.

"I bruise easily"

is one of the lies

she sprinkles like sugar.

But I'm fifteen,

Not brainless. Besides,

I knew the truth at ten.

"He'll never do it again,"

she swears.

But he will, because

she'll let him.

Now, me?

I've got no use

for lame excuses

or imitation love

that packs a punch.

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Tyrone

My pops used to hit my moms like that.

When I was little, I used to hide under my bed and cry, scared he was coming for me next. Damn, I ain't thought about that in years. How could you do that, Pops? I don't get it. Is that why he hung around? So he'd have somebody smaller than him to beat up on? I don't even want to go there. I'm just glad he finally stopped drinking and cleaned up his act before he checked out. It gave us a chance to have some good times together.

Chankara was the third one up today. Her stuff was so deep, nobody wanted to follow her. There weren't but two more people planning to read anyway, including me. We both decided to bag it 'til the next Open Mike.

Meanwhile, I'm going to be busy writing me a rap about dudes beatin' on women. I'll call it "Little Men," 'cause that's what they are.

Raul Ramirez

Lunch is a memory of indigestion. Chankara sat across from me in the cafeteria and I couldn't help staring at her. Her bruises are almost gone, but I can still see the shadows they left behind. If she was my *hermanita*, I'd squash the cockroach who messed her up like that. That's what I was thinking when I remembered it ain't nice to stare. So I ate too fast and got out of there before she could catch me.

Only twenty minutes 'til class starts, and Mr. Ward don't like it if I leave a mess on his desk, so that's eighteen minutes to paint, plus two more for cleaning up and washing the paintbrushes. If Raynard gets here early, he'll help. He always does, I don't know why. Tyrone's another story. He checks in early lots of times when I'm here, but he keeps his distance, usually. Once he came up behind me and watched over my shoulder while I worked. Made me kinda nervous, if you must know. The Ricans and the

brothers don't always hit it off. Anyway, he stood there for the longest. Then he grunted and said, "You good, man, I'll give you that."

"Thanks," I said.

"You wasting your time, though. You know you ain't gonna make no money doing this."

"Maybe. Maybe not," I said. "But some things ain't about money."

"You tripping, man," said Tyrone. "Money is the alpha and omega. Ask anybody."

I just shrugged and gave him my "*No hablo ingles*" look, like I didn't get what he was talking about. It was the quickest way to end the conversation.

People just don't get it. Even if I never make a dime—which, by the way, ain't gonna happen—I'd still have to paint.

Don't get me wrong. Money is useful. I'm lucky Mr. Ward leaves brushes and watercolor paper for me to use, though I ain't gonna tell him that. It's none of his business I can't afford fancy brushes and watercolor paper at home. Anyway, it's good for him to help out the future Diego Rivera. He knows I'm the real deal. Didn't he come to me for advice on how to decorate the classroom? The paper frames were my idea. Good work belongs in the gallery, I told him. Especially if it's mine.

I never thought about writing poetry before, but Mr. Ward said he's going to start videotaping our Friday sessions. Guess who's going to be the first one in front of the camera. Of course, that means I have to write a poem, so I better get busy. Even if it's hard, I'll do it. I don't mind working hard. Whatever it takes, ¿entiendes? Raul Ramirez, painter-poet. Yeah. I like the sound of that.

Someday I'll have a poetry reading and a one-man show at the Nuyorican Poets Café on the Lower East Side. I'll hand out

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tokens to all my friends so they got no excuse not to take the ride downtown, okay?

My brothers laugh at me just ‘cause they’ve been in the world a little longer. They say I’m *loco en la cabeza*, that ain’t no spic gonna be no big-time artist in America. “First off,” I tell them, “I ain’t no spic. And second, watch me.”

Abuelita says my talent is as old as her bones. She says I got it, and my stubbornness, from her father. He never id nothing with his talent, though. I asked her why not. “*Porque la familia* could not eat paint,” she said. So I will be the first painter in the family. That’s fine with me.

I’ve been drawing pictures all my life. I used to make my sister model for me. I’d bribe her with whatever I could scrounge up from returning soda bottles to the grocery. Eventually, I got tired of digging through trash for bottles, and she got bored modeling. Now it’s easier. My girlfriend sits for me. Every painter needs a model, right? Anyway, she knows sif she’s nice to me, one day I’ll make her famous. Even if she’s not nice, I’ll probably paint her because she’s beautiful.

I want to show the beauty of our people, that we are not all *banditos* like the show on TV, munching *cuchfritos* and sipping beer through chipped teeth. I will paint *los ninos* scooping up laughter in the sunshine and splashing in the temporary pool of a fire hydrant. I will paint my cousins, turning the sidewalk into a dance floor when *salsa* or *la bamba* spills from the third-floor window. I will paint Mami, standing at the ironing board late in the evening, after a day of piecework in the factory, sweat pouring off her, steam rising from a pot in the background, me tugging at her skirt while she irons. I will paint the way she used to smile down at me, the love in her eyes saying “I only do this for you.” Mami’s beauty is better than a movie star’s. It survives a kind of life where pamper is a noun, not a verb. I will capture that beauty on canvas, someday, when I am good enough.

For now, I draw in my sketchbook and paint portraits of myself for practice. But it’s not so bad. I’m handsome, after all.

OPEN MIKE: Zorro

By Raul Ramirez

Call me Zorro, all swash and buckle while the cameras roll, cape swinging in the breeze, teeth showing as expected. I lunge on cue, save the damsel in distress. I understand my role. I’ve studied all those scripts and comic books. I used to pose for close-ups, knew how to dutifully disappear

when the script said:

“Fade to black.” Then

I’d wait uncomfortably between the lines

of my own story ‘til

someone with skin like

milk yelled “Action!”

But I’m done. I’m to

old for comic heros. It’s

time to lose the cape,

step off the page, except I think I’ll keep the mask.

Why make it easy for you to choose whether I am Zorro or el bandito when I am neither? Your categories are too confining. The fact is, you’re more comfortable with myth than man. But I am here to help. First Off, put down your camera. Second, give me your hand.

Tyrone

Raul is on the money. You gotta make your own rules, Jack. That’s the real 411. Forget who white folks think you are, ‘cause they ain’t got a clue.

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That's some strong stuff Raul be writin'. That "Z" thing was cool too. He was working it.

Frankly, I didn't know Raul had it in him. Matter of fact, I didn't know he knew that much English!

Diondra Jordan

If only I was as bold as Raul. The other day, he left one of his paintings out on Mr. Ward's desk where anybody could see it. Which was the point. He sometimes works at Mr. Ward's desk during lunch. The wet paintbrushes sticking up out of the jar are always a sign that he's been at it again. So of course, anybody who glances over in that direction will be tempted to stop by and look.

This particular painting was rough, but anyone could tell it was Raul. A self-portrait. He'll probably hang it in class. Back in September, Mr. Ward covered two of the classroom walls with black construction paper and then scattered paper frames up and down the walls, each one a different size and color. Now half the room looks sort of like an art gallery, which was the idea. We're supposed to use the paper frames for our work. Whether we put up poems or photographs or even paintings is up to us, so long as the work is ours and we can tie it in with our study of the Harlem Renaissance. I guess Raul's self-portrait fits, since we've been talking a lot about identity. He'll probably put it up next to his poem. You should have seen him hand that thing. You'd think he was handling a million-dollar masterpiece the way he took his time placing it just so. If you look close, you can see the smudges where he erased a word or two and rewrote it. Mr. Ward must be in shock. He can never get Raul to rewrite a lick of homework or anything else. And don't even talk to him about checking his spelling. He'll launch into a tirade on you in a minute. "What?" he'll snap. "You thing Puerto Ricans can't spell?" Forget it. Anyway, I dare you to find one misspelled word in that poem of

his! Maybe it's a visual thing. Maybe he wants his poem to look as good as his self-portrait. And it is good.

I've never tried doing a self-portrait, but why not? I could maybe do one in charcoal. I've been drawing since I can't remember when. Not that anyone here knows that, except Tanisha, and she found out by accident when she came to my house to study once and saw a couple of drawings hanging in my room. Mom loves my watercolors and she hung one in the living room, but it isn't signed. Nobody ever mentions it, especially not my father. He's not too wild about my art. Mostly, he's disappointed, first off that I wasn't born a boy, and second that I won't play ball like one. I'm six feet tall, almost as tall as he, and he figures the height is wasted on me since I don't share his dreams of me going to the WNBA. I keep telling him not to hold his breath.

I hate always being the tallest girl in school. Everybody expects me to play basketball, so they pick me for their team, throw me the ball, and wait for me to shoot. Big mistake. I fumble it every time. Then they have the nerve to get mad at me, like I did it on purpose! But basketball is not my game. I have no game. I'm an artist, like Raul. The difference is, I don't tell anybody. I refuse to give them new reasons to laugh at me. The Jolly Green Giant jokes are bad enough.

Yeah, it's definitely time to try a self-portrait. I think I'll paint myself in front of an easel. With a basketball jersey sticking up out of the trash. Then I could hang it in Mr. Ward's class. See if anybody notices.

Open Mike: If By Diondra Jordan

*If I stood on tiptoe
reached up and sculpted*

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*mountains from clouds
would you laugh out loud?*

*If I dipped my brush in starlight
painted a ribbon of night
on your windowsill
would you still laugh?*

*If I drew you adrift
in a pen and ink sea
in a raging storm
would you laugh at me?*

*If I planted watercolor roses
in your garden
would you laugh then?
Or would you breathe deep
to sample their scent?
I wonder.*

Tyrone

If the sista read any faster, I'd be looking for her Supergirl cape. Talk about nervous! Diondra's hands were shaking the whole time she was holding that poem. She sure spooks easy for somebody so tall.

"Yo!" I said. "Take a deep breath. Ain't nobody going to hurt you here." She smiled a little and tried to slow down. But I swear that girl burned rubber getting back to her seat when she was through. I guess she's not exactly used to the limelight.

She's got plenty of company. Four more kids read their poetry for the first time today. They were shaking in their boots, but it was all good. I only had to tell one of them to loosen up. Guess you could call that progress!

Devon Hope

Jump Shot. What kind of name is that? Not mine, but try telling that to the brothers at school. That's all they ever call me.

You'd think it was written somewhere. Tall guys must be jocks. No. Make that tall *people*, 'cause Diondra's got the same problem. Everybody expects her to shoot hoops. The difference is, she's got no talent in that direction. Ask me, she's got no business playing b-ball. That's my game.

I've got good height and good hands, and that's a fact. But what about the rest of me? Forget who I really am, who I really want to be. The law is be cool, be tough, play ball, and use books for weight training—not reading. Otherwise, everybody gives you grief. Don't ask me why I care, especially when the grief is coming from a punk like Wesley. Judging from the company he keeps, he's a gangsta in sheep's clothing. I don't even know why he and Tyrone bother coming to school. It's clear they don't take it seriously, although maybe they're starting to. That's according to Sterling, who believes in praying for everybody and giving them the benefit of the doubt. I love the preacher-man, but I think he may be giving these brothers too much credit. Anyway, when I hang around after school and any of the guys ask me: "Yo, Devon, where you going?" I tell them I'm heading for the gym to meet Coach and work on my lay-up. Then once they're out the door, I cut upstairs to the library to sneak a read.

It's not much better at home. My older brother's always after me to hit the streets with him, calls me a girly man for loving books and jazz.

Don't get me wrong. B-ball is all right. Girls like you, for one thing. But it's not *you* they like. It's Mr. Basketball. And if that's not who you are inside, then it's not you they're liking. So what's the point? Still, I don't mind playing, just not all the time.

This year is looking better. My English teacher has got us studying the Harlem Renaissance, which means we have to read a

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lot of poetry. That suits me just fine, gives me a reason to grad around my beat-up volumes of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay. Whenever anybody bugs me about it, all I have to say is “Homework.” Even so, I’d rather the brothers not catch me with my head in a book.

The other day, I duck into the library, snare a corner table, and hunker down with *3000 Years of Black Poetry*. Raynard sees me, but it’s not like he’s going to tell anybody. He hardly speaks, and he never hangs with any of the brothers I know. So I breathe easy. I’m sure no one else has spotted me until a head pops up from behind the stacks. It’s Janelle Battle from my English class. I freeze and wait for the snickers I’m used to. Wait for her to say something like: “What Coach got you *reading* now? Afraid you’re going to flunk out and drop off the team?” But all she does is smile and wave. Like it’s no big deal for me to be in a library reading. Like I have a right to be there if I want. Then she pads over, slips a copy of *The Panther & the Lash* on my table, and walks away without saying a word. It’s one of m favorite books by Langston Hughes. How could she know? Seems like she’s noticed me in the library more often than I thought.

Janelle is all right. So what if she’s a little plump? At least when you turn the light on upstairs, somebody’s at home. She’s smart, and she doesn’t try hiding it. Which gets me thinking. Maybe it’s time I quit sneaking in and out of the library like some thief. Maybe it’s time I just started being who I am.

Open Mike: Bronx Masquerade By Devon Hope

*I woke up this morning
exhausted from hiding
the me of me
so I stand here confiding*

*there’s more to Devon
thank jump shot and rim.
I’m more than tall
and lengthy of limb.
I dare you to peep
behind these eyes,
discover the poet
in tough-guy disguise.
Don’t call me Jump Shot.
My name is Surprise.*

Tyrone

Shoot. If I have moves like Devon, I’d be cruising crosscourt with Scotty Pippin! That’s probably what the brotha’s gonna end up doing, anyway, ‘cause he ain’t half the word-man I am. ‘Course, I probably been at it longer.

He might get better. I said *might*. And who knows? Muhammad Ali was a boxer *and* a poet. Maybe it’s time for another hoop-man to rise to the occasion and show Shaquille he ain’t the only word-man on the court.

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Lupe Algarin

Janelle's got a thing for Devon, but she ain't the only one. Last week I seen some girl named Beth in here staring tat him like he was chocolate ice cream she couldn't wait to spoon up. She don't even belong in this class. Come to think of it, a lot of extra kids been showing up in our class on Open Mike Fridays. They heard about the poetry and they been coming to check it out. A bunch of teachers are getting mad at Mr. Ward with all these kids skipping their classes. Everybody's talking about it.

Poor Mr. Ward. He sends students back where they belong—when he catches them. Our class is big, though, and it's easy to duck down behind someone in the back of the room and hide. Sometimes we're halfway through the period before the notices someone who doesn't belong. But he caught Beth last week, and I saw Janelle grinning. She don't have Devon yet, but still she wants him all to herself. I know that feeling, when you love somebody like that. And not just a guy.

I love my Rosa.

Rosa is o beautiful. I wish I could bring her to school. Mr. Ward would love her. Her toes are like tiny *churros* you want to nibble al the time. And I do, whenever my big sister, Christina, has me over to baby-sit. She smiles more than she did before she had Rosa. Or maybe she's just happy to be out of the house. I would be. There's nothing for me there, that's for user.

My brother, Tito, left long ago, and then Christina. So it's just me now, with Mami and her husband, Berto. Besides her factory job, all she cares about is him. As for Berto, he's got no use for nobody's kids, even Mami's.

Why does she put up with him? All he does is belch beer and scream at her to bring him and his buddies more while they sit around playing dominos or watching fights on TV.

"I bet Papi doesn't guzzle beer all the time," I often say to Mami.

"You don't know what he does, Lupe," she always says. "How could you? You were only five when he left. And he left on his own, Lupe. *Pero*, what did I expect? He was a *jibaro* through and through. He couldn't *wait* to get back to his precious mountains! And this is the man you love? But Berto, who puts food in your mouth, him you despise. *Dios mio!*"

I hate it when she calls Papi a hick, the way she spits the word out.

I used to write him. So many letters. But he never wrote back. Why, Papi? There's nobody here to love me now. Mami has Berto, Tito has his *carnales* on the streets, Christina has Chooch and Rosa. And me? Raul's been giving me the eye lately, but he can forget it. He's too much in love with himself, always drawing pictures of his own face. What's that about? Besides, I already got a man. My Marco. Except, Marco hardly has time for me, even though he claims I'm his woman, his one and only.

Sometimes I say my rosaries and beg for someone to love. I lay in bed under the crucifix and pray 'til my fingers go numb on the beads.

Lately when I look at Rosa, I think I should do like my friend Gloria Martinez. I should make a baby of my own. Maybe that's the answer.

I like Marco good enough. I don't want to marry him, but he's cute. We'd make pretty babies together, I think.

I've always loved babies. When I was younger, I would wrap my doll in the lace from my first Communion and I'd show her off to all my neighbors. "*Mira, mira,*" I'd say. "See my baby. Isn't she perfect?" and she loved me better tan anybody, because I was her mother. It was only pretend, of course. But if I had a real baby, she would love me like that. The way Gloria's baby loves her. The way Rosa loves Christina.

***Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes**

I saw Gloria and her baby in the grocery last night. I waved to them and all the time, I'm thinking, Gloria, you have no idea how lucky you are.

Open Mike: Brown Hands By Lupe Algarin

*You, macho soledad,
the secret I whisper in the night,
you fill your eyes with me
like a mirror
I see myself in.
Our twin hearts beat
like congas, the rhythm
churning our blood
to salsa.
Our brown hands entwine
beneath moonshine,
clasping all the love
we'll ever need—*

Tyrone

So, the daydreamer speaks.

Every time I look at Lupe, she seems like she's somewhere else. Or maybe she just wants to be. Maybe she's thinkin' about the guy in that poem. But if she is, how come she never smiles?

Gloria Martinez

Pampers. Apple sauce. Strained peas. I look up for a minute, see Lupe smiling at me. I nod, then go back to making my list. *Orange juice. Baby powder. Soy milk.* I didn't even know what soy milk was a year ago.

"Gloria." Raynard pokes me in the arm, gestures toward the front of the room. Mr. Ward is heading in my direction. I put my shopping list away before he can ask me what soy milk has to do with Zora Neale Hurston and the book he's been reading to us, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I turn to Raynard and nod thanks. He doesn't say much, but he always looks out for me.

I shoulda made a shopping list before I left the house this morning, but I barely got out as it is. Angel spit up on my shirt right when I was headed out the door. It's like he *picks* the time to do it. Like he doesn't want me to leave. It took me ten minutes to clean him up and find myself another shirt. If Mami hadn't done the laundry for me yesterday, I wouldn't even have a clean one to wear.

I was stupid to think I could do this on my own. Even with Mami's help, I hardly have time to study or do my homework. Last week, Lupe asked if I could hang out with her after school and I just about laughed in her face. "*Chica*," I wanted to say, "them days are over for me." I go right home now, except for maybe stopping at the grocery. It's no more *Gloria Loca*, party girl. Fun ain't even in my vocabulary any more.

Once you have a kid, everything changes.

If I could go back, do things over...but I can't. No sense dreaming about it.

I love my Angel, and that's no lie. But I wish he didn't cry so much. He always wants something—his bottle, a new diaper, the teddy he dropped on the floor for the sixteenth time in a row. Or else he wants me to hold him, kike I can rock a baby and write a paper at the same time! And forget about sleep. He wakes me up in the middle of the night so much, I practically wake up on my own now.

Two weeks ago, he wakes up crying with a fever. I don't know what to do. I rub him with cold washcloths, and then I take his temperature. I give him baby Tylenol, walk him up and down,

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and I take his temperature. I sing to him, I rock him, I give him a bottle of water, and I take his temperature. I must've taken his temperature ten times before his fever finally broke. Then I put him in bed with me so I can watch him. By the time I close my eyes, the clock radio says 3:16A.M. The next day, I have a math test. Which I flunk, of course. I keep nodding off between reading the problems and working out the solutions. I was a mess. Lucky for me, when I explained what happened, the teacher let me take the test over.

I still got two years to go before I graduate. But I've got to make it, and I've got to go to college. Period. Angel's father already told me straight-up he ain't having nothing to do with this baby, so it's on me. Mami says she'll help, but it's me who has to make a good life for Angel. It's like she says, but life ain't about just me anymore. It's about my son.

Lupe has no idea how lucky she is.
How can I get through to her?

Open Mike: Message to a Friend By Gloria Martinez

*That girl in the mirror,
daughter of San Jan
made of sunshine and sugarcane,
looks like me.
She used to run, weightless,
Time a perfumed bottle
hanging from her neck,
mañana a song
she made up the words to
while she skipped—
until the day she stopped,
caught the toothless, squirming bundle*

*heaven dropped into her arms
and gravity kicked in.
Her life took a new spin.
This screaming gift did not
lead her to dream places
or fill all her empty spaces
like she thought.
Silly chica. She bought into
Hollywood's lie,
that love is mostly what you get
instead of what you give,
and what it costs,
like the perfumed bottle
ripped from her neck
and sent flying to the ground.
The crashing sound
of years lost
shattered in her ears,
and new fears emerged
from the looking glass.
Sometimes I wonder
if she'll ever sing again.*

Tyrone

Girl's got a lot of heart, coming back to school after havin' a baby. I saw her around here last year. Man, did she get big! She shrunk right back down, though. She's fine, so I can see why a guy would want to give her a child. Not like any other guy will get the chance, the way she steers clear and keeps to herself.

Fine as she is, the girl ain't no dummy. Not writing poetry like that.

She should put it up on the wall. If you ask me, it belongs there.

Bronx Masquerade by Nikki Grimes

Janelle Battle

“Janelle Hope. Mrs. Janelle Hope. Mrs. Devon Hope.” Dream on, fool. You can stand here in the girls’ room and practice saying that name ‘til your tongue falls out, or the change bell rings, whichever comes first, and it still won’t ever be true. Face it. Devon is Denzel Washington, and you are Thighs “R” Us.

I can hear Lupe now. “Stop putting yourself down. You have a very pretty face. Besides, you have a lot more going for you.” Yeah, well, I guess that’s true. I mean, I am smart and funny, and I know I’m a good person. But this is high school, and nobody seems to care about that. Why couldn’t I be tall and elegant like Diondra, or have Judianne’s perfect complexion, all smooth, super-rich fudge? Better yet, why couldn’t I look like Tanisha, or Gloria? Then I might have a chance with somebody like Devon. But I don’t, so forget it.

Devon is different from the other jocks, though. How many guys you know read Claude McKay for fun? Seems like every time I go to the library, I catch him squeezed into a corner like he’s got something to hide. He smiled at me last time I saw him there. That’s something, isn’t it? He didn’t have to smile, even if I did smile and wave first. And he seemed to like the poem I read at the last Open Mike Friday.

I can’t believe I’m getting up in front of people and talking about personal stuff, and liking it. I’m saying things that I would never tell anybody, usually. But, I don’t know. There’s something about reading poetry. It’s almost like acting. The room is kind of set up like a stage, anyway. Mr. Ward turns most of the lights out, and we stand in a spot in front of the video camera. Once he switches it on, it’s like you become somebody else, and you can say anything, as long as it’s in a poem. Then, when you’re finished, you just disappear into the dark and sit down, and you’re back to being your own self. Gloria says it’s the same for her.

“Hey, Janelle.”

Oh, no. It’s Miss Big Mouth Fifth Avenue in another one of her original getups. Where’d she come from?

“Hey, Judianne.” I thought the bathroom was empty. How long was she there? I hope she didn’t hear me talking to the mirror. That’s all I need, to have the whole school laughing about me having a crush on Devon. Lord, please don’t let that happen. It’s bad enough they call me Battle of the Bulge behind my back.

I wish, I wish, I wish. God, I wish people could see me on the inside. I know I’m beautiful there.

Open Mike: Inside By Janelle Battle

Daily

*I notice you frown
at my thick casing,
feel you poke me
with the sharp tip
of your booted words.
You laugh,
rap my woody shell
with wicked whispers shaped
like knuckles,
then toss me aside.
Lucky for me,
I don’t bruise easily.
Besides,
your loss
is someone else’s gain
for I am coconut,
and the heart of me
is sweeter
than you know.*

***Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes**

Tyrone

You never think other folks got feelings. Like Janelle. I must've cracked wise a hundred times about her weight. Never even thought about it. It was just something I did for a laugh. Listening to her now, it don't seem all that funny.

Leslie Lucas

I'm starting to feel like I know Janelle, at least a little. And Lupe. And Gloria. And Raynard. Before Open Mike Fridays, I hardly knew anybody in this school at all. Big surprise.

What could I possibly have in common with these kids? I must've asked myself that question a million times a day when I moved here. I'm white, they're Black and Hispanic. I grew up in Westchester County. They grew up in New York City. I like Sheryl Crow, they like Lauryn Hill. Except for Raynard and Devon, who are into jazz. It's like we come from two different planets. But hey, it's not my fault. I didn't choose to be here. If it weren't for Mom up and dying on me, I'd still be back in Ossining with my friends.

I miss my friends. That's mostly why I hated moving here. I knew I wouldn't have anybody to talk to when it hurts, and it hurts all the time. Missing Mom, I mean. I was full up with loneliness for her a few weeks ago. It was one of those moments that come from outta nowhere, when you all of a sudden feel something read inside your chest, grab your heart, and squeeze 'til you can hardly breathe. I was in the girls' locker room at the time, and for a minute, I wheeled around like Uncle Donny does when he's drunk. That's when I bumped into Porscha Johnson.

Porscha Johnson has the reputation for being a little touched in the head. In freshman year, she'd beaten the snot out of a girl who'd pushed her too far. They say it took four people to pull her off of the other girl. Everybody had pretty much steered clear of her since then. This is who I bump into.

"Hey! Watch it," she said.

"Sorry," I told her.

"You got that right. Why don't you sorry yourself on outta here?" Usually, this would be the cue for me to make my self invisible, but I was hurting too bad, and I was not in the mood. I flung my locker door open and spoke between my teeth.

"I said I was sorry. Now why don't you just leave me alone?"

"Leave you alone? Look, if you wanted to be left alone, why the hell did you invade *my* space?"

By space, I thought she meant neighborhood. That's when I felt my head spin off. "My mom died, all right? And I was sent to live with my grandmother, who lives in this neighborhood, and I had no choice. Not that it's any of your business."

The split second those last words flew out, I wanted to take them back, but I couldn't. I swallowed hard and waited for Porscha to shove me against the lockers, or to punch me in the stomach, or to whip out a knife like I'd seen kids do on TV. Instead, she stepped back, lowered herself to the bench, and said, "Sorry about your mom. My mom died too."

Turns out we both live with our grandmothers. For a long time, she put off telling me what her mom died from. My mom died of cancer, which was not big secret, but hers died from a drug overdose. Porscha thought that would make a difference, but when I found out, I told her it made no difference at all. Dead is dead, and lonely is lonely, and they both stink. All that matters, I told her, is that we're friends. And we are.

I'm lucky. I was on my way to being like Amy Moscovitz, the one girl in class almost nobody knows anything about. She cuts herself off, hardly ever speaks, or lets anyone in. She seems to be happy by herself, but I need to hear somebody's voice besides my own. I'm not as strong as she is, and now I don't have to pretend that I am.

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Open Mike Fridays help. We kind of have our own little clique now. The whole school knows who we are, that we're "the poets." It's weird. For the first time in my life, I'm part of a group that's cool. Who would believe it?

Last month, Mr. Ward gave our class an assignment to write a poem about what frightens us most, in honor of Halloween. A year ago, I might have written about something silly, like ghosts, which I don't even believe in, and even if I did, ghosts would not be at the top of my list. The scariest thing I can think of now is being all alone in the world.

Open Mike: Common Ground By Leslie Lucas

*On the dark side of the moon
where death comes sooner
than expected;
at the edge of heartbreak
we both take
a leap
into the unknown;
at the center of loneliness
we dip into a pool
of tears
and thrash around
desperate not to drown;
we both reach out
for a life preserver,
something to hold on to
something sturdy
something new.
That's when we see it,
a buoy called friendship*

*bobbling up between us
and we swim toward it
for all we are worth
and we meet there,
somewhere
in the middle.*

Tyrone

Man, that little white girl be getting pretty deep. I figured her for something lame like "Roses are red, violets are blue." Glad I didn't have a bet on that action.

More than half the class wanted to read today, but most of them were girls. I wish a few more of the brothas would step up to the mike, even this thing out a little. Know what I'm saying?

Judianne Alexander

Good thing Leslie's cough woke me in class this morning. I nodded off three times. Once more and Mr. Ward said he'd be bringing me a pillow. That's what I get for staying up late. Again.

What choice did I have? Open Mike Friday it today, and I am not about to stand in front of the class in some funky old outfit. I didn't realize it would take me half the night to finish something new. I hope I can stay awake long enough to read my poem when my turn comes.

Me, writing poetry! What a scream. I'm not smart enough to be writing poetry in the first place, though Mr. Ward says I'm smarter than I know. Yeah, well, I wouldn't have bothered trying to write anything except that Open Mike Friday is one time I know I can get Tyrone Bitting's attention, and I've got a thing for Tyrone. Of course, he's got a thing for Tanisha Scott—like every other boy in school.

Too bad we can't all have good hair and light skin. Who am I kidding? She's more than that. She's pretty. Which I'm not, as my

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stepfather reminds me ten times a day. Like I don't know that from looking in the mirror, or from having kids tease me about my blue-black skin all the way through school. But my body's good. Nothing wrong with me in that department. That's why I got to show it off, wear clothes that accentuate the positive. The shorter, the better. And I don't even have to buy them. I can make them my self. It ain't much, but that's one thing I learned from my mother. How to sew.

Last week, I wore my patchwork denim skirt and vest with the red leather pockets that just about broke my sewing machine needle. Sheila was all up in my face, telling me how cool I looked, like I needed her opinion. Why she's always trying to kiss up to Black people is beyond me. Anyway, it was Lupe's compliment I listened to. She took one look at my outfit and told me she was jealous. Said she wished she could sew like me. Honey, I thought to myself, give me some of that pretty skin and hair of yours, and I'll trade.

Lupe has no idea how pretty she is. You should see Raul and some of the other guys—Black *and* white—sniffing round her. And does she notice? Don't' look lit it to me. Except for Raul. It's hard not to notice Mr. Latin Loverboy. Anyway, Lupe says she already has a boyfriend. I'm thinking he's invisible, though. I never see him. He goes to another school, she says. Others say he doesn't go to school at all, that he dropped out a long time ago, that he's eight years older than Lupe. Eight years! But he, it's none of my business. At least she's got somebody. I'm still working on that one. Meanwhile, I spend my weekends alone, holed up in a room with my Singer sewing machine.

I've been helping Mom mark and cut out patterns for as long as I can remember. I even helped her draw a few that Vogue never thought of. They should take a look at my sketch pad! Now, if I could just figure out how to design poetry as well as I design

clothing, I could turn myself into somebody special. Wouldn't that be a neat trick?

It wouldn't hurt if I could come up with something deep to write about, like Chankara. I wouldn't want to have the experience of someone beating up on me, though. It's bad enough my stepfather talks about me like a dog. The few times my mother gets on him about it, he laughs it off and shays he's just joking. I should cut his tongue out, see how funny he thinks that is, 'cause there's sure nothing funny about being called ugly. So why does Mom let him do it? Sometimes I think she loves him more than me. Otherwise, she wouldn't let him tear me down like that.

One of these days, he's going to call me ugly, and I'm going to ugly myself on outta there. I don't know where I'll go, but it'll be fare away from him. Then Mom won't have to worry about defending me. And I won't have to waste energy being angry because she hardly ever does.

She's all right in private, though. She tells me to ignore my stepfather, says I've got a lot to work with, that I can make myself over with hair and makeup. When I'm older. For now, I can barely get out of the house with lipstick. meanwhile, I sit at my sewing machine and dream about the great transformation I'm going to make someday. As if I could use pinking shears to cut out a new face for myself.

Right. Dream on.

Open Mike: Cocoon
By Judianne Alexander

Her cocoon is see-through.

Inside, she is busy

with pattern and pinking shears.

If the ears are too long, she'll snip them.

If the mouth is too wide,

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*she'll stitch up the corners.
Her needle and thread
hold more magic
than any wand.
With her chalk,
she can outline
a fine and voluptuous shape.
The nape of the neck
is a perfect place
to tuck and fold.
Her straight pins hold
the skin together, just so.
A quick basting stitch
lets her know where
to set her seams,
her cuffs, her hem.
After all, her arms and legs
mustn't be too long.
She mustn't stand too tall.
Perfect beauty is what
she's after.
She's already had enough laughter in her life.
The day she clips her way
out of her cocoon,
the only sound
she plans to hear
is a deafening cheer.*

Tyrone

Don't none of these girls like the way they look? I don't get it.
Guys don't have that problem. Not the guys I know. Would
somebody clue me in?

Lupe

Judianne tapped me on the shoulder this morning and passed me a note real quick before Mr. Ward could see. It was from Leslie. "Are you okay?" it said. I turned and flashed her my "okay" smile. The mile was for real. I'm fine today. *Pero*, last night? Forget it. I broke up with Marco and I was a mess.

It was so silly. I been planning to break up with him for weeks. I mean, I hardly ever seen him anyways. Plus, I've been thinking, if I'm ever going to have a baby, I need to find a better father than Marco, somebody who's got time for me, at least. I don't want my baby and me to be alone, like Gloria and Angel. She's got it harder than I though. Still, I wasn't in no hurry to break up with Marco, because that would make it official: Lupe Algarin is alone. I can't hardly breathe thinking about it.

I busted up with Marco over the phone, which is good because, right after I hung up, I felt this big hole rip open inside of me, and I started c'frying like little Rosa does when she's hungry and her bottle is empty and her mom has just left the room. Once I calmed down, I called Leslie. But as soon as I heard her voice, the tears started coming again.

"I'm sorry,

I said, trying to hide my sniffles. "I shouldn't have called."

"Lupe, what's wrong?"

"I don't want to bother you."

"You're not bothering me. Anyway, that's what friends are for. Now, what happened?"

I told her about Marco, and how I left him, and how he didn't even seem to care that much, and how I was all alone now. She was quiet for a minute. Then she said, "Lupe, sounded to me like you were already alone."

"I know, but—"

"Never mind. It's okay. You're not really alone, anyhow. You have friends. You have me."

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“Yeah. I guess.”

Leslie said she feels lonely sometimes, too. She told me about how it was right after her mom died. I really listened because she doesn’t talk about her mother much. She said that after the funeral, and even months after she moved in with her grandmother, her world felt so empty and hollow, she could hold it at one end and ring it like a bell. It’s better now, she said.

We must’ve talked for an hour. I can’t remember half of what we talked about, except that Leslie said friends can be like *familia*. Only she pronounced it *fama-lea*. It took me a minute to figure out what she meant. Anyway, she was right.

So I don’t have a boyfriend now. So what? Neither does Janelle. Or Gloria. Or Leslie. But we have each other.

Maybe we can all be alone together.

Open Mike: El Noche By Lupe Algarin

*I stand out in the cold
el noche and I
both too lonely for whispers.
Only the wind
shatters this silence.
I have been here before
choking in solitude,
but this time
when all the earth
is hollow as a bell,
I hold one end,
ring it,
and you come—
a pale-skinned surprise,
a friend.*

Tyrone

Her voice is so soft, I close my eyes every time she reads, trying to hold in the sound a little longer. I’m glad Mr. Ward asked her to read her piece over again. She says it like a whisper, but it’s powerful stuff. That’s one thing these ladies know how to do. Be soft and strong at the same time. Like my moms.

Janelle

Tyrone said something to me today, but I didn’t hear him. I’m having trouble getting Judianne’s poem out of my head. Even Lupe said it was a surprise. We all thought Miss Fifth Avenue was self-confidence with a capital S, but her poem was all about wishing she could make herself over. I know what that’s like. Which is what I tried telling Judianne the other day. Boy, was *that* a mistake!

I ran into her in the bathroom. That seems to be our place to meet. Anyway, I decided to take advantage of the meeting.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you, I really liked the poem you read for Open Mike Friday.”

“Yeah? Well, thanks. I’m not used to writing poetry.”

“Well, nobody could tell it. You know, I could really get into what you were saying about trying to make yourself over, wishing you could be perfect and all. I mean, I feel like that every time I look in the mirror.”

Judianne nodded, and her tight mouth softened a little. She was about to say something, but then a toilet flushed and she realized we were not alone. Sheila Gamberoni came out of the stall, and the minute she did, Judianne slipped back behind her usual scowl and turned mean.

“Look, I am nothing like you, okay?” she spit out. “In case you haven’t noticed, you’re fat and I’m not. And you’re wrong about my poem. It was just words. It didn’t mean anything. You

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got that?" And she slammed out of the bathroom and left me there, stinging from the inside out.

I bit my lip to keep the tears back. I turned the faucet on and washed my hands a few times, staring at the sink until I heard Sheila step out into the hall. I glanced up at the mirror before I left. "You're wrong, Judianne," I said to the mirror. "They weren't just words, and you know it."

I haven't tried talking with her since. I don't want to give her an excuse to be mean to me again. I'm not mad at her, though. I know there's a part of her that's as scared to look in the mirror as I am. I saw that person for a few seconds, even if she wants to deny it. Calling me names won't change the way she feels inside. One of these days, she's going to find that out.

Open Mike: Mirror, Mirror By Janelle Battle

*Sisters under the skin,
we meet in the mirror,
our images superimposed
for one split second.
Ready or not,
I peer into your soul
and dive deep,
splash-landing
in a pool of pain
as salty and familiar
as the tears on my cheek.
Your eyes don't like
what I see.
You don't want to be me.
So you curse
and smash the mirror,*

*which gets you what?
A bit of blood,
a handful of glass splinters,
another source of pain.*

Tyrone

Mm, mm, mm. Janelle is working it. seems like her pieces are getting tighter. Actually, I think everybody's getting better. Practice makes perfect, I guess, and we be getting plenty of practice these days. Mr. Ward had to switch Open Mike from once a month to once a week 'cause so many people be wanting to read their work.

I b'lieve there's more to this thing than Mr. Ward planned on. But he's cool. He keeps rolling with it.

Tanisha Scott

If Tyrone calls me "caramel cuie" one more time, I'll scream. I turn to cut my eyes at him and find Judianne staring at me again. Even after I turn away, I can feel her eyes stroking the back of my head. I'm so sick of people making a big deal over my "good hair."

I caught her pawning my hair just last week. I reached back and grabbed a finger before she had a chance to pull away. I spun around, more aggravated than angry, and said, "Look, it's just hair. It's not magic, so don't go rubbing it for good luck. Trust me, it hasn't brought me any." Raynard stifled a laugh. You never know when that boy is paying attention. Of course, Judianne made out like she didn't know what I was talking about, swearing up and down she hadn't touched a single hair on my head. But I'd seen that hungry look in her eyes, like I had something she wanted. It was the same look my cousin Faith always gives me just before she says "I sure wish I had good hair like yours" or "I wish I was light like you," followed by "then boys would like me

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better.” Which isn’t true, if you ask me. But try telling that to my cousin. Or to Judianne. If she doesn’t quit bugging me, I’m gonna ask Mr. Ward to change my seat.

She’s why I chopped all my hair off last year. Well, people like her.

My mother freaked when she saw me. My bangs were cut straight across my brow and the sides were sort of squared at the neck. I looked like a clown minus the red nose. It was the best I could do on my own. And it looked better than that time I washed it in detergent to kink it up so I could have an Afro like my cousins. Anyway, Mom hated it so much, she finally forked over money for a visit to a hair salon to have it cut professionally.

Served her right. I’d begged her to let me cut it off before. “But your hair is so beautiful,” she’d say. “Why would you want to cut it?”

My mind flashed to the school cafeteria that afternoon. I’d walked past a group of would-be girlfriends who sucked their teeth at me and said my name like it was curdled milk they couldn’t wait to spit out. “Here come Miss High-Yella, thinkin’ she’s all that, with her so-called ‘good hair,’” said one. “Far’s I’m concerned, she ain’t nothin’,” said another. “Less than nothin’,” said a third. I shook of the memory.

“Look, Mom,” I said. “You don’t understand.” But she wasn’t listening.

“Most girls you know would kill to have your hair,” she said.

“That’s just it, Mom. They hate me for it and they hate my skin. I can’t do anything about my skin, okay, but my hair I can fix.” I lost the argument, of course. Then, three weeks alter, I cut it anyway.

It’s growing back now and I’ve decided to let it. I mean, it’s not like I can win, you know? I’ve tried dressing down in T-shirts and baggy pants, with no makeup, and it’s still either “Come here, pretty mama” from cocky boys like Wesley who I have absolutely

no use for, or getting grief from girls I used to want as friends. I even thought about getting brown contact lenses once, to cover up my green eyes, but my friend Sterling talked me out of it. He’s light-skinned, too, so he knows where I’m coming from. He said he used to twist himself into a pretzel over it until he realized God loves him just the way he is. Besides, he told me, if I did start wearing colored contacts, those girls would only say I was trying to be something I’m not, and he’s right. So I give up. Let ‘em say what they want. I am not a skin color or a hank of wavy hair. I am a person, and if they don’t get that, it’s their problem, not mine.

I’m better off with friends like Diondra and Janelle who know I’m more than what I look like. they know I’ve got a brain, and I know how to use it. They’re no dummies either. That’s why I asked Mr. Ward if the three of us could do a group project on Women of the Harlem Renaissance for extra credit. We had our first meeting at my house.

“Can we do Zora Neale Hurston?” asked Janelle. “I know we read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in class, but she wrote a bunch of other stuff too.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Good idea.” I picked up my pad and wrote Z. Hurston at the top. “Okay. That’s a good start, but I think we should cover some women you don’t hear so much about.”

“Like?”

“Georgia Douglas Johnson. I read some of her work in a book called *3000 Years of Black Poetry*. I’d never heard of her before, and I bet nobody else in class has either.”

“Cool,” said Diondra. “Maybe I should read that book and see if I can get a couple of ideas.”

“You can borrow it from the library,” I said. “Soon as I return it, that is.” We all laughed. I’m notorious for turning library books in late. “Meanwhile, Diondra, you can start working on portraits of these sisters so we can use them for our report covers when we’re done.”

***Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes**

I didn't wait for her to volunteer, because I knew she wouldn't. For somebody who has talent, she spends an awful lot of energy hiding it. But I figure if enough people tell her she's good, she'll start believing it. That means people actually have to *see* her work. I'm going to make sure they do, even if I have to keep volunteering her for projects 'til we graduate. She's not about to say no to me. She knows I'm stubborn when I want something.

"Fine," says Diondra. "I'll do the portraits, but don't look at me when Mr. Ward sees those report covers and busts out laughing."

"Laughing? What do you mean, laughing?" Janelle and I looked at each other. I nodded, and on the count of three, we jumped on Diondra and tickled her 'til tears of laughter squirted out of her eyes.

Them's my girls. They don't care what I look like. They know the only difference between my color and theirs is that the slave master who owned my family raped my great-great-grandma instead of theirs. And like my dad says, that ain't nothing to celebrate or be stuck up about.

Open Mike: For the Record By Tanisha Scott

*It's the blood that tells:
slaves black as the Mississippi mud
ring the trunk
of my family tree.
They speak through me
Black as they want to be.
The slaver's white drop
couldn't stop the spread
of African cells.*

*They're bred
in the bone,
past the slick hair,
the too-fair skin.
So don't tell me
I can't fit in.
My heart beats
like a talking drum,
my mom hums to Bessie
just like yours,
the brothers in my dreams
are pure ebony,
and blue-black grandmother arms
like the ones
that cradled my ancestors
have often cradled me.*

Tyrone

Now I know why the sista hisses every time I call her "caramel cutie." That'd be the last ting she wants to hear! She's proud of her African self, and I'm down with that. That's why I be wearing my *kufi* every chance I get.

I wonder if the sista's into African music. I gotta ask her about that sometime. Maybe I could hook up some African drum music to go with her poetry for the assembly Teach told us about. She could read her stuff, and I could play DJ. Yeah! I could get into that.

Devon

I look up from my lunch tray and catch Tanisha's eye while she stands in the cafeteria line. We nod.

"Yo, brotha," says Tyrone, thinking I'm nodding to him. I wave and turn away.

***Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes**

Tanisha is one fine sister, but I never say that to her face. She gets tired of hearing it from all the other guys. They look at her and that's all they see, what's on the surface. That's what she told me when we talked once after Open Mike Friday. We talked about superficial judgments, how people look at you and think they know who you are, what you are, how they put you in a box: jock, china doll, whatever. That's one thing me and Tanisha got in common. We know all about being put in a box. I feel like I'm gonna be climbing out of the one marked "dumb jock" all my life.

"Hey, Jump Shot," I hear somebody call me from behind. It's Mike from the basketball team. I nod, then go back to reading Imamu Amiri Baraka's *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*. Mike slams his tray down beside me and sits.

"What's that you reading?"

"Baraka," I tell him. "Poetry."

"Oh. Right. You got that class."

At first I don't say anything. Then I decide. "No, man. It's not for class. I'm reading it for me, actually."

"You guts to be kidding'."

"No."

"That's so lame, man."

I keep my finger nit eh book and turn to face him.

"You ever read Baraka?" No answer. "You should check him out."

"Hey, do what you want, man. I isn't interested." Mike picks up his tray and moves to another table, shaking his head. I go back to my reading, seeing as how he'd given me *permission* and all.

Forget this. Tonight our team plays Bronx Science. When I get on the bus with the rest of the guys, I'm taking a copy of Baraka's book with me to read, and I'm gonna make sure everybody sees it. Especially Mike.

Open Mike: Black Box By Devon Hope

*In case I forgot to tell you,
I'm allergic to boxes:
Black boxes, shoe boxes
New boxes, You boxes—
even cereal boxes Boasting champions.
(It's all a lie.
I've peeked inside
And what I found
were flakes.)
Make no mistake,
I make no exceptions
For Cracker Jack
Or Christmas glitter.
Haven't you noticed?
I'm made of skeleton,
Muscle and skin.
My body is the only box
I belong in.
But you like your boxes
So keep them.
Mark them geek, wimp, bully.
Mark them china doll, brainier,
Or plain dumb jock.
Choose whatever
Box you like, Mike.
Just don't put me
In one, son.
Believe me,
I won't fit.*

***Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes**

Tyrone

The broth's right. I look around this class and nobody I see fits into the box I used to put them in. Starting' with Mr. Ward. I figured him for a lightweight do-gooder who would last about five minutes in this neighborhood. But he stuck, and he got this poetry thing going. He even reads his won stuff sometimes. He's okay.

Devon's okay too. I don't know how bright the other jocks are, but there's nothing dumb about this brotha. Mr. Ward says you have to take people one at a time, check out what's in their head and heart before you judge.

Word.

Sterling S. Hughes

Devon shook his head when he saw me standing in the lunch line yesterday, fingering an imaginary fret, making the appropriate sound effects. Friend or not, he thinks I'm crazy, but the brother behind me got into it, snapping his fingers to the rhythm I set. "Yeah!" he said. "Preacher got it going' on."

My name is Sterling Samson, but everyone calls me Preacher. I intend to become a science teacher, not a preacher, but I don't mind being called one. Just so long as you don't call me Samson. I'm hoping to end up in a little better shape than he did.

I turned to the brother behind me and eased into a smile. "I play a real guitar at church every Sunday. You ought to come by and check me out sometime." Judging by the way the brother cut his eyes at me, his appearance on the steps of First Baptist Church seemed highly unlikely. Still, you never know.

I went back to my invisible string playing to keep my fingers limber for later. I had promised to hold the bass line for some of the brothers reading at this week's Open Mike. Mr. Ward was kind enough to lock my guitar up in his office in the morning so I wouldn't have to worry about it walking away before then.

Assuming I made it to his class without any trouble.

A brother named Leon "accidentally" bumped into me as I approached the cashier. He spilled, or should I say poured a cupful of honey on my shoes. My *new* shoes.

"Oops! Looks like Mr. Goody Two-shoes got a mess to clean up," he said, laughing. His buddies joined in.

I stared down at my shoes, counting. *One. Two. Three. Four.* By the time I reached ten, I realized counting was not going to suffice.

I need you, Lord. Hold back the Samson in me. I may not have his strength, but you know I have his temper.

I counted backward from ten, felt my breath slowly evening out. A still, small voice reminded me to return good for evil, reminded me that my plans for the future do not include fisticuffs or expulsion. I am college-bound and nothing is going to keep me from it. Besides, these poor fools are only trying to get a rise out of me. they're only trying to prove that the peace of God is nonexistent. But how can they?

I look up at Leon and shook my head. Then I grabbed him by the shoulders, kissed him loudly on both cheeks, and gave him a bear hug.

"Get off me, man!" he said, trying to pull away.

When I finally let him go, I whispered, "Leon, I forgive you." Fear blotted out the pupils in his eyes.

"Man," he yelled, "you some kind of freak!"

I smiled, strummed my imaginary guitar, and sang, "I'll be a fool for Christ, not just once, but twice." Leon and his friends backed away as if I'd set a match to them. They put as much distance between us as possible.

"You sick, man," Leon called over his shoulder. "Stay away from me!"

It's always something with these guys. either they're trying to draw me into an infantile game of The Dozens so we can trade insults left and right, or they're slapping porno pictures inside my

***Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes**

locker hoping to set me off. If they had some direction in their lives like Raul, Devon, or Reynard, they wouldn't have time to worry about me one way or the other. Which is precisely why I want to teach, to give young brothers like Leon some direction. Even Wesley has direction, although the brother could clean up his language. Sometimes he sounds like a thug in training. Leon's not much better.

If only Leon and his friends knew how lame their antics are. As if any of that could stop me from believing in God.

All my life, I've seen my mother pray, and all my life, I've seen her prayers answered. There was the time my baby brother was dying of pneumonia and the doctors had given up, but she prayed until the fever broke. There was the time she was laid off from her job, and the refrigerator was empty, and she bowed her head over an empty pot and prayed for God to fill it. That night, a woman upstairs begged her to accept a bag of frozen meats and vegetables, because she was moving the next day, and she hated to see good food go to waste. We had steaks that night, and we *never* have steaks. There were lots of times like that. "See there," Mom would say. "That's God's hand. If you have God's hand on your life, everything will be all right." So of course I believe. And I believed big. I'm believing God's going to get me and my three brothers into manhood, into college, and off of these streets—with no more than maybe a couple of black eyes between us. How's that for believing?

The change bell rang and I was still cleaning off my shoes. I could've used a few extra minutes to work on my own poem. It took me a while to get into this whole poetry thing, but that I don't like it. I read *God's Trombones* by James Weldon Johnson, and some of the work by Countee Cullen, like "Simon the Cyrenian Speaks," and I liked what the brothers had to say, but their styles don't suit me. Then Mr. Ward turned me onto Rev. Pedro Pietri, who is more my speed, even if he is kind of old. He knows how to

put God and the street in the same sentence, and I figured if I'm going to write poetry at all, that's what I want to do. So I put together a few. I couldn't tell if they were any good, but I decided to read one anyway. If I get a laugh, it won't be the first time. The bell rang one last time. I took a few bites of my sandwich, wrapped up the rest, and tossed it in my book case for later. I told my growling stomach to be quiet and headed to Mr. Ward's office for my guitar.

Open Mike: D-Train By Sterling L. Hughes

*He squeezed through the subway doors
a young gun, thirsty for the kind of coke
you can't sip through a straw.
He sized up the passengers,
chose his prey:
a wrinkled woman at the tail end
of her Genital years
who fears her own shadow
with good reason.
He lunged at her,
demanded her cash
to replenish his stash
of powdered death.
No one blinked or came
to her aid, at first.
Then, in He beamed.
Light streamed from His fingers,
singed anyone caught without
a robe of righteousness
across his back.
The lack of goodness*

***Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes**

*in the young gun's heart
was oxygen to the fire, and so
he burned a good long while
before I woke.
The dream stoked my faith
in the judgment and justice
that will come someday
or this afternoon.
Soon, I turn up the collar
of my white robe,
relieved to know
God's got me covered
'cause I'm good,
but not that good.*

Tyrone

The brotha took me to a whole other place. I'm not sure I got all of it, but I got that he don't call himself no angel. 'Course, if Mr. Goody Two-shoes isn't no angel, what does that make me? Never mind.

He sure worked that rhythm. I know that much. He snuck a little rhyme in there too. I like that. Go on, Preacher! Look like God got himself a poet!

Diondra

I spent way too long yakking with Tanisha over lunch. She couldn't stop talking about Pedro Pietri, the poet Mr. Ward had invited to visit our class. He as coming in a couple of weeks and Tanisha said he was gonna rock the house. He was the only poet Mr. Ward had us read who we were actually going to meet, which was pretty cool. Tanisha could hardly wait to check him out. I had other things on my mind, though, so I was glad Tyrone came over

and broke up the conversation. He started hitting on Tanisha, as usual. I whispered, "Sorry," and took off.

Ten more minutes and Mr. Ward will be in here. I flip my sketchbook open to a fresh page, clip my father's photo to the corner, and get busy. A few strokes of my pencil and the oval of his face is done. then I start with his chin, I don't know why. Maybe because the hardness is there and I want to get it out of the way, hurry on to the softer parts of his face. The parts that show love. I've never done a portrait from the bottom the to top before, but why not? As long as it looks like my father when I'm done.

The first bell rings. I lift my head and there's Sterling, staring over my shoulder.

"Hey."

"Hey." I lean back so he can get a better look. "I just started this one," I tell him. Other kids file in, so I gather up my charcoal pencils.

Raul swirls his brushes in a jar of water and finishes straightening up Mr. Ward's desk. I catch his eye and we smile at each other. He's part of the reason I don't mind people looking at my drawings anymore. I guess I should give Tanisha some credit too. It was her bright idea to have me do those book report covers.

the day we got our reports back, Mr. Ward held mine up so everyone could see the cover. I tried evaporating on the spot, I swear. The last thing I wanted was extra attention. too late! when class was over, I ran out of the room before anyone had a chance to laugh in my face, but Raul caught me in the hall and snatched the report from me quicker than a subway door slamming shut. He said he wanted to get a better look at it. I bit my tongue and stared at the floor.

"This is good!" he said. "Especially the eyes. They look right through you. You gotta show me how you do the eyes."

My jaw dropped. "You think they're that good?"

***Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes**

“You’re kidding, right?” Raul didn’t wait for an answer. He handed me back the report, shaking his head. “Wish I could do eyes like that. Anyway, see you later.”

I looked down at my book cover as if I was seeing it for the first time. Raul was right. The drawing *was* good. the eyes *did* look right through you. Maybe I should try working on the rest of the face, I thought. I could do studies of mouths and noses and chins. I could try different kinds of faces, different shapes. I could get Mom to model for me. Or Tanisha. Or I could use pictures. We only have a bazillion photo albums around my house. Maybe I could bring one of them to school with me. Or I could just borrow a few of the pictures and then put them back later. Maybe...

I had a hard time concentrating on my classes that afternoon.

The next day, I wolfed down my lunch and half ran to Mr. Ward’s room with a sketch pad and charcoal pencils. By the time Raul arrived, I was already at work. Nowadays I’m in here two, three times a week. I’d come more often, but I gotta make time for my friends.

I shade in my father’s jawline just as Mr. Ward enters the room, then put my pencil down and look up in case he tries to catch my eye.

“Mr. Ramirez,” says Mr. Ward, “may I have my desk, please?” Raul bows deep, like some actor in an old-time movie, then struts to his seat. He passes me on the way, leans down, eyes my rough sketch, and whispers, “Let me know when you get to the eyes.”

My smile is so wide, my cheeks hurt.

Open Mike: High Dive By Diondra Jordan

*A trip to the city pool
isn’t what it used to be.*

*I left the kiddie pool behind
many moons ago.
I know how to float
how to dog paddle
how to hold my breath
between breaststrokes.
I know the stench and sting
of chlorine.
It’s no big thing.
But this,
scaling the ladder
for the high dive
drives me to distraction.
What if
I forget to swim?
What if
there’s no water in the pool?
But wait.
Is it really water
I’m after?
I reach the top,
pad to the edge of the board,
and peek.
There it is,
swirls of blue, purple,
and periwinkle watercolor.
The perfect palette.
I take a deep breath,
dip the tip of my brush
into sky,
take one long leap
and...
To be continued.*

Bronx Masquerade by Nikki Grimes

Tyrone

I've been thinking we should plan on having a poetry slam next year. I ran the idea past Dionard. She's one of the shyest siestas in our class. At least, she was when school got started. Anyway, I figure if she's into the idea, everybody else should be down with it.

Next thing I need to do is pitch it to Mr. Ward, see if he can get the principal to go for it. Man, I would love to get in some guys from Bronx Science, or one of them other special schools, and turn them into toast at a poetry slam. There's no way they'd beat us. They wouldn't even know what hit 'me!

Amy Moscovitz

Amy. The name is petite, like me. It's also soft. I'm not. Just ask Tyrone. Or Diondra. Or Sterling. Better yet, as my father. He thinks I'm so tough, I don't need anybody. Not even him. He didn't always treat me that way. He used to handle me more like china. But then Mom left to start another family—without us. After the divorce, Dad decided we both needed to toughen up, that we needed to learn to stand on our own. I though he meant together.

Two years ago I got sick at school and he was called in to take me to the hospital. Apparently I had appendicitis. I was doubled over with pain, tears streaming down my face, and he wouldn't even put his arm around me. He just walked beside me, stiff as a two-by-four, asking "Are you okay?" every couple of minutes. Jerk.

Would it have killed him to touch me? To help me up the hospital stairs? Never mind. I won't bother needing anyone like that again.

Too bad my father's not more like Mr. Ward. His daughter goes to this school, and I saw the two of them in the cafeteria the other day. I hear they have lunch together three times a week.

Anyhow, there they were in the lunch line, him with his arm draped over her shoulder, the two of them blabbing away like old buddies. She was bent over a little, from the weight of her backpack I guess, and when he noticed, he slipped it off and carried it for her. She smiled up at him and gave his waist a squeeze, and I felt my stomach turn.

For about a minute, I hated that girl.

Sterling says jealousy is a waste of energy, that I should focus on what I have, not what I don't. That's what I get for opening my big mouth and telling him how I feel. But he's so easy to talk to, sometimes I let things slip before I even realize my mouth is open. Anyway, he's too busy trying to save my Jewish should to think about betraying my secrets. He knows I'd never forgive him, and then where would he be? He could pretty much forget about preaching love and forgiveness around me after that. Not that all his preaching will get him anywhere, seeing as I'm an atheist. Still, his trying doesn't bother me, he's so up front about it.

He's right about the jealousy, though. I seem to be jealous of everyone and everything. Especially the friendships I see all around me. Leslie and Porscha, Lupe and Gloria, Tanisha and Diondra. It's enough to make me ill.

It's been forever since I had a best friend, let alone a boyfriend.

"Friendships don't just happen," Sterling tells me whenever I complain. "You have to reach out and make them."

"How?" I ask him.

"Just be yourself."

Myself. That's a laugh. If I were to show anyone who I really am inside, how cold my heart it, they'd probably run in the opposite direction. I tell Sterling this and he says, "Maybe. Maybe not. You won't know unless you try."

Sterling's right. I haven't been trying. Not since my parents divorced. I've been afraid to get close to anyone. When my mom

***Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes**

left, I was suddenly out of orbit. It's like she was the sun, and when she took off, the only thing left was a big black hole where she used to be. Now the idea of letting somebody else get that close...I don't know. I'm just not ready. I wonder if I ever will be.

Open Mike: Ode to Stone By Amy Moskowitz

*One day at Far Rockaway
is all it took.
One look at rocks in water
decided me:
I want to be stone.
I want to be marble.
Dressed up limestone
never looked so good
Let me be granite
and I promise
I'll show you how to take
a shellacking.
Yes, I'll risk sunburn.
Just let me be rock
wedged into the earth or sea
tidal waves crashing over me
while I remain intact—
no split at the core,
more buffed than bruised.
Forget the pillar of salt.
I'll look back at the count of three
and you can turn me into stone.
Go on.
I'm half rock
already.*

Tyrone

Man! That girl is as cold as the snow on the ground. Somebody must've put a hurting on her. "I want to be stone." Can you get next to that? I've felt that way a couple of times. Once, when the undertaker carried my pops out of here. Another time when my girlfriend left me for my supposed-to-be homey. Both times I remember wishing I couldn't feel the hurt, wishing I could just cut my heart out and be done with it. But I like the way Amy said it. Let me be stone.