

# IN FRONT OF THE CLASS

*by Bonafide Rojas*

i'm standing in front of a class  
society has deemed derelicts and hoodlums  
and i am their teacher

i share with them the poem  
that will save the world  
and they say that it's got to be as good  
as a nas rhyme and have more emotion  
than tupac did

my class consisting  
of ex-gang bangers, drug dealers, graffiti writers  
and students who have traveled too much  
in the cracks of the public school system  
they are my students

and as their teacher  
i have traveled as many roads  
as they have, and stand in front  
of them without fear  
because they can smell fear

i am them eight years ahead  
with poetry being the left turn i made at 17  
i tell them that road is approaching  
all they have to do is take that road  
and run down it so fast that their past  
will never catch up to them

i tell them in their metamorphosis  
they can change their name

their place of rest, their life,  
their career, their goals  
and strive for that that has seemed  
unattainable for so many years

one student says “how”  
it’s easy for you to say it now  
how the hell am i supposed to get there,  
i have one kid, one gang after me, and no job,  
how the hell am i supposed to go anywhere  
besides down.

i ask him “how bad do you want it?”  
in the beginning all i had was poetry  
everything else took a back seat  
girls, family, and work was a part time  
that lasted 6 months with me getting  
fired for writing on the job

i tell them to use their connections,  
intern somewhere,  
learn to live, live to write  
love to learn, write to love

this is the last day of your life  
what are you going to leave behind?  
what will be your legacy?  
and they stare at me like  
a rabbit in the headlights  
and say they don’t know

i tell them to open their chests  
and let whatever falls out  
let it fall on the page

let the page be  
your doctor

your therapist  
your lover

let the page be  
your enemy, punch it in the face  
the best friend that'll never stab you in the back  
your prozac

let the page be  
your hip hop  
your rock and roll  
the fancy ride you're always talking about

let the page be  
the bling bling on your wrist  
the underground beat your about to rip  
your autobiography

tell them who you are  
tell them they're wrong for labeling you  
tell them your life may not be worth anything now  
but tomorrow gives you hope  
so you won't take your life today or the next day  
tell them you will be here forever  
tell them you are the future your parents have been planning for  
tell them you are the ones who create beautiful art from stark realities  
tell them you are loved  
no matter what anyone says  
tell them you are loved

and they write  
head down for fifteen minutes  
pen in hand  
never coming off the page  
no cares for grammar  
no cares for spelling  
no cares for structure  
never coming off the page

and the first student gets up  
and his mouth open wide and says

“i want to live”

“i want to love”

(repeated a hundred times over)

“i want to live”

“i want to love”

and he asks me  
if that was any good  
and i tell him  
it's the best poem  
i've ever heard.

# IGNITION

*by Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz*

like the first time you step  
into the driveway and see no parents

the first time you open that door  
and the sound it makes when you close it

the first time you hear the rebel's yell of your engine  
and the buzzing confederacy it stirs in your ribs

the first time you leave the neighborhood  
and the whole city explodes onto your radar

and you could go anywhere, anywhere,  
and the radio feels like a soundtrack

and the radio feels like an anthem

# HISTORY OF THE ARDENWOOD B-BOYS

*by Jason Bayani*

This is where I'm from,

Fremont, California  
It was no South Bronx

we never had Central Park  
Kool Herc plugged into the lamppost  
uprook battles on the subway.

This is the history of the Ardenwood B-boys  
elementary school kids with brown skin  
first and second generation Filipino sons  
lugging around cardboard  
that were meant by our parents to be used as Balikbayan boxes

All we knew were three moves.  
Groundwork, backspin, pose  
been in love with Hip Hop since back in the day

And no it wasn't the day I first heard Run DMC  
watched Beat Street  
or threaded fat laces into my Adidas.

The day I fell in love with Hip Hop  
I can trace back to the playground of Ardenwood Elementary  
the day we stood up to the white kids  
who kept us under knuckle and sneaker heel  
with the same curses their parents  
had for ours.  
What began as a high noon standoff  
of potty mouthed children burst

into a chipped wood pressure cooker  
it was only a matter of time before one of us popped.  
Never thought it'd be the quiet kid Neil  
who walked into the tanbark crossfire  
his provincial malnourished body  
was a steel girder through the tempest  
toothpick arms clenched  
like a moro warrior facing a colt 45.

This was everything that defined hip hop for us  
who worshipped at the house of European gods  
who learned the words Washington, Lincoln  
before we ever learned words Bonifacio, Rizal  
who were made to contort the nature of our tongue  
to more easily pronounce the words—

Assimilation.  
Acculturation.

To tell you the truth, my crew sucked.  
We looked like heroin addicts taking a tumbling class.  
In time none of us followed the sprayed pathways of Krylon  
or lived behind two turntables.  
I made one rap song in high school  
It was called "Bust a Freak Mode" so you know my stuff was wack.

But you ask any one of us  
where Hip Hop is for us today,  
we'll tell you.

It's raising children.  
It's fighting to pay the bills.  
It is living split lip, bruised knuckles and an ear to ear grin.  
And yet another MC contemplates the death of Hip Hop  
as their philosopher stone.

I ain't ready to believe it.

At my base mettle  
I am still that kid hurling tanbark at America.  
And yeah sometimes I still dream of being a dope MC  
but I tell stories,  
like this one.

See a while back I found my brother  
curled up in a sleeping blanket on my parents driveway.  
When I asked him what he was thinking  
he said to me "I got these friends B-boys from Hungary  
Every night they gotta sleep on the streets to keep doing what they do  
I had to know if I loved this art as much as they did."  
A wash of embarrassment wipes over his face as he says to me  
"You think I'm pretty stupid huh."  
I take a seat hold him tight and tell him,  
  
"Not one bit, not one bit at all."