

To the old man who said
“You teach in East Oakland and you haven’t been shot yet?”

Sixty pleading eyes
Bright and wide
“Ms. BB, read mine!”

They shuffle into class
Trickle in late
“I forgot my pencil.”

Bright green hair
glued into tight pony tails
Fluorescent pink strands
Woven into hundreds of tiny braids

“Ow!” “Damn!” “MOOOOVE!”
They loudly resist
The persistent bell

Caps ironed flat
The authentic sticker
catches the glow of the projector
Gold cross chains hang low
A rainbow of piercings
follow the curve of open ears

Jordans, Vans and Jellys
Stampede over the murky floor
Leave a whirlwind of tiny white flakes
The result of a page hastily ripped
From its spiral binding
“I’m not finished!”

Cheeks tear stained
From scandalous boys
And shiesty girls

Full lips droop
From mama’s harsh words
And daddy’s firm belt

Foreheads rest on hard desks
Up late that night
Listening to scrapers slappin’
“Go stupid, go dumb, dumb!”
Drive by flyin’
And dophines hollerin’

Desks littered with

Big Juicys, Hot Chips
And saran-wrapped salami
“Ay, lemme get a piece of that!”

Folders boldly claim hoods
Turfs and cliques

Papers shuffle
The sharpener buzzes
“Do we have to copy the warm up?”

Then we write

We write through blaring fire alarms
that holler at us weekly

He writes through the death of
Another brother shot

She writes through the honks on East 14th

They write with red eyes and dry mouths
With spiked juice bottles
to dull the pain

She writes through scars from a blade
That cuts her own brown flesh

They write through the unwanted pregnancies
And premature labors
Through divorce
incarceration
And deportation

They write in Spanish and Cambodian
Tagalog and Chinese
Vietnamese, Tongan, Ebonics, French

They write even when outsiders believe
they have nothing important to say

So old man
I haven’t been shot
No explosion rings in my ear
Because these strong voices
Choke any gun’s blast
Why can’t you hear them?