

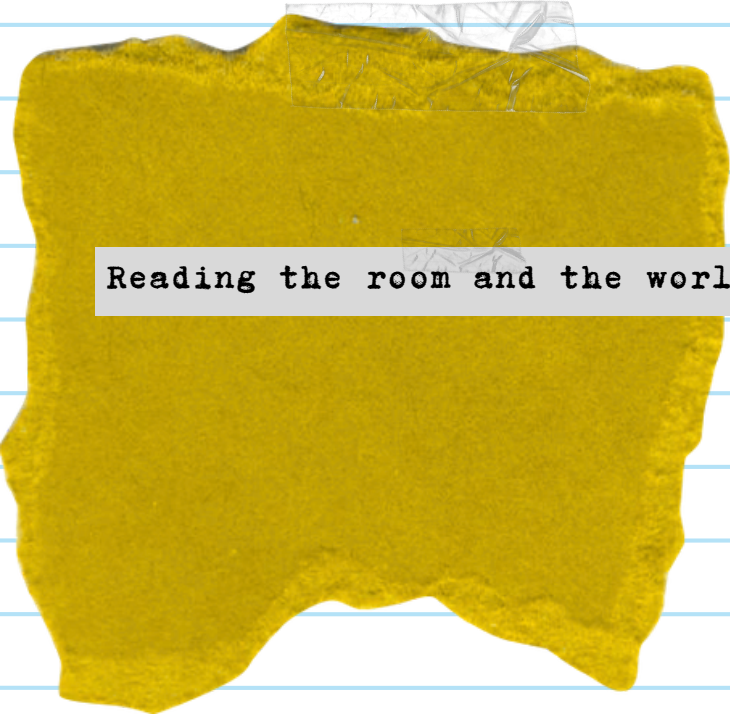
READ THE ROOM

VOLUME 1



COMMUNITY ZINE

This Zine Belongs To:



Reading the room and the world together.

A note from the editor

This zine began in a room gathered around James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and around the questions his work still leaves ruminating in the world today. What do we inherit from the people who raised us? What lessons survive in the name of faith, family, love, and belonging? What does it mean to search for the self inside a world that has already decided who you are, attempt to contain you, or simply look past you?

Across our virtual sessions, Baldwin's novel became a threshold. Through it, we entered conversations about identity, parenting, Black interior life, spiritual inheritance, cultural memory, and the complicated ways love and fear can live under the same roof. Alongside Baldwin, the words and legacies of writers such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde helped us widen the frame, bringing us toward questions of Black women's safety, tenderness, survival, and the sacred work of being. In short, we packed in a lot in three sessions. Creative expression served as a guide in helping us move through topics with grace and bravery.

The work collected here comes from a community of remarkable readers, artists, and witnesses who allowed literature to move through them and return in new forms.

These pages hold reflections, offerings, questions, and creative responses born from our time together.

I am deeply grateful to everyone who entered this space with both care and honesty. Thank you for listening. Thank you for creating. Thank you for craving this space. Thank you for helping build a room wide enough to hold what Baldwin gave us, what our ancestors left us, and what we are still learning to carry forward.

Welcome to the room.

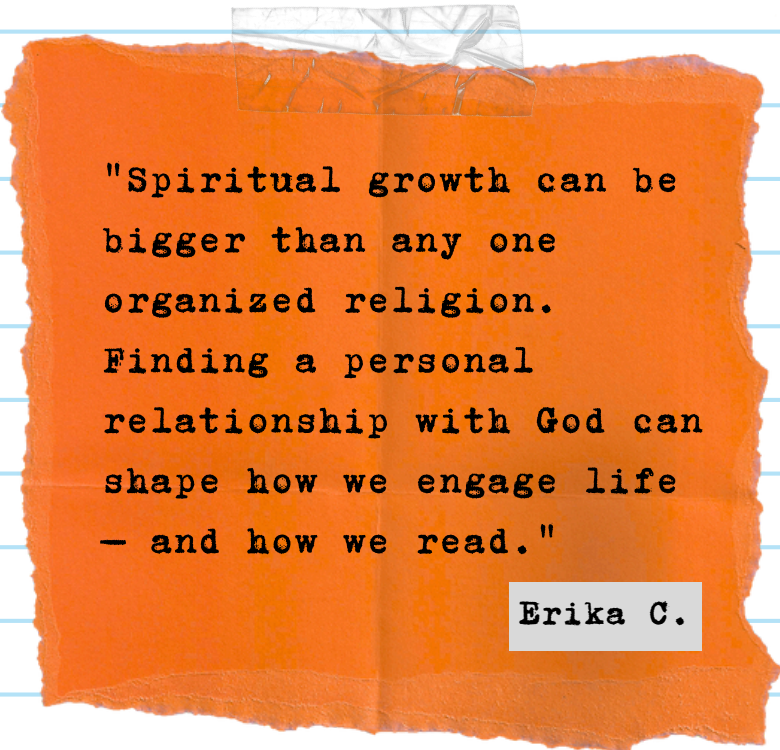
Asia Ashley-Emerson



Now Reading

Go Tell it On The Mountain

James Baldwin



"Spiritual growth can be bigger than any one organized religion. Finding a personal relationship with God can shape how we engage life – and how we read."

Erika C.



A note to you

Sefina V Aulei

May the present hold you in warm bliss
the softness of romance, a sweet kiss.

A reminder to breathe, deeply, with depth
like the sea.

When somber, release worry's embrace, and
let this love letter grant you grace.



Rum Cake

Asha Abena Heru (@OAH)

Write a short letter to someone or something you once judged.

You can choose anything:

- a person
- a younger version of yourself
- a belief
- a memory
- a community you once misunderstood
- an emotion you used to fear
- a part of yourself you tried to hide

Let the letter reveal how your understanding has changed. This letter can be written in poetic verse.

So Much More

Akili Burton

I'm so sorry for not being more understanding.

A false sense of love when you've endured so much trauma can be comforting unfortunately.

I wish that I could take the pain away to truly see you shine, but I know that has to come within your own time.

I know you want the best for me, and I truly only want the best for you as well.

I love you forever, just know that you deserve so much more.



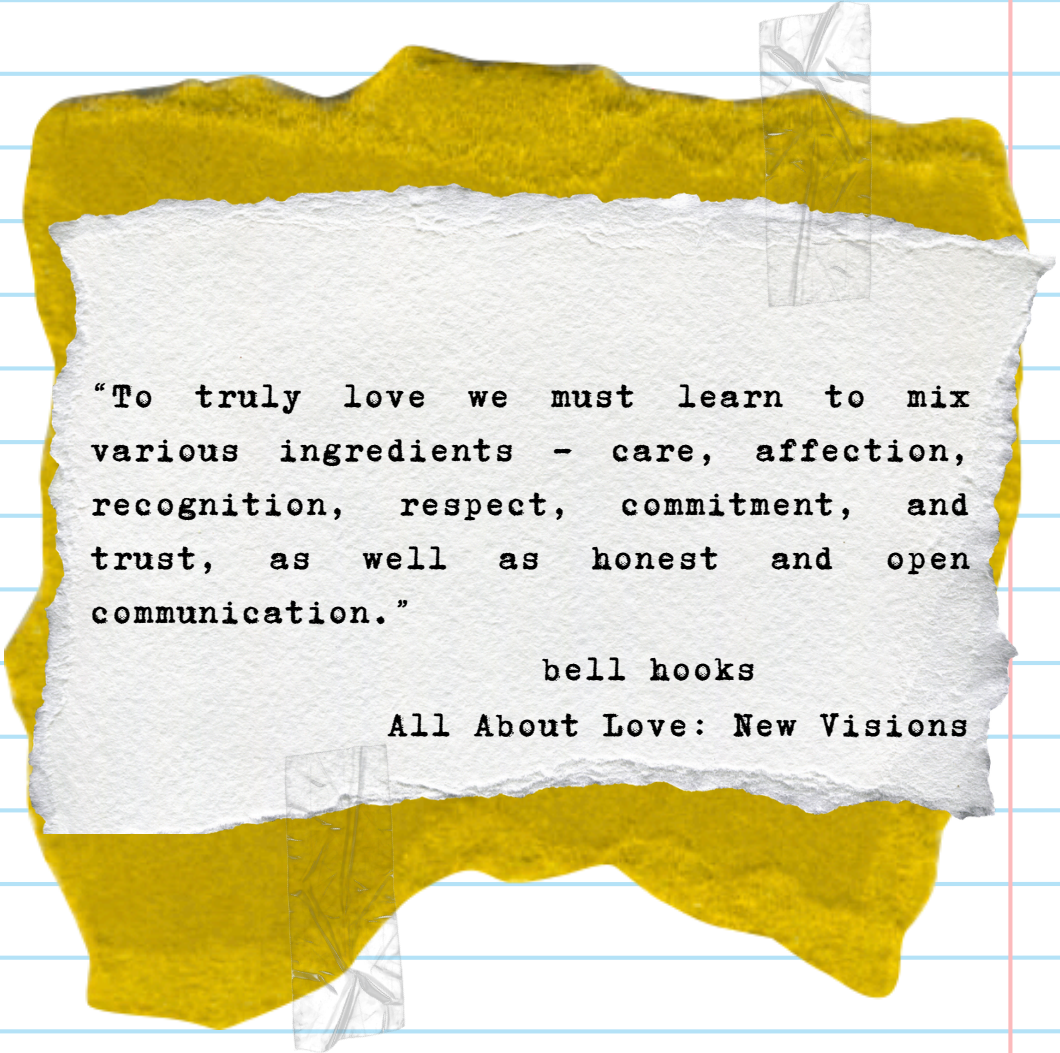


Stream of Conscience

Devin Walker

So here I go pouring my soul into a text
for you again
It must be a millennial thing
A new way of showing this same old thing
How sweet a struggle it is to learn you
Such a delight to be able to call you boo
You make me understand why people get
married for love
In this imperfect world we make do with
what we have..
But you make it so much easier..
Your imperfections are cute and give you
depth of character
So I embrace them I love them because I
love you

Draw, Collage, paint or color what freedom looks like to you? This canvas is yours to do whatever you like to it.



“To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients - care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication.”

bell hooks

All About Love: New Visions

Write a poem set on the morning of a birthday
(yours or a fictional speaker).

Use three images that contrast:

- something hopeful
- something heavy
- something left unsaid

End the poem with a line beginning "But still.."

On My Birthday

Bre Taylor



For the past 4 years I've done my own thing on my birthday. No big birthday dinner, no counting on partners to make my day special. I wake up doing what I want to do. Why?

I vowed to never feel sad again on the day I was blessed to breathe life. There's peace in my existence and I refuse to let that be shaken if someone doesn't like my restaurant choice. Fuck that.

In reality, we only get so many birthdays, so on these days I will do what I want (and if I choose to invite someone, that sounds fun too).

But sometimes I do wonder what it would feel like to have a surprise party. But until then, I'll wander through the streets in a city or country I've never been, and try new eats while reading the birthday comments on my momma's facebook post. "Happy Birthday to my favorite daughter" Even though I'm her only daughter.

A moment for reflection:

What is one tradition, ritual, or everyday practice from your life or culture that shapes how you show up in community?



florescimento tardio

Asha Abena Heru (@OAH)

Untitled

Devin Walker

I love you

more than

I love the idea

of you

Your flaws

intrigue me

Your complexities

perplex me

A Letter to Us

Erika Crawley

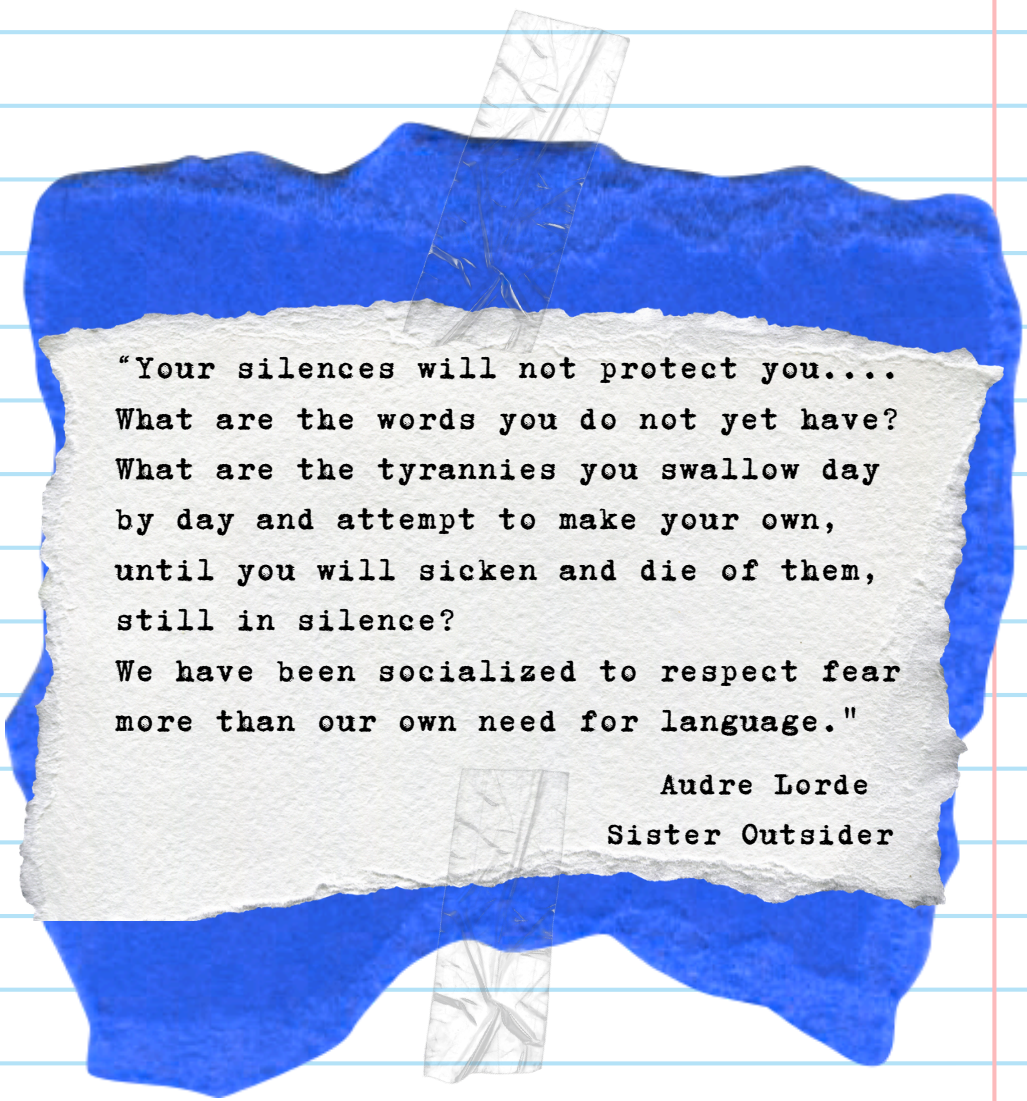
For those of us
who are Burdened
The weight of the world
Not yours to carry
Help us on the way
The gravity of expectation
That you inherit from family
Give that back today
Your path is yours
To carve
And theirs to witness

For those of us
who are Kissed by natures sun
You are the manifestation
If Gods greatest ideation
People ought to be intimidated
As you grace spaces
You are the brightest star
In the darkest sky
You are the flyest thing walking
And it might bring a tear to their eye
Keep pressing baby
You are it





For those of us
who are Trauma incarnate
Your purpose is plentiful
Your existence is existential
Your ability to take
One more breath
One more step
And wake up refreshed
IS A GOD DAMN MIRACLE
You are more than
Circumstance
You are



"Your silences will not protect you....
What are the words you do not yet have?
What are the tyrannies you swallow day
by day and attempt to make your own,
until you will sicken and die of them,
still in silence?

We have been socialized to respect fear
more than our own need for language."

Audre Lorde
Sister Outsider

Write a poem starting from one of Audre Lorde's lines from the poem, "A Litany for Survival"

Write to a group or community you belong to or that you'd like to speak to. What do you need them to know or remember?

Are there any shared emotions, ideas, experiences stories, etc that you can speak to?

may twenty-fifth

Mariah Ashley-Emerson

a gemini sun awoke me
on the twenty-fifth day
exactly what I asked for
in palms as cold and day
as winter's barren branches
rushing over me with the gift of
the water,
running quickly down the earth
gravity
always there to remind you
to fall into faith
or sink into fear
but still,
I crave the nectar
of the fruit bursts of her pod

A moment for you to reflect:

How does fear shape the way authority, faith, and love are expressed in your life, and where do you see the cost of that fear?

For good.

Asia Ashley-Emerson



For those of us who are tired of trying.

Where hard work is often met with,
“Thank you for your services,
and ideas, and new policies,
and ideologies, but I think it’s time we
part ways.”

Where success is measured
by how well you take orders,
instead of solving problems.

Where determination is often met with,
doors slammed in faces
hope still ringing the bell, wondering maybe,
just maybe this time, I will walk away.

For those of us navigating restless nights thinking,
this isn’t what I wished for on my 16th birthday
After so many no’s turned into endless loops
So you stopped asking for permission
Not seeing mama’s no’s as cloaks of protection
but vows of restriction
Begging for the day to be grown and on your own.
And this wasn’t the future you imagined, was it?

For those of us sick and tired of midnight scrolls
Trying not to be traumatized by
each new body
each new name
each new file, each new child,
we will never meet
but somehow grieve
at the edge of forgotten humanity
When did we collectively lose ours?

For those of us who have run out of incense,
run out of savings,
run out of patience,
run out of havens,
run out of complaining
run out of fucks to give
run out of people to outlive
left grieving foundations
that once taught you to stand tall,
And still, here you stand.

For those of us who feel like a broken sentence,
there's no autocorrect
only this breath
and it fully belongs to you.
So sit with me during the pause.
stay for the next small thing.
Sit with me, til' the next joke
you have not heard,

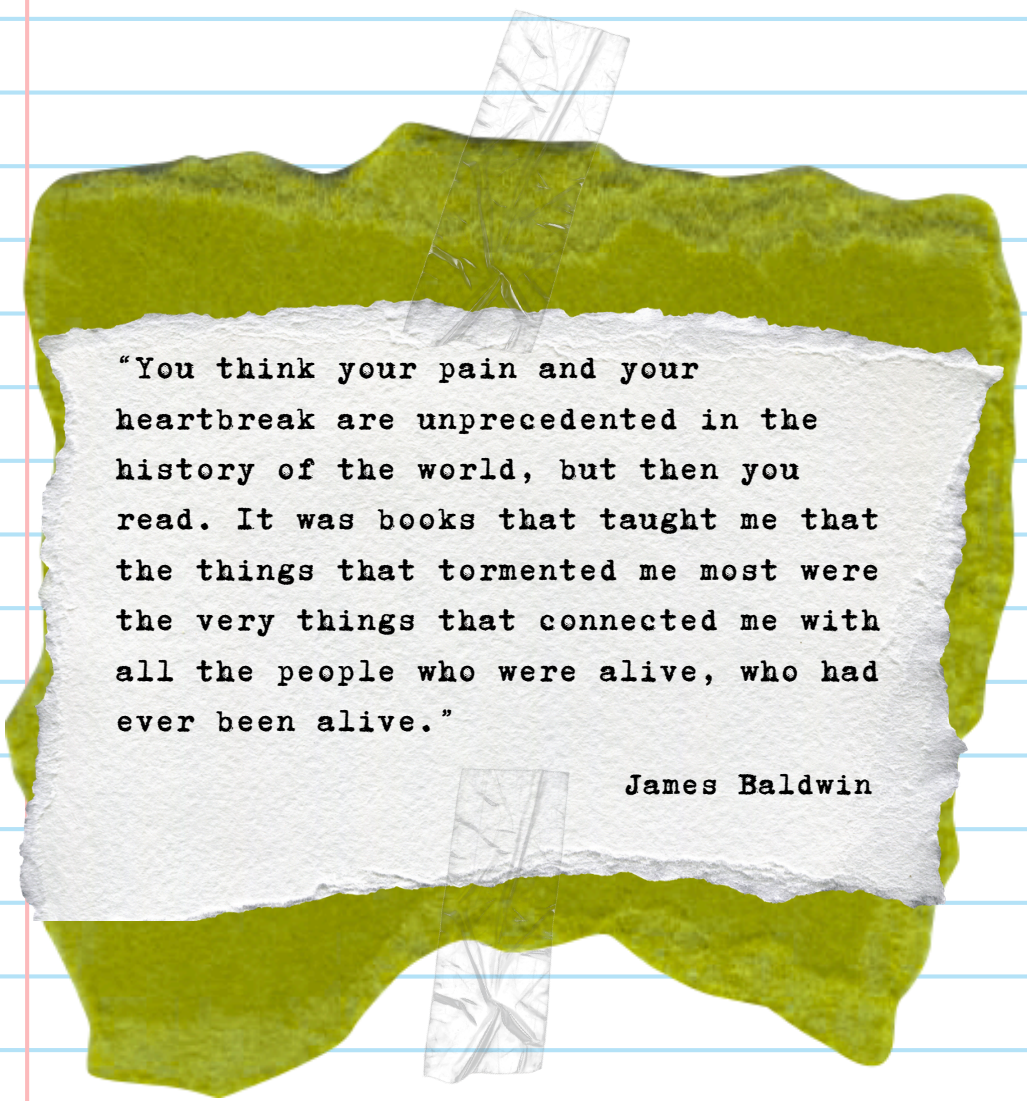
or the next song
that won't leave your tongue
the next beat
that knows your body better
than the mirror
the next quiet morning
where nothing miraculous happens
except that you woke up
and the sky did not fall
and your name was still
your name.

For those of us who are almost gone
let this be your miracle
a fingertip
on the edge of your hand
Saying, friend:

“I am here
you are here.”

Let it be enough
to be encouraged
to turn one more page
before you decide
to close the book
for good.





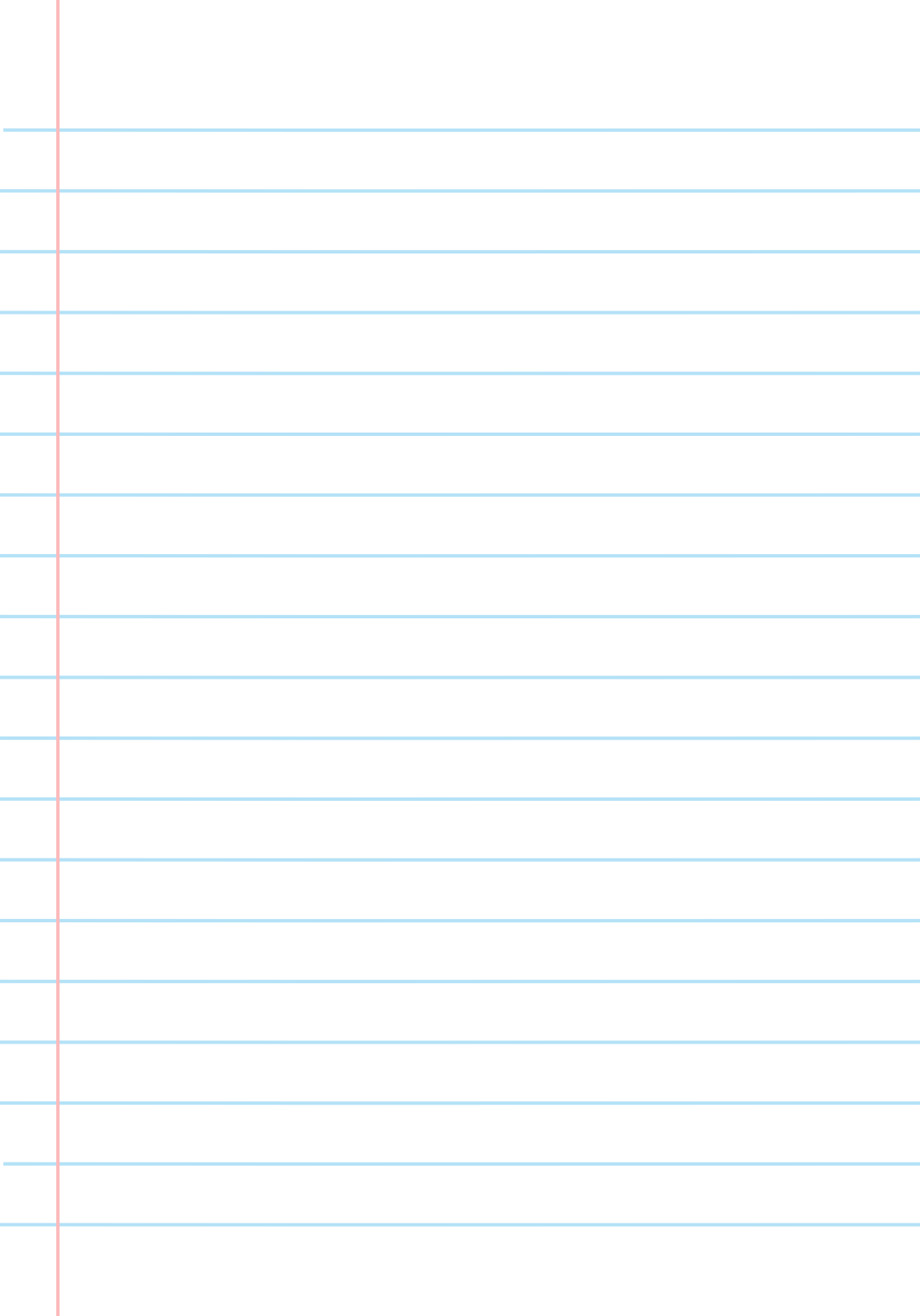
"You think your pain and your
heartbreak are unprecedented in the
history of the world, but then you
read. It was books that taught me that
the things that tormented me most were
the very things that connected me with
all the people who were alive, who had
ever been alive."

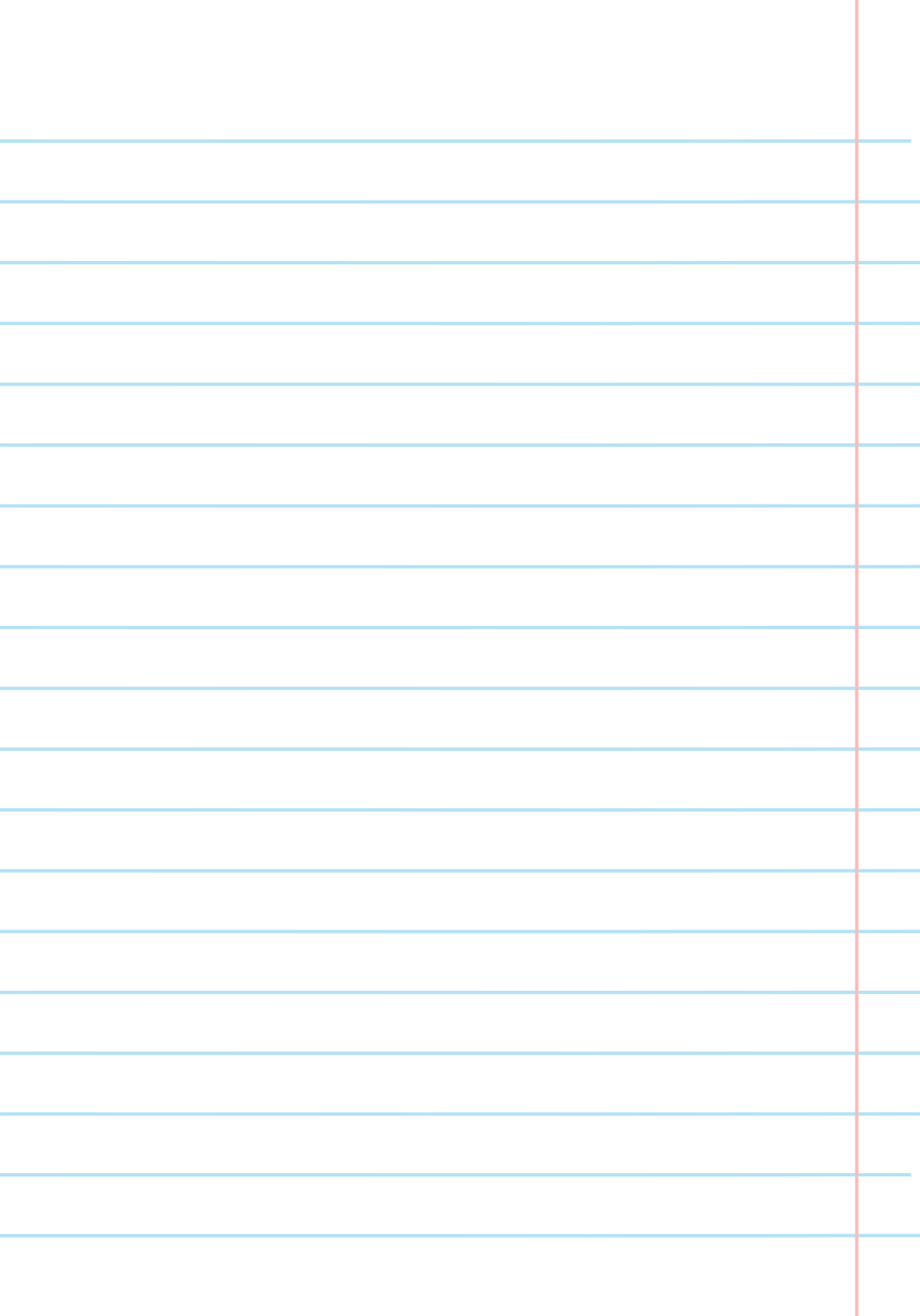
James Baldwin

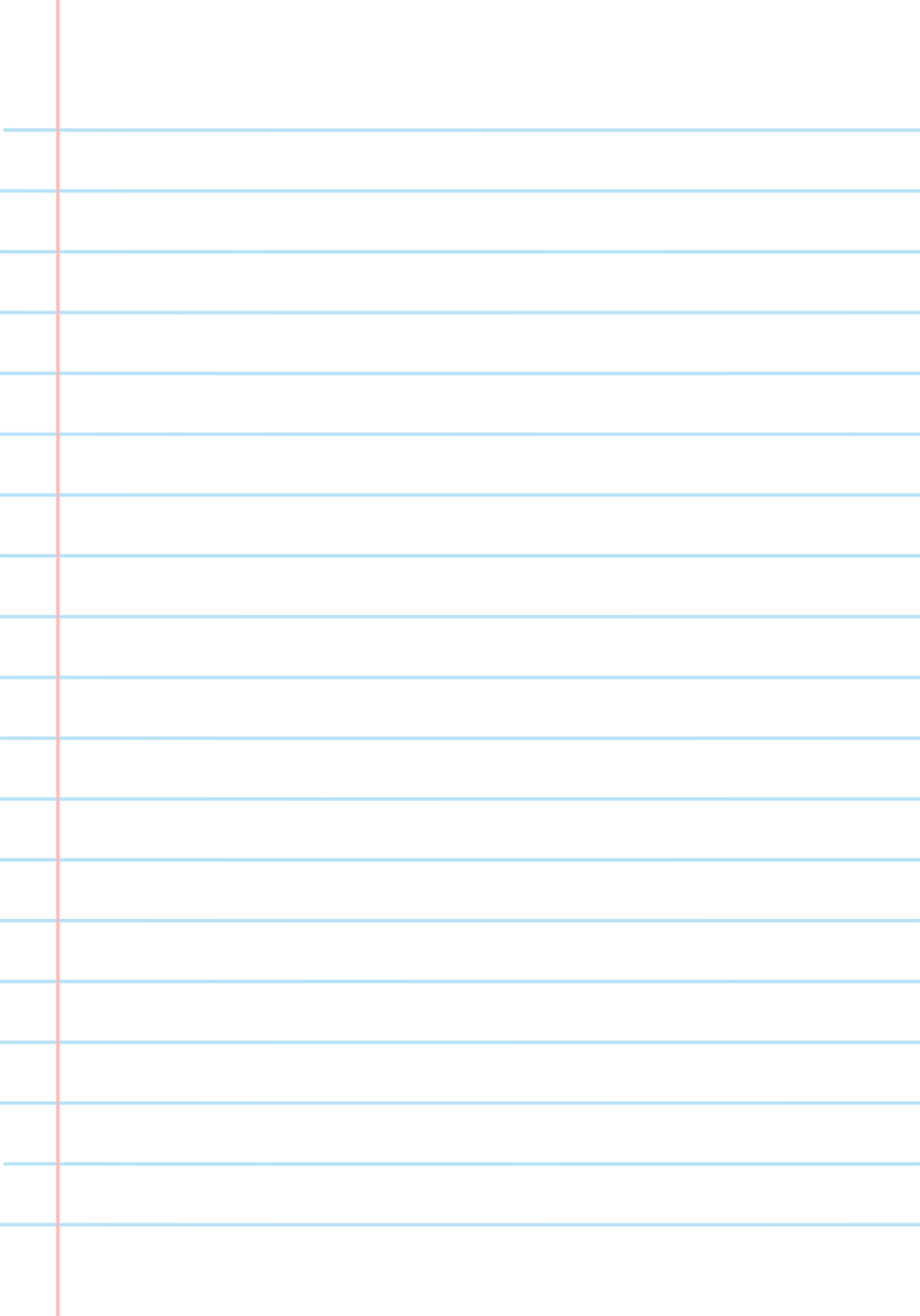
A moment for reflection:

What's a conversation you wish you had and with whom?

Write to that person, place or thing.







Contributing Writers

Asia Ashley-Emerson

Mariah Ashley-Emerson

Sefina V Aulei

Akili Burton

Erika Crawley

Asha Abena Heru (@OAH)

Devin Walker

Contributing Readers

Senait Brown

Havika Jones Fleming

Tatiana Randolph



With deep gratitude...

Thank you for reading,
witnessing and showing what's
possible when we give space for
our stories to be heard.

Now do me a favor, go tell the
community we heal together.

Warmly,

Asia Ashley-Emerson

Bring Read the Room to Your Community

Read the Room is growing, and we're looking for organizations, spaces, and partners who believe in the power of communal reading.

Whether you're a community center, a library, a cultural organization, a school, a healing community, or a business that invests in people, there's a place for you in this room.

Here's how you can be part of the next session:

Sponsor a series. Your support helps cover facilitation and materials, making participation free and accessible for everyone in the room.


Open your space. If you have a space that can accommodate people, in person or virtually, we'd love to bring Read the Room to your community.

Partner on programming. Co-present, help us reach your network, or collaborate on a reading series shaped around the communities you serve.

Read the Room is community-focused and people-first. While we love art, we're looking less for logos on a flyer and more for partners who want to be in the room with us.

If that's you, let's talk.

letsreadtheroom@gmail.com



Read the Room
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