

captured words

Writings from America's **prisons**

Volume 13, Summer 2016



## **OPENING & THANKS**

*Captured Words/Free Thoughts* offers testimony from inside America's prisons and prison-impacted communities. This issue includes poems, stories, letters, word-clouds, essays, and art made by men and women incarcerated in Colorado, New Jersey, Texas, North Carolina, California, and Illinois.

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## **CONTRIBUTORS**

If you would like your work to be considered for forthcoming issues of this magazine, please send your poems, stories, testimonials, or art to Stephen John Hartnett, Professor, Department of Communication, UC Denver, 1201 Larimer Street, Room 3016, Denver, CO 80204; [stephen.hartnett@ucdenver.edu](mailto:stephen.hartnett@ucdenver.edu); 303.315.1914. Please note that each year we receive hundreds of submissions from around the world and read every word of these incredible submissions, but are not always able to include them in the final publication. Regardless, please continue sharing your work, we are always honored to receive and read it.

## **BACK ISSUES & ACCESS**

For those of you who would like to use *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* in your classes, or for other purposes, you can access volumes 7 through 12 by logging onto Dr. Hartnett's Academia page at <http://ucdenver.academia.edu/StephenHartnett>.

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## **JOURNAL REFLECTIONS**

by the Co-Facilitators

You have to be quick when opening the gates at the Denver Reception & Diagnostic Center in Denver, Colorado, when you are buzzed in by the prison guard at the entryway. Miss the limited window of time and the guard becomes antsy: “You gotta’ be faster,” he says with a slight chuckle. He has done this before; he has seen the quick ones and the slow; he swiftly and deftly handles the opening and closing and locking of prison gates every day. Those doors and gates monitored, triggered, and maintained by the guards are cold to the touch, even in the summer months when all the other substances on the grounds carry a glossy sheen, as though the air itself is sweating.

In the winter months, our class on “Conflict, Communication, and Forgiveness” is marked by snowy pathways towards the men’s classroom, a space we called The Sanctuary, though we don’t recall articulating to our co-learners why exactly it was a sanctuary and not a classroom or a prison. We should do better with that next time.

Then again, there are many things we should do next time—the next time we walk into the prison, the next class we teach, the next cohort of learners eagerly awaiting our partnership. This is part of the joy of critical pedagogy: reflection, evaluation, praxis. We ask ourselves: “What can we do better next time?”



It's graduation night. My favorite—and least favorite—night. Favorite because of the sense of accomplishment in the air—the pride, the consummation. Least favorite because it means the class is over and, sadly, I can't be sure when I'll see these people—my co-learners, my friends—again. I remind myself that such uncertainty is unavoidable behind prison walls; still, we look on with pride and satisfaction as our incarcerated co-learners are photographed receiving their certificates of completion for the course.

As I take turns handing out certificates with my co-facilitators, one of the co-learners, Duncan, approaches me. He hands me a folded up piece of paper, part of our requested workshop evaluation. "I wrote this for you and the other teachers," Duncan says, smiling. "You can read it now if you want."

I smile, take his observation, and thank Duncan as I shake his hand. When I open it, I find that it's handwritten and short, about half a page long. In it, Duncan expresses gratitude to my co-facilitators and me for offering the workshop and coming to spend time with him and the other incarcerated learners week after week. He ends the letter by acknowledging that, although the workshop has been a challenge for him, he's glad he was a part of it. I find one line in particular especially moving: In reference to the difficulty of the course readings and overall content, Duncan explains, "The big words swirled, but I hung in there."

I smile to myself and look up to see Duncan beaming at me from across the room. "Yeah," I think to myself. "Graduation night is definitely my favorite night."



## **OP-ED: PELL GRANTS FOR PRISONERS**

by Rodney Jeske

The likelihood that a prison inmate will commit another crime after release is high. By one measure from the Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, published in 2014, more than 75% of prisoners were rearrested within 5 years of release.

At the same time, a RAND Corporation study from 2013 revealed that correctional education “improves inmates’ chances of not returning to prison” to the tune of 43% lower odds of recidivating.

Now is the time to reinstate Pell grants for prison inmates to take college-level courses, thus deterring future crimes and saving taxpayers millions of dollars.

I know the value of education for a prison inmate: I’ve been one since 2009, and my classroom experiences have given me great purpose.

You see, I was a selfish alcoholic for 17 years. When I came to prison, I left behind a wife and two small daughters because of my poor choices. Those lonely nights in the county jail gave me time to think about how far down my life had spiraled. I made the decision, no matter what, that I was going to make something positive out of my negativity.

For 6 years, I’ve remained sober and committed to a 12-step program. I’ve completed more than 30 classes, some upwards of 6 months long. In 2012, I became an Offender Care Aid, supporting the terminally ill inmates at the Denver Reception & Diagnostic Center (DRDC). In 2014, I co-founded the Peer Educator Adjustment Keepers (PEAK) program. Since its inception, PEAK has grown to 11 inmates devoted to “positively influencing our peers during their stay at DRDC and beyond.” We mentor new arrivals, discussing harm reduction practices and program opportunities, serving as both leaders and role models. In the next few years, I hope to begin the Peer One Therapeutic Community treatment program (the hardest in the country from what I understand) and counsel my peers in a highly structured, scientifically supported treatment model. Every person we can help support in overcoming their addiction is a huge win.

The ultimate goal of all this learning is to become a Certified Addictions Counselor, but it’s financially impossible right now. The cost for just one class is \$300, and the entire degree could cost more than \$11,000.

I'm grateful to the University of Colorado Denver for their undergraduate, graduate, and PhD student volunteers who have taught us creative writing and public speaking. Most recently, as part of a class called "Conflict, Communication, and Forgiveness," we've been reading graduate-level texts on the paradigm of constructed potentiality, invitational rhetoric, and other fascinating topics addressed by Michel Foucault, Martin Buber, and Jacques Derrida as modes of seeking forgiveness, both for ourselves and others. But we don't receive credit for these classes, nor could we afford them if they were for credit.

Critics of Pell grants argue that funding an inmate's education strips non-incarcerated learners of valuable dollars, but the pilot program offering Pell grants to inmates uses less than 1% of the total funds and covers about 2% of the total prison population, according to an article in *The Nation*. And let us not forget that every dollar invested in prison education programs saves taxpayers five dollars on average, according to the RAND study.

National leaders appear to be behind the idea: President Obama, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Attorney General Loretta Lynch, even presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. But Congress is the only governing body who can roll back the law that prohibits Pell grants for prisoners.

As committed learners, we ask Congress to reconsider the negative effects of banning money for rigorous classes, subsequently contributing to a wasted prison sentence. Now is the time to let learners learn—for we know that more education for the incarcerated will prevent future crimes, save taxpayers millions of dollars, and help contribute to healthy communities.



## UNSPOKEN JUSTICE

by Tony Otero

It's a summer day in 2014 and I'm in the Denver Reception & Diagnostic Center painting a prison cell. I had come here the year before, sentenced to 5 years for menacing with a deadly weapon. I would have been sent somewhere else eventually, but they kept me around because I can paint. I used to paint on the outside. Now I paint on the inside.

I finish painting the cell and go back to my unit. For some reason it smells like burnt popcorn, so I decide to go outside.

I walk out to the yard and look around for a place to sit. Allen, Chris, and John are hanging out by a bench nearby. They're OCAs—Offender Care Assistants in the infirmary—and they're talking about work. By the time I sit down next to them my forehead's already starting to sweat under the sun, a bead running down my face. I take a look around. A few guys I know are scattered around the yard, and there's an old man sitting in a wheelchair by the fence. I look up at the sky. It's a beautiful day, no clouds out, the mountains in plain sight in the distance. I think to myself, "Damn, what a perfect day to drink beer and go fishing. I wish I was home." I lean back, enjoying the heat.

Then, suddenly, I hear Allen say a name: C.B.

I immediately sit up. "How do you know that name?" I ask.

"C.B.?" Allen says. "He's sitting right over there." He points to the old man in the wheelchair.

My mind starts to race. "I found him," I think.

\*\*\*\*\*

My big cousin, Synthia Otero, always took care of me. She'd take me out for ice cream, and whenever she came to pick me up, I'd run over to her and she'd hold me close. She was more like a sister or mother to me than a cousin. I loved her.

Synthia was good at taking care of a lot of people, not just me. And she was good at forgiving people too. C.B. was her neighbor, and even though he was known around town for doing a lot of bad things in his time, he was old now and Synthia cared about him. She'd help him out all the time—cooking, bringing him groceries, cleaning his place.

One day when I was 12, I was sitting in the corner of the classroom at school because I'd gotten in trouble for something, and the principal walked in. He whispered something to my teacher.



“Tony,” my teacher said. “You need to go with Principal Gonzalez to his office.”

I thought the principal was going to yell at me for whatever I’d done. But when I got to his office, my family was there. My cousin Synthia had been shot and killed in cold blood. Last night she had gone over to C.B.’s place and he’d shot her in a drunken rage.

C.B. was arrested but released not a week later.<sup>1</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

I’m striding across the yard and I can feel hate running through my heart. “I found the fucker,” I think. “It’s time to make him pay.”

I stop in front of him, blocking his view of the mountains. I look down at him with rage in my eyes. He sits there in his wheelchair, motionless, sweat running down his forehead. I ask him, “Are you C.B.?”

“Yeah,” he says with a slur in his voice.

“I’m Tony Otero,” I say.

He stares at me. He doesn’t say anything.

“Otero,” I repeat. “My cousin was Synthia Otero.”

Still all he does is stare.

“Do you know that name?” I ask.

“No,” he says.

I continue to stare back at him.

And then, looking me right in the eyes, he asks: “Do you know when the bus is coming?”

I take a step back, completely confused. “No,” I say.

I turn and walk away. I go over to Allen and ask him about C.B.

“Dementia,” he says. “Sometimes he can’t even remember his own name.”

*1. Colorado’s “make your day” law grants immunity to homeowners who shoot and kill “intruders” on their property.*

I sit back down on the bench and look back at C.B. My face is sweating even more now. I lean forward, my fists balled up, my knuckles turning white. “He can’t even remember killing her,” I think. My heart is torn in two. On the one hand, I want to hurt him like he hurt my cousin, like he hurt my whole family. On the other hand, here I am looking at an empty body with a blank face, the shell of a being who used to be a man.

“Fuck,” I think.

\*\*\*\*\*

A few days later I’m sitting out in the pod watching TV when the door slides open. C.B. comes rolling in, followed by his OCA. I try to ignore him but the OCA parks him right next to me before leaving. I feel my face start to get hot, my fists start to clench, my heart pounding. I’m thinking, “Should I do it?”

I turn to him. He’s looking at me. But before I can do or say anything he talks.

“Can you help me go to the bathroom?” he asks.

My heart sinks into my stomach. I pause.

“Sure, I’ll help you,” I hear myself saying.

I get up and start to push him to the back of the pod. My heart is racing fast and I start to get nervous.

I help him up and sit him down to use the toilet. “Thank you,” he says.

I stare at him and start to realize: he is no longer here. C.B. died years ago. This is now an empty body that used to be C.B. My heart starts to slow down and I start seeing him not for what he has done but for what he is now. And I think to myself: Synthia would forgive him. She would tell me, “Wouldn’t you want someone to forgive you, Tony? Why punish him for what he can’t even remember doing to me?” And at that point I start to tear up. Because I can’t do it, I can’t kill this man. She cared for him—why can’t I?

\*\*\*\*\*

Six months later, I was C.B.'s personal OCA. I took the class, got my certificate, and began working in the infirmary, helping him with his diapers and sitting up and watching him all night from 8pm to 4am. After a month, he started waiting up for me until I came to work. "Everyone is trying to kill me or jump me," he would say. And I would tell him, "Go ahead and go to sleep, C.B. I'll watch out for you."

After a year, I grew to love him. Here he was, the man who did my family an unforgivable wrong, and honest to God, I loved him. And sometimes I'd hear Synthia's voice in my head. "I'm proud of you, Tony," she'd say, "If you can forgive him, everyone you did wrong can forgive you too."

At the end of 2015 the guards told me they were moving CB to Territorial and they needed me to pack him up. "You're the only one he'll trust to do it," they said.

So I start to get ready. I'm starting to feel sad and to cry, thinking, "I don't want him to go. I'll miss him."

But I pack him up and he looks at me and says what he's said to me every night: "Hey Tony."

"What, C.B.," I would answer.

"Fuck you." And he would laugh.

"Fuck you too, C.B.," I said.

And just like that, he was gone out of my life. But because of him, my life has changed for the better: I no longer hate, I no longer hurt, and every night, with peace in my heart, I pray that God will take care of him.



## **A CHILD'S IMAGINATION**

by James May

Do you remember when you would go outside and play?  
You would let your imagination take you away

When a normal stick could be your sword  
A paper crown from Burger King could make you a lord

An old shopping cart could be your spaceship  
A tack of cardboard boxes could be a fortress

You could play championship soccer with an aluminum can  
Bang pots and pans and pretend to be an all-star band

Tie a sheet around your neck and become Superman  
Or imagine that your backyard was a far away land

Did you forget that you had an imagination?  
Are you too caught up worrying about the newest gadget or creation

Forgetting what it is like to go outside and play?  
You'd rather sit in front of a TV or computer screen all day

Answer me this one question and I'll let this be:  
If you didn't have an imagination growing up

What kind of person would you be?

## USED & ABUSED

by Jackie Joseph

I know I should be asleep  
but I'm unable to keep  
my eyes from the light  
that shines through the gap  
at the bottom of my door

I watch it  
Wondering if I'll see a shadow  
The first warning that someone is coming for me  
and I wonder who it will be

She, who  
needs to rid  
herself of anger,  
who'll beat me bad  
for some little thing  
she's just remembered  
or,  
He, who  
is confused enough to  
seek relief in the bed  
of this young girl  
who he 'adores'  
and manipulates  
mindlessly

I watch  
and wait  
and pray  
that if my mind gives way  
I'll be safe inside my dreams

*EDITORS' NOTE: Jackie is our featured poet for this issue, so we include here three of her pieces. Jackie's work touches upon the complications of family life, the mysteries of memory, and the tricky question of how past traumas influence present choices. This is brave and honest work that we are proud to feature here.*

## WHO THE HELL TO TELL?!

by Jackie Joseph

It was an average end of day  
bath-time for the kids  
with bubbles, and toys  
and washing given up to play

until the scariest-ever happening  
stopped the games  
and killed the fun  
(it was indeed a nightmare thing):

I suddenly saw the eyes of my daughter  
panic stricken as  
she tried to resist  
someone's hand holding her *under* the water

and I noticed those hands *were mine!*  
Stunned I  
pulled back  
but knew I'd lost more than some time

as muted horror came between us  
her bewildered  
gaze said trust  
had been snatched away

I tried to shake off my "how can this be?!"  
dry her off and  
get her dressed  
and un-trap a heartfelt *sorry*

but like her I was stuck  
in that awful silence  
as my mum  
and I were  
when I last lived that violence

I must have been four and my brother just one  
when I had struggled  
for air like my daughter  
when I'd tried not to drown  
under *my* mother's hand

nor fear those things  
I could not understand

And then it dawned on me  
a memory had claimed  
this new generation

and would haunt the next one as well  
but who would believe  
what had happened?

Who the hell could I tell?!

## **ME & C**

by Jackie Joseph

The last time I visited my daughter  
I tried to explain  
how Post Traumatic Stress Disorder  
hammers the brain

but she didn't believe me  
or understand and  
got mad and tried to hit me  
(with the bar she pulled  
from under her kitchen work-top)

The last time I saw my daughter  
she had just climbed out of a car  
(pulled up down the road  
behind me, not far)  
and decided to throw the bottle  
she was holding at me  
(it missed) while cursing  
me for keeping a distance  
since Social Services "can't"

make such things stop

## **THE HONEYMOON**

by Lorenzo Franco

I remember the light shined brighter that day

She remembers the hope for the future

I remember the lady's man

She remembers the deceit

I remember the caring man

She remembers the creep

I remember the hard worker

She remembers the hard liquor

I remember the play fighting

She remembers how hard he'd kick her

I remember the tears he cried

She remembers the hug she felt

I remember staying the night

She remembers the talk we had

I remember telling her it was alright

She remembers me holding her hand

I remember the morning after

She remembers waking up safe

I remember the hope for the future

She remembers the light shined brighter that day



## **MORIBUND**

by Abraham "Hammie" Picasso Neal

Ma, what can I really do for you to cease the drinking?  
If I try to pull you out will that cause deeper sinking?  
And you smoking nicotine ain't making it no better  
I see you as a goddess, Ma, I need you to live forever  
But we both know forever won't last as long  
With all those chemicals in your body

Your memory ain't strong  
You barely remember your son  
When I call you from prison and  
You go to the wrong table when you schedule a visit

You sent me a card two months ago  
Thinking I just turned 19  
All my life I felt neglected  
Alcohol was to blame  
Since addiction took over your life  
You've never been the same

## OPPOSITE END OF THE SPECTRUM

by Bryan Nwoke

Why do you hate me?  
Is it because you think I hate you?

Why do you run from me?  
Do you think I like to chase you?

Why do you try to fight me?  
I don't want to do you any harm

Why is it that every time you see me you wish me ill?  
Don't you know that everyday I'm out here is a day I could get killed?

You think I treat you like an animal and want to lock you in a cage  
You think I beat you down like a slave just to let out all my rage

Really I just want to help you by giving you another chance  
But at the same time I have to protect myself and I can't see your hands

Why do you portray me as a killer on TV?  
You think pulling the trigger on another human is easy?

You think this is the way I want the world to view me?  
I wonder if my children still want to grow up to be me

Why do you expect me to be perfect?  
You don't think I'm human too?  
You don't think I breath the same air or drink the same water as you do?

Sometimes I make mistakes  
Obviously you make mistakes too

So why is it that I'm the only one who needs to change?



*EDITORS' NOTE: Inspired by a class prompt asking writers to explore new perspectives and different personae, Bryan wrote this piece in the voice of a police officer.*

## **PRISON IS**

by Lester Alford

*Prison is a place* where the flame in every man burns low; sometimes it goes out. But for most, it flickers weakly, sometimes flashes brightly, but never seems to burn as strong as it did before.

*Prison is a place* where you can go for years without feeling the touch of a hand, where you can go for years without hearing a kind word. It's a place where friendships are shallow.

*Prison is a place* where you forget the sound of a baby's cry, the sound of a cat's meow, or the sound of the dial tone of a telephone.

*Prison is a place* where you go to bed before you're tired, where you pull the blankets over your head when you're not even cold. It's a place where you escape by reading, playing games, dreaming, or even going mad.

*Prison is a place* where you see people that you don't admire and you wonder if you are anything like them. It's a place where you strive to stay civilized, but you know you're losing ground.

*Prison is a place* where you fool yourself, where you promise yourself you'll be a better man when you go home.

*Prison is a place* where you get out someday. When you do, you wonder how everyone can stay so calm when you're so excited. When the bus driver goes over 25 MPH, you want him to slow down, but you don't say anything because you know that's foolish.

*Prison is a place* where you wake everyday and wonder if you'll ever hear someone tell you they love you again and mean it. It's a place where a hug from someone who truly loves and cares for you can get you through the next week, month, or year.

*Prison is a place* where you realize that the things the outside world considers little actually mean the world to you.

*Prison is a place* where no one wants to be, especially me.

## **IF WALLS COULD SPEAK**

by Shane Davis

If only these walls could speak.  
What would you like to hear, my child?  
The good over the bad?  
A playback of fears fostered or those we've overcome?  
Know your strengths, your superhero.  
Set aside your kryptonite.  
Allow a persistent,  
positive,  
self-fulfilling  
thought  
to drag  
on.

How vivid are the memories  
of: shots fired, 'til death do us part, your wails after the pause,  
the months of unemployment?

Over time, they've faded.  
If they'd speak, they'd express pains before us.  
Human constructs made of synthetic material  
have no voice,  
    But you do.  
No heart to feel,  
    But you do.

Ignorance, stagnation, immaturity, lack of vocab:  
These are barriers erected.  
Tattered on these walls:  
memories awaiting your personal expression.

From this point forward,  
I declare to you—  
my inhabitant of ideas,  
of imagination with intent so intense you'll burn  
holes in the fabric.

I don't hear you. Are you asleep? Can you hear me?

Architect, author, creator of  
a mansion under construction.  
Its walls will not imprison or impede your growth  
but hold precious thought and acts of love.  
My walls don't speak, they sing.

And in a still small voice, he who hears is still.



## DEVOID DISCUSSIONS

by William Taylor III and Lorenzo Franco

It's imperative you know how you are being perceived  
When you are speaking  
It's a must if you want to reach them  
Any offensive word or sign of disrespect  
And they'll automatically put up their defense  
For example, if I was speaking to a corrections officer here  
I would have to make myself awfully clear  
*Look C.O., so there won't be any confusion*  
*I'm not too thrilled about you or anyone at this institution*  
If he feels I'm too abrupt then . . .

Let me stop this dumb shit  
And pardon the interruption  
But I'm done with hearing you thugs insist  
That the system's flawed and full of corruption  
Yet when we give you education, weights, and PlayStations  
A safe haven from gangbangin' in hopes your life changes  
Do we get a thank you?

Thank who? You? The self-proclaimed judge  
Mr. I Wouldn't Have A Job were it not for those who murder and sling drugs?  
Excuse me, sir, forgive me if I'm being too obtrusive  
But you have the power to change lives and you abuse it

Oh so you think you're tough now?  
Don't make me get the cuffs out  
Puff out your chest, go ahead, say hello to Ad Seg  
You'll never be able to get the fuck out  
I'll show you control when we stroll to the hole  
Listen to my mouth, YOU'RE LIVING IN MY HOUSE!

*EDITORS' NOTE: Bill and Franco performed this mini-play in one workshop, bringing intense energy to their readings. Like Ted Conover's Newjack, Guarding Sing-Sing, the piece explores the tensions between prisoners and guards, depicting a tragic cycle of miscommunication.*

If you think that's going to hurt me, you're wrong and have a clear misconception  
That shiny badge of yours has you gassed up like indigestion  
You were the one in high school that wasn't socially accepted  
In fact, no one in their right mind even chooses your profession  
They trust you so much around killers they give you mace for a weapon

It's my job to make sure you're messed with  
So you lose your cool and begin stressing  
You want a good time, phone calls and blessings  
Like 3 hots and a cot we provide you and the rest with —

Except it's always an exception to the rule  
The food you serve here is both unusual and cruel  
As far as beds go I'm better off sleeping in an empty pool  
You disrespect me because you're vexed by my intellect

Wait, wait, wait —

Hold up, I'm not finished yet  
Just know my acceptance isn't based off your perception  
Quit wasting seconds thinking about me  
I don't need your affection

Ya, ya, you're all the same, we're the ones to blame  
Go ahead and run your game on someone senseless  
I'm tired of hearing how you are defenseless  
Your innocence stripped within prison fences  
Your best bet is you get out with better criminal intentions  
from the Department of Corrections

Whatever, I'm gone  
It's clear your perception of me is all wrong

You got it!  
In my mind inmates are all wrong  
Now LOCKDOWN!

## **NO ONE**

by Melissa McKee

The doors are closed  
The walls are silent  
The cement is old  
The cell is cold  
There is no warmth here  
There is no love here  
Kindness is a weakness  
Violence makes you strong

You learn to sleep when you are hungry  
You learn to sleep when you are cold  
They put you down  
They cuff you up  
They take you to the hole

The chaos surrounds you  
The only safe place is to lock yourself away  
You dream about tomorrow  
But do nothing today

This is the way of life in prison  
The land without reason  
When will we learn  
Incarceration serves no one



*Devon Weinstein (opposite page)*



## **I TRIED**

by Devon Weinstein

I saw him die. I watched from a distance as every breathing tube was disconnected. I saw his chest slowly start to move less and less, until it finally stopped. Another one dead in prison. I saw the family crying and hugging each other as they exited down the hall.

I tried to help him! I tried to get in there!

I was there for him.

“Hey guys, they’re bringing another one in on a gurney,” I remember hearing nine months ago. At any second now I’m going to be asked to assist in his recovery, because I know a friendly voice combined with a human touch can be soothing and healing. That’s exactly what he needs. “What?!” STAFF ONLY, the sign reads on the door. “He shouldn’t be alone!” I yell at a nurse.

“His family only wants staff in his room since gang violence caused his injuries.”

“I understand the need to protect him,” I think, “but they’re keeping the good guys out.”

Days, weeks, and months go by. Still no voluntary movement. His chest continues to move up and down, up and down.

Then, four months ago, he got paroled. He could finally go to a good hospital and receive better care.

“His family won’t sign the parole papers,” I overhear a nurse saying, “because they can’t afford the medical bills.” How can anyone do that to someone they love?

Today they watched him die.

They walk down the hall to exit again.

All of a sudden a nurse yells, “STOP! STOP! He’s awake!” She runs down the hall to the family. The family rushes back into the room. They are ecstatic as they watch the patient’s eyes open.

Then it happens.

I saw him die twice.

His family saw him die twice.

Just to make sure they get it.

## **THE EVALUATION**

by Abraham "Hammie" Picasso Neal

We are quick to scream Black power when we lack power  
The call us the N word then we act sour  
How you want us to keep peace when they react violent?  
We scream "DON'T SHOOT" and they still fire  
They hate our color that's why they stick us down in the gutter  
We need you to see the world how it is  
Enlighten my people so we can finally live

## **FROZEN IN TIME**

by Terrance Harris Jr.

I ate until I was full, then gorged myself on the fruits of my own labor.  
My appetite was insatiable, but I still ate.  
I had become selfish, because once I tried to share and gave everything away.  
I let love lead and it left me alone.  
Now I choose to center myself.  
Self-centered, I enter a new phase.  
I encase myself in a network of my own creations,  
I work so hard that I disregard the rest of the world.  
I choose my own life, and can you blame me?  
What if I decided to choose yours? Would you trust me with the results?  
Could you really trust me with your future?  
Look how mine turned out.

Nevertheless, I leave my past behind  
And build a shelter with my own imagination.  
It feels so natural to me.  
I find so much comfort in my chrysalis.  
I am alone as the world changes.  
Sometimes for the worse, sometimes for the better.  
So many illusions dissolve as the world revolves.  
So many dreams deferred as technology evolves.  
I pray to God, but he is perfectly silent!  
I'm glad He, or maybe She, doesn't say anything.  
Others might not hear it. I seal myself in.  
And without the Fahrenheit dropping a single digit, I'm frozen in time.

I wait until the day I emerge.  
Blessed by the spirit of Maya Angelou,  
I fight with all my might to break down the walls, fighting to free myself.  
I embrace change.  
I embrace evolution.  
I embrace the future.  
I fear not!

As my cocoon creaks open, I feel the warmth of the sun and spread my wings.  
As soon as my wings dry, I will fly.  
I ride the winds of my new life.  
I reach heights that I never could imagine  
When I was crawling at my lowest point.  
Being frozen in time wasn't such a bad thing  
Because I became more than I was.

Once, I crawled  
I was frozen in time,  
Now I fly.

## **RUNNING LAPS/ NEW SPARKS**

by Jason Herrygers

Wasted opportunities  
Hang listlessly in the recesses  
Of idle minds. Dust motes of time  
Shining in rays of light, precariously  
Balanced on contagious optimism  
Head up, chest out

This toxic rubber fantasyland  
Breeds intentional malevolence  
One foot in front of the other  
Passion, fire, and pure intent  
So far ahead I've ended up behind

Once again caught up  
In the "what-if" riptide  
Sea of discontent  
My vision obscured  
Only by the limitations  
Of my own imagination  
I see clearly  
No end in sight

Each inhalation pushes  
My lungs to exhale filth  
From frozen moments  
Memories in sepia tones  
Paused for effect

Each haunting image  
Lurking in the dusty corners  
Of my subconscious  
Street sweepers on endless  
Mental highways  
Each push clears the path  
For my confident footfalls

On precarious trails  
One foot leads the other  
Through moments frozen in gray  
Matter, motes of dust,  
Rays of light. Waiting for release  
From this cage of fallacy

So comes the dawning  
Of enlightened days  
Memory relinquishes  
Its monopoly  
On occupied time

New sparks travel  
At the speed of thought  
Ideas burning paths  
Across barren landscapes  
Creating new growth

## **HAIKU**

by Denise Presson

Rising valiantly  
Spring's vivid white harbinger  
Chasing winter's lot

## **ODE TO SPRING**

by Quy Nguyen

A cucumber or a pumpkin  
A cutting from a mother plant  
Sprouting roots  
Yearly planted in this farmyard  
On vines like time you slowly grow  
Through a fence life goes by  
In due season picked off the vine  
Become a pickle or a pie  
Free to be consumed and to satisfy

## PURGE

by Patrice Lumbaba Daniels

I hereby find me not guilty  
Of all that  
Hindered defiled harmed  
Injured soiled violated  
And dirtied my soul

I am now free  
To live an authentic life  
Harmonious and unobstructed  
To cherish every moment  
As it truly is



*Dances for Solidarity raises questions such as: How do people in solitary confinement respond to the invitation to dance with us? Is it possible to use the postal service to create a dance? Can we contribute to the movement to end solitary confinement through dance and letter writing? Explore more at [dancesforsolidarity.org](http://dancesforsolidarity.org)*

*EDITORS' NOTE: Patrice is a pen pal with Dances for Solidarity-Denver, a project sharing dance through letter writing with people in solitary confinement. Patrice writes, "Thanks for caring and for rejecting the notion that those of us in prison have no value."*

## **COLLECTIVELY**

by Erika Arroya, Janice Haught, Lori Pantazes, Natasha Poele,  
Denise Presson, Ashley Tafoya, and Christy Villegas Miller

Life is about day and night  
The darkness versus the light  
The wrong and the right  
    Yet with so much gray in between

There's too little time, too little day  
    So we all wish our problems away

Fresh fruit falls from the tree  
Then rots away, only to  
    Turn to a budding flower another day

Hopeless thoughts fade  
With love, good friend,  
I fair thee well  
    For tomorrow's a new day



## **HEIGHTS OF LIFE**

by Rodrick Finley

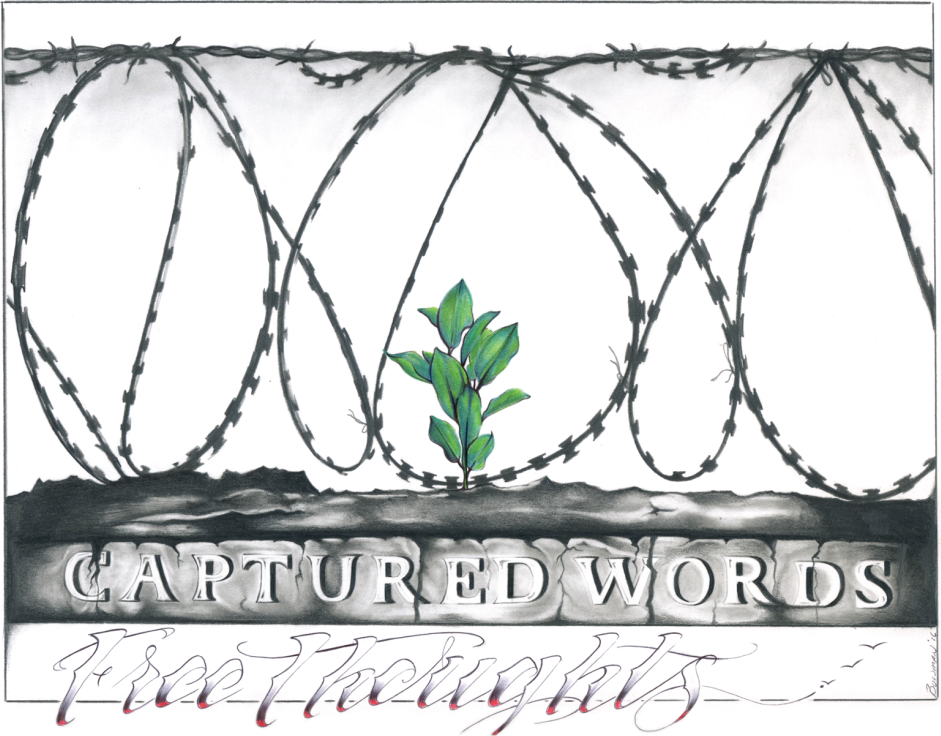
The heights reached by great men and women  
Were not attained by sudden over-night success  
But by daily hard work for a better tomorrow

Men and women of real power and influence are few  
Because few are prepared to make the necessary sacrifices  
To acquire this power and reach the new heights of life

So keep that focus, keep that energy  
Live the words "I can"  
To obtain a sweet, healthy soul

Experience, knowledge, and wisdom  
Are powers that catch the world's attention  
And leave happiness in the heart





Original art by Aaron Bowman



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LEARN WITH PURPOSE

LEARN WHAT'S KNOWN.  
DISCOVER WHAT'S NOT.

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