



**CAPTURED WORDS
FREE THOUGHTS**

Writings from America's Prisons
Volume 9, Fall 2011

Openings

During the Winter and Spring of 2011, a group of us gathered in the Camp George West Correctional Facility, Denver, CO, each Tuesday night and alternating Thursday nights to experiment with memoirs, poems, letters, and other forms of communication. The pieces printed here are but a sliver of the materials we produced, but they offer a glimpse into the heartbreaks and hopes of everyone involved in our workshop.

Guest writers

- Our guest writers from the Federal Prison Camp, in Phoenix, AZ, are Araceli R., Meagan G., Michelle J., Quentin M., and Veronica C.
- Our guest artist from the Polunsky Unit, in Livingston, TX, is Rodrick Finley. See page 11.
- Our guest writer from the California State Prison, LA County, is Brother Thangs.
- Our guest writers from the Denver Women's Correctional Facility are Crystal Carney and Claudia Liria Manriquez.
- Our guest writer from the University of Colorado, Denver, is Valerie Villarruel.

Special thanks

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Jim Bullington, who directs the Adams State College program that sends college classes into Colorado's prisons.

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Ryann Dubiel, UCD alum, who taught creative writing at the Denver Women's Correctional Facility during the Spring of 2011 and supplied us with the works of Carney and Manriquez.

Rachel Amaru, our Boulder-based editor, who has helped clean up our writings.

And all the prison educators and activists, imprisoned artists, progressive media producers, and other friends and allies around the country who have supported our efforts.

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Breathing

By Kendall Sullivan

Inhale

Taking in that first breath
The road passes under my heels
As the wind rushes by me
It's sweet freedom I feel

Exhale

My heart beats like a drum
Blood rushing through my veins
A new life has begun
Never to be the same

Inhale

My mind wanders out
Far into the skies
Focused on what's ahead
Seeking words from the wise

Exhale

Let it all out
Forgiving where I have been
Cuz all the King's horses
And all the King's men
Can't bring back
What could have been

Inhale

I step in rhythm
As I feel the beat
The pain subsides
From my knees and feet
Adrenaline rush
the fountain of youth
Ringing a bell
as clear as the truth

Exhale

Mo(u)rning

By Philip Lobato

Smells spread through the house
early in the morning
like a fog above the familiar skyline

I'm stuck, trapped inside my bed's
bear hug encouraging me to snooze
a while longer

but the sleepiness vanishes
when my nose puzzles with smells
of oil sizzling
as the sweet sun filters
through the blinds

I snuggle my feet inside cozy slippers
the radio quietly hums
as if it's hidden far away
but the voices slowly increase
as I wander to the kitchen

I peek in to spot my Mom hard at work
and rush to wrap myself around her leg
she picks me up with a smile
I was my Mom's joy

But as I grew up
I became a burden
and so now I wonder:
What was on her mind
as I became so destructive?

Listen to My Tattoos

By Lamont Mack

Listen to my tattoos
speaking loud and clear
yelling at the world
year after year after year

Listen to my tattoos
shouting how much I've cried
'cause of crossed-out names
and ex-girlfriends' lies

Listen to my tattoos
bragging about places I've been
the bullshit I've been through
blinking warning signs
of gang affiliation
and disrespect in my enemy's eyes

My tattoos speak
of things I love
and try to hide
but sometimes they speak too much
like on job interviews
when they won't shut the fuck up

or on that first meeting
when I want everyone to be impressed
but it's 100 degrees and
I'm sweatin' in long sleeves
worn to hide the designs
screaming out from my wrist to my
neck

...happinesspain ... struggles...and
tears

listen to my tattoos

they speak loud and clear!

My Prison

By Amos Rogers

Prison is about "hurry up and wait."

Prison is realizing that I have nothing.

Prison is living in a 6-by-9 restroom
that holds a bed and belongings, and
frequently having to bathe in the sink.

Prison is recognizing that despite all the
good within me, despite the positive
qualities I cherish, I have no one to
share them with.

Prison is being told what you can wear,
what you can own, what you can eat,
how much sun and fresh air you can
enjoy, and when you can call home,
if you have a home.

At some facilities, prison is strife, not
life; there is no time to worry about the
world outside the kill fence because
there is always a drama in play,
usually more than one, meaning you
are always watching your back.

Every day is live: you have no idea
what is going to happen, every day is
a gamble. This misery, this danger, this
loneliness, this is what you get when
you gamble with your own freedom
and live by your own set of rules.

But prison has allowed me to look at
the irrational thinking and behaviors
that I didn't take the time to analyze
while I was free. Now, I sit in a camp
where my politics are my own; my only
focus is me and my family; my only
goal now is to get ready to go home.

My prison is knowing that my mate
had to learn to live without me—and
now I'm mate-less.

My prison is knowing all the love and
goodness I have within me is wasted,
for I've confined myself away from my
family and friends.

My prison is knowing that another
man is taking care of what was once
my family.

My prison is knowing that I had to
come back for seconds to learn what
I should have realized the first time.

My prison is wanting so desperately to
leave this place and find a woman to
love and to love me; we will appreciate
and cherish each other, accept each
other for all that we are and are not,
and take into consideration each other's
thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, and
desires.

TIXEXIT

By Conrad Rossman

Red, glowing, the exit sign hangs
above the white-walled door.

My way out from prison, self,
loneliness.

A world so big, never stopping
without me.

Exit starts the path to freedom,
watching the stars twinkle,
plush carpet brushing soft on the
bottoms of my feet,
sounds of silence after casting,
while my bait sinks to the dark below.

My family awaits me.
Anticipating my exit from this hole
filled with broken dreams
white-walled, with mirrors scratched
and foggy.

Exit means so much in a place of
swallowed souls.

Red, glowing, the exit sign hangs
above the white-walled door.

TIXEXIT



Ink Biography

By Philip Lobato

The needle digs its way through my flesh, inserting its permanent trail of ink, which will forever tell a story about my past. I have six as of now, but I'm sure that number will increase, because I have an addiction to ink.

I have two women, one on each arm. The one on my right represents my first love, who passed away when we were only teens. In the design, her eyes are closed. My opposite arm represents the same woman watching down from the clouds.

Pili is inked in a winding pattern along my neck. It's a name I've gone by for most of my life, a nickname that never went away. Lobato is inked on my forearm. My family is my back bone, a force that will always be there regardless of where I am, and so I need these names etched into my skin. My lucky number is also embedded in an intricate design on the front of my left forearm, forever there to keep me safe.

My body is sacred. My body is a temple. Or perhaps it is a cathedral decked out in fine art, or a canvas animating a twisted path.

Fiesta in the USA

By Valerie Villarruel

This piece was originally performed in the UCD course "Communication and Citizenship" (COMM 2020); the editors include it here because it speaks so powerfully to issues of race, class, and belonging—ideas that powerfully impact the prison system.

My name is Valerie Villarruel. Some people call me Valeria Villarrrrrrrrrruel and others call me, Valerie villa-what? Regardless, that is the name on my birth certificate. Who would have thought that a name would have forever determined my future, and that from the day I entered elementary school I would have my work cut for me because of my last name?

Although I was born third generation, my parents made sure I knew about my heritage. So much so, that at an early age I was sent to school with tortillas wrapped in tin foil with salsas on the side. I envied all those fair skinned children and their Oscar Myer-lunchables! I quickly became known as Taco-Val. "Yo quiero taco-val," kids would laugh as I pulled out my tortillas. Not only did I stick out because of my comida, but also because I was the only person in school who spoke English and Spanish. I thus became a translator, or as they called me, an "ambassador" for all the Latino children attending my elementary school.

When I was in second grade, my father was transferred to Mexico to work for the American government. My culture shock was coupled with identity shock, as I soon learned that I wasn't a Mexican-American; in fact I wasn't Mexican at all! By Mexican standards, I was a "pocha." I was una desgraciada—a disgrace—because my great grandparents had moved to the United States for a better life, and now their great grandchildren had returned to Mexico! I was going to pay. At this point in my life I was very confused: in the United States I had been Taco-Val and deemed as Mexican as the nopales found in the Sonoran desert, but in Mexico, I was una pocha and as "white-washed" as they come.

To make matters worse, in the middle of 7th grade, my father was transferred to Arizona, where I was thrown into middle school. My first class was Spanish, and I made such an impression on my Spanish teacher, Ms. Vigo, that she assigned me the job of getting her coffee and taking her attendance to the office. I was like "la mera, mera." One day after class, while I was getting Ms. Vigo her coffee, I was stopped by the scariest girl in my middle school. Her name was Liz Cordova. She was tall, with jet black hair, no eye brows, black lip liner, eye liner, you name it, she had it. This girl looked like she had just walked off of the set from the movie *Mi Vida Loca*. "Listen," she said, "I don't know who chu tink chu are, but chu need to stop acting like chor spanich is all good n stuff cuz you ain't in Mexico no more and ain't nobody got Mexicans' backs here. Weez the only Mexicans here at this school, so you better start representing La Raza." Like the little

girl in Martin Luther King's speech, I "began to to distort my personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people." Her words stuck to me like a band-aid. I began to believe I was Mexican again, but this time I was an oppressed Mexican. Everything got to me. If someone looked at me in the wrong way, it was because I was Mexican. If I had to stay in for recess, it was because I was Mexican. If my mom got a red light while on our way to school, it was because we were Mexican. Everything I did was in the name of "La Raza."

It wasn't until I began high school, this time in the lovely state of Colorado, that it all became clear to me that all the confusion, all the name calling, all the people I had met throughout my journey, had come together and made me the person I was. I was in the first graduating class at Regis Jesuit High School Girls' Division. There was no such thing as "diversity" yet, so I was appointed President of our Multi-Cultural Alliance and began listening to different stories that would inspire me. It became obvious how much of a struggle being an immigrant was for these girls. Not only did they face culture shock, but they also came

up against a language barrier. As I listened to their stories, I realized how privileged I was because of my bilingual and multicultural upbringing.

Our club worked hard to raise money for different diversity conferences that would open my eyes to even more issues concerning immigration. When I graduated, I decided that I wanted to help people, especially the Latino population, so at nineteen years old, I got a job with the Denver Public Schools as a para-professional. As soon as the principal found out I spoke Spanish, she put me in my very own classroom with all the struggling Latino immigrants. I made both English and Spanish lesson plans. It was amazing! Parents were ecstatic because they were able to talk to someone who knew their language, and, in addition, I was handsomely rewarded with pupusas, tamales, tacos wrapped in tin foil and other delicious goodies. Overnight, I had become famous on Federal Boulevard.

If there is anything I have learned throughout my experiences, it is that no matter what generation you belong to, or how long your parents have been in the United States, we have all struggled and should not be punished for wanting more for our children. It is so easy to turn your head when you are privileged, but by doing so, you will never learn. And so today, as an Administrative Assistant at a Charter School, I proudly have a sign on my desk that reads, "Valerie Villarruel," and in bold print under my name, *Se habla español*.

Lord Knows

By Lamont Mack

Lord Knows
My pain, struggles, tears
Being fatherless
running through women
Being a disappointment to my peers

Lord Knows
My addictions, weakness, fears
Money's the root of all evil
quick to anger
Dying young behind mistakes
in past years

Lord Knows
My desire, aspiration, hunger
To change from my sinful ways
To become new
and fall under God's grace

Lord Knows
My passion, yearning, devotion
So when I am asked
to whom I give my love
look for no other name than GOD

MY LORD KNOWS

Juice of Chaos

By Richard Rader

This body of mine is only 29
but it's been put through the ringer
a few times
mangled, smashed, and bashed
from dirt bike accidents
only to be rebuilt by Doctors
and then put back into action
for week—long crystal meth binges

The drug destroys your body
death is all it seeks and desires
I know this, but will inject the juice
because it feels good now
so I reject the reality
of consequences I know are inevitable

Soon I will either break out in handcuffs
or die from lack of food and sleep
but I have no choice, my body gives in
I'm only going to lie down for a minute
two days later, I wake up
fuck, I lost my job again
now I have to sell more meth

I kept on using and dealing until I was
almost dead
then I was arrested, "saved" if you will
Without those cops
I would have killed myself

Sometimes I thank God
for being incarcerated
at least now my mind and body
are finally free
from the juice of chaos

Miss Iris

By Lamont Mack

I used to wonder about the difference
between living and dying
I didn't know that the answer was lying
In the tears my mother was crying
'Cause between each of her tears was
years and years of my lying
And so now I am here to say
I am Sorry
I am here to say *I love you*

Miss Iris
Black queen
With cinnamon skin
Jet and coconut eyes
I believe you are royalty

My father was already gone
So you had to raise two young men
From the streets to the pen
But our mistakes are not yours

Miss Iris
You are so strong
You make the heavens sing
Of love, compassion, and devotion

Just the other day
You made me see from a letter
That wasn't even a page long
What a terrible mistake it was
To have left home

But even while teaching me
A hard lesson I should have learned
Your love was so strong
That now all my worries are gone

Don't Quit

By Swan

"Mr. Swan, I hereby sentence you to 21 years in the Department of Corrections."

That is what I heard in November 2006. I was either going to have to do 21 years or get that time reduced by going to Boot Camp—I chose Boot Camp.

Waiting in a small cell, a drill instructor burst through the door and shouted "Get your asses on that bus now and if you don't do as I say, shit will get real bad, real fast!" We loaded the bus only to be ushered off by different sergeants boarding the bus at our destination.

Then the real training began. I was running laps for an hour and suddenly I got exhausted and had to stop. At that moment, a drill instructor jumped in my face and said "You fat piece of shit, get your fucking ass moving or you're going to do this all night." So I got my ass moving. There was no way I was going to do this all night.

Next, push-ups followed. I was drenched by water and I could hardly breathe. Following that I was sent to get my hair cut. What a great job they did. It took only two minutes to get it done, and they left patches all over my head. After haircuts, we assembled in the gym. We were told to eat standing up and that to sit down while eating was a privilege to be earned. We were told not to move at all and only to move our arms to shovel the food in our mouths. Most of us spilled our drinks and our food while trying to eat.

Any food that fell on the ground, we had to pick up and put in our pockets or on top of our heads.

Late that night, as I lay in my rack, I knew I was in hell. All I could hear were voices of men I didn't know, breaking down in tears. As I laid there and listened, I wonder how I got myself into all this mess. I went from being charged with forgery for selling cars to a 21-year prison sentence. I found out that hiring a good attorney did me no good at all. I got greedy without taking a look at the consequences of my actions. There was no slap on the wrist this time. All I could do to reduce my sentence was to finish Boot Camp successfully. So I knew I would have to endure the hardships and agony of the next few months. My eyes heavy with pain, I finally drifted off to sleep.

Training was intense. Every time I needed a break, there was a sergeant there making sure I didn't have time to sneak one by him. "Either quit now, or get your asses moving," was all I ever heard from the officers and of course they had to scream it out. I knew that if I quit, I would be sent to a maximum security prison—I definitely did not want that. I would have no hope then of reconsideration of my sentence. So I kept telling myself that quitting was not an option.

Quitting was not an option and now, five years later, I'm on my way to a half-way house.

Love and Forgiveness

By Richard Rader

I want to believe that back before I can remember, she was a good mom. That would mean we had a good relationship at some point, even if I don't remember that far back.

What I remember is the start and finish of my parents' divorce. My dad would come home from work late at night, or that's where I thought he was, but come to think of it, work couldn't have been the only place he was. My mom would always start to yell and scream at him about how he was drunk again and she was tired of it. I always wondered why, if he was the drunk one causing all the problems, she was the first one to start yelling. That went on for I don't know how long, and then divorce was finalized. My dad left.

My two brothers, our stepsister and I stayed with my mom in a little house in Topock, Arizona. I don't exactly remember how it all happened, but from what my dad told me, one night after the divorce, my mom called him up and told him if he wanted us boys, to come get us. She was leaving for Montana with her boyfriend; my brothers and I would be at the house with our eighteen-year-old stepsister until he arrived. That night she gave me a hug and kiss, told me she loved me, and walked out the door. I said, "Goodbye. I love you, mom." I stood at the door watching her leave, wondering how she could say she loved me and leave me at the same time. Would I ever see her again? "Mom, please don't go." She was gone.

My dad came to get us. My stepsister stayed in Arizona with her boyfriend. The three of us boys went back to Utah with our dad where we lived in a van until he could buy a 46-foot camper trailer for us to live in. Somehow, he managed to keep a roof over our heads, help us with our school work, and make every birthday, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and other holidays wonderful for us.

We didn't hear from my mom or get any Christmas, Easter, or birthday cards for what had to be at least five years. The next time I heard from her, we'd moved to Ft. Lupton, Colorado, with my dad's sister. My mom showed up one day and took us to lunch. She got upset with us because we were being loud, slurping our soft drinks through our straws, chewing with our mouths open, and just all together being obnoxious toward her and her boyfriend. He'd taken our mom from us and we didn't like him. I think misbehaving was our way of giving back the hurt she left us with. After that visit, she showed up once in awhile and then disappeared again.

I got locked up when I was eighteen. I think she wrote once or twice. I can't be sure, so let's give her the benefit of the doubt and say she wrote twice. I wrote back, and that was it. I don't know if it was something I wrote in my letters back to her or what, but she never wrote me again. I remember telling myself when I wrote to be nice and try to be the better person, so I don't think I said anything offensive. I even signed the letter, "P.S. I love you and miss you, Mom."

When I got parole, she was there at my dad's house with the rest of the family. We hugged, spoke briefly, and I hung around with everyone trying to figure out how to act after being incarcerated so long. My mom and my little brother and his family didn't stay long. They had to head back to Nebraska where they lived.

My mom bought a house in Nebraska, not too far from my brother's house. She lives alone, but he helps her out when she needs something. I still don't know exactly why my mom left us with our dad. I was angry with her for it. I don't understand why she did what she did, but she must have had her reasons. My mother and I, we don't really know one another. We simply know of one another's existence in this world.



The following pieces were written by women enrolled in a creative writing and communication class taught at the Federal Prison Camp (FPC) in Phoenix, Arizona, by Dr. K. B. Valentine, of Arizona State University. For their support for enhanced educational opportunities for the women incarcerated at FPC, Dr. Valentine thanks the staff at FPC, the volunteers at Arizona State University, and the staff at Rio Salado Community College, in Maricopa County, Arizona.

Pain Turns into Beauty

By Araceli R.

I remember the excruciating pain and thinking “I am NOT going to make it through this!”

The pain afflicting my lower back and pelvis was so powerful that it left me breathless. It left me feeling as if I was being torn in half. “My God, this is so hard,” I thought. I remember trying to think, “In the end, it will be worth all of this fear and pain.”

Suddenly, in one last burst of pain, and after the strong urge to push, I felt relief wash over me. Then the room was filled with a cry so beautiful that it sounded like angels singing a lovely melody.

That sound soothed my pain just as water soothes thirst. It filled me with emotions I’d never encountered before, including joy, unconditional love, amazement, pride, and euphoria.

Child, as I held you in my arms, you opened your tiny eyes, and slightly shivered as you felt coolness after leaving the warmth of my womb. Your eyes sparkled, smiled, and showed a promise of life as you saw, for the first time, the face of the woman you would someday call “mama.”

Imprints in the Snow

By Meagan G.

It’s mid-January, the 17th, one day before my twenty-fourth birthday. I am in Mammoth Lakes, California, at my favorite cabin, nestled in a postcard-perfect hillside. Snow is falling from an eternity of silvery sky.

In my matching sea-foam-green thermals and my favorite latte-colored Ugg boots, I race to the sliding glass door and step out onto the deck. As my boots make their first imprints in the freshly fallen snow, I am consumed by the winter wonderland surrounding me. The icicles—perfectly sharp and dangerous—hang down from the rooftops. I feel the innocent white snowflakes graze my rose-colored cheeks, while others blanket the world around me.

I can no longer fight the urge, and leap from the deck into the tall snow bank. All around me, sprawling evergreens stretch into the heavens and dance in

unison as the silent wind moves
delicately through their voluptuous,
velvety branches. The intoxicating
scent of pine swirls all around me.
I inhale the crisp, clean mountain air,
over and over again.

As I walk back toward the cabin,
I know what awaits me inside.
The wood-burning stove-painted black
as night-is filled with cut wood that has
been drying for a whole year waiting to
be burned. As I draw nearer,
I hear the fire popping and crackling.
An old friend sits on the floor in front
of the fire, proud of his creation.
We sit there together, and I feel the
warmth of the fire envelop me.

Now, as I look toward the future,
I am eager to create new memories
in that place; to leave new imprints
in the snow.

Streams

by Crystal Carney

Memories are streaming
Through my imagination
Feelings from my past
Anticipations
The pictures so clear
Conversations I can't seem to forget
Echo off the walls of my mind
Ringing in my ears

I open my eyes
To see if I'm still here
Soaked in sweat
Shallow ragged breath
These walls consume me
The razor wire keeps me trapped
My body a prisoner to the system
My mind a fugitive
They cannot shackle down or trap

I am tired because my mind
runs in circles
Between what was
and should have been
Simply waiting for the rest of me
to be free

So I'm closing my eyes
To run back through
The streams of my imagination
Looking for glimmers of the future
Anticipations
The pictures so clear
Conversation I long to hear
Ringing through my ears

I Used to Think

By Michelle J.

I used to think
That everything would always be the same
That nothing would ever change

I used to think
That I would forever be stuck in the same
Self-destructive pattern

I used to think
That I was nobody

I used to think
That my life meant nothing

I used to think
It won't matter to anyone if I get high

I used to think
That no one would be able to see
The needle marks on my arms

I used to think
That no one would notice the emptiness
In my eyes and soul

I used to think
That I would never find my way back
From that dark place

I used to think
That there was no light at the end
Of the tunnel

I used to think
If I could just stop

I used to think
I can stop

I used to think
I can do it alone



I COULDN'T

Now I think
How happy I am that I didn't
Have to do it alone

Now I think
I *did* stop

Now I think
There is light

Now I think
I found my way back

Now I think
When people look at me, they see life
In my eyes

Now I think
That the marks are gone

Now I think
Everyone cares about my sobriety

Now I think
My life is everything

Now I think
I AM somebody

Now I think
I will never be stuck in that pattern again

Now I think
That things CAN change

Now I think
That I used to NOT think.

Paint Me

By Quentin M.

Paint me like I am. Paint me at home.
Paint the smile on my face; no, not
the one I carry around this prison that
makes each day pass a little easier,
paint *the* smile, the genuine, sincere
smile that I have when I'm with my
family.

Paint the joy I will have when we
reunite. Paint the laughter. Paint the
love. Paint the hugs and kisses. Paint
the renewal in our lives. Paint the
change, the freedom.

Paint me centered and with lots of
color. Paint some color and swirls all
around me to represent the
happiness that will surround me.
Paint my children, don't forget them,
paint them next to me with smiles.
Paint my husband with his arms around
all of us and a much-anticipated look
of relief and knowing on his face.

Oh, and please, paint us in
PERMANENT paints that do not fade
or wash away with time.

La Nostalgia

By Veronica C.

*La nostalgia es algo que cuando te
agarra de las manos y te lleva con ella
te de tierra por dentro y te destruye el
alma y el espíritu. Te hace sentir muy
triste en el corazón y trae muchas
lagrimas y tristezas. Si le permites
entrar te puede llevar hasta la
depresión.*

Always keep home memories alive,
and remember that a happy spirit can
never be brought down. We won't be
here forever and our day will come
when we will walk out those doors and
go home to make new memories.
We will start a new life.

*A si que no permitas que la nostalgia
te agarre de las manos. La vida es muy
preciada para dejarse llevar por ella.*

Enjoy life as it comes and learn to be
thankful for everything you have.

Stuck Underground

By Lamont Mack

After being locked in a cage for all
these years, I have to ask myself,
do I really want to leave?

Can you imagine getting off the bus
with tight shiny handcuffs and long
thick chains dangling seductively
between your legs?

I'm terrified of what's awaiting on
the other side of those gates.
But there's no sense in looking back,
because now my days are spent
looking through bars at dark gray cinder
blocks, just killing time.

Now I don't have to worry about
a damn thing, because somehow deep
inside, I love being here.

I gave up Sunday mornings of bacon
and eggs, family gatherings, fried
chicken, and collard greens.
Now I have to settle for cold, lumpy,
oatmeal and saccharin Kool-aid,
all because of my fucked up ways.

To those still behind bars,
there are no trees
and the sunlight touches reluctantly.

So at night I cry,
because emotions are seen
as a weakness, and the weak are
preyed upon, by the strong who rule
with no shame.

But I can't complain,
because this cage has made me
change,

and I can now see better
days ahead,
where the streets are paved in gold,
and angels play harps singing
beautiful songs

Now my world has turned around,
but I will never forget when I was
stuck underground.

Today in America

By Kendall Sullivan

As his tank gulps, gurgles, and swallows gallon upon gallon of fuel, Scott's eyes try to focus on the digital display emitting a strobe light of the nickels, dimes, and dollars fleeing his pocket. Scott McGowan—or “Scottie” as his friends call him—is a hard-working, dependable, honest family man with three beautiful children and a loving wife. A slave to debt, he works twelve hours a day at a job he hates. Occasionally, he remembers his dream of being a firefighter.

“Good morning,” he says to the friendly cashier who always greets him with a smile. While she rings him up, Scottie rubs two fingers across his forehead as if he could remove the lines that have been created from carrying the weight of the world.

“That’ll be \$87.73,” the cashier says in a pleasant voice that can’t cushion the blow of his dwindling bank account. Scottie thinks to himself, “How am I going to pay the electric bill, buy groceries, save for Sarah’s braces and—Oh, man—I almost forgot Joey’s birthday is coming up.”

“Thank you,” the woman says.
“Have a nice day.”

When he climbs into the driver’s seat of the SUV he absolutely had to own, Scottie is overwhelmed with buyer’s remorse. He’s strapped with an enormous payment, inflated insurance, and a gas tank that’s hard to satisfy. He sighs and sips coffee before

starting the engine. He merges into a two-mile-long row of vehicles driven by other hard-working Americans on their way to work who wear the same expression that’s on his face—stress. Scottie turns on his favorite radio station.

“In the news today, millions of Americans are feeling the squeeze at the pumps. Transportation costs are skyrocketing with the unrest in the Middle East, causing speculation in commodities and futures. Gas prices continue to rise and are expected to reach \$5.00 a gallon by the end of the year. This, coupled with the busy traveling season ahead, means there is concern that we may see gas shortages like in the 1970’s.

However, there is some good news surfacing from the Obama administration: the president announced today that an investigation is being launched to explore oil companies suspected of price gouging. This couldn’t come at a better time, considering Exxon’s recent report of a 60 percent increase in profits over the last quarter. You’re listening to N.P.R.,” the radio man says in his familiar baritone.

Attach. File. Kirkwood.doc. Send. This is Lisa’s tenth resume today and she prays the fruit of her labor will produce at least one interview. Just six months ago, life was going well. Things weren’t perfect, but the bills were paid and she was on her way toward a promising career. Being a legal assistant in a small law firm had been a wonderful opportunity, a stepping stone to her future.

"We're sorry, Lisa. We have to let you go. We just can't afford three assistants. I wish there was another way, but our hands are tied. We can give you two weeks' severance pay and a letter of recommendation. It's not much. We hope it helps. Maybe we can hire you back if things turn around." Lisa remembers those words like they were an hour ago. She remembers thinking, "This is only fair—I was the last hired and Scottie did everything he could to keep me."

She slips on her tennis shoes and checks the mailbox before heading for the workforce center. Every day, she hopes they can find her something, anything, to help until her unemployment check comes. When she looks at the mail, there it is—Lisa Kirkwood, 1732 Sweet Brook Lane, Apt. C—electronically stamped and beaming through the windowed envelope. "Thank God," she says to herself. This check holds every thread of her financial security. The check is late, but that's okay. "My rent is paid," she says aloud.

Then Lisa notices a woman with a dirty coat and a red face pushing a shopping cart down the street toward the A Bridge. She smells the noxious, choking odor of carbon monoxide as a truck roars by. She hears, "Get a job!" being shouted at the poor woman. A blue Toyota full of laughing teenagers rushes by. Lisa realizes suddenly that she is just 40 weeks away from moving in next door to the somber looking lady who lives under the bridge.

"Scottie McGowan's office. Oh, hi, Honey. Sure, I can stop by the store on my way home, but I am probably

going to be late again tonight. Sorry, but since I laid off Lisa there are only two assistants and I'm swamped. Okay. See you tonight. I love you, too."

They tell us the recession has been over for nearly a year. They tell us they are investing in new forms of renewable energy and are creating new jobs. Sure doesn't look like it from where I'm sitting. The Republicans and Democrats argue, bash each other, and align themselves for the next best move in the political chess match. While the national debt skyrockets, our sons and daughters are being killed overseas in two wars and now there's Libya. People in this country are starving, out of work and clinging to hope in an uncertain future. We are watching the decay of our moral fabric, living in fear of the crime creeping into our neighborhoods and listening for the next natural disaster that is sure to be coming.

On the other hand, are we just going to give up? Lock our doors and wait for the end? No, because we are Americans. We will put a smile on our faces, find our faith, and step into tomorrow with the confident expectation that everything is going to get better.

Mis Días de Olas, Desiertos y Gloria

By Claudia Liria Manriquez

Apesar de que aquí en prisión tenemos programas y clases que nos pueden ayudar a encontrar estructura, sanación, educación o espiritualidad, al final del día prisión es prisión. La vida en prisión es dura, degradante, violenta, dolorosa, traumática y tenemos muchas pérdidas. Aquí en prisión, yo aprendí algo que yo no podía hacer antes. Aprendí a soportar, escuchar y a adaptarme a las olas del océano y al calor, viento y frío del desierto. Las olas en estado calmadas y de repente empiezan a moverse. Hay días que las olas son tan violentas que siento ahogarme y no encuentro salida. En mis días de desierto siento que me sofoco con las llamas del calor. Los vientos de repente son fríos y me siento fría por dentro. Siento que nada me calienta. Siento una grande soledad. No todos mis días son de olas o desiertos, también tengo días de Gloria. Apesar de todo no importa que día tenga porque todo lo puedo en Cristo que me fortalece. Yo no soy víctima, al contrario toda situación me ha hecho victoriosa. Soy una mujer fuerte, llena de fé y esperanza. Por primera vez le encuentro propósito a mi vida. Tengo carácter, me respeto, tengo valor y amor. Me quiero comer al mundo entero porque sabe delicioso. Yo viví en una prisión física, pero ya no en una prisión espiritual. De nada me serviría la libertad física sin libertad espiritual. Por eso vivo agradecida día a día. Bendito sea el nombre de Jehová Dios por su misericordia y por su amor.

My Days of Waves, Deserts, and Glory

Translation

Even though there are programs and classes in prison that can help us find structure, healing, education, or spirituality, at the end of the day prison is prison. Prison life is hard, degrading, violent, painful, traumatic, and we suffer many losses. In prison, I learned to do something that I could not do before: I learned to endure, listen, and adapt to the waves of the sea and the heat, winds, and cold of the desert. The waves are calm and then suddenly begin to move. There are days when the waves are too violent, and I feel like I am drowning and cannot find my way out. In my desert days, I feel as if I am suffocating with the flames of the heat. The wind is suddenly cold and I feel empty inside. I feel that nothing can warm me up, and I feel a great solitude. Not all of my days are waves or deserts—I also have glorious days. Overall, it does not matter what kind of day I am having because I can do all things through Jesus Christ. He strengthens me. I am not a victim. On the contrary, every situation has made me victorious. I am a strong woman, full of faith and hope. For the first time, I find purpose in my life. I have character and respect myself. I have value and love. I want to eat the entire world because it is delicious. I live in a physical prison but not in a spiritual prison. Physical freedom would have no worth without spiritual freedom. For this freedom, I live with gratitude, day by day. Blessed be the name of Jehovah God for his mercy and love.

Waiting on Daddy

By Brother Thangs



Standing in giant bay windows watching the cloudless sky turn dark with time, I wondered, "Where is he?" He said he would come today. "He" was my estranged father. I was a young 'tween desperate for male guidance, and I could not understand what was wrong with me.

"Get away from that window, Boy," my momma cried. "He ain't coming!" How did she know? He said he would. Was she convinced of his hatred for me? He had to hate me, right? He didn't come 'cause I was a bad boy. I was far too young to understand that my father's inability to parent, to direct, to instill a legacy in me, was his flaw, not mine.

I refused to leave the window. I turned and said, "My daddy is coming to see me. I want to see him when he comes." Momma opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it. She didn't want to demolish me. I continued in my vigil. My heart would rise and fall with every car that passed, every black man walking this way, that way. I thought of all the boys and girls who had daddies, who weren't like me.

The day continued to drag on—more cars, more men, and no daddy. I must have begun to cry, because momma took me away from the window and said in a soft voice,

"Son, I don't think he's coming, but maybe he will next time."

As I looked out the window, I began to die. I didn't know it then, but I was becoming callous. I was becoming cold.

Years passed, and my attitude became as dark and brooding as the midnight sky. "F* him! Feed him dog food!" I vowed inwardly never to wait for daddy again. Then my momma remarried, and my stepfather tried to crack my shell. It took some time, but I opened up to him. We went deep sea fishing, worked together on odd jobs, and played basketball against other dads and sons. Then, because he was human and had flaws, their marriage began to fall apart. And there I was again, at the window waiting for my daddy. For shame. I understood it better this time. I didn't like it, but I understood it.

A few years later when I began to develop relationships of my own, I had a heart hunger to undo what I had experienced. This was just a concept until I started having sexual relationships. When things felt serious, the concept of a lifetime began to loom over my head. I began to think, "Do I want to be with *this* woman forever? Do I want to deal with this drama?" I didn't. "This is over," I told her. "What? You're pregnant? Can I see the little guy? No? But he's my son, too."

And so the saga continues, with another little boy looking out the window, waiting for his daddy.

If you are imprisoned and would like to contribute to the next issue, or if you are free and would like to lend your assistance, or if you are wealthy and care to make a donation to our humble magazine, then please contact:

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