

**CAPTURED  
WORDS**

*Free Thoughts*

Writings from The Poetry Workshop  
at the Colorado Women's Correctional Facility

*Volume 7, Fall 2009*

## OPENINGS

During the Autumn of 2009, a group of us gathered in the Denver Women's Correctional Facility (DWCF) each Monday night and alternating Wednesday nights to read, write, and edit essays, memoirs, poems, and other works. 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.

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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## Our guest writers from the Federal Prison Camp, in Phoenix, AZ, are:

Veronica Chavéz, Dharma McRyhew, and Elizabeth Ortega

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## MY HEART STARTS TO BREAK

by Georgiana Valdez

Imagine your heart is beating very fast: boom-boom, boom-boom, boom-boom. Your palms are sweating, you have perspiration on your top lip, and your whole body is aching from the ordeal. You're feeling alone, emotionally drained, the pain is unimaginable—you would rather die than have to endure it.

I kept telling myself, "it's ok, you're gonna be fine, don't cry." But then my heart started to break; as I saw the sunlight dawning, tears rolled down my face, for I knew I was leaving a piece of myself behind: my newborn son, Davion.

For two days, Davion would stay at Denver Health Hospital without me. My mind raced; "Is he gonna be ok? What if they just let him cry?" I was not allowed to see his chubby cheeks, I was not allowed to kiss his big hands, feel his thin baby hair, or hear his cry—they took my boy away.

Being denied the right to love my baby made me want to scream, but I knew I had to be strong. I couldn't be weak, for only the weak cry. I couldn't allow the guard to see me vulnerable. And so I returned to the facility handcuffed like an animal. I no longer felt like a human being. I was back to being just a last name and a number. My son was gone, I was alone.

By the time I was back in my cell, nothing moved inside of me, just the agony of my heart starting to break.

*Editor's Note: Part one of this story, describing Georgiana Valdez's ordeal of being pregnant in prison, was published in the previous volume (number 6, Spring 2009) of this same journal. Since then, a Federal Appeals Court has ruled that women in Arkansas subjected to the same treatment noted here had been treated unconstitutionally, for their eighth amendment right to protection from "cruel and unusual punishment" had been violated. For background on the decision, see "One Protection for Prisoners," an editorial in the New York Times (14 October 2009), available at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).*

## GRANDPA

by Frankie McConnell

In honor of John McConnell

I strolled to downtown Newark with my Grandpa to buy a newspaper and penny candy. He walked slowly, with his head slumped slightly, his hands behind his back. We talked and laughed while watching children playing stickball in the street. We argued playfully about the fair price for a pomegranate, and I convinced him that it was a fruit, not a vegetable.

He took me on this journey throughout my life, as I watched him become a silver-haired fox. His wisdom told me I'd be healthy as long as I ate oranges; he said our lives are perpetual and that we all come back, just like the fruit trees in springtime.

His education only went through the sixth grade, but through his kindness and patience I learned many things. He was a good family provider who lived by the simple facts of life: hard work, family first, and now and then a little whiskey.

When he left this world without the benefit of fame or fortune, I promised myself that I would always remember what I had learned about human greatness from his kind example.

## THE WORLD ALSO HURTS

by Erika Baro

The skies are dark and gray  
The rain won't stop falling  
The lightning throbs and screams  
Looking at the turmoil in my soul  
I realize I'm not the only one  
Who feels this way  
The world also hurts  
It just broke  
Before I did

## NO LONGER A PRISONER WITHIN MYSELF

by Amber Gray

I'm 24, single, and have been in prison since March 23, 2009. At 8:00 a.m. on that fateful day, I was getting my picture taken, blood drawn, and health checked because I was now an inmate, not a human being. Since then, I sometimes feel like I have been forgotten, as if no one even knows that I'm gone.

Now I'm sitting in my cell with a bible in my hands and tears rolling down my face. I feel like I'm not loveable anymore. I've become not only a prisoner of the state, but a prisoner within myself.

How do I break free? Do I get angry and throw things? Do I withdraw inside these prison walls and retreat from the world outside? My mind races with so many thoughts that I can't get a grasp on reality.

What is reality? Reality is me in prison for the mistakes that I've made, mistakes that go back for years. And so now I walk around the rocks, grass, and people in blue, who smell like Irish spring, while I stink like an animal and always look like a Green Bay Packers fan on game day. *When I'm outta here, I will never wear green again.*

This battle I'm fighting with myself is a hard one, but I must overcome! I have learned to express myself through the lines of hopes and dreams on paper. Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. Yeah, I'm floating like a butterfly in these walls, but I sting like a bee on paper!

Along with my writing, I've found someone who has shown me the way through this maze. No, I know what you're thinking, she found her a good man. Well I did, but mainly I found GOD. He throws road blocks at me only to help me overcome them like I'm a track star in a hurdle race. My new sense of grace feels so good it makes you wanna slap your momma.

So now I know that just because I'm a prisoner doesn't mean that I can't better myself. Look at me, as an inmate I am getting stronger. I can still get my degree and start my own business one day. My dreams haven't stopped just because I'm locked up. If anything, being here has made me strive harder to reach my goals.

Now it's October, 2009, and I'm sitting in my cell again, only this time I'm happy, content with myself and who I'm becoming. I know that I'm lovable and that I am loved. I'm still fighting the battle within myself, but I've found love within these prison walls. And I know that that love will grow like a baby in the womb. It will blossom like a beautiful red rose. I was once the ugly duckling, trapped in self-doubt and bad habits, but now I am becoming the beautiful swan.

## I STAND IN HIS PRESENCE

by Lora Wilson

In the beginning, there was God, and the word was with God and the word was God (John 1:1). The majesty and power of God bloomed as he separated the darkness that gave way to the light; He hanged the sun in the sky by day, and the moon and stars in the sky by night. My mind is awed by the omnipotent grandeur of His sky's colors, the rustic oranges mingled with calm soothing splashes of purple, yellow, and pink. Rising in the east and setting in the west, the sun never deviates from its perfection.

When I returned to the reality of my journey, awakening from my moment of reverie, I had almost reached my destination. I stood outside the courtroom and wondered what would be said and how things would go. While the mood in the courtroom was intemperate, my heart was quieted by focusing on the mesmerizing beauty of His world; its beauty created in me a sense of tranquility and peacefulness. I knew that leaving the orifice closed would have saved me from the subduer, but I had allowed the forked-tongued enemy to plunder every intimate facet of my existence, swaggering promiscuously through my fortitude, reducing it to a conquered mockery. So there I was, both awed and ashamed, concerned but calm, standing in the presence of a judge who would mediate my fate.

Making one right decision, a few months earlier, would have saved me from having to face the judge. Barely glancing up from his paperwork, he could see the facts clearly stated before him: I enjoyed strong family and community support, I had completed numerous classes, was a model citizen, and so, in my heart, I desperately imagined him saying "Time served." However, the District Attorney wanted me to go to prison. Still, I thought I saw a glimpse of compassion on the judge's face. While I waited for the public pretender to collect her thoughts and produce some evidence on my behalf, I listened to my heart's consistent beat. Finally, I was awakened to the realization that the judge had spoken—"Five Years."

Five years seemed unfathomable. But then a sovereign thought conquered the delusions that I had clung to for so long: I knew that I was ready to follow the road that had, so many times before, opened before me. He had gone ahead of me to make the crooked places straight and He had carried me when I didn't have the confidence or courage to make it on my own. Some might say that my realization was "a day late and a dollar short," for I had traveled all around the perimeter of my life, instead of surrendering to what was best for me and others. I had allowed a chaotic craving to become my life, knowing that my redeemer was there to catch my every fall. Who am I that the Lord of Heaven and earth might care to know my name and would care to feel my hurt? Who am I that the morning star would choose to light the way for my forever wondering heart? I am a wave tossed in the ocean and a vapor in the wind. Still you hear me when I call, you catch me when I fall, and you show me who I am. I am yours.

Now, true to my path and calling, I forbid any satanic personalities with diabolical assignments from harming me or my family. To wage war against wrong, I pursue prophetic purpose and divine destiny. I move synchronized and syncopated to the symphonic music of God.

## BLOOD ON THE CARPET

by Brittany King

One time back in high school, I cut my wrist in front of my mom. It was the day of the "Stoners and Jocks" rumble, scheduled during the second lunch period. My stoner friends and I went to first lunch period, and so had to ditch our afternoon classes. We all met at "stoner's corner," crossed the road, and walked past the railroad tracks. The jocks all had cars, so they were already there waiting for us, talking shit as always. The jocks had just the guys fighting while their preppy little cheerleader bitches stood ready to drive them to safety if the cops showed up.

But not us, we had twenty guys and seven girls fighting. I was right in the middle of that shit, swinging right alongside of my boys. When things started going badly for her boys, one of the preppy bitches called the cops and the jocks took off. Of course, all of us stoners were stopped and questioned before being sent back to school. Tom-E, my boyfriend at the time, and I went straight to the handicap stall in the boy's room. He pulled out a gallon bottle of Skol Vodka and we polished it off, then started on a second, before sneaking outside to sit along the wall and wait for the buses.

By that time my parents had been called by the school and were looking for me. When they found me with Tom-E they told him to get lost and walked me to my mom's car. My dad took his truck and went on ahead of us. I remember being drunk and trying to tell my mom about the fight, but she didn't care and didn't want to hear my excuses. When we got home, she dragged me into the house. I punched her to try to break her grip on me and ran up to my room. By the time she climbed up to my doorway, I had found my razor blade. She took one step into my room and the blade made its cut. Blood splattered my wall. Blood dripped off my fingertips onto the carpet. I was drunk, crying, and bleeding, yet still trying to tell my stunned mom about the fight.

That's when my Dad rushed into the room. He surveyed the scene and without hesitating hit me in the face, hard, which made me drop the blade, still dripping blood in my hand. He dragged me into the bathroom as I kicked and cursed him out for not letting me die. I wanted to die. He washed my wrist and wrapped a towel around it while yelling at my mom to go start the car. She was in shock while driving us to the ER, with my dad in the backseat holding the towel on my wrist and keeping me from trying to jump out of the car.

By the time we got to the ER I was in a daze. I had a black eye, bloody nose, and fat lip from my dad hitting me. I had three fractured ribs from one of the jocks punching me, but the bloody wrist was my own doing. I was locked up in the mental ward for two-to-three weeks that time, being served a nightly cocktail of Respiradol and Thorazine. One day, a lady from social services tried to convince me that my dad was abusing me. I laughed at her and said "If he hadn't hit me when he did, I would have cut my other wrist the right way and I wouldn't be here, so fuck off. All you're trying to do is make me a ward of the state so you can make money off me."

When it was time to go home, I found a few blood stains on the backseat of my mother's car. At the house, my blood was still on the carpet and wall, waiting for me to clean it up. That wasn't the first time I cut myself, nor would it be the last.

## MY LAST NIGHT OF FREEDOM

by Rachel Verlarde

I still remember when I disconnected my computer and made sure all of my worldly possessions were packed up good and tight. I turned out the lights to the only place I've ever been able to call my own, and then I left. I was with my mom, brother, and sister, and we went to stay at a hotel not far from the courthouse. We stayed up late playing board games and watching *Mama Mia*—we all love musicals. As the minutes ticked away, my heart grew heavy.

After they all went to bed, I crept outside and ran till my lungs ached; then I ran some more. As I ran through the empty streets, the tears I'd been holding finally fell. I cried for my siblings, my parents, and my family as a whole. I cried for my life and for what I was about to lose. I found my way back to the hotel's side entrance and sat on the steps, drenched in sweat, crying, alone.

As I sat there, the door opened and out came my brother (11) and sister (17). They sat on either side of me and hugged me as I cried in silence. I've always been strong for them and sheltered them from my pain, but in that precious moment I drew strength from them.

The next morning we ate a breakfast of bacon, pancakes, and eggs. After we picked up my dad from the airport, we continued the board game; we laughed, we smiled, every blessed second was perfect. Then the time came for me to head to the courthouse. I had talked with my parents and we agreed that my dad, my brother, and my sister wouldn't go with me, for the whole ordeal was too much for them to deal with; so I hugged them one last time, turned with a broken heart, and walked out the door.

My mom and I still had to make some final arrangements. I told her where my important papers and official documents were kept. I laid out the plans for what she would need to do for me through the next numberless years. My mom, God bless her, still had hopes for probation. I thought that was sweet, but not realistic.

When we got to the courthouse, I walked straight in with my head held high. I was about to admit to a crime I never committed. I was holding onto my emotions with every part of my being. The court proceedings began and I quickly learned that the prosecutor was smart. I had no record—not even a speeding ticket—so what did she use against me? She used my intelligence as a weapon, citing my I.Q. as proof of my ability to be a “criminal mastermind.” That's absurd, I thought. Still, at my lawyer's urging, when it was time for my defense, I copped a plea. I said, “I did it. I'm guilty. Forgive me.” Tears trickled down my cheeks as I waited for the judge to speak. She gave me ten years, ten years for a crime I did not commit. Her mallet fell hard as she ended the hearing; by then my tears had ceased and I had hardened my heart.

I turned to my mom with a smile on my face. “Don't worry,” I said, as she sat sobbing. “I'll be OK. I will be strong for you and for me. This won't last forever—one day I'll be free.”

## THE NIGHT I DID METH, THE NIGHT I KISSED DEATH

by R. Verlarde

I was 17, living at home with my parents in middle-class suburbia, and had just finished a hard-core week taking all my final exams for my senior year. My classes included AP Government, AP Statistics, AP English, AP Psychology, Honors Physics, and Spanish II. It may sound like a bit much, being in all college classes while still in high school, and I admit it wasn't always easy. After all, I still had to balance school with my laundry list of extracurricular activities. My favorite had been “Link Crew,” a peer mentorship club for seniors to help the fresh meat, ahem, I mean freshman, by teaching them how to avoid peer pressure. My life was ideal, at least in a scholastic sense—I had my eyes on Dartmouth. Why Dartmouth? Well, the great Dr. Seuss went there and any school that was good enough for “green eggs and ham” was good enough for me. I was young, invincible, and nothing could stand in my way. There was no wall built too high, no damn question unsolvable. With my path to success laid out before me, I decided to indulge in rebellion by hosting a senior party at my house while my family was out of town. And so it began . . .

The cool desert breeze licks at my cheeks and whips my hair around my face as the crickets sing their love songs beneath the stubby palm trees in my front yard. Rocks molded into little rolling hills cover the ground, imitating the most fashionable way to arrange your yard in Phoenix, Arizona. I look from my silver candy-coated Honda Civic to a buff looking Mexican known as El Hombre de Muerto. I have known him since we moved into our house six years ago, but I just learned his nick-name two hours ago. For the past five years and 364 days, I have had a crush on him, but it wasn't until this last year that we began to talk. I adored him and naively saw myself making a positive future with him. But, truth be told, he was the worst thing for me, and I knew it. He had been in and out of prison for years, was involved in gangs at some point, and his body was covered in ink. I always loved the stories he told of prison life. When I was with him, I could be a girl without logic or reason—I could let my hair down.

Removing the clip holding my hair up, I shake my head back and forth, letting my hair cascade down my back. As his eyes move over me, I run my shaking fingers through the tendrils on the top of my head. I can't help wondering what devious thoughts run through his head. “Hey you,” is what I manage to squeak out.

He chuckles and shakes his head, replying “care to help me bring in the liquid courage?”

“Sure sexy, after all, I'm the one with all the muscles, right?” I tease him.

Together we unload the boxes of beer and liquor. Bottles filled with brown, clear, blue, and red liquids sprawl over the tables and counter tops. People begin to file into the house in pairs and groups, and within an hour, the whole neighborhood knows there's a party going on—the night is popping.

After some mandatory mingling, I look around for Muerto, and find him in the garage leaning on my father's Infiniti G-35. A small glass tube with a rounded end rests on his fingertips.

"Whatcha' got there big boy?" As soon as the words slip past my lips, I blush crimson from the embarrassment at my own cornyness.

With his eyes trailing to my lips, he crooks his finger motioning for me to come closer. My feet move on their own, as if they are connected to his every whim by an invisible thread.

"Ever had glass before sweetie?" He asks me softly.

Attempting to not appear confused, I merely shake my head and reply "not lately." My nonchalant attitude amuses him.

"Come closer you." His hands reach around my back and press our bodies together. "See, watch and I'll show you," he proclaims as he lifts the glass piece to his mouth.

And so Muerto gently inhales as the flame from his lighter dances under the ball-shaped glass end. As the smoke floods his lungs, I watch in wonderment. He blows the smoke out and it drifts into my nostrils, smelling like burning plastic and enticing danger.

"Breathe in, now," Muerto demands.

As soon as I inhale, my head begins to swim. As he releases the smoke from his own body to my own, hit after hit, I begin to feel immense lust. An overwhelming desire to touch him and be touched overcomes me. I want his hands over every inch of my body. My hands move without ever being told, and we are instantly locked in an embrace that I never want to end.

"How fast can you make everyone leave?" He whispers into my ear.

I race back into the house, demanding that everyone leave, but as I look around my wrecked house I find two girls passed out on the couch; a couple playing in the pool; oats spilled across the kitchen floor. . . After finally dismissing my hammered guests, I rush back to where I left Muerto and reach for his hand, leading him up to my bedroom. . .

Soon after the break of dawn, Muerto fell asleep. I assumed the only way he was able to crash was the fact that he was used to the effects of the heavenly crystal shards. I, however, could not keep my body still. So I moved around the house scrubbing and spraying until there wasn't a pillow out of place. Thankfully, everyone managed to flee before the sun rose, so no one was in the way of my cleaning frenzy. At about three in the afternoon, he awoke; I still felt invincible, and so we came together as one, again and again, until neither of us could move. Then he kissed me farewell as he walked out of the door and my life.

After that unforgettable night, he refrained from acknowledging me. No longer did he tell me stories of prison and of good times from the past. What we had was lost. However, if ever I wanted to smoke, he was there.

In the years following my introduction to meth, I chased that first experience, hoping to recapture the rush of energy, the calming of the senses as the smoke seeped into my system. Meth filled me with a sense that everything would be all right—I just needed one more hit.

If I had just said no to death, then I'd be in the Ivy League instead of a Correctional Facility

9/11

*by Frankie McConnell*

September 11th, 2001, was a breezy morning. I ate breakfast with my husband, sent him off to work, and had the whole house to myself. I danced around, putting things away, following my usual morning routine.

But then a voice came over the radio announcing that planes loaded with passengers had been taken over by hijackers and turned into weapons; the first plane rammed into the World Trade Center. As I stood there listening, my body froze. The glass in my hand hit the floor and broke into pieces, my feet would not move, my brain went into pause status, and the phone started ringing off the hook. Then someone started banging on my front door; I could hear my heart pounding, my stomach was tied up in knots, and my name was being called from outside. I forced myself to focus and answered the door with a blank look on my face. It was Timmy and Sheila, my husband's brother and his wife. Just after Timmy asked if my husband, James, went to work this morning, the voice on the radio told us that a second plane had slammed into the World Trade Center. I went down to the floor in a pool of tears and fear. Then the door opened to reveal my son and my three precious grandbabies running toward me. The children put their arms around me as the oldest asked "is Grandpa James dead?"

The rest of the morning was horrible. I could barely breathe, I was shaking, pacing the floor, for some reason I kept changing my clothes and combing my hair, but nothing calmed me down. Family and friends kept stopping by, the phones kept ringing. By then we had turned on the TV, and each time we watched the Towers fall again, and again, and again, I wondered about the fate of my husband.

Then the bishop came by to pray with the family; I saw his mouth moving, but heard nothing. As the shock gave way to realization, I started crying uncontrollably. I folded into my sons arms as my twelve-year-old granddaughter said "don't cry nana, please don't cry, Grandpa James be here soon."

I don't know why, but then I went and put on my husband's favorite football jersey, his old black-n-gold testament to a life of loving the Steelers. My family started calling all the local hospitals and trauma sites, but we found nothing, the whole city was in a panic. So we sat, waiting for the dreaded call. I paced back and forth, back and forth, trying to have a positive frame of mind for the children, my mother-in-law, and my son. More family arrived, bringing food and drinks and support, but I couldn't take it any longer and went into the bedroom, fell to my knees, grabbed James' pillow, and prayed to Almighty God.

Then the phone rang and it was Michael, James' younger brother, who had received some news. He said it was possible that James was at Beth Israel Hospital and that he would call back when he knew more. Others called saying it was possible that he might be at the East Orange Trauma Site? We contacted Uncle Lou, who lived in East Orange, but he hadn't heard anything.

When I went outside to try to see what I could learn, people were screaming, running, sobbing, talking loud, and firemen and police were running all over the place. A tall, bald-headed, man with coffee breath approached us to say that people from this area could have been taken anywhere, that he knew nothing, and that the police would update us when they had some news. Then he asked us what James did and if he had any scars or tattoos to help identify him. Helplessly, I stood there with my husband's Steelers jersey on, and couldn't remember what he wore to work that morning. All I could recall was telling my husband that I loved him before he went to work.

My head was exploding as the day's fear took its toll. The air had the most unusual, nasty smell, and debris in the air flowed around us and made it feel as though we carried 10 pounds of dirt. That's when I snapped and started screaming into the foul air, "James! Where in the hell are you baby? I love you so much. I promise I won't over-charge the credit cards, buy another pair of shoes, or sneak dresses in the house and tell you I already had them. Please, just answer..."

## ONE WISH

by Jessica Yarbrough

When you were a little girl, did you ever go around asking your family or friends “if you had three wishes, what would they be?” If you were anything like me, your answers were probably to be rich, to drive a dream car, or to go to the mall every day. I know there is no such thing as “three wishes,” but if there were, I wouldn’t have three, I would have only one. That wish would be to erase my childhood and start over again, with normal parents, stability, and lots of love. There would be no physical, emotional, or mental abuse—is that too much to ask?

Wishing for a childhood full of love and support would mean not having black eyes when I start the first day at another new school. It would mean not being afraid of my mother leaving me alone with my uncle, who touches me. It would mean not being told every day how worthless and stupid I am and that I’ll never amount to anything—is that too much to ask?

I always wanted to be one of those kids who wore brand name clothes with matching tennis shoes. I wanted to carry one of those cool lunch boxes filled with all of the fancy new foods. Was that too much to ask? But no, I was passed back and forth from my mom to my dad monthly, and I hated it! I was a 7-year-old living a 20-year-old life. I never had the chance to be a little girl. I thought it was because I was just not good enough—so whatever I did wrong, I’m sorry!

When it finally came out that my uncle raped me when I was twelve, no one believed me. They thought I made it up to get attention, but the doctors at the hospital proved it was true. After that, I thought things would get better, but they got worse. My family started fighting, social services got involved, and then, when I was thirteen, my dad blew his head off. That was the worst phone call I’ve ever gotten. My mother still blames me for everything. I guess if I had never revealed what my uncle did to me, then my father would not have felt so guilty that he took his own life. Ever since that day, I’ve been on my own.

I look back on my life and it kills me. I married at 17, and had four kids by the time I was 19. We moved to Hawaii after my husband joined the military and I thought my life was finally going to be normal. However, the verbal abuse began again and I was a “stupid worthless bitch” every day for thirteen years. No matter how many tears I cried, or how many talks we had, it never changed and progressively got worse. The cheating started and the affairs became unmanageable. I just wanted to take my kids and disappear. Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore and so I filed for a divorce, thinking it would end the pain.

But getting a divorce didn’t end the pain, so I started to party and began using meth. I no longer cared about anyone or anything. My kids went to stay with their dad, so I figured why stop now? I was self-medicating to try to get through each day. Then I started selling drugs and writing bad checks. I even got the cool lunch box that I had wanted when I was a little girl, but that didn’t stop the hurt.

Now, here I am in prison, begging to take any classes that might benefit me when I am released. I’m desperate to get right with God and my four kids, who deserve only the best. Still, I wonder about what my life might be like if I could have that one wish.

## HE KNOWS WHY

by S. Hea Groves-Lee

Please note that names were changed to protect the people involved in this true event.

The sunlight is glowing red from behind my eyelids, begging me to wake up. Giving in, I blink away the veil of sleep and feel the needles injecting doses of pain all over my body, an oil canvas of brilliant blues, purples, and black, still tender and sore, and I don’t know why.

Broken and awkward, I feel like a seventy-five year old woman who wobbles along on a cane, but I’m only twenty-four. Fresh cuts, scrapes, and scabs cover my hands, arms, hips, legs, and even my toes, and I don’t know why.

I do know that I was at the Def Leppard concert surrounded by friends and co-workers. The muddy grass squished beneath my toes, the cool summer air tickled my skin, smoke fumed in the air, and the guitars and drums pushed me to deafness as the taste of alcohol burned my judgment—I sailed to sleep that Sunday night. But now I am waking up to Thursday, and I don’t know why.

This isn’t my home. Why am I here? I need to go. Where’s my phone and keys? “Calm down, Baby Girl, calm down... I’ve been worried. I know you’re confused... please sit down and read this, ‘cause you need to know...”

### ARAPAHOE COUNTY SHERIFF’S DEPT. POLICE REPORT

*Re: S.M. Green: 24 yr old Female, 5’6”, 124 lbs., Asian, and D.S. Fury: 26 yr old Male, 6’2”, 250 lbs., Caucasian.*

*Date of Incident: 0720: 09/11/2007—0130: 09/12/2007.*

*INCIDENT: On or about Tuesday, September 11, 2007, at 0720, emergency dispatch received twelve calls from different parties regarding a domestic disturbance outside the Fury/Green residence. Callers informed 911 Dispatch that “a man was beating and throwing his girlfriend.” Dispatch sent police and ambulance to respond. First on the scene was Officer Swann. Fury was kneeling on the back of Green on the driveway in front of their home. Green’s mother was crying on the phone with dispatch. Witnesses were watching and screaming for Fury to stop. Green was rushed to Aurora Medical Emergency Room, barely conscious. Green suffered two broken toes on the right foot, a fractured left knee cap, and several lacerations to both hands, both elbows, both hips, and both knees and feet.*

The words blur from the flood of thoughts rushing to my mind. This isn’t true, I know he would never harm me. He loves me, I love him, we are engaged! There is a mistake, an error. What would we even argue about? Someone please explain, ‘cause I don’t know why.

“You were given a ‘Mickey’ at the concert on Sunday; he took you to Urgent care first thing on Monday morning, where they found large traces of GHB, the ‘date rape’ drug. Then something happened to you on Monday night, ‘cause on Tuesday morning you were rushed back to the hospital, you were barely alive, blood tests contradicted the ones from Urgent Care the day before and showed that along with traces of GHB, the equivalent of 40 doses of barbiturates and 40 doses of valium were found in your system. You were released back to him, but 30 minutes later you were in an ambulance heading for the domestic . . . you know the rest.”

I can try to remember, but I recover only snapshots of the holes in the fog. Where did Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday go? I remember Sunday, but now it’s Thursday. Someone who still says *I love you* did this to me. I know I should hate him, but I still love him; he hurt me and I still don’t know why, but really, *he knows why*.

## MI JEFÍTA

by Anita Cisneros

Her love shines brighter than an afternoon autumn day,  
Precious moments in her presence will tickle you in so many ways,  
She glows like a star, brighter than a rising sun,  
And wipes away all my hardships with just the tender look in her eyes.

My Mom is sweeter than the sweetest tooth,  
But compassionate describes her best,  
For she always put her two kids first, no matter how bad they get.  
And though she never lived a lifestyle like mine, she accepts who I am.  
She never stopped loving me, although she didn't understand,  
She sees in me the person I might be—  
She believes my dreams can become reality.

Her touch will shake your soul,  
Her love is so unconditional,  
I'm telling you, she's part of God's crew!  
With such a big Corazon  
She helps anyone but judges none.

A walk through her mente will explain it all.  
I know without a doubt, she is behind me whatever I face,  
No need to look back, she is riding it out all the way,  
She has never let me down.  
She knew who I was meant to be, even when I was lost.

More priceless than diamonds and gold,  
Her value is too great for cost,  
She's too kind to have any enemies  
And has a wise soul.  
She's so small, but her spirit is so big,  
Enough to walk with me on this journey for 28 years  
Always defending me!

I wish they made a bunch of little Marinas  
So that everyone could know this love.  
I put her on a pedestal for the whole wide world to see,  
So until I see you again mom,  
besitos is what I leave.

### Glossary

*Mi Jefita* = My Mom

*Corazon* = heart

*Mente* = mind

*Besitos* = kisses

## WHEREVER THOSE LITTLE BOYS ARE

by Amy Montoya

Lord, I have asked many things of you,  
but all of those requests didn't mean a thing  
compared to this prayer for the sons I love.

You know that I live for them  
with all of my being.

So, wherever those little boys are...

Let them wake up with a smile each day.

Let them feel loved and wanted  
By all of the people that come their way.

Let them be healthy and strong,  
And let them feel like they belong.  
Fill their foster parents' hearts with love.

Let them see my sons as I see them,  
Because they are all I've ever dreamt of.  
Please let them know that I'm still alive.

Wherever those little boys are...

Don't let them feel sad, hurt, or alone,

I'm begging you, Lord,

Just be with them, in that home.

Let them have lots of friends in school,  
But study hard, doing homework too.

Give them good teachers to help them learn.  
My days are filled with worry, pain, and regret,

I still have nightmares at night,

For I don't know where they are,

And to a mother that feels the worst.

I thought they were safe in my family's hands,

But they were taken by someone  
who decided my mother was not fit.

Wherever those little boys are...

I love you my sons, you belong with me.

I pray, we must be together again.

Wherever you are, My David,

I want you to know that you saved my life.

I had you so young, it was always you and me,  
Sometimes at night I think I still feel you.

Wherever you are, my Anthony,

I want you to know you're my superman, so happy and bright,

The day you were born you were already smiling.

I knew you were special right from the start.

Wherever David and Anthony are,

I'm sorry for any times that you cried,

Or were frightened, mamma and grandma not there.

I'm sorry I messed up and that I'm locked away.



I know it's not fair, but try to be strong  
And believe that God is by your side.  
One thing I've learned, is it's never the end,  
And I don't know how, I don't know when,  
But I have to believe we will meet up again,  
Wherever those little boys are.....

*Editor's note: Amy's children were removed from her mother's home because she did not qualify, in the legal sense, as a suitable foster home, meaning that her children were then placed in another temporary foster home. Under the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, "states must file a petition to terminate parental rights and concurrently, identify, recruit, process, and approve a qualified adoptive family on behalf of any child, regardless of age, that has been in foster care for 15 out of the most recent 22 months" (ASFA; Public Law 105-89). This law was intended to keep children from being housed long-term in foster care; however, with an average sentence of 18 months, incarcerated women often lose custody of their children if there are no other legally designated caregivers in their immediate family. In essence, like in Montoya's poem, when the state sends mothers to prison, it prosecutes their children as well.*

## TO EVE

by Lora Wilson

"We are cursed with a curse." When things go wrong, we are quick to blame.  
I've been thinking about your suffering and pain,  
And know that your burden would have been  
Too much for me to carry.  
You withstood the "woe is me" through Adam's plea,  
Yet late at night you cried when no one would see.  
I now feel empathy, Eve,  
For You, I would never want to be  
The first woman, the first example,  
The first decision maker you came to be.  
Perfect love, perfect man, perfect family, perfect plan;  
In the presence of our Creator, you could no longer stand.  
How could you have known that the path you'd take  
Would be considered so cruel and for eternity would seal all women's fate?  
We'll never live it down, never turn opinions around.  
The weaker vessel, how could that be?  
We bare the pain that men never see.  
We multi-task and juggle our lives only to become somebody's wife.  
We spend our days trying to make things perfect for those we love.  
So tell me, Eve, what was your plan?  
To make a better life for you and Adam, your man?  
If you had it to do over, what would you do?  
Would you follow the same plan?  
Would you have been satisfied?  
What would you do?  
Being in the land of good and plenty,  
Would that have been enough for you?

## DEMAND LIFE

by Keisha McNeese

Break Life  
Take Life  
Create Life  
The swoop of an abuser's hand coming toward her face  
Breaks life.  
The crack of gunshots on inner city streets  
Takes life.  
The sensual moan of lovers in the heat of passion  
Creates life.  
The mass solitude of faces working on manufactured landscapes  
Breaks life.  
The broken healthcare system and the obesity epidemic  
Takes life.  
The unity of the people, the cause, the needed revolution  
Creates life.  
The oppression of freedom, the stifling of our liberties  
Breaks life.  
The tobacco companies' cancerous promises, poisoning our lungs, tongues, throats  
Takes life.  
The striving for selflessness, embracing our struggles  
Creates life.  
Striking fear into the hearts of people, filling their souls with the need for more fear  
Breaks life.  
Being dupes into your own destruction, because you are blinded by false hopes  
Takes life.  
Making love with your cherished one  
Creates life.  
The manufactured landscapes assemble the lives of the masses,  
Who are forced to work in quiet solitude,  
Breaking life.  
Children dying from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome in the most  
Technologically-advanced country echoes the silent cry for help,  
In our closed eyes, closed ears, closed mouths society,  
Taking life.  
Promoting education, solidarity, and unity within the struggle for the right  
To be a healthy, prosperous human who is not stagnated by gender, class,  
Or social status is what we all have a responsibility to demand.  
Demand Life, and what you will have is the beginning of  
Creating life.

## I AM WHO I AM

by Anita Cisneros

Ain't life a trip? You're young but then before you know it,  
you're all grown up into what you mold yourself into.

I try to ask myself "would'of's, "could'of's, and "should'of's,  
*What could I have done to make things go this way or that?*

But regardless of those questions, I am who I am.

I can't go back, won't turn back,  
cause I'm on the battlefield living Mi Vida Loca of a warrior,  
with lots of bloodshed, cuts, bruises, and black eyes  
to prove who I am.

I got myself all tatted down with what I rep.

It seems like there ain't no turning back  
when it comes to the TOWN.

I've been on this ride since '96,  
In and out of juvi and county jail,  
but now I rest my head on a 12 piece in la pinta.

I guess partying till the wheels fall off  
led me to a life being run by people in blue.  
But it's so hard to let go, I'm 28 years old, and it's all I know.

Yet there's another part of me that nobody knows.

One that's so sad, tired of all the hurt I cause,  
especially with a mother who has worked so hard  
just to see that I get all I want.

She is new to all of this, and doesn't have  
a clue to this gangster lifestyle.

But she has such high hopes that I'll do a 180.  
If you could only see her ojos and all they hold inside.

Just the thought of it breaks me.

I say I care, yes, I really do care,  
So why haven't I made the changes?

Do I need to hit rock bottom?

How much longer?

I guess I'll never know  
until it's all said and done.

I am who I am.

### Glossary

*My Vida Loca* = my crazy life  
*12 Piece* = a twelve year sentence  
*La Pinta* = the prison  
*Ojos* = eyes

## ALONE

by Jasmine D. McClanahan

Sitting in a crowd of many  
Waiting to go to my cell  
So much laughter, so much noise  
Yet I'm all alone in my silent hell

Should I live or should I die?  
Does anyone even care why?  
What is the answer, die or fight?  
Where'd you go, my guiding light?

Somehow I misplaced you  
And now I'm in the dark  
Demons run rampant inside my mind  
Like kids rampaging in a park

Drugs, pills, a way out, give me something now!  
Welcome to my land of torment  
Introduce yourself  
Take a bow

I want you to feel my hurt  
deep, deep within  
The parasitic condemnation  
Crawling under my skin

I won't let it be over  
'Til you're in my sea of despair  
All 'cause society created a psycho bitch  
Who has no reason to care

Laugh, laugh, and joke all that you can  
Take what you can have for now  
Death will have your soul  
In the end

As my departure from life draws closer  
And it's time for me to leave  
I feel the calling of death  
Telling me not to breathe

So goodbye and so long  
Death has called me to its throne  
Never to endure your cruelty  
Never to be alone.

*Editor's Note:* Jasmine wrote this piece during a low period, but since then, and since discovering writing as a means of self-reflection, she has pulled out of her "land of tumult" and is now writing every day. And so a piece that some of us thought read like a suicide note stands now as a declaration of independence.

## MY HELL

*by Amy Montoya*

At night I can't sleep, holding back tears  
As I re-live memories of past years.  
A time not long ago full of crazy days and shameless nights,  
Twisted in the head, dedicating myself to sin, alcohol, and glass pipes.  
I was the queen of my circle, overpowering lost souls  
With the evil bliss I clutched in my fingertips,  
Owning those around me with the pipe I put to their lips.

There was always enough money, but the greed  
Locked a ghost of myself behind doors trying to silence the need  
I became another fallen angel, another victim of the game  
And lost all sanity, my grip on reality.  
My sons at my side, I was perfect in their eyes,  
They just wanted me to stay, but I chose to get high,  
Thinking money was what they needed,  
But what they needed was my time.

I slowly faded away until I left them behind  
In the care of strangers, how much damage have I done?  
All the pain and shock my little boys faced,  
Is it too much to overcome?

Now I pray into the night  
To please let me see their faces  
And just let them be alright.

Deuce, Tre, every day, you would never believe  
How deep my blood runs, the love for my family  
*Montoya Para Siempre*, we were taught by my dad  
That you rise for your blood through the good times and the bad.

During my incarceration the cancer took him instantly  
How am I supposed to cope? It all happened too suddenly.  
All my strength and love was lost.  
My dad was everything to me.

Now I lay and pray for sleep, because I meet him in my dreams  
The love I thought we had just slowly fell apart  
Losing my boys and my dad put this hole in my heart.

Now dazed and confused, with nothing left to lose  
I know Karma exist, for I have paid my dues.  
My days in this cell are full of pain and misery  
My nights even colder as I battle mentally.  
I lost EVERYTHING that was ever close to me  
And now I need you know is there any hope for me?

Fate?? Karma?? Luck??

I really can't decide

I'm calling out to God, but he doesn't answer me.

I lost my heart to the streets,

now I'm just an empty shell

Will you help me live again?

Or will you leave me in this hell?

## THE FIRST LAW

*by Cheniece Mason*

Life depends on me to shine, to bloom, and to glorify.  
I may not meet everyone's expectations or demands,  
But I make one hell of an effort.  
Still, in some cases, I must admit,  
I have allowed myself to fall into situations  
That I could not get back out of.

Back in 2006, telling the whole truth  
Would have created serious problems  
For me and others,  
So I deleted a few facts, altered reality.

But since then I have learned  
There is no such thing as a little lie,  
A good lie, or a necessary lie.

Now I know  
That I am held accountable  
For everything that flows from my mouth  
Because truth is the First Law.

## SMALL WORLD OF HOPE

*by Erika Baro*

The world seems to think that there is always a sad story  
behind every face. But there is a reason we are fucked up:  
unwanted by society because of the crime we committed,  
we all wear a label, our felonies define us,  
and so we are seen as a number, a statistic, a color, a horrible person  
—that kind of hate can make you crazy.

What people who have never been behind these walls fail to realize  
is that underneath our state-issued shield,  
we hold a small world of hope.

We all landed here because of a single moment  
that swallowed everything in our path:  
family, goals, dreams, all gone in a breath.  
Darkness caved in and we were lost  
to the "free" world, transforming us  
into something ugly, something less,  
something eventually forgotten.

All that we have left that is free,  
to remind us of our past lives,  
is when we melt into the never-ending ocean  
of clouds that smear and grow  
with our imagination.

We walk around holding a secret  
for we are afraid to be judged  
and so we hold onto that one moment  
that destroyed all we once were.

And so the world might be right,  
there may be a sad story behind every face,  
perhaps even the story that made us snap  
and end up here, imprisoned, clinging  
to a small world of hope.

## NOWHERE HOLY

*by Erika Baro*

I stumble around blinded by a present  
that seems to wipe away the past.  
But when I close my eyes I return  
to when I was thirteen years old:  
A candle lights my darkness, a shadow sits behind me,  
A lighter heats the foil I hold, smoke rises,  
I inhale, my heart races, trying to break free from my chest,  
The blood rushes through my veins  
As my skin loses its color,  
My clothes suddenly feel too big for me now.

Everyone around me is strange:

My Mom constantly cries,  
My Dad screams in rage,

And so I ran away.

I fled to the middle of nowhere holy, tumbling through  
The abandoned streets of the Mile High City,  
Losing bits of my soul along the way.

I wanted to grow up not having to listen to anyone,  
And I did, but they all grew tired of my same old shit,  
And so they left me, alone, stupid, scared.

It's been years since that Hell,  
And my Mom still cries, praying for me every day.  
My Dad's still angry, and still keeps away.  
My heart still wants to rip out of my chest,  
My tears still want to fall, but don't know how.

The candle no longer lights my darkness, nor the foil.  
I still sit here and wait for something that has no name.

I ran away, but didn't know how to go back, didn't know  
How to fix the damaged childhood that has forever  
Left me wandering through nowhere holy.

## I NEED HELP

*by Brittany King*

Is there anyone who can help someone like me?  
I'm the one who stands in the background  
trying to go unnoticed, feeling worthless and unwanted.  
I'm the one who always makes the wrong choices,  
Like forgetting how my actions hurt my husband and our family—  
I need help.

I'm the one who lets people get close, only to push them away  
Because I'm scared of getting hurt or just feel like being a bitch that day.  
I've done this to my parents, my friends, my husband  
and even to my best and only friend inside these walls—  
I need help.

I'm the pothead ditching school  
to go drive around the desert.  
I'm the tweeker who got 15 credits to graduate on time  
by going to an alternative school and  
doing all the work when I was spun out.  
I'm the alcoholic who can party on straight Vodka, Jack, and Jose,  
I'm the Meth dealer who supplied Grand Junction  
with shards so good that the Mesa County Sherrifs cut it up  
and had it back on the streets within 5 days  
of my husband and me being busted—  
I need help.

I'm the one who would rather go to prison than roll on my husband,  
But when he doesn't write, I find a pen pal who will.  
I'm the one who was selfish enough to have even the passing thought  
of leaving my husband and best friend for a guy I've never met in person.  
What the fuck was I thinking?—  
I need help.

I'm the one who has forgotten how to cry, so I cut.  
I'm the schizophrenic who sits by herself in her cell  
but is never really alone.  
I'm the lonely young wife dying  
to be at home with her husband—  
I need help.

## I JUMPED, BUT DID NOT FALL

by Ethel White

Blessings are what the lord has given me,  
For it is a miracle that I am still alive.

Yes, when I look into the mirror, all I see is forgiven.  
Now forgiveness takes time, especially when  
you are trying to forgive yourself,  
But the bible says that when you learn to forgive yourself,  
you will be forgiven, and you will forgive the sins of others.  
And so I have come to learn that although I jumped,  
I did not fall.

Like Jesus, we fall down, but we get up,  
A saint is just a sinner who falls down  
But does not give up.

I had sunk so low back in December, 2003,  
That I jumped out of a window 50 feet high  
and 'though I landed on both my feet, like a cat,  
I crushed every bone in my body,  
both legs, both arms, everything.

They said I would never walk again,  
But here I am today, standing tall and boldly  
Offering testimony that all things are possible  
through Christ Jesus our Lord.

I learned from the bible that you can step into a curse  
Just as you can step into a blessing—  
I chose to step into my blessing.  
And so I forgive everyone  
and in return ask for your forgiveness.

The doctor said I would be in a wheelchair for life,  
But today, six years later,  
Thanks being to Jesus, my strength,  
and Dr. Smith at Denver Health and Hospital,  
I am still climbing.

The bible says we all struggle through many storms  
but you must press on, praise God,  
and keep your head high,  
for like me you too may Jump  
but not Fall.

## TORN

by Jasmine D. McClanahan

When I met you, my beautiful Nicole, I instantly longed to get to know you as the  
clouds know the sky, to know your heart like the eye knows the storm, to know your  
soul like a mother knows her child. You captivated me with your beauty.

*I can no longer love her beauty for it is only skin-deep.*

I loved the flow of your words. I loved our differences, and oh how many  
differences there were When I looked at you, I felt fascinated, you became my focus.

*I can no longer love her kindness for she withholds it from me.*

I felt a bond in our first kiss, when I was aware of every little movement of your  
mouth with mine.

*I can no longer love her kisses for they are given to someone else.*

With that first kiss, I lost my sanity. When we held hands, my heart burst with happiness.

*I can no longer love her touch for contact is now forbidden.*

We were thrown into an environment where our beautiful love would turn ugly.  
We had too little time together, and the time we did have was spent fighting—  
we became so cruel to each other.

*I can no longer love the sound of her voice for now it is always angry.*

It did not take long for our fights to become too much, yet inside I never believed  
we were finished. Yet we parted for good on April 17th after causing irreparable damage.  
I missed you immediately; you ran to the arms of another woman.  
I LOST MYSELF IN LOSING YOU.

I am now forced to watch you and her daily. I am forced to watch you give all of yourself,  
all that was once mine, to this new woman.

*I can no longer love the feel of her skin under my fingertips  
for I am no longer the one touching her.*

*I cannot love our quiet times for they are now shared with someone else.*

We can barely talk now, and when we do, you play games. I cannot help but hold  
onto the idea that we will reunite one day, yet my hopes and wishes always prove to  
be in vain. But as I said, when I kissed you, I lost my sanity, and in the insane way  
that I long to be with you I just have not been able to let you go, but now...

*I can no longer love her and so will finally let her go.*

## GUEST AUTHORS FROM ARIZONA

The three poems below were written by women enrolled in a creative writing and communication class held at the Federal Prison Camp (FPC) in Phoenix, Arizona. This class is taught by Dr. Kristin Bervig Valentine, Professor Emerita of Communication and Women's Studies at Arizona State University. Strong support for enhanced educational opportunities for the women incarcerated at this facility has been demonstrated by Associate Warden Steven Southall, Supervisor of Education Karrie Martin, and Education Director Michael Janke. The college program in general, and the creative writing and communication class in particular, has also benefitted from the work of volunteers from Arizona State University and from Ms. Heidi Jaeger and Dr. Jo Jorgensen at Rio Salado College in Phoenix.

### LOVE IS...

*by Veronica Chávez*

The look on children's faces when they see their mother come home;  
The smile on a child's face when a mother calls on the telephone;  
The sense of security a father offers a child when in his arms;  
The brightness in my mother's eyes when she comes to visit;  
Telling your children that you support them in any decision  
they make in life;  
Knowing that no matter what mistakes you make,  
God is there unconditionally.

### FAST HORSE

*by Dharma McRyhe*

*Inspired by "Fast Horse," a painting by Rocky Hawkings*

Go fast, horse, carry me swift.  
Do not tarry, slow, or drift.  
Go fast, horse, trouble comes quick.  
We must alert our people and remove them from danger,  
through the streams of conquerors,  
over the mountains of warriors.  
Go fast, horse, carry me swift.  
The army of ignorance brings the war of self-pity.  
Go fast, horse. Do not tarry, slow, or drift.  
Go fast, horse, carry me swift.  
Do not tarry, slow, or drift.

## THE MESQUITE TREE

*by Elizabeth Ortega*

My favorite place is near the mesquite tree that grows in the desert, close to my home. I can smell the leaves of life in the breeze, like a mist of perfume, delicate, as I pick a stem of leaves.

As I walk in the desert, I hail the green mesquite tree standing strong, waving its branches in greeting, as if an old friend came by to visit.

The leaves are green with a mixture of yellow, and show the veins that give life—the tree has grown with love, passion, and peace.

Birds sit on its branches and sing as they mate and build their homes, jubilant in nature. The clouds cover the sun and offer shade as all kinds of insects celebrate their company and the beauty of the tree.

Powerful words give way to a whisper in a breath of air that blows away with the wind, lifted up in the sky—the whisper of prayers flies to the kingdom of heaven, and kind words are whispered back to me.

Just like the freshness of blossoming roses, the words blow back down upon the wind and caress my body with many blessings.

*Were you aware that*  
*1 out of 3*

*American women  
are raped in their lifetimes?*

**RAISN**

Rape Awareness & Information Support Network

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