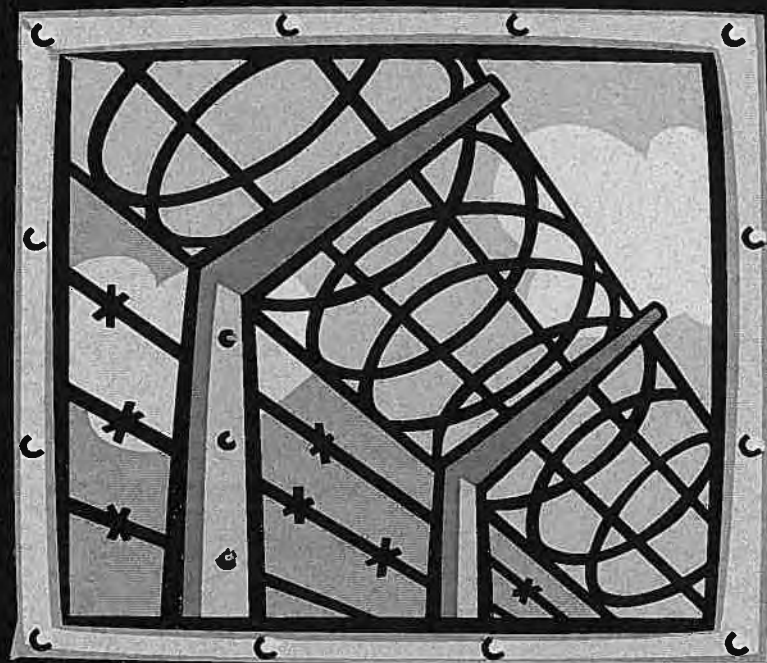


Captured Words/ Free Thoughts

Volume 5 • Spring 2008



Poems from the Champaign County Jail
Poetry Workshop, with guest writers
from around the nation

Openings & Thanks

During the Winter and Spring of 2008, a group of us gathered in the Champaign County Jail in Illinois each Tuesday to read, write, and edit poems. 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.

Imprisoned Workshop Participants

Toney Bonez, Derrick Cox, Daniel Fuentes, Kenneth S. Kelly, Calvin Rowan, Raheem Shakur, Michael Terry, James Wade, Timothy Wilbourn & Otto.

Guest Writers

Johnny E. Crowder, from Kansas; Patrice Daniels, from Illinois; and Anthony Leahey and Marvin Mays, both from New Jersey.

University of Illinois Student Participants

Justin Lensing, Jennifer Mussman, Sejal Patel, and Ashley Reibel, who hopped to the workshop on one leg when her crutches were not allowed into the facility.

Special thanks to . . .

Nancy Griffin, the Jail's coordinator of programs, who makes our work possible; to Lisa Keränen at the University of Colorado, for her desktop publishing wonders; Becky Kaiser, whose poem was written as part of "Art for Life: Words and Music Against the Death Penalty," an event she organized with Nadia Afinah to help give voice to the poets included here; and everyone in Speech Communication 396 for another semester's worth of deep thinking, honest writing, and world-improving community service.

—Stephen John Hartnett, April 25, 2008

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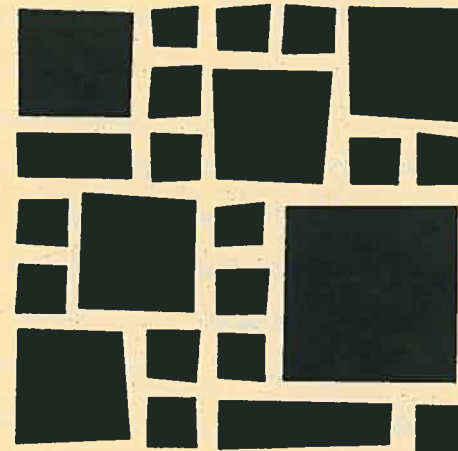
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Ivan, Oh Ivan!

By Raheem Shakur

In conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities' "Big Read" project, we read Leo Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich and then wrote poems in response; this is one of those poems written to honor Tolstoy. Thanks to Lynda Park of the University of Illinois for including us in the "Big Read."

Ivan lived a perfect life
With a big house, two kids, and a socialite wife;
He had a great job in the judicial system
Casually deciding others' fate;
Well mannered and always punctual
Ol' Ivan was never late.

He had a blueprint for living, yes a perfect plan,
But then the pain started and Ivan became a scared man.
Neither money nor family nor work seemed to help,
So he questioned everything in his life
But only at that moment, yes . . .
Right before death.

Anger

by Kenneth S. Kelly

Anger
It's a demon that haunts
My heart and soul

Anger
I would love to tie it up
And pour mercy all over it
Then when it's dried
Peel it like a banana

Anger
You mother fuckin' son-of-bitch
You cost me countless jobs
And relationships all because
You pushed my buttons

But when I see myself
In the mirror I confront
The one person who's at fault
For getting angry

So, Sean, please calm down

A Warning

by Calvin Rowan

Ahhhh fuck

What the hell

That fire won't go out

I'm burning

I'm trapped

Let me out

Set me off and you'll see

How much of a beast I can be

On the Death Penalty

by Derrick Cox

Death before dishonor

Sometimes I wonder

why the institution is so judgmental

to take the lives of others

We're taught to celebrate

the home of the brave

and to recite the Pledge of Allegiance

but that's just a charade

robbing us of our dignity

My mind gets hazy

thinking about this Death Penalty

and those who incarcerate us

demean us

kill us

send us straight to hell

Those who want to see me die

get away with murder

and their task forces are ruthless

nitpicking, locking us up for tickets

they'll take your life

just 'cause you were

minding your own business

So why are you sitting in jail

praying for forgiveness

on death row

with no family members to hold you

no loved ones near?

All I know is

every life is precious

no matter its circumstances

Handle with Care

by Derrick Cox

Manipulation, procrastination, incarceration. . .

If it wasn't for my Patience

I'd probably blame everything

On discrimination, racism, and republicans

With no hope to cling to

I blame others for my downfall

But then I get down on my knees

And pray for forgiveness

For inflicting this prejudice

On those who have harmed me

I'm sorry, truly sorry

For being judgmental

If only I had a clue about what to do?

If only I knew why I'm so angry?

Maybe for my own reasons

Maybe 'cause I fall short

When I hope to succeed

When I hope to fly

But no matter how hard I try

There are few opportunities for convicted felons

It seems like law enforcement's a weapon

Used to lock us up in a great depression

And so I sit alone

Waiting on a miracle

I Am. . .

by Michael Terry

[AKA Reverend Michael, who was thrown in the hole

and thus deprived of the joy of writing and reading

his poems with us. . .]

Who am I? you ask me—

From the spiritual aspect

I am Christ incarnate

I am *agape* Love

I am patience

I am tolerance

I am understanding

I am wisdom

I am acceptance

I am the solution to every problem

And the answer to every question

I am universal

I am immortal

I am that I am

From the physical aspect

I am strong

I am tall

I am dark bronze

I am arrogant

I am selfish

I am callous

I am uncaring

I am immature

I am a slave

And when I look around the room

Staring deeply into the eye's of all

I realize that I am you

Directions

by Johnny E. Crowder

[*a correspondent from Kansas*]

2 live life is 2 hear the small voice

of direction within you

it is there 2 guide you

through the many stages of life's trials

while the evil one smiles,

trying 2 persuade you 2 follow him

you must give each new day a hug

and whisper *I love you*

for the next day is not promised

listen for the voice of righteousness

echoing off in the distance

while the shadow of evil tiptoes behind you

he who hides will call 2 you

but you must move away

you can never escape his reach

he is always close

yet if a stranger speaks

greet him with a prayer

for evil will dare not reply

Execute the Idea!

By Daniel Fuentes

He kills, she kills, they kill...

Who saw the blood, the agony, the tears?

Who saw the fear, the rage, the excitement?

Who saw what they saw?

He's dead, she's dead, they're dead.

What did they see?

What did they do?

Self-defense, accident, cold-blooded, fried brains, drunken soul?

Who handles the evidence? Who investigates?

A family friend, the D-student, the crony with benefits?

Is he white, black, rich, poor, having a good day, bad day?

So many different pieces need to be assembled,

You're better off putting Humpty Dumpty back together again!

The only thing that needs the death penalty is the system itself.

Fuck cleaning up a killing with another killing.

Clean up the justice system first,

Before the next innocent person gets executed.

Death's Release

By Patrice Daniels

*[a tireless correspondent who writes from
the Pontiac Correctional Center in Illinois]*

Imprisoned by the memories

The sense of loss

Imprisoned by the thoughts

Running through my mind

Why me?

What's next?

How long?

I share no serenity, no peace

This pain will never cease

Until I find death's release

I wish I could turn back time

& change my life

I'd go back to that hot June night

To make things right

But there's blood on my hands

And there is no making sense

Of that night's violence

There will be no freedom for me

No matter how long

No matter how hard

I fight to become a better man
It's still there yelling at me
You killer!

And so there will be no peace
Without death's release
That's my just deserts
To be haunted forever

If I Had to Do It Over

by Tony Bonez

If I had to do it over,
I probably wouldn't have shouldered
This responsibility 'till I got a little older.
Then, my lyrics would be bolder and colder and really vicious,
Even though some of the words I be spittin' are fictitious.

If I had three wishes
Everybody would welcome me back with hugs and kisses,
I'd be #1 in the district.

And second, I wish I could play Tekken with my homeboy
Right in between the microphone checkin'.
I take life as a lesson, because I know that I'm destined

To spit out the pain of the adolescent's aggression,
Instead of me going out usin' some drugs or a weapon.
I'm just here to rap, I try to send a positive message,
At the same time, I try to live my life in the moment,
'Cause it might be taken away
If God don't think that you want it.

And my third wish,
I wanna get you people to dance.
I want you bobbin' your heads
while you be clappin' your hands.

Letter from Home

by Tony Bonez

The other day, I got a letter from home
Everybody is so proud of me,
and everybody's lovin' my poems.
It seems everywhere that I go they be singin' along,
But I miss my girl so every day I talk on the phone.
I'm like, "hey how you doin' what interests you pursuin'?"
I heard you been taken Spanish I heard you really fluent,
So maybe when I get back, you can teach me a thing or two
about rappin' in Spanish and mix it with English boo."
I'd probably say, *Darme un beso por favor*

my mamacita muy bonita and mi amor.

I seen your face before. Every time I reminisce
When we met back in Illinois on the playground in '96.
Right by the monkey bars straight to the sandbox.
You watch me and my homeboys play baseball on the sandlot.
Now, look at the years. The time just flew,
But I promise baby I will make it up to you..

Mend the Pain

by Ashley Reibel

A stormy surge of rain clouds
Hangs over your lowered head
You look at the ground hoping no one will see
The sharpened knife speared through your heart

You think your spilled blood
Will be washed away
By the trickle of tears
But we see it plain as day
A wound patched up on the outside
Is still a wound in disguise

You look to other things and people

To take the brunt of the blame
Hoping the anger will be set aside with the pain
Little distractions ease your mind
But then a familiar song plays, a smell rises
And you feel it all over again

Love so cruel to an already tortured soul
Never as forgiving as we were told
Love so blind, so hurtful, yet so true,
Never gave a guarantee that it'd be true to you

A pure thing in all its virtue
Love has no bounds
From a new born baby, to a little pup
To the person of your dreams
Love knows not what it does
But it does it all the same

They say it takes one love to break a heart
And another to take it away
Let heartbreak teach a lesson
Let love mend your pain

Maybe Tomorrow

by Justin Lensing

Ugh . . . Ahh! this stupid fuckin' . . . errahhl!

Why do they put this stupid sticky shit

all over everything?

And why do people not know how to drive?

And could we please get some damn drinks already?

It's steady bullshit with a light twist of fate

Today's the day I'll shoot my fuckin' boss

If he tells me to take out one more piece of trash

Yeah, I know a thing or two about anger

I know it's a gas that fuels hate

A spooky change of mood

Shooting through the roof

Only two things separate me from a monster

A beast with shiny teeth and 6 inch claws

Tearing through the walls of patience

Clean sweeping the room leaving it lean

Of any and all lazy fat headed chumps

And greedy, two-bit, ass-scratching bureaucrats

And then who'll have the last laugh?

Who then will laugh last

When I am broken

When I am diminished

To an animal instead of a man

And rise as muscle and brawn

With no reason or wit left to stand on

I have lost

I have given in to the rusted tin painted gold

While straying from the real prize

And we all have

Every time we submit our control to frustration

Every time we commit ourselves to revenge

Every time we lust towards damnation

Our world becomes a pool of blood

Maybe tomorrow

Maybe in a day we'll find a path towards a revival

Maybe the bible isn't the answer but maybe it's better than its rival

And I've seen too much of this evil to just turn my head

Maybe tomorrow I'll awake to the sun shining at a different angle

Wherein this world won't look so mangled

We're tattered

Busted and broken are the things we carry on our backs

And the track marks can't be hidden

For the ink in our veins has written

A story of shattered dreams

A gleam in the eye of an idealist

Is a vision of what this world could be

What this world ceases to be
We're anything but happy
If anything we're sadly representing sadness
This madness has trapped us and we're blind to our own doings
Encased in a box with our mistakes tucked away from exposure
But time is a bitch and time will tell
She'll puncture holes in our delusions
And as our beams of darkness shoot through the atmosphere
Blackening the painted sky
We will have revealed the masked world we live in
and what will emerge are stories

The story of a dying woman giving birth to a bastard child
The story of a weary old man who's legs were taken by disease
The story of a 30 year old child who has never opened a book
The story of an 8 year old with 8 good fingers
working 8 hours a day
But he'd need to work 8 days a week
to make enough to survive
While we lie to ourselves about our misfortune
Our energy wasted on sticky shit and sissy fits
And the cocky weekend bar bitch

That's energy better spent doing instead of worrying
Trying instead of giving in
Giving up pretense and accepting life
For what she throws at you

Two things separate me from a monster
The patience to overcome what I cannot change
And my commitment to the beauty in moments

Grudges

by Justin Lensing

I'm 6 six years old and I got a grudge against the world
'cause the young wanna be old and the old wanna be young
but growing cold in the sun is as likely as getting what we want
so we hold grudges against the world

I don't wanna play on the swings anymore 'cause that's for 5 year olds
and I once was 5 years old but I told you I'm six now
and how come no one listens to me?

I sometimes tell people I'm 7 'cause that's one year closer to 21
and I don't see what the big deal is with being 30
I mean it's like a dream of mine to be like 39
so I can climb the corporate ladder and make all those other kids'

dreams shatter for wasting my time
with poetic rhymes and interpretive mimes
and all the other creative crimes
and I just wanna skip being 8 and get straight to the good stuff
and I wanna run to the finish line and pass all this young stuff
and give me some new stuff

and some career stuff
and I'm sick of being 9 stuff
and some responsibility stuff
and stop telling me what to do
and stop feeding me this bullshit
and stop holding me back

If it weren't for time's constraints, I'd jump over 10 and land again
on 11 or 12 and cruise past the pre-teens and on to the big teens
leaving me 3 to 5 until I'm 21 and 22's around the block
but 23 is comin' up quick and man I'm already 24?
Well what happened to 25?

It just flew by and I'm out here on a limb
and I'm wonderin' what happened to all the young stuff
and I want some kid stuff
some I wish I was 9 stuff
some more time stuff

But I floated that boat long ago
and I'm rowing up stream trying to get it back
I'm scared
I'm afraid of losing another second to the wind
and not having that last hoorah
I'm scared of taking a breath
only to find it's already been taken
I'm scared of growing up
and losing what it means to be alive.

Freedom In Question

by Jennifer Mussman

Freedom is a word thrown around like a baseball
And judged like an umpire making a call
To every American each their own
I am learning the meaning of Freedom is unknown
Derrick feels it is a choice of independence
The same independence he awaits with patience
Sean studies a world of uncertainty
But states it with such clarity
Raheem wants clarification on the Constitution
He'd be out if he had better representation
These men aren't Free in the aspect of their American rights
If they were they would be with their children in the daylight

We take for granted the freedom we are given
It can be taken away and you're free voice is deafened
Whatever freedom you had before entering the bland walls
Of a prison are taken away in a rapid downfall
The first amendment is stripped from your existence
No matter your persistence to obtain your rights
Between the hours of 12 and 6 you're denied Freedom of Speech
Even if you make but a slight screech
You'll be thrown into seg for many weeks
Without mental strength these men's insanity starts to peak
They own you, you stand no chance, no mater how hard you fight
You are denied freedom and all of your rights!

I know the US as the
Land of the Free, Home of the Brave
Prisoners know the US as the
Land of the Theives, home of the Slaves.
They are Thieves, but thieves that got caught.
We look down on them because that's what we were taught
Many of these men made a simple mistake
They will never experience freedom again, they'll never be cut a break
Freedom to them is demolished
For the rest of their life they will be punished until the grave
Never to be a Free American but be a Free American's Slave!

Poems from the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, NJ

[Our friend Kal Wagenheim collected these poems, and can be reached at kalwagenheim@cs.com.]

Gotta Be Careful Where Ya Plant Ya Feet

by Marvin Mays

All tears ain't weeps, all closed eyes ain't sleep,
So ya gotta be careful where ya plant ya feet.

Ya homeboy was gleamin', riding low and leaning,
Getting' crazy money and his hustle was screaming.

*Jump in gee, I'm a'gonna teach you how to be
A real smooth operator. just like me.*

Hit you off with a package, showed ya how to move,
Ya started clocking crack, not taking ya butt to school.

He was ya tutor, mentor, ya first homeboy,
the one ya thought was all that and more.

Then the bust came down and he wasn't around,
ya screamed for his help, but he couldn't be found.

Now ya feel like hell, cause he won't go ya bail,
word's on the street that he's got ya girl.

Now ya days are dull, at night ya can't sleep,
ya gotta be careful where ya plant ya feet.

The History of a Misunderstanding

by Anthony Leahey

Don't call me nigga, whitey
Don't call me whitey, nigga

Oh no, this cracker must have a death wish
A death wish, yeah, I got a death wish

I wish for the death of

Standards and traditions

Fads and egos

Elitist evils and defeatist peoples

I wish for the death of weak minds

Easily persuaded by propaganda

And crazy, cultish concepts

Concepts that cause you to look at me

But when you look at me

You don't see me

No, you see a 17th century English colonist

Or an ignorant hoop dreamin' drug dealin' rapper

Or an interloper on an innertube

But that is not me.

If you were to look at me

I mean *really look at me*

You would see that we are joined at the hip

As we struggle and fight

Suffering the same plight

We fight the same so-called democracy

I mean a moneyocracy, or is it an oilocracy?

Either way we toil in mockery

In hate of them, I'm mocking you

In hate of them, you're mocking me

Race traitors and culture stealers

Both sides watching me, both sides watching you

But that's what mental blocks will do

They cause us to fall prey to subtle deceptions

And glamorous illusions by planting

Poisonous seeds corrupting our intellect

And we have pride, oh yeah, so much

Pride of self, or pride of our bloodline

Some idiots even have pride of their thug mind

That's why pride, as good as it sounds

Left unchecked will take you out of bounds

Everyone is susceptible to this madness

Especially the powers that be

Running in their elitist circles

Looking down on me

Looking down on you

Looking down on the masses from

Thrones of disdain and prejudice

Yet we look to each other to vent our hate of them

We are all sheep running to the same slaughter

Faceless drones used to facilitate the cause of lies

I said *faceless drones used to facilitate the cause of lies*

Spiritually dead, the cause of our own demise

Yes, our folly is the perpetual regeneration of mis-education

From generation

To generation

To generation

To generation

To generation

For the Cause of Lies

by Anthony Leahey

Let us march my friends in arms!
Take hold of your weapons and prepare to fight!
Some will live and walk unharmed,
But most of you will die tonight.
Yes, your blood will stain sandy ground;
However, fear not, it is all for good reasons.
They need what flows beneath the ground
To fulfill their reign of treason.
And all of these things I've said to you
I'm sure you have known all along.
Yet their lies have made a monster of you
So you take more lives in happy song.
Now let us march on!
Let not my words keep us more.
For I am ready to kill,
In the name of our capitalist whore.

Recipe for Insanity

by Sejal Patel

Locked up tight
Stripped of your rights
Subjected to a doom
No one could foretell

A few days
A few months
A few years
Or even mere hours
That's all it takes to fall
Victim to its bully powers

Suffocating
Challenging
Beating you down
Even the mentally strong
Have only half a fighting chance

Demeaned to a point no one should endure
Yet forced to swallow back words
Or face cruel and inhumane torture

Two weeks in the hole is a recipe for insanity

Speak out against the system
And your only glimpse of the free world
Is nothing but a faint memory

Even if you make it out
You'll never be the same
Because

 This jail

 This box

 This hell

Will suck the life
Out of even the strongest soul

Compassion

by Becky Kaiser

Father Tom once said
You be the minister of charity
You be the living proof
That somebody cares

 that their life hurts
 that it's messed up
 that it needs help

You be the one

 who consoles those who need
 to believe that things will change

You be the one

 who speaks for justice
 when someone is not rendered their due

You be the one
That's how you show the face of God to others

.....

I've never met anyone facing execution
with a date on the calendar
a time on the clock
a cause of death
already planned
counting down the days
enduring the slow disintegration of the spirit
culminating in the merciless injection
of final revenge

Their breath of life stolen

But I have known people
For whom Death lurks near
His faint whisper filling the air
Sometimes suffocating
Sometimes pacifying
But knowing that death is not
In the hands of another human being
Somehow makes it seem a little less cruel

I've been lucky
Women behind bars are
 Raped
 Beaten
 Abused
 Degraded

No longer able to watch a guy lift his hand
Without cowering in fear
That it might be used to punish them
For the crime of falling in love
With the wrong kind of man

I've never been assaulted
Never been a victim of sexual violence
But I know what it's like
 to be a toy
 to be desired only for my flesh
 to be assaulted by masculine eyes
 that linger on the curves of my body
 without seeing any value within

.....

But still, I've been lucky
My father works too many hours
My mother is always busy with this and that
But I didn't have to grow up
With my sole parental guidance
Coming from a television screen

Sometimes I wish that they
Could be pulled away from their corporate worlds
Could give me the same attention
As when I was a child

But at least they are here
I can touch them
And hug them
Steel bars don't prevent them
From being my parents

I've been incredibly lucky.

Blood coursing through veins
Rising and falling chests
Breaths
In
Out
Whether society has deemed us worthy or not
We all have desires
And fears
We have all sinned
And we've all acted out of love

So if we won't be the ones
To spread the arms of compassion
Then how do we expect to see God?

For more information . . .

If you would like to join the movement for a sane criminal justice system, then please contact:

THE SENTENCING PROJECT: www.sentencingproject.org

CRITICAL RESISTANCE: www.criticalresistance.org

CHAMPAIGN URBANA BOOKS-2-PRISONERS: www.books2prisoners.org

THE PRISON ACTIVIST RESOURCE CENTER www.prisonactivist.org

THE JOHN HOWARD ASSOCIATION: www.john-howard.org



This is a quarterly publication, made possible by the love and sweat of our volunteers and the hard work of imprisoned men, writers who have sought empowerment in the strength of *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*.



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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