

Captured Words/Free Thoughts

Volume 17 Winter 2021



QUARANTINE EDITION

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CAPTURED WORDS/FREE THOUGHTS

Volume 17, Winter 2021

—Writing and Art from America's Prisons—

Captured Words/Free Thoughts offers testimony from America's prisons and prison-impacted communities. This issue includes poems, stories, letters, essays, and art made by men and women incarcerated in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, New Jersey, Utah, Texas, and Wisconsin. To expand the scope of our project, we also include works made by folks on the free side of the prison walls whose lives have been impacted by crime, violence, and the prison industrial-complex.

Volume 17 was compiled and edited by Benjamin Boyce, Meghan Cosgrove, Stephen J. Hartnett, and Vincent Russell. Layout, design, and this volume's gorgeous photography were all handled by Andrei Howell.

MISSION STATEMENT

We believe reducing crime and reclaiming our neighborhoods depends in part on enabling a generation of abandoned Americans to experience different modes of citizenship, self-reflection, and personal expression. Captured Words/Free Thoughts therefore aspires to empower its contributors, to enlighten its readers, and to shift societal perception so that prisoners are viewed as talented, valuable members of society, not persons to be feared. We believe in the humanity, creativity, and indomitable spirit of each and every one of our collaborators, meaning our magazine is a celebration of the power of turning tragedy into art, of using our communication skills to work collectively for social justice.

THANKS

- Thanks to the CU Denver Department of Communication Chair, Dr. Lisa Keränen, for her support for this project.
- Thanks to Dr. Eleanor Novek at Monmouth University (New Jersey) for her continuous support of the magazine and for sharing her students' work with us.
- Thanks to Dr. Kamran Afary at California State University, Los Angeles, for his work inside California prisons and for sharing his students' work with us.
- Thanks to the Colorado Department of Corrections (DOC) for supporting our project, with special thanks to everyone at Faith and Citizen Programs, especially the Program Coordinator, Kerri Delarosa. Thanks to Danyel Fox, who is always so helpful in processing our volunteer applications.
- At the Colorado Correctional Center (CCC), thanks to Officers Michael Albritton and Misha Showalter for welcoming our teams into the facility.

- At the Denver Women’s Correctional Facility (DWCF), thanks to Officer Jason Smith for his support.
- Thanks to the Colorado Division of Youth Services for supporting our Democratic Communication Workshops in the Gilliam Youth Services Center, where we send thanks to Officer Lindsey Miller for her good work.
- Prior to COVID-19 shutting us down in March, 2020, the Democratic Communication Workshops hosted at the facilities mentioned above were staffed by Ashley Anaya, Sarah Burlin, Jeffrey J. Franklin, Rob Hatcher, Emily Loker, Natalie McAnulla, Anna McCaffrey, Katy Parr, Vincent Russell, and Andi W. D. Savage.
- Special thanks to the CU Denver Department of Communication’s awesome Program Assistant, Michelle Médal, for all of her expert support on this and so many other projects.
- Because our programming inside prisons, jails, and youth facilities was postponed due to COVID-19, this issue was assembled, in part, by relying upon submissions shared by friends, including especially the Justice Arts Coalition, where we send our thanks and solidarity to Wendy Jason, Joslyn Lapinski, and their team.
- For generous financial assistance, thanks to the Max and Anna Levinson Foundation (<https://www.levinsonfoundation.org>), where they bring a joyous energy to working for social justice.

CONTRIBUTORS & SUBSCRIBERS

If you would like to contribute work to forthcoming issues of this magazine, please send your poems, stories, testimonials, or art to our Correspondence Editor, Benjamin Boyce, c/o the Department of Communication, CU Denver, 1201 Larimer St., Denver, CO 80204. If you want to email questions or comments, please write to our Founding Editor, Stephen J. Hartnett, at stephen.hartnett@ucdenver.edu.

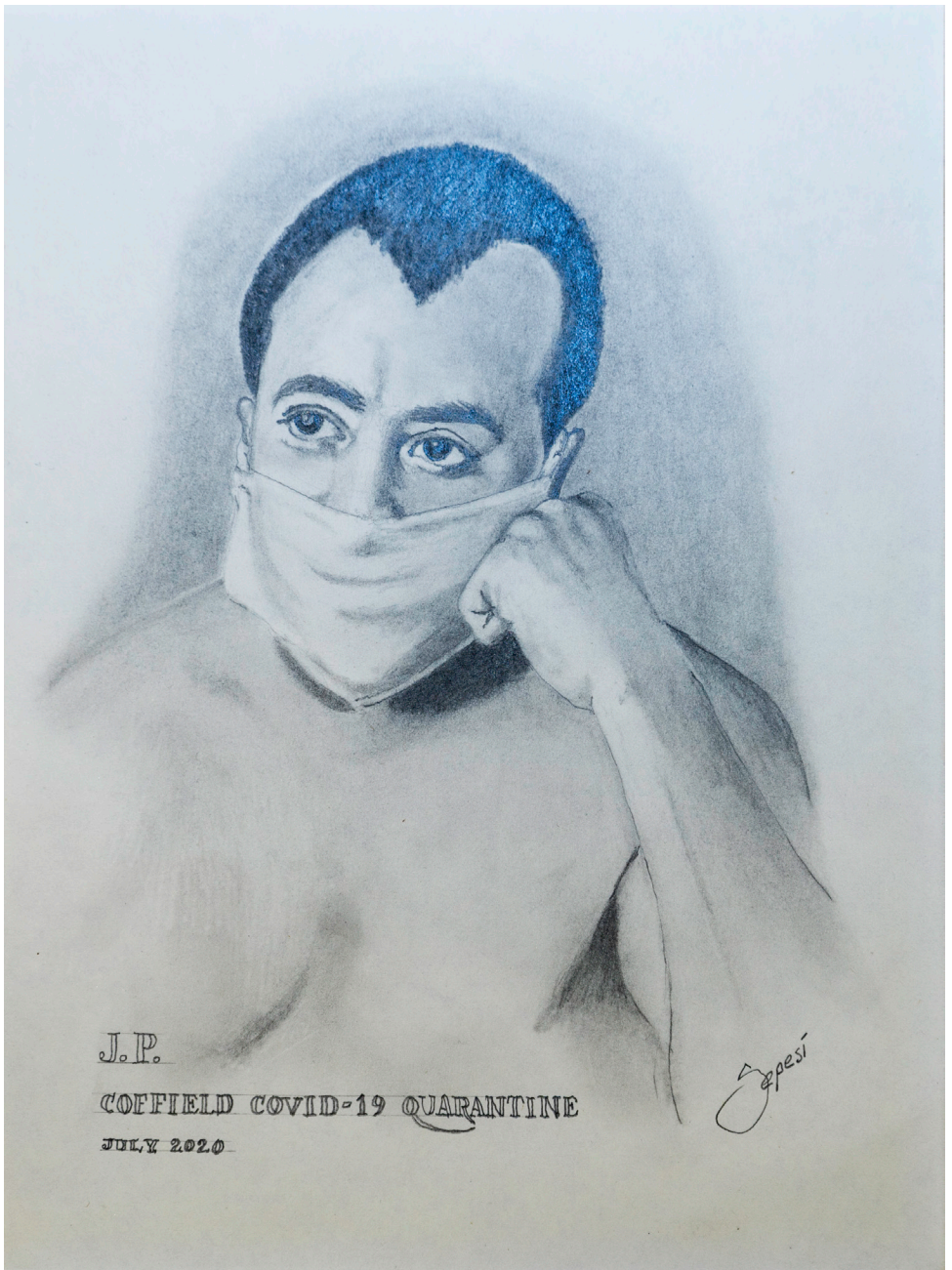
BACK ISSUES & ACCESS

For those of you who would like to use Captured Words/Free Thoughts in your classes or for other purposes, you can access volumes 7 through 17 by logging on to the Academia.edu webpage of Stephen Hartnett (<http://ucdenver.academia.edu/StephenHartnett>). Once there, you can download free PDFs of the magazine.

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The cover art is titled "Still Left with Me," by William B. Livingston III. Hand-made screen-print on recycled paper. To order William's art, please write to the artist: William B. Livingston III, DOC #607598, JHCCC D-2-115, P.O. Box 548, Lexington, OK, 73051.



"Portrait of James M. Sepesi's Cellmate, J.P.,"
by James M. Sepesi (Pencil on paper)



Volume 17 of *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* is dedicated to our dear friend, mentor, and ally, Judith Tannenbaum, who passed away in December, 2019, at the age of 72. Many of you know Judith as the author of *Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin*, her gorgeous recounting of the work she began at San Quentin in 1985. As a part of this labor-of-love, she also wrote a *Manual for Artists Working in Prison*. Teaming up with the California Division of Juvenile Justice and the California Arts Council, she edited the *Handbook for Arts in the Youth Authority Program*. When not teaching inside prisons, Judith was a champion of youth literacy and arts, a calling she practiced in partnership with the San Francisco-based WritersCorps. I (SJH) first met Judith in 1996 at a retreat up in northern New York, buried in the deep woods of the Adirondacks, where a group of prison activists, educators, and artists met for a week of intense workshopping and brainstorming. Ever since then, she has been a dear friend, tireless ally, and relentless source of joy. No matter how hard her work, no matter how difficult the situation, Judith was always a beacon of hope. At the close of *Disguised as a Poem* she concluded that regardless of the shifting winds of politics and the trauma of working inside the prison-industrial complex, she remained convinced that teaching was about building trust and practicing empathy. "My students and I knew love was the human gift we had to give," she wrote, "and we did our best to give it."

Mourning Our Losses in the Shadow of COVID

We want to share our love and thanks with everyone who has worked to mitigate the damage of COVID upon our communities. Especially for those who live in or work in prisons, or who live in or work in prison-impacted communities, the disease has been devastating. In fact, during the global pandemic, five of the six worst virus hotspots in the United States were prisons. In the spring of 2020, 2,400 men at the Marion Correctional Institution in Ohio were tested for COVID-19 with more than 90% of them testing positive. As of September 2020, Virginia's Deerfield Correctional Institute, which houses 925 individuals, reported 723 cases of COVID-19 and 12 deaths. Statewide, the Virginia Department of Corrections has seen 3,600 cases of coronavirus and 26 deaths. A study performed at an unidentified large, urban prison by Stanford University found that for every incarcerated individual contracting COVID-19, 8.44 more people were infected. For perspective, this means that COVID-19 in this prison spread 3.6 times faster than it did aboard the notorious Princess Diamond cruise ship in February of 2020, and 4 times faster than in Wuhan, China. In short, prisons were and remain petri dishes for COVID, putting our friends, family, students, and colleagues at risk.

Given these facts, we open this issue with a special set of remembrances. The three profiles tell the stories of neighbors whose lives were lost due to COVID; two of the profiles are of prisoners and one is of a prison doctor. These contributions come to us from a remarkable group called Mourning Our Losses, which was created out of anguish for those lost to COVID-19. Founder Kelsey Kauffman, a former corrections officer from Indiana, began the project to honor individuals who died as a result of COVID while incarcerated or working in prisons. Mourning Our Losses is led by educators, activists, artists, and organizers, some of whom are previously incarcerated, all of whom are committed to the release of those in confinement. The group works each day to prevent the sacrifice of those living behind bars and strives to let those in and outside of prison know that they are seen, they are heard, they are valuable, and they are mourned.

Anyone who has lost a friend, colleague, family member, or loved one is encouraged to share their story by submitting a memorial to Mourning Our Losses, c/o The Texas After Violence Project, PO Box 15005, Austin, TX, 78761. Readers can see more remembrances on their website, www.mourningourlosses.org. Their email is mourningourlosses@gmail.com.

The remembrances printed below appear here with the permission of Mourning Our Losses. For their support of this CW/FT partnership with Mourning Our Losses, thanks to Kirsten Pickering, Eliza Kravitz, and Luci Harrell.

For My Brother, James Scott, by Anthony Ehlers

Photograph of James Scott, courtesy of Anthony Ehlers, who was previously Scott's cellie and is now a student in the Northwestern Prison Education Program

I'd like to write about my cellie, James Scott. He was a good person who was always smiling and laughing. His energy was infectious. Most people, when they saw him coming, smiled automatically. He was 58 years old. We had been in the cell together for almost 5 years. He was my best friend. James died on Monday, 4/20/20, from COVID.



Like James, I was sick, very sick, and we were on lockdown. But James had some pre-existing health problems. A few years ago he was diagnosed with stage 4 lymphoma. He fought the cancer hard. At one point, he was getting chemotherapy every day. I helped take care of him in the cell. He fought back through sheer will and desire to live! He beat the cancer, and had been in remission for over a year. He was also diabetic and had asthma. Knowing that COVID was in prison, and I was sick, they left us in the cell together on lockdown. He then caught what I had. If the prison administration had quarantined me away from him (and everyone else), then he might not have caught it. He could be alive today. Instead, they left me in the cell very sick, and he was taking care of me. Then he got sick. He tried to stay in the cell with me, but his breathing got bad. They took him out the night of March 29, and I never got to see him again.

Since his death, I find myself going back and forth between being ok for short periods of time, and then crying until my eyes hurt. This place is so macho and testosterone-driven that you can't let anyone see you cry. You have to hide your pain and your hurt, or someone will use it against you.

In prison, having a good cellie is a huge part of your prison bit. If you have a bad cellie or a cellie you don't get along with, it's miserable. If you have a cellie who's alright, it's endurable, but when you have a good cellie, it makes your life so much better. This is the first person you see every morning, the last person you talk to at night, the guy you eat with, talk to, and confide in, who helps you. With a good cellie, you share a bond of trying to survive this place as unscathed as you can, so you get close, you become brothers, you become family. So it's not just that I lost a cellie, I lost my best friend, my support system, my Brother—I lost my family.

James and I were an odd couple to be best friends. Guys used to make fun of us. We didn't care. I'm sure it was kind of weird, he was a short, bald, dark skinned black guy, and I am tall, and very white. But, we were inseparable. He was calm to my hyped up; he was friendly and talkative to my introverted ass. We balanced each other's lives. I took care of him when his health wasn't good, and he helped me through some very tough times. He always had a way to make you laugh and smile.

I understand, on an intellectual level, that grief is mostly based on selfish emotions. I lost this. I don't have that anymore, I miss this . . . But knowing this doesn't stop the emotional pain of any of your loss. I loved that old man. How do you heal when a family member dies?

James was 58 years old, I called him "Old Man" a lot, mostly because it seemed like he'd been around forever. We laughed at everything. He used to say it's too hard to be miserable, it takes too much effort. Sometimes if I was down, he would sneak up on me and hit me a couple of times in the ribs. It always made me laugh. When I look back I can see how much he took care of me in a lot of little ways. This is such a lonely, lonely place . . . you could be surrounded by other guys, in school, in the chow hall, and still you'd feel utterly alone. When you're lucky enough to find a best friend, here or anywhere, it makes your loneliness go away, you know you don't have to endure without being able to turn to someone else.

Now, I have so much pain and guilt and anger, I don't know how to get through it. He got COVID from me! A C/O (correctional officer) stood outside my bars and said, "You killed your cellie, huh?" I just wanted to punch him . . . But, I can't help feeling guilty. It makes me ache. Did he die because of me?

James was always smiling, cutting up, and talking shit to make you laugh. The old man always flirted with the female C/Os and med-techs, and they would laugh. He touched everybody. He was something else . . . and I miss him. I don't make friends easily, I generally don't like or trust most people, so a friendship like James and I had is really special. I don't make friends easily, so it really hurts to lose him. I would give anything if it would just go away, but, I guess that's how you know you really loved someone, when the mere lack of their presence is devastating. I feel so utterly alone right now.

James had to fight his whole life. He fought cancer and diabetes. And in his last days, he fought for breath. Now he doesn't have to fight anymore. Rest Brother. He's in a much better place, he doesn't have to struggle for breath, or worry about cancer coming back. I hope he is happy and that he's reunited with his wife and family . . . he's Free . . . after 36 years in prison, he's home. Knowing this doesn't stop the pain, or make me miss him any less, but it does make me happy.

James Scott was my best friend, a good and kind man. His light has dimmed, but it will never go out. I love you Brother.

**Memorials for Madonna Watson,
by Tee Tee, April Harris, Katrina Brown, Kyra Michelle Baker,
Brandy Foreman, Jones, and Donna (Chinita) Esparza**

Photo of Madonna courtesy of her son, obtained from the
California Coalition of Women Prisoners.



Tee Tee: I love you, and I never imagined this happening to you my dear friend. I pray for you "Mad D" that Allah, the most merciful, will have mercy on your soul, and let you into them pearly gates on judgement day. Allah knows best, and as we mourn a precious friend that He called on from here, I pray your soul is resting in peace. Your life and worldly death both touched me in a way that made me a stronger and better person. You taught me what a real friend is, the true meaning of selflessness, as you always have been with me from the very first day I met you almost 20 years ago. I been around you for half my life. I always knew who I could come to and count on and you were nothing but a blessing in my life, all glory be to God. Your death has been a wake-up call and a reminder that this life and the things in this world are only for a short time, because we are here one day and gone the next. So every day I try and make it count by doing good deeds, forgiving others and myself and letting go of hate, hurt, and anger, for the sake of my own soul and being a flicker of light in a world of darkness. You are missed and will never be forgotten, no doubt about it. Your name will continue to live on and on. My condolences and prayers go out to you and your family. I have a piece of you that I will hold onto forever till one day when we will all cross paths again, and that's your beautiful smile. My sister, my friend, and family, now my angel watching over me. Rest easy girl.

April Harris: God has a tendency to place things in the soil that will bear fruit. Why Madonna was placed on this soil only God knows. But as a witness to her growth and the lives she touched, I can almost see His purpose. We never know the where and why of life, but Madonna grew tremendously behind these walls. I remember when she first walked in hard-headed and full of opinions. I just knew that I would have my hands full. And I did. But in doing so, she taught me so much about life and how to not always be so uptight. She taught me to laugh a little louder and that it was OK to speak my mind. A lot of people have many memories of the woman we call Madonna, but the thing that sticks with me the most is her attitude. She wasn't afraid of nothing or no one. She lived out loud. So many women have yet to find their roar. Madonna was born with hers. She will forever be missed. She will forever be loved. And she will always be remembered. May she rest in Paradise. I can only picture her in heaven looking around, trying to see what mischief she can get into next.

Katrina Brown: Madonna was such a wonderful woman. Even though I wasn't really close to her, we had a silent bond that made it easy for me to speak to her. She would always make me laugh. I heard her talk about going home and her freedom and what she wanted to do when she paroled. She had a wonderful spirit and a big heart. I saw her to be very outspoken. God bless her and her family. She is now at peace. God bless!!

Kyra Michelle Baker: Madonna, RIP, I loooove you girl, fly with the angels.

Brandy Foreman: Madonna, you were a blessing to us all. You are loved.

Jones: Madonna, Pooch and Leslie will miss you from now till eternity. You were amazing as a play sister, and we love you! Peace till we meet again.

Donna (Chinita) Esparza: To Ms. Madonna and family, I send my love. Madonna is gone but never forgotten. She will always be missed and loved. God has gained another angel to watch us. I'll always remember all the funny jokes and shit talkin' we used to do in Harrison . . . I love and miss you so much, Madonna. Lord be with you and your family, Love always.

Remembrance of Dr. Casey McVea

Written by MOL team member Tiara Smith with information from an obituary published by the Crain Funeral Home and reporting by Lea Skene of *The Advocate*, transcribed for the MOL website by Ivana Bozic and edited by the CW/FT team.

Photograph of Casey obtained from Dr. Chip McVea's Facebook profile.



God bless everyone in the medical profession, especially those who work with prisoners. Jesus said: "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). Being in prison is already hard, but working with those outcast by society, with a pure heart, by seeing their humanity and extending a helping hand, is the definition of a true servant of God. I did not personally know Dr. McVea, but as a prisoner I truly appreciate all those in the medical profession who put their life at risk every day to help those in need. This incredible man worked in the prison as a medical director until his life was taken by COVID. He did not abandon his flock, nor did he cower away in fear. Through faith, he took up his cross and did what Jesus would have done. He suffered with those who suffered. He loved the unlovable. He touched the untouchable. So in this troublesome world, he fearlessly led a life of service and stayed true to his professional medical oath. His life speaks volumes and must be celebrated and remembered as a continuous testimony of what it means to usher in the kingdom of God. He lived a life of love, and I know his dedication to his patients, friends, and family will not be forgotten. His work during this global epidemic is not in vain. Dr. McVea is living proof that love is still real, and we have the power within us all to be a champion for those society has judged harshly for their sins. By working in the prison system, he chose to work for a group of people who go unnoticed by society - The condemned, the vulnerable, those atoning for their misdeeds. May he rest in peace knowing that greater is his reward in heaven.

Locked Up with COVID—"Lockdown" from a Prisoner's Perspective

Dortell Williams

"America's on Lockdown." These are jarring words to prisoners across the land, yet they also seem inappropriate for a free society. The use of the phrase is even more grating when associated with schools, where we teach, protect, and love the young, innocent, and most vulnerable members of our society.

If anyone knows the real meaning of the word lockdown, it is the prisoner. To the incarcerated, lockdown often instigates the empathic refrain, "I wouldn't wish this on anyone." The idea of being confined in an 8 x 12 cage for 24 hours a day is revolting (think about living in a small bathroom). You get no showers, no phone calls, no fresh air, no care packages, and no store for weeks or even months. To add to that, you're sardined in a cage with another human being. No privacy and limited autonomy are the norm. You awaken daily with the odor of steel and concrete, hearing the keys of the guard changing shift, and the gun tower checking rifles—clack, clack, clack.

Lockdowns are extreme, and thank God, rare. Sometimes they result because of mass rebellions, which are typically triggered by some real or perceived injustice, and are what Martin Luther King Jr. called the expression of the voiceless. Other reasons for lockdowns include institutional power outages or computer failures, which usually last a few days to a few weeks. Solitary confinement is the most extreme version of lockdown. Solitary is the place where grown men cry at night, scream during the day, and sometimes disappear in the blur of the in-between. It's torture, plain and simple.

I've always disliked the term lockdown for a free society. It doesn't belong in a country that hails itself as the "land of the free." Then again, with 2.2 million souls now locked down—the vast majority of them either mentally ill, suffering from substance abuse, or prior victims of violence—the whole notion of incarceration is counterintuitive.

As a Communication Studies scholar, I understand the underpinnings of language. The words any particular culture uses tend to reveal our collective mindset. America has a particular penchant for the term war. And as a verb it is an aggressive, hostile, and even destructive word. Consider the phrases "war on poverty," or "war on crime," or the latest, "war on drugs." Indeed, America is at war with itself. And up until the opioid crisis, when America's more empathetic response appeared, the longstanding target of the war on crime has been urban American citizens, leaving much damage and carnage spread throughout American prisons.

So we prisoners know lockdowns, we know their costs and consequences and contradictions; we know the pain of being confined, your future uncertain, your sense of autonomy denied.

Lockdown? As we say behind the razor wire, "I wouldn't wish this on anyone."

Doomed
Chris Trigg

I was born doomed. Fated to a cage by my poverty in a nation that consumes its children. As the machine of mass incarceration churned to life in the early 80s, I became a ward of the court. At 13, I was strip-searched and tossed into a cell, fodder for the machine. It's gnawed at me ever since. What I know is the "system." It is my America. Cruel, unrelenting, and merciless. Its appetite is insatiable. You want to disassemble the machine. I commend you. But a lot of people live off its blood. It has an army. It hears your chant, but it won't go quietly.

I have stories, observations, and street corner drag, but let's talk about the war on drugs, which is the heart of the machine. I should know. I'm 23 years into a 30 year sentence for a nonviolent drug crime. Of that 23, I spent 20 years entombed alive at a federal supermax, where I received letters from international human rights organizations recognizing me as a victim of torture because of my long-term solitary confinement.

So many of you are clueless about the system that operates in your name. Indeed, my indictment is headed "United States of America versus Chris Trigg." That's you versus me.

So you had me arrested, sentenced to 30 years, and buried alive, but I bet you didn't know you did all that to little old me for words. Words just like these.

That's right. I was not caught with drugs, money, or guns. Not a gram nor a dollar nor even a rusty revolver.

How, you say? Well, in your system all it takes to be buried alive is words. We in the know call it "ghost dope." You can't see it. You can't touch it. And you definitely can't use it. But you could lose your life over it in a US courtroom.

Your war on drugs is waged primarily through the tactic of flipping suspects. They arrest some schmoo with a little dope, and pay him off with money, a reduced sentence, or no sentence to implicate as many people as possible in a major conspiracy. The more victims or suspects, the greater the reward for the flipped. The greater the chances for career advancement for the flipper. It's all good, honest hearsay.

What you see is the newsflash: "20 arrested in major drug trafficker takedown," or "Organization believed to be responsible for trafficking hundreds...thousands...gazillions of kilos of [insert drug here] sold to our children."

Actual drugs seized? Not so much.

It happens every day in America, land of the free. And you pay for it. It's incredibly difficult to win a conspiracy case in court. Everything is aligned against you. The courtroom has little to do with fairness or even logic. Let's be real, the whole process plays out in a language you rarely understand.

So let's talk about some truths. Your drug war has destroyed more lives and families around the world than the drugs themselves. And there is a stink of hypocrisy about it. To begin with, our legal system is rooted in that of Britain. If you know a little world history, Britain trafficked opium in trade for tea in Asia. They could be said to have comprised the first super cartel.*

Many of the baby boomer politicians and their minions who have perpetrated mass-incarceration have indulged in some drug use themselves, including the now multiple US presidents who have admitted to it. Even the ones who didn't inhale.

Perhaps worst, the drug war misses the real causes of harm in our society. Big pharma has exacerbated the drug problem in a way your neighborhood drug dealer could never even imagine, and many a drug war politician has profited. Alcohol, gambling, guns, tobacco, and what else create equal, if not more social tragedy than drugs, but you don't see the Bacardi family, Smith and Wesson, or the Marlboro man on the cellblock. What you do see is the urban poor—the urban poor guarded by the rural poor.

I am not saying drugs are good for you. But neither is a fast food diet. Yet it is a question of free will, right? The war on drugs is a war on people. People like me who may have played kickball with you in school. A son, a father. Maybe I should have been better. But perhaps America should be better too.

I've sold some dope in my life, but I have never locked someone in a concrete box for 20 years.

*Editors' Note: Trigg refers here to the Opium Wars Britain launched against China, beginning in 1839, whereby Britain forced opium into China to balance out the deficits Britain was accruing from Chinese imports, including tea. Critical historians agree that Britain was, in fact, acting like the world's first international drug cartel.



WE ARE NO EXCE



"We Are No Exception," by Joshua Earls

Notes from the "Roo"

Carla Walker

Isolation cell stifles human contact
as keys jingle teasing by back and forth
or not at all, maybe once an hour
rarely stopping to open, never to greet
delightedly barking arbitrary and often idiotic directives
through a slammed sealed paint-chipped steel door
(once graffitied with lustful proclamations of love for "pooki bear")
that clangs shut vibrating an already traumatized soul
Loudly! Abruptly! Rudely! Repeatedly!
All night and all day! All day and all night!
in a dehumanizing cycle
segregation produces fear
warps a sense of control
welcome to the RHU ("roo")*
where we try to break you

You Got Me Wrong

Tammy Englerth

You thought you had me
Your hatred
Your lies
Your jealousy

But not me
You got me all wrong
You just made me stronger

Your path of destruction
Is my path of hope
You're the last laugh
You got me all wrong

You can't break me

*Editors' Note: RHU stands for Restrictive Housing Unit. The solitary confinement created by RHUs has been evaluated as a form of torture, as noted in D. Williams' piece above. For additional information, see <https://solitarywatch.org/2012/07/28/voices-from-solitary-surviving-the-prison-within-a-prison>.

Locked Up with COVID—I'm Keeping My Mask On

Richard F. Angulo

Four months ago today my life in a California prison turned upside down. Due to the coronavirus, our entire prison yard was quarantined. Till further notice, all education and vocational classes were cancelled. So were visits and Chapel, and recreational time has been limited to two hours per day.

All inmates were given 5 face masks to be worn outside of our dorm. It didn't matter if I went outside, sat in the dayroom, used the telephone, or walked the yard, I wore my mask at all times.

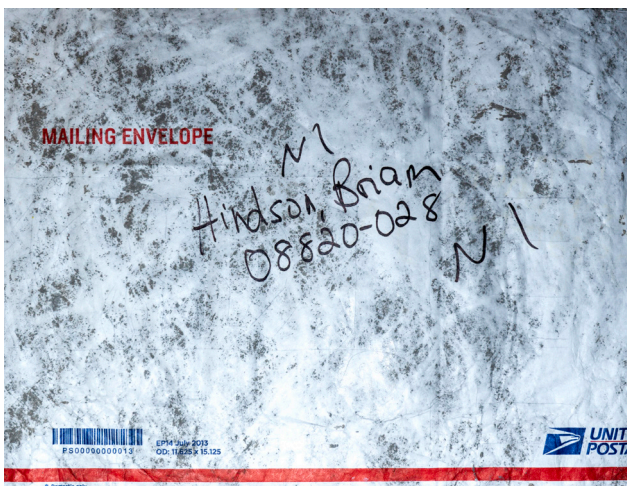
A couple of months into the quarantine, all 192 guys in my building were tested for the virus. Two days later, 141 inmates (73%!) tested positive. Since the testing took place, several of the 51 guys who originally tested negative have contracted the virus. Not only did I test negative, but I'm only one of a handful of guys who has never experienced any symptoms.

As I sit in the dayroom, today is July 16, 2020, and most guys have their face masks on. Both correctional officers also have their masks on. This has become our new normal. Moving forward, I feel like I have more questions, no different than citizens who are not incarcerated. But for now, I am embracing our new normal and hoping someday there will be a cure for this virus. Until then, I'm keeping my mask on.

On Life's Edge

Daniel Gamboa

Cool grains of sand, in between my toes
Heels dug down deep to the cold clay
Bottom
I've been there before, the bottom
So this is familiar to me yet
Different
No longer caged in, like a beast from the jungle
Finally, free to roam in a world
That feels like a jungle
Navigation's the plan whether in rugged waters or calm
Sun setting upon my face, at the ocean's edge
It's where I've stood for so long
On life's edge
Yet Still standing



"Covid Trying to Get Me," by Brian D. Hinson. Latex and acrylic print, made on a recycled USPS envelope. To order Brian's art, please write to the artist: Brian D. Hinson, c/o U.S. Penitentiary, P.O. Box 5000, Yazoo City, MS, 39194.

MASS INCARCERATION 2020

I wasn't given a death sentence in court...
So why am I facing
one now?



A+ blood type

poor medical tx

Will I see my mom's dad again?

It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.
- Nelson Mandela

stagnant competition
↑ violence

"Living Dead Girl," by Tacía Prows

Locked Up with COVID—Waiting on the Angel of Death

Kenneth M. Key

It was March 14, around 10:45 AM, when Bravo house, the unit where I reside, was placed on quarantine. It seemed someone had been identified as possibly contracting the virus. The order came down: No one was to enter or leave the cell house. The rest of the prison was allowed to go to school, to eat in the dining room, and to participate in physical activities such as going to the gym, hitting the yard, and even visiting with family. That would later be determined to be the first mistake.

Within a few days, nurses converged on the cell house, taking readings of everyone, checking for fevers and oxygen levels—that's when the panic began. A few more days passed, and then the Illinois Department of Corrections placed the entire prison system on level-1 lockdown. No one knew what was going on, and it was pure panic. We were cut off from visits, phones, and no one offered us any information. So we were quarantined in our cells, but had no idea what was happening.

Humanity had long left the prison. After all, we were offenders, and according to society, we are deserving of everything we get. The atmosphere was like several officers had been assaulted and despite having caught the offender who did it, they took it out on everyone . . . If it was like we were all culprits of some offense . . .

I tried to text a comrade at the Industrial Workers Organization committee, to place information on a blog we had created, called Live from Lockdown, but no more blog, it was gone.

All of a sudden, nurses were everywhere, and everyone was complaining about flu-like symptoms. Within a week, several inmates were removed from Bravo house and placed in what is known as X-House—once the housing unit for those sentenced to die. I can't imagine what was running through those men's minds as they were stuffed in what was the death house, stripped of their property, and placed on a more intense quarantine than the rest of us.

It would be almost two weeks before anything would happen for prisoners in Statesville. Eventually, we received one donation of hotel courtesy soap, and a few days later we were all given one mask to wear over and over again. That wouldn't change until about a month later, when we started getting a new mask every week. But not much else has changed since this started.

Once a week we receive watered-down bleach solution to clean our cells. Hand sanitizer was donated as well, but we can only receive it right before meals, when it is brought directly to our cells. That would be the extent of preventative measures in this place.

The main problem is that social distancing is totally impossible. I live with one other inmate 24/7, and we are surrounded by open cells on all sides, for the length and breadth of the entire cell-house, which is too old to have proper ventilation. So when a man coughs, it travels throughout the cell-house and the particles of COVID-19 move like the death Angel in the exodus story. We lie awake wondering if the Angel of death will pass over us.

Then came the guards in riot gear carrying guns with rubber bullets . . . for who? There was no resistance, no unruly behavior, nothing! The lock down would last weeks before we would start to get the news through the walls and through the vents—names like G. Jones, Rusty, Old Man, Jesse, Mr. Holland, and Big Fella Wilson—all dead because of COVID-19. Big fella Wilson was a friend of mine and a classmate in the North Park Theological Seminary. He sat right next to me. I made him a jailhouse cake just weeks before, a cake which he shared with the class.

Many would die over the next month, and I wondered if their families had been afforded the opportunity to say goodbye. I know if I got sick and died, no one would be there. I would transition, and that would be it. Inmates who die in prison with no one to claim the body for burial are simply cremated and end up in a storage room—their ashes are stored on a shelf. It's not the vision I like, but certainly the most possible reality, having no one to claim my body or bury me. My only son is incarcerated and resides right above me, serving life.

Now my temperature is taken each morning, as well as my O2 level, by the National Guard, and sometimes the nurse, who is supposed to check it three times a day, but only does so once. I remain faithful despite the COVID-19 storm. I know He will bring us all through, so we either get busy living or we get busy dying.

Locked Up with COVID—Still Grateful

Guadalupe Garcia

We have seen so many lives lost
We may never know or fully understand what went wrong
Still, I am grateful for what we have
COVID-19 got many of us at this facility
But mostly I'm worried about my elderly mother

Behind the Grey Mountain

Andrew Kicking Horse

What matters most is that my heart beats. AKA *chuma imma an chu kask*, the goodness of my heart, against the worst intentions of a few, against the odds of many, my heart beats on, marking the passing of the prime of my life in this cell.

My heart beat in wild terror as the judge announced the verdict in July 1988. Guilty! Instead of giving me death, the sentence was life in prison without the possibility of parole. Never even achieving as much as a traffic citation before, I was now thrust into an unknown world behind the Grey Mountain.

I could have considered a more immediate alternative—dash to the open court room window, 10 stories above the busy California street. But my Mama was there. She watched attempts to give me death in three different trials, withstood that shock and accompanied me in prayer over the hundreds of miles that separated us. Now she watched me being sentenced to life in prison. She was a strong woman and forgiving in nature. Just three years before my trials, her only daughter, my beloved sister Kim, was tragically murdered and now, as always, Mama stood there tall, proud, sending strength to me through eyes filled with love and tears. I was sorely tempted by the window and the prospect of a life so drastically altered, it simply terrified me. Atto! The trickster, the one they call the devil was playing games with my mind. But I could not ask her to witness the leap. Mothers see their children into this broken world, and none should have to watch them leave it so abruptly.

That was 34 years ago, approximately 12,410 days, 297,840 hours, 17,870,400 minutes ago. How many heartbeats? My mind can't compute the number, yet others have played longer periods in these cells. Surely I can muster the strength and faith to endure this journey.

Mom is gone now. She crossed over into the spirit world in 1996. Not a day goes by that she is not thought of and missed. She visited me that day she left in spirit.

The morning silence is flushed as the cell door opens its steel jawed mouth. It is a beautiful day as big rays of sunlight smash through the tinted glass of my window. The cells around me empty as the repetitive motion of work-call begins more institutionally structured time unfolding into another mindless day. As the tiers of lost souls on my block begin to empty, I hear prisoners crossing and verbally abusing the young officer. Her name does not matter. These men would goose and grumble at whoever opened the doors, regardless of their gender.

This matters though, and the sickening display of verbal abuse towards another person underscores our culture today. It exposes our societal attitudes. No, this is not simply a bunch of prisoners yelling just to be heard, but a reflection of a society gone awry. Sometimes the dehumanization in this place hangs thick enough to cut it with a knife.

Throughout the day, shouts, curses, racial slurs, and the mind numbing blare of TV sets in crowded day rooms make concentration difficult and sleep impossible. As I write, earplugs made of toilet paper screwed firmly into my head, a half-dozen prisoners stop at my cell to interrupt. They ask me if I want to get in on the football pool. I tell each one that I don't gamble. They look at me like I'm crazy. Some ask for coffee, something to smoke, anything before realizing that when I say no, I mean no. "Sorry chief," they utter. I reply, "I'm not a chief."

Despite my attempts to adhere to nonviolence, there have been times when that rage has overflowed. I try to check the stress and tension sparked in the belly of this overcrowded beast by running the perimeter of the yard until, exhausted and winded, I stagger to a halt. Other times, I do Tai chi exercises trying to keep at bay not only my rage but the toll of 64 years on my body.

One afternoon, under the weight of thought, I watched a thunderstorm move toward the prison. As it began to baptize the land, a brisk wind sprang up, heavy with the breath of wet soil in the advent of another fall coming. The sky cleared its throat with the rattle of thunder. Raindrops peppered me, soft accompaniment to my bursts of expelled breath as I worked through another set of pushups—pushing my rage away.

My catharsis incomplete, I walk over to the heavy bag and burn my hands punching the wildly swinging bag until an officer tells me to stop. He notices the crimson smears left on the bag when I stop to wipe my hands on my shirt. He doesn't understand. Sometimes neither do I.

I know the truth about prison and being an Indian in prison. One must pierce illusions and view it from the inside. Things aren't always as they appear and the general public has been blinded about truth, common justice, and the American way. What most Americans don't seem to realize is that prisons slowly kill most souls. They swallow lives whole and cut many of them short. Prisons affect everyone they touch forever. They are designed and operated specifically for revenge. This country gives out harsher punishments for longer duration than any other industrialized nation in the world. And why? Prisons hurt, they maim, and they kill. They demoralize and feed the self-hatred generated by failed human potential. To be a human caged, shackled, and bound is a humiliation that makes one feel subhuman. This is the white man's way. His promise of justice for all that only a few select receive. He has made the Indian people many promises and broken every one of them.

The slow and methodical rape of the spirit continues day after day. Lots of people in prison are convinced they have no worth, no purpose, no hope, no sight. So they have no chance in life. After all, they are prisoners...subhuman to society... For too many, this terrible lie becomes truth, a prophecy fulfilled in a thousand ways each day and night, a reality sometimes culminating in a sharp razor blade at midnight.

In a quiet moment, I recall Thomas Merton's words on decisions: "we live in a time in which one cannot help making decisions for or against humanity, for or against life, for or against justice, for or against truth." As long as our decisions are made for the wrong reasons, we are all doing time. As long as there are others willing to sit in judgment of many, regardless of whether they are right or not, we are walking a road of eventual doom. For it is only when we decide in favor of humanity, in favor of life, justice, and truth, that the rage I acknowledge and so many others deny can be kept at bay. Then the job of rebuilding the shattered lives of a broken world can begin.

But I am simply a red man, an Indian incarcerated behind the Grey Mountain. A number the court has sentenced to serve time. It has been said, "it is easier to perceive error than find the truth," and I believe this is true. The former lies on the surface and is easily seen, while the latter lies in the depths, where few are willing to seek it.

It is midnight again and darkness has fallen over the cell. A tiny insect crawls around the corner of the concrete wall that separates me from the man next door. It stops to watch me write memories away.

Our Democracy

Armod Hinkle

We must remember to be civil in democratic debate
For we are all Americans so we should ultimately relate

I bleed red, white, and blue
A proud veteran through and through

Who is capable of listening to both sides of the aisle
Being kind-hearted, I typically respond with a smile

Our democracy ebbs and flows
Our democracy has its woes

Our democracy was not crafted with unequivocal perfection
Yet, democracy needs our undying and constant protection

For George Floyd

Daniel Gamboa

Today is a day to remember, because respects were paid and goodbyes were said at the memorial service for George Floyd. Not only in his city, but in cities all over the world. No matter your age, or how hectic your life might be during these unfortunate times, you cannot not know about, you can't avoid being affected by, the murder of George Floyd. He was a victim of yet another senseless and unjust killing. Regardless of your race, religion, political views, or otherwise, you cannot avoid the movement for change. This summer's protests have addressed the decades of unjust history that many have tried to silence and sweep under the carpets that line the floors of the homes and offices of America.

George Floyd is just one of the countless victims who had their lives as Americans taken away from them. But when we saw the video of his killing, that was the straw that broke the camel's back. Ask yourself, would you want your children or your grandchildren to have to deal with unjust and racist violence like that? I think not. So the question is, what are you going to do in order to help change the narrative?

Remember that there is strength in numbers; these past days are proof of that. The world was united and for a really great cause. Now tell me, what cause will you stand for? As a father, a son, a brother, and an uncle, my heart is heavy and my eyes are filled yet again. As I sit in my prison cell and watch what's been taking place in the world on my little TV, it makes me feel that much more confined to this prison, with my hands tied behind my back, because I can't do something to help, to be a part of the solution. So I hope and pray that the power I hold in my BIC pen will be of some use to at least one of you. Be safe, stay healthy, and remain free. #blm #takeyourkneeoffournecks #JusticeforGeorgeFloyd

Entertaining Anxiety

Carla Walker

Anxiety began to build from the bottom
of my feet and belly rising up my esophagus
it boiled slowly and then not so slowly
like a pot of salted water
rather than adding noodles, rice, or frozen vegetables
a combination of caged wild butterflies, hopelessness
confusion and shock are available
for this recipe of injustice
lying leadership lack an ounce of integrity
roaming free like wild mustangs
reaching flaccid goals of control over others
performing degrading, dehumanizing rituals
over/under/on/and around incarcerated males and females
caged wounded women wait for emotional healing
and warmth under the guise of "Mental Health" care and "safety"
we sit in segregation or in stinky, smelly, filthy cells
behind unsecured steel doors
staring as sanity, common sense, and hope
swirl down the clogged hair drains
soiled shower curtains hang ignored and never sanitized
"don't look," "don't tell," "pretend it doesn't exist"
stay in your lane
no help in sight
Department of Health? Fire Marshal? OSHA?
surrounded by broken lights and laws
paint chipped cell walls bubbled with random
pockets of moldy water
protective custody doors unlocking and popping open randomly
in and alleged "maximum security" women's prison
saturday mornings bring mental health doctors and secretaries
but no readjusted medications, methods of survival
or coping skills
it's been nine months of "you're on the list"
just hurry up and wait
they will release you before they treat you
there are no solutions for staff's deliberate incompetence
they are overworked, underpaid, disrespected
by their superiors and inmates alike
broken cogs in a hopelessly dysfunctional system
laziness, complacency, the same behaviors
repeating day after day, month after month, year after year
"I'm just doing my job"
for entertainment I watch Super Sergeants march along
screaming expletives, orders, and directives like Nazi guards
jaded, drunk with the facade of being better-than
setting up inmates for failure
rather than preparing for reentry
drunk with power and horribly hungover
entertaining insanity boiling
rapidly and consistently

A Story to Share

Carla Walker

I came to prison an angry and broken woman. Before coming here, I served in the United States Navy, where I was beaten, raped, and inflamed; my temper was short, and I was often depressed.

Another issue was having food allergies. I did not know what was wrong with me for many years. I just knew that I was sick, and, most of the time, I felt like I was losing my mind. People called me "crazy." Even my own family called me crazy. For years, I prayed for death; sometimes I planned for it. . . But I could find no relief. It was a difficult existence.

Thoughtless love found me, but when you cannot love yourself it's really difficult to love someone else or to let someone love you. I had multiple dysfunctional and often abusive relationships. Finally, I attacked an ex-boyfriend. I really lost my mind and was not living in reality. It took this horrific act to stop my running away from emotional pain and finally deciding to choose whether I was going to get busy living or get busy dying, as the character "Red" said in *Shawshank Redemption*. In order to live a fulfilled life, I was going to have to spend my sentence digging deep within and accepting all my past actions. Then I realized that prison could be a place where my skills (writing letters and being an advocate) could help others. But in order to help peers, I have to be healthy; and now I know that to be healthy, I have to help others.

Receiving my special, medically prescribed diet in prison has often been difficult, but I have learned to persevere. It took four years to figure out what was wrong, and what worked. To receive my special diet, I had to promise to the prison authorities that I would not do drugs, fight, or engage in romantic/physical relationships. Yoga and meditation have helped me to keep those promises.

Then I enrolled in a free correspondence course that taught me creative writing and poetry. Then I began a paid course that offered training in anger management. I cannot wipe away what I did in the past, or what others did to me, but I can control what happens to me in the future. There's so much about prison that is abusive and dysfunctional, so I advocate and change what I can. I focus on my daily practice of forgiving and showing grace; I have learned to disagree appropriately.

In the long run, I know success will be my best revenge. Reading helps, too.

So I crawl into my bunk, face the cold paint-chipped cement wall, place an earbud in the ear opposite the pillow, turn on the TV, radio, or tablet, and disappear. Through my writing and meditation, I escape without taking a step.

I Never Had Time to Grieve

Terrance Harris Jr.

I don't believe
I ever had time to grieve
I never learned how to "get over it"
I never figured out how to "move on"
I just can't grasp the concept of
Acceptance
My heart developed this thick callous
To protect me
From myself
I'd rather numb out
Than face my own feelings
I wonder what healing feels like?

If I get healthy
Maybe I'll forgive
Myself
Maybe I'll forget
Everyone else

I haven't had a chance to grieve
I want to cry
But...well...um...I
Never mind
Who's going to hear it?
Why should my problems
Be everyone's problem?
If they can feel my pain, they can have it
I don't want it

Everybody has advice
A trillion quick fixes
I realize how stupid I must be
Because those solutions seem easy
What was I thinking?
Please, do not
Downplay my perspective
Like, what I've experienced
Is child's play
And I'll grow out of it
Maybe even learn how to
Act like things aren't what they are
Maybe I should act like I'm you
And never try to be me again
Maybe I should scream
Or be deathly silent
Or rage out in violence
Or just get in bed and sleep until next month

Maybe
If I roll myself
Tight enough in all my blankets
I'll emerge with colorful wings
And fly away from the shell of the old me

I haven't had a chance to mourn
Because the sunrise comes faster and faster
Revealing yesterday's disaster
And tomorrow's recovery mission
Today has such a negative connotation
No matter how much I ignore it
It's always there

I've been deceived so many times
I quit telling the truth
Honestly
I'm just going to close my eyes
And let go
And free fall
And hope that I land
Safely
What is safety?
What is security?
What is going to happen if I finally
Stop trying to hide all the hurt?
Why am I afraid to mourn?

Maybe
If I stay busy enough
To work myself to death
I'll realize
I lost myself
Somewhere along the way

Locked Up with COVID—Prisoners Empathize about Depression

Dortell Williams

Depression is debilitating. Depression saps one's energy, induces whole body numbness, and stimulates streams of negative thoughts. In the extreme, those negative thoughts can provoke suicidal ideation. As a prisoner serving a sentence of life without the possibility of parole, I know about depression from first-hand experience and observation. Fortunately, I've learned to utilize a number of resilience practices to help me bounce back from adversity. Yet, I've witnessed too many successful suicides to count. Sadly, many of us prisoners have. In fact, California's prison population has the highest prison suicide rate in the nation (CDCR, 2016).

And now, because of COVID, depression in the free world has skyrocketed as well. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 45% of the US population is now depressed; Iran self-reports a 60% depression rate, and China reports a 35% rate of depression (Goodman, 2020). As someone who has long dealt with confinement, I can empathize with how the COVID-driven lockdown has spiked these depression figures.

There are many triggers of depression. As with those in larger society, prisoners wrestle with long-term loss of autonomy and uncertainty. Prisoners are arrested by thick bouts of anxiety and isolation. And while it may seem ironic that a person thrusts into overcrowded conditions could suffer from loneliness, the paradox holds firm. Human beings, whether confined in a home of luxury for a few months or in a barren cell of concrete and steel for decades, tend to withdraw when depressed. We self-isolate.

Free Americans are largely depressed because they understandably desire to get back to work, to visit their families, and to have some control over their lives. Prisoners can relate to those needs. The one disconnect from prisoners in the larger world is that for most free persons, abiding in their homes offers both physical safety and a degree of comfort. Not so for the average prisoner. Prisoners have no control over with whom they are forced to share a cell (i.e., a serial killer, a severely mentally challenged person, or a violent and unreasonable person), we can hardly control our diets, or schedules, or work routines.

Some readers may retort that prisoners are criminals, therefore we deserve what we get, we have lost our right to make daily choices, and so on. Yet rarely is any human phenomenon so simple. In recent years DNA has proven there are many innocent people behind bars; and we now know that race plays a huge part in who goes to prison. Likewise, what about those who suffer from substance abuse and would be better served in a treatment center rather than in a prison? And what about those who reform themselves after years or decades of self-help? "Prisoners" are not monolithic; our stories are complex, our needs diverse, our emotions just as confusing and conflicted as those out in the free world.

Now we know that we're all susceptible to COVID, depression, and other vulnerabilities. Whether in bondage or free, we have quite a bit in common. If anyone can relate to the concept of situational lockdowns, it is the American prisoner. And when it comes to debilitating depression, anxiety, and loneliness, the prisoner's expertise goes far beyond any textbook or media account—and so, during COVID, as you struggle with lockdown, remember, we prisoners empathize more than you could ever imagine.

Sources: *CDCR Report* (2016), California Department of Corrections, www.cdcr.ca.gov; Amy Goodman, May 14, 2020, *Democracy Now* (interviewing Devora Kestel of the WHO and Andrew Solomon, author of "The Noon Day Demon").

A Grateful Complaint

Jarold A. Walton

You made me wear clothes that fit
They were tight
Felt like church clothes
When I wanted to go outside to play you made me stay home
said I had to help you roof and paint our house
That was mean
Why did I have to break and turnover the soil in the front yard for new grass?
You could have hired someone for that
But no. You were too cheap
All those times you ruined my plans
Waking me up early in the morning to go fishing with you
That was torture
Tilling parts of the backyard, planting fruit trees, and cutting wood
That was all punishment
I think back to the way you were
The things you did not allow me to do, the parties and events I missed

I did not deserve to be treated that way
The juvenile in me gets angry
The adult says thanks



"Remember Their Names," by Harry Ellis.



"Distancia Social," by Marcus Pettiford.

Do I Matter?

Terrance Harris Jr.

I died last week
I got killed in the middle of the street
Nobody marched for me

My black life didn't matter
Moms couldn't afford a suit or a casket
So I was burned to ashes

I got shot to death last week
I got knocked off my feet
By somebody that looks just like me

Don't anybody even care
My whole life was unfair
Because MLK's dream is America's nightmare

I got murdered in cold blood
Because I thought it was cool to thug
And I never knew who I truly was

No rallies or no signs
Never seen justice eye to eye
I guess it's true, justice is blind

Somebody called the police who said
"That's how they act in the summer heat"
And I got what was coming to me

I got slaughtered in the street
By a child people called a beast
Didn't nobody even walk a single step for me?

Maybe because I wasn't killed by police
Maybe if my killer was racist
It would provoke compassion and hatred

Instead my black ass life don't matter
And my killer's black ass life matters even less
When they give his black ass life
For our entire black ass lives
We fought the wrong fight

I got gunned down in the street last week
In front of everybody
Ain't no witnesses the difference is

If I got shot by a cop
People from everywhere would flock
And fill the whole block

And they'd sing, and march, and protest, and chant, and cry, and scream,
and holler, and barricade city hall, block off the freeway, and hold people
accountable, demand change, and demand justice, and hold up signs and . . .

Hold up
Timeout
I can't breathe
I can't believe
I got killed last week
And you didn't even hear a peep
Because my killer looks just like me

Associations

Fredrick Mason

In our everyday lives, whether we find ourselves in jail or out, associations are important. We are often judged by who we associate with. The old saying "birds of a feather flock together" holds true. Because of the close proximity of life in prison, you will be judged more harshly by your associations.

Associations are of two types, positive and negative. If we reflect on our past, it will usually be seen that our lives took a turn for the worse when we began to "hang around the wrong crowd." It was in that group that we smoked our first joint, skipped school, and began stealing. All behavior is learned and so was our criminal behavior. As easily as going along with the wrong crowd, we could have sat in the front row of the class with those "A" students who went on to college and later became professionals. Had we made the decision to have positive associations we would not have fallen prey to the negativity that eventually led us to being where we are. We all know about how race and class and gender and other systemic forces impact our lives, but I am telling you, your decisions matter. You decide who to hang out with, you pick your associations.

This means one of the first steps toward change and self-improvement is to begin to choose positive associations who will benefit us in the long run. One good look will tell you that there is very little actual thinking going on in prison environments. The real thinkers are few, and that is what makes them noticeable. You will find these persons taking full advantage of the educational and vocational opportunities made available to them. They use their time wisely, preparing themselves for their lives in the free world. These are the best associates, and we can usually benefit from their insights and accept their advice.

Try to remember, your friends will either help bring you up or take you down. They can be assets or liabilities. So choose your friends wisely!!!!

Fever Dream/Cold Splash of Water in the Face/Caesura

Bill Yousman

He sits down to write, because that's what he does:

When interpreting the seemingly sudden and widespread embrace of the Black Lives Matter movement in the Spring of 2020, two important strategic and ideological aspects of the movement must be considered. First, contrary to the discourse of conservative media and politicians, BLM does not advocate violence as a path to social change. Second, BLM is grounded in a radically intersectional approach to the fight for social justice (Taylor, 2016). Alicia Garza made this explicit when she wrote:

It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum (2014, n.p.).

Similarly, Kelley points out the ideals behind both BLM and the larger justice movement they are emblematic of: "They are trying not only to stop state thuggery, but also to create a new community dedicated to a post-racist, post-sexist, post-homophobic, and post-colonial world" (2016, p. 33).

Therefore, the new widespread public adoption of the slogan Black Lives Matter must be seen as paradoxical in that...

Wait. Stop.

He can't do this. He can't write another academic paper. He can't offer a theoretical analysis.

Fever Dream

4% of the world's population, yet
25% of global carbon dioxide emissions
25% of the world's prisoners
25% of the world's Covid-19 deaths

America Eats Its Young
Who would sacrifice the great grandsons and daughters
Of her jealous mother

By sucking their brain
Until their ability to think was amputated?
-- Funkadelic

Cold Splash of Water in the Face

Even in the midst of global protest... global pandemic... global dis-ease. Keep adding names to the list:

Rayshard Brooks. 27 years old. A son. A father. A husband. A member of a family. A friend. A human being. Write it down. Keep writing. Even when you can't.

Caesura

Stop. Something new is happening outside his window. Is the revolution being televised?

Instead of repeating the same deadly errors of official history—instead of stepping forward as a soldier, instead of getting on the train as a Good German, instead of saluting the flag as a patriot, instead of going to work, instead of nodding in assent when addressed through all of our shared stupidities—why don't we try something else, something that is more adequate to how we'd like to live? (White, 2020, p. 118).

Fever Dream

Morning. Mourning. We've been in mourning for four hundred years of mornings.

Liberation from oppression is, in the most concrete sense, a matter of life and death. Therefore, oppression is as impermissible and intolerable as murder. Oppression is, in fact, murder. To him, any attempt to dodge this truth, or to hide from its imperative for immediate action, was incomprehensible and unforgivable. Comfort with oppression wasn't bad because it might lead to a holocaust; oppression was the holocaust, and comfort was complicity (Kushner, 2020, p. A27).

Cold Splash of Water in the Face

He looks out the window at a house where a multigenerational family lives. One resident of the house abuses the others. Beats them, neglects them, steals from them, molests them. Finally, some of the residents, out of sheer frustration, sorrow, and rage, smash all of the windows, rip the doors off the hinges. Neighbors, who have been silent for all these years, suddenly feel the need to voice their concerns. So, they speak up . . . condemning those who broke the windows. Broken windows. Broken windows.

Social psychologists and police officers tend to agree that if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken (Kelling and Wilson, 1982, n.p.)

Imagine that. The neighbors, psychologists, and police all agree. Did anyone ask the humans living in the house?

Caesura

Tired of Waiting For You:
I'm so tired
Tired of waiting
Tired of waiting for you
-- The Kinks

Wasn't it inevitable?

This multiracial, multigenerational, multigendered rebellion.

The frustration of generations boils over. It is Emmett Till, Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor and... and... and... and all of the other youngoldmalefemaletransBlack people America has eaten. And continues to eat. Every. Single. Day. But it is also the "collateral damage" of brutal racial capitalism.

Our ancestral memories sense what has changed and, crucially, what has not. This is the heart of "no justice, no peace."

Fever Dream

Screen One: Such an unbelievable (but so believable) racist slur at a rally (so odious he won't write it)... and the almost entirely White crowd goes wild with approval, starts chanting it over and over.

Screen Two: Multicultural protestors, led by Black people, fill the streets with music and chanting and outpourings of love and defiance in a way this nation may have never experienced before.

When white protestors, armed to the teeth in Michigan and elsewhere, make threats against elected officials, the president praises them as "very good people" and they are largely left alone. They are certainly not suffocated to death on the street. In contrast, after Minnesota's governor activated the National Guard on Thursday evening, the president suggested that those who protest police brutality could be shot (Taylor, 2020, n.p.).

1861 : 2020. The American Civil War moves into the next phase.

Cold Splash of Water in the Face (American History)

The White woman in Central Park who called the police on the Black man she said was threatening her (he wasn't) share the same last name. Cask makers all.

There's a hole in the bucket... So fix it. Fix it. Fix it.

Caesura

This is real. Your eyes reading this text, your hands, your breath, the time of day, the place where you are reading this— these things are real. I'm real too. I am not an avatar, a set of preferences, or some smooth cognitive force; I'm lumpy and porous, I'm an animal, I hurt sometimes, and I'm different one day to the next. I hear, see, and smell things in a world where others also hear, see, and smell me. And it takes a break to remember that: a break to do nothing, to just listen, to remember in the deepest sense what, when, and where we are (Odell, 2019, p. 22).

Stop. He can't do this. He can't just write another academic paper.

Coda

He wanted to end this with the last words of Elijah McClain. He can't. He can't steal that. He just has to... stop.

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Who are You?
Conner Donohue

Lean closer and you'll smell freedom
As I inch toward the real world
It is magnetic in its attraction
Hauling me outside and homeward bound
Or perhaps you'll catch a scent
Of fresh leather primed for molding
I am a blank slate revived, an unblemished canvas
Paint me as you wish

A watchful eye might see a masculine form
Modeled in my forefathers' image
The hazel irises came from Mom
Dad's responsible for the smirking smile
But pay attention to your periphery and behold
I am a snowflake, my crystals gleam
My structure intrinsically unique
Look through my clown suit and gaze inside
I am hope incarnate, invincible and alive

Lay a hand on my skin and it may appear familiar
Layers of flesh and sinew, vibrant veins will pulse
However, let it linger and graze the surface, feel its sheen
I have become brand new
I have shed the cocoon of my past life
Slithered away from my old skin
I am ready to spread my wings!
I am eager to soar to heights unknown

I could tell you all about my outer life
My scars and facial hair or who I pretend to be
Perhaps I might describe my shortcomings
What I find fault with or some pet peeves
Yet I discovered that is all shallow and superficial
I long to be seen in a different light
I want to be heard by diverse ears
I need to be felt wholeheartedly
I will answer to completion when you ask
"Just who in the world are you?"

Back into the Belly of the Beast: Organizing in One of California's Maximum-Security Prisons

Lee Gibson

Snowflakes gently fell to the ground as I stepped out of our rented Suburban. My feet touched prison property for the first time in 10 months and 18 days. I took a deep breath of frigid Susanville air.

The gun towers and once-foreboding concrete walls looked smaller than I remembered them. Through the electric fences, the housing units were littered with perfectly slivered windows, each one confining someone whom society cast away.

We, Initiate Justice (IJ), were there to end mass incarceration by activating the power of the people it directly impacts. We organize our members, both outside and inside prisons like these, to advocate for their freedom and change criminal justice policy in California.

We traveled 10 hours to High Desert State Prison (HDSP) to educate our members there about our current legislative campaigns: ACA6, which would grant voting rights to Californians on parole; AB965, to expand credit earning for Youth Offenders; AB3160, to grant people inside more access to programs and credit earning opportunities, and ACR186, a resolution that would bind our politicians to take a stand on extreme sentencing.

Dressed in all black, with Initiate Justice logos planted across our chests, we walked through the waiting maws of the prison front doors. Three formerly incarcerated people, two partners of incarcerated people, and a man who vowed to fight for his incarcerated best friend, we made our way to the administration office.



We were greeted by friendly correctional officers and Ms. Speer's energetic and excited staff. Pleasantries were exchanged and tingles coursed through my body. I was so happy and honored that these amazing people were all of collective minds: we wanted to bring civic engagement to HDSP's incarcerated people and visit IJAG's (Initiate Justice Activity Group) participants. We wanted safer communities, inside and out, and we all believed that democracy and education is the answer. Standing there, waiting for clearance to proceed, a smile split my face and my heart raced with anticipation.

The chain-link gate slid open and, like bulls waiting in a rodeo chute, we charged into the arena where our people fight for freedom every day. We walked through A Yard's recreation area—a dirt-covered football field sprinkled with tattooed captives eyeing us quizzically. We eventually made our way to the gym where our Inside Organizers had our event set up and ready to take place.

Dressed in all blue, rows of seated incarcerated souls shifted in their chairs, and the hum of greetings rose from their lips. The energy crackled with heart-pumping electricity. We went right to work preparing for the workshop.

For being such a life-sucking place, I was surprised by how alive everyone felt. The space around me buzzed with love and hope. I was honored to share space with this group. I was humbled by their strength. While last-minute details were negotiated by the leadership, I stood at the gym windows overlooking the yard. The sweat lodge was fired up with religious rituals carrying prayers to the ancestors, the soccer field sported jerseyed teams vying for goals in competitive comradery. Basketballs were sailing through the snowflaked air with shouts of "Kobeeeeee!" trailing behind.

After 25 years of living in this scene, these sights were all too familiar. I was glad to be free and knew all of the white-sneaker-wearing athletes I saw outside that window were also eager to return home.

The workshop began with A Yard's lead Inside Organizer, Kenny W. He, along with a team of HDSP Inside Organizers (Kailon, Kenny B, and Alfredo), helped create an Initiate Justice Advocacy Group to teach other incarcerated people legislative advocacy, intersectionality, and how to organize from the inside. Kenny took this moment to acknowledge his team before giving way to James—another Inside Organizer—who provided heart-stirring testimony about organizing unity.

The rest of the day flew by, visiting three more yards, all of them maximum security. With each stop, I was amazed by the professionalism, knowledge, and passion that poured from the hearts of the Initiate Justice inside and outside team. Eyes that spoke curiosity from the audience turned into a look of solidarity at every turn.

At each new session, an inside organizer started things off, laid the groundwork, and dug from the trenches of his heart about our purpose. After igniting the flames of the fellas, Richie, co-founder of Initiate Justice and recently released from prison, always went next, his presence reminding them of freedom. Richie began by reminding everyone that even though AB965, Expansion of Credit Earnings for Youth Offenders, had passed, we still needed to organize for its implementation. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) was responsible for administering AB965, and collectively we need to share our opinions on how that should be done.

Throughout the workshops, we all covered our parts. Our Bay Area community organizer, Kristine, and I discussed ACA6 (voting rights to Californians on parole). Our policy associate, Greg, and operations manager, Marta, covered AB3160, Access to Rehabilitative Programs and Equal Credit Earning. Ears perked up and bodies shifted in their seats with the realization that one day they may all earn significant amounts of time off their inflated sentences.

Táina, our co-founder and executive director, closed. She always stood, feet and resolve firmly grounded, to look the guys in the eyes. She spoke with authority about the importance of ACR186, the resolution that would require our politicians to take a stand on extreme sentencing. Under this act, the elected representatives either admit or deny that California has work to do in correcting its mass incarceration problem. This resolution will lay the groundwork for future policy changes. The overall message of the day was that every house of change is built on a strong foundation, and the battle-scarred faces in those gyms are that foundation.

Whether dressed in CDCR blue or IJ black, everyone who shared did so while wearing shoes of experience and hearts on their sleeves. We were a family united around ending mass incarceration.



Once One Day We Met

Mark DeKing

Once one day we met
we were face to face
wherever we were we
embraced the same space

Loving and laughing
we never complained
when we were together
were one and the same

Now life moves along
at times without thanks
no matter what you do
you're working for banks

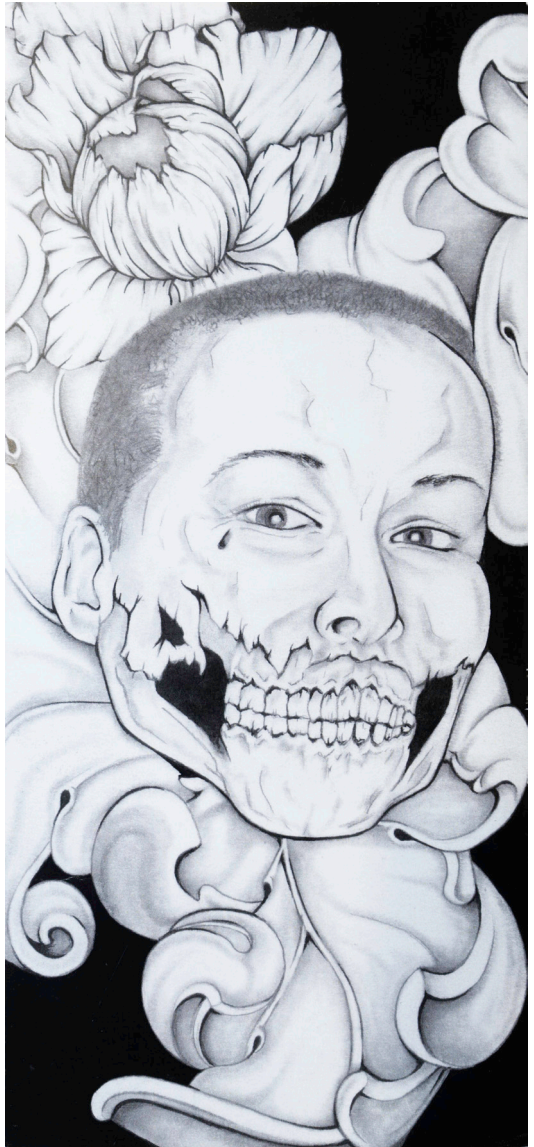
To keep and sustain
our place in the sun
we struggle and we fight
to hold what we won

Technology spurs
the progress of man
but to pay for it all
we do what we can

We work at two jobs
burnt now at both ends
rarely stop to say hi
we cease to be friends

Things we think we own
have torn us apart
a thirty-year mortgage
has replaced our heart

I'll text you back soon
as soon as I can
I'm leaving by noon for
the progress of man



"Self-Expression," by Convict Kim Henderson

I Can't Breathe

Duncan Martinez

[Angry, almost shouting] Get off my neck! What right do you have to dominate me? Why do I need to listen to you? Because you wear a badge? What does that even mean? You went to school for a couple months and carry a gun? You protect and serve? Then get your knee off my neck! Don't you get it? I ain't done nothing wrong.

[Losing steam] Get your knee off my neck. Please, I just want to live here, to be the best me I can be. I don't care about your hatred, your problems—they're not mine. Don't you get it? Just because you wear that gun like some kind'a gunslinger. What gives you the right to act like this? Why is it me that has to suffer?

[Desperate] The irony is you're the same as me, just another body under the knee of the people that pay you. The one-percenters at the top, they control this shit, and you enforce it, and you don't even know it. I voted, voted for all the right people, and it still ain't changed nothing. Not a damn thing. People are still dying because some ignorant idiot gets to be a bully. It's not just you cops, either. It's everything. If I ain't IN, I'm OUT. Get it? There's some good cops out there, too—so much of society is. But, the knee that keeps us down, it keeps all of us down.

[Breaking] The knee, it's on all our necks. We just get used to it, don't we? We go on and on just losing and stop caring. So easy, the fire just goes out. That knee gets heavier and eats into you—becomes a part of who you are. Day in and day out, that fucking knee . . . You feel a little less every day until you don't even notice. Right? Please . . . your knee?

[Broken] I . . . can't . . . breathe.

Prison Yoga

Carla Walker

In mid-morning, I lie still on dusty concrete (no yoga mats allowed outdoors!)
Breathing deeply and mindfully in corpse pose
Allowing my eyes to open briefly, I spy the majestic blue sky
With its luscious inviting fluffy clouds hovering over me
While winsome swallows dart around playfully
Inhale—I feel the cool gentle breeze and embrace the moment
Exhale—I rid my body of negative thoughts, stale memories
And grudges that no longer serve me
Instead, counting my blessings
I focus on the precious sounds of rustling leaves
Singing birds, meditative breathing
And giggling girlfriends observing nearby

Green Pastures

Terrance Harris Jr.

Green pastures, by still water
Alpha male and his followers
The wolf pack, Remus and Romulus
Hunt or starve, time to slaughter
Grim reaper, death harbingers
The thirst for blood
Eternal hunger
Eternal grudge, hate monger
Lust and greed
Full moon
Howls and screams
Its' time to feed
See the Shepard, with the staff
Time for war, this too shall pass
Protect the flock, at all cost
Stand firm, hold the line
Holy mission, divine design
Save the babies, lambs of God
Time for war, Aries and Mars
It was written in the stars
Innocent blood, martial laws
Lawlessness, fatal flaw
Coast to coast, call in the troops
Flood the streets, cock and shoot
Reload, repeat, burn and loot
Wolf is creeping in sheep's clothing
Inching closer, to god's chosen
The fence is broken, defense is open, and truth is spoken
From Philadelphia out to Oakland
Ever since Trump/Pence
In the distance
I hear trumpets
The drums of war, battle cries
Tears of fear, tear gas burns my eyes
Point of no return, insurrection
Loot and burn, from every direction
Look back, turn to salt
Art of war, war of art
Save the world like Noah's ark
Manifest the master plan, masquerade as man's best friend
Hounds of hades, full of rabies
Ain't no peace, ain't no safety
Human beings, endangered species
Propaganda, spreading lies
Children living like
Lord of the Flies
No future, born to die

Sacrificial lambs on the alter
Progeny of the martyrs
Sons of Abraham, sons of Jacob
Rise from your slumber, get out of the matrix
Wolves just want to eat
Sheep just want to graze in peace
Shepard must protect the flock
At all cost or all is lost
Burning and looting, the only solution?
No justice, no peace

Can You do What you Know?

Roderick Finley

The substance of life
Is knowledge and peace
Victory in challenges
Learning in defeat

To grab your circumstances
And conquer your fears
Taking chances and knowing
Life isn't what it appears

The real question is, can you do what you know?

Can you do what you know
With the thoughts and the words
Embedded in your mind
From the lessons you learned

Will you hold, or will you fold
Can you do what you know?

Can you dream of success
From your station in life
Until day after day
And then night after night
Becomes fruit of your hard work
Bread of your brow

Can you do what you know?
Do you even know how?

A Lesson in Language

Chand Jiwani

It started with a simple request: Please stay home.

When I hear about catastrophes, I feel like the earth's rotation slows because it is a rare occasion, when all of humanity's focus is on one incident. This time, it felt like the earth completely stopped, and then an explosion of unrest ensued. This manifested itself through fear, anger, hope, and pleas for change.

A plea for a leader of any kind to guide the masses not to graves, but to safety. The plea for our earth to heal from the inside out. A plea for care and support, for all of humanity to show its capacity for kindness.

And even after the loudness, we fell silent. The statistics, the insights, and the conversations became numbing, yet many learned to moderate their consumption and behaviors in order to protect themselves and their neighbors.

As I witness this response, I find one common factor driving people's actions: their language. Words affect response and effect change. If someone does not understand the concept, they won't consider the practice. Now more than ever, younger generations are striving for deeper meaning, mindful intentions, and detailed action. This is an uncharted path with novel navigation, which means we need now more than ever to speak clearly, to listen deeply, and to choose our words carefully. Now is not the time for loose talk and idle bluster.

In this current state, every *I love you* means a little more.

We are striving to return to a better normal, to an environment where inappropriate actions result in consequences, where lives don't need to be unnecessarily lost. This means people's eyes will need to open a little wider beyond their comfort zone to see the world, not their world. And using the right words with a steady approach is how we will get there. Whether people like it or not, this year's catastrophes are leading to an awakening, a new beginning. Hopefully we'll meet this opportunity with kindness, creativity, and the language of care and justice.

Chand Jiwani graduated from Colorado State University in 2016 as a Puksta Scholar. The Puksta Foundation supports Colorado undergraduates doing civic engagement for the common good; see our website at <https://pukstafoundation.org>.

Superhero

Jason Symonds

Members of the Imperial court, I've been brought before you on the charge of heresy, all because I dared to proclaim that my grandmother is the most powerful superhero on the planet—more powerful even than Superman. I'm aware that the law commands that only the most powerful can be superheroes. But the gods have granted me special revelation to see past limited physical traits to unlimited spiritual essence.

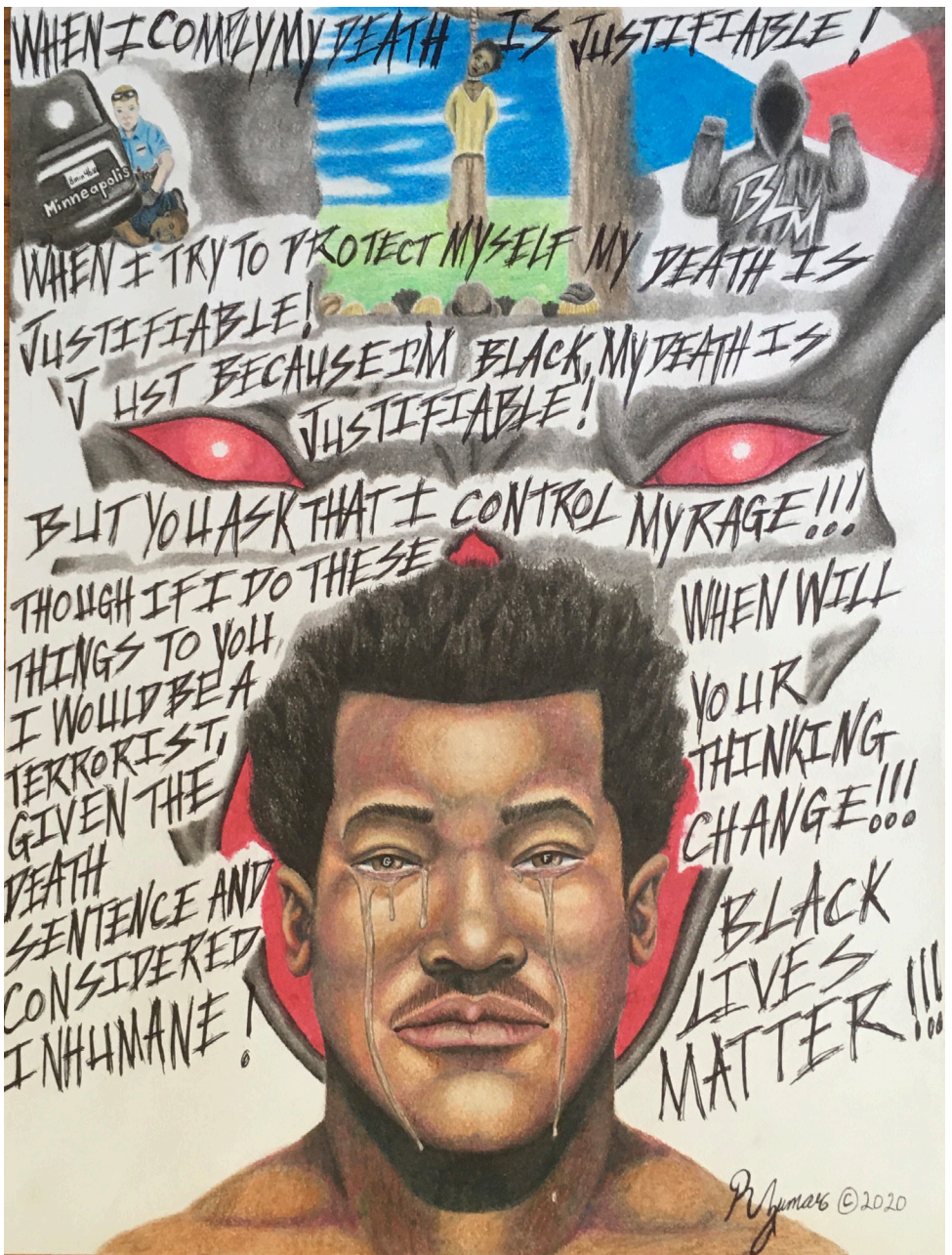
As to the charges, I'll admit that my grandmother can't see through walls like Superman. In fact, she has to wear prescription eyeglasses to watch her favorite soap operas on television. I'll also affirm that my grandmother can't leap over buildings in a single bound. On the other hand, if you saw her at 70 years old jump on top of the counter to get away from a mouse, you might think she had superpowers. And, sure, grandma doesn't have bones of steel or light speed or superhuman strength, but her smile is enough to warm any heart. It is the stuff of who I am.

I don't look like your standard issue golden-haired, blue-eyed, six-foot-one US citizen—I am no mythical norm. I'm five-foot-four, almond eyed, stocky, oh, and as if you hadn't noticed, I'm not white. In my youth, growing up in Podunk, USA, this caused me much grief. For reasons unknown to me at the time, I was stigmatized—denied participation in our culture and systems. Eventually I began to believe that what they said about me was true.

But whenever I would come home with downcast eyes and a burdened soul, grandma would ask what was wrong. "Nothing," I would recite, but she would look into my soul and know already what I would begin to tell her: "there must be something wrong with me. I'm different and alone." Grandma's response, as steady as her smile, was more than the words she spoke—more than she could ever know. From that day till now, her message of timeless wisdom and love has given me strength. She presses me on.

Years later, as a young man, I met the love of my life, and in short order we made a covenant. But when that promise was to be fulfilled, the gods in their mystery left me in despair. But grandma was there, and she knew my plight. She could feel my fear and she cared. With her superhero powers, she led me away from fear and into the light of confident love.

With this, your Honor and members of the jury, I rest my case.



"Rage," by R. Zumar

SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION ON PRISONS IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

(This will be an ongoing section of our magazine, for which we encourage our international readers to send in contributions)

U.S. & Iranian Formerly Imprisoned Women Talk Abolitionism

Frieda Afary

On September 26, the Zanan Group of Northern California, an Iranian feminist organization, sponsored a panel on women in prisons in the U.S. and Iran. Chaired by Jamileh Davoudi, the chair of the Zanan Group, the speakers included:

- Romarilyn Ralson, Program Director of Project Rebound at California State University Fullerton, who had herself served 23 years at the California Institution for Women and is an organizer with the California Coalition for Women Prisoners.
- Fatemeh Masjedi, an Iranian feminist academic historian and activist based in Berlin. She is a member of the Alliance of Middle Eastern and North African Socialists, and is a former political prisoner in Iran.
- Shahla Talebi, Associate Professor of Religious Studies/Anthropology of religion at Arizona State University, former political prisoner in Iran, and author of *Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran*.

I had the honor of moderating the panel and share these notes with the readers of Captured Words/Free Thoughts in the hope that this contribution will be the first of many in which we think about how prison-industrial complexes align across national borders, hence creating both international challenges and opportunities for organizing.

Romarilyn Ralston started the session by describing the plight of the 231,000 incarcerated women in the U.S. mass incarceration system, which is the largest in the world. Women are the fastest growing part of the U.S. prison and jail population. This rise in the prison population is strengthened by mandatory sentencing laws, harsher and longer sentencing policies, racial discrimination and bias in the courts, the criminalization of drugs, houselessness, mental illness, and poverty. This is how Ralston described the pathway to incarceration for most women: "Childhood victimization drives girls to run away from home and to use illegal drugs as a means of coping with the trauma of physical and sexual abuse. Drug selling, prostitution, and burglary often follow as a means of street survival. In a related sequence, adult women who have experienced childhood victimization resort to drugs to cope with the pain of abuse, as well as other stressors in their lives, such as adult intimate partner violence, sexual assault, or grief over the loss of custody of children." In California, as in other states: "because of poor legal representation, poverty, and racial and gender bias," mostly Black and Latinx women "are railroaded into federal and state facilities across the state to be a captive labor force for the prison regime while their children oftentimes are shuttled into a problematic and tyrannical foster care system."

Fatemeh Masjedi spoke about women political prisoners in Iran, which has 240,000 incarcerated people by the government's own report. In addition to several hundred known political prisoners, several thousand youth were arrested and held in prison for participating in uprisings against the Iranian regime since 2017. Most women are imprisoned for drug charges or their husband's debt or for defending themselves against abusive husbands. Iran allows femicide in the form of "honor" killings. Women prisoners also face the threat of death by COVID-19. Masjedi also spoke about well-known feminist political prisoners, such as Nasrin Sotudeh, a human rights attorney serving a 38-year sentence (including 148 lashes) for defending women who have taken off their headscarves in public to oppose the compulsory hijab; Narges Mohammadi, journalist and human rights activist serving an 11-year sentence for opposing the death penalty; and Zaynab Jalalian, a Kurdish political activist who is serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole for her advocacy of the Kurdish right to self-determination. She concluded that "Women imprisoned in Iran are not passive victims . . . Solidarity with them is a concrete way to oppose authoritarian and imperialist or sub-imperialist powers that are promoting exploitation, repression, misogyny, racism, and war in the Middle East and North Africa region and around the world."

Shahla Talebi argued that imprisonment should never be imagined as a solution for social problems. Prisons are about expanding forms of domination and creating docile subjects. Punishment disrupts the lives of not only the prisoners but so many around them. We need a different kind of thinking about life. Talebi's own experience of imprisonment in Iran showed her that prisoners seek ways to connect with each other to maintain their humanity. For instance, in 1988, after the Iranian government executed thousands of mostly male political prisoners, women prisoners sought to come together to create community and resistance. On an international scale, too, we need to educate ourselves about each other's struggles and not allow our governments to promote the myth of U.S. or Iranian exceptionalism.

As the moderator, I picked up from where Talebi left off, on the interconnection of struggles in the U.S. and Iran, and addressed two issues: 1) A major barrier to solidarity has been the fear of most U.S. activists that defending the uprisings inside Iran would mean supporting U.S. imperialism and its brutal sanctions against Iran. In fact, however, most Iranians oppose both their authoritarian government and imperialist intervention and sanctions. 2) Iranian prisoner solidarity activists can learn a lot from U.S. abolitionist feminism. Abolitionist feminists do not separate the plight of political and social prisoners. They oppose the carceral system as an integral part of capitalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and offer affirmative alternatives, such as restorative and transformative justice.

Romarilyn Ralston urged the audience to explore the work of abolitionist feminists and specifically Mariame Kaba's website, transformharm.org. Fatemeh Masjedi and Shahla Talebi both talked about the ways in Iran, and other countries, a harmful class distinction is made between political and social prisoners. Through their own prison experience and being put in the same cell with women who were not considered "political prisoners," however, they learned so much from women who were from working class and rural backgrounds. Romarilyn Ralston added that for abolitionist feminists, those who have been incarcerated for violent offenses also deserve healing and freedom.

This panel was highly informative and inspirational for all participants. On an immediate level, Ralston suggested that we share petitions and have more joint forums. Iranians too need an abolitionist movement that questions the very idea of prisons and shows that only a fundamental transformation of society and human relations is the solution.

For readers who want to learn more about prisons in Iran, and the roles women are playing in bringing democracy to Iran, please write to the author, Dr. Frieda Afary, at fafarysecond@yahoo.com, or visit the website of Human Rights Watch, www.hrw.org.



"Wisdom," by Convict Kim Henderson

Shout-Outs to Friends and Allies

Over the years we have thanked our friends, colleagues, and allies at the Shakespeare Prison Project in Wisconsin; the Prison Creative Arts Project in Michigan; Voices UnBroken in New York; Each One Reach One in California; the nation-wide alliance known as PCARE, which stands for Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education; the team driving the remarkable newspaper, *Prison Legal News*; the California-based but now nationally recognized activists at Critical Resistance; the Criminal Justice Reform Coalition in Colorado; and many others. For this issue, we want to offer shout-outs to new and old friends in the hope that our readers will make contact with these amazing organizations.

- If you are an activist or educator seeking colleagues with great ideas, or if you are imprisoned and seeking solidarity for your art projects, check out **The Justice Arts Coalition**. Their website is at <https://thejusticeartscoalition.org>, or you can email them at info@thejusticeartscoalition.org.

- If you are imprisoned and looking for ways to connect with correspondents, please contact the **Denver Pen Pal Collaborative** at PO Box 300562, Denver, CO, 80218. You can email them at denverpenpalcollaborative@gmail.com; or see their work on Instagram @denverpenpalcollaborative; or see their Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/denverpenpalcollaborative>.

- Three Cheers of Hooray for our friends, colleagues, and allies at what used to be called the **Prison University Project (PUP)**, out in the San Francisco Bay Area. Under Jody Lewen's leadership, PUP is morphing from an activist adventure in education-in-prison into a fully accredited 2-year college, with the new name Mt. Tamalpais College. Check out the remarkable news at their new website, www.mttamcollege.org.

- For those of you seeking the best evidence about criminal justice issues, all hail **The Sentencing Project**, which for more than 30 years has been cranking out reports, briefs, videos, and testimonies in the name of justice. Their information-stocked website is at www.sentencingproject.org, or you can email them at staff@sentencingproject.org.

CONNECTING LIFE
AND
LEARNING

TRANSFORMING
FUTURES



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COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES