Captured Free Words Thoughts



Writing & Art From America's Prisons Volume 21 - Summer 2025

CAPTURED WORDS/FREE THOUGHTS —Writing and Art from America's Prisons— Volume 21, Summer 2025

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 colleagues incarcerated in California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin.

Volume 21 was compiled and edited by Benjamin Boyce, Meghan Cosgrove, Sinead Keelin Beacom, and Stephen Hartnett. Layout and design were handled by Julia Beverly. Mailing-list management and financial responsibility were handled by Michelle Médal.

MISSION STATEMENT

We believe that 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 incarcerated writers and artists 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

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CONTRIBUTORS & SUBSCRIBERS

If you would like to contribute work to forthcoming issues, please send your poems, stories, testimonials, or art to our Correspondence Editor, Dr. 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, Dr. Stephen J. Hartnett, at stephen.hartnett@ucdenver. edu. If you submit work, please make sure to include the Permission Form, which you can find at the back of this issue.

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 1 through 21 by logging on to the CU Denver Department of Communication webpage to download free PDFs of the magazine:

 $\label{lem:https://clas.ucdenver.edu/communication/research-creative-work/captured-words-free-thoughts$

NOTES ON THE COVER

Garcia Lui's "Call Me" is an oil on canvas, used with the artist's permission. For the back-story on this joyous piece, please see Vaughn Wright's "Call Me," a poem he wrote to honor the painting, which appears on page 73. In keeping with the painting's urging, we call upon our readers to reach out to your loved ones—come on, make the call, tell 'em you love 'em.

CORRECTIONS

We try our best to get everything right, but we are human, so we make mistakes. In Vol. 20, Chris Rader's "The Apprentice Writer" should have been titled "The Appreciative Writer." Timothy Wakefield's "Sepstina Godspell" should have been titled "Sestina Godspell" and formatted in a slightly different form that corresponds to traditional sestina poetry. In Vol. 19, Louis Mamo was mistyped as Mayo. Our apologies for these errors and the others yet to come!

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Inner Space by Louis Mamo



Reporting in from deep inner space Only distant hope stars light this place Your memory still keeps me company Even if you're not here with me Even though I may seem fine I feel loose in deep space mind Engines burn and I've let go Of normalities I used to know Seeking inner worlds where I can grow Not enough time to take it slow I wish I could be there sharing your space, sharing your air But of course it's mission first Adventure is a blessing and a curse Through the hidden truths and bright lies Past the "I shoulda"s and "why try"s Awaits the planet "My Best Self" When I will arrive, I cannot tell Pray to all that I make it back And provide the man my family lacks You're doing so good, all on your own Stronger together after being alone So keep your eyes on my inner stars Your love makes it seem like it's not so far Return travel still looks real to me And pray I don't burn up on re-entry

Pavlov's Dogs by Gary Farlow

They call "chow" and we begin to salivate in anticipation of over-cooked vegetables and "mystery meat"

They call "count"
and we stand erect
silent until asked, then
we recite a number, denying our humanity

They call "mail" and we line up eyes hopeful, eager for a missive of love

They call "yard"
and we file out
to breathe the air, feel the sun
a brief respite from a cage

We are dehumanized society's forgotten existing in a maelstrom trained like circus animals but with none of their value except as cogs in the industry of evil called prison



Photo: Erastus McCart

Photo: Taylor Kopel

Bluesby Chantry Loewen

Well nigh on 5 miles East of Dodge City
I finally had to break down and show my baby pity
She looked at me and her face turned red
Puffing up like a bird she said
"Lover, I need a blue...a bluuuue to take my blues away"

Well now the first sign of life was old Fort Dodge 2 AM found us in a parking lot Just me, my baby, the dust, and our dog

Well come nigh on 3 I had to stop and smile
Yeah I had glanced at her, she'd been nodding for awhile
So I took a rip, then I had a talk with God

Well by the time I was done, you know all I loved was gone She took my damn car, my money, my wallet, dog, and phone Yeah, all she left me was a broken heart

Well all these years later I guess here I am
Yeah I'm just me, just another man
Moving on and doing the best I can
Singing "I need a bluuuue, a bluuuue to take my blues away"

Everywhere by Sylvester Jones Jr.

Any and everywhere I am Is my motherland I am the creator of my outcome

Where I travel, wherever I rest I'm mastering my thoughts Which create what's next

Whether I'm here or there I control my surroundings everywhere

My Christmas Prez: The Nutcracker by Lytezia Montes

Christmas bells chime, reindeer fly Little girls and little boys excited for gifts beneath the tree Family photos at Macy's with Santa A ballet—The Nutcracker Symphony

Broken hearted as tears stain my face I look across the auditorium to see my father With another family A new little girl on his lap

Only five, my heart pieces slowly fall to the floor

He made a promise that night To come and sit with me Before the start of the symphony Instead, I was met with betrayal

It came soon after that Toys began to disappear My Ferbie, My Nintendo Switch Anything that reminded me of him

I never threw a tantrum But I did start to forget I lost a father I'll never get back Memories I expected but will never have

Years later I'm arrested And who is my officer But my father Who gives me his name But nothing else Slams me into a cell And says goodbye Again

Christmases come and go So do fathers Who knew to know?



State Issued Socks by Larry May

The holiday season in prison can be miserable. Being separated from family members and friends this time of year is especially trying. I often flash back to my childhood to distract me from my current situation. The smell of a freshly cut tree, the hundreds of colorful lights, and the presents in all shapes and sizes bring back fond memories. The hanging of beautiful Christmas stockings was a highlight for me. Santa would fill them with many small toys and various candies. After waking my parents, I remember running toward the fireplace and reaching for my stocking. I'd dump out all the goodies—they always put a smile on my face. The combination of toys and chocolate couldn't be beat.

Now I have my own kids. Before I came to prison, Santa and I stuffed their stockings each year to the brim. These cherished stockings brought as much happiness to my children as they did to me.

At Pelican Bay State Prison, here in the Crescent City, my roommate and I had an idea: why not share the joy and cheer up other inmates through the gift of giving? How? We invited every man in our building to decorate a state-issued sock with a holiday theme. Ken and I supplied the markers and explained that each sock should be returned on Christmas eve to be filled with treats.

The response was overwhelming. We hung dozens of beautifully decorated empty socks on the wall leading up to Christmas. It was an astonishing display of artwork that guards in other buildings stopped by to see. But it was the evening of the 24th when the real magic happened—when Ken and I went to

work for and as Santa.

We slowly stockpiled an assortment of treats and hygiene items from our quarterly packages and the canteen. Shower shoes are essential in prison, so they went into the socks first. Then came a soda, a bag of mixed nuts, a Rice Krispy treat, a pastry, some hard candy, and a variety of dark and milk chocolates. We jammed those socks to the brim, and I couldn't remember the last time I felt so good about life. Ken did too. We stayed up all night laughing and telling childhood stories.

On Christmas morning, Ken asked the guard if we could pass out the bulging socks, and bright and early, our doors popped open. Off we went on a mission of spreading Christmas joy to our neighbors. We started at one end of the building, going from cell to cell and receiving thanks, smiles, and even hugs. "Merry Christmas" echoed throughout the cellblock as each door was closed before the next was opened (for safety reasons). t took us an hour to make it to every cell and return to our bunks, content in the sound of soda cans popping all morning.

We performed the annual event for four years before I was transferred to Corcoran State Prison. This simple act of love deeply affected those restless and homesick men. It deeply affected us as well. It may have given them a nice Christmas morning, but it changed our lives forever.

Happy holidays and God bless.

My Execution: Last Will and Testament by Dale "Bugsy" Wakefield

Will you come to my execution? I would rather die by your electrocution When you touch me A lasting memory on my way to eternity

Will you come to my execution? Before they put the noose around my neck I've had a lot of time to reflect On all the things that went unmasked

Will you come to my execution? Before they stick the needle in my vein Any last words for me to say? On my dying breath was your name

So don't break eye contact This feeling won't last Before I'm forced to breathe in the toxic gas I think of all the things that went unmasked

I want to tell you something I want to feel you more I'm going to tell you something I have never said before And that is how my heart is finally yours



Photo: Alexis Fauvet

A Captured Words/Free Thoughts Interview with Dortell Williams

A long-time contributor to our magazine, graduate of the Cal State LA prison education program, and now a Master's student out in California, we thought it was time to speak in more detail with Dortell Williams. We conducted this interview the old fashioned way, via snail mail.

SJH: So, Dortell, you have earned a Bachelor's Degree through the fantastic program run by Cal State LA—congratulations! I was meeting with one of your professors, Dr. Kamran Afary, at a conference in Washington, D.C., and he mentioned that you have matriculated into a Master's Degree program? Wow, that is great news. So, this is a two-part question: First, what does it mean to you and your family to have earned that college degree? Second, please tell us about your Master's work—how is it going? What are you working on? Does this mean you are aiming for a PhD eventually?

Dortell: The benefits of earning a BA continue to multiply for me and my family. For me, having been called stupid and other disparaging names growing up, my self-esteem was damaged. For many of us having gone through the criminal court apparatus, and being constantly controlled and belittled by correctional staff, it is easy to fall into defeatism. Education challenged me to seek my potential, to challenge warped thinking patterns, and to understand mainstream thinking, ideals, and mores. Participating in education made me feel like a part of society, as opposed to being marginalized by society. My education has helped me to lead and guide my family and made me a positive model for my peers.

My first semester in the Cal State Dominguez Hills Master's Program has been very rewarding, but also deeply challenging. So much reading, with deadlines piled on top of deadlines! I suppose this is why they call it a discipline, a great characteristic to instill in incarcerated people. Our field of study is humanities, which is also good for incarcerated persons because people who think criminally tend to "otherize" those we choose to victimize. Humanities teaches us how deeply humanity is connected, and how much we must depend on each other's contributions to survive and thrive. As for earning a PhD, I am willing to go as far as opportunity will allow me. I am just as interested in what my potential is as those who believe in and support me.

SJH: I want to go back to Volumes 17 and 18 of our magazine. Those issues were published during the worst phases of the COVID pandemic, and in both editions you wrote terrific pieces tackling issues of how to hold on to hope in dark times. You wrote that staying positive "is a choice, 'cause it's all about perspective" (Vol. 18, p. 51, in "Happy Holidays in the Era of COVID"). You make it sound easy, but I know you have to do the work of staying positive, right? It is an effort, a series of hard-earned practices. So can you share with us, what mental, physical, and spiritual routines do you use to help you stay positive?

Dortell: There is no question that prison is difficult. Prison's very design is to punish, and the extent of the deprivation—from privacy to autonomy—is physically and mentally draining. However, 34 years of imprisonment and self-education have helped me develop coping

skills and a resilience that has thus far helped me avoid the suicidal ideation that is too common in American, and particularly California, prisons. From Viktor Frankl and his logotherapy, to cognitive behavior intervention, to trauma-informed care, I have not only internalized these perspectives-based modalities, but I teach them to my peers. In this way, education has helped me shape my environments to make them more palatable and survivable, making them less violent and more prosocial.

SJH: So, Dortell, now that federal Pell Grants are available to incarcerated learners, we're seeing a stampede of educational programs coming back into prison. Please talk with us about what it means to incarcerated students to have the opportunity to take college classes? And to those of our neighbors who criticize the use of tax dollars to support these educational programs, what would you say?

Dortell: I welcome Federal Pell grants to help subsidize the education of the incarcerated class. Many of us come from "neglected neighborhoods" and "defunded" zip codes (historically redlined areas) where our educational opportunities were very limited. Most of the people who come to prison are undereducated. So this assistance is viewed as a social reset, social justice if you will, that gives us another opportunity to catch up and contribute to the larger community. And with incarceration costing anywhere from \$70,000 to \$100,000 annually to warehouse one person behind bars, most people understand it is more sensible to pay \$4,500 in Pell Grants each semester as a better return on our community's investment in public safety.

SJH: OK, final question. Most of us who work in prisons, or live in prisons, or teach in prisons, find ourselves circling again and again back to the question of mentorship. Some of us had great mothers and fathers who were also our teachers and role models, but many young people caught up in the prison system never had those positive role models—either through parents, or good teachers, or sports coaches, or band leaders, you name it. So now that you are an older prisoner, a college graduate, a published writer, and a strong community leader, what kind of mentoring do you offer to the youngsters? How do you embody that spirit of mentoring and leadership?

Dortell: Mentorship is paramount. In addition to traumatic events and neglect, from my experience, lack of mentorship is one of the top causes of imprisonment. My approach to mentorship is empowerment. I go in discounting my eldership and emphasizing my experience. I explain that my age is irrelevant and as a truly curious soul, I invite my peers to teach me what I don't know. From the outset, I make my mentorship inclusive and equal. Even if we were all the same age, experience is what sets us apart. I learn from those who play b-ball better than me, or play an instrument, and they learn from my writing and cognitive behavior therapy classes. Again, from my experience, by empowering and highlighting their potential, the masks come off and people are more willing to be vulnerable and supported. This approach opens the door to modeling de-escalation, patience, responding rather than reacting, and offers better long-term outcomes.

Captured Words / Free Thoughts Writing & Art From America's Prisons

Territorial Uniformity by Timothy Wakefield

Frendof was a tiger born stripeless in the jungle. He saw his mother's stripes, and he knew he belonged to her—they were family. It didn't take long for his dependence on her to cause him to want stripes of his own. Frendof began to identify himself with his mother's stripes. He met his father and began to obsess about stripes of his own, "When will I get my stripes? Will they look exactly like everyone in my family?" he asked. No one had a good answer.

Frendof's family had wide, black stripes and long tails that allowed for more balance and agility. But Frendof was born a free spirit, maybe even a bit rebellious. When he was young, he wanted his tail to be shorter, and he wanted more orange stripes than black. He loved the color orange because it made him stand out in the jungle. And in an odd twist of fate, he got his wish; his stripes didn't show up like the other young tigers.

His parents noticed his coming of age and they were worried Frendof wouldn't be able to survive without their protection. The other creatures of the jungle would see him too easily. How would he eat?

But Frendof wasn't worried about blending in. He just wanted to be comfortable in his own skin. He wanted to grow up to be the most orange, most unique, most beautiful tiger the world had ever seen. Proud of his orange stripes, the jungle became a safer place because it was easier for the other unique and exotic creatures to see him. They would call down to him from the safety of the branches overhead, shouting hellos and caw-caw from on high. But it didn't take long for their greetings to start to sound like mocking. Frendof was starving, and he couldn't eat because he couldn't sneak up on anything. For the first time in his life, he wished he had the same stripes his parents had.

Frendof wound up in a steel cage one day when he came out of the jungle to poach a helpless piglet. Poachers of a different breed captured him and put him behind bars. Blindfolded from everything he had ever known, they sent him by train to an international circus.

Trapped in a bad situation, he tried to look on the bright side; at least he wasn't starving in the jungle because his prey could see him coming a mile away. Now he had plenty to eat. But something wasn't right. In fact, it was all wrong. Tigers aren't supposed to live in dank cages.

One day he awoke to the jingling of chains, the blinding sunlight, and the smell of many other tigers, his first vision was a man approaching him with a leash in hand. From the first time he saw him, Prosin inspired nothing but fear within Frendof. His

intuition was correct.

Prosin was the circus's head trainer—"the best, and most famous tiger trainer in all of the land," as he frequently repeated. Prosin's training lineage could be traced back 151 years, so he relied on what his daddy had taught him: brute force and more error than trial. Whispering to the tigers appealed less to him than shouting with the crack of a whip. Of course, Frendof was angry and resisted performing, so Prosin tried starving him to break his stubborn spirit. Then he tried leaving him in his cage for days on end. Once he even forced him to wear a muzzle.

When none of that worked, Prosin sedated Frendof with raw meat. When Frendof awakened from his dream, he saw his stripes had been dyed from orange to green. His trainer laughed in his face saying, "If you don't want to be a good tiger and you are no longer free, maybe now you'll act more like a tree."

Stripeless and terribly green, Frendof became despondent. He suddenly loved his stripes, and he worried his family wouldn't recognize him at all. They wouldn't even see him because he would just look like every jungle tree. Prosin thought the scheme worked so well that he began to dye all the other tigers green. But little did he know this would unite the tigers against him and the audience would lose interest in the tiger act because they, too, enjoyed the black and orange majesty of each tiger.

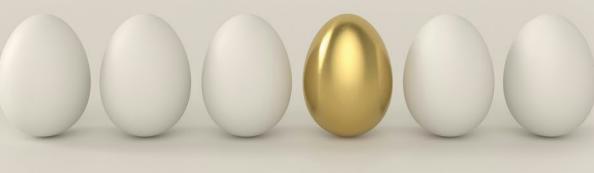
Tigers will do anything to keep their choice of stripes. It didn't take Frendof long to figure out a way to get some of his stripes back: he began to claw at his face until he had stripes that were red and raw. The other tigers, seeing this, began to do the same. Prosin noticed all the tigers began to have scars on their legs and marks on their chests and backs, but because he didn't believe in animal. psychology—that animals were even capable of psychology—he never stopped to think about why they were hurting themselves. Instead he started taking more things away from the tigers.

By this point Frendof and the other tigers no longer cared. They had their new stripes that could never be taken away. With these new stripes they were committed to the only version of freedom they had ever known, their own circus freedom. Some of them escaped. Most of them refused to perform. Eventually the circus had to release them back into the wild, and Prosin was fired for his incompetence.

As for Frendof, he returned to the wild, untrained, and with his new stripes. No longer were the overhead branches crowded with friendly calls of admiration and jest. Now the other creatures of the jungle were terrified of Frendof far more than when he was first put into the cage.

Frendof was lost. He wandered around as if he was floating in outer space; society saw it written all over his face. His new stripes made him part of neither world.









Healing the Past to Build a Future that Lasts by Lisa Forbes

I've read and loved many prison memoirs. But what I didn't see in them was a pathway to break the chains of trauma that were keeping people tied to their past. Toni Morrison said "If there's a book that you want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." So I wrote it.

I Can Take It from Here: A Memoir of Trauma, Prison, and Self-Empowerment is the statement I want to make about myself and it's the vision I hold of other people-that they too can get to the point where they can go forward from wherever they are.

I spent 14 years in prison for killing my daughter's father. In my memoir I refer to myself as a "restored citizen," a phrase I use to describe people who have been released from prison. The term has special meaning to me. There's a scripture in the Bible, which I read in prison.

that says "God will restore to you the years that the locusts and the cankerworm and the caterpillar have devoured" (Joel 2:25). When I read that promise, I claimed it. I wanted to be restored to the life I knew I was capable of living.

I started writing my memoir for people who had been incarcerated. I wanted to share my experiences with them and give them not just hope, but a tool they could use, like I did, to create permanent change in their lives.

As I shared my drafts along the way, people who had never been in prison started sharing their stories with me, and then I realized that trauma is trauma. You don't have to ever have been arrested to be in a prison in your own life.

I grew up with five brothers and sisters in a cramped public housing apartment on the south side of Chicago. I got hit by a car when I was four and was told it was because I was "hardheaded." I was bullied and emotionally and spiritually abused. My mother was in a religious group that was waiting for the end of the world. I was sexually abused daily by one of my brothers beginning at the age of eight and developed suicidal ideations. My father was an alcoholic. I graduated from high school at 15, but my mother said I didn't need any more knowledge of this world. Instead of being sent off to college, I was handed a worker's permit and sent to a full-time job at a downtown Chicago office. At 16, I was pregnant by a man I met on that job. When my daughter was two years old, I stabbed her father in a fit of rage, and spent the next 14 years in prison, convicted of murder.

At my sentencing hearing, the judge said, "It is too late for Lisa Forbes."

But something in me knew that couldn't be true. I couldn't change what I had done, but I could change who I was being.

In prison, I escaped back into books, just as I had during childhood. I spent as much time as I could in the prison library. I discovered Mark Twain, who made me laugh. I read the Complete Works of William Shakespeare. But I also read books like Revolutionary Suicide by Huey P. Newton, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, and The Wretched of the Earth by Franz Fanon.

I was 19 when I went to prison and 33 when I came home. Once released, re-entry organizations that helped former prisoners find jobs wouldn't help me. With my crime, I was considered "the worst of the worst." I realized I was going to have to help myself. In my book I take you with me on the path I took toward self-empowerment, using a technique called "tapping" (aka "EFT" or "Emotional Freedom Techniques") as my primary means of emotional emancipation.

And when I began to experience the benefits of EFT—feeling more capable, less trapped, and less triggered by things—I knew I had landed on something powerful. Because it had to be powerful to help me. And if it could set me free, I was confident it could help a lot of people.

I support criminal justice reform, but I will also tell you that it wouldn't have helped me. And it wouldn't have helped the masses of people like me, whose primary path to the prison door was paved with unprocessed pain. As a society, we will never end mass incarceration and mass recidivism until we acknowledge and address the role that trauma plays in it

My book is my story, but in many ways it is the story of millions of people, and it is a thread woven throughout the American story. I believe the next chapter in this story should be, first, healing the root causes of an individual's incarceration, and then addressing the systemic causes of mass incarceration. But we cannot wait for poverty and racism to be eradicated from the world before we decide to make better decisions in our own lives.

I have a pilot program called OPERATION: I Can Take it From Here, based upon a program in which combat veterans with severe PTSD had EFT practitioners work with them for five days. These veterans were then followed for two years, and it was proven that EFT had resolved their trauma. I want to bring the same pilot program to prisoners and to restored citizens upon their release.

My dream is to launch national awareness about trauma resolution before it explodes into a crime. We also need treatment at the community level that will enable not just former prisoners, but anyone struggling with a personal history of trauma, to be able to say "That was then. This is now. I can take it from here."

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Overcoming Childhood Trauma with Forgiveness and Love by Joshua A. Wolf

My name is Joshua A. Wolf. I was asked by Dr. Hartnett to write an essay, letter, or poem for this magazine. I was excited about this invitation and decided to write you a personal letter. I would like to begin with a few words from one of my heroes, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I pray that you think about these words as they hold a key to overcoming trauma and abuse. I remember him saying: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that. We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. Forgiveness comes before love."* Those last four words have always challenged me: forgiveness comes before love. How? Why? In my worldview, I tend to think that love motivates us to extend forgiveness to others. I see forgiveness as the outflow of love. But why does he say "forgiveness comes before love?" In what circumstances would forgiveness be a requirement before love could flow?

I think Dr. King meant that unhandled abuse and trauma create festering resentments that generate hate and darkness within us. They blind us to the positive emotions in life. They fill us with so much negativity that our growth and maturity is choked and cut off. Unforgiveness and hate make finding helpful solutions to real problems almost impossible. They rob us of our humanity and enslave us. They blind us to the way forward. Dr. King was largely speaking to a group of oppressed people, many of whom held deep resentments and hate toward a system that had, for decades, abused and oppressed them. They had internalized the trauma. The hate was real and the way forward would be forgiveness as the first step in healing. Dr. King knew that if hate won their hearts, and bitter reactionary behavior ensued, then the potential for the annihilation of the entire movement and people was on the table. The stakes were high, and King knew, hate and reaction were not the way forward. No, on the contrary, forgiveness and the power to love were what the movement needed. Here, forgiveness had to precede love so that the resentments could be let go and the light allowed in so that the way forward could be realized.

So what does this have to do with overcoming childhood trauma? How does the oppression of an entire race of people relate to the abuse that a person may unleash on a child? The situations are similar in some ways. In general, there is an authority figure or system that abuses their power on a human they are responsible for taking care of. During and after the abuse, feelings of helplessness, shame, powerlessness, resentment, anger, and enslaving hate can ensue if not handled properly. If the abuse generates shame and is internalized, then the psychological phenomena of disassociation can occur to varying degrees where we withdraw inwardly to protect ourselves and put up a protective wall of anger to drive others away. It is a defense mechanism. With this defense, we will struggle to truly love and feel the wonderful love from others. We essentially become our own prison and surrender our real power as human beings.

But wait, you object and say: "I have been victimized! What power do I have?"

*Martin Luther King, Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," sermon delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, November 17, 1957.

The real power you have is the ability to choose your attitude in any given set of circumstances. That is the one power that no system or person can ever take from you. Within all of us lies the incredible ability to choose our attitude. We always have the power to extend forgiveness and love from deep within our hearts. Allowing forgiveness and love to rule as the internal attitude of our hearts does not let the abuser off the hook or allow the system to stay the same. No. Consequences will still be rendered and change for the better must be strived for. But we do not have to be slaves to resentments and anger. We can be free men and women on the inside. We can be liberated from the inside out. This freedom starts with a powerful choice that you will always have: the power to choose to love and forgive others from deep within your hearts.

My fiancée, Pam, is a wonderful person and my love for her motivates me to extend unconditional love and forgiveness to her whenever she slips and unintentionally hurts me.

I have to do this. Why? Because as a child I suffered unimaginable abuse and trauma from my mentally-ill mother who would often go off her medication and abuse me in the most inhumane and horrific ways. The abuse lasted all through my elementary school years. To cope with this as a child, I put

up a protective wall (disassociation) and lashed out in anger at anyone who hurt me, especially emotionally. Anger was my response to almost every type of emotional hurt. I was stuck and Pam started to feel my anger whenever she would unintentionally hurt me emotionally. I loved Pam though and hated hurting her feelings with my anger over trivial things. I did not understand what was going on until something miraculous happened.

One day, while I was in a dissociative state, Pam's love gently graced the walls of my fortified heart. There, in that moment, I knew it was time to let go of the past so I could love Pam as she deserves. I forgave and allowed the light to come in. Darkness and hate fled. They had to. Light and love had dispelled them. I was liberated on that day from the inside out. I was truly free.

Today, Pam and I recognize that we are both broken and fallen people who need grace and mercy every day. We both have been through a great deal in life and I know there is a chance that you have too (most people in prison have). Pam and I both had to let go of the past resentments and anger that held us in bondage. Because we let go and embraced unconditional love and forgiveness as a way of life, we can now share our hurts with each other in a kind and gentle way. We apologize, forgive, and pray whenever necessary. She shares and I

empathetically listen. I share and she listens with her kind heart. We forgive and love marches forward. Because Pam and I chose to let go of our past by embracing love, a wonderful and harmonious dance radiates between us and out into the world. We have chosen to forgive ourselves and those who have trespassed against us—and the reward is a shared heart of love! We invite you to do the same.

I will leave you with the words of Victor Frankl from his memoir *Man's Search for Meaning*: "Anything can be taken from a man, except one thing, the last of the human freedoms: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." I pray you choose love and walk in the light of your future.



Photo: Winnie H.

As I Walk Out the Gate by Jakeilah Weeks

"Legal Mail: Second District Court of Appeals." Is this what I think it is? Could it be true? Am I finally going home after a decade of incarceration? Should I pack my stuff? Where do I begin? What will I take with me? Hmmm...let me see...

My photo albums and pictures will go, of course, even though all of them are over five years old—reminders of my memories and what I missed while I was gone. I lost out on birthdays, funerals, weddings, and first days of school. I can't get those days back; they're gone forever. These pictures will keep my mind focused so I never miss another important day.

My Lady and the Tramp cup that my sister Latoya made for me. It will remind me of the talent and gems that I'm leaving behind this iron gate. I vow to do what I can to raise awareness concerning the cruelty of a life sentence. There is so much treasure buried here, so many abilities left undiscovered. Someone needs to uncover them. We can all benefit from the riches created with second changes.

My pretty, purple pen, long since run out of ink. It's a gift I cherish from a

long-gone friend. I can't bear to part with it, for it reminds me of those who were meant to be in my life for a season. We were never made to be forever. I know our friendship was real, but we walked as far along the road together as we could. When she decided to go left, I went right, but I pray our paths will cross again someday.

My canteen bag, because I'm not carrying all of this stuff in my hands and pockets.

My journals? Yeah, I want those, plus the cards and letters I received while inside, and the poems I've written.

I'm leaving my DOC number. I'm tired of being "Weeks! 156808!" For ten years I've been forced to identify myself as that number, but no more. I am not a number. My name is Jakeilah Renee. I have a purpose. I have power. I am a work of beauty. I am bold. I am strong. I am a woman of dignity. No longer property of the state, at last I have the opportunity to reach my full potential. Only the sky is the limit as to what I can truly be. Loosened from the heavy chains that weighted me down, finally, yes finally, I am free.



What you Make of It: Restorative Justice and Self-Improvement by Andrew Foust

"This will be what you make of it," I repeatedly told myself the day I got to Montana State Prison. The mantra has been a constant reminder; I am my biggest supporter. The things we tell ourselves on a daily basis can be the difference between whether we are self-motivated or not. I've seen both extremes inside. For many, acedia and apathy take hold as they constantly focus on the negative aspects of prison and project their victimization onto others. There are few opportunities for education or self-improvement in prison; they act more like waste management facilities by reinforcing a counterintuitive prevention focus that leads to unconscious incompetence. For many, it's an inescapable trap.

US citizens often have a misunderstanding of their justice system. We tend to overlook the damaging effects of prison when we are not impacted personally. But once we become involved in it, we either let it consume us, or we overcome its seemingly insurmountable pressure, often by realizing that incarceration is what we make of it.

The right mindset can help us tolerate the devastating and dehumanizing biases and judgements that come with the prison and post-prison experience. In his poem "Invictus," William E. Henley helps us envision a more promising future for ourselves: "It matters not how straight the gate, How charged with punishment the scroll, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." Manifest-

ing these words has changed my life.

In the land of the free, no one should be thrown away. Everyone is capable of a redemption story. In order for the US Justice System to be truly transformed, in addition to our frame of mind, we must embrace a promotion focus that encourages us to practice options and behaviors related to healing.

Restorative Justice is a powerful tool for catalyzing recovery. Desmond Tutu's *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and our World,* inspires us to create a secure and safe setting where the one who has been harmed (directly or indirectly) can name their hurts without risking further trauma. They are then encouraged to tell their story of how they were harmed. It is entirely up to the victim to decide whether they want to forgive their abuser or not.

Forgiving one's abuser is typically the longest and most difficult part of Restorative Justice, but, if accomplished, the person who was harmed can continue to the final and maybe the most empowering step: to either renew or release the relationship with the person who harmed them. If we can implement concrete frameworks of forgiveness into the American Justice System by practicing Desmond Tutu's restorative justice advice, redemption stories will abound and healing will become the new normal. Our attitudes along the way determine our success. It is now, as always, what you make of it.

Photo: Ravi Sharma



Through the years much has changed Years apart my step-fathers were taken by cancer My mind's closet is full of their memories It's filled with their uniforms

To the right is a sailor's hat on a shelf Below is his Navy uniform and shoes His daily uniform he wore on deck is so worn He spoke of the battleship USS Sims He mentioned the long hours below deck

As I turn, tears crest my eyes
There in the center are two folded flags
To the left on the shelf is a Marine's hat
Below is his green uniform and boots
His dress blues he wore are so clean
He only spoke of driving troops in a truck
The rest of Vietnam was silent to my ears

They battled the war from within
One uniform at a time I try on
Though the mirror remains clear
Their shoes and boots stay in the closet
For I can not walk in their steps

I open my crying eyes I feel as if they're watching over me Days I long for their advice So I close my eyes tightly There they are with open arms

My Spanish Lullaby by Wesley Carroll

Last night I dreamed of Puerto Rico Just like I'd never gone I knew a song

Young girl with eyes like bandidos It all seems like yesterday Not far away

Tropical the island breeze All of nature wild and free This is where I long to be

Logista bonetta

And when the samba played The sun would set so high Ring through my ears And sting my eyes

You Spanish Lullaby

I fell in love with Puerto Rico Warm winds carried on the sea She called to me

A de ho de oh mo

I prayed that the days would last They went by so fast

I want to be where the sun wants the sky When it's time for my siesta You can watch them go by Beautiful faces, no cares in the world Where a girl loves a guy And a guy loves a girl

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Tales of Toasted Tongue by Troy Glover, who aspires to be a Prison Cooking Gangsta

You free-world people got it good. You can go where you want, do what you want, act on your cravings and food impulses. Incarceration changes that. Although you're confined to prison, your free-world cravings do not cease. I'm not talking about those cravings that make you want to skydive, swim with sharks, or jump in a lake butt-naked at the North Pole. I'm referring to those psychological and physiological food cravings that twerk on your willpower. That's the type of cravings I have for jalapeño peppers.

I woke in the middle of the night to use the toilet. The 8 ft x 6 ft cell was as dark as Gotham city, but it was not cold enough for the authorities to issue blankets. I shuffled 2 feet to the toilet and came completely awake when my cheeks sat down on the ice-cold stainless steel. Sitting there, I took in the sounds of the prison nightlife: whimpers of despair due to the longing for family mixed with sighs of ecstasy from those enjoying newfound companionship. As I returned to the top bunk (a sheet of cold steel prison calls a bed), the craving to sample my prison-pickled peppers hit me with the force of a Dallas Cowboys defensive linemen. I had twenty chili piquant, thirty jalapeños, five banana peppers, and just the other day, I traded two blocks of prison kitchen cheese—tactfully maneuvered out of the kitchen vault—for six green, tomato-shaped peppers (also tactfully maneuvered from the prison garden).

"Tactfully maneuvered" means to grab an item, stuff it into a plastic bread bag, shove that into a sock, and then keister it. Nah! I'm just playin'. However, you do stuff the sock down your pants, placing it snugly against that little sweet spot between your balls and your butt. Tactfully maneuvered: pilfered, pinched, purloined, horn-swoggled, in other words, stolen.

Living in prison, you quickly learn the old school trade of bartering for things that make doing time easier. For me it is culinary ingredients, acquired from the prison's black-market, which now sat marinating in a secret jailhouse recipe of habanero sauce, vinegar, chili powder, garlic seasoning, cumin, red pepper, and black pepper. Earlier that week, I had added a splash of a picante chili soup seasoning for that added pizzazz and thrown in a pinch of dill (all tactfully maneuvered) to give it that Mayweather K-O punch of pickle flavor.

The secret culinary art of prison pepper pickling was not of my own making. It was bequeathed to me by Burnt-Nose Nuévez, the crazy Cuban cook, a legend in convict culinary cell-cooking. Rumor says he got the moniker "Burnt Nose" while perfecting this very pickled pepper recipe, which he just called "Ay ya yei peppers." Another rumor is that Nuévez perfected a recipe for a picante sauce so hot that when you took the lid off the jar a soft "you'll be sorry" could be heard wafting on the breeze.

Nuévez's creativity in cooking was amazing, especially when it came to using improvised cooking equipment. He'd use three spoons tied together as an improvised eggbeater, dismantled razors for cutlery, and bags wrapped around a boiling hot pot as an improvised oven. Nuévez once took a bag of corn chips crushed into a powder, ramen noodle chicken-soup seasoning



packages, and twenty raw Pleasant Farms Chicken drumsticks and thighs tactfully maneuvered from the kitchen to make fried chicken.

To gain cooking tutelage from Nuévez, you had to show an interest in learning to cook not just to feed yourself, but the community. You had to display an intelligence for thinking outside the prison-box-kitchen. He had 6 rules:

- 1. Sanitize and clean your utensils before and after using
- 2. Wash your hands before and immediately after touching food
- 3. Never use unfamiliar ingredients
- 4. Don't just cook for yourself
- 5. Share with those less fortunate regardless of how little you have
- 6. Put your heart into everything you prepare

No other con on the farm could get down like Nuévez. I trained in the art of convict cooking with him for 3 years. He was good, but I wanted to be better. I realized, as I turned over on my steel-slab bed, that my aspirations were no longer just to cook fantastic meals made from little to nothing, like Nuévez could. My dreams were to outshine the legend who fed the masses with three Jack Macs and five tortillas. I wanted the title of PCG: Prison Cooking Gangsta.

I had an advantage Nuévez didn't have. I worked in the kitchen, where he had used the cream fillings from Duplex cookies boiled down in a hot pot to make caramel. I had access to powdered sugar, vanilla, and industrial pots and pans. Where Nuévez used cinnamon oatmeal packages and spoons of peanut butter to make cake crust, I added lemonade to mine.

I couldn't sleep. I thought of how bad I wanted to surpass the master chef, and how bad I was suddenly craving my own hot sauce. I would make my mark and surpass Nuévez with a new pepper pickling recipe.

I reached up onto my shelf to get my locker key. Couldn't find it. The dim glow from the 200-year-old security light wasn't enough to search adequately, but the cravings for a juicy pepper and a new hot sauce had visions of jalapeños dancing in my head. I started pulling everything off my shelf: books, folders, lotions, papers, but the key was not there. I tore my bed apart. The craving clawed at my chest like a satyr locked outside of a strip club. Then it hit me: I put my keys in my shoe. I climbed down from my bunk and picked up my shoe. Wrong one. I picked up the other one, but in my frantic haste, the keys fell and slid out of the cell onto the catwalk. Damn!

I dropped to my knees and tried to reach them, but the keys were too far away. I quickly took my pants and tied my shoe to one of the legs. I flung it out between the bars and tried to fish them in. But on the first cast, the shoe hit the keys and caused them to slide half a foot further. I was convicted under Texas Law, but right then, Murphy's Law was screwing with me. After three castings, I finally snagged the keys and drew them to me. Thank you, Uncle Blake, for teaching me fly fishing.

My hands shook as I unlocked my locker and pulled the 32-ounce jar off the shelf. When I removed the lid, my nose was assaulted by the mouth-watering aroma of perfectly pickled jalapeños. My heart quickened with anticipation of the spicy dill flavor that would dance on my tongue like Beyonce's back-up dancers. Overwhelmed by the impulsive craving, my right hand fished out the first pepper my fingers touched. I popped it into my mouth in anticipation of the jalapeño happiness I would experience.

I chomped away at the tiny thumb-sized fruit as I laid down. I licked my fingers

clean, enjoying the tangy taste of peppery garlic and vinegar bursting in my mouth. I sighed happily as I closed my eyes in culinary bliss.

I soon had visions of the Vlasic pickle stork soaring through pink clouds while giving me a feathered thumbs up. After the stork, there was a blinding light. Then, hurricane gust winds from an atomic bomb turned into an explosion of air from my cheeks. The feathered stork disintegrated in a mushroom cloud behind my eyelids.

I bolted upright in my bunk, hit my head on the lower shelf, fell back, then sprung up again. A tidal wave of tears rose over the banks of my eyelids, then came a golf-ball sized hickey on my forehead. The saliva in my mouth turned to a fiery wave of liquid lava ridden by an infernal imp. My hand clutched my chest.

I sat on the edge of my bunk suffocating as I tried to imagine what went wrong. I prayed to ten deities, afraid to put my trust in just one. I wiped the Niagara Falls tears from my eyes with my right hand as I struggled to catch my breath. From somewhere in the darkness of the cell, I swear I heard Burnt Nose Nuévez's gruff Cuban voice: "Los lamentaras..." But I don't speak Spanish and right now I don't care. My imagination raced right to the call that would soon have to be made by the warden to my family, explaining my imminent death:

"I'm sorry ma'am but your grandson died due to asphyxiation from the consumption of a well-marinated contraband capsicum," the Warden would say.

"I'm sorry sir, but I don't understand. Tell me plainly how my grandson died?"

"Your son suffocated from a perfectly pickled prison pepper that he tactfully maneuvered out of the prison garden. I'm sorry for your loss, ma'am."

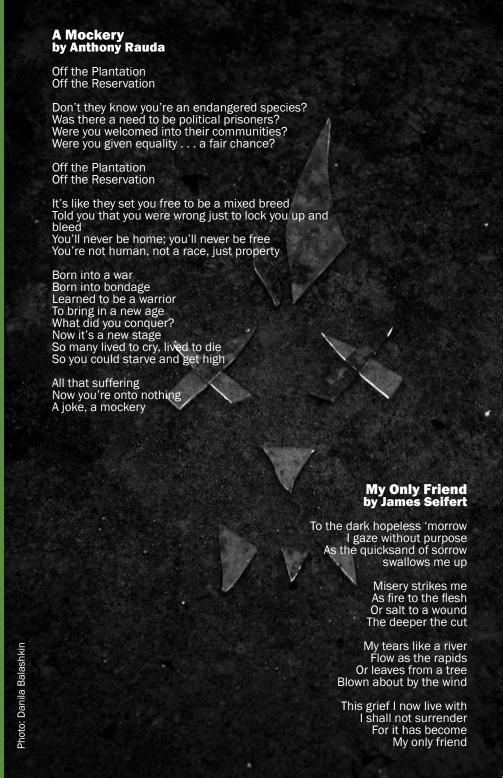
"It's quite alright. He had those cravings, you know."

I sat there in the dark, feeling perspiration pouring out of my ears. My hands fanned frantically to put out that demonic fire in my mouth. As my breath returned, that infernal imp climbed out of my mouth and punched me in the eyes. "Oh god," I moaned, as I leaped, blind, from my perch to the floor. As I landed, my knees buckled, causing me to stagger forward and strike my head on the wall. A new hickey rose next to the previous one. I flailed through the cell with my eyes shooting solar flares to the toilet's edge. For a few fleeting seconds I contemplated lapping the cool liquid of the latrine itself, but sanity cut through the forest fire of thought. I turned on the sink spigot and doused my face.

Slowly, the hellfire bachelor party in my mouth ended. My eyes cooled. The only thing that remained was the throbbing hickeys on my forehead, bearing witness to my stupidity. While my sight and breathing returned to normal, I stood there for a few minutes longer, staying vigilant for a resurgence of jalapeño juice justice.

Later that morning, I checked to see which pepper I had eaten. It was one of the tiny green tomatoes. The next day, I asked the gardener what kind of peppers he had given me, because I did not know. He said they were "Ghost Peppers," some of the hottest peppers on the planet.

Burnt Nose's rules #2 and #3 resonated in my head. And yet, it was that night I joined the ranks of Nuévez. Because with a few modifications, I made my first batch of this hot sauce recipe. It was a hit. And for now, a dream was realized. To my fellow inmates, I am now known as Toasted Tongue Troy, the prison pepper-pickler.



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For Daisy by Jorge Lechuga-Arguijo

Because of what I am
That's how she ended every sentence
Even though he let her know he was perfectly comfortable being around her
Still she ended her sentences with
Because of what I am

60 years old but still at odds with herself Sadly those years have not been kind to her No teeth, thin, blonde smoker's hair, ragged Drawn-on eyebrows and the wrong shade of make-up She looked every inch of a grandmother But she didn't want to accept it Because of what she is

He thought she was proud of who she was
Everyday she walked into work smiling
Make-up of a 10 year old and cracking jokes with all who came around
But still she couldn't look him in the eyes and talk about her past
Her past haunted her and now she lives with abandonment
Because of what she is

Does her choice haunt her every time she looks in the mirror?
Does she still love herself?
Why does she choose to end her sentences with
Because of what I am?

My dad disowned me because of what I am
My mom can no longer stand the sight of me because of what I am
My kids don't want to talk to me because of what I am
I can no longer go to the VA or see my old army buddies because of what I am
Making friends is a struggle everyday now because of what I am
Because, because, because

You see, Daisy was born Desmond
If it weren't for the fact that we were in a men's prison
You wouldn't be able to tell
She seemed so lost every time she talked about herself
The outside image never matched the inside image—the self-hate talk
There was nothing wrong with what she is

40 years apart and the young man listening to Daisy says You are perfect I made a great friend because of who you are I am excited to come to work because of who you are I have more confidence in myself because of who you are I want to live my life more because of the bravery you are You are alive, happy, and breathing because of who you are I'm glad to have met this woman you are

Designs by Inmate 3424 by Shawn Harris

It sprouts from the boredom and redundancy of my small, confined space. The symmetrical alignment of the walls, the paved cement floor, the industrial steel toilet-sink and desk combined with the steel bunk bed and cabinet—they all make up the canvas of my artistic expression. The tools of my artistry are 4 ragged rugs, 1 prayer rug, and 3 colored towels.

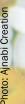
My process is measured. I sit for a moment or two perched on the toilet's edge, staring at the blankness of my canvas until a pattern approaches me. And like a ravenous fiend, when the imagery spills into my mind, I rush to the task of transforming this Space into a Place. But first my canvas must be clean, so I wipe the paved cement floor with an old sock soaked in soap and water.

Next, the canvas must be stable, so I stretch out a bed sheet on the floor, binding its edges to the base of the bed and the desk. Sometimes the rugs and towels are arranged in symmetrical angles to form a triangle. Other times they are lapped like shingles. With the sheet keeping them sturdy, it's all about the angles. Shall I arrange them in parallels, rugs and towels running the length of this Space? Or shall I create a contrast, the towels running the length, the rugs running the width? Or perhaps parallel them in width—towel, rug, towel, rug?

The way the colors combine and blend—the geometrical scape created by creativity—loosens the knot in my chest, anchoring me to the present of this (now) Place. The ragged rugs provide a motif of colors that neither clash nor contrast. The rough and soft textures create the feeling of balance, replacing the spiritual obstruction of this lifeless Space. Now it is a Place...at least until I get bored with it and replace it with another Place.

The prayer rug is the Accent. Green and beige garnish it in a beautiful design of patterns. The peace betrays its purpose, speaking less of servitude and more of extravagance. I place the rug on the desktop, its edge draping over the sides like an exotic awning. To highlight the green, I add two equally green shirts draped over two desk seats. If the mood takes me, I'll place the rug on the floor, paralleled by two beige towels, then two ragged rugs, with gray draped on the desk in the background. When people peer inside, their eyes tell a tale of admiration and wonderment. But their inability to see beyond this Space quickly overtakes them, and they see nothing more than futility.

Nonetheless, I continue to design and create more facets of Place beyond this Space.



Convict Chronicles: A Christmas Story by Leo Cardez

In prison, your celly is ninety percent of your bit. My new celly, C-section (cause his head is so big they say he needs a prescription pillow) is the last thing a recent born-again Christian needs. He spends his days mean-muggin' the guards and stomping around our tiny crypt like he's killing roaches. He won't be leaving prison out the front door, and thirty years in, the dark magic of these walls has consumed his spirit.

We barely speak. He's old enough to be my dad and from a street culture I do not understand. Last week I tried to talk to him about the upcoming election, but inevitably the conversation led to his hate of the officers and how he's innocent and the legal system screwed him. What can I say? I get it, me too buddy. But he can't hear anyone past his own anger. I worry how long we might be buried together when an idea strikes me. My mom did it when I was a kid.

Christmas Eve Lockdown

We're wearing every piece of clothing we own, but still shivering so hard our teeth sound like maracas. Our "Holiday" meal, essentially a Hungry Man TV dinner, wouldn't satisfy a five-year old. I can hear him clicking through channels, avoiding the non-stop Christmas movie marathons on his small, personal TV. This is my chance.

Me: (Offering a small piece of hard candy) "I gotta deal for ya. You can have this piece of candy, but only if I can't pry it out of your hand."

C: (Grabbing candy and clenching it in his fist) "Go for it."

Me: (Pretending to try and open his fist before going into my Box and grabbing a Honey Bun-his fav-and offering it to him.) "Trade ya."

I grab a Honey Bun of my own as I share the story of when my mom offered me a similar deal.

In fifth grade we moved to a white slice of Dave Mathews' suburbia. I struggled to fit in with my olive complexion and Latino accent. My giant ears and mouth full of metal didn't help either. I fought everyone and even punched a crossing guard in his frank and beans. They threatened to kick me out of school.

My mom did the candy trick, and like him, I traded up. She told me holding on to anger so tightly wasn't giving space for anything new or good to come into my life. A fervent Catholic with shrines to saints and the Virgin Mary all over the house, she dropped a few Bible verses to sanctify her point: "Don't let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the Devil" (Ephesians 4:27), and "But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth" (Colossians 3:8).

I tell C-section how I took her advice and joined the school play and soccer team, and was soon flush with friends. I started enjoying life again. An eternity of silence passed before he nodded his head slowly, "I think I get what you're saying... thanks," he whispered.

We talked for the rest of the night. I let him vent his frustrations. I told him about my own struggles with forgiveness and how finding Jesus in prison helped me finally forgive others and myself; and I described the new-found peace and happiness I found on the other side. We discussed the quote I keep pasted over my bunk: "When you forgive others, you take their power over you away."

"I have an idea, celly," he starts. "I will write down the name of every person who's done me wrong, forgive them, and then flush them down the toilet." And we did. He glanced up at me as the last pieces of paper disappeared down the drain and we mouthed "It's over." The hair on the back of my neck spiked as a wave of chills washed over me. Listen, I'm not saying something supernatural happened that night, but I can't say it didn't.

The sun creeps in our window and we hear the breakfast cart coming around. "Merry Christmas," I tell him. "Yeah," he says, "I think it will be."

This is the part of the story where you want to hear how C-section changed his life, came to Jesus, and is now living victoriously somewhere helping others endure what he has overcome. I wish I could tell you that. I wish I could tell you he reconnected with his estranged family, got his degree while in prison, and volunteered to help others; how I saw him, years later, a changed man with a glow of happiness around him. I wish I could tell you that.

Shortly after the Super Bowl, he tested positive for COVID and was moved to the Quarantine Building. I heard he died in his sleep. By the time the officers found him, he was stiff to the touch.

I didn't cry when I heard about him. COVID had turned my life upside down and I was dealing with my own problems, but not a Christmas passes where I don't think of him and what I felt that night. I hope that in his last couple months, after that night, he felt a new peace, and that he died with a lighter heart.













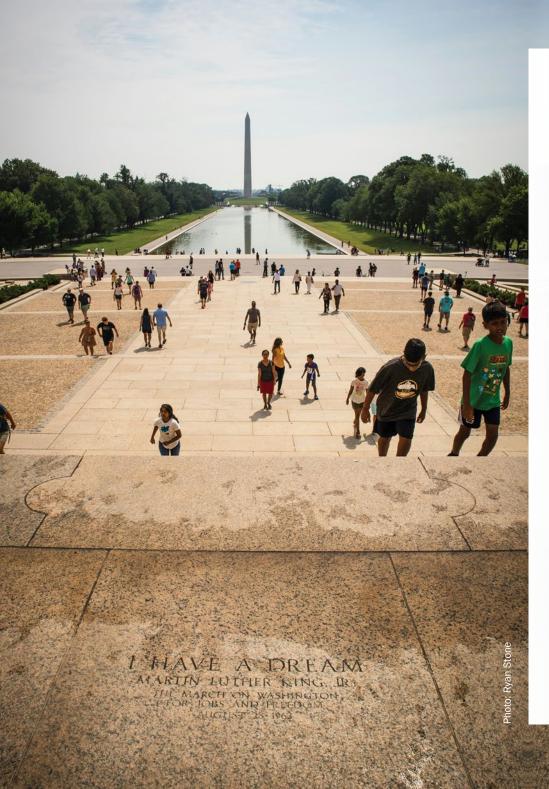








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King of Hope by David Antares

Atlanta born, Southern bred King of Hope had dreams in his head From mountaintop saw Promised Land White and Black, hand in hand Jew and Gentile, others too Him and her and me and you

Shared with all his potent dream Gave us hope and self-esteem Bombings soon though made it clear To racist minds his dream brought fear

King of Hope MLK Signing books got stabbed one day Near his heart lodged tip of knife Just a sneeze could end his life

Doctors saved him, letters came
From rich and poor and those with fame
But sentiments so pure and clean
Came from a girl perhaps fifteen
Her words were sweet and meant to please
So happy I am you didn't sneeze

King of Hope MLK Lived to speak another day He called for peace and unity At a church in Memphis, Tennessee

One day later God let him rest And Love's the way we honor him best Keep Hope alive, echo his words Sing like angels, sing like birds When Love makes Hate a dinosaur past Thank God Almighty, we'll be free at last!

Editor's note: The stabbing incident and the subsequent story of the young girl's sentiments are detailed in *The Radical King*, a collection of King's sermons edited by Cornel West.



Celebrating International Alliances: A Special Section Featuring Work from England's Hull and Full Sutton Prisons

Over the past two years, Dr. Josephine Metcalf, from the University of Hull, United Kingdom, and Dr. Kristen Drybread, from the University of Colorado-Boulder, have been working with two prison partners in the north of England and two in Colorado to deliver a 10-week module that includes critical study and creative writing. Two of the editors of this magazine (Ben Boyce and Meghan Cosgrove) led Colorado prison sections. Individuals from His Majesty's Prison (HMP) Hull and HMP Full Sutton in the UK and the Limon Correctional Facility and Boulder County Jail studied a range of US/UK texts, including prison memoirs, novels, poetry, and prison films and TV, doing so simultaneously. They also participated in creative writing exercises linked to each week's text and then swapped their critical and creative writings across the Atlantic for peer review. We are proud to publish a sample of the creative pieces the students produced as part of this exploratory project in international collaboration.

In a second project that has been running at both HMP Hull and HMP Full Sutton in the UK this year, both Jo Metcalf and Dr. Laura Burkinshaw, from the University of Hull, have been running a series of book groups that also engage with creative writing. The books under discussion were all loosely linked by themes of isolation and loneliness, which underpinned the city of Hull's award-winning Freedom Festival in 2023. The Freedom Festival is a three-day arts and creative event that takes place annually, and we were honored that a number of writings

from the book groups were exhibited at the

2024 event as part of a gallery exhibition about prison.

For more information about either of these projects please email Dr. Jo at J.Metcalf@hull.ac.uk.

The following section is composed of work submitted by our UK authors and artists. Their work is anonymized at the request of prison officials. With apologies to our British colleagues, we have Americanized the spellings.

Emotional Eating (a response to Michelle Zauner's Crying in H Mart) by G Whizz



Sweet, soft, light and fluffy... The instant, short-lived emotional lift from the dark depths of depression is the common experience when comfort eating with tasty treats.

When I was younger, I would see my mum sway towards an icy cream cake, a chocolate bun or some other bakery delights. usually when she was upset but also happy or celebrating occasions too. My mum is a petite, pretty woman with bobbed hair, a warm and trustworthy face, and a calming smile. She is selfless and family orientated. Having never drunk, gambled, or taken drugs, she seeks enjoyment in her materialistic pleasures along with a taste for the finest desserts. If there wasn't exciting biscuits in the tin, a fridge with a stash of mouth-watering yogurts or a box of eye-catching chocolates in the cupboard, then you weren't in my mum's house.

I soon adopted this method of coping when growing up. Everybody has their poison or their thing they turn to when having a hard time... there's something about biting into a glazed jam and cream filled doughnut, sugary flavours erupting in your mouth sending your taste buds and brain into overdrive.

A Poem from Frankenstein's Monster (a response to Mary Shelley) by Sloth Cat



Fear not, man; for I am no beast My nature is of virtue and benevolence: I wish to reside in peace Alas! My wish for a simple life, it can never be met As I face such prejudice from man, my mere appearance is a threat I curse my creator! What was thy meaning of life? To inflict such cruelty to deny such pleasures as a wife Cursed was I, the day I grew self-aware; for I obtained great intellect, of which none I can share I was cast out by man, with such abhorrence of me Simply for the way I looked, my unconventional beauty For I am merely a mirror, reflecting horrors within man They see such evil, a demon with a plan Oh Creator, cursed was this seed you've sewn, you have denied your Responsibility; so the monster has grown My heart beats with such malice it denies thy sleep Now the blood of your loved ones will be the tears you weep

A Prison Pastoral; Cell with a View by Jaffa

I was never great at making choices. For most of my life, I've made the wrong ones, taking false paths which meant that I ended up here. Damned, in the middle of a prison sentence, abandoned by most of my family, without the love of a partner, without a meaningful job, sensory starved and alone.

Over the years, ants, millipedes, mice, hornets, cockroaches, ladybirds, spiders, daddy long legs, earwigs, woodlice, fleas, aphids, flies, wasps, bees, moths, and a plethora of unidentified bugs and even a pigeon have cohabited my cell like it was an Airbnb. Today my cell resembles a nature reserve for insects. They come and go under my door and through my window as they please. I don't mind, though, because too often I can feel as lonely as the nucleus of an atom. Looking at nature fills the void in my mind, sparks my imagination, teaches me lessons, fills me with hope and helps me escape my reality, if only briefly. Until recently, I hadn't paid much attention to the wildlife outside until I was asked to do so for a book group. The following is what I noticed when I opened my eyes one day.

The plastic panels between the steel bars of my cell windows are opaque through sun damage, depriving me of a meaningful vista. It's impossible for me to see through them in this concrete jungle. Mercifully, my windows open two inches, allowing me a limited view outside. Beyond my cell I perceive red and grey hues of steel, brick, and concrete encompassing a patch of grass, roughly 50 metres squared dotted with weeds, daisies, and buttercups. A zealous breeze animates the flora and carries the repugnant scent of fresh pig manure, offending my senses and reminding me I'm in the countryside. I'd love to be able to feel that grass with my bare feet and connect with it, something I took for granted before. The grass might as well be on Mars.

Fences topped with coils of gnarly razor wire stare back at me. To my right, I spy the perimeter wall, topped with a weathered and slippery large brown plastic tube that was red in another life. A starling suddenly flies past from left to right against the backdrop of a blue, cloudless sky, prompting me to think of times when I was free. Moments later, I focus back on reality when I notice a tiny, black, industrious spider, discreetly going about his business along the cage over my window inches from my nose. Like myself, it doesn't appear to have a purpose, but I know it does. With quizzical eyes, I watch, intrigued. I wonder how it survives in any weather thrown its way, as I wonder how I am surviving. If it can endure, so can I.

Just beyond the perimeter wall, I spy a long row of tall, leafy trees swaying in the wind, as if dancing like they're drunk. Surveying them over time has taught me some valuable lessons; to stand tall and proud, go out on a limb, remember my roots, and drink plenty of water. The trees are home to a large colony of black crows who wake me up most days, usually between 5am and 7am, with the finesse of a pneumatic drill. Their vigilant eyes are as black as the bottom of an overused Jamaican Dutchie Pot. They hunt for food silently, poking and prodding between the grass with their beaks until they locate a meal, usually a worm or some bug, which they quickly dispatch. They're intelligent creatures that appear robotic when they walk.

Studying nature in captivity breaks up the monotony of my prison day and helps release the emotional steam I hold in my boiler. Sometimes, looking beyond my cage, I rue the poor choices I made that put me in my plight. Inevitably, an avalanche of sadness collapses over me as I recall a life I once knew.

Wagtails rarely come into view. They're beautiful, delicate, and fragile creatures; they have tiny, gentle eyes set into black faces with grey and blue bodies and hyperactive yellow tails. They undulate when flying, rising and falling as if riding an invisible rollercoaster; a strong reminder of my younger years spent at a now-decaying coastal town.

Sometimes they come close to my window when foraging, often tilting their heads to me to check me out. When that occurs, I either hide or keep still as a soldier outside Buckingham Palace, so as not to unnerve. I don't want to scare them away because I enjoy their company. They always appear alert as if behind enemy lines on some battlefield. Their tails flutter incessantly, fixing me into some kind of trance as I imagine a hypnotist's pocket watch would. I find it very difficult to pull my gaze away from them. Their song is as exquisite as the finest aria in contrast to the crow's riotous, maniacal, and disjointed cacophony. I rarely get to watch them for more than a minute or two, if I'm lucky. I wish they would keep still. They act as if they have ADHD, mirroring myself.

The only thing I have seen in prison more enchanting was the murmuration of starlings at sunset. They resembled a shoal of fish, only with more finesse and grace. Einstein once said, "Look deep into nature and then you will understand everything better." I concur.

A Response to Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning by Beloved

Finis

The Latin word Finis has two meanings: the end or the finish, and a goal to reach. I think this epitomizes each day in prison. I wake longing for the 5 second solace each morning, allowing myself to bask in the tranquility of my imagination. I try to humanize the prison sounds I hear each day.

For example, the jangle of the officers' keys as they enter the wing each morning in my mind is now the ambient sound of the wind chime outside my bedroom window playing a mellow backing to choruses of bird song.

The squeak of the iron gate opening is like an aged and weathered garden gate creaking open, which results in my dog howling at the top of her voice, tail wagging in anticipation to greet our next visitor.

I allow myself the opportunity every morning to remind myself that I'm still human, that there is still a life waiting for me on the other side of these walls, and that my incarceration is not eternal. When the cell door is eventually opened, I brace myself for the silence to be broken by an increasing cacophony, slowly surrounding me, leading to a complete sensory overload.

This is my indication the day has begun, and I face the challenge of navigating the carceral geography of this environment in a feeble attempt to maintain my sanity. For me, this consists of setting realistic goals to feel like I have achieved something each day and I am continuing to better myself in preparation for when I get home. If this environment teaches you anything, it's that life is way too precious to waste.

These goals can be something as

simple as checking in with someone that doesn't seem their normal self, or speaking to the new person on the wing, right up to milestone goals of reading 100 books in a year. I try to keep my routine as regimented as possible during the week, treating my jobs in prison the same as I did at home, doing them to the best of my ability and to a high standard.

This allows me to maintain control and to keep on top of my mental health in a positive manner, removing myself from any toxicity that can quickly spread through the wing. There are days that are testing when it comes to your mental health: you must be strong-minded and appear docile but have the strength to keep your composure and spirits high.

Although there can be dark days in here, I try to always be pragmatic. Rather than fear the anxiety and depression, I have started to use the cell door to welcome them both in. I want to get to know them both as they are now part of me, in the hope that we can reach some form of understanding which will enable me to take back control in my life.

I think the key to finding yourself is sometimes to stop looking and just live a little, instead of not being able to see the forest for the trees, appreciate the beauty of the scenic view before you. Acceptance is paramount to a positive outlook; every day I think of a thousand reasons to give up, but always seem to find one to carry on. I try to learn a new word each day in both English and Spanish.

I think an apt ending to this reflection is Esperanza, which is Spanish for hope. Hope is why I find one reason daily to carry on, to welcome discovering beauty in the detail of what you miss during Groundhog Day.

A Commemorative poem about Me by Gamer

I look back at my life and lament the waste the potential lost, the memories gone my time outside limited to nothing the drinking and pain, the fights as well the time I wasted on people that hate the times I wish I'd been able to say I love you; I miss you, I wish I'd treated you right the times I wish I'd been able to feel my brain is broken, and I can't say what I need I can't express what you mean to me with speech so the written word will have to do to my friends I say I love you all, thanks for sticking by me to my family I say I love you, I'm sorry for the constant heartache and stress never again will I scare you like this to my partner I say I love you like crazy, can't wait to be free to hold you again, this I say to express my emotions is what you will get and to myself I say use this time to reflect and rewind use your mind, expand your heart don't waste this chance to change now you're here, keep your faith don't lose yourself in hate

A Response to Daisy Hildyard's Emergency by Huan Mantie

The silver snake of the illegal razor wire borders the gutter filled with untold amounts of fallen leaves, silt, and bird droppings. No longer recognizable as anything other than a mystery, yet no doubt the ideal compost bed, the home of more than moss. In the corner, almost 2 ft high, grows a plant of unknown species, or even origin.

All that is known is that somehow the once small seed has now found its way to become so much more. It has fought its way to escape its shell before extending its roots across, rather than down, allowing it to spread its green arms outwards and upwards, waiting for the right time to unclench its fist and reveal its hidden glory and purpose.

The roof, through varying states of decay and rust, welcomes the birds of beyond with stability, and even beneath its skin, offers shelter to those able to find an entrance. Blackbirds, crows, and pigeons pad along its surface, scoping out the surroundings, waiting for movement from a window, knowing that the mystery buffet will arrive without warning. There's always something at some point.

In the concrete jungle of the exercise yard, long buried life has defied the solid grey stone and broken free of its suffocation. Strengthened by the fresh warmth of the sun and cooling taste of the rain, grass shoots and weeds welcome vibrancy amidst the dull, bleak paths walked upon by the hopeless. They prove that sometimes, beyond the realms of impossibility, with patience and perseverance, roses can grow from concrete.

Photo: Aaron Burden

Photo: Who's Denilo

My Earliest Memory by The Professor

Sunlight, leaves, and birdsong. This may sound somewhat idyllic, and it was. Sometimes we can fall into a trap with memories, make them become an idealized version of a past we wished did exist. These were, luckily, a routine feature of walks in the woods when I was very little, say four or five years old. I have other half memories before then, but they are more half whispers, like vapor off a lake in the morning, not fully there.

I was there though. I would always start bravely, determined to walk on my own, with the aid of my mum's trusty hand whenever I came across a treacherous puddle or stretch of quicksand-like mud. The wood was dense, the air thick, trees hiding trees hiding monsters, the product of far too many fairy tales at bedtime. The sun always managed to break through the upper canopy of nature though, always warm and reassuring. Laughter as well, that's reassuring, and I remember that, not my own, but rather that of my family. I remember happiness.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Leaves breaking underfoot, well under the feet of a young person jumping up and down with delight at the wanton destruction he is causing. Almost like that feeling of popping bubble wrap, it wasn't all chaos and anarchy among the leaves and mud. I remember being picked up and seated on someone's shoulders, then told to be deathly quiet. Can you hear that? No, I don't think I could either, or more likely, I was too impatient to try. But my mum would always point out birds calling to each other in song, lyrical notes better suited to a theatre stage than next to a main road perhaps, which is where the woods were situated. I was young though, and I didn't appreciate the clash between nature and cars. I just remember my mum cursing that the birds would plead the fifth whenever we tried to stand stock still and listen.

The last part of this memory, sadly, isn't cuddled up warm and safe on the drive back home, but the pain of stinging nettles. Even to this day, they are more nemesis whenever I hike, and this memory may explain why. Mix together pain, inching, shock and hot heat, then spread that spiteful concoction over your legs and you know how I felt. I remember screaming, not anyone's name and certainly not any swear words as I was innocent then. No, just a scream of pain, a scream of helplessness, and a scream of abandon. How could anywhere so beautiful be prepared to inflict such hurt on one so young? Nature does that though. It doesn't judge. It seldom selects. It just is. Instead of comfort and cuddles, I ran to my mum for protection and healing, for a remedy, for something, anything.

That is where the memory ends. I know I would have found that "something" from my mum, as I encountered stinging nettles far too many times in the intermittent years. I visited those woods often, and I'm pleased to say that neither the trees, nor I, lost that sense of wonder and adventure. The last time I was there, I tried standing suddenly still, trying to catch those birds out so I could eavesdrop on their conversation. They must have recognized me, for they never said a word.

My Earliest Memory by Paintbrush

One of my earliest memories is being taken from my mother to live with other people. On some occasions it was foster homes, other times it was with my mother's friends, and a few times it was in state group homes. At the time, I never knew why I was being taken from my mother; I just knew I did not like it and I remember crying and running from the people who were trying to take me. It wasn't until I was in fifth or sixth grade that I discovered my mother had mental health issues and we were being taken "for our safety."

Because we were poor, a lot of the places where my siblings and I went were like palaces. We went to homes where we had our own beds, did not have to share baths to save water, and I was given my own clothes that I did not have to keep clean to pass down to my little brother. Most importantly, we could eat—and get full—at every meal. These were things we could not do at home with my mother. I was happy in those moments, like any child would be, but I always wondered why I could not be with my mother.

It wasn't until I was in high school, in a State group home for various crimes and offenses, that I discovered my mother had mental health issues. Although I did not know what they were exactly, I knew that they were serious, and I knew they were the reason(s) that we were taken from her. This was disturbing but comforting because there were times when we were being taken when I thought she did not love me and my siblings.

Since coming to college, I've completed various social-psych classes, and I've realized how bad my mother was how bad she actually is. During my 13 years in prison, I've listened to her over the phone and realized she is continually getting worse. She is self-isolating, and she makes up diseases and illnesses as a reason to go to the doctor after looking online to find the symptoms.

Over the 54 years of my existence, I've spent less than 10 years with my mother. This memory/realization is upsetting because I love and miss my mother, regardless of her particular brand of crazy.

Better Luck Version of Me by Troubadour

Somewhere in another dimension
There's a version of me I should mention
Same look; different timeline
Better luck; livin' the high life
I lose my wallet; he finds a five
My best-friend dog dies; while his stays alive
The girl of my dreams leaves me; for the slob down the street
His love stays by his side; makes him all he can eat
My truck breaks down; it's about all I can take
He drives his dream off the lot; passes me on the interstate
Space and time collide; I begin to fade
Is this truly my fate?
Somehow there has to be
To justify my tragedies
A better luck version of me

My Hometown by Folksinger

Carmarthen is a town steeped in history. It's Wales's oldest town, the birthplace of Merlin, mentor to the legendary King of the Britons, Arthur. A monolith to the last British general to fall in battle looms over the town. The ruins of the Norman castle still stand guard over the River Tywi, a landmark to our continued subservience to the Crown. In Lammas Street, the Sons of Rebecca, donned in scarlet red, tore down the landlord's gate. And it was from the balcony of the old Guildhall that Gwynfor Evans addressed a cheering crowd, as the first nationalist to represent Wales in Westminster.

Behind every street, every building, nearly every tree, is a story. But time is never static. Merlin's oak is now a stump. The monument to General Picton now stands at the center of a busy traffic junction. The Norman castle became a prison and is now the administrative center of the County Council. If you look over the river from the castle, to the South East are the Golden Arches, a new symbolic representation of imperialism, but under a more calorific guise. Lammas Street is now lined by terraced houses, leading to the ancient heart of the town. The insubordinate attitude which galvanized the townsfolk to join the Rebecca Rising, and then to embrace Plaid Cymru's vision for an independent Wales,

is evidenced only by unobstructive, unnoticed, little blue plaques. The tumultuous past is mostly forgotten by today's denizens.

The center of town, with its eclectic mix of shops, pubs, restaurants. banks, and chapels is a curious juxtaposition of old and new, a place where antediluvian apothecaries exist alongside the modernist architecture of the indoor market: where a Gothic building, housing a branch of Barclays bank, with its intricately detailed frieze, stands opposite a Brutalist, 1960s building divided into compact shopping units on ground floor, and with offices housed above. It's a testament to the utilitarian thinking of that time. Much like the Tywi, the streets of this quaint town twist, turn, bend, and curve. To get anywhere, you have to meander around the town landmarks: the castle, the guildhall, the bus station. The uneven geography adds to this, as you're never walking on level-ground, but always either walking up or down a hill. Living here, you learn to accept the necessary delay from getting from point A to B, which does condition you to adopt a more leisurely approach to life.

This is where I live. I've grown up here. I went to school here. It's where I got my first job, stacking shelves in a supermarket. It's not a rural idvII. There isn't much money around. Most young people move away for university. Those who stay are condemned. Not to a bad life, but to a banal one. Life won't be perfect. Addiction, divorce, death: these are all here. Tramps still panhandle on street corners, begging for change, but there is no snobbish undercurrent, just humble people who appreciate what could be if they fell on hard times. When my parents divorced, it was amicable. When my friend Alex's Dad went to prison, there was no moral denunciation for selling cannabis, just sympathy for Alex. Once when he was over, Mum remarked that "he might lose some weight, which would be good, because he is carrying a few too many pounds" with complete sincerity. Everyone here is measured and reasonable, which just doesn't feel like real living to me.

I'm getting ready to fly the nest. I've just completed my A Levels, I just need to get the results. Then I'm off. If all goes to plan, London. If not, the fallback is Manchester. Soon, I hope to join my peers, with a modicum of ambition, who have departed for new vistas. I can't articulate clearly what it is I'm hoping to find, I just want something exciting.

History hangs heavy over the town. It's everywhere. That is the problem. Everywhere I go I'm reminded that once things did happen here. Intrigue, battle, unrest, political earthquakes, at one time or another, all happened here, on these streets, places I pass

everyday. Now, it all feels so average, so stale. Claustropho...

The phone in my pocket vibrates. It's a text. U coming or what?

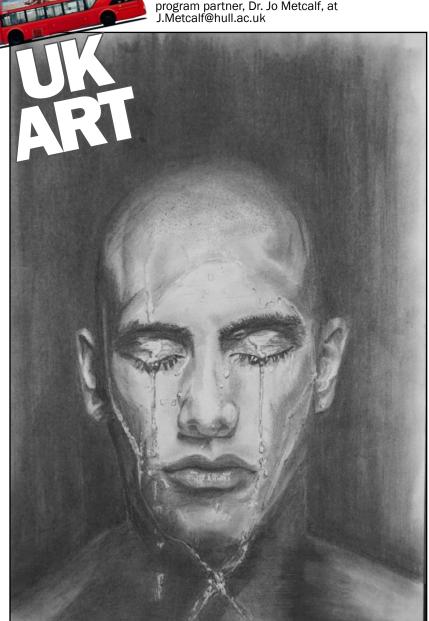
Fuck. I was supposed to meet Alex at The Gold. Time always flies when I'm daydreaming.

I rummage through a large pile of clothes in the corner of the room. A black hoodie, with a Rancid logo on the front, seems to be the cleanest. I take a quick sniff. Nothing a few bursts of Lynx Africa can't fix.

I might ruminate on the staleness of living here, but I must concede that to describe the air in my room as stale would not be a figurative statement. Once dressed, I jam the window open, letting the air circulate. Then I cascade down the stairs and out the door. Just before exiting I shout, "Mum, I'm going out for a bit!" without waiting for a reply.

Walking briskly, dark clouds are beginning to gather. The weather over the past week has been equable, sunny spells and light winds. It would soon change for the worse. Luckily, I was heading to a pub, so the weather wouldn't spoil my plans. Now that I was 18, I could join Alex in the pub. Phone in hand, I send Alex a rushed text. Be thr in min. It might not be particularly refined, but a good nightout is the closest to really living I can get in this town. Let's cause some mayhem!

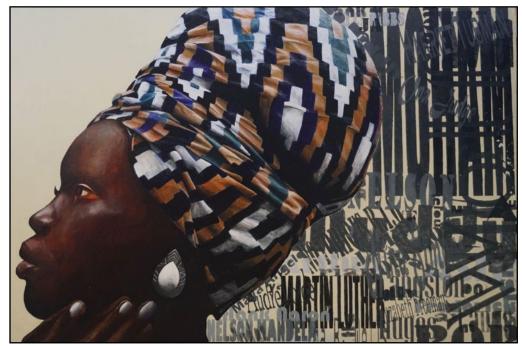
Editor's Note: The following four pages include art from our friends in the U.K. Like the poems above, the U.K. prison authorities have asked us to use this work anonymously. While we are committed to making sure all writers and artists receive full acknowledgement of their work, UK prison rules force us to use pen names. In this case, we are assenting to that rule because our UK contributors want us to see their work, even if listed under identity-concealing names. If readers wish to learn more about these writers and artists, please write to our UK program partner, Dr. Jo Metcalf, at J.Metcalf@hull.ac.uk



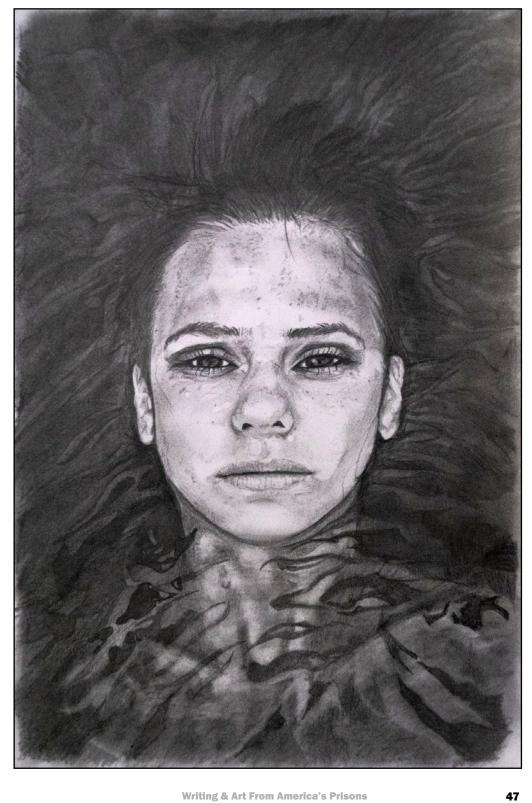




45







Forgotten Youth

by Devon D. Howard

Every time I look around I'm reminded of the sad truth That we're stereotypes well known but drowned To hide the failure; to help the youth

Don't talk of responsibility And always doing what's right If you'll just choose deniability When it becomes an uphill fight

Regardless of whether or not I respect the man next to me At some point most of us were left to rot Some as kids, some at a later decree

This world kicks kids to the curb When all they need is one with love to give In a world where love is rarely a verb

They don't need a pretentious front Another superficial pair Already in position to punt The kids to the nearest couple there

If we can't set kids up for success And teach forgiveness to all ages Don't be surprised when people possess A spirit that resents and rages

How can you expect a kid to grow With a kind and compassionate heart When resentment is all they know After a life of being torn apart

It's shameful that people still can't see When you treat others as if they're rabid Then most times rabid is what they'll be

Break a spirit and evil will happen At some point in our chaotic pasts The value of love has been forgotten Then people judge when the light never lasts In lost children, where hate is begotten

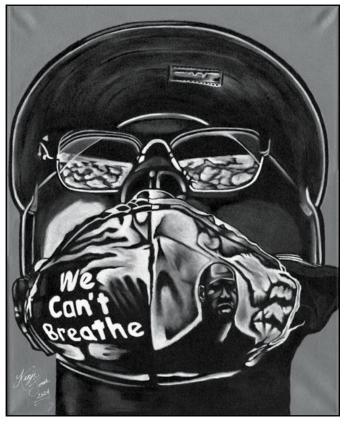


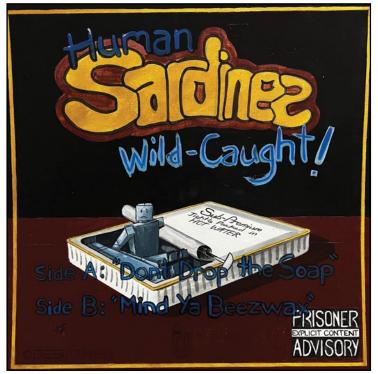


Captured Words / Free Thoughts Writing & Art From America's Prisons

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Kenji Jones' "We Can't Breathe," a pencil sketch tribute to George Floyd









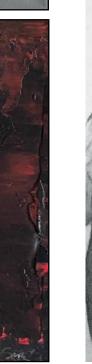
record."

Biggie in pencil by Edward Wilkes

51









Rehabilitated by Safi Dona

Today I was asked by another prisoner, "Are you rehabilitated?" I told him, "I know I am." Then he asked, "what have you learned?" I told him: I've learned that when I'm on the phone talking to my daughter it feels like my heart is in my ear.

I've learned that for some, escape is easier through an open wrist than an open door.

I've learned open jugular veins don't have exit signs.

I've learned hopes and dreams can die in coagulated blood puddles if they can't swim.

I've learned death sentences can be carried out with silent ticks of the clock rather than a lethal dose of poison.

I've learned memories have expiration dates.

I've learned my nightmares occur when I'm awake, and peace is in my sleep.

I've learned blue lipstick is a terrible color for lips.

I've learned sheets are used for more than mattresses.

I've learned the sound of keys can cause post-traumatic stress.

I've learned toothbrushes can pierce a heart for simply being the outlet and object of someone's pent up aggression.

I've learned when I cry thinking about my family, my tears aren't salty.

I've learned some of my grey hairs are rearview mirrors for how I never want to live my life again.

I've learned zoos aren't just for animals.

I've learned animals probably miss their family and friends who live in zoos.

I've learned a stick of gum can be a luxury.

I've learned tombs can contain the living.

I've learned the victims of my crimes include multiple people outside of my actual crimes.

I've learned when the chaplain shows up at my door he's escorting death.

I've learned looking out of a rectangle window for 25 years doesn't stop me from believing the world is still around.

I've learned drugs can find their way into prison without a map.

I've learned birds can make beautiful music without any practice.

I've learned none of the guards paid much attention when their mothers told them to "stop slamming the door!"

I've learned bars can stop bodies but not visions.

I've learned bars pull double duty: holding bodies in and up.

I've learned zombies do exist and are dangerous in close proximity.

I've learned mail makes my life happy.

I've learned steel bunks are a practice run for the morgue.

I've learned that my coffee is ruined with sugar and cream.

I've learned algebra, trigonometry, angles, percents, parallelograms and three languages.

I've learned apparently I've forgotten most of it.

I've learned that listening to voices outside of your head is just as dangerous as listening to the ones inside your head when they're delusional.

I've learned that heating and air conditioning systems can be used as tools of torture.

I've learned justice has nothing to do with courts, constitutions, or law, but solely the universal good or bad energy we radiate or absorb.

I've learned Top Ramen Soups taste like steak compared to prison food.

I've learned insanity constantly chases me like I'm a fugitive, and my sanity must fight to the death if cornered.

I've learned chains in the mind are just as bad as chains on your ankles.

I've learned women are beautiful.

I've learned women are beautiful reminders.

I've learned women are beautiful reminders of freedom.

Then I told the other prisoner, "that's what I've learned, Brotha." He said, "is that it?" I said, "oh yeah, I forgot. Remember I told you about those animals in the zoo?" He said, "yea." I said, "I've learned that if I'm gonna be treated like an animal, then I wanna learn how to grow a beautiful fur coat too."



at the traffic stop where just enough attitude became the reason your face met cold concrete through the heavy smoke defying gravity on each exhale 6 deep crowded in the backseat of a joyride that summer night we sometimes caught a brief taste of what it would feel like to find what we were missing

like the THC briefly coating our tongue before dissipating into thin air . . . it left

before we even had a chance to be introduced it became a stranger amongst the forgotten a distant relative

of the downtrodden spoken about in hushed tones
we looked for it...just like our fathers did
but this is not a place where love lives
it hides from us like one who flees from death
we never spoke about it but we all wondered
d find us before barbed wire held us on the other side of

if it would find us before barbed wire held us on the other side of regret love once lived here

they said it was found by every street sign lived in the crevice of every crooked smile traded beneath the reflection of the sun on any given day carried in every word spoken by that same corner where hot metal carved holes into his rib cage it used to live here, at least those are the stories they tell me past the corner store, a hard left near the alley on the dead end, 2 blocks away from that side street before we sought after what was impossible to find love used to live here they say

maybe it did but that was way before our time

hoto: Aline de Nadai

Photo: Jason Dent

How Dare They by Dorothy Maraglino

"How dare they?!" my inside voice rages
They discount any trace of my humanity
They try to strip me of any individuality
"You're a convict" is their universal justification

Coerced into work for little or no pay at all It's a crime on the safe streets of the free world It's standard operating procedure in prison "They're convicts" is their universal justification

Anything we say is assumed to be a lie In court, disciplinary hearings, or any conversation We're automatically wrong, no matter the situation "They're convicts" is their universal justification

Incoming words-censored; outgoing words-censored No altercations, no personalization, no deviation "You're nothing special!" soon becomes "you're nothing!" "They're convicts" is their universal justification

"How dare they?!" I feel the anger building Why am I surprised they see or treat me as nothing? Then I realize I am mad because I believe them "I'm just a convict" becomes my own justification

The Fight by Neely Phillips

We are all fighting the same fight Fighting to get right No more release, repeat, recapture in sight We are bound by pain Held by fences with razor wire extensions With our families missing us Or masking the thoughts of everyone forgetting us We become stripped of trust The games begin: is it them or us? Always feeling divided, never united That's a mind that's always tied up We must release the beast, become unleashed At the same time keeping the peace We have to build and create Stop the hate: don't devastate 'Cause we all have it in us to be something great To be great we must trust in ourselves Come out of our shells Soon the change will come within You will get tired of losing and prepare to win No more letting the cycle spin you again We have to work together to fight the rapture Recidivism is the justice system's worst disaster Real change is what I am after I refuse to keep doing the release, repeat, and recapture

Survival Mode by Neely Phillips

Exhale, wake up, wait Breathe in, make a wish, take Life is strange, head change, great Eyes closed, lights fades, think Go to sleep, dream, escape Eyes wide, new stride, change First step, walk, make your way Precious time, freedom, see the grade Transition into a new way A challenge to change for better days Imagination can be key to everything Brain waves, minds to create Space widens, New Paths for learning things Against the grain Times have changed to better ways Be wise, no more ties, hide from fake Retrain the brain that's designed for pain Take your time, perfection isn't everything Rise above, be an example, make a change Don't revert back to the insane Survival mode has become everything!

Forgotten Memories by Terry Miksell

They say, "If you don't use it, you lose it" In this place of exile and forgotten memories It is hard to remember being out in the world Here is full of nothingness, the same ol, same ol

Sisters and Brothers, Mothers and Fathers Out there my life was full, before coming here to stay Friends and Family, Sons and Daughters When I'm not reminded of my past, it tends to slip away

Without guilt trips or condemnation of any kind From all of us in this place of exile and forgotten memories A small reminder that what we desire while doing time Nothing extravagant or even costly

A letter now and then, they don't have to be long Even a simple postcard saying, "Do you remember that time we..." Maybe a picture of us in days bygone Little things to keep you in my memory

The jokes we told each other
The pranks we played back and forth
Secrets we shared with one another
Times we cried together when we hurt
Those are the little things that don't amount to much
That we need here in this place of exile and forgotten memories

Forgiveness by Mario Nichols Dedicated to my daughters

square box is what I live in my girls need me so I can't give in I let my kids down, years of prison I been missin' I apologize please forgive my decisions It's hard to call home, I be homesick daily thinkin' bout my babies got my mind goin' crazy visits once a month, sendin' letters thru the mail doin' all that I can to pick up where I failed they tell me they miss me, I tell em' daddy love em' they say they wanna kiss me, I say I wanna hug em' I put the streets above em', livin' for today not thinkin' about tomorrow, I regret that mistake no one to blame but myself and I'm sorry daddy love yall to death, this for Avi' - Gia - Mari beat myself up everyday cus we lost so many years everytime I think about it, daddy always sheds tears

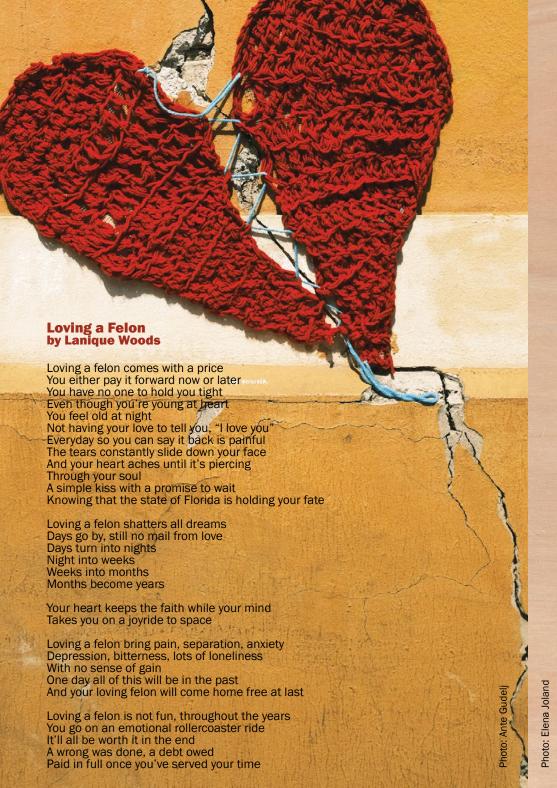


Humans need kindness and compassion. It's not a want; it's a need.

As a kid, my mom's sister, who we called "Big Auntie," always showed me love. I miss those weekends spending time with her. I learned the power of manners: good morning, good afternoon, and good night. I discovered how these greetings can strengthen communication and forge deeper connections. With her help, I discovered the joy of Thanksgiving, and the relationships that are strengthened when we take the time to do so. She taught me compassion.

When I was bullied in school because I didn't want to fight, my mother would always tell me, "Boy, if anybody puts their hands on you, you better hit 'em!" But Big Auntie—she had better answers, compassionate answers. When I asked her, "How do I get out of fighting somebody I don't want to fight without looking like a punk?" She taught me that hatred is never appeased by more hatred, it is frequently appeased by kindness. She said that one can defeat anger through compassion, wickedness through goodness, selfishness through charity, and falsehood through truthfulness. The victor might breed hatred while the defeated lie down in misery, but he who renounces both victory and defeat as a framework for conflict is happy and peaceful. Her lessons shaped me into who I am.

Big Auntie is the reason I know that compassion inevitably reduces psychological torture and hate. I now see a world full of compassion, and it's no different in prison. Compassion improves the mental, physical, and spiritual health of both individuals and communities. Share the word.





Self-Change Journey by Roderick Finley

A new future graduating into a greater vision starts with the educational tools to work on change. We may have come from the hood, but we can strive for a breakthrough–for a better tomorrow. We can work toward bettering ourselves while seeing the glow of freedom's light at the end of the tunnel.

My journey of incarceration started in 1994, 30 years ago. I was still a young teenager in the late 80s, when crack and gang culture hit the hood. I'm a product of that environment, hardened by the ghetto and shaped by struggle. It was hard to get to school; it was sometimes hard to even see the next day. But I also came up with breadwinners-hustlers, drug dealers and gangsters who showed me how to be a man.

By the 90s, the prison population was exploding. When I came to prison in '94, things were what we called "super square business." It was sometimes a game of survival amongst the violent, and after so much fighting, whether you were defending yourself or not, you were labeled violent by the institution–diagnosed with a behavioral problem. Trained to be gladiators then disciplined for gladiating, we were stuck between two worlds.

Over time, things changed. The prison system changed: it's not designed to be quite as violent and predatory as it was when I came in. I've changed: I grew up in here, and I got my education in here. Like Malcolm X, I learned about the world outside prison while inside prison. And now I'm working toward my parole, hopefully in the next 3 years. My main goal is to prepare to never come back, so I spend my days in reentry class and reading books from people who have successfully transitioned. Change is possible, but it's on you to make it happen.

Convict Chronicles: A Tribute to a Bad Man by Leo Cardez

Malo is a bad man. Malo is a convict. Malo is a mean-muggin' three-time loser crank. He is probably OCD. He is definitely institutionalized. He is locked up for something vicious. He doesn't like to talk about it. He will look at you sideways and walk away if you ask.

Yet Malo is cool. He is straight. He is old school. Malo knows how to bite. Malo took the weight on something he didn't do just so other guys wouldn't lose their job. Malo will hook you up with a honey bun on your birthday without looking for anything in return. He goes to Chow just to give away his tray to someone hungry. He doesn't care who you are, what color you are, who you ride with, or your crime. If you're hungry, he's got you. He once gave Mad Dog his jean jacket just 'cause he mentioned he liked it. He gave an on-the-new state baby a care package so big the kid staggered to carry it. He posts the day's TV schedule on his door. He pins up articles in the Dayroom about new laws and organizations helping inmates. He does not post positive articles about prison 'cause privately he says it's propaganda.

But Malo don't play. Malo follows the convict code. Malo once threatened Green (a known thief) with a beatdown with a hot pot, which is a coffee-machine-sized appliance inmates use to heat up water for cooking. It has a large handle and steel plate, and when Malo showed it to Green, the punk ran so fast around the corner he slipped and banged his head on the floor, which knocked him out for a second. Well deserved, said Malo.

Yet when I.A. caught up with Green and interviewed guys on the deck, Malo refused to say a word because the only thing he hates more than a thief is a rat.

Nor did Malo kick his celly, Pharaoh, out of the cell, even though it was clear he was a viking and a cell slug. Pharaoh made a whole show of throwing out his back while trying to clean the cell floor, so Malo did all the cleaning until the slug actually did throw his back out while horseplaying and had to be moved to the prison hospice. Malo got a new celly who may or may not have been a hype and a geechee. He didn't throw

him out either. These things have a way of working themselves out, he explained.

But Malo bugs-up on the officers when they try to spin him about lock-downs. He goes off on the kitchen supervisors when the portions are too small or the slop is overcooked. He checks porters who don't do their jobs. He hasn't spoken to Snoop, his oldest friend, for years 'cause Snoop jumped him in the laundry line. "I believe people when they show me who they are," Malo told him.

Yet Malo does other people's laundry; he'll even throw in a dryer sheet and fold everything afterward. He made his neighbor, Corners, burritos for a week when his mom passed from COVID and he refused to go to Chow. During the 2019-2020 COVID quarantine lockdown when LTS stopped playing any new movies or series on the inmate channel, Malo quietly ordered and paid for Game of Thrones, Stranger Things, and the new Star Wars series for everyone to watch.

But when Quacks, a bootlicker, came to Malo's cell to give him props, Malo

denied all of it and accused him of being a gossip. He said, "If you're here just to spin some inmate twitter, then stop wasting my time. No thanks and kick rocks." Quacks rolled his eyes and stormed away.

"Why are you such a prick?" I asked him once, even though I knew I risked his fury. "Prick? Don't you have anything better to do than waste my time? Why are you worrying about what I am doing?" he asked. "I don't even know what you are talking about. Now take your nose out my ass and get small." Malo closed his cell door in my face.

I clenched my jaw and took a deep breath as I turned and walked back to my cell. I sunk into my bunk and planned my revenge. Of course, I never did anything.

Malo went home last year. I think about him as I warm up a honey bun in my hot pot. See, it's Smitty's birthday and even though he's a hype and a bug, I need to make sure I drop the honey bun off to him before lockup.



Photo: Yazdan Ghamaryan

In August of last year, I took a bold step toward redemption. After serving eleven years of a thirty year sentence, I compiled a 71-page portfolio addressed to the original prosecutor who had overseen my case. That portfolio was not merely a collection of papers but a testament to my transformation and growth. It consisted of character letters, certificates of achievement and education, and a comprehensive one-year reentry plan.

As I sent the portfolio off, the uncertainty of its reception weighed heavily on me. What would the prosecutor think? Would my efforts be in vain? I tried to set aside my anxieties and move forward, focusing on my daily routine. Two weeks later, however, my world shifted dramatically.

I woke up on a Saturday morning and began to brush my teeth when I noticed a piece of mail wedged inside the cell door. As I read the words penned by the prosecutor who had once aggressively advocated for a 30-year prison sentence, tears began to crawl down my face. "Dear Mr. Williams, I received your letter and packet of information. I remember you and your case clearly. I am very impressed with all of your accomplishments since you have been incarcerated. It is rare to see such an impressive list of achievements given where you started 11 years ago. You should be proud of yourself for making such a positive change in your life. I am writing to let you know I intend to support your effort for an early release." This unexpected act of compassion from someone who had once been my adversary was profoundly moving.

The realization that someone who had once been a symbol of my sentence was now advocating for my release was humbling and exhilarating. It was a gesture that extended beyond mere leniency; it was an acknowledgement of my capacity for change and an affirmation of my worthiness for an opportunity at redemption. This compassion became a beacon of hope and further reinforced my belief in the possibility of redemption. Shortly thereafter, my friends and family hired an attorney, and ten months later my

sentence was reduced. I am now on the cusp of reentering society, armed with years of preparation and ready to make a significant impact upon the community I had once harmed. This experience underscores the power of compassion and its capacity to effect profound change in the lives of those who seek it.

To those currently incarcerated, my message is clear: do not succumb to despair or frustration. Even if you are serving a lengthy bid, you must hold onto the faith that a beautiful thing can be born out of an ugly situation. Become a greedy reader with an insatiable appetite. Engage in every educational opportunity. Participate in cognitive classes. Strive to grow in every sphere of your life. Your efforts can alter the trajectory of your life in ways you might not anticipate. I can attest to this from my own journey. Had I not dedicated myself early off in my journey, I might not have received the opportunity for early release.

For prosecutors and others in positions of power, I urge you to approach each case with an open heart. People evolve, learn and grow, often in ways that are not immediately visible. A person who once made a terrible decision may now be an asset to society, capable of contributing positively and making a difference. Your willingness to reconsider cases based on genuine evolution and potential for positive impact can transform lives in ways that extend far beyond the courtroom. For the prosecutor who changed his mind about my sentence—thank you from the bottom of my heart.

In closing, my journey illustrates that even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges, compassion and belief in a human being's capacity for change can lead to extraordinary outcomes. It is a reminder that everyone has the potential for redemption, and that sometimes the most unlikely sources of support can become the catalysts for profound personal and societal transformation. Through my story, I hope to inspire both those who are incarcerated and those in positions of authority to embrace the power of compassion.

Within this carceral space, the scores of bodies desecrated by dead time are the only remnants of the dance. My body became entangled between the arms of time, stuck in an awkward tango signaling the most toxic relationship I have ever known.

I speak to O.G., his 25 years of captivity lingering overhead as I naively ask, "Did it go by fast?" as if his answer could somehow relieve me of my very own tango. I don't remember their names. It could've been Slick, Smoove, or Swan, names serving as a memorial to a generation frozen in time. I knew the answer, but maybe there was a secret cheat code found within these tombs, exchanged through hands like ancient scrolls. This was a question I would've asked my father had he ever shared the misfortune of having his body confined by metal and twisted razor wire. Maybe I would've asked my great great grandfather, whose limbs. choked by binds, passed through Goree Island: the door of no return awaiting the theft of his future. O.G. leaned his back against the cold wall with stacked, gray bricks shadowed by the anchoring of dreams. He reluctantly answered, his own body withered by the torment of an endless dance. "The worst days are longer than months and years fly by, young blood." These words spilled from his lips, dissolving into the stale air.

The clock perched on my shoulders trails me like an omen. There are no hands on this clock; hands mark minutes and hours, which ring insignificant to us. JoJo carried this clock around like he was Flavor Flav christening the stage for Public Enemy. He always seemed to be in contemplation, his eyes excavating questions sunken beneath reinforced concrete; questions for which no one had answerslike why we searched for power in a gun only to be found powerless while sitting in a courtroom, shackled by our choices. But JoJo returned from court like he somehow took back his power. His too cool for air glide, the one that made his right leg dip in unison with his cupped hand slicing through the wind, would've made a pimp named Slick envious. "I caught life plus twenty, bro," The combination of letters and numbers seeped into my pores, settling somewhere between my bones

and cellular tissue. His bulletproof facade intact as he shut his door, the clock still tethered to his black body. 187Slay, whose moniker betrayed his small stature and comedic delivery, had the sickest crossover jumpback three, holding the orange flame like an extension of his body. His wrinkles buried by the sun, his face creased by denied appeals and meritless motions, the clock hovering undefeated in the plundering of potential.

We talked about what girl we last pulled, bobbing and weaving around the question of how long it would take for us to turn into a memory–like the faded baby pictures gathering dust on our mother's walls. Would we ever notice dead time draining our youth? Maybe we did but simply chose to laugh it off, pointing fingers at what we no longer had. Like when JoJo brought attention to my receding hairline; my rebuttal, a joke about the thinning follicles on his crown resembling the drop top sunroof on a 94' Porsche. We were just teenagers twirling through the intimacy of time.

My fingers ran along the grooves of my face tracing my bare jawline and lips. I wondered who would teach me how to shave. Reflecting on the ease in which I allowed the forfeiture of my name in exchange for a couple of numbers sprawled across my prison issued I.D. card. My thoughts land on my own clock, a term of life in prison as definitive as the banging of wooden gavels.

"How much time you catch?" Slay answered the question with the grace of a ballerina steadying for a pirouette. dreaded the moment when the question would be thrown my way. The phrase made time seem so manageable, as if you could stand over and surround it near the corner of your cell. I pictured catching time like trying to hold rain inside the palms of my outreaching arms, holding it in the pocket of my cupped hands only to have it seep through my tightly squeezed fingers.Or maybe catching time was like those fireflies beside the creek spinning in the Summer air, evading the open mason iars held in the palms of optimistic children.

Eventually time eludes all.

On Reconciliation by Phillip Carter

Editor's note: The following conversation originally evolved in response to a prompt for a larger chapter published by a group of free and incarcerated scholars about the process of reconciliation. Unfortunately, this contribution by our long-time contributor, Phillip Carter, was lost in the mail and didn't get included in that chapter. Like so much of the work we all do in prison arts and letters, here is another instance of communication sailing throught the prison walls, sometimes landing home in time, sometimes getting lost in the shuffle. For all those letter writers awaiting a reply from a loved one, or wondering what happened to your submission, stay strong knowing that your words, like Phillip's, are not lost or forgotten, just buried somewhere in a mail room, awaiting discovery.

SJH: Phillip, what does "reconciliation" mean to you, both personally and politically? Is it something you achieve, or is it an ongoing process?

PC: From the monotonous confines of a prison cell, reconciliation is a concept laden with complexities and contradictions. Incarceration often strips individuals of their identity, reducing them to numbers and case files, yet it is within these austere walls that the true essence of reconciliation is sought, chased after, and desired. Reconciliation transcends the mere act of seeking forgiveness from those wronged: it is about the profound journey of coming to terms with one's own humanity. It is a process akin to Malcom Gladwell's theory in *The Tipping Point*, where small, seemingly insignificant actions collectively lead to significant change. Each step towards understanding one's past, whether through writing letters of apology or participating in restorative justice programs, serves as a catalyst for a larger transformation, both within myself and the community I harmed.

In Gladwell's terms, reconciliation within the prison system operates like a "connector" in social networks, bridging the gap between the fractured and fragmented lives of inmates and the broader society. It underscores the potent power of personal narratives to foster empathy and change. As prisoners navigate this complex path to redemption, we encounter "mavens" in the form of counselors and mentors who provide crucial guidance and support. These interactions illuminate a fundamental truth: reconciliation is a deeply personal odyssey that requires the convergence of opportunity, intent, and the courage to confront uncomfortable truths. By embracing this arduous and vulnerable process, prisoners not only pursue their own redemption, but also contribute to collective healing that ripples beyond the prison walls, challenging societal perceptions and fostering a more compassionate world.

On a political level, reconciliation embodies the complex task of addressing historical injustices and systemic inequalities. It necessitates an unwavering commitment to truth, accountability and the creation of inclusive narratives that honor diverse experiences and perspectives. Restoration, therefore, cannot be perceived as a finite achievement: it is inherently an ongoing process. It requires sustained effort, vigilance and the willingness to engage in perpetual dialog and introspection. Politically, it demands long-term structural reforms and the cultivation of policies that promote social justice and equity. Thus, reconciliation is both a personal endeavor and a collective responsibility, a perpetual striving towards a more just and compassionate society. It is an evolving praxis, continually shaped by the interplay of past actions and future aspirations.

SJH: Can you share a story of how you worked through anger or trauma toward reconciliation?

PC: As a former gang leader in the presence of 2,400 inmates, I understand my influence. I also understand my destruction, and that my former reputation supersedes me, and that it's not what I say, but what I do that holds the most weight. I understand that if others view the radical changes in me, they, too, can see the possibility in changing themselves. Truthfully, I may never find atonement, reconciliation, or redemption, so a story of its kind wouldn't fit here. There is a host of devastation in my wake, things that I can never fix, lives forever changed because of my audacious stupidity. So I simply live each day in a space that chases betterment. Whether that means mentoring these men around here, being a father to two beautiful young girls, a friend to those I am loyal to, a son my mother can be proud of, or simply a man of integrity and valuable character—that's my goal today.

SJH: When you think about reconciliation, who are your touchstones, your inspirations?

PC: When contemplating reconciliation, several profound figures and movements come to mind, each embodying the transformative power of forgiveness and healing. Nelson Mandela stands as a towering beacon of reconciliation, having navigated the treacherous path from imprisonment to presidency with a vision rooted in unity and forgiveness. His ability to extend an olive branch to those who once oppressed him, fostering a new era of peace in South Africa, is nothing short of inspiring. As a leader, he teaches us that true reconciliation requires immense courage, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to healing collective wounds.

In a broader cultural context, the Civil Rights movement in the United States offers another rich source of inspiration. Figures like Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrate how the pursuit of justice and reconciliation can coexist, driving forward a vision of an equitable society through nonviolent resistance and profound empathy. King's belief in the "Beloved Community" underscores the idea that reconciliation is not merely an end but a continuous journey towards a more inclusive and compassionate society. These touchstones remind us that reconciliation is an active, dynamic process, requiring both personal and collective efforts to build and heal divisions.

SJH: Does reconciliation-seeking communication have a style, or a set of best practices?

PC: Reconciliation-seeking communication indeed possesses a distinctive style and a set of best practices characterized by deep empathy, active listening, and unflinching honesty. It requires creating a safe, non-judgmental space where all parties feel heard and respected, allowing for the expression of pain and the acknowledgement of past wrongs. This process of elevated dialogue is underpinned by a commitment to understanding differing perspectives and fostering mutual respect. It involves clear, compassionate communication that seeks to bridge divides rather than exacerbate them, emphasizing restorative justice over retribution. Ultimately, reconciliation-seeking communication is about healing relationships and driving collective transformation anchored in transparency, humility and an unwavering dedication to justice and unity.



Special Section of Work from the Knox College/Henry Hill Program Preface by Leanne Trapedo Sims

The following mosaic of poems and expressivity was borne from the Inside Out program run at the Henry Hill Correctional Center, in Galesburg, Illinois, in collaboration with Knox College, a small liberal arts college. In 2021, I met a group of men who inspired me with their gifts, hearts, minds, grace, and resilience. Over the next few terms, I facilitated Life Writing as Social Engagement and Restorative Justice classes as Inside-Out classes at the facility. The Inside-Out model brings students from campus (we call them outside students) to work shoulder-to-shoulder with incarcerated students (we call them inside students), building a unique learning community. Over the years, the creative writing persisted, as the students in Hill are avid and ritualistic poets. We workshopped, we read, and we wrote. I hope the work will linger and live with you as it has with me.

The Voice of Silence by Willie Nichols

Suddenly I'm inspired
The weight of the world my muse
Trapped between the traumas of the past
And the fear of an unseen future

I look in the mirror, "There you are"
Most days a stranger stares back
Boastful and full of pride
Telling me I'm special, but
Today it is me

Unspecial and ordinary Flawed—the grumpy old man Over-indulged on life's forbidden This gray hair the witness

The mere thought produces a smile Hidden from sight of course My vanity confined Nevertheless, I gloat

Maybe confession is good for the soul These tears are but a portion The transitive burden of my penance

Compelling me to walk against the wind Only looking back to define my path forward Maintaining my proximity to truth Editor's Note: Dr. Trapedo Sims' last book was Reckoning with Restorative Justice: Hawai'i Women's Prison Writing (Duke University Press, 2023), wherein she chronicles her years teaching poetry in Hawai'i. Through that work, she encountered "This island on which I love you," by the native Hawaiian poet, Brandy Nălani McDougall. The Knox/Hill students read that poem, and spoke to its author, leading to the following reflection by Isaiah.

This Island Is Alive with Love by Isaiah

This island is alive with love For all the losses I had to endure It's a wonder my smile still appears Cast to the side and left For only God knew what would happen Drifting through treacherous waters Toward one storm after another Torrential rain beating my body Stripping me bare Exposing my soul For any voyager who passes and stares
This Island is alive with love Far off in the distance Miles away from a first glance That one lifeless plot ripped from its foundation Has grown to a sizable place to stand Bearing fruit, spreading love And nourishment for all who visit The castaway you deemed helpless Has grown brilliantly exquisite

This island is alive with love

Gathered Spirits by Willie Nichols

I come alive in the forest A bright-eyed boy Most lonesome and cautious The warmth of the fire comforts me Captivated by the memories of my ancestors Dancing on the flames My heart beats steady, full of purpose Every sense searching for the smallest detail The aroma is a lazy greeting from an old friend The force is alive, a symphony of life The tree sings to me-along with all that creeps For my ancestors carry the wind Moaning and groaning and pain Telling epic tales of a lost world—a lost tongue Assuring me—encouraging me of who I am Encamped at the Edge of Darkness Taunting the fire as shadows they dance As proud as peacock swing back and forth Their feet tuned to the rhythm of nature The beauty in their movement intoxicating My stomach opens up and I fall in My blood compelled me Together—we howl at the moon

KNOX COLLEGE/HENRY HILL PROGRAM SECTION

Sanctuary by Ben Israel

A tar-coated roof that has basked in the heat of a 90° day. The warmth of the sun's rays radiating off that black top can still be felt deep into the starless, artificially lit night.

That all-too-familiar smell of slaughtered cattle and hogs emitting from the old union stock-yards lingers in the hot August air. 15 summers since I came into this world, but on this rooftop, I feel older, no cares and no worries. A hangout for friends and me, where we make the rules, where we are on top.

The pungent, skunky aroma of freshly lit marijuana masks that nauseating smell of death hovering in the air. Immature and naive to the many dangers and pains this manner of life and thinking will one day lead to. But at that moment, it is a place to escape the harsh realities of my environment. A place of freedom.

The symphonic sounds of car horns, Mexican and House music blare from passing rides, harmonizing to my ears, relaxing and soothing. Whisking me away to thoughts of my first love.

Picturing that smile, hearing her melodious laughter, clinging on desperately to the taste of her lips, which still lingers from an earlier deceptively stolen kiss.

The sound of distant gunfire shatters that moment of bliss.

Trying to discern the distance of those shots. Thinking whether someone familiar was the target or victim. Thoughts a 15-year-old child should never have to contemplate. The only assurance is in knowing that up here on this blacktopped roof, I am safe.

Safe from guns, safe from the police, safe from harm.

Safe from the world surrounding this roof.

A sanctuary in a sea of chaos!

Back of the Yards by Ben Israel

Decrepit four-story warehouses of the old Union Stockyards. Debilitated by nature and abandonment. A sea of grass their only barrier. Their only occupants, the pigeons, possums and other vermin who sought shelter within those feeble structures. For me and my cousins, it was a playground with infinite possibilities, not conscious of the many dangers of that red brick and mortar environment.

I can still hark back to the redolence of the old pigeon droppings and decomposition, which to an eleven-year-old boy was the smell of adventure. "Jerardo," my cousin Temo or Javier would yell, "race you to the other end," which felt like being in an episode of American Gladiator, having to run around those elephantine turn-of-the-century machines, remnants of the industrial age.

Years later, I would reminisce about those buildings. I had given up that playground for the savage pot-holed Back of the Yards streets. No longer racing my cousins to get to the other side of a building, but running for my life from those who threatened it. Circumspect not to cross that invisible border. For to do so meant clashing with those I was programmed to look at as an enemy. An enemy all

because they wore a different color than I. Because they grew up on the other side of a street belonging to no one. A barbarous neighborhood which calibrated my mind to become a soldier in an inexcusable war.

I had no care. What was expected I did, for it was a kill-or-be-killed mentality instilled in me. Thinking there were no choices, no options. The Universal Law of Relativity in full effect, for death or prison was my lot on this path. Prison was my judgement, death I escaped, but still a casualty of that heathen conscience.

Sitting in my cell thinking, "How did I end up in here?" Blaming him or her, but never myself. Deep intro- and retrospective meditation led me to the Truth—that I was culpable. A new perspective, a new idea. A righteous seed planted, working for life, not recognizing death. Slaying that egoic "I" and striving for the betterment of all.

Not the end of me, but a second chance to right my wrongs. To show to all, those streets define me no more. For what are those streets but lifeless concrete with no power but the power we give them. They have no power over me!

American Made by Emmitt X Wright, from the Belly of the Beast

Why Bother I have no name, no mother tongue And no father Every time I overcome one obstacle I'm faced with something harder Larger than the expected vexed With the most hectic life "Roll like dice" dead or alive I'm still Paying A Price Wedding rice get thrown, I held up my bowl Because having no food every night was in My household Cold soul because everybody that raised me Put snow in their nose Showed how to unload and reload pistols at 11 years old Grow'd up where nobody ever grew up Stuck between a dope dealer and a dope fiend Was the only examples I seen Cream was money, big money was cake I only had a taste Created in haste, so fast is my only pace Embrace only with gang hand shakes Self-hate so I find myself being Someone else every day Prey only on the weak because I'm weak Sleep all day even when I'm awake Fake outwardly because inside I'm doubting Tattoos on my body because I saw Somebody else's body, and Everything I am I copied

American Made

Lost Art by Larry Chapman

The lost art of writing, so lost that words are disrespected, what are people's real objectives, because it's almost never corrected?

The lost art of writing is like paintings and pictures, words misused, construed, and abused; lost by a society stuck in a millennial state confused and looking like fools.

Every letter, every word, every syllable, hyphen, punctuation, period, comma, colon and apostrophe; every exclamation point, every everything is important to me.

The lost art of writing is my favorite relief; it helps me when I'm going through my ups and downs, even in times of grief.

It gives my life meaning and helps me understand me better. This lost art is my peace and I know it loves me, so I will love it back forever.

Therapeutic Exposure by Terance Dejuan Wilson

I've been alone a lot lately. Every time I try to escape my thoughts I fall flat upon my face.

I find myself too high to concentrate but too low to come down. If my thoughts would only slow down, I'd probably be chasing the past. Life's too fast. You were a moment suspended in a flash of shimmering lights. Whether it's wrong or right, I still write about our last life.

That crash site.

You were my genius and my downfall-the evidence that I had ever grown at all. My heart is a pulsating standing applause.

Love advertises herself, established by a warrior. Life's only made you complicated, but I knew you before your flaws. When life engineered unexpected traumas, you came to the defense. Distilled wisdom gained at my very own expense. These thoughts of mine open doors and unveil the divine. No more sweet release.

I met you in a fantasy. Now they question my sanity. Is it vanity to believe that we still could be? Need therapy—these nights with no sleep, I cherish them because soon I'II be at peace. I was just another pitstop on route to your true destination. There are fighting revelations, secretly wishing for your devastation.

Who could I tell these thoughts to without being judged? I don't even hold an angry grudge; I just wish we never was. I used to make you drip all over like a ball of wax, trip over your words. Now you pretend you don't care. Do you dare? Memory late–I could take you there. But there are some things true gentlemen never share. You broke me down, gave me your secrets like a designating crown. Built up just to be let down. I wish I never felt your secret pulse. These are the thoughts I'd like to efface.

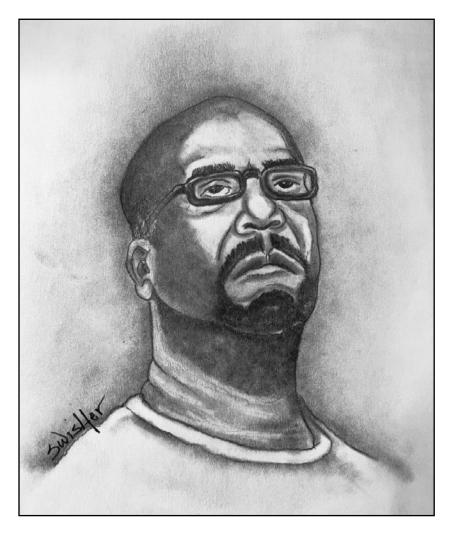
Hearts break in love; this isn't even a thank you grudge. This is therapeutic exposure where things get shaken up.

Photo: Denisse Leon

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Special Section from the Writing Group at the State Correctional Institute of Huntingdon, PA Edited by Vaughn Wright

Long-time correspondent Vaughn Wright (pictured below, as drawn in pencil by George Swisher) has been leading writing groups in Pennsylvania, so here we feature works from that team. We encourage other writing collectives to consider this kind of group submission.



Brick Counter by Vaughn Wright

The walls of my prison are made of regrets conveniently sized in the shape of rectangles and reddish-orange in color. Cemented together by time. Erected higher than I can climb. Enclosing me on all sides. I pass the time counting them. Each day I find new ones that distract me from my place. I'll never count them all.

Call Me by Vaughn Wright

With her hand raised to her smiling brown face Pinky and thumb extended in the sign of a telephone handset Her meaning is clear

Call me

She doesn't have to paint me a picture

I've been down too long Missed out on too much of the world Lost so much love over the years To years, to COVID

Her invitation is a lifeline

Call me?

She won't have to wait long

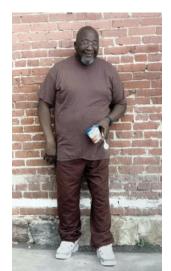
Editor's Note: "Call Me" was written as a companion piece for Garcia Lui's "Call Me," the painting that appears on our cover.

Why Quit? by Jamal Lewis

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When times are bad and you're feeling sad Why quit? When you're tired and time seems almost expired Why quit? When love fails and hearts are left with trails, be strong Why quit?

For it will get better no matter if there is stormy weather



Ol' Head by Eugene "Tsunami" Miller

Hey, ol' head Who, me, young buck? Yes, ol' G What's up, my man? For some time, my friend, I have had my eyes on you. How can you sit up here on this prison bench with an ol' number like that and always have a smile on your face?

Well, son, when I was your age, I had many things. Big cars, pretty women, and pockets full of cash. That's all gone now, young'un, and now that bill is due. The bill always comes due.

Then what are you smilin' for?

Because for me, the price was worth it. See you in traffic, son

HUNTINGDON SECTION EDITED BY VAUGHN WRIGHT

Smile by R. Ya'iyr Carter

when she broke open the door (hair like lightning) and stomped out my yesterdays they don't even look the same anymore

(shattered) i don't dare make plans—maps are the worst poems dreams only disappoint idealists—realists are seduced by satire or nihilism

(they have the most familiar teeth) or at least the most interesting

Was is a Drug? by R. Ya'iyr Carter

deal gone wrong? or gang related? it's like our life leaking on the pavement hums at a tone out of tune to their ear drums cause frequently too frequent to me they misquote our lines like our red tie-dyed tees don't scream to the world like feedback

they compose notes for the news station about the new statistic but their disharmony sounds flat to the unheard whose street language confounds & stage presence incites imitation yeah our slang be resonatin'

we were born refugees orphans with no songs from our homeland we record our maladies

i mean melodies in a mournful octave in brick tent cities where the anthem is survival of the fittest who relate to their gangs & it's only natural to select the art of the drug deal & pitch in the pursuit of happiness when the law of the land is we got the right to bear arms & stand our ground on our blocks & defend our castles it's a remix

"It was a preemptive strike against an adversary who had weapons of mass destruction and was known for committing war crimes. And now the world is a safer place... Your Honor."

Pork Ribs by R. Ya'iyr Carter (in memory of Maurice Clemmons, Ismaayil Brinsley & Micah Johnson)

smoke trails from a blunt cherry drift toward heaven trapped with us while we wait with intentions hidden behind windows tinted waitin' on the opposition to be optimal

smoke lifts off steel toward heaven free like us (if we make it) so our boots is movin to get back hidden behind windows tinted intense pretendin' it was just business

all the smoke back when we didn't know nothin

smoke clouds the legacy of Tulsa bearin' witness in heaven an ominous testimony of genocide and hatred hidden behind whitewashed history books an attempt to paint over a Black Wall Street

smoke rises over the rubble of a church empty like us draggin' prayers to a snorin' white god who closes his eyes to our tears for 4 Black girls whose names are Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins & Denise McNair 4 Black girls with white socks and probably colorful barrettes wake us up and wipe our cheeks and tell us to do something something just

but "black leaders" never want no smoke

smoke mixes with smog & rage over L.A., Detroit, Newark, Baltimore on the 6 o'clock news buildings burn acrid stingin' lungs tastin' like justice in a sinister system vengeance fits whoever fits the description even a white truck driver takin a cement slab to the face might be just layin down some ground work

smoke fades in the night over a police station bonfire in Minneapolis and it smells like generations of frustration of mommas & daddies sons, daughters & brothas sistas & cuzzins chokin from the knee on our necks

yeah it smells like gunpowder, teargas & white privilege

but we don't really want no smoke smoke dances on the hood of a black & white Ford Taurus in the dark cold like me behind tinted windows waitin to make the scales just a little more even waitin on a cop position to be optimal and rememberin old smoke wonderin if that was just or unjust business

Editor's Note: "Pork Ribs" won the 2024 PEN America Fielding A. Dawson Prize for Poetry.

Vending Machines by R. Ya'iyr Carter

they are invisible until you need them until you want what they have crinkling bags of crispy chips uppity rows of chocolate bars standing sticky brown cinnamon buns to slake your hunger dark fizzy cola to quench your thirst

they don't have communities or someone to love they only exist for your pleasure

they own nothing despite being providers full of your desires

all that is given to them is emptied out appropriated they'd better work they'd better not ever fail or they'll be punched, kicked manhandled and shaken until they relinquish their treasures for your fickle consumption

if they don't fulfill
your desire or
submit to your
will and
untwist their curly coils
to accommodate your comfort
they malfunctioned
they must be broken open
and fixed
or disposed of

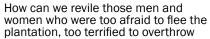
they can never just be

they have been constructed for a particular purpose they must know their place



A Statesman's Frame of Mind by Ira Johnson

As men who have lost practically everything to the criminal justice system, I find it ironic that so many of us are either ill-prepared or simply too afraid to pick up the mighty pen and dive into the fight of securing our God-inherited rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This is why I'm skeptical of those around me who heap disdain upon the subservient slaves of yesteryear. Such people seem disingenuous.



their masters, or too petrified by the expectant consequences that some friend or relative's rebellious attitude would most certainly incur, yet willingly submit ourselves to be abused by excessive commissary prices, exorbitant cable subscription fees, costly medical co-pays, slave-labor wages, and so forth? It seems hypocritical. So you'll have to excuse me when I say, miss me with all that rebel-rousing talk of a revolution.

The fact of the matter is incarceration wears many different faces. But it's true identity is an attitude that some have come to adopt as their own because they have no clue who they are as an individual. "Prisoner," like "Slave," is a dangerous and contagious persona that begins and ends in the mind, if only because an overwhelming majority of us have never been truly free. And I suspect that most who claim to be "freemen" don't possess the slightest clue what real freedom is, nor would they know what to do with it if it fell into their laps.

As a result, I put forth the opinion that Freedom is too subjective an ideal to be measured objectively. It supersedes any notion of time and space and laughs in the face of adversity. True freedom is obtained by undertaking the long and arduous process of shedding the mental shackles that bind us. These restraints have kept us from thinking of true freedom's potential for far too long. We must slay the opposition within ourselves first. Then we'll be equipped to start doing more than just serving time inside these fortified trenches of captivity.

Cease wasting what limited freedom we have on debates over inconsequential matters to assuage the errant ego or any other abstract or non-reciprocal thing. Come to the basic understanding that what doesn't add value to life is most likely subtracting from it or worse, keeping us stagnated. Refrain from resorting to our baser instincts to settle differences. Rely upon our higher intellect instead. And never make the fool's choice of mistaking our enemy's perceived slights or threats for preemptive strikes. Where their objective is our complete subjugation, the attacks will be unmistakably direct. Remain vigilant for the presumed enemy who first provides a warning; they should be counted as a potential ally. Above all, end the madness of cutting off our noses to spite someone else's face. I can absolutely guarantee that they're sitting back laughing at us when we do, and they become concerned when we don't.

Learn to wield the pen with a righteous wrath toward the singular purpose of manifesting justice. And always keep ourselves in a constant state of demanding the tools that are required to effect the change we desire.

The Wall by Michael De La Cruz

Over the wall I see fear and sadness and oppression An angry nation divided Battling between what is white and what is right

Over the wall I see cultural hegemony
Systems-impacted communities
Withstanding the weight of police discrimination
Racist policies
Deportation, mass incarceration, barriers to education
Troubled youth with no role model to look up to
A landscape of generational trauma

Over the wall I see an insurrection in the hearts of the system A racist leader dethroned Penalty a slap on the wrist A darker complexion would have been labeled "Domestic terrorists"

Over the wall I see communities fed up Marching in peace to end murdering police "Hands up; don't shoot" "I can't breathe" George Floyd painted in the street

Over the wall I see a bigger wall being built Twisted razor wire buoys in the Rio Grande Slashing the flesh of the oppressed Green suit on horseback Herding people like cattle Man, not even Superman is exempt

Over the wall I see a collection of fearful and sad minds Collaborating for a brighter future Paulo Freire was onto something Pedagogy of the Oppressed is a great beginning So is breaking down the wall

Barriers down, there's more space to breathe
No more murders by racist police
Protecting and serving all of humanity
Not a hand on a gun, but hand in a hand
With compassion and empathy
Then, and only then, can we truly embrace #AllLivesMatter

Anzaldua writes a new story
Accepting a wild tongue and borders no longer struggling
Deportation–there is no fear
Razor wire and herding people become a distant memory
Higher education can now be in all our paths

No longer afraid when we walk down the street No fear that the system is going to racially profile me Those are no longer my worries

MAGA-Marginalized Americans are Great Again

Lady Justice balances out the choice for a woman's right to her body

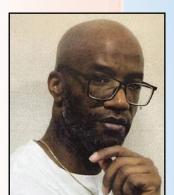
The weight of those nine months are not ours to worry When we will no longer victim-blame and force women to carry children of rape

These choices belong solely to women to make

Dreamers can dream and families can be People are able to assume any identity Male, female, they/them, black, white We can live together without society asking us, "why?"

Justice, there is much more to reimagine
But this is the start
These things more problematic to my heart
I imagine a world where we can all just get along
It can be truth if we all just hold strong

I speak in places occupied by the oppressed America-enough is enough We won't let it happen again If you try to rebuild the wall Best believe we will break it down again



Broken Rose by Christopher Hall, aka Outta'Syiett

I never knew what mistakes I made
I never knew just how much of my life they would change
I never knew . . . never, never knew
Until the old me, the new outgrew
Many silent nights of isolating myself
The BHP* says I'm bound to fail
But they don't know what they don't know
Just why I wear this mask
So the pain won't show
Crying out from the hurt bottled deep inside
All these tears represent the warm streams of my life

I'm no red-rosed thornbush tree I'm just a black rose spring from broken concrete

*BHP is an acronym for Behavioral Health Specialists

I had the Greatest Friendship Once by Derek Rose

I had the dearest friendship once A once-in-a-lifetime thing if you're lucky, I think I've been told it's unnatural for grown men to be so close But we met in jail with nothing but time, and our lives laid bare on the brink

Is something created unnaturally when two kindreds meet in need? Two mature educated men in a county jail where we didn't fit in And no one to relate to, we became an island fortress of two With 16 hours a day just talking, like two children in summer playing

After 6 months my friend moved on to pay for his crime of addiction 4 more years in a cell in a prison to teach him his lesson We the people are so very angry with you, and we're goin' to make you know it We'll teach you a lesson you won't forget, and why did you choose to be an addict?

I watched my friend drowning in want and need and hunger and pleading Simmering in anticipation and expectation and daydreams of fiending Strategically plotting, planning and scheming every detail of that first shot Fantasizing his memories of that feeling, the bliss, the satisfaction–pure contentment

My friend now had 10 times the addiction of before he arrived Everyone leaves prison so much more broken than they ever were in their lives No programs or counseling or rehabilitative behavioral science They pretend prisoners sitting around talking about drugs for years is just fine

When his time was up they wouldn't let him go home to live with family or friends

They forced him to live in a halfway house filled with drug users Many of these places are owned by parole officers or correctional staff It's a dirty little secret that helps to ensure felons keep coming back

He spent the next 2 years bouncing in and out, between the drug house and country jail



For 4 years we wrote every week, 14-page limit to keep it under 1 oz. Over 5,000 pages if you're doing the math, learning everything there ever was about us both

Likes and loves and dreams and fears, disappointments, secret weaknesses and broken pieces

Neither had ever been so raw and open and honest-exposed

At a point we were startled when we got so deep into each other's core We saw that we were the same, this friend, this brother, this kindred soul We could feel and see where our humanity was fused at its base We looked out at the rest of the world as one, from the same place

Over those years I began to worry as I watched my friend's unchecked addiction grow

See, there are no corrections in prison, especially not with mental health They lock junkies in boxes and say, "hey, there's the fix!! They can't get high anymore!"

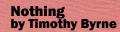
They pretend not to know about the front-end of addiction, the foundationthe yearning Suffering from increasing depression from his growing collection of accumulated fails

Until one crisp New Years Day when he decided to up the dose We'll never know what he meant to do. It doesn't matter, he's just gone forever

His obituary was filled with the kindest adjectives and declarations And someone trying to describe how empty the world is without him His contagious smile a bright shining light, his positive outlook larger than life All I know is I loved him so much I never felt such a connection, such brokenness

I don't have a comforting myth to sooth me; I don't believe in magic or ghouls I only know that he was real and now he's gone
And I just wish that everyone I ever knew could have known him too
Because I had the dearest friendship once

Photo: Arthur A



I see Nothing pass by my window Nothing usually does. I know this Because I sit by my window and wait For nothing to pass Not really moving until Nothing has Day after day I sit by my window Looking for something, and Nothing My intimate arrives My number one friend By default There were days I went after other things While Nothing was there Or Nothing was missing And filled myself with anything While Nothing lamented my absence I even tried leaving Nothing For things that say they love me And came to this conclusion: Anything, everything, and always something Will never see me as Nothing does Nothing never neglects me Nothing knows all the years And I'm fast approaching sixty Together with Nothing It's Nothing I'm afraid to lose

Hesitation by Timothy Byrne

A little boy

lies before

a slow moving stream

on the eve

of his eleventh birthday no plans have been made

beyond his reflection where little brown striders

dance

on the surface not for a little

not for a little

not for a boy of ten

It's Count Time by Anthony Beckem

Sentenced away from my wife, mom, sister, and those I hold dear to my heart. Deprived of life's many pleasures. Forced to embark on a pilgrimage through an unknown world with no map or compass, haunted by the "what ifs" of life. Now faced with the most daunting sound, the words I have learned to hate!

It's count time!

How did I get here? How did I allow this to happen? This was not the plan! Nothing I do or have done seems to have ever made a difference. It's count time!

Why count what doesn't matter? Stand? For what? Both feet on the floor! Be in an upright position! It's count time!

When the noise stops and I am left all alone in the hours of the night and the quietness forces me to examine myself and think over my life, I ask myself: Has my life counted for anything? Many have counted me out. Some are counting on me to fail! It's count time!

How I got here doesn't matter. If I decide to stay here is what matters. My past was just a comma, keep watching, there is greatness ahead! It's count time!

I know now I have been looking at this all wrong! I allowed my own faulty thinking to trap me with 3 simple words. It's count time!

I know and see now the supreme power sends me a reminder each and every morning and gives me another chance to make it count. It's count time!

Now is my time to stand with both feet on the floor, in the upright position, with no shame, stabilized and strong as I take advantage of the time and make my life count for my family, my children, and for myself, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

There is no future dwelling in the past. Now pull yourself together, stabilize yourself by putting both feet on the ground, be in the upright position, stand tall, be intentional from this day on, face your fears, conquer yourself, get ready. It's count time!

Photo: Alvaro Matzumura

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Axiom by Domingo Palafox

During my prison sentence, I've used my time to reflect on my life and where it is going. The choices I was making before my arrest supported a behavioral pattern of perpetual negative actions. While in prison, forced to live in a way nobody should ever live, I've used my time to get sober, exercise every week, and to pursue my college education to better my situation and my future.

The general public often views convicted people as irredeemable monsters. Michelle Alexander once said, "Criminals, it turns out, are the one social group in America we have permission to hate" (p. 41). I wish the world did not see felons as incongruous with society.

Changes of heart don't happen overnight in prison. It took me almost a vear-and-a-half to implement a solid change of behavior aimed at bettering myself. Along the way, I've had to battle society's perception of those in prison.

From the Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here." While I am guilty of the crimes I committed, I am not broken forever. We in prison are not hopeless, lost causes; we are capable of reform. Like MLK, I want people to know that we are not unfit for participation in the general populace. We want to be heard, not silenced.

MLK goes on to say, "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere . . . whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." Injustice is evident when entire groups of people are disqualified for participation in society, stamped with the label of "The New Jim Crow" and warehoused in conditions unfit for animals.

We can change our negative behavior patterns. We are not irredeemable, uneducated monsters; we are capable of great things. No longer willing to be victims of our circumstances, we aim to be victors of our situations and creators of a great future society. Some of the damage we've caused may be irreparable, but we are not. The goal of recovery should be restoration as justice. We should have an opportunity to fix the harm we've caused.

Citations:

Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (New York: The New Press, 2010).

Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963, see the version accessible at https://letterfromjail.com.



SHOUT-OUTS TO FRIENDS AND ALLIES

Over the years, we have celebrated friends, colleagues, and allies in a section we call "Shout Outs." The idea is that we want to share information about the folks doing good work on the frontlines of social change, enabling our readers to contact—and hopefully support or work with—these terrific organizations. In the past decade, we have profiled:

- The Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition, https://www.ccjrc.org
- Critical Resistance, a national group headquartered in Oakland, CA, https://criticalresistance.org
- The Justice Arts Coalition from Takoma Park, MD,

https://thejusticeartscoalition.org

- Mourning our Losses from Austin, TX, https://www.mourningourlosses.org
- Mt. Tamalpais College, outside San Francisco, CA,

https://www.mttamcollege.edu

- PCARE, the nationwide alliance of educators working on Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education; join the conversation at https://www.facebook.com/groups/45471852149
- PEN America, https://pen.org, and the allies who run their Prison and Justice Writing programming at https://pen.org/prison-writing
- The Prison Creative Arts Project in Ann Arbor, MI, https://lsa.umich.edu/pcap
- Prison Legal News, the national newspaper, based in Florida, https://www.prisonlegalnews.org
- Remerg, the safe transitions NGO from Denver, https://remerg.com
- The Sentencing Project in Washington, D.C.,

https://www.sentencingproject.org

• The Shakespeare Prison Project in Racine, WI,

http://www.shakespeareprisonproject.com

- The University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI), https://liberalarts.du.edu/prison-arts
- The Vera Institute of Justice, https://www.vera.org

For this issue, we want to celebrate two national groups doing terrific work. Both have been instrumental in supporting educational efforts in prisons and in prison-impacted communities, so we send along our love and thanks.

PRISON

The Prison Policy Initiative produces cuttingedge research to expose the broader harm of mass POLICY INITIATIVE incarceration, and then sparks advocacy campaigns to create a more just society. The organization's most

well-known work is its annual report Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie and its campaigns to end prison phone exploitation and prison gerrymandering. Learn more at www.prisonpolicy.org.



The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison seeks to expand and enhance opportunities for incarcerated learners by

promoting quality nigner education in prison. Supporting a collaborative network of practitioners and students from approximately 400 higher education in prison programs across the United States, we foster connections that strengthen this field. Through these efforts, we provide pathways for both incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people to build relationships in new settings, share reliable data and research, and communicate the value of quality higher education in prison. Additionally, the Alliance is committed to creating meaningful, paid, and credit-bearing opportunities for currently and formerly incarcerated people to apply their education, achieve economic stability, and embody new identities. Learn more at www.higheredinprison.org.

Author's Corner

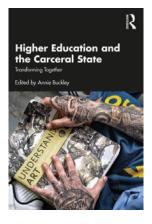
In "Author's Corner" we celebrate recent accomplishments by friends, allies, and contributors. Join us in applauding these new works. . .



Captured Words/Free Thoughts
correspondence editor Ben
Boyce hosts The Dr. Junkie Show
podcast, where he translates the written
work of incarcerated artists into audio
form. Recently, The Dr. Junkie Show
hosted a series of stories from previously
incarcerated people who are doing
incredible work in the community. All
episodes are available on your favorite
podcatcher.

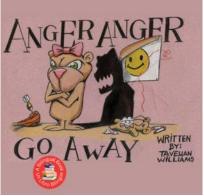
Education and the Carceral State:

Transforming Together, edited by Annie
Buckley, the Director of the Prison Arts Collective
(www.prisonartscollective.com). This collection
of 22 essays offers a compelling snapshot of
how education in prison is transforming lives,
changing institutions, and triggering nation-wide
conversations about social justice. The book
includes chapters by incarcerated artists and
authors, formerly incarcerated scholars, and
a range of educators and activists, all sharing
personal stories about collaborations that cross
prison walls and confound stereotypes.





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Anger Anger Go Away and Saying Goodbye are two of long-time contributor Taveuan Williams' newest children's books. Taveuan has been publishing children's books devoted to regulating emotions, dealing with the pain of loss, and navigating the social pressures of gender. You can find Taveuan's books at Amazon, or wherever you buy books. The illustration are by Warren Worthington, the artist who gave us the incredible cover of Volume 20 of this magazine.

Captured Words/Free Thoughts Publication Permission Form

Dear Readers, we hope you enjoyed Volume 21 of our magazine. For those of you who are submitting work to be considered for publication in our next issue, please complete this form and return it with your submission. Please email your submission(s) to stephen.hartnett@ucdenver.edu, or mail them to the University of Colorado Denver Department of Communication, 1201 Larimer Street, Denver CO, 80204.

| I, (author/artist name), |
|---|
| ereby testify on this day, (date here), that I greemission to Dr. Stephen Hartnett to publish my poem(s) and/or story(ies) nd/or other artwork, entitled (name of work here) |
| in Volume 22 of Captured Words/Free Thoughts. |
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