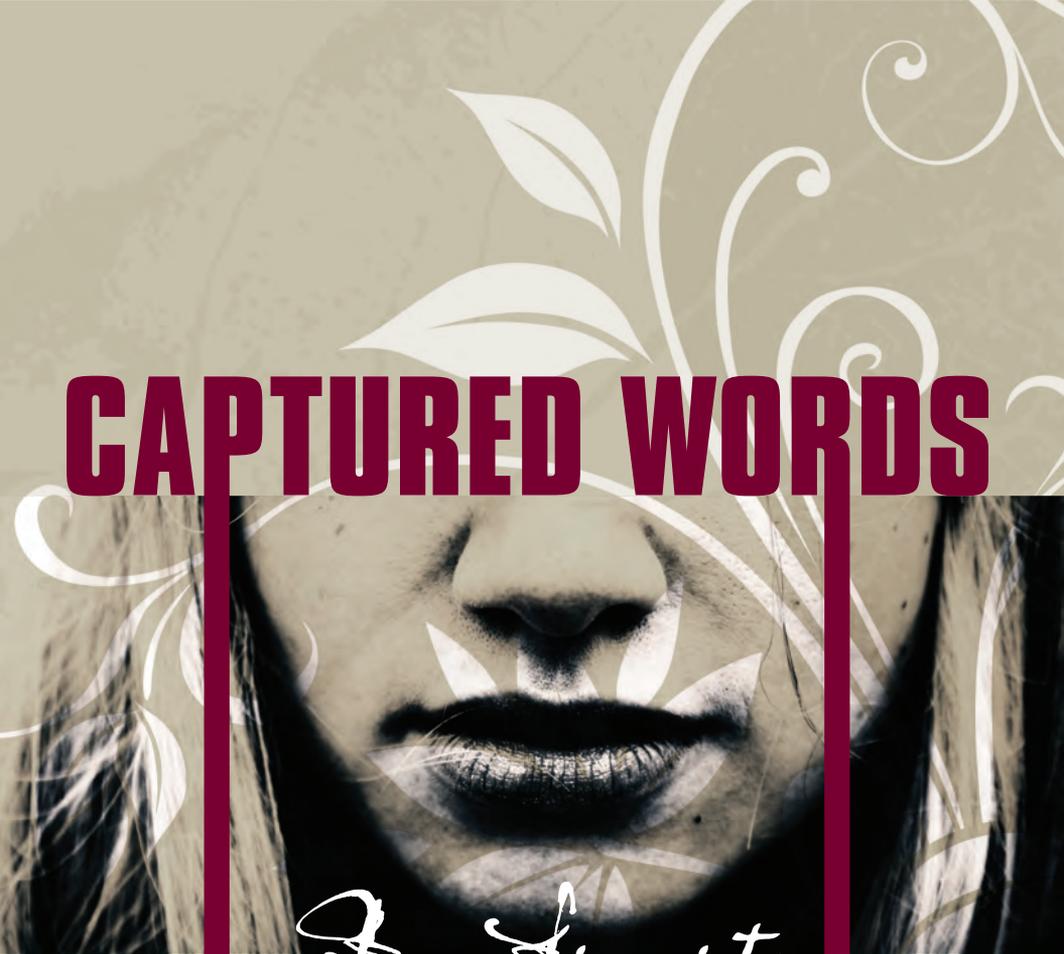


CAPTURED WORDS



Free Thoughts

Writings from America's Prisons
Volume 10, Fall 2012

Openings

During the Spring of 2012, a group of us gathered in the Denver Women's Correctional Facility each Tuesday night and alternating Thursday nights to experiment with memoirs, poems, letters, and other forms of communication. The pieces printed here are but a sliver of the materials we produced, but they offer a glimpse into the heartbreaks and hopes of everyone involved in our workshop.

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

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- Our guest writers from the New Jersey State Prison are Thomas Zowacky, Luther Thomas, Francisco Wills, and Abdul Qawi Whitehurst; special thanks to Dr. Eleanor Novek for sharing this work.
- Our guest artist from the Polunsky Unit, in Livingston, Texas, is Rodrick Finley.
- Our guest artist from the Limon Correctional Facility, Colorado, is John P. Sherman.
- Our guest writer from the California State Prison, LA County, is Brother Thangs.
- Our writers from the Denver Women's Correctional Facility are Dayle Garfield, Latisha Garrett,

Alyssa Kurtz, Claudia Liria Manriquez, Michelle Moore, Tina Moya, Tiffanee O, and Mysti Perkins. Special thanks to our writing partners: Arian Carney, Natalie Ealy, Janiece Ferguson, Danielle Gonzalez, Tabitha Highsmith, Tiffany Maestas, and Anita Montoya.

Special thanks to:

- University of Colorado Denver graduate students Nicole Palidwor and Alex Rowan, UCD alumna Linda Guthrie, and UCD undergraduates Parker Bremner, Liz Casillas, Samantha Miles, Anh Nguyen, and Misty Saribal, who went to the prison as "learning partners" and helped type up and edit the works included here.
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- And all the prison educators and activists, imprisoned artists, progressive media producers, and other friends and allies around the country who have supported our efforts.

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The Promise

Tiffanee O

I promised myself I would never turn out like them. I was going to work hard, stay sober, and provide a good life for my daughters. Instead, I have copied my parents' lives almost to perfection.

I was four when my parents divorced. I cannot remember the circumstances surrounding the separation, but I was told later that my mom could not take the beatings and drug use any longer. For a long time, I thought that my mother was the innocent one, but eventually I would learn that my mom was also using drugs.

Moving to California was supposed to be a fresh start for us. If I was older at the time, perhaps I would have recognized the warning signs. My mom, brother, and I had only been in California for six short months before I opened the door to the men who took my mom away from me. I looked up at the police towering over me as they rushed my Mom through her packing. I was crying as they took me out the door, on my way to my first foster home.

Six years later I was on my way back to living with my mom in Silverthorne. I was excited, but that excitement was short lived. Our new home environment was déjà vu of my mom and dad's marriage. My mom had not learned anything from her time of incarceration. My new stepdad, George, and my mom would constantly argue—he liked to hit her. I became like a slave to them: cleaning the house, washing laundry, and preparing meals. When

my sister was born, I became a mother, caring for her while my mom worked. I was eleven years old. My self-esteem cracked and my grades began to plummet, but that seemed unimportant to my parents, who continued to use drugs, to fight nearly every night, and to make fun of me.

During those four years I experienced things no kid should. For a while we were homeless, then we lived in a tent; we eventually ended up in a two-room shack with no running water. I was beaten with belts and closed fists for anything that would set George or my mom off, like accidentally breaking a dish or being too sick to complete my chores. I would often go hungry, having only a bologna sandwich for dinner. Because I was never allowed to hang out with other kids or their families, I assumed this chaos was normal.

By the time I was twelve, I was introduced to drugging and drinking by George and his friends. They would send me to my room while they partied, but I knew what they were doing. I began to experiment with the weed roaches and open beers I would find lying around after their all-nighters. Their irresponsibility led to my brother taking his first hit of acid when he was nine. That's right about when I started doing Meth. My life was falling apart, and I was only thirteen years young.

Angry and full of hate, I became rebellious. My actions were uncontrollable. I was skipping school, sneaking out at night, and disappearing

for days. I left home all together and stayed away for months until my mom begged me to come home. Since I had been taking care of myself, I demanded that if I came home, then I would be treated as the adult I thought I was. Because of this arrangement, I was free to do what I wanted without consequences, so I dropped out of school and spent my days smoking weed and meth with my parents and their friends.

My mom eventually stopped using drugs. Getting back with her high school sweetheart, Alan, she left George and tried to rebuild her life. I stayed with George and continued to feed my addiction. My mom wanted nothing to do with me, and I hated her for not being there for me. She had helped me become the druggie I was, but it now seemed like my sister and her three step-siblings were more important to my Mom than I was. They were sober and seemed to have a future ahead of them; I was an outcast, so I numbed myself by increasing my drug use. Before long, I was experimenting with ecstasy and cocaine.

Everything changed at eighteen, when I found out I was pregnant. I quit using drugs and tried to get my life together. I went back to high school and graduated. Moving out and being independent meant everything to me. This is when I made my promise to be different than my parents.

After having my second daughter, my life was still going nowhere. I was stuck at a dead end job barely making ends meet. I knew I needed a better education to improve the quality of our lives, so I enrolled into Remington College and began working toward an Associate's degree in Criminal Justice. My plan was that I would then go to UCCS to get my Bachelor's degree in Chemistry. My dream was to work as a forensic scientist. Pulling straight As while holding on to two full-time jobs and raising my daughters, it seemed for a while that my dreams were coming true.

But my daughter's father, Rory, and I were young and foolish; we fought daily, we split up when the girls were only eighteen months and two. I was totally unequipped to handle life as a single mother. I had no idea how to live alone. I had become a co-dependent like my mother, and thought I needed a man by my side.

I thought Adam was a blessing sent to help me. I started living with him two months after me and Rory split up. He seemed charming, and made me feel loved and needed, but at heart he was a real son of a bitch. By the time his deceptive qualities came to the surface, it was already too late—I was trapped again in another bad relationship. And just as quickly as I had quit, I began using meth again. That's when I found

out that Adam was a drug dealer. I was once again hooked into a drug I hadn't even thought about in over three years. Then Adam began mentally and physically abusing me; my daughters were right there to witness it all. I was forced to give up custody to keep them safe, until I could get my act together.

It took over a year until I was able to get any parental rights back. I got a good job and went back to finish my degree. Focusing once again on a brighter future, but again being alone, got to be too much for me to handle. So I started another string of bad relationships with more abusive men who, this time, influenced me into an addiction to alcohol. Because of the drinking, I soon lost my job; as a response to my life spiraling downward again, I started using meth, again. My life was a wreck, yet the people I

chose to surround myself with taught me ways to make fast and easy money. But that didn't last long, for in May 2007, my oldest daughter answered the door to the men who would take me away.

It has been almost five years since my first felony conviction and since my daughters have lived with me. It seems like my whole life, I have been stuck in a circle, going nowhere. I have been in and out of facilities, turning a five year sentence into a ten year sentence. At times, I wanted nothing more than to make it all end. I wonder how my daughters will react to all the bad things I have allowed them to experience. Will they learn from the mistakes I have made, or will they—like me—make the same mistakes over and over again? Can I teach them what it takes to break this cycle?

Different Directions

Latisha Garrett

To begin to answer that question, let me make another promise based on some hard lessons. First, I can finally see what has caused my bad choices and addictions for so many years: I have always held on to my negative experiences. Because I focus on bad experiences, I have low self-esteem, which is why I am attracted to bad boys who cause me further pain. I let hurt and resentment determine who I am. I am unforgiving and relentlessly hard on myself, which is turning me into a bitter, angry person who seeks to drown out the pain in drugs and bad men.

But I am learning the lessons of forgiveness and love. I am drug free. I will never again start a relationship with a man who is an addict, is violent, or does not respect me and my daughters. When I get out of prison, I hope to have the chance to teach my daughters these lessons with full understanding of their power. I also hope to teach them to trust in God and to always love themselves, to always let go of the past, and to keep an eye on the future.

I am taking this prison term and making it a time of growth. I am taking full opportunity of the classes and programs that will move me forward, and have even re-enrolled in college, where I am working toward a business degree. Now is my time! This is my last chance at freedom and my last chance to live a better life. This is my time to make my promise a reality.

New York is the name you gave me
When we met on Colfax and Yosemite
We clicked like two pieces of a puzzle

We were considered loners
But our friendship blossomed
Building trust and understanding
With love

Back then I called you Roy
Partner
Lover
Companion

Our friends called us Bonny and Clyde
Riding in stolen cars
Leading crime sprees
To pay for more drugs

Once behind bars
Letters flew from me to you
But none came back
Filling me with
Fear
Doubt
Uncertainty

In our phone conversations
You promised to stand by me forever

But we're still separated
For over a year
Full of lying and cheating

Now we're
Two broken hearts
Walking in different directions

Tree of Silence

Michelle Moore

Knees pulled to my chest, my back presses against my special tree.
My head pounds, my heart aches.
The sky is dark grey; angry storm clouds swirl above me.
I am confused, seven years old, the innocence drained from me.
My tiny child ribs are sore, bruised, and broken.
I ignore the physical pain; my tears dried not long ago.
I'm begging to melt into the rain I know will soon arrive in torrents.
Here I rest, invisible against my tree of silence, my safety, my shelter.
He battered my small frail body, but not where grown-ups can see.
After the pain, the torture, the usury, it became my fault:
"don't tell," he warned, "do not tell a soul."
How could I say one word? I had no voice to speak.
No one would believe I could be so bad; wasn't it me who did something awful?
I knew it was only him who could make me a good girl again, and
That's all I wanted: to please my mama, to be her little angel.
Damn, it hurt to be a good little girl.
I'd squeeze my eyes shut, hoping the pain would leave, but the scars itch and ache.
Today my mind is heavy with angry, bitter thoughts.
He will stop, he must stop, my consciousness tells me so.
I am only a baby girl, a child; he's so big and powerful!
For now, I will cling to my tree and keep it close.
The rain disguises my tears; my anguish drowns
In alliance with the thunder, bold and building.
Huddled under these swaying branches numb,
I am yearning for the dusk to this summer day.

The War Inside

Dayle Garfield

I'd paint my arms with razor blades
I'd do anything to numb the war inside
I'd bleed and bleed, watching the wounds heal to scars
Leaving marks showing the pain I felt
When I waited and waited for you to come back.

My need for you is a powerful longing,
An itch so deep, like torture, that can't stay still,
Yet my hopes only pushed you away.

I never understood your want for absence
Or your ease in lying to my face
Looking into my tear-filled eyes
The whole thing wrong, out of control
Forbidden desire, we both knew.

But always you returned
But only when you felt like it
On your time, in my fear
Making my nightmare a devastating reality:
You're not coming back—
And so the war
Will never stop.

Daddy

Mysti Perkins

The screams fill my head like something out of a horror film: loud, high-pitched, a young girl's screams. But this is not a movie, it is real, the screams are not out of an actress's flawless lips, but come from my own bloodied lips.

I have been beaten, hurt, raped—and am eight years old. The abuser is not a stranger, who stole me off of the street or out of my front yard. No. He is my father. This night is not the first time he has hurt me, but it is the most traumatic.

“Daddy, no, stop, ouch, stop, please.” He doesn't listen. The heroin and alcohol have consumed him, creating a demon from the depths of Hell. It is a hot, humid, breezeless night in Merritt Island, Florida. We are living in a migrant workers' camp. Why doesn't anyone hear me? Why won't someone save me?

At 10 years old, my brother, Donnie, has tried a few times to be my hero; he still wears the scars from the beatings he endured while trying to protect his little sister.

So I close my eyes as tight as possible and pray for an angel to take me away, for it all to end. Finally, he stops; when he releases me, I fold into a ball,

making myself as small as possible. He leaves the room. “God, please take me, Please God.” I do not sleep.

In the morning, he reminds me that I am to say a bigger kid at the camp beat me up. *Never tell on Daddy.*

But the next morning I can barely move, and am trembling in fear and pain, so my teacher takes me into another room. There are five or six people. This is my first time talking with a police officer. “Tell us what happened, Mysti, it's okay, just tell us, we will protect you.” I look at my teacher, who is shedding tears, and ask “am I being bad again?”

My teacher hugs me. I am taken to the hospital, but don't want to take my clothes off. I don't want the Doctor to touch me. He might hurt me. A woman doctor comes, the man leaves, that's better. I let her check me, do an exam. She holds my hand and says “Honey, I need you to tell me what happened.” And I think to myself “did God send you? Are you my Angel?”

She ask me again, “Who hurt you?” I mumble, “Daddy.”

She helps me put on the new clothes a social worker brought me. I breathe, a long exhale. I know it's over. Angels were sent; I will not die in the hands of Satan's Demon.

End the Wallflower Movement

Michelle Moore

I go to my first foster home, they are nice, they don't get mad when I wake up screaming at night. Then one day a social worker comes and says they have contacted my Mom, I'm going home. Yes! For the first time, I feel safe, I know it's okay. When I see my mother, I run to her crying, saying "I love you, I'm sorry, I love you. Please can we go home?" Mom blames herself, but it's not her fault.

It has been 21 years since that night. I have written my father, but he didn't respond.

So I want to say, Dad, *I forgive you.*
I do.

I just wish I could forget what you did to me.

(This is the text of a speech performed by Michelle Moore before an audience of cheering classmates, smiling guards, and proud tutors gathered within the walls of the Denver Women's Correctional Facility.)

There are scarce few American women in positions of power. While society may not unconditionally agree with the female leaders we have, admiration is due for any woman who can rise above the crowd of grey-haired blowhard men in suits. Hilary Clinton has topped that short list of women who have made a difference and so this evening I will discuss Clinton and other powerful women, their philosophies on feminism, and their call to activism.

According to a Gallup Poll, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is the most admired woman in America—even beating out Oprah! While America is one of the most developed and richest countries in the world, it lags behind other countries in appointing women into leadership roles. The number of women in Congress stands at a mere 17%, and we have never elected a woman to be the president. Even Kosovo has advanced beyond sexism enough to elect Atifete Jahjaga as their 37 year old, female president. The United States looks like a rusty and antiqued black and white photo compared to the colorful gender equality most first world countries employ.

Hilary Clinton lost the 2008 Presidential Campaign and she may never run

again. We have made it damn near impossible for a woman to excel in public service. Women are the effective communicators, managers and peacekeepers of the house, community and many businesses ... it makes sense that those qualities would carry over into politics. In WWI 90% of casualties were soldiers and in Africa's most recent conflict 90% of casualties were civilians. With staggering and dismal results like these, it seems logical to seek out creative thinkers with peaceful options—I believe women have the fresh insight and answers we need. No woman would stand by and let innocent people be slaughtered on her watch; it's not in our nature.

Clinton has made massive strides in being an ambassador at large for global women's issues. She states that "a lot of the work I do here in the State Department on women's or human rights issues is not just because I care passionately—which I do—but because I see it as a way to increase security to fulfill American interests. These are all foreign policy and national security issues for me." Hear that ladies? When you bitch about your fellow women in power, terrorists win, both at home and abroad. It's time to be stern with ourselves as American women; let's stop complaining and bickering and step up to the plate. Let's stop being defeatists and giving sexism the ammunition it needs to spread fire. Sheryl Landberg, the Facebook Chief Operating Officer, says women

need to quit moaning about how the man is keeping them out of the corner office and actually address their own "ambition gap."

Hillary Clinton, along with Maria Shriver and other female activists, cannot make these enormous changes alone. With very few women in politics, and only about 2.4% of fortune 500 companies being run by women, according to Congressional Research Service, it will take 500 years to reach parity in our government. Women must realize the dire situation we face. We can right our own frontline battle to win the war. Women can serve as mediators and mobilize other noncombat groups to pressure militaries to lay down their arms. Clinton says that "Women are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world." It's a fact that women's complex community ties make them strongly invested in the well-being of many groups. Women are more likely to raise issues that truly influence peace, education, health, justice, employment and many other key factors that impact our quality of life.

I have come before you, then, to say that we must end the wallflower movement! Let's stop focusing on the clothes and hair of our fellow females who are actually doing something about our crisis and listen to their ideas. The world is stacked against women—it's sickening.

Hear Me Roar

Claudia Liria Manriquez

It will be difficult to change the way life is, but I don't take issue with difficulty. I do reject the idea of "never." We, as women, must rid our minds of the baggage that has been inherited. Start fresh; believe in the diversity of the thought Americans have proved to uphold. Look at the leaps and bounds of progress we've made with same-sex marriage over the past 20 years.

Women have so much to contribute to the world. There are too many consequences to continuing to hold back. It's our duty to turn the 4-letter word of politics into a 5-letter mantra—peace. Stop categorizing and start cooperating! Otherwise, we create a devastating open season on people who are judged as less than human. Women have the opportunity to accelerate progress if only we stand up and create a united voice.

The landing ended in a horrifying impact. I was terrified about the condition of my unborn baby. I gasped for air and positioned myself to try to keep my baby safe from the attack. In those moments, I hit a landmine. After he threw me, my body struck the mattress so forcefully it flipped over along with me onto the floor. I knew I needed to protect my unborn child, so I stretched out my arms so that my stomach wouldn't collide against the ground. With the help of both my arms and my back, I was finally able to apply pressure against the mattress and thrust it off my body. After he saw the extreme damage he inflicted from his repeated slapping, punching, and shoving, he fled the apartment.

Later that night, the doctors tried to stop my contractions. They gave me steroid shots to strengthen my baby's lungs and heart just in case my delivery could not be prevented. My heart was beating so fast that I was extremely frightened. As I cried uncontrollably, I felt incompetent. I was desperate. I wasn't a religious person, but that night I cried out to God. The doctors made a phone call. As the police wrote down the report, I felt embarrassed and humiliated.

These were the types of life experiences I encountered for a very long time. I can't believe that my grandmother, my mother, and I accepted this cycle of abuse. As I think about these traumatic experiences, the feelings of intense anger and fear don't allow me to speak or even whisper his name.

As a child, I heard the fairy tales of Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty. They all had someone in their lives who caused them pain, but in the end, prince charming came to rescue them. They lived happily ever after. I guess deep down inside, I always hoped that I would be rescued too. But every weekend was the same: My mother either did or said the wrong thing, so my father would bruise her face and body. I hate the color red. Too many reminders. Too many memories. Too many tragedies I want to forget.

I knew that the same kind of abuse was happening to my aunts and many other women. We all wore a mask by pretending life was a fairy tale. As a child, I could not figure out if others didn't know what was happening, or if they simply didn't care. I swore to myself that I would never marry someone like that, but I did.

While in prison, I learned that I have the right to choose. I had time to meditate on who I am and what I want. Culture, traditions, and family are very important, but I do not have to be silent nor allow anyone to dictate how I speak, how I behave, or what I wear. I live my life with the guidance of God. He is gentle, compassionate, and loves me unconditionally. Through His word, He has shown me how precious I am to him, and that I should see myself with

value and talent. He says that I can do all the things I want through Him, and that He will strengthen me.

I can now see the light and purpose in my life. If I want to work and go to college to become a career woman, I will do it. I can travel, be a minister, and be beautiful. Relationships do not have to be possessive, controlling, violent, and dominant. I have confidence in myself to do and choose what is right for me. I am unique, talented, and irreplaceable. I do not have to be arrogant, but I do not have to be beaten down either. I have hope and know that if I am careful and give myself time to really get to know someone, I will have my prince charming. I will have a godly man and a good relationship. Hear me roar!

A Beautiful Thing to Love and Hold

Rodrick Finley



The following poems were submitted by men incarcerated at the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, New Jersey. Their work comes from a weekly creative writing workshop in the school's education wing, where students write in a variety of forms, including nonfiction essays and poetry. Three of the authors are or were students in the prison's GED program, and one is a teacher's aide in the program. Since 2007 the workshop has been led by Dr. Eleanor Novek, Associate Professor of Communication at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, NJ. Readers can contact Dr. Novek at enovek@monmouth.edu.

Everything is Charcoal and Gray (a reflection)

By Thomas Zowasky

As I shove off into the great expanse,
From as far to the east, to as far to the west,
As far as possible that the eye can see,
There's nothing but clouds all around me—
 everything is charcoal and gray.

Today is odd, because there are no birds flying 'round,
Not chasing after others, as I would have normally found,
No planes, no jets, have yet to pass me by,
I cannot even get a glimpse of a trail in the sky, no—
 everything is charcoal and gray.

So I began to ponder and reminisce,
About days similar to this,
When I would stoke up my stove, heating the house,
Dead in January, in the crispest of air,
When I would throw in some birch,
Letting everyone know I was there.

But as I'm staring, and thinking of the past,
Behold, there is something else that appears
It's two of my old friends, staring back at me.

To Be Myself

Luther Thomas

When I soared with eagles, I learned to look down on others.
When I roamed with shire horses, I learned I was the largest of my breed.
When I traveled with wolverines, I learned to wreak havoc.
When I slid with pythons, I learned to apply pressure.
When I looked in the mirror, I learned to be myself.

Memories

Francisco Wills

The broken window,
Shattered glass,
Screams in the night,
Everyone heard.

The moon-shaped dark shadow
Imposed on mother's face,
Everyone ignored,
Even her.

The next day,
The neighbors said
Good morning to father,
While averting their eyes

From the mother with child in tow.

Life is Strange

Luther Thomas

When I was around eight or nine years old, me and this one kid never got along—we even fought once. Everyone watched us fight, even the usual police officers who patrolled the neighborhood. Months later, me and the guy somehow became friends, and I invited him into my home when my mother wasn't home. When I went into the refrigerator for something and he saw what was in there, he said "Wow, y'all got a lot of food."

Do Not Lose Focus

Abdul Qawi Whitehurst

If your legs get weakened, your heart and mind waver, it's okay, just don't doubt!

Stand up now. All "the believers" are going to be tested. Try, try, try, and purify yourself.

Don't gamble with what you have been put here to do... It's understood. We already know.

Cry and then smile. Do the best you can. Yeah! Now you have it.

You like that! But you need this. That's your goal, and you must die with it. Are you focused?

Somehow we got into a conversation about how some days he doesn't eat, so from then on he would come over to my house after my mom left for work. Before school, I would make sandwiches for him for breakfast, and then more sandwiches he could take with him for lunch. When my mom found out, I was scared as hell, but when she found out why I was doing it, she supported my actions. Me and this guy are friends to this day.

One Voice

(This is the text of a collectively-authored poem performed at the Denver Women's Correctional Facility by Parker Bremner, Arian Carney, Liz Casillas, Natalie Ealy, Janiece Ferguson, Dayle Garfield, Latisha Garrett, Danielle Gonzalez, Linda Guthrie, Tabitha Highsmith, Alyssa Kurtz, Claudia Liria Manriquez, Tiffany Maestas, Samantha Miles, Anita Montoya, Michelle Moore, Tina Moya, Anh Nguyen, Tiffanee O, Nicole Palidwor, Mysti Perkins, Alex Rowan, and Misty Saribal. Each line is a statement by one of the authors, who interlaced their experiences into this powerful tribute to hope, personal growth, and collective change)

I was restrained against my free will in this Colorado prison
I am that child that roams the dangerous streets
I am a product of a society that glorifies the forbidden
I am a living example of a criminal encaged full of rage

I was born with a needle in my arm
I was tired with life and born for death; taking the plunge that steals every breath
I was a drug addict and a prostitute
I was destructive and addicted
I was a criminal. I was once a victim; now I am the perpetrator

I was blinded by all that glitters; by the glamour and thrill of the fast life
I wanted the rush, the rush that warms my body
I am a product of every experience I have ever lived
I was "just a position" inspired by chance; juxtaposition at a glance

I was quick to make assumptions
I was molded by every interaction, every place, person, sight, smell, or sound
I was silent and full of unimportance
I am the one who creeps in the shadows while all is asleep

I am full of anger, pain, and fear
I want my soul to forget to ache, a crippling wave—a crushing break
I want to be free; free of stress, free of worries, free of mind-boggling thoughts
I want my chaos controlled

I was an abused little girl
I was the one hiding in the shadows when the gunshots fired
I was punished
I want someone to stop and care

I am the melody of the meadowlark; a new season emerging from the dark
I was a woman who was afraid to speak out, but now I can't be silenced
I will not be afraid to make difficult choices—it is my destiny to fulfill my heart's
desire
I want to loosen my grip on failure and clutch success

I am a woman who wants to make a difference
I am a woman to be loved perpetually, and perpetually loving me
I want to see everything, go everywhere; I want to be whole
I will gain structure to change my character

I want to be that woman that makes you say WOW!
I want to be able to walk and hold my head high
I want to continue going to college
I want to be respected for all that I am as a woman

I want to be a mom
I want to be a powerful woman
I will make a difference
I want to be heard

I am a soldier and I'll never stop
I will succeed in life
I will continue to evolve with every passing day, every encounter

I am a strong, southern, black woman
I am a lesbian
I will be a registered nurse
I will be the one who rises above the destruction

We are sisters, we are mothers, we are brothers
We are daughters, we are sons, we are fathers
We will be the messengers—our pens, our sword
We are witnesses to the struggle
We were the beginning and we'll be the end
We will reveal the devastation of incarceration

My Long Road from Morton, Texas, to Denver, Colorado

Latisha Garrett

I come from Morton, Texas, a little farming town with a population of less than two thousand. Fields of cotton surrounded our house, and a cotton gin threw up clouds of dirt just a block away. Morton had one lonely traffic light that stood in the middle of town. I get butterflies when I think of how we would gather at the games of our high school football team, where the marching band and our community would cheer on the boys. I remember sitting in the stands, eating nachos, and staring up at the lights as the bugs formed a swirling cloud.

Growing up in my family, there was a sense of closeness. I would walk through a little dirt trail into the back yard of my grandma's house, which was next to my parents' home. Every summer, my Aunt Gloria and my first cousin, Natasha, who lived five blocks down the road, would join my mother, Sherrie, older sister, Gayla, and my younger brother, Travis, to help clean out the little house that stood in the back yard. My Uncles—Frankie, Charles, and Willie—would bring out boxes of knickknacks, pieces of furniture, chairs, and tables. As I watched my Uncles work, the hot wind kicked up; as we sifted through boxes, with my Grandma deciding what she wanted to keep, the sand stung my legs. To escape the stinging wind, I ran into the house, which was filled with the sweet smell of Aunt Murl's chocolate chip cookies. When night fell, my siblings and I sat in the kitchen as our Uncle Frankie told ghost stories.

Throughout the years, times changed a great deal. I was living at home with my daughter, Porsha, who was only 8 months old, and my Mother. One day, as I walked from the kitchen with Porsha in my arms, my Mother called out in a tired voice a list of medications she had received from the pharmacy and what they were for. She'd been out of the hospital for a day. I placed my daughter in my mom's arms, and rushed back to the kitchen, where I was cooking steak potato burritos. From the kitchen, I could hear the roaring cry of Porsha. Entering back into the living room, I saw my mother sitting on the couch with my daughter, who was crying. As I picked my baby out of my Mother's arms, she said softly "Tisha, your baby needs her diaper changed." As I laid my daughter down on the other couch to change her, I turned to see my Mother holding her chest, unable to speak. The look on her face cried out pain, fear, and panic.

Tears raced down my face. My sister, Gayla, and I held hands as we sat in the hall at the hospital. Finally, after what seemed like forever, a doctor came out with my Aunt Murl, who was a nurse. Shock filled my body as the words rang in my head. The doctor said he and the team of nurses did all they could do, but she was gone. March 5, 2001, was the day my family had to say goodbye. I not only lost my mother, but my best friend. They say that the father keeps the family together, but after the death of my beloved Mother, things in my family began to fall apart.

My father, Joe, remarried less than a year after the passing of my mother, his supposed soul mate. Because of feelings of disappointment with my father, and missing my Mother's guiding hand, the family slowly started to separate. My sister, Gayla, ended up going to prison, and my brother, Travis, moved to Colorado. Then I was a single mother raising two nephews, two children of my own, and a younger brother. Once we were a family with the support of one another who shared smiles and hugs, but now we were distanced, with little-to-no communication and broken hearts.

Times got even harder when I relapsed back on cocaine. Entering under the dark cloud of addiction began with lines, then ended with a pipe and blisters on my thumbs. Moving to Colorado with my brother didn't make things any different. My drug use got heavier, so I slowly began sending my kids back home. The first to leave were my two nephews, Jarvis and Jaylen, and my younger brother, Antione. Feeling the loss of them, even though I still had my own two, Porsha and Jamatrick, my addiction got worse. Finally, I felt I had no choice but to send even my babies back to Texas. Now in a life without responsibilities, I drowned in a sea of hard drugs, bad men, and mean streets.

On sleepless nights I would walk along Colfax. Hearing the honk of an oncoming car as it slowed down, I would walk closer to the car; if I heard the doors unlock, that was a sign for

me to enter, so that I could continue my trade. One night, while finishing a deal, lights of red, white, and blue began flashing behind me. Not only am I going back to jail, I thought, I'm going back to prison. Being out only six months, my parole violation automatically sentenced me back for the remainder of my original sentence. I was heartbroken and ashamed that I had not learned the right lessons from my first imprisonment. In the hearing, I recall my parole officer saying I didn't have a chance of being paroled, as I was homeless, addicted, and without any support.

Seven months have passed since I was brought back to the Denver Woman's Correctional Facility. Good changes have taken place, as each day I am learning new things about myself. I have even accomplished a goal of getting back into college, as I am now taking classes through the Adams State College Program. This is encouraging me to work for continued success, because I know I can do well in college classes. Even better, I am in contact with my children again. We write letters and send pictures to each other. Most of all, I've come to realize how much the good Lord has done for me.

Even though it has been a long, hard road from Morton to Denver, I now know that all the changes I've been through have made me a better person. So here I stand, a woman ready to make better choices, a woman ready for more positive changes.

Stares

by John P. Sherman



A Woman's Prerogative

Alyssa Kurtz

(This is the text of a speech performed by Kurtz before an audience doubled-over with laughter; to appreciate the speech's full impact, imagine Kurtz delivering the speech with a sly smile and a knowing wink)

Life is harder for women than it is for men. I do not blame the hardships of womankind on men. On the contrary, we do it to ourselves. The world at large does it to us, as well. Between our own complex nature and the perplexing messages the world sends us, life can be quite baffling for us ladies.

Women often over-complicate things, while men tend to simplify things. We try to be objective, to view situations from every possible angle, to think ahead. We try to view opposing sides of each scenario and give sensitivity and understanding to both sides, but by the time we have given a compassionate look at all angles, it's extremely difficult to decide on what to do. Men tend to be more decisive, they tend to take the shortest route to any particular destination. Wouldn't life be easier if we could take some emotion out of the equation or stand firm by our first instinct? Life is further complicated for females because we tend to be eager to please. Whereas men can often evaluate a situation and quickly determine to opt out, women often suffer the repercussions of attempting to please someone else.

Women are eternally engaged in an

internal battle. We want to imagine the potential pros and cons of everything and struggle to make any final decision. In addition, we want to satisfy others and society is ever bombarding women with contradictory expectations. It is said that it is "a woman's prerogative" to change her mind. This is absolutely true. How could a woman be anything BUT indecisive? From birth, women are receiving messages about how we should behave. Certainly, a person needs not believe every message they hear, but how does one decide which sources are valid? All around us are different sources, professing different truths. Everyone has a "How to ..." or a "You should..." recipe for becoming the ideal woman.

With so many messages that counter one another, women are incessantly trying to determine what to do. We either waver between different ideals or else we try to do it all and feel continually inadequate. Can any woman be seen as a perfect house wife, and still be seen as a sex kitten? Is it possible to embody grace without coming off as prude or prissy? Can a woman accommodate the wants and needs of her family and still retain some independence? Can a woman have sex appeal and dignity? Can a woman indulge her man and still be strong and assertive? Can a woman be honest and still keep her mystery? Can a woman exercise her feminine wiles and still be respectable? A woman can never do anything without some opposition. No matter what we do,

there will be someone who will say we should have done more, done less, or done the complete opposite. So, what is a girl to do?

The world tells women to “Be confident and let yourself shine!”, then admonishes, “Now, now, be humble.” We are told that we are not limited to women’s work, but we are not embraced in the work force when it comes to cars or construction. Women should be delicate, yet the world wants us to toughen up. The world wants us to have style, but not try too hard. We ought to be thin, but still have curves. The world tells us to strive to be intelligent and successful, but not so much that we intimidate or out shine our male counterparts. We ought to be self-sufficient, but men still want to feel like we need them. The world wants women to be nurturers, to care for our children, but not coddle them; to care for our men, but not to smother them. We ought to be ladylike, but still have a sassy attitude. We ought to be kind and forgiving, but not be a pushover. We ought to have a voice but not talk too much. We are told to be aloof, to play hard to get, but do not be a snob and do not be afraid to make the first move. Women are told not to be airheads, of course, we must think! But do not over-analyze, that is never attractive. It seems that women can never please the world.

So many women absorb the messages that the world sets forth. We hear it from our mothers, our fathers, our siblings, teachers, friends, media, and from society as a whole, what a woman should be. Because it is in our nature to try to please, we set off on an impossible mission to be an “ideal woman.” Of course, it might be easier to be a man. It would be simpler, because men are simple creatures.

No woman can please everyone in her life. Each of us, as individuals, must determine for ourselves what our own “ideal” is. This may be a life-long process of evaluating our own values and trying on different “hats,” but in the end, a woman should be what pleases her. Our only hope for achieving a sense of accomplishment in regards to being a perfect woman is to be what we want to be and to see ourselves as perfect. The only person we have to please is ourselves, so let us disregard the messages the world sends and become what makes us happy.

I am a Woman

Tiffanee O

They call me Mommy
Oversized sweat pants and t-shirt
Early morning their site of amusement
Messy hair and morning breath
Dawn and Ashlyn's protector, teacher
Creating security
Loved
Needed
Running on coffee
Providing daily necessities
I sing lullabies
Make favorite snacks
Help with undone homework
Retrieve misplaced shoes
I find EVERYTHING

He calls me Gilly
Loving wife
Keeping his home in order
An irreplaceable best friend
Mikey's one and only soul-mate
Undying loyalty
Obedience
Honor
Mellowing him like a sedative
Tug-boating along in a perfect dream
Attending to him with such ease
No self-consciousness
No hesitation
Forever

To some I am Tiffanee
Wearing a heart on my sleeve
Enlarging the world of friends
Keeping deep and soulful secrets
Hearing thoughts before spoken words
Infinite
Immortal

Un-judging
Riding on waves of laughter
Providing shelter from sadness
Unmatched understanding
Open minded
Trusted

But now I am O
Inmate number 147493
Wearing yellow and green
Stumbling blindly toward chaos
Hurricanes, rage, and lightening
I have been cast away
Hurting
Missing
Needing
In a skull shattering free-fall
Playing tug-of-war with good and evil
Cursed
Emotionless
Withdrawn
Misunderstood
Learning from a life full of mistakes

I am a woman.

Monsters

by Tina Moya

It's dark everywhere in the house, except for one room, where even though there's light, it's always dark and dismal. I get up and look out the window. The moon casts its light upon the shadows, where strange patterns draw my eyes. The taste of fear envelopes my tongue. There's something haunting me . . .

I can hear my Mom talking and laughing in the strange room. Her voice sounds stressed, her laughter exhausted. I don't know who else is in the room, but there is always someone in there with her. I know this because I am awake; of course, I'm always awake when I'm not supposed to be. Every night is the same, with the hushed whispers and odd sounds. I feel this repressive darkness, painfully aware that there's something coming that will change my life.

I'm used to seeing monsters. My mom says they can't hurt me, but that's only when my eyes are closed. This time my eyes are open. I look down at my lil' brother, Joey. Sighing, I wonder how I can save him. He's sleeping, as usual, locked in the deep, calm sleep enjoyed only by the innocent and those who are too young to perceive the reality creeping through the darkness. I feel the monsters, and sense a thickening of the air before I ever see them. I panic, fear washes over me. I freeze because I know I need to tell my Mom, but I don't want to leave Joey alone.

Then I see the lights, lots of white lights bouncing off the trees. I'm afraid,

but I cannot say why. The sounds are getting louder and the lights are getting closer. My heart burns in my chest. I hate the monsters. I run from the room, not realizing that I'm shaking uncontrollably. I have to tell my Mom. I have to tell her what I've seen—the monsters are coming!

I run to the forbidden door and knock and scream. I know I'm not supposed to be here. I remember what happened the last time. I don't want to be in trouble, 'cause Mom gets so mad! I knock on the door again, but no one answers. I knock harder. I hate this door! I want this door gone! No one answers, EVER! I stand staring at the door, empty and ignored. Then a loud noise explodes. It is the loudest noise I have ever heard. I run back to my lil' brother. He's awake. I look out my room and the forbidden door is now wide open. Finally that door came open!

Now I can see the lights reflecting off the dirty walls. I run to my window to see if the monsters are still there. I see different colored lights flashing brightly outside. Those lights are so familiar, I know I've seen them before. I look down and Joey is at my side. He's not crying like a normal four year old should be doing at a time like this. He doesn't understand, he's just looking up at me, innocent. I can hear lots of people yelling, but above it all I hear my mom shouting "my kids," "my babies." I've never heard her call us babies before. I don't like this night!

March 1, 2011

Alyssa Kurtz

I'm older now, much older. It has been 17 years since that scary night, but I still remember everything. The people I called monsters put me in a place called Girl's View, one of five "treatment" facilities I have lived in. They say I'm "angry" and need to work on my "anger issues." Fuck that, they don't know me.

What I do know is that me and Joey have been separated for seven years. That person I once called Mom is a distant memory. They keep telling me I have to stop doing drugs and stop being angry. They say I have to take my medication. But I just want the monsters to go away.

I have always felt like I am on a long walk, a long disappointing walk. But I'm still walking. I know deep down inside my soul that I'm walking toward my Mom, my Joey, my home—all the people and things I could not save.

It has been one year today, one long, despairing year since I have felt like a part of my family. On March 1, 2011, I spent 48 hours with my kin. It was the only time in the past two years we have all been together. In reliving those two days, I become nostalgic for home and for each of my eccentric, yet endearing relatives.

My mom picked me up at the Boulder County Jail (just barely in time, which is absolutely typical of her). My daughter, Mia, is in the back seat, excited, scared, and still wet from her swim lesson. I settle into the car on the way to the hospital and mom puts her hand on my leg and asks how far apart the contractions are. She jokingly says, "I guess it's a good thing I stepped into the technology age and got a cell phone, huh?" Mia wants my attention, she is excited to be a big sister, but more excited just to be in the presence of her mommy. I reach back to her booster seat and hold her soft small hand. My compassionate angel, she asks me if it hurts and wants to watch when her sister is born. I answer Mia's questions and the chaos begins to settle. I become aware of my surroundings; mom's new car is different from the old one. It smells new, not like sage and coffee spills. It has the same dream catcher hanging from the rear-view mirror with amethyst and eagle feathers, the same hippie chick slogans about world peace

and recycling. The same clutter, which was not trash, but clothes, mail, and some things for my hospital stay. My mom swears there's a "method to her madness," but I cannot tell. It is hectic and it would normally irritate me, but now it is "homey" and comforting.

I know this is going to be bittersweet, joyful and then the hardest thing I have ever had to do, so I try to stay in the moment and not think about the imminent heartache. I look out the window (we're taking the scenic route—mom always insists on it). I am calm while looking over the yellow dry land alongside the county road. Mom says "Oooh, ooh, a hawk! Hawks symbolize looking at the Big Picture." I used to think my mom's new age, earthy hocus pocus was kooky and annoying. Now I appreciate it; the symbolism and mystery, and interconnectedness of all things. This sensation of being un-cuffed and unescorted is surreal and I feel confused by the illusion of freedom.

My dad and sister show up shortly after we check into the maternity ward. Sissy looks so relaxed, like she should be lounging at a ski lodge. She slinks into the room in her warm up pants and skater shirt and drops her backpack. Despite her casual look, she is always the voice of reason, the responsible one. My sister brought snacks and overnight clothes for Mia. She rolls

her eyes at my mom who brought numerous CD's, crystals and sarongs, but nothing to eat, and no toothbrush. My sister's calm and cool demeanor balances my mom, who seems loud and fast, even when she is not moving or speaking. Something about mom's energy is intense and it makes me anxious. Sissy is relaxed and she only speaks when necessary: soft, easy, patient, and pre-meditated.

My sister is more like dad. It is a relief to see him, his mellow greeting "Hey, how ya doin' kiddo?" In the sweet childish voice he only uses when he calls his mom or when one of his girls (usually me) is in some vulnerable state. Dad is always mellow (a few scotches usually aid him in that). Men do not know how to deal with an emotionally charged room full of women, but at least he tries. Daddy is stoic, yet sensitive to the situation. He prefers to act as if things are normal. Dad sits quietly on the couch and attends to Mia's story time. I am touched by seeing my daddy read to Mia like he used to read to me. I wish I could be that little girl again, where did I go wrong in life? I decide to try the Jacuzzi tub (hell, it will be years before I see a bathtub again).

Mia, my mini-me, my side-kick, wants to get into the tub with me. She misses bath time with mommy and so do I. Mia holds my hand for each contraction. The warm water is soothing, but it is speeding up my

labor. Mia's small, soft, fluid hands mingle easily with mine and she squeezes with her tiny might every time I squeeze. She plays with a rubber ducky as her interest wanes and she squirts bath water at me during the next contraction. She is giggling "Mom, the duck peed on you!" I try to play along with her, but the labor is getting harder. I force a smile and say "Eew, duck pee," then I ask Mia to hold my hand again, she jolts back to attention, proudly remembering her job of helping mommy.

I go back to the hospital bed because it is going to be time to push soon. I silently wonder if Dad is going to stay. He does, as he knows our family's women are open about these kinds of things and he can feel how badly I need everyone close to me. It hurts more than I remember from before. Mia holds my hand until the time comes for me to push and then she goes to my sister's lap. Mia cries when she sees me, straining with my face twisted in pain. Her little body twists and kicks to leave the room. The room is hot, I feel wet and steamy from the tub and my loins are burning. Yet I refuse to scream or to scare my children, the born and the crowning. The pain is intense, but I know my body was made to do this. With a steadfast and high pitched tone, I try to calm Mia and tell her, "It only hurts for a minute and then Mommy's ok." Another contraction comes on and my sister is going to take Mia out of the room. Just as they reach the

door my little Gianna's black fuzzy head emerges. Mia filled with excitement, wants to stay and see her sister.

Those 48 hours are a memory, a self-contained pocket of real life in the midst of a nightmare, or a mirage in the midst of my crude and surreal reality. Either way, it seems like it was all a dream, but in that moment I felt a tiny sliver of home. That room felt like home because my family was there, and with them some of the odd treasures that make up "home." Mom brought music and photos and Mia's baby blanket. My sister brought real food and her relaxed demeanor. Dad brought a book and a sense of serenity. How quickly that room felt familiar when it was filled with my family.

But the room was still my prison because I knew I had to go back. Once I left the room, the dream would be over, so I stayed as long as I could. For those two days I was a part of my family. We laughed and cried together, we ate together, we gave each other a hard time and we interacted all together like people do. Dad sat with me, quietly reading until I woke up. We talked about the lawyer and finances. We talked "business," but there is tenderness in the way he talks with me. We do not know how to talk about emotions. My sister comes to visit with Mia. Mia picks an outfit for her new

sister while I nurse my new baby. My sister amazes me with how natural she is at instructing Mia. I have not seen her be the parent before; I was the parent. I am impressed with the way she is patient, but firm, and the way Mia respects her. I am so grateful for my selfless, amazing sister and so proud of her. She is “the good one.”

My sister suggests Mia and I get some time together by going out to the hospital courtyard. I carry my big girl to the bench outside. It is crisp and cool, but the sun is shining and I feel overwhelmed and awkward going outside on my own free will. I again feel that false sense of freedom. I peel off Mia’s pink socks and brush the fuzzes off of her feet. Her feet have grown since the last time I touched them. I remember the day she was born; how tiny her feet were on that day in this same hospital. I want her to know how much I cherish her. I do not know how to make a 6 year old understand the depth of my love. I tell her she is the most wonderful thing in my whole life. She says she knows. I think she does but I wish I could make her “know” more. I cannot let myself fall apart, for her sake, but I am scared of what might happen to me. I try to enjoy the moment but I am torn. I only have a little time with my new baby,

so I paint Mia’s toenails quickly and we go back inside. My sister is smiling at little Gianna in her arms. She is not the emotional wreck like me and my mom, but my sister is not a robot either. I smile at the scene. She helps Mia get seated so that she can hold her sister. This is a precious moment and I know it is one of the only ones like this that I will ever witness.

When my mom comes to visit me, she comes to nurture. There have been many times my mom has misunderstood me, embarrassed me, undermined me, and betrayed my trust, but right now she is my mommy. She rolls my baby into the bathroom in her basinet and runs a bath for me. Mommy empties her spa bag and treats me to a “last bath.” She foams up my hair and conditions it. Then she gets a body scrub and tries to scrub the jail off of me, from head to toe. When the nurses peek in on us my mother explains to them that this is the last bath before I go back to jail. Mom is talking too much, telling too many stories. I want to shush her, but the nurses think she is charming (if a little crazy). My mom lotions me, puts me in a night gown, puts my baby in my arms, and tucks me into bed.

When I wake up I am alone with my baby, this will be the first and only time. I feel so instinctive and powerful as I guide her perfect rosebud lips to my

breast. The tug and pull of her sucking brings my milk rushing down. The pain in my breasts is nothing compared to the pain in my heart. The room feels like the room of a new baby and mommy about to start a life together. It feels like this room I was in right before I took Mia home and started my life as a mom, but it is not the same. This is a temporary sanctuary, in a few hours I will be back in jail. I try to soak up every second of her precious tiny fingers, the black down on her little head, the scrunch of her forehead, and the pout of her lips. I want to memorize the curve of her long feet, of her round belly and her faint eyebrows. Time is moving too fast. I cannot wrap my head around the idea of leaving her. The thought makes my skin crawl. The idea of us being separated seems against the laws of nature.

The nurses are trying to kick me out; it is time to ready the room for another patient. The local paper printed an article about me this morning. I have seen it circulating around the nurses' station. The nurses know who I am. I beg for another hour, but they tell me it is time to go, they have no empathy for me. My family is bustling around the room and loading up the cars. We decide to allow Mia to ride back to the jail with me. My mom and sister

load my daughters into the back seat. Daddy hugs me to him with one arm (his other hand in his pocket). He tells me in his 'sweet voice' that he will be there to visit me on Friday. As I get into the back seat of my mom's car I know the dream is coming to an end. We try to think of ways to prolong the drive, to savor each moment. Mia starts to cry, "Mommy, all I want, more than anything in the world is to go home with you and my sister." I cannot hold back the tears now. I tell her "That's all I want too, but I have to go back." I tell her we have to be sad later and be happy now while we are together. I promise her we will be together again someday. I notice that I am sitting on my mom's Alpaca blanket, the same stupid, itchy blanket that haunted me on every childhood road trip. My sister and I always complained "Mom, it's itchy!" Mom always said, "But it's warm and good to have in emergencies." I laughed through my tears, as I told my sister, "Who would have thought I would be happy to see this stupid damn itchy blanket?!" My sister, my mom, and I all laughed together at our little inside joke.

At the jail, my sister (the voice of reason) suggests Mia stay in the car as I go inside. Mia wants to come with me and I cannot say "no." We take our time; all 5 of us exit the car. The breeze is eerie as I lead the pack, walking towards the booking entrance

of the jail. I know that my sister takes good care of Mia, they are adjusting. I know that my 60 year old mom will somehow manage to care for my infant. I know, but it is still the hardest thing I have ever had to do and I try to do it with some dignity. I wave to the officer (they know who I am) and wait in the lobby with the females of my family. My mom cannot soothe me, she is crying "oh my baby." Mia is crying "Mommy" and holding on to me. Even my sister is teary eyed. I try to tell them to "Be strong," but really I am telling myself. This is the moment I have been trying not to think about for 10 months. This is the rawest human emotion I have ever felt. Every ounce of joy I have ever felt is being sucked out of me. A vacuum swallows all of my insides into blackness. I try to hold my head up and choke back the tears. I bite my lip and hug them all. I lay a last kiss on my sleeping infant and allow the officer to escort me back to a holding cell.

Now back to reality. Here, behind the walls, the gates, the thirteen foot fences and barbed wire, I am not someone's mom, someone's daughter,

or someone's sister. Here, I am a "top level dealer, running a well-organized and far reaching drug enterprise" who is facing 4-96 years in prison. I am all of these things. I am the sum of my experiences. What moments in my family life lead me to this place, these choices and the person I am? I have some ideas, but who really knows? At the end of the day, as I sit in my cell in the Women's Maximum Unit, I remember images of my family over the last two days. I see them just being who they are: twisted, dysfunctional, crazy, kooky and embarrassing. I love who they are and I look forward to being a part of their madness again. Their madness is familiar and comfortable. Everyone is crazy after all. I prefer familiar madness to the unpredictable madness that I encounter day to day in jail. Now, thinking of my family from prison, I find their quirks and flaws endearing and I see them in heavenly glowing light, even in their dysfunction. I hope they never change, because it would not feel like "home" without those same old absurdities and eccentricities.

FENCES

Brother Thangs

I can recall a time in my life when I would see a fence and just had to climb it. The urge was irresistible. It did not matter if it was a chain-link, a wooden picket, or a brick Masonite—I had to climb it. The height was not a factor either: A six, twelve, or fifteen footer just excited me all the more. I had to see what was on the other side. In my juvenile mind, that fence was a barrier, an obstruction to my happiness, and I could not let that go.

When peer pressure was mixed in with my juvenile bravado, it was not a question of if I was going over a particular fence, but just how many of my friends I would beat to the other side.

Many times the rewards were absolutely fascinating. I would find neat basketball courts, glimmering swimming pools, and the occasional fruit tree, sweet with ripe pickings to invite my pleasure. Other times my spirit of adventure paid off no better than the antics of *Curious George*. Sometimes my findings were more punishment than reward: an angry Rottweiler, thorny bushes, thick mud patches (messing up my bright white kicks), or an angry and surprised homeowner who felt disrespected or violated and showed no compassion in cursing savagely at a minor.

Other times, a fence could make for an adrenaline-fueled escape route as I would “hit” the fence in an effort to shake the authorities. Sometimes this entailed a spectacular acrobatic

feat of jumping up toward the top of a chain-link fence and flipping my body over, hopefully landing on my feet. Of course, every effort of mine to complete this maneuver did not result in cat-like charm and agility. There were many painful sprains, nasty scrapes, and lasting breaks; none of which hindered me until the adrenaline wore off.

Wild nostalgia giving way to reality, or what I used to view as harmless fun; the hijinks of youthful exuberance, I know now that these were the seeds of my eventual, inevitable destruction. What I failed to understand was that those fences represented law, and rules, and my need to climb them fed the roots of my disrespect for such social mores.

I used to say “fences were made to be climbed,” but the unconscious message that registered in my spirit was that rules were made to be broken. Little did I know that those fences were not there to separate me from my happiness, but from my own despair.

Now, incarcerated, I find myself surrounded by at least two miles of chain-link fence. I cannot help but wonder if there is a younger version of me looking in and wanting to hit the fence. If I could, I would tell him that there is nothing in here to see, but if he is not moved by my words perhaps the razor wire and 10,000 volts might speak loud enough.

Additional Resources

If the writings contained herein have motivated you to learn more about the U.S. prison-industrial complex, the men and women incarcerated within it, the communities impacted by the prison system, or the artists, teachers, and activists who work both within prisons and against mass-incarceration, then please consult the materials contained on these two websites:

- **PCARE** is the Prison Communication Activism Education and Research Collective, a national organization of teachers, scholars, artists, activists, prisoners, and allies. The PCARE website (<http://p-care.org/>) offers an amazing array of resources, including a bibliography, video and audio files, art, and links to other organizations.
- **The Prison Justice Project** supports a website built and managed by students at the University of Colorado Denver. Like the PCARE website, this one (<http://prisonjusticeproject.org/>) offers a remarkable range of information, art, links to other organizations, an embedded catalogue of suggested Hip Hop tracks, and back copies of this magazine.

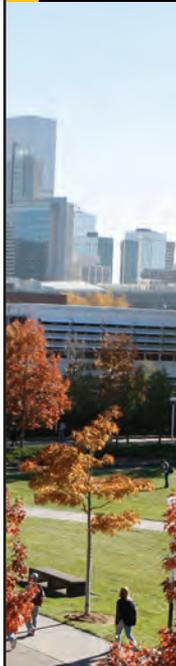
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If you are imprisoned and would like to contribute to the next issue, or if you are free and would like to lend your assistance, or if you are wealthy and care to make a donation to our humble magazine, then please contact:

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