

CAPTURED
WORDS
FREE
THOUGHTS



OPENINGS & THANKS

Working under the assumption 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* aspires to empower its contributors and enlighten its readers.

This issue includes poems, stories, letters, prose, essays, and art made by men and women incarcerated in California, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, New Jersey, New York, and Texas. To expand the scope of our project, we also include works created by folks on the “free” side of the prison walls who have been impacted by crime, violence, and the prison-industrial complex.

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BACK ISSUES & ACCESS

For those of you who would like to use *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* in your classes or for other political purposes, you can access volumes 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 by logging on to the Acedemia.edu webpage of Stephen Hartnett (<http://ucdenver.academia.edu/StephenHartnett>).

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All photographs by Jeremy Make

LIFE ENERGY; LETTERS FROM RODERICK FINLEY

Editor's Note: *Over the past ten years, Roderick Finley has been one of the best correspondents in the family of Captured Words/Free Thoughts. Writing from the notorious Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas, Finley has offered a torrent of gorgeous, philosophical, and personal reflections on the call of conscience to live with dignity and grace. To honor his contributions, we offer here an edited collection of some of his dazzling prose, as shared in recent letters.*

“Peace and Blessings be upon you!” By saying these words we cultivate the moral virtue and righteous force of all life energy, which calls us to pursue love, a life of knowledge, and right actions.

•••••

I try to live with and in creative good will, and to preoccupy myself with beneficial things—with all the progress outside these prison walls—thus liberating my mind and honoring all those family, friends, students, and teachers who operate as social forces walking toward wisdom.

•••••

To be amazing:
Risk more than is required
Learn more than you are asked
Show courage and breathe deeply
Aim for excellence and shun mediocrity
Dream BIG but stand humbly before others

•••••

Whudd’up Stephen? How are your students and the team? I’m sitting here sipping coffee in the free zone of my mind, just coming off the rec. yard, where I was running some laps, doing some jumping jacks, and trying some sparring—*directing my energy in a positive way*. You know, I put God first and write for all those students eager to learn, to achieve, and to commit to the abiding purposes of the heart. Let me call upon them to captivate the mind so as to stimulate the body toward action, ultimately motivating the feet to dance while fertilizing our lives with belief and passion and dignity.

BANG! BANG!

Shane Davis

Bang, bang has banged my consciousness for over 20 years.

It was a sunny summer day; I remember because I watched through my grandma’s front window while my neighborhood friends played football and then a game of hide and go seek. Momma didn’t tell me why I couldn’t go out and play as I’d usually done, she just kept me close to her, but with that, I was cool. I was the baby of the family, “a momma’s boy.”

I heard the motorcycle engine of my cousin, Charlie Earl. I could pick up that sound from a mile away. As I peeked out the side of the curtain, I saw Donald trailing Charlie Earl. He was an ex-boyfriend of my mother, a man we’d lived with ever since I could remember. Grandma ordered my Momma to the back bedroom and then answered the door. Grandma lied and said Momma wasn’t there, but he knew better and kicked in the door, barging his way straight to the back bedroom where my momma was hiding.

Pop.
Pop. Pop.
Pop. Pop. Pop.
Pop.

I counted the shots, seven entered my mother’s body. I too was 7, inhaling the smoke of a hot pistol. To this day, the residuals of gunpowder linger. It tastes like sulfur and in strong doses the tears of a child come back to my eyes.

Today, I acknowledge that no human being is an accident. In fact, there are no such things as accidents—laws govern all events. What once haunted, now enlivens the soul. A mere snapshot into what was and what will be.



THE NEW “N” WORD

Alex Manigo

Lynch mobs may be long gone, but the threat of police violence is ever present. One wrong move or sudden gesture could mean massive retaliation. A wallet could be mistaken for a gun, reaching for your phone can be construed as “resisting arrest.”

The “white only” signs may be long gone, but new signs have gone up! Notices placed in job applications, rental agreements, and loan applications inform the general public that “felons” are not wanted here.

Felony is the new “N” word. They don’t have to call you *Nigger* anymore; they just say you’re a *felon*.

In every inner city ghetto throughout America, alarming numbers of young black, brown, and poor men carry felony convictions. Once you have that felony stamp or prison label, your hopes for employment—for achieving the American dream—for achieving any kind of integration into society begin to fade out...

PTSD: FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC

Jameel R. Cole

What makes me different? Is it because my battle fatigues are black khakis and white tees? Is it because they lack camouflage? I too have been under fire. It may not have been in Iraq or Afghanistan, but in the streets where I stand, I’ve seen my own version of the Royal Guard and Taliban.

While most grew up on *American Bandstand*, naming that tune, I grew up playing name that gun. And you have the audacity to say I’m not traumatized? I was 14 when the gun I was supposed to take home was used instead by my close friend to commit suicide.

Disorder

No one came to ask me about my feelings. Instead, the ones who gave the oath to “do no harm” came to testify that I have no feelings. They perceived me as cold-blooded. But maybe these emotional scars have made me purple-hearted.

I almost escaped the trappings of my circumstances. But I still suffer the chronic pain from my environment. I do not equate myself with the heroes who died for the American flag, but this is my desperate cry and plea for the medical attention we need, because the post-traumatic stress of battle is real—for both foreign and domestic veterans.

**FROM THE WOMEN'S BLOCK, IN A COUNTY JAIL,
IN A COLLEGE TOWN**

Co-written by the women incarcerated in the Monroe County Jail (who wish to remain anonymous) and their local writing partners: L. N. Badger, Franci English, Kerstin Hixon, Tammy Miles, Marcy Payne, Jade Sanders, Ashley Shields, and Stacey Terrell.

This town can suck you in and spit you out
A totally different person
It opens its arms with Welcome weeks
Tailgates two dollar Tuesdays
Thursday night Vegas bombs shot skis
O-bombs \$1 Well Specials

I'm not saying my behavior was OK
But I never learned how to do anything else
 With everything in ruins
 It's frightening to admit
 The only thing that keeps me
 sane is my addiction
It's ruined my life
Keeping me locked in a hell hole
But if I don't use on the streets
I'm still in that hell hole

This town can suck you in and spit you out
Housing rates rising student high rises
Yet all the services are moving
Farther from the city center out to nowhere
I'm working for a living on poverty wages
While carrying the burden
Of managing my addiction
Caring for my family and all my secrets
The burden of my addiction
And the gift of release

Sometimes I wonder why the love of my kids
Or of my parents isn't enough
 for me to stop
My mother just died
And I wasn't there
I've lost so much sitting here
Family, respect, dignity
Each time I've been locked up
I've lost a little more
I thought I hit rock bottom thousands of times
 But there's never an end
 I've let my addiction own me
 Leaving a paralyzing feeling
 That I can't do freedom without it

It doesn't help that you assume
 I'm a bad mother
 Selfish

 That I don't care
The label *criminal*
Makes it easy for you to assume
You feel negative about *criminals*
Without knowing the back story
 I know you hate me
 Are afraid of me
 I know 'cause most days
 I feel the same

 I need to kill my self-loathing
 I need people to understand
 That my anger has nothing
 To do with them
 I need my children
 I need community

This jail just sucks you in
Time behind these walls seems to stop
And there's nothing but forever
For us to endure the world
We have made for ourselves
For us to settle into knowing
The rules are a ladder
Far out of reach

 I go to court in a week
 I hope they let me back home

DO YOU KNOW ME?

Stephen Dossman

Do you know me?

I am Allen Iverson, I am Tyrone standing on the corner, and I am Leroy at the construction site. I have a PhD from Harvard and I am your president, a social activist by choice. I have the same degree from the same college in 1895, I am W. E. B. Du Bois.

Do you know me?

I am Trayvon Martin and Oscar Grant, I am Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, *we built it and we'll burn this mothafucka down!* I am Ptahhotep, Prime Minster of the Kushite Empire, I am Johnnie L. Cochran, esq.

Do you know me?

I am Too \$hort and San Quinn. I am C-Bo and E-Feezy, I am Andre 3000 and Young Jeezy. I am a modern day intellectual scholar, Michael Eric Dyson. I am Muhammad Ali and Iron Mike Tyson. I am Frederick Douglass, I am Malcolm X and Dr. King. I am the Ethiopian Phillip riding my chariot on a mission for the Queen, and I'm also the Afrikan Intellectual Saint Augustine.

Do you know me?

I am the kingpin Felix Mitchell and Mickey Mo. I am Suge Knight, P. Diddy, Master P and Tupac Shakur. I am the great Haitian General Toussaint L'Ouverture. I'm not braggin or tryin to be haughty, but another man reorganized the world beginning in 1440. Writing his story to change my own story, well I'm still here and it ain't too late to set things straight.

Do you know me?

I am Hannibal Barca the son of Hamlicar and we fought both Punic Wars. For 16 years I terrorized Rome trying to knock down her door. My legacy is rich and eternal, I am Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, we published the first black newspaper in 1828 called *Freedom's Journal*.

Do you know me?

I am Elijah Muhammad, with a third grade education I raised a Nation. I am Carter G. Woodson trying to explain the miseducation of the Negro. My name is Marcus Garvey trying to be your motivation expounding on repatriation. I am Lil Wayne and Jay Z, Nas and Big Pun, but they lied when they told you I once worshipped the sun.

Do you know me?

Well I am David Walker and this is my appeal, there are a lot of ways to look at the Black Man but if you look deep enough you just might see the real.

PASS AROUND POEM

T. Atchley, S. Davis, M. Gunderson, A. Manigo, B. Nwoke, and R. Van

The picture had lied
about the project
we had just finished

It should have reflected meaning
shown how we found a path
to explore ourselves. But instead
it illustrated lives we were ready
to leave behind

We are prepared to move towards
the future, no matter how terrifying
it may be to think about

We have found that if you look
deep enough, you discover words
as a way to feel free

In the end, there is nobody
else to be, even when the rest
of the world doesn't see
what you see

A picture might be
worth a thousand words, but
those words might just
miss the truth



**FOR A WHITE MOTHER, FROM A CONFUSED
BLACK SON SEEKING HER LOVE**

John A. Moore

I want my Mommy. What if I can't figure it out?

My alarmingly late transition into adulthood was accompanied by all the kicking and screaming of my 3 year old self, desperately trying to reason why I can't have cake and ice cream for dinner. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Yet, you and I seem like we couldn't be further from whom we once were, for good and bad. You steadily got better, while I cultivated my own little corner of hell.

My childhood resurfaces and confuses me with such questions as "how am I both black and white, yet these two sides of my nature hardly speak; let alone be caught dead at any gathering with one another?" Just one conundrum amongst many a mind-fuck I haphazardly navigated in a paper boat.

But there you always were, my Mommy, luminous with spirit and exception; your white skin a testament to your privilege and virtue; and I was your baby boy. You spoke of your pregnancy with me and my birth like something directly from scripture. I was something special; was something special, but somewhere between here and there I seem to have lost my luster. I believe this happened slowly over time, like the elements turning a crack into a crevasse upon glass, but the jumble that is my past will not allow me to pinpoint exactly when or how this happened.

You seemed to channel all of your anger, resentment, and frustrations at a memory. From all your descriptions, you two were polar opposites. How appropriate then that his skin be black. Black: soiled, dirty, wicked, devoid of light, my father.

Where did that leave me? I know when we were at family functions, the only other thing of color was the TV. I looked so much like the man you hated, that I hated the man you hated. Your words were my gospel.

So what then constitutes "black"? What constitutes "white"? Despite this kinky hair and these little boys calling me "nigger," white sounds right. I wanna be like my Mommy. Yet, I like cottage cheese with my pig-eared sandwich.

When I go to granny's, nothing but love emanates from the black people seated at her house. What does it all mean? I want Mommy. Explain it to me Mommy. Why are these people different from those? Where does that leave me? Can't you hear me, Mommy, can't you? All these questions knock me off my equilibrium. Tell me something, my majestic, esteemed and exalted white Mommy. I need you.

But alas, we can only do what we know as our best. You were no more nor less sanctified than anyone else, for innocence is lost on all human consciences. Eden was forever lost, and my family splintered that much more, driven apart by more conflict, more confusion, more questions, and more resentment. Lines were drawn so deep in the sand you had to be careful not to fall in.

Words swirled:

Right Wrong Innocent Guilty
Mercy Revenge White Black

••••• the more things stay the same •••••

Thus, the same riddles make me feel like that much more of an imbecile for not having mastered them by now. In so many ways I am still trying to have cake and ice cream for dinner. I've been unable to perceive life in any other context than extremes, like my family's two sides. I've failed to consider the middle ground, which is essentially my nature.

Most importantly, on either end of the spectrum and anywhere in between, these truths permeate: passion ... compassion ... humility ... sacrifice ... perseverance ... love. You gifted me these values as you demonstrated them in your daily walk amidst forces that would have it otherwise.

I love you, Mommy.

HOW MANY GONE?

John A. Moore

We are at war, lives are at stake.

Lives are taken nonchalantly and forever maimed as the magistrate's gavel resounds, echoing like a gunshot of sniper-like precision in a bombed-out tenement hallway where poverty has done its evil work.

This is urban warfare. It's nothing personal, for bullets don't have names, they just rip apart the innocent. As the gavel strikes, a lone .50 caliber round shreds the crown of your unprepared psyche.

As your brains are blown out onto your family sitting stunned in the court's first row, you become aware of a second booming: your heart threatening to burst from your weary chest and hurtle towards the wall, as if fired from a bazooka.

As you stand motionless, a spell of shell-shock sinking in, your mother fixes her lips to speak, "Baby . . ." only to have the bailiff interrupt, "Ma'am, you can't talk to the prisoner. No ma'am, get back, you can't touch him . . ."

And so it goes, case by case, day by day, another skirmish in the urban war.

There are exceptions, I know, but in most cases our fates were decided long before we entered this court—for poverty does its evil work with stunning force.

We hear talk of laws and rules, but decency dwells not amidst this war-machine disguised as criminal "justice." For what is "due process" when you know not the inner workings of this chamber and its infinite Catch-22s? It's like wielding a .22 handgun against an F-22 fighter.

Amidst the wreckage, I'm hardly a ripple on the sea of hypocrisy, yet my tears could fill an ark.

And so I wonder, how many daughters must continue to look for their missing fathers? How many sons will be forced to grow up alone? How many families will be laid to waste by poverty and drugs and violence and the war-like machinery of "justice," which pretends to balance our fundamentally flawed society by locking away the masses?

How many gone? How many gone?

My prayers go out to the war-torn world.

SECTS IN THE BIG CITY

Calvin R. Jones

The ole lady sed
If y'all boys don't quit standin round here
spittin on the sidewalk
cussin n' smokin them reefer cigarettes

Ah'ma hafta call the po-lece. An I don wanna do that!
So they did
backed off
'ntil about two in the afternoon

And then ... in broad daylight
They jacked her
Oh, she put up a good fight alright!
But they won anyway

And nobody cared

Not even enough to pledge a rose
But then maybe they just don't
sell roses on this side of town

MY BROTHERS ABOVE

Darren Henry

Once a family of seven, then we were six,
With one guardian angel watching over us from above.

Once a family of seven, then torn apart by tragedy,
Haunted by opportunities we allowed to pass us by.

A family of six still smiling to the face of the world,
While holding back emotions to protect us from the fallout.

A family of five now scared to get too close in case Death
Casts his eyes upon our family and comes to collect another.

Now a family of five, stumbling in our grief,
Numbing our wounded souls with drugs and sex.

Two guardian angels showering us with their tears,
Pleading with us through the ether to feel their love.

A family of five with two guardian angels watching over us,
Lost and unsure of what to do . . .

Now a family of five.

THE BOMB

Albert Lang

If they dropped the bomb today,
what would the children say?
 Would their smiles be hidden behind faces of anger?
 Would their love be wrapped with ribbons of hate?

If they dropped the bomb today,
what would the children say?
 Would their hearts be broken?
 Would their seat of life be turned into evil stones?

If they dropped the bomb today,
what would the children say?
 Would they aim their slender shafts towards the sky?
 Would words exciting hate grow sharp on their tongues?

If they dropped the bomb today,
what would the children say?
 Would those yet to live be born
 With arrows of malice within their tiny palms?

 Would their offspring create anarchy—
 A society of supreme madness?

I SEE A MAN

Michael Gunderson

I see a man growing up amidst cornfields
learning to work hard on that farm
As a young man wanting to see the world
he becomes a Marine
and sees the end of what man can do to man—it scares him

Coming home, he finds his way to the Rockies
where he starts a family
with the love of his life
Raising two daughters and a son
With the hard work he was taught by his father
he looks forward to passing everything on to his children

As his family grows and the grandkids are born
his life is full of joy and happiness
Then one day he becomes ill
and fights with everything he has
but the sickness takes him away

I want to see him again
to tell him I love him
to just sit and talk and say “thank you”
for teaching me to be a man



NOTE TO SELF

Kevin Butler

The party took me everywhere I ever wanted to be, until I got to a place I never wanted to go. How does abusing drugs or alcohol manifest itself as a viable coping mechanism?

I was 20 the first time I attempted the “crawl in the bottle” maneuver. The reason had all the elements of a classic country song. I was the poor young boy having his heart broken by the worldly woman with the wild eyes and a Kentucky twang that made my heart melt. After a straight Tequila night, spent drowning the hurt and pushing piles of pain under the rug, I felt better.

We all know a friend will bail you out, but a best friend will be sitting in jail right beside you saying “Damn man, that shit was fun!” Together we waged war against all. You were my partner in crime. In vain, we continued digging late night graves. We buried any and all who betrayed our tender hearts. A few came close, but just when the walls we erected were about to be overwhelmed, somehow and some way, you came through for me.

We partied hard into the night for years. I became a small town rock star and you were my entourage. We chased the bigger and better nightly. We shined in our hand-made universe and it was just that, our world. Those were the best days of our lives. You ever heard the saying “all good things must come to an end?” Well, whoever the hell that poet was, he hit the proverbial nail on the head.

The struggle began about the age of 25. I no longer took joy in all of our late night escapades. Our mission to maintain the heart’s well-being was no longer priority number one. I questioned your motives, fruitlessly. Honestly, I questioned them half-heartedly. Not knowing how I got there, I became a prisoner of your immoral and wicked desires. My actions were not my intentions. We were no longer on equal footing. You had been promoted to capo while I remained a mere thug doing time in jails and institutions. Numerous times I was just short of death, while you sat idle, just watching. Addiction had completely taken control.

I am now 36 years old and feel as if I have sold myself short. I have betrayed pools of potential, instead drowning in your abuse-filled cesspool. I feel as if I have been flushed down the toilet, and all you can say is “shit happens.” I say it’s been 16 years since we met and I think this relationship (as we know it) has run its course. This is not one of those sugar-coated ballads Taylor puts out. This, my one-time friend, is a “fuck you” letter. You have never been the beacon in my night. For no apparent reason we built this ark together, only to have it sunk by your torpedic ways. From this point on, I will no longer toast to crime. We have ridden together for the last time.

You
Are
All
Alone
From
Here
On
Out.



A
Fathers
Key to
Freedom
Faith
Hope and
Love

(PREVIOUS PAGE)

DRAWING: A FATHER'S KEYS

Rodney Serna

Editor's Note: Mr. Serna found his inspiration for this drawing from his family, specifically from his son and the birth of his most recent grandchild. As a life-long artist, Mr. Serna uses his artistic skills not only as a way to express himself, but also as a way to give back. His murals can be found on the walls of the Denver Reception and Diagnostics Center, where Serna currently resides.



POLICY VERSUS PROTOCOL

Michael Owens

“Cell inspections will not be used as a punitive measure.”
California Code of Regulations 3287.2

Contrary to popular belief and California state policy, cell searches are always a form of punishment. Officially, they are called “Facility Contraband Searches”; unofficially, they are a form of retaliation used by prison staff to punish inmates for the idiotic behavior of the few. The policy states that these searches happen for one of two reasons: either to control inmate accumulation of contraband and excessive property, or to recover dangerous items believed to have been stolen, lost, or recently smuggled into prison. Protocol is the unwritten rule that if you piss-off the guards, they will pay you back by going into your cell and wreaking a little havoc. This is the California DOC, the most schizophrenic prison system in the world. In this system, policy is always trumped by protocol—and searches are always retaliatory.

The most recent search here was executed under the guise of an attempt to recover pills and syringes that were stolen from the nurse’s station. We all knew this search was about punishment because by the time they came looking, the items had already been missing for days. Contrary to what you may have seen in the movies, drugs and other kinds of illegal items are not passed down the tier, swung by convicts cell to cell, in a dirty sock tied closed with a shoelace. If contraband was really moved in that fashion, then it might make sense to order a general lockdown and shakedown all of our houses to punish our criminal conspiracies. But the truth is, 99% of us had no idea what had happened until the officers started going around questioning people.

As soon as I heard what had been taken, I knew a major search was coming; not to find the items, but for payback. Every man within the walls of this prison knew that ten minutes after the goods were looted, they were dispersed and stashed in various convict lockers around the yard. And for those who don’t know what a “convict locker” is, it is the safest place an inmate has to hide small items, we *all* have one. A convict locker is an ass, and that’s exactly what happened to those drugs and needles—they disappeared up the asses of a half-dozen convicts unconnected to the original theft, never to be found by any cell search. Everybody knew that. Yet, as protocol dictates, an immediate lockdown and search order was issued.

Searches that are ordered in an attempt to locate stolen items are the most punitive and retaliatory of all. For not only have the officers that were on duty during the theft been made to look negligent, but anytime a prisoner gets over on a guard, there will be a reckoning.

So on the night of the crime, the on-duty sergeant (who would normally be getting ready to go home at that time) comes striding into our unit, and up to a cell door, trailing two other guards:

POLICY VERSES PROTOCOL (CONTINUED)

"Inmate John Doe, cuff up and step out."

The inmate, who most of us know to be innocent of any involvement, complies. Once he's handcuffed and escorted a short distance away, the sergeant and guards proceed to rummage through the contents of the cell, tossing items aside haphazardly as they go. His neatly made bed is dumped on the floor. The contents of his shelves are pawed through and scattered. All pictures and posters are torn from the walls.

The inmate protests, "Hey man, you don't got to disrespect my shit like that!"

"Dude," the sergeant replies matter-of-factly, "I'm a sergeant, in your cell, at 9 o'clock at night. Your house is getting fucked."

See, sergeants don't search cells, that's grunt work for regular guards to do. But lieutenants and captains tend to regard thefts of this size as significant breaches of security. If they are going to have to submit a report to a warden explaining that one of their subordinates got beat for enough morphine to dope a herd of elephants, then sergeants are going to get an earful too.

For prisoners, the violation of our already limited private space feels like grave injustice. It is not the search itself, but it's the destructive ways in which they are carried out. Inmate John Doe *expected* to be searched; he was seen in the area, but he also expected *not to be punished* for something everyone knew he hadn't done. On the other hand, the sergeant expected him to understand that when some dipshit inmate steals something important enough to cause the top brass to order an immediate lockdown and search, then *every* inmate is going to get punished during the shakedown. To hell with our rights, and our innocence, and non-punitive cell inspection policies; the protocol is that if something is a big enough deal to warrant sergeants getting off their asses to *personally* search cells, well, your house is getting fucked!

MY LIFE

Michael Vander Pol

My life, my life
I search for you

As I look around
All I see are fences
Short
Tall
Small
Nothing
More than a wall

What is my purpose?
I search for you

What brought me
To this place?
Is it because I dared
To unlock my emotions
And let my feelings show
Only to be ridiculed?

Will I become a teacher?
A teacher of what?
Will I become a guide?
A guide to where?

Acting in confusion
Full of pain and hurt
I repeat
Acts of anger
And someone gets hurt
Time for more fences

I pray and pray
To find my way
To become a teacher
A fence mender
A preacher
Of God's way

My life, my life
Have I found thee?

MOVING ON

Timothy Atchley

Sorry I never told you all I wanted to say,
but it is time for us to go our separate ways.

These feelings I have, I cannot explain,
immersed in emotion, immersed in pain.

Your big brown eyes have so much mystery;
turning dreams to reality and reality into history.

The more I think about you, the crazier I get;
the crazier I get, the more I want to forget.

To forget about the bad that once controlled my life,
to forget about the one I once loved as my wife.



WHAT'S UP ONE GOD?

W. L. Jones

I dream of peace and see
fields of corn much taller than me

I dream of row upon row of empty holes
where peanuts and potatoes are laid to grow

These are the memories from when I was five
powerful visions still vivid before my eyes

Setup for chow
the scene explodes
I'm wide awake
the floor is cold

By the grace of Allah
I gather my wits
and step outside
into a cruel snake pit

I see the young G's step across my path
and I wonder "was I ever that bad?"

Then I hear them ask "What's up O.G.?"
Do I really have to tell you
in them, I saw me?

REHABILITATION: A LETTER

Amir Andrews

Dear Senator Cory Booker,

Special report: “Young black man, 27, released from prison visits parole officer on time weekly. Currently, he has two places of employment to provide for his family. He is attending night classes at a local community college to further his career. He pays his taxes, contributes to his community in a positive way, and is treated fairly by society.”

You won’t ever hear this story depicted on the news. But I am sure you have heard the more familiar version: “A man released from prison commits another heinous offense. Authorities say he has an extensive criminal record, with convictions for various offenses. Authorities referred to the suspect as a career criminal.”

Following such stories, community members are paraded before cameras to speak out with statements such as “Authorities should have never released him, they should lock all criminals up and throw away the key,” or “We should do away with parole altogether,” or “There should be stiffer penalties and longer terms of imprisonment for criminals.”

This attitude only aids in building stigma surrounding those who are currently imprisoned, those who are working to rehabilitate themselves. So many prisoners simply give up and resign themselves to a defeated life of knowing that future imprisonment awaits them because there is no real hope of re-entry into society. This dynamic makes hardened hearts harder. I know, because I am one of these men.

Recidivism is the tendency to slip back into a previous behavior, especially a tendency to return to criminal habits and activities. The fact that the recidivism rate is around 76% suggests that all these “get tough on crime” policies are creating a culture of recidivism, and thus not helping imprisoned men and women to reintegrate back into society after serving their time.¹

The political philosophy driving these self-defeating policies seems to be “Keep them separate from society.” Mr. Senator, I am writing to you to argue that we would be better served as a society if we created a slight shift in that philosophy. Perhaps we should begin asking “What can we do to incorporate ex-cons back into society?” This simple shift would go a long way toward creating real reform in the criminal justice system.

For this reform to take hold, we need to create room for a more positive image for the modern incarcerated individual. In so doing, society would create hope and opportunity for the prisoner; it would give us something to strive for—a true second chance.

To understand the despair felt by prisoners who are soon to return as residents of Newark, we need only look to a notable example of a reformed ex-con who is a now positive influence: Michael Vick. This is a man who was convicted of a crime, served his time, and tried to re-enter society as a changed man. He returned to his career and emerged as an all-star quarterback. But years after his release and successful re-entry, there are still many who vilify him. There are those who say he should have never been given a second chance. If he continues to be looked upon as a villain, what hope do those of us who were not rich or famous before our imprisonment have of being treated fairly after re-entry?

Across the nation, men and women convicted of a felony face a future of discrimination so severe that it mirrors the policies of previous generations of slavery!

Ex-convicts don’t have a right to vote, equal employment, access to government housing, etc. We don’t have any say in the laws that will affect our lives nor the lives of our families. But who better to know what works and what doesn’t work in this criminal rehabilitation process than one with firsthand knowledge of the inner-workings of the system itself?

The need is clear and urgent: we must reform a criminal justice system that is broken and bloated, and we must help ex-convicts transition successfully back into society, thus lowering the recidivism rate. To do this, society must become more forgiving by helping prisoners earn a second chance. So, Senator Booker, what are you going to do about this?

Sincerely,

Mr. Amir Andrews

1. According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report that studied over 400,000 former prisoners from 30 states, “within five years of release, about three-quarters (76.6 percent) of released prisoners were rearrested”; see the data available at <http://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism/Pages/welcome.aspx>.

I WONDER

Steve Tuggle

I wonder every day, about my son who passed away.
He died at birth, twin to a brother.

I wonder what life would be like, what he would
look like, perhaps just like his brother?

I wonder would he be left-handed, have brown hair,
or have eyes of blue?

I wonder, would he like being held, being loved?

I wonder, would he be smart, would he be fair,
what kind of games would he play?

I wonder, would he be strong, would he like sports,
what kind of things he would say?

I wonder, would he be happy, would he be sad,
would he have hated or have been glad?

I wonder every day, it is all I can do.

LOOKING GLASS

Gordon Melvin

In time this person will become
familiar to you standing there
in the looking glass, those eyes
looking back into the past
far beyond any realized memory

Far beyond any remembered imagining
standing there, outside, always alone

Those eyes, clouded, shuttered, pained
do not see the future, cannot see that
in time, this person will become
old, standing here, imagining the failings

of those eyes, looking beyond the looking glass

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

Rodney Jeske

*Let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works
and glory to your father who is in heaven
Matthew 5:16*

For 17 years my world was dark and gray. Long before I found myself in prison, I was locked in a prison within my mind: I was selfish, dishonest, angry, and addicted to alcohol and drugs. This dead-end road led me to a 26-year prison sentence.

Let Your Light Shine

Within these walls, I have found freedom. I believe that no matter how hard your past was, you can overcome it. Through classes and a diligent program of recovery, I began my life-long journey of change and service. In the six years I've been incarcerated, I've been blessed with many opportunities to better myself. Two years ago, I was blessed with the opportunity to come to D.R.D.C. to work in the infirmary. Being able to give a little back through helping handicapped and terminally ill patients has been truly humbling. Last year, I became a Peer Educator who speaks to new arrivals about harm reduction, high-risk behavior, and communicable diseases. Speaking to these men has helped me to realize my own goals.

Let Your Light Shine

If you want something you have never had, you have to do something you have never done. And so, on July 19th, 2014, with the support and guidance from my beautiful wife, I accepted Christ as my savior.

Let Your Light Shine

When my day finally comes to walk out of these prison walls, all of the hard work, and this rock solid foundation of recovery and change that I have built, will help me rise from the ashes of my past to achieve greatness. I will spend the rest of my life as a loving husband, father, and dedicated AA member. You see, although some of my mistakes were very costly, I do not regret my past, for I will use my mistakes and experiences to help other alcoholics achieve sobriety, one day at a time.

Let Your Light Shine



MY LIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT IF...

Quan Le Huynh

My life would have been different if our people had won the Vietnam War
My life would have been different if I grew up as a white kid in Provo, Utah
My life would have been different if my family had not moved to California when I was 10
My life would have been different if my father had not died from leukemia when I was 13
My life would have been different if I had not blamed God and the world for his death

My life would have been different if I had attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point
My life would have been different if I never went to juvenile hall
My life would have been different if I had learned something in the California Youth Authority
My life would have been different if I never joined a gang
My life would have been different if I never murdered a man

My life would have been different if I had received the Death Penalty
My life would have been different if I was still a "self-made hustla"
My life would have been different if I still cast myself in a good light
My life would have been different if I still needed others' approval
My life would have been different if I still chased recognition

My life would have been different if I was still enamored with the sound of my own voice
My life would have been different if I could not recognize when I am speaking from a place
of pride and ego
My life would have been different if I did not realize I am responsible for every thought,
word, and choice in this life
My life would have been different if I did not make time for prayer and mindfulness
My life would have been different if I could not glimpse the flashes of beauty in each
person I come across

My life would have been different if I had not finally awakened

IF APPOINTMENTS BE IN ORDER

Calvin R. Jones

If I must go, please God
call me at a time when emotion is high

When love, wrath, ambition, jealousy
or even hate are at crest

If I must go, then let it be
when feelings tell me I am alive

Snatch me out of orgasmic ecstasy if you must
anything other than a life among the walking-dead
or the living of one's own lingering death

Take me please, while I have something yet to give!

GREATER IS HE THAT IS IN ME THAN HE THAT IS IN THE WORLD

Dominick Swabacker

He had me confused
My priorities mixed up
He had me all screwed up

Man was I blind
No one could tell me nothin'
Check my records
The proof is in the pudding
15 years, my first high speed chase
I graduated from breaking into cars
And started pushing weight

Yeah, I looked up to that cross-country bandit
And, after a couple years, I saw that he ran that shit
He made me a dad at age 17
He had me thinking everything in life had to come quickly

He robbed me of my patience, faith, love, and hope
He had me gaining the world, but losing my soul

BUT

Greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world

So, sometimes we must die to live
'Cause "I was blind, but now I see!
I was lost. But now am found"
I was stained red with sin
But have been washed white as snow
I was pressed, but not crushed

My future is bright
For now, I have hope
The old is gone, the new has come
He is in me and I am in Him

COMING HOME

Terrance Harris Jr.

I never imagined what freedom would feel like, though I had dreamt of a life outside prison walls for ten long years. When I was released, it was just in time to watch AIDS extinguish the flame of my mother's life. Then I had to prepare a place for my little brother to come home, after more than a decade of his own combat.

When I opened the door, I didn't recognize him. He seemed taller, maybe because he stood with his back straight or perhaps because he held his chin up. His crisp uniform was adorned with a cornucopia of medals, symbols of the good he had done for the country. His once chubby, boyish face was now replaced with a rugged square jaw, covered in stubble. The youthful sparkle that had lit his teenage eyes now clouded over with the fog of war. He appeared lost, but my little brother was finally home from battle.

"What's up pipsqueak?" I asked as I choked back tears in anticipation of hearing his voice.

But all I got in return was a nod of his head.

"Come in!" I fumbled, as I moved out of his way.

He took a step forward, stopped, and glanced to both sides of the door frame, carefully scanning the inside of the house. He walked to his old room and put his things away before returning in a pair of blue jeans and a gray hooded sweatshirt. I watched him from a distance, trying not to make him uncomfortable. He sat on the couch and stared down at his pristine white Nikes. Every now and then he would look up and a chill would shock my spine as the coldest, lifeless, stare would penetrate my soul.

Finally, I had enough courage to ask, "Are you okay?"

He remained quiet and slowly nodded his head. I felt like he had me locked in the crosshairs in the scope of his sniper rifle. I couldn't help but peek at my chest to see if an infrared dot had somehow suddenly appeared. I didn't know what to say. I thought these homecomings were happy moments with parades and keys to the city being given away—all captured on YouTube. But here, I sat a few feet away from a government-trained killing machine who had spent the last 14 years fighting two wars with nothing to show for it but a chest full of medals. The little brother I remember was now just a memory.

Terror crept into my entire body as he finally spoke, "Did mom suffer?" he asked.

"No. She died peacefully in her sleep." I lied.

He pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head, casting an eerie shadow on his face. I caught a glimpse of a single tear that tailed to his chin.

"I'm glad you're home," I stuttered, still afraid to say the wrong thing.

He quickly sprang to his feet and walked over to me. I could feel the heat of his breath from his nostrils. I was petrified in fear.

"I can't turn it off," he whispered in shame as he shook uncontrollably.

"I can't either," I mumbled as I hugged him as tightly as possible.

Editors Note: *For anyone who has been away from family for extended periods of time, be it due to incarceration or war, coming home can be an unfamiliar transition. But it can also be a rewarding period of new experiences and growth for both the returnee and family alike. For readers seeking resources, we suggest:*

For Veterans:
<http://veteranscominghome.org/family-resources/>

For Prisoners:
<https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/prisoners-families-friends/>

MY LIFE WILL BE DIFFERENT

Mark Richards

My life will be different because I have the ability
to create the kind of life I want

Each of us has the power, the honor to speak
and write about what we want to experience

This can be something very special, because we are
conscious of the power of manifestation

We know we have the ability to create our lives
in the way we want, by redirecting the creative energy
that surrounds us and is at the very core of our being

This directing and redirecting is done at the level of thought

If we are not happy with a current experience
we can choose to think and see it in a different way
by redirecting the energy

That energy which is creative, then begins to form new experiences

This is not about magic or religion

This is about trusting and knowing
that the law of the universe
works all of the time

My life will be different because no matter what you do
I shall use the power of creativity
to unfold a more positive future

If you would like to learn more about America's prison system, the work of educators and artists seeking to support the men and women caught in that system, or the work of activists seeking to change it, please check out the information available from these websites:

ACLU PRISON PROJECT

<https://www.aclu.org/issues/prisoners-rights>

BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS

www.bjs.gov

COLORADO CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM COALITION

<http://www.ccjrc.org/>

CRITICAL RESISTANCE

<http://criticalresistance.org/>

EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE

<http://eji.org>

PRISON ARTS COALITION

<http://thepisonartscoalition.com/>

PRISON COMMUNICATION, ACTIVISM, RESEARCH, AND EDUCATION (PCARE)

<http://p-care.org>

SENTENCING PROJECT

www.sentencingproject.org

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