

# Captured / Free Words / Thoughts



**Writing & Art From America's Prisons**

**Volume 19  
Winter 2023**

**CAPTURED WORDS/FREE THOUGHTS**  
**Volume 19, Winter 2023**  
**—Writing and Art from America’s Prisons—**

*Captured Words/Free Thoughts* offers testimony from America’s prisons and prison-impacted communities. This issue includes poems, stories, letters, essays, and art made by colleagues incarcerated in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. To expand the scope of our project, we also include works made by folks on the free side of the prison walls whose lives have been impacted by crime, violence, and the prison industrial-complex.

Volume 19 was compiled and edited by Benjamin Boyce, Meghan Cosgrove, Lisa Dicksteen, and Stephen Hartnett. Layout and design were handled by Julia Beverly, with cover art by Jake Carlock.

**MISSION STATEMENT**

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

**THANKS**

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### **CONTRIBUTORS & SUBSCRIBERS**


If you would like to contribute work to forthcoming issues of this magazine, please send your poems, stories, testimonials, or art to our Correspondence Editor, Benjamin Boyce, c/o the Department of Communication, CU Denver, 1201 Larimer St., Denver, CO 80204. If you want to email questions or comments, please write to our Founding Editor, Stephen J. Hartnett, at [stephen.hartnett@ucdenver.edu](mailto:stephen.hartnett@ucdenver.edu). If you submit work, please make sure to include the Permission Form, which you can find at the back of this issue.

### **BACK ISSUES & ACCESS**

For those of you who would like to use Captured Words/Free Thoughts in your classes or for other purposes, you can access volumes 7 through 19 by logging on to the CU Denver Department of Communication webpage: <https://clas.ucdenver.edu/communication/research-creative-work/captured-words-free-thoughts>. Once there, you can download free PDFs of the magazine.



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## **Invisible Father** **by Louis Mayo**

I've never tucked him in, I've never read him a story before bed, or kissed him goodnight. I'm sure some nights he thinks I've forsaken him, or feels abandoned by the Father he tells people he has, but never sees when it counts.

He hears my digitized voice, reassuring, proud. He believes his hard work matters to me; it does. On Daddy Day at his school, I'm never there, I've never been there. I might never be there. He has faith in goodness, he says his Daddy is good. Goodness disagrees.

For sins committed before his birth, his father is forsaken. Consequences he doesn't understand rob him of the memories he could have had. Instead, memories of sterile white rooms and candy vending machines, controlled hugs, and momentary kisses covered in his father's salty tears.

Dad, stoic in his funny green pajamas.

Measured half-day doses of his invisible father professing love from a place he won't, or can't, return from. I pray to all the Gods he never knows this kind of place, the crushing weight of it.

The cost.

I watch my son leave the hell I have placed myself in. The curtain of reality falls as I undress for the stranger. Naked, my self-respect and dignity on the table with my clothes.

I hope my son bought my reassuring smile, my words of encouragement. The fleeting moments I get to be a human, the privilege of being a father.

He rides home with opinions unshared, thoughts unknown. He travels in silence with his mother, the one who is always there. Local scenery passes his reflection in the car window. His feelings private, he reflects on his time with the temporary image of his Father in mind.

I return to my cell and gaze upon his picture on my wall. I, the invisible father of an amazing son, am resolute that I will come home to him one day.

His belief in me and my goodness will not be in vain.



## From This Window by Vaughn Wright

Outside my window, sparrows herald the sun every morn  
As they search below my sill for an early-bird worm  
They pick among the yellow heads of dandelions and tall green grass  
Until the convict executioner with his lawnmower makes a pass

Razor wire sparkles in the daylight  
Glistening like jewels if the sun hits the fence right  
Row upon row, miles of it  
Hell of a contract from a bid that was likely rigged

Beyond is a parking lot, a rainbow of rides  
Bucket seats and stick shifts aplenty, begging me inside  
If the chance ever comes, I'm surely gonna get gone  
But until then it's just a car show waiting to go wrong

Oftentimes, I watch the drivers as they come and go  
Most work here, though a few visit guys I know  
They're pretty interesting, some of the folks I see  
Few truly get that they're only one bad idea away from being me

Amid the sea of cars is a tree, but I don't know what kind  
It's pretty big, so it's been there a very long time  
Usually use it to gauge the wind  
I sometimes wonder how many of us it's outlived

In the distance are rolling hills of green  
During the fall they explode into colors like you've never seen  
The brightest yellows and oranges and fiery reds  
Until winter comes to put them to bed

But they'll come back again, they always do  
Now that I think about it, Mother Nature's a recidivist too!  
Above and beyond is a sky of pale blue  
It's the same one you see, just from a different view

And, you know, I got the bars and screen and glass  
I can't clean the outside off to see past  
But I thank God that it's something I get to witness  
Still, every day the horizon remains the same  
Never getting any nearer or farther; I've never seen it change

When darkness falls, down come the drapes on my day  
To give sodium vapor its turn to bathe everything in eerie orange rays  
The Moon never passes this way, and the glass is too dirty to see stars  
But I know they're still out there—Oh yes, I know they certainly are

And so, once the Sun is gone away  
I pray the Lord for another day  
As I climb into bed with still more to see  
Because then comes the time to look inside of me

## **Taking My Life Back** by Tammy Englerth

Hurt after hurt  
Pain after pain  
Slamming to the floor  
Wishing for life  
Scars, cuts, bruises  
Stitch after stitch  
Rape after rape  
Nowhere to go  
No one to tell  
Bouncing from prison to prison  
A victim of abuse  
A victim of assault  
Once weak, broken, fragile  
Yep—that was my life

Now, even from the grave  
You haunt me  
I still wonder when  
You are going to take  
My last breath away

News flash!  
No more! I am taking my life back  
You have no more control over me  
    I am a survivor  
        I am free  
            I am taking my life back!







**Tanka #1**  
**by Rob McCracken**

Mom in her coma  
sister cried in her stroller  
menthol memories  
brothers' hand-me-down hoody  
hides the hot tears and hunger

**Footprints**  
**by Rob McCracken**

It's the winter of '05, Christmas Eve.

With a pillowcase full of Kudus bars and a half-eaten birthday cake, we run.

Time escapes with us. We follow the half-frozen creek, the wind whipping through the trees cracking our cheeks and burning our faces.  
Dawn finds us first; her sun shining like a searchlight.

Hunger, regret, fatigue, and fear quickly follow. One slow stumble-step at a time, we argue and cry though the high snow.

Refuge comes as a small cobblestone bridge curved over the crooked creek.  
Finding a tiny alcove below, we pack in side-by-side and back-to-back.

Too exhausted to eat, we fall asleep, a bunched-up bundle of lost boys.

Men are laughing in my dreams  
Dogs bark  
We awake  
To state troopers and staff on ATVs  
Once back at our cottage  
I ask a nurse how they found us  
She smiles and says  
They just followed the footprints in the snow

# The Ones the River Wouldn't Keep

by Cedar Annenkovna

Navajo kid  
I don't think your pop wanted to kill you  
That he didn't care or that he hated you  
When he threw you into the river  
While he was drunk and you were just a little boy  
I'm sorry that happened  
I'm sorry it took all of your life to learn to float  
    To relax  
    To love the water

How many times did I say  
    Just fill your chest up with air  
    I'm right here  
    I won't let go  
    It's OK  
    You're in control

I felt you when you finally did it  
You swam out to the deep end across the river  
over lakes  
Then you wanted to meet the tide  
You learned to surf  
Soon you were jumping off cliffs, bridges, and  
dams  
From higher than I ever dared  
You learned to love the water  
    But you never forgave your dad

I wish I could tell you I understand him now  
Now that my own heart is cracked open  
I wish to help you see to find peace  
    It was a rite of passage  
    Not for you but for him  
    A test of faith





This beautiful healthy baby  
If you could float, if you could swim  
If Great Spirit let you live  
Then you really belonged to him  
You weren't just another broken promise  
Something, someone he would love  
    And then be snatched away  
    Like everything else in his life  
    Breaking his heart again

If you lived then it meant you might stick around  
My love, he didn't throw you in the river to try to drown  
you  
To throw you away  
He threw you in to prove to himself to not be afraid to  
keep you  
You were strong  
He could go ahead and love you  
    And he did  
    He loved you  
    He was so proud of you

You're off swimming in a sea of stars and clouds now  
But I forgive you for leaving me down here alone  
I will swim  
I will forgive your dad  
As I forgive my mother  
She did the same to me

We were the ones given back to our family  
We were the ones the river wouldn't keep



**Instructions on How to be  
Caught in the Rain**  
Andy McClay

When you're out and about, and a beautiful day takes a turn, shifting the blue sky to gray, take a moment.

When you're first struck by a tiny droplet from the heavens above, and you feel a powerful urge to find cover in a hurry, take a moment.

When the pace of the rainfall quickens, keeping time with the beating of your heart, and your instincts call for you to move along, take a moment.

When everyone else has gone, seeking shelter from the storm, and you are soaked to the bone with a chill running through you, take a moment.

When the water runs down your face, and drips off the tip of your nose, and your breath is a visible plume with every exhalation, take a moment.

When you know that you're alive, and are filled with immense gratitude for the fact, recognize the beauty in the experience of having truly taken a moment

Photo: Julia Beverly



## For Chris and Annie Chantry Loewen

When I first found you, I was simply amazed  
After all the things you do, I've yet to understand your ways  
We've been together, then drifted apart  
For you I sold my soul, and even bartered my heart  
When I first found you, so many years ago now  
I felt that I had arrived, I believed I had made it somehow  
Ever dancing closer, a moth to your fiery flame  
Even in my burning, you offered no blame  
Our life together, a one-way beneficial use  
My love for you never letting me break loose  
I may see you once more, someday again my sweet  
Your vague clarity never permitting me to cheat  
The toll you've taken—I've seen others far worse  
The allure of your beauty, naught but a beautiful curse  
I've found you on tables, shattered in pieces  
I've looked for you everywhere, until the night ceases  
I've picked you up, broken you down  
Carried you with me from town to town  
I've been your creator, and yet you've still used me  
What a strange relationship, it's often confusing  
I guess at times I miss you, I won't tell a lie  
I know you'll always be waiting, just to get me high

**Voices from History Debate the Pitfalls and Promises of American Democracy**

**Reflections by  
Taveuan Williams,  
David Torrez,  
Louis Mamo,  
and Manuel Sisneros**





*Editor's Note: In the summer of 2022 a group of students from the Territorial and Sterling Correctional Facilities in Colorado did an independent study with SJH. We read the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, setting the table for our thinking about the founders and the work they did to establish the United States of America. Then, like now, public deliberation was diverse and complex, so to understand the perspectives of some of the Americans left out of the founding documents, we read narratives by run-away slaves, indentured servants, women dissidents, and frontier settlers. To try to make our national history come alive, we then wrote about the period with each student adopting the voice of a character from the period. The characters are technically fictional, but their views are rooted in our study of actual historical documents. The resulting reflections ask, What does American democracy mean? Who counts as a citizen? And what are our obligations to work for justice?—precisely the themes that drive our magazine.*



### **Taveuan Williams**

The benefits of escaping from slavery would be innumerable. For years, I flirted with the idea of living a free life off the plantation. I heard countless stories of audacious men and women who escaped, only to later be captured and returned to dreadful circumstances. By no means is that a viable option for me—I will die before I go back.

As long as I can get as far north as Pennsylvania, or Massachusetts, or maybe even Rhode Island, my chances of making a life for myself will greatly increase. Unlike most slaves, I had what others call a “privileged upbringing,” at least by slave standards. ‘Masta allowed me to study and I heard that a reading man can go a long way in America. If I was wise, I would’ve made a run for it when the last bunch made their daring escape in the middle of the night. ‘Masta and the hounds never caught up with them. But the odds are drastically stacked against anyone attempting this death-defying feat. Aside from the physical anguish one encounters along this

journey, the mental hurdles one must surmount are paramount. For years they lied to me and unfortunately I believed them. I was told that I am “property” and that I wouldn’t survive off the plantation. ‘Masta said he was “protecting” me and that he was doing me a favor by allowing me to pick his cotton, wash his clothes, and cook his food. I was paralyzed by fear.

But then a local preacher started talking about a revolution. He had some documents, and I must admit they were beautifully crafted—so inspiring! The locals were going to throw off the yoke of British domination and build a land of freedom and equality and opportunity. That sounded great. But as I studied the documents, I felt yet again a sense of betrayal, for their promises did not speak to me nor my people. After carefully observing the language, it is apparent “We the People” is not the majority of people. That phrase pertains to men like ‘Masta, who are white, land-holding and slave-owning Christians. Throughout the years, I eavesdropped on enough of ‘Masta’s conversations to know that politics is reserved solely



for their kind of folk. The Constitution even states I am considered to be three-fifths of a person and not a whole human being, so what good do these documents do me? Form a more perfect Union? Establish justice? Insure tranquility? Provide for the common defense? Promote the general welfare? Secure the blessings of liberty? That sounds great, but I know I am excluded from those high ideals.

And what about our hard-working women-folk? As far as those documents go, women apparently have no place in this so-called Union. I've witnessed them treated worse than my own people. Now excuse me if I am wrong, but us slaves, the indigenous folks who were here before us, women, and even poor white folks—are we at liberty to take full advantage of the new government and its rights and privileges? The more I study these documents, the more “We the People” sounds hollow.

That Mr. Jefferson can sure write, though, wow, his Declaration of Independence makes America sound like the future, a new land of justice. I understand that his words have provided hope for a better tomorrow and I hope 'Masta and his folk make those promises come true. But as of today, I'm stuck on the plantation, dreaming of escape. As I look around, it is clear that most of us remain bound to the horrific circumstances we have been enduring since the conception of these wicked colonies. I have seen enough. I am done believing unsubstantiated claims. Until my physical reality reveals something different, I remain excluded from “We the People.” Until then, my quest for freedom continues.



## David Torrez

The date is 12/25/1791. Another painstaking day down. I'm five years into a seven-year contract. I got nicked in London but got out of jail by signing on as an indentured servant. Complete your time, they said, and you'd be a free man in a new land. That sounded like a good deal. Yes sir, Merry Christmas to you!

Now, I'm beyond tired, but I'm accepting the fact that if I don't get my thoughts, problems, hopes, and dreams written down, the world may never know I had any at all. These tobacco fields seem to be claiming more lives than the King's army ever did, and I live with dread that my body will be next amongst the poor souls who've died before me. The Master works us from dusk till dawn under the relentless and wholly unforgiving sun. If we stop working, we are beaten. Most days, I contemplate what would hurt worse: the work or the whip. I dream all day about running away. I've heard rumors of guys getting away and finding a Master who treats them better, but is the risk greater than the reward? And does it make sense to run from bondage to bondage? Will I make it to the end of my contract and get to live a free life? Or will I become fertilizer for the fields that I toil?

My mind races through these possibilities all day long, searching for some meaning to this madness, searching for hope, clinging to the little bit of sanity I have left. Disease is rampant, and after the sun goes down, I get little reprieve from this brutality, since our living conditions are so primitive. The work is so hard, monotonous, and mind-numbing.

My body is on the verge of collapse, while my mind remains unchallenged, since there is nothing in my life that is mentally stimulating besides journaling. I think and think and think to keep my mind alive, fearing that if I don't use it, I'll lose it. So far, I've found nothing to cling to that provides hope, but that may change based on what's happening in America right now. The main question is, will these revolutionary ideas and changes impact people like me?

In my mind's eye, I can see a distant and faint light. It's small and far away, but it's there, and I ask myself, does that light off in the distance represent hope and freedom? Or does it represent the end of my life slowly drawing to a close? Technically, I do have the promise of freedom if I can make it to the end of my contract, but I just don't think I can last that long. After all, most of those around me are dying before they hit the finish line. This land has been nothing but war and terror ever since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When that happened, I remember being filled with hope and rage at the same time. I felt hope because I know personally how horrible it is to be living in bondage, and America no longer is standing for the oppression the King has them under. They are lashing back against their "Master," demanding freedom, rights, dignity, and the ability to create a better place for people to live. But who are the "people" they wish to liberate? This leads to the rage I feel, because of the blatant hypocrisy heard in their war cry. America wants its freedom from the King, while simultaneously beating the backs of indentured servants and slaves to toil its land! What difference is there between the King and these elite American land owners? The harder I look for differences between them, the more

similarities I find! How can you shout for freedom from one side of your mouth, while yelling at your slaves and servants out the other?

America called for a revolution, to stand up and fight back against the tyranny that holds them down. But what if we servants band together and revolt against our Masters? Isn't that what they are asking for, and what the Declaration of Independence is encouraging? Wouldn't we simply be answering the call they are making? I even heard that Britain's Lord Dunmore offered "freedom" to any slave or servant who fought for the crown against the colonies! So the Americans want us to kill the Redcoats and the Tea-Drinkers want us to rebel against our masters—seems like either way, I am working for or fighting against someone who treats me like dirt.

I can tell you this: the Revolution led to chaos—there was fighting everywhere, piracy, markets collapsing, just traveling at night was dangerous. And so, the Americans tried to simmer down by writing a Constitution, a call to law-and-order. Their Constitution says, "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility" and more. I understand lots of folks heard those words and shouted with joy, but when I heard these words I wanted to cry! The little bit of weltering dreams I have left were watered and fertilized with these beautiful words, like a glass of clean water offered to a person dying of dehydration. The picture these words paint is so beautiful, so opposite of everyday life for me. But as my eyes dry, I can see the faint light of sunrise, knowing that soon, my truth and battered existence will greet me once again. When I drift



down from my gorgeous dream state, I place my bloody and blistered feet back down into this awful reality. I re-hear the Constitution and confront the sobering fact the “We” in “We the People” does not include me. I have one more thought before I turn in for the night. Just 10 days ago, America ratified the Bill of Rights. Should these ever apply to me, my journal entries may not be the only place these thoughts and dreams exist. I may have the right to actually speak about them! This concept is so foreign to me, that the people of this land will be able to speak their mind and to petition the Government for grievances. How can this be? Back home, this would not only be impossible, but a death sentence! And freedom of religion, I wasn’t aware there were other options out there! I’ve been suppressed my whole life, told what to do, what to think, what to believe, and what to be. I simply can’t wrap my mind around the ability to choose. I’m not sure I’d even be able to handle it. To have the right to due process, a chance for a proper defense? Senseless! I didn’t have that in my case, I was simply convicted and told my punishment. The most puzzling piece is that no person shall be subjected to cruel and unusual punishment. What does that mean for people like me and the millions of others in my shoes? How is the government defining “cruel and unusual punishment?” Does this mean I’ll finally be free from this nightmare?! The Bill of Rights states people will have the ability to bear arms to protect themselves. I’m barely trusted with basic farm tools!

This Bill of Rights also says people will be able to have a secure house free from unreasonable search and seizure by the government. How nice would it be to even have

the opportunity to have a home? I can’t imagine that at this point. This all sounds too good to be true, and the reality is for people like me, it probably is. What makes us so different? And by us I mean, indentured servants, slaves, women and the Natives of this land? We are human beings too, with emotions, hopes, and dreams, yet we are treated like animals, locked away in cages. According to the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the wealthy, white elite will enjoy a life of seemingly heavenly bliss, while building their lives on soil enriched with the blood, sweat, and tears of millions of less fortunate people. Who knows, I might survive to see the end of my contract. Even if I do, then what? Even if I were to be given freedom, how do I handle and harness it? I’m simply a carpenter with not a penny to my name. I can’t afford a loaf of bread, much less an education or a home.

Still, I know I need to stay strong and to hope that someday the “We” includes me. But I need to be honest and confess that part of me is scared that someday, it actually will. The hand that beats me is the same hand that feeds me! That hand is all I know, and as much as it hurts me, I know deep down that without it, I might be lost. I feel like a hypocrite. Freedom is my greatest desire, all I dream about every day. But it’s also my greatest fear. As I drift off to sleep, I wrestle with the gloomy reality that my life feels like one immense contradiction, and I realize that despite my deepest hope and desire, I’ve become just like the very country I toil and pour my life into, nothing but an immense contradiction.



## Louis Mamo

Dear Mr. Samuel Mansfried,

I believe you knew my husband, Mark Tallfellow, he served with you against the English and fell honorably in the birth pains of this new-founded country. I have some questions and concerns; if you please, I would have you explain these things to me as I am just a poor widow, left out of most conversations men have about politics.

I know you were a confidant and friend of Mr. Benjamin Franklin, and good friends of mine, Ms. Sara G. Stanley and our sisters of the Ohio Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, are trying to reconcile our leaders' philosophy of freedom as laid out in the Constitution with the reality we women face each day. Please bear with me as I ponder these questions.

I can see that the Constitution begins with "We the People of the United States," which gives me such hope, but it does not explain clearly who the "People" are? Does that include the immigrants from Europe and their imported "property"? The indigenous captured peoples of Africa? What about the indigenous people who populated these parts when we came? I see no inclusion of them or recompense for their lost lands and peace of mind. Did our Great Lord Jesus, in his infinite plan and wisdom, forget to include them in his divine designs for this Great Land? It would seem that including those people with tea colored skin who lived in these parts before you or I would complicate the agenda and designs of our leaders. I also see the language of "In order to form a more perfect union," does that more perfect union include those who wish to flee oppression everywhere else

in this world? What about the slaves who helped build the ships and harvest the produce that helped our brothers win this war? Are they a part of "We the People"?

As I think about the Constitution, it seems to me that it might more honestly read like this:

We the (European) people (MEN!) of the United states, in order to form a more perfect (White and Male) Union, establish (partial) Justice, insure domestic Tranquility (by repressing Natives and Slaves), provide for the common defense (of land-holding Whites), promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of liberty to ourselves (White Men) and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Does this seem unfair? I think it is perfectly accurate, or is there an article in the Constitution that I have somehow missed that includes the Justice, Tranquility, Defense, Welfare, Blessings, Liberty, and Posterity of the African MEN and WOMEN you purportedly God-fearing leaders still refer to as negroes and slaves? Or what about the native peoples of this land? Do they not deserve to be called by name and recognized in this foundational document while we plant our corn in soil still damp with the blood of the people who were unlucky enough to reside here when our boats breached these shores? United indeed.

Forgive me, Mr. Mansfried, if my words seem harsh, but I do humbly request you answer these questions. Chief among my concerns is this: it seems that while the Declaration of Independence is a call to Revolution, so the Constitution is a call to succumb to law and order—isn't



there an inherent conflict between these founding documents? As I read the Declaration of Independence, it contains powerful phrases that, if truly universal, would be world-pivoting in their scope of social change—this is truly a document of hope, of revolution, of shining aspirations! Yet the Constitution mentions neither me nor my sisters. The Constitution says the slave-holding southerners may count them as three-fifths of a human, oh my. And as I read between the lines, it seems the Constitution empowers the new government to support slavery, quell rebellions, and enforce law-and-order—hence contradicting the spirit of the Declaration, no?

We swatted away the British authorities who sought to oppress us, yet we signed the Constitution that solidifies our power over others through exclusion. Before we have healed the wounds the yoke of abused power has left upon our necks, we fashion a new yoke for a new people even more helpless to the hierarchal machinations of our social and imaginary constructs. Dear sir, as you can see, the conflict between these two documents is clear: No one can say we have declared ourselves independent from Tyranny while we sup and dine on the benefits of our own updated and imported brand of the same oppression.

I assume you have studied the Bill of Rights. While also noble in intention, this document seems vague as to who these Rights belong to. I do hope you can clear this up for me, for as I indicate below, it appears me and my sisters are excluded. Let me explain:

In Amendment V, it says “Nor shall be compelled in any criminal case

to be a witness against himself.” Likewise, in Amendment VI, it says “to be confronted with the witnesses against him.” I understand that these Amendments are meant to provide justice to Americans in the face of unfair prosecutions, good. But was this language chosen on purpose? Out of a romantic notion that women would never be in such a position to need rights in a criminal capacity? As a woman, I cannot help but feel that these rights were written by men in power for other men in power.

In Amendment IV, “We” are provided the “Right to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects.” Does that apply to the Indigenous people of this land? I mean, obviously it didn’t when we came here, which is evident by our atrocious and barbaric treatment of them since first contact. Does it NOW apply to them? And what of the Slaves bought and sold, traded and abused, unable to choose their own destiny as children of God? Do these rights apply to them as well?

I find it hard to believe that this revolution would be won if not for the mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives who came to this land seeking freedom—yet you and your colleagues could not even mention us in these historical documents? I cannot find even one word of women’s rights in any of these. Why, dear sir, cannot our rights as women be included as well?

In closing, I hope that you walk in the Grace and Favor of our Lord. Thank you in advance for any clarity and wisdom on these issues that you can provide.

With humble thanks,  
Elizabeth Tallfellow



## Manuel Sisneros

November 2, 1789. I sit here at mi mesa, lost in thought and filled with fear as I ponder the raucous goings on up North. What will come next?

A veterano of many fights with Spanish conquerors, French raiders, and Native warriors, I live in constant fear of foreign armies coming to take my land. Some call it Spanish Texas, others call it New Spain, some just say Texas, but I call it home. Now this news from the former British Colonies worries me—will these so-called Americans be heading my way soon? Is their revolution a blessing or a curse?

My Quezada family has tended this land for many generations. We are a frontier people and life is hard. But now the Americans are beginning to push the Natives off their land, sending them west. And King Cotton is heading west as well, chewing up new lands with the toil of slaves. These pressures are sure to land on my doorstep soon.

To try to make sense of all of this, I read the Americans' Declaration of Independence. Those gringos hate the British king, just as I have come to hate the kings of Spain and France. We agree, when a country is run by a ruler who only cares about destroying and conquering other lands, not caring for his own people, then one can only feel disdain for all higher authorities. In this sense, I support their revolution and welcome its outcome!

Their Declaration is a powerful complaint. It includes a long list of documented facts of how their ruler has oppressed them and has no regard for humanity. The British indeed seem awful. But within

their complaints, the Americans mention such pleas that intrude on the Natives in their own land. How is it that they speak of unjust "Appropriations of Lands" when they too have overtaken lands that were never theirs to begin with? It seems their complaints against the King might just as easily be levelled against them.

The Americans' Declaration also proclaims their right, free of the King's interference, to "contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which independent States may of right do." Thinking to myself, I am inferior to no one. Many generations before me have tilled this earth beneath my very feet, building the wealth and comfort of my family. And so I wonder: How will these Americans establish such commerce? Will they be fair traders when it comes to the many commodities my land can provide? I have no answers, yet it seems clear that life in Texas will soon be impacted by this new America. . .

November 3, 1789. I read that Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis, a Spanish diplomat and finance minister to the West Indies, argued that "what ought to occupy the whole attention of politics, is the great upheaval that in time the North American revolution is going to produce in the human race." Like me, he foresees the Americans changing the world—but for good or bad?

I was surprised to read in the Americans' Constitution that southerners are allowed to count slaves as three fifths of a person. I was not surprised to find that their rights and liberties extend only to men, who believe even their wives and daughters are useful only to cater to the home and bear children. Even



former convicts and those sentenced to be indentured servants are able to eventually hold a place in society after their required time is fulfilled. The Americans' revolution, therefore, seems to me an odd combination of world-shaking hope and mind-numbing cruelty. They pledge for freedom yet limit its bounty.

Freedom for slaves is something we here on the hacienda hear about often, yet every one of us is filled with doubt. As we see the constant struggle throughout our great land with the Spanish and how they terrorize and pillage, rape and degrade the people of our land, it is too hard to believe that any form of freedom is attainable without bloodshed. And so I wonder: Will the Americans' freedom mean bondage to my people? Will their slaves flee to Texas? Will the Spanish armies march to fight them? What, then, will my family have to pass on to future generations, and what would my great ancestors feel to see this land plundered for the ill-deeds of those who have no respect for humanity?

Alas, I see conflict over resources for many years to come, and I sit in constant fear as I look over my great land, envisioning settlements taking over with no regard to my great ancestors and the sweat and labor they've tilled into this soil. To be a father in these times only brings great sorrow. I am filled with a terror that no man should ever feel. What will come of my hard-working sons and beautiful daughters? I must banish such thoughts, for now it is time to ready the saddles of my caballos, for a rancher's work is never done.

November 19, 1789. As a new season settles in and I sit and take in this early morning, breathing the

air that mother earth greets me with, I can't help but open this new set of documents that were delivered days earlier. As they sat there, I stared many hours at them, thinking if there is a possibility of something positive to come from the North. For the many years I have documented my life, never have I shaken with fear as I write. Labeled the Bill of Rights, my mind races to come to its senses . . . the rights for whom? Slowly I read.

Apparently, the Americans have come to a realization that rules shall be implemented so as to end the chaos unleashed by their revolution. I'm automatically taken aback by this notion of "rights," as the Americans seem to believe that laws are meant to bring fairness, not oppression—what a radical idea. Yet it also seems their sense of fairness does not extend to the indigenous peoples, nor to women, nor does it have anything to do with abolishing slavery. I am confused.

For many years we have heard of this man, Franklin, in Pennsylvania and how he openly speaks of abolishing slavery. We hear he has gone so far as to advocate for ending the death penalty! A true man of the people! I hope this Franklin is an hombre of great stature and dignity who uses his platform to bring light to the great harm his new country is doing to the slaves and indigenous people who this land belonged to first. And what of the great women who seem to be the mortar that holds up the households of all these men? Nowhere in these "Bill of Rights" does it seem as if anyone but themselves (white men) are affected by them. Philadelphia is far away, but I wish this Franklin and his allies good luck—perhaps there is hope for this new nation?

As a hard-working veterano, I understand that structure is needed to maintain a sound environment with some sort of cohesiveness. Just the thought of these gentleman considering some sort of framework for the betterment of their country is good news. But how long will it take and will there ever be a true fairness for ALL? Are there enough pages in this journal to attest to such a feat, or will generations after me continue to question the intent of this America and where they truly stand on some sort of equality within themselves?

Only my Lord will know the truths to these questions. What does a man do

in the face of such questions?

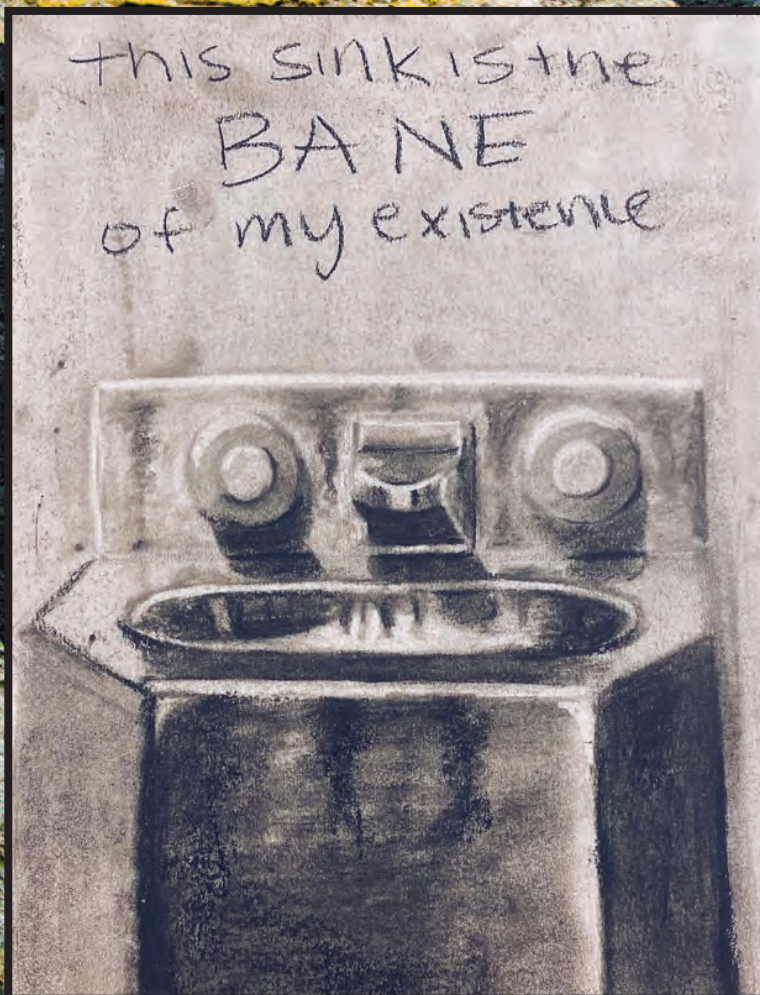
Preparing for what is to come, whether good or bad, a man must not live in the future, for he can only appreciate what stands in front of him at this very moment. We bear no control of what may come. Good luck to these Americans. May their liberty flourish. I must turn from their promises to my reality—the animals need feeding, my crops need tending, and the fence along the west pasture needs mending. Life here in Texas goes on. The Americans can talk all they want, but I must live to love my family and care for my land in the here and now.



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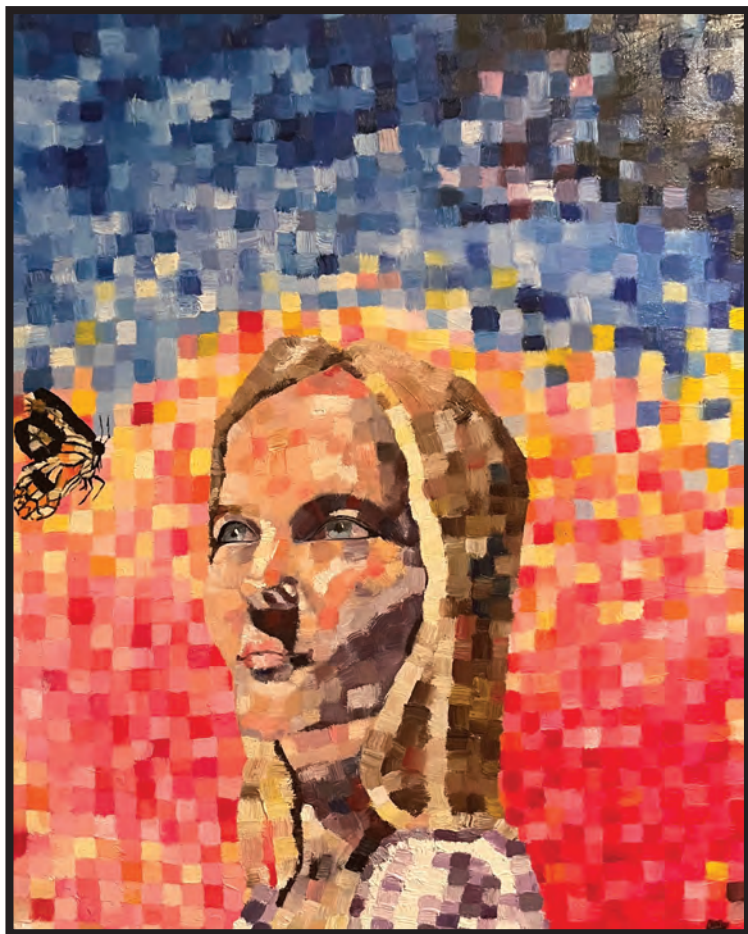
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"This Sink is the Bane of My Existence," by Abigail Cook, 2022





**“Lynn and Ann,” by Abigail Cook, 2022**

In 2018, Alyssa walked by an ailing butterfly on the sidewalk. She revived the little creature using sugar water and patience. Months later, Alyssa was in a medically-induced coma from which she never awoke. Each time her friends and family came across a butterfly, they remembered her; her smile and kindness and light and joy. This painting captures Sam, her high school friend and my identical twin sister, spending time with Alyssa in the only mortal way possible. The piece is influenced by the concept of pixelation, how modern technology has reduced the need for traditional academic painting. The pixels distort the scene to make it a captured memory; almost real, but not quite tangible. This notion aligns with grieving the loss of a person—at some point the memories fade into these minute bits and pieces of a night together or a ride in the car or a day at the park. You strive and struggle for the full picture, but it feels broken. Each impasto stroke on the canvas is a mental battleground for the full picture, for the fading moments, for the lost soul.

## Used to Introduce or Remove Jack S. Copeman

When they tell me

There are PLENTY of jobs  
But few benefits to working

That living has become a survivalist  
Paradox of basic economics maximizing  
Profits and price points while  
Minimizing goods and services

That our government is bloated and the parties  
Are divisive, dysfunctional, dystopian

That serving chicken to prisoners  
Has become a resource drain  
Eat baloney instead!

That my outlook is bleak

That my attitude is bad

That my bones are thinning

That I am beyond redemption

That my oldest sister died

Well then  
I respond to your Bad News with  
It just doesn't faze me any  
more  
how  
or way

I'm held together  
With determination  
And the superglue of Hope

## State Blues Jack S. Copeman

it is not a mood  
nor a popular genre  
some think it an illness  
or an anti-social disease  
while not some unlimited color  
yet always  
a confining condition

this certainty cannot be solid  
just a single striped line  
written along a pocket seam  
of obvious bad choices  
makes for even worse pants  
their issue  
in winter is a mint-  
thin of a coat  
too cold to be tasteless

all tied together in knots  
with black Oxford shoes  
so tight they pinch  
pennies or an ill-  
fitting ache

lost some time ago  
now dressed for unsuccess  
out on the gray and coiled steel  
prison yard  
serving recess  
to lost children

## Butterfly Effect Terrance Harris, Jr.

Swinging from a lemon tree  
Noose draining the life out me  
Stripped naked, shaking as I choke  
Sweat dripping, blacking out  
Then the rope broke  
Seeing stars  
Searing pains  
Screams profane  
I won't answer  
Never again  
That's not my name

Gotta run  
Get up, stand up  
Slip the handcuffs  
Fight for life  
Catch a fire  
Run like hell  
I rebel  
Freedom calls  
Escape the claws  
Escape the jaws  
Turn around  
Turn to salt  
I was never a slave, resisted being broken  
So they tried to lynch me  
Put the weight of the state  
Of California against me  
Life sentence is a slow death mutilation brainwashing  
Soul stealing  
Soul searching  
Soul revealing  
Soul healing grew strong grew wise learned to fight  
learned to see learned to plan out a strategy strategize  
from A to Z learned to read learned to speak learned  
to pray learned to think revolution is complete change  
evolution can feel strange priorities re-arrange rebellion  
runs in my veins shake the foundation of the plantation  
earth quaking tattoos hurt pain worth taking ain't forever  
long enough sunset sunrise free spirit new life wake up  
and live less take more give be peaceful 4 give apologies  
accepted human flaws neglected accept the message  
accept the blessing answer the question question the  
answer do your best inspire genius build a legacy fly like  
Pegasus fly like Icarus butterfly effect remain rebellious

Liberation







**A Day of Healing:  
A Restorative Justice  
Victim/Offender  
Circle Process**  
Andy McClay

By 2016, I had done seven years in prison, and I was barely surviving. Simply going through the motions day-to-day, I knew that I would not be able to go on much longer. I am not a religious man, and I do not believe in things being ordained, but looking back on it now, it seems like a miracle that I came across a flyer for a new program being introduced to the Buena Vista Correctional Facility. I had never really participated in any programs before, but I was a desperate man, so I took a chance and signed up for Restorative Justice (RJ). I had no idea that I was embarking on the most transformative journey of my life.

After taking part in the RJ Program, I developed a new sense of meaning and purpose in my life. RJ teaches that when a wrong has been committed, there is an obligation to do everything possible to right that wrong. There is no possible way to make up for taking a life—no turning back the clock or undoing what was done. What I was able to do was take all of the shame, guilt, and remorse from my crime and use what I learned in RJ to put my energy into being of service to others.

After six years of being involved in the program and participating as a Peer Facilitator, I had the opportunity, along with six other men, to take part in a Victim/Offender Circle Process with two civilians who had lost a loved one to murder. In the months leading up to the dialogue, I was riddled with anxiety. I questioned my own capabilities in being able to hold the space for two brave women who had chosen to come into a prison and sit in a circle with seven incarcerated men. I wondered how I would muster the courage to sit face-to-face with individuals who had a loved one murdered and stolen away from them forever; I am, after all, responsible for doing the same thing to someone else's loved one.



These two women came in and told us their stories. The first asked us to look her in the eyes, and to truly see her tears. She assured us that she would be looking into each one of our faces in return. They shared the stories of their loss— who their loved ones were, what their lives had been like, and the devastating toll it has taken on those who were left behind to pick up all the pieces after being blindsided by unimaginable tragedy. The first to tell her story also shared a photo album with pictures of her murdered son, spanning from him as a toddler to lying deceased in his coffin.

After sharing their stories, they asked to hear each one of ours. We shared with them a bit of history from our own lives—who our victims were and the circumstances of our crimes. They wanted to know what we had done with our lives since then: what had we learned and how had we grown? We shared all that they wanted to hear, and we wept together at the magnitude and senselessness of it all.

Although it was one of the most emotionally intense days of my life, I walked away with a sense of healing, not only for myself, but, more importantly, for the two women who came to sit with us, speak with us, and extend grace to us. I learned that it is truly a gift to be in two separate worlds but come together to share in a dialogue as human beings. It was a difficult process, but the fact that it was difficult was an important part of the journey. I left that day feeling inspired to continue to do all that I can to bring healing to others in any way possible. To make up for taking a life is an impossible feat. All I can do is be of service and help others, and never cause harm again. That is the promise I made to the two women who bravely came into a prison to share their stories, and that is a promise that will never be broken.

## How to Paint When You Are Nearly Blind

Sean Mueller



One of my first jobs in prison was teaching a GED class. Sometimes there was free time, which I spent looking at encyclopedias in the classroom. The art section was especially appealing at that time as the beautiful paintings filled me with humanity and warmth. A friend loaned me some colored pencils and paper and I started replicating the paintings that moved me from Van Gogh and Monet. Eventually, we were allowed to purchase watercolors and brushes, so I jumped in and painted almost every day the first year. The new hobby quite possibly saved me from sinking into depression caused by my new prison surroundings.

I don't paint nearly as much now, but when the mood strikes, I can sit down and get lost in the serenity and creative process. Before incarceration, I didn't even like going to art museums, so it was quite a shock for my family and friends to get these pieces in the mail! They all were aware of my eyesight and wondered how it was possible. What follows is the process for a sight-challenged, non-artistic person to paint like Monet.

His eyesight was severely limited when he did his most famous paintings of the water garden at his estate. My warning to the reader is that these steps have been learned through mainly trial and error. There probably is a better, more professional way to paint; however, this works for me. My eyesight requires me to remove my glasses, as I cannot see details when wearing them. My face ends up being a few inches above the painting, which is amusing to people walking past my room, but this is the only way I can see the details.

The result of following these steps will be a version of a specific painting (Water Lilies and Japanese Bridge) but you can use the general outline to paint anything.

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**STEP ONE:** Make sure your music tablet is fully charged. Plug your headphones in and set your playlist. Visualize the person you are painting for so that they are “with” you while you paint. To start, I usually play mellow, acoustic versions of popular songs like, “Everlong” by Foo Fighters and “Heartbreak Warfare” from John

Mayer. As the tempo picks up, I will switch into higher energy songs like “Can’t Hold Us” by Macklemore & Ryan Lewis and “Kickstart My Heart” by Mötley Crüe. Don’t think, just apply the paint.

**STEP TWO:** Paint the entire sheet black. I choose not to use much



water for this step, as I want the color very deep and rich without dilution whatsoever. Keep in mind, this method uses more paint. I have found that using a big brush like a ¾" will cover substantially more area than smaller brushes. The paint will need 30-45 minutes to dry so doing this ahead of time makes sense.

**STEP THREE:** Now that you have a completely blacked-out sheet of paper, draw the bridge outline with a pencil. The paint should be dry, or the pencil will sink into the paint. Keep in mind the bridge has an arc and will vary in perspective depending on where you are looking. Straight-on paintings are rare because they are not as interesting as those done from a slight angle. As you create your bridge, make sure to leave spaces to distinguish the front and rear rails. The angle will affect these spaces. We will fill in the outline after doing the background.

**STEP FOUR:** In my painting, I wanted to have different trees in the background. For that reason, I painted hanging vines on the left with a size 6 shader brush held vertically, perpendicular to the paper. In my mixing tray were thalo green, ultramarine blue, Chinese white, cadmium yellow, and yellow ochre, each in an individual slot. Using that same brush, lightly transfer some of each color into the inner circle of your tray. Dip different parts of the brush into each color. Do this by changing the angle of the brush for each new addition of color. As you draw each vertical line, holding the brush so the bristles are vertical in relation to the page, the resulting vine will be unique. As you are moving the brush, the pressure will naturally change, blending the colors. Each vine is then a different mix of paint, which serves to replicate light at different angles.

Don't forget to use varying lengths so the vines are different not just in color, but in shape.

**STEP FIVE:** The green and yellow just above the bridge on the left was painted with a 3/0 round brush. Apply the paint using the same method outlined above. When the brush is almost out of paint, use the last fragments to paint the bushes underneath the bridge in the rear. You can see in the picture that this light paint application allows the black background to shadow the paint, naturally giving it depth. With this step, it is important to stay above the background paint by dabbing at the paper instead of rubbing it, otherwise the black and green/yellow will mix together and look distant.

**STEP SIX:** The flowering trees behind the bridge and above right are applied using a #2 round brush. Instead of making all the trees in the back only yellow and green, I mixed blue with green and white to create the teal color. To give the flower-like appearance, I dab the round brush against the paper once. Putting the paints directly next to each other and lightly dipping the brush into blue, green, and then white will give the mixed teal appearance. Flowers like this may not actually exist, but since you are the creator, you can make anything you can imagine. Before you reload your brush, remember to use the last bits of paint on it to fill in underneath the bridge and between the rails. The dryer paint (no water diluting the color) will display more definition, which replicates closer objects. Wetter paints will blend and look farther away. Because Monet was almost blind, the colors would blend naturally for him and there are no hard edges in his paintings.

**STEP SEVEN:** Paint the bridge

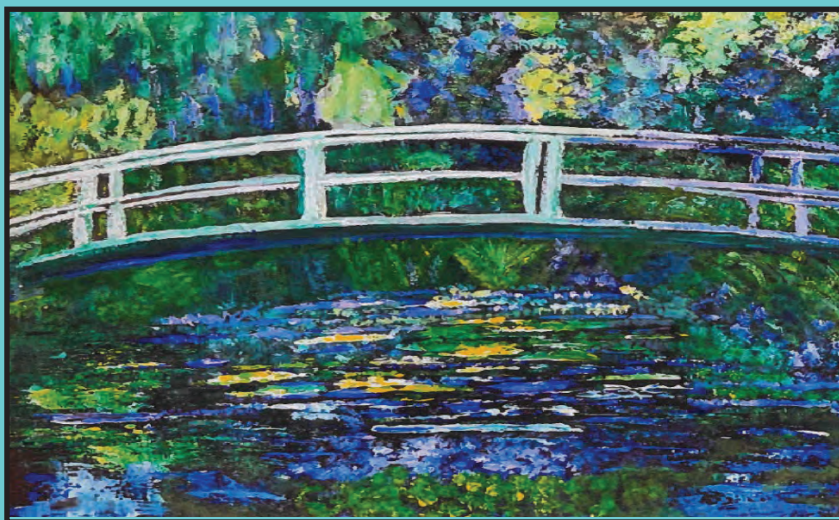
white. Once it is predominantly covered in white, you can use a little water to spread the paint evenly and blur the edges slightly. Before it is dry, lightly paint in some blue and green (adding some water to the brush this time to allow blending) in different areas to show reflection. Underneath the bridge, the blue and green go on top of the black. Use a small amount of water to blend those colors with the black background. This should not have heavy detail since it is underneath the bridge and would be dark.

**STEP EIGHT:** Using heavy paint with no water added, make the lilies in the water. Use blue and white together first, followed by yellow and green. Monet's water lilies are yellow and green, but it's your choice. I use the side of a broken ruler by applying paint to the edge of the ruler and sliding the painted edge horizontally across the page, smudging the paint as it goes. The ruler fragment works great because the hard edge creates a horizontal line. Reflections in the

water like the blue and white in the bottom left corner can be made by applying the same ruler edge. This takes away the thick texture and mimics a reflection.

**STEP NINE:** Fill in the bottom of the painting with another round of #2 round brush flowers. Mine are green and yellow, yours can be whatever colors you choose. Dab the color on once and move to the next one. Before cleaning off this, use the leftover green and yellow to paint the edge of the ruler for the empty black spaces. Be sure to leave some empty space so it looks like water is still there between the flowers.

**STEP TEN:** Sit back and appreciate what you just completed. Observe what you did right and what you would change next time. As you do more paintings, you will start to deconstruct how an artist creates a piece. Most of all, try to ignore the internal voices saying it stinks because the joy and release is worth more to your mental health.



Painting by Sean Mueller, June 2022, 9" x 12", currently in a private collection in New York, NY.

## We Can Only Imagine

Antoine Nathaniel Jackson

Tragic moments in America's communities unfold too often. As prisoners, we can only imagine how those we've affected will go about finding healing amongst the aching traumas we've caused. We can only imagine the time when those we've hurt choose to fuel their minds with an idea that's not Retributive Justice, but Restorative Justice.

We can only imagine the speed, focus, and instinctual thoughts that reside in the minds of those we've wronged when they sit across from us to begin the restorative process. When abrupt facial changes are recognized, we imagine that their brains are remembering vivid images the moment their eyes meet ours. Suddenly, the period of time when we brought chaos into their world drifts back to us.

What were we thinking that day? They must want to know, "Why? Why? Why?" Even as we gain the momentum to answer their questions truthfully, without denial or minimization, we can only imagine how those across from us might ask more questions—questions only we can answer. We can only imagine how we might come to understand their pain at our betrayal to community, to humanity, to them.

We can only imagine how therapeutic it might be for our victims to hear us talk about

our crimes, to see us listen to them from across the table, as they explain the emotional and financial turmoil caused by our actions. Our bodies brace for the impact of each statement; our stomachs ball up; our pulse races; our breathing gets deeper. We can only imagine how telling their personal story to us might rescue them from the realm of isolation and despair. How are we going to make up for what we did? What actions have we demonstrated throughout incarceration to show we will never be the cause of another's pain? We can only imagine how much and how long they despise us because they cannot talk to us.

We can only imagine how instrumental our expressions will be so that minds, bodies, and spirits can collectively forgive and begin to heal. Establishing human connections, allowing for reconsideration of past events, providing hope for a better future—we can only imagine.

A restorative project, we can only imagine, would allow those who we have aggrieved to amplify their need for answers, truth, empowerment, and restitution. When the people we have harmed allow us to make amends, we can only imagine how their interpretive framework might bend away from retribution and further toward restoration.



## Painting a Picture

Darrell Sharpe

Long before I ever stepped inside of a prison cell, I knew fully just what violence can take away. Most of you think you know too, but I want you to take a closer look. I want you to be as intimate with the loss that comes from violence as I am. Violence is the voices of my sisters saying, are you going to prison? how bad is it? what did you do?

Violence is my nephew telling Nana that if he eats all of his vegetables his muscles will turn to rocks, because all he remembers of his uncle is squeezing my arm inside a prison visiting room.

Violence is my youngest sister, who received the brunt of my teasing and taunting, crying as she blew out the candles on her birthday cake because all that she wished for was her big brother to come home to her.

Violence is taking responsibility for a person's life that was ended too soon because of me.

Violence is a death certificate that says, "parents too distraught to sign."

Violence is an empty place at the table, a missing face in the family photos.

Violence is the emptiness that's left behind.

Violence is the guttural sound that escaped my mother's mouth when the judge sentenced me to life without parole.

Violence is me trying to calm my mother's broken heart by telling her, "I'm gonna be okay; it's gonna be alright."

Violence is the past 23 years I've spent attempting to atone for something for which there is no atonement.

Violence is not knowing what to say about the pain I've caused so many people.

Violence is the tears streaming down my face as I share this with you—they stain the page.

Violence is the picture I've painted today of heartbreak and despair that I can never erase from my life.

It is my sincere hope that you will not ever have to paint such a picture for yourself.

**Enlighten Me**  
**Donald Warner**

Is it possible to kill this personality  
without killing the body?  
Suicide of I  
Snuff the ego  
Not this life  
Would then have to bottle it  
Share it  
Teach it  
Unmake it mine  
How many want this?  
How many would?  
If they—I  
Could  
Commit euthanasia of  
the mind  
Egotistic martyrdom  
Assassination of I

**Imposed**  
**Donald Warner**

Being sentenced to time  
A foreign currency to most of us  
No realization of the exchange rate  
We spend it and spend it  
Like it is burning a hole  
Failing to understand  
How it or human life are

Time is the commodity of the political-economic-  
capitalist system  
of this imperialist nation  
A parasitic nation  
A commodity I failed to understand the virtue of

Time is suffering  
As are you  
As am I  
Suffering in time



## "If any or all of us die"

I wake each morning, go to the window,  
peer at the new day sky -  
Put on a mask, pray for us all,  
and ready myself to die.  
Keep my ears open, for any new news,  
like who's gonna fall down next.  
Open my Bible, search for a verse,  
and read from the good Lord's text.  
Somebody's coming, many doors slam,  
louder as they're closer to me.  
Head to the door, to find out the cause,  
times are as rough as can be.  
Bringing the trays, breakfast delivered,  
two out of three wear masks -  
No gloves again, on any of them,  
as they come with this crucial task.  
I guess it don't matter, to them at the top,  
No more strength to ask why.  
They won't let us go, they really don't care,  
If any or all of us die.



(clockwise  
from below)

"Mini Art" by  
Sam Umbrall

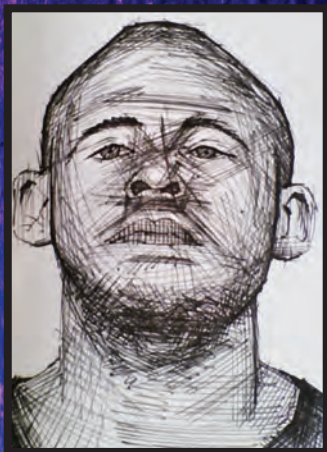
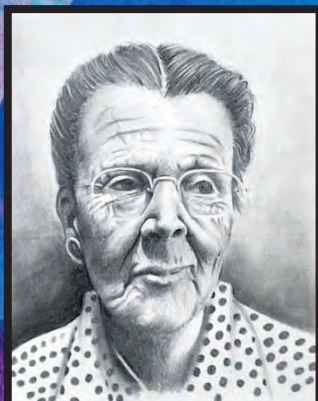
"Untitled" by  
Nate Fischer

"If any or all of us die"  
by Michael P. Riley

"Lion" by Brian Hindson







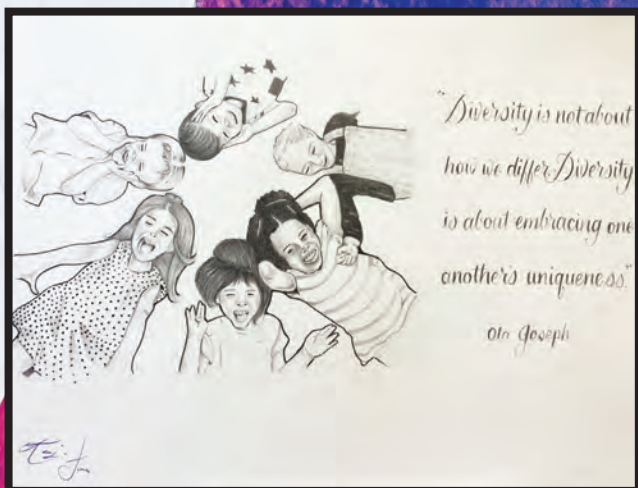
(clockwise from above)

“Redemption” by Carlos Ayala

“Mary” by Schelble

“Jacob” by Schelble

“Diversity” by Kenji Jones



## **Working for Justice from Inside Prison A Captured Words/Free Thoughts Interview with Roderick Finley**

*As part of a new feature in Captured Words/Free Thoughts, each issue will include an interview with one of our correspondents. For our first interview, we knew we had to speak with Roderick Finley, one of our longest-running correspondents and a writer who, over almost 20 years of collaboration, has become a friend and inspiration.*

*SJH:* Brother Roderick, it is always good to be in dialogue with you! Let's start with your telling our readers about how you evolved into one of our magazine's longest-running correspondents.

*RF:* I started this ride with Dr. Stephen back in 2005, 18 years ago! I was sitting in a cell and I came across a resource pack with Dr. Hartnett's contact information at the University of Colorado. So I wrote Dr. H. a letter and asked for a copy of the magazine, *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*. When it showed up, I discovered a diversity of people from all over the country had published work in it, including poetry, prose, artwork, and editorials. The magazine had a good energy and created the sense that you can just be you—the editors and volunteers understood that some of us are from the hood, some of us have life struggles different than theirs, and everyone is going through something different. You all were publishing people from different prison systems around the country who were writing, facing themselves and their talent, and expressing their experiences, what they have overcome, and their creative messages of truth and improvement. I knew I had to be a part of that. So, I started writing for the magazine and sending long letters to Stephen. Then, after a few years, when he joined the magazine's editorial board, I started writing to Dr. Ben, and we have become regular correspondents, trading ideas and drafts, building that relationship from a place of trust and support.

*SJH:* So, Roderick, you are one of the most consistent contributors to *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*—thank you! Can you please tell us: A) what does it mean to you, as a writer, to participate in this venture? And B) what does it mean to you, as an activist, to publish your work in this venue?

*RF:* As a writer, I've realized that consistency depends in part on a strong practice of self-worth, a routine of daily thinking, surviving, and getting things done. I hit the rec yard at 7AM, as soon as it opens, to get in a 2-mile run, some cardio, and some sparring. Then I come inside, shower, and use the dayroom to make my own space—one full of good energy. I make sure my mind is on a full tank of gas and I start painting two or three

humble versions with words of reality. So, I think a big part of being a writer, especially if you are incarcerated, is finding ways to build your discipline, so that you create good work habits that feed the work and your sense of self.

As an activist, I try to pay attention to different situations and remind myself and others that big gaps without bridges are spaces people can't cross. They just can't. So, we should be working on building those bridges to a better life, a better future, and helping each other to find their bridges. I think my work in *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* is a reality check and a shot of good energy, hopefully building some bridges for readers. I think it's really important for your readers to know that how we move forward as a culture depends, in part, on hearing our voices from the inside, and on listening to our perspectives—I'm proud to be a part of that process.

*BB:* You are an older prisoner, with many years of experience in the Texas DOC. The prisons in Texas are now flooded with youngsters. So, along with your roles as a writer and activist, do you also see yourself as a teacher for the younger fellas around you? What does that look like? What do you hope to share with this new generation of incarcerated young men?

*RF:* As an older prisoner, who has many years of experience, the new generation of youngsters puts me in the role of teacher. I see myself as an educator, an advisor, a mentor of enlightenment, and a trainer all in one. I have learned to endure, to be steadfast in my studies and present in my experiences, while constantly sharpening my skills of perception and my natural talent as someone who paints pictures with words. Before any person, young or old, can acquire knowledge about anything, they must first find themselves and open up as a teachable spirit. Some of the greatest teachers are sitting on the shelves in the prison library. Once youngsters begin building their own routines of health, knowledge, and awareness, then they usually realize they always knew what they had to do. It's also about helping them avoid those games people run into in prison—the “you are the weakest link” games. So some of my duties as a teacher flow from my writings, where I try to share ideas, and some of them flow from daily interactions with youngsters seeking support.

*SJH:* Our culture seems to have taken a hard turn toward anger lately. Maybe it was COVID? Maybe it was Trump and his followers? Maybe it was a nation losing its direction and an economy that feels unfair to so many? I don't know the exact reasons, but it seems like the anger-level is high. Yet your writings are all about hope, calm, working toward a better future. So, please talk to us about how and why you, as a figure of hope, cling to the idea that positive thinking is a radical tool for justice.



*RF:* True enough, tragedy and pressure has hit the country hard, and in many forms. Many are sending out a cry for relief. People lost family members and loved ones to COVID. We don't know what's next. And not knowing what's next causes heated controversies on many levels: injustice, political mayhem, economic upheaval, inflation, fear—it's all starting to become a line in the sand for people. All this pressure has worsened a mental health crisis that was already boiling. We are all trying to survive, to deal with new issues in this old country, to balance children, spouses, and work. Frustrations do cause many to hurl insults or flip the finger, but only when their minds stop thinking. See, the mind is like a big parking lot. You got to keep some spaces open to take in knowledge on situations and know when to release old spots when better ideas come along. If you don't, you will get stuck going round and round with nowhere to put new information. You might even reject it. So part of my message of hope is about being open to adapting, learning new things, being willing to grow.

It is also important to remember that you got to have some me-time, your own space of keeping your mind open. Get all that friction up off you mentally by getting a good run in, or a hike, or a cycle—work out. Keep your mind occupied and your body moving and you will find your strength. Know that adversity teaches us something even when we are struggling. It's always a temporary deal. In that sense, my practice of hope is also about movement, about

keeping strong and busy and always moving forward, not getting bogged down in the negative.

I think your readers will know that the last three years have been heavy with staff shortages and trying to figure out a good way to manage COVID. All across the country—as many of your correspondents have written in recent issues—the flow of daily prison functions has stopped in many ways. This has left our brothers and sisters in prisons in really hard spots, but it has also led to some hopeful changes. For example, the Texas prison system is in the process of giving everyone a tablet for doing email and finding other electronic information—this is a huge improvement in our daily lives. Hopefully, that will be a game changer that will motivate people to keep working on themselves, while keeping in touch with their families and communities. So, even in the years of COVID and anger, good things are happening. We need to stay strong, stay disciplined, and keep moving.



**Poems by  
Antonio Sanchez-Day  
Foreword by Brian Daldorph**

I first met Antonio Sanchez-Day in 2013 in my writing class at Douglas County Jail in Lawrence, Kansas. He'd been in "The System," as he called it, for 13 years, and he was desperate to get out. He saw his writing as a way of freeing himself from everything that had kept him incarcerated over the years. He was the best writer I worked with in my 20 years of teaching at the jail. After he was released, Antonio came back to the class as a co-instructor. He was an inspiration to the writers in the class, telling them, "I was sitting where you're sitting now . . ."

Antonio had severe health problems, especially because of his diabetes. He died in March 2021 at the age of 46. His family asked me to look through all the writing he left behind and try to publish it, if possible. Antonio would have known exactly what is meant by *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*.



**I Write Because  
Antonio Sanchez-Day**

I write because  
I am somewhat introverted  
with a dose of alexithymia

I write because  
it unclutters my mind  
purges the negativity  
and replenishes peace  
while holding my demons  
at bay

I write because  
of self-discovery  
and mental freedom

I write because  
I am a testimony  
to the power of the written word

**Easier to Be Me  
Antonio Sanchez-Day**

Been labeled a weirdo  
I like being strange  
To hell with pleasing the masses  
I'm in my own lane

Half Potawatomi, so I'm teased by full-bloods  
Half Chicano, so I'm "not Mexican enough"

I love hip-hop, oldies, and heavy metal  
And due to the latter, people think I'm into the Devil

Yeah, him and I have danced a couple of times  
Mostly during my 13 years behind enemy lines

So, lessons learned, behind trying to be  
What they want me to be  
Forget being fake  
It's easier to be me



## **My Life Story (13 years)** **Antonio Sanchez-Day**

I was born on the 21st day of the 7th month of '74.  
That makes me 2 years shy of 40.

I lost my brother when I was 7 years old  
And lost my sister when I was 8.  
In the 3rd grade, at the age of 9,  
I 1st smoked marijuana.  
I was placed in Alcoholics Anonymous at 10.

When I was 12, in the 6th grade,  
I watched my father die,  
2 days after meeting him for the 1st time  
After he dedicated himself to 7 years of  
sobriety to be able to see me.  
At 13 years old, I began therapy.  
When I was 16, I was kicked out of Lawrence High  
And ran away from home.

I caught my 1st felony at 18,  
4 years later at 21, I received my 2nd strike  
And was sentenced to 10 years.  
They say an individual ceases to mature emotionally  
At the age at which he is incarcerated  
According to that theory, I am mentally 9 years old,  
And emotionally 21.

When I went through D.O.C. in '96, I became #63803.

In 2006, 480 cheeseburgers later (cheeseburgers  
are served for lunch every Saturday in Kansas prisons)  
I was released: 2 months later, my mother  
Passed away. Her 1 and only dying request was  
That I stop drinking. 7 years later, I have  
Left that 1 promise broken, resulting in  
another 3-year bid.

All that adds up to 13 years  
I'll have given the Kansas Department  
of Corrections when this is all over.  
1 day I hope to get it together.





## Life

### Antonio Sanchez-Day

Life means various things to different people.

Life means something different to me now than it did 5, 10, 15 years ago . . .

Today, life to me is first and foremost a gift. This very Day, this very moment, as I write these words is a gift, a blessing Given to me by my creator. A gift that is to be cherished and treated With love, and kindness.

I view life today as new, so the wonder of life is always present. I create my life with joy and abandon, without concern of what Others think about my creation. Today I know I have The choice of creating hell in my life, or creating beauty and Peace. I wake up and am stunned by the beauty of the day, be it Rain, snow, or sunshine. I drink the morning water, life itself, and Give thanks. I view the given day as a challenge and an opportunity. A challenge to face whatever situations present themselves to me. Challenges are neither good nor bad, neither curse nor Blessing. They are only what we make of them, depending on what Meaning we assign them. The assigned meaning does not alter The content of the situation. Our perception gives the assigned meaning.

Today I choose to view all challenges as opportunities. An opportunity To be impeccable. To act to the very best of my ability upon Whatever knowledge happens to be available to me at any given Moment. To live this life with the knowledge that every Act matters. To understand that to believe I have All the time in the world is not only foolish, but also takes Away from the appreciation of life. Today I savor life to The fullest, and enjoy every moment of this precious time On this red road. Today I don't need anything or want Anything but to be happy and to live an impeccable life. Needing and wanting to have something are just expressions Of the egotistical desires of my mind's programming and have Nothing to do with my spiritual path.

Today, my life is an expression of the beauty of my Spirit and the Great Spirit. I was once told that life is nothing but a Dream, and if I create my life with love, my dream will Become a masterpiece of art. This is the power of life. The power of life is inside all of us.

Photo: Jonny Gios



## Healing

Geordan C. Morris

He stepped on the D.O.C bus with thoughts and emotions racing through his head, a 23-year-old kid, scared, angry, hateful, and broken. But one thing he was not: remorseful. He was a ghost of a man who had yet to comprehend the damage he had caused.

Stepping off that bus into the place he would call home for the next 24 years, it hit him: this is it, this is where I will perish. Thoughts of survival raced through his mind, who will I have to fight? Which gang will I have to join? Will I have to stab someone? And what about my family? Will they be there? Again, this moment was all about him—no signs of remorse or concern for anyone else. He was ready to face any problems prison could throw at him. The only problems he was unable to face at the time were those he created internally. The years of drug abuse and suppressing his emotions had not healed the trauma. More importantly, the countless number of victims he had created were reason enough to do whatever it took to distract himself from facing the reality he'd created.

Distraction became the most powerful tool for him to avoid his past. At times, he would go so far as to cover the little foggy mirror in his cell with a piece of paper. Every time he caught a glimpse of his reflection, he was confronted with the most incorrigible person he knew. He was guided by the fear of confronting the truth. And the truth was that he had become a monster.

It took years of unanswered phone calls and letters before he could get

even his own mother to respond. He had utterly destroyed every relationship he touched. His days were filled with letters going out, but none coming back. He had no healthy relationships; he didn't know how to have a healthy relationship. Perhaps this is what it took to get him to slowly remove the piece of paper that blocked him from looking at the face he had tried so hard to avoid. It was then that he began the process of looking inside himself to see what needed to be done. He needed to change. He needed to understand why he was so fearful of himself.

He eventually learned to confront the traumas in his life to heal. The pain he had gone through helped him understand the pain he had put others through. He'd always blamed his surroundings and circumstances for what happened. But the person to blame was there the whole time.

Now, here he stands, looking in the mirror, staring directly into the eyes of the man who has caused so much pain. Similar emotions run through his veins, but no longer is he scared to confront them. He is filled with guilt, shame, remorse, empathy, and determination. The difference now is that he is capable of looking inside to find the answers. He is comprised of many mistakes and guilty of victimizing many people, but from here on out he will own that, have remorse for that, and ultimately let that be the guiding force to navigating his life.

No more a victim of circumstance, he is in the process of healing.



## **Not Much Makes Me Nostalgic Anymore**

**J. Terence Schelble**

Not much makes me nostalgic anymore, except maybe the smell of the hair conditioner I bought right after I got out of prison last year. I found the bottle on the roof last month where it'd fallen and waited out the winter with all the other odds and ends I'd given up on or the wind had claimed off of my bathroom windowsill. The shriveled apple with just the one bite missing that I remember being mealy. An almost empty bottle of hand soap. A rock-hard hunk of bread, the butt end of a loaf I'd neglected until it was too late. And, of course, the conditioner I never even missed until I climbed up onto the roof.

The conditioner was a luxury purchase made in the flush of my release from a five-year prison sentence the year before. When I unscrewed the cap in the cosmetics aisle, the smell registered somewhere between sunscreen and rubbing alcohol, triggering a cascade of memories, some recent, some older. A pretty prison nurse sat silently beside me, swabbing my arm, my head spinning and my heart thumping. And from farther back, the mismatched sunburns and spaghetti straps on the bony shoulders of the two neighbor girls on the long drive home from a childhood trip to San Diego and the beach. They were there too. The intensity of the memories was dizzying. The conditioner wasn't at all what I'd normally buy. It didn't come in a thirty-two-ounce bottle with a pump dispenser, and it wasn't on sale. But it belonged to an earlier life that included women and childhood crushes, and so I took it home and left it on the bathroom windowsill. I didn't notice it went missing till I found it on the roof.

## **Yesterday I said Goodbye**

**J. Terence Schelble**

Yesterday, I said goodbye to my best friend for the summer, and today I'm feeling panicky. All the feelings I didn't let myself feel while she was here are now swimming in circles beneath my feet. I know what it's all about, I guess. But I seem to have fallen into the habit just the same, which is how you get hooked on pretty much anything. It just happens to fill an empty place inside you that you didn't realize was there. But it is there, and it does hurt. Or maybe it just aches. And so, a friend's loving gaze, or the care she showed you when she made you the toast, you rightly recognized as love. But love can also feed the empty place that never gets enough, that frets and fidgets and is always too tired to sleep. That place never seems to rest.



## Requiescat In Pace

J. Terence Schelble

I found out today that he died while I was in prison. Often homeless, and frequently incarcerated, I picture him sitting somewhere random, like a field of dead grass, or in an abandoned dirt lot. Maybe he was in the middle of a pair of railroad tracks, waiting for a friend to go out and find him wherever he happened to be and put a bottle of beer in his hands. "Don't quit now."

His voice registered somewhere between a groan and a slur. I always felt a little queasy after hearing him speak. And then there was his face: forty-four years of self-destruction. Nose broken and rebroken, then broken again; half his teeth missing (the left half). They say he got tuberculosis in prison, and that he died. I don't know if it was the tuberculosis that finally got him or some other disease. Maybe he just OD'd, or lost one too many fights. I'm sure someone, somewhere knows how he actually died, but I don't want to know. I prefer not knowing.

He never backed down from a fight, but he was always outmatched. He earned his flattened nose the hard way. Stand up and slap the chessboard off the table. Fuck your checkmate. He was like that. Couldn't help it. I don't know if deep down he was actually a decent human being or if he was just the piece of shit he seemed to be. The art of self-destruction involves endless sacrifice and propriety is its first victim. Then it's morality. And in the end, it's your body that has to go. But along the way, he got to experience things the rest of us never do, like deliberately and repeatedly driving his car off a cliff. Did he change his mind on the way down? I don't think he did. And what shape did his death take? An apologetic friend who said it was time to leave? Or something else, something simpler, like the flashing wings of a bird or the smell of mint leaves or something important, like forgiveness or a forgotten grief or the taste of something so sweet and so bitter that you know it has to be true. Like saying goodbye forever.

But I don't really know what it meant to him or what it means to me, except that now he's gone, and I hope he can finally rest in peace.



Photo: Jon Tyson

## **Loss Unrelated to Gain** **J. Terence Schelble**

The kind of loss unrelated to gain. Greater than the loss of a zero-sum game.  
The afterimage of something I wanted to see. Of translucent kneecaps and  
black skirts full of hips and promises and kisses and tears and gladness and  
the moon and the clouds and thumping hearts and squeezing hands and  
flashing teeth and staring eyes and pale legs beating the greasy night water.  
And regret so strong it buckles your knees and chokes you to sleep.

## **God's Whisper** **Patrick J. McCamey**

If you feel alone, know you are not abandoned  
Listen to the wind and feel it gliding across your skin  
Listen to the rustling leaves on the trees  
Listen to the waves rolling into a shoreline  
Listen to the pine tree needles brushing together as they move with nature's  
breath  
Listen to the distant roll of thunder moving across the sky

If you feel alone, know you are not abandoned  
Just walk outside to hear, see, and feel the love of God's whisper

## Reflections on Character and Kindness: The Trash-Truck Driver

Joshua Huckelberry

As a child of 10 growing up in western Colorado, my friends and I liked to cause trouble. We were the type of kids who, if we weren't getting yelled at or our butts spanked, we didn't feel that we were having enough fun.

On Sundays, the trash man would go down the alleys and pick up the trash cans, empty them, and go about his day. My friends and I started going down the alley on Saturday nights and putting as many trash cans as we could in the middle of the alley, thus requiring the trash man to get out and move all the cans back to the curb.

Each week, by the time he got to my house, my friends and I were laughing hysterically. As the trash man got out, he was so pissed at us that his face was red. Seeing this caused us to laugh and joke even more, in turn pissing this man off even more. He walked straight up to us, started yelling and screaming, telling us how late he was on his route. He was supposed to be done an hour and a half ago and he was getting his ass chewed by his boss.

He decided to teach us a lesson. He wouldn't pick up our trash. He moved the cans aside and drove away. This caused even more laughter by my gang. When my folks got home, I was told to take out the trash. My reply was, "I can't. The cans are full." This reply angered my dad. His natural question was "what do you mean full? Today's trash day."

Being the little shit I was, I said, "they are full, I watched the trash man skip our cans as he yelled at me while driving by."

"Yelled at you?" said my dad, "why was he yelling at you?"

"I don't know dad," I replied, "I guess he thought I was the one putting the trash cans in the alley."

"That's bullshit," said dad. "I'll handle this," as he called and complained to the trash company.

Our shenanigans continued for several months. We were dedicated to making this man's life hell. It didn't matter if it was raining, snowing, or the sun was shining, we were putting cans in this man's way. One day, things changed. As my friends and I were in the alley, watching the trash man stop constantly to move the trash cans aside so he could drive past to pick them up with his truck, we, like normal, were laughing and joking. As the trash man got closer we noticed it was a





different driver. When he got out of the truck, he came around and started talking to us. He asked, “is it always like this?”

Our reply was “What?”

He said, “do people always put their cans in the middle of the street like this?”

We busted up laughing and said “yep, that’s a weekly thing.”

He said “it’s weird that it’s only these three blocks that do it.” He got back in his truck and moved on.

The next week, there we were. Once again watching and laughing. The new trash man made his way to my house and once again, he started talking with us. This time, he introduces himself and tells us how much harder these three blocks are. He finishes moving and emptying the cans and moves on.

The following week, there we were, waiting, watching, and laughing. As the trash man pulls up yet again to move the cans, “Rudy” (we will call him that) says hello and gives us all pieces of candy. This brought on a different attitude towards Rudy and our joke playing, well, at least while the candy lasted.

Sunday came around and there we were, cans all in a line right down the middle of the alley. We had to be quick and efficient with this can moving thing. We had it down to an art. Here comes Rudy. This time our conversation wasn’t about how funny this is; we were talking about candy and what we hoped Rudy would have for us. The truck pulls up and out comes Rudy. A smile on his face and candy in his hand. With a thank you from all of us and candy in hand, we watch Rudy do our trash and go about his day.

This takes place for about six weeks. Rudy shows up and candy gets eaten. It’s a good deal for us all, or so we thought. On the seventh week, here comes the truck. Our excitement grows. We can taste the candy. Out comes Rudy. With a lax hello and no candy, we all look at each other with long and concerned faces that beg the question, where’s the candy. Rudy looks at us and says, “Sorry kids, I didn’t get off work in time to go to the store and get candy. There was too many trash cans in my way that held me up.” Looking at the shock on our faces, he says, “Maybe next week” and he drives away.

We all turned around and walked away, sad that we didn’t get candy and with guilt flowing through our veins. Saturday comes around and we come up with a plan. We are not going

to put the trash cans out. We will then tell Rudy that we went to all the houses and personally asked them to not put the trash cans in the middle of the alley because it slows the trash man down. We were all excited about this lie we came up with and couldn't wait to get back to getting candy.

We wake early and meet in the alley, hopes of candy in mind and a perfect lie on our tongues. Rudy shows up. He has a huge smile on his face and says, "sorry kids, no candy again, same problem as the week before, I got off too late to go to the store. Why are there no cans in the middle of the alley?" Not wanting to waste a lie, I told Rudy our story and what we did "for him" so he could make it to the store in time to get us candy. He gave a "huh" huff, looked at us, picked up the trash and drove away.

The next week, as we wait anxiously for Rudy to show up so we can get candy, he makes his way down the alley, obstacle free and stops at my house. He gets out, excitement on our faces, he calls us over. "I want to talk with you boys since I have extra time today." With candy on our minds, excitement on our faces, and no cares in the world, we rush over to him. Rudy says "Now, normally I would give you boys candy, today I'm going to give you a lesson." All the wind left our sails. What does he mean? No candy? "What lesson?" we asked.

With a deep breath, Rudy says, "I am not giving you guys candy today because you lied to me." Without speaking a word, we all looked around at each other and our heads started to hang. Rudy said, "You lied to me by telling me you guys talked to the neighbors and asked them to stop putting the trash cans in the middle of the road, isn't that right?"

"Yeah," we all replied.


"In fact, I want you boys to know I took this route because the last driver complained about you boys so much, he was going to quit his job if he had to take this route. I couldn't let that happen because he just got married and last year had a new baby." Once again we looked at each other, this time, with more shame than before.

"Today's lesson," Rudy says, "is on character."

"What's that mean?" I asked.

"Good question," Rudy said. "Character is about doing the right thing, even when no one is looking. It's about telling the truth, it's about being a good person, it's about standing up for what's right, like I did to help the last driver keep his job." With a little confusion on our faces, we looked at each other





again. Rudy said, “When you boys started putting the cans in the middle of the street, did you think it was a nice thing to do?”

“No,” we said in unison.

“Do you think it was nice or funny to keep him from doing his job properly and keeping him away from his wife and new baby?”

Once again, our reply was “no.”

“Do you think it was the right thing to do when you stopped putting the cans in the middle of the street?”

“Yes,” we replied.

“Do you boys feel that you should apologize to me for making me work harder by moving the cans before I could empty them?” One at a time we offered up our most sincere apology. Rudy told us to be back in the alley next Sunday.

As luck would have it, we didn’t have anything better to do on a Sunday. We spent so many Sundays watching and laughing at our joke that we never came up with anything else to do. Rudy shows up and stops at my house in the same spot as the previous weeks. He comes around the truck and says, “Hey, I got something for you guys.” Excitement strikes our faces and our first thought is CANDY. Rudy looks at us and tells us to go down the alley a little ways and wait. Curious as we were, we followed instructions. Rudy turns and heads to the cab of his truck. He comes back with the coolest Nerf football I had ever seen. He throws it to us and naturally we throw it back. This continues for a good thirty minutes. Me, my friends, and the trash man, all playing catch in the alley.

He calls us back to him and asks us if we had fun. We replied how cool it was and how much fun we had. This answer makes Rudy smile; he says, “You kids are good kids. All the times you kept me held up, we could have been playing catch or hanging out. Isn’t this more fun than doing the wrong thing?” We replied with yeses and yeahs. Rudy said, “By not putting the cans in the street, allowing me to get my job done faster, speaks to each one of you boys’ character. It was kind of you to stop and I want you to know I appreciate you boys for stopping. I have kids I want to get home to and spend time with.”

He returns to his truck and starts to get in. I yell, “Rudy wait, you’re forgetting your football.”

“Keep it,” Rudy says, “I’ll see you next week.”



## **The Right to Vote Should Be Available to Everyone— Including Prisoners Like Me**

**Joseph Dole**

People in prison often begin their life in marginalized communities where their families' right to vote has historically been suppressed. Today, voter suppression of those communities is again on the rise. The fact that people are actively trying to legislate additional hindrances to already marginalized communities' right to vote highlights the need to ensure the right to vote for all of these communities' members — even if they are in prison.

This is especially true because, once convicted, their imprisonment further marginalizes them from society. In Illinois, where I'm incarcerated, everyone in prison is completely stripped of their right to vote until release. (For the thousands of people sentenced to die in Illinois prisons, this is a lifetime denial of the right to vote.)

As someone who has been sitting in prison for the last two decades, I know the full effects of being disenfranchised. It leaves us vulnerable to a voting public that has almost zero concern for our welfare, and deprives us of both a voice in society and what could be a powerful tool to facilitate our return to useful citizenship.

Fortunately, the organization Chicago Votes has been working to pass Senate Bill 828 in partnership with State Representative Lashawn Ford. If passed, this bill will restore voting rights to the roughly 30,000 individuals incarcerated in Illinois prisons, including me.

Those of us in prison are severely affected by our inability to vote. First, judges in Illinois are elected. For decades, getting elected required promising to be, or proving they were, "tough-on-crime" — meaning they would, or were, handing out overly harsh prison sentences. Those judges never had to worry about the victims of those harsh sentences voting against them in the next election, because prisoners do not have the right to vote.

This continues today, and affects all of one's appeals and resentencing hearings. Moreover, the inability to vote means we can't vote for fair-minded judges who will protect our rights in civil court, nor vote against judges who openly discriminate against petitions filed by people in prison.

Second, most legislators don't view people in prison as their constituents simply because they can't vote. This is true whether they were a constituent prior to incarceration or whether the prison is in their district. If legislators don't need to court the votes of people in prison, it ensures they are unlikely to take their concerns or viewpoints into consideration when passing legislation.

That simple fact has greatly contributed to the passing of tougher and tougher sentencing guidelines, and also ensures that today's "reforms" of those extreme sentencing laws won't help the currently incarcerated.





Photo: Ella Christenson

Thus, the disenfranchisement of people in prison helps to ensure that they serve more time in prison. This does not serve any true penological or public safety goal. Rather, it serves to benefit the personal political careers of judges and legislators, many of whom have already retired. Therefore, those in prison have a serious liberty-based interest in obtaining the right to vote.

The fact that people in prison can't vote for state legislators also leaves them extremely vulnerable to abuse by the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC). Legislators constantly cater to the guards' union because they are a powerful voting bloc. This allows them to get legislation passed that is beneficial to prison guards, but detrimental to those of us in prison. This has negatively affected everything from our right to access public records to our ability to peacefully protest inhumane living conditions via hunger strikes.

We are also captive consumers at the mercy of monopolistic companies that routinely engage in price-gouging and other anti-competitive business practices — all to the detriment of the incarcerated. Additionally, the IDOC adds unnecessary and unjust surcharges or increases prices by demanding kickbacks or “commissions.” This too is at our expense.

Without the right to vote, this is effectively “taxation without representation.” Thus, people confined to the IDOC are not only exploited by yesterday's “tough-on-crime” politicians and ignored by today's “reformers,” but are continuously exploited financially throughout our incarceration.

People in prison are also largely prohibited from earning a living wage, and are often forced to work for pennies per day with no days off for months on end in unsafe working conditions.

Being disenfranchised means we cannot vote for legislators who will look out for our interests — who will pass laws to stop our exploitation, require a living wage for prison labor, ensure we receive adequate medical care, provide access to educational programming, and more.

Society has this misconception that people in prison are “anti-social” or hell-bent on destroying society and should therefore not be allowed to vote so they can't “poison the system.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Don't get me wrong; society's constant efforts to marginalize, ostracize, oppress, and discriminate against



the incarcerated definitely doesn't help engender strong ties to society. But despite all of that, ties to the community usually remain.

That's because no matter how much society dehumanizes us, we remain just that—human. We are human beings with families and friends out in free society who we care deeply about. I myself am a son, father, and grandfather. My right to vote, if restored to me, would be exercised primarily in support of my family's safety and economic well-being.

My vote for candidates would also probably be much more informed than the average citizen's, due to the fact that I have the time to research both the candidates and their stances on the issues. Moreover, I have the time to get a real understanding of the issues and not just vote along party lines or for someone who spouts the best misleading rhetoric.

People in prison also have a ton of experiential knowledge that can be used to help heal societal ills. We not only have firsthand knowledge about injustices embedded in our legal system, but we also have firsthand experience with oppression and being at the mercy of unaccountable agents of the state. For many people who come to prison, this makes us acutely aware of the injustices other people suffer and allows us to relate with empathy.

This is a significant factor not only in why people personally impacted by mass incarceration are at the forefront of the movement to decarcerate, but also why people who leave prison often get involved in working for nonprofits, become "violence interrupters," fight against racial discrimination and corruption,

and more.

Denying someone the right to vote is an extremely dehumanizing act. Rather than further ostracizing people in prison—the majority of whom will return to their communities someday—society should work to increase people's attachments to society.

Restoring people's right to vote while in prison would go a long way toward engendering feelings of belonging to society. This would both make it more likely that the incarcerated would work towards the betterment of society, and increase the likelihood that they will be "returned to useful citizenship," as our state constitution states should be the goal.

The right to vote should be available to everyone, incarcerated or not.

**Joseph Dole is a published writer, artist, and activist who has been incarcerated for over 22 years, and spent a decade in the notorious TAMMS supermax prison. He recently received his Bachelor's Degree from NEIU/UWW, focusing on Critical Carceral-Legal Studies. He is co-founder and policy director of Parole Illinois, an organization dedicated to abolishing long-term prison sentences. See more of his work on his Facebook page. He can be contacted at [JosephDole4paroleillinois@gmail.com](mailto:JosephDole4paroleillinois@gmail.com) or Joseph Dole K84446, Stateville C.C., PO Box 112, Joliet, IL 60434.**

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## Having our Palms Exposed Jevon Jackson

Blushed with a hint of the Devil  
She slashes through my prison  
With gloss lipstick daggers  
And cinnamon body glitter

Hope in a tiger skirt  
She owns the world when she  
Struts the might-mighty long leg  
Click-clack against concrete  
Tattooed music curved down  
From her thigh  
To the cliff of her  
Sky high stilettos

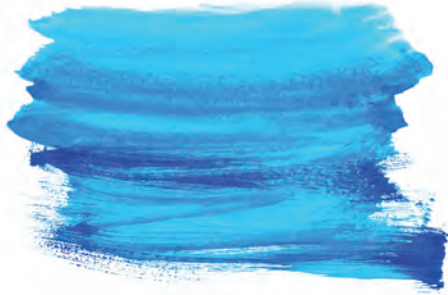
With polished, long, bright, manicure  
Hope, she gathers me up  
From chasm  
The ministry of her wings  
Stretches beyond iris  
Beyond the chemistry of fear  
beyond all history of falling

High above the moon  
She churches us

In the simple metaphysics of  
Providence  
And the wild, kinetic laughter  
That erupts extemporaneously  
Six seconds after Triumph

But there are moments when  
Hope is not around, interspersed  
Extragalactic  
Too far  
To be  
Breathing

And then someone leans in close  
To summon her name  
You are too ashamed  
To acknowledge her whereabouts—  
Hope in a tattered skirt, disheveled  
In slow, timid heartbeats  
Blistered feet bare  
Dragged across the bottom earth  
Her body broken into  
The cynical revisions of god



## Net of Love Patrick J. McCamey

My sister is my net, because she  
captures my loneliness and returns  
love.

Even though I have put her through  
many years of my own problems,  
the net she casts is never too small.

Just when I think she has given up,  
she casts her net again,  
to save me from drowning in my own  
woes.

Nothing compares to having the love  
of a sister.

## **I Remember to Forget** **Catherine LaFleur**

I remember to forget

Salt air from white sand beaches

Lincoln roses from mother's garden

And the taste of Blue Dot Cafe

Burgers in brown bags, grease

leaking guiltily through the paper

I remember to forget

Life before prison

The busyness of it all

Running from home to work

Back home and the many hats

I wore: mother, wife, daughter

I remember to forget

The scent of Nathan's little-boy hair

His blue toy truck and lisp

Causing him to repeat bue fuck

In front of Father Charles

On Ash Wednesday

I remember to forget

Things which draw me away from

Chains and fences pinned to me

Remember to forget life

I remember

And I forget

## **All Gas, No Brakes** **Micah Braided Hair**

where I'm from we twist glass pipes

'till we see prophetic visions

like we were crystal ball gazers

divining the future

from the smoking bowl of a LOC\*

white clouds blow from our lungs

and billow across the room

shrouding the sharp edges

of life behind the pureness

of the wave we ride

This high is heavenly

shadows coalesce around our souls

as we insert needles filled with shards

now transmuted to syrup into our veins

quickly losing control to the rush

it's all gas and no brakes

for brief moments

the needle transforms us into gods

who preside over the streets

madness flickers

along the edges of our minds

\* An LOC is an indigenous smoking pipe.

**Affiliated**  
**Jevon Jackson**

We are magic dying  
Mostly science  
Almost god until  
We fall unto  
The tiny profane appetites

We are wilderness still  
No matter how creased the pleat  
We are trauma bombs  
Pressure-rigged beneath the garden

We are mostly dying  
Magic science  
Never god until  
Love impales our breathing

We are bliss machines still  
No matter how savage the camp  
We are calm sonata balms  
Hummed and rubbed against our quills

**Orchard of We**  
**Gary Farlow**

From blossoms we arrived  
the promise of things to come  
nourished by hope  
watered by love  
like a forest of strength

Our numbers are many  
the colors of a rainbow  
blending together into one voice  
no longer willing to accept the status quo

The fruit of humanity ripened  
into a song of freedom and equality  
our fruit is not bitter but sweet  
sweet like the air a convict breathes

Walking out the prison gates  
sweet like the first day of classes  
for one long denied an education  
sweet to simply . . . be



## **Prisoner's Holiday** **Robert D. Nelson**

Dear Santa,

Well, here it is, December 25, after dark. There appears to have been a slight hiccup in my Christmas planning, and I have a few grievances to air. So, I thought I would begin by addressing yours first.

See, with this being my favorite holiday, I geared up by getting a jumpstart on Big Box department store purchases, corresponding with you long before they had a chance to get out of the gate. There's no possibility that those guys would have placed orders with you before the Fourth of July, like I did. This race should have been won, buddy!

To the sum of no less than 20 follow-up letters, I amended my "wish" list to the point where you should have had a gazillion options for gifts. I even provided you with a few pointers on how to get all this stuff past the prison guards (granted, it may have been a little tough to get the pre-lit Christmas tree in, but that falls into the category of "not my problem"). I'm just the recipient, not the delivery guy.

Because I accidently popped that sprinkler head in my cell a few months back, I was required to finance the replacement costs over

a 15-month period. My prisoners' incentive pay was deducted accordingly, leaving me a bit strapped for cash. Ergo, the recent misunderstanding when prison officials busted me for jacking food from the cafeteria. I attempted to explain that the roast beef and onions were for Santa's late night Christmas Eve snack—hey, even Santa's gotta eat, right?—but the guards obviously can't fathom the spirit of Christmas giving like you and I do. But since I had your best interests in mind, that unforeseeable episode truly shouldn't count against me on the "naughty-or-nice" list.

Anyhow, since my roadmap to a Merry Christmas developed a few unexpected twists of fate, I decided to make it up to you by staying awake all night Christmas Eve until you arrived. I figured that we could play a couple games of chess while watching holiday cartoons, which could give you an opportunity to rest up from being out in the cold all night. Maybe we could talk about me coming to work for you when I get out. . . you know: all the things that you might enjoy doing on such a festive occasion.

So, I waited. And waited. And when you didn't show up, I thought that perhaps you got lost and were in need of guidance. Being the sort of person that I am, I felt that it would



be prudent for me to climb onto the rooftop and flag you in. Man, was it cold up there!

Anyway, when I finally arrived up there, I realized that I didn't have a flag, per se, so decided to improvise by waving my boxer shorts around until you spotted me. In hindsight, that was probably not the best of ideas, because all that I got for my troubles were pot-shots by the tower guard, misconduct violations for attempted escape and indecent exposure, and frostbite in my nether region. Oh, and a trip to solitary confinement wearing shackles and a strait-jacket, while singing, "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas."

I must have dozed off for a spell, but when I awoke, daylight had peeked into my cell from a narrow window located on the outer wall. Ah, Christmas Day! And since I knew that you wouldn't let me down, I glanced around the room, anticipating good things to come. Only, I wasn't seeing very much. In fact, the only thing I did notice was my makeshift Christmas stocking . . . er, a dingy old prison sock with a hole worn into the toe.

Hampered by my prison smock, I fought my way over to the stocking, which should have contained endless scads of sweets and treats. But, to my dismay, the only booty retrieved was sock lint and toe cheese. Not a good way to begin Christmas Day, I must confess.

As the day progressed, I finally convinced the prison psychiatrist that, in the interest of Holiday Spirit, I should be relieved of the strait-jacket and provided with proper stationery so that my side of the events could be properly summarized (I blamed everything on you; hope you don't mind).

Through the ensuing disciplinary process, you have been named as my only witness. It's only fair that you should take the heat for this: After all, I wasn't the one who failed to show.

With this in mind, I merely suggest that you do the right thing. Take a good, hard look at all of the people that you will let down if you don't own up to your bad choices, and you should also look at the bright side: Years from now, millions of children from all over the world could be wearing 'W.W.S.D.' bracelets, while contemplating difficult choices. In the end, they might refer back to your decision in this moment and ask themselves "What Would Santa Do?" then choose the morally correct option. Hey, I'm even willing to forgive and forget. But I've got to tell you: Next Christmas had better be a whole lot different than this one, if you know what I mean! (Hmm, I wonder what a good, used Christmas sled might fetch online?)

Anyway, Happy Holidays, and until the next time, I remain, yours truly.



## People Like Us Gary Farlow

Right off the bat  
let's get things straight  
I've no time to waste  
no time for your hate

Being gay is no crime  
it's not a taboo  
we are not a disease  
you can catch like the flu

We're your neighbors  
family, friends  
the people at church  
being gay is no sin

History is full of "people like us"  
Alexander the Great  
Plato, Aristotle, Claudius

We're on city streets  
and rural country lanes  
so, stop the hate  
Have you no shame?

We're a part of the family  
that we call humanity  
so try to tolerate  
love, peace  
Stop the insanity



Artwork by Jamie Diaz  
To see more of Jamie's art, please go to [www.jamiediazart.com](http://www.jamiediazart.com)





**You May Ask**  
**Kean Davis**

Who am I? You may ask  
A person who tried to fit society's standards  
By staying in the closet about my sexuality

A person who refuses to let people tell me  
How I should identify racially  
I am multiracial and I love me for me  
Why pick a side?

Who am I? You may ask  
A person who still believes in God and the Bible

How did I get this way? You may ask  
Parents who always taught me  
To be proud of who I am  
"You are our son, and we will always love you for you"

Why did I stay in the closet so long? You may ask  
Society teaches us that if we are "abnormal"  
Then we will never be accepted  
But now I live in the truth of acceptance  
And wish I had come out sooner

Why do you follow a religion that condemns your sexuality?  
You may ask  
Because I believe God has made me in his image  
And will accept me for who I am

## Contemplating Time

Terrance Harris, Jr.



I finally realize that time has made a fool of me  
 It dragged by slowly  
 Then zoomed by  
 Even though time is the most consistent entity  
 Infinity is the only thing that can be proven  
 Because it takes time to prove everything  
 Time made me realize what is important  
 Nothing really matters  
 I spent most of my adult life searching  
 Only to find that all I want is  
 That time back  
 I forfeited my time

Seconds Minutes Hours Days  
 Weeks Months Years Decades  
 Life

I mourn for the time I have left  
 I am addicted to time  
 Using time  
 Abusing time  
 I need more  
 Taking my time  
 Patience  
 Wasting time  
 Pacing  
 Waiting  
 Racing  
 Running out of time

Suspense Anticipation Boredom  
 Melancholy moments

Mastering the art of timing  
 A slave to every second  
 Hesitating  
 Time out  
 Time's up Old-timer  
 Until the end of time  
 If eternity = forever  
 Then we have been here the whole  
 time  
 Acting like we got forever  
 Until we don't  
 Then what?  
 Time to die?  
 Then what after that?  
 Forever?  
 If every moment in life is precious  
 Does it really matter what time it is?  
 Because time changes everything  
 anyway

I wish I had used my time wisely  
 Instead  
 Time made a fool of me



## A Night Darker than Most

Emillio Fernandez

Fluorescent lights weigh heavy on my eyes  
Sleepless nights try tugging them closed  
I remember their faces  
Glossy eyes full of tears  
Crying out for help

I want to wipe them away  
But they are only pictures  
Images of who they were

I want to give up  
To stop remembering  
But it's useless

My dreams will paint their pictures forever  
Beautiful brown flowing hair  
Like their mother, bright smiles  
Deep pools of blue, green, and hazel  
Looking to me for the safety I didn't provide

My reflection in the mirror-tinted glass is not that of a man

No smile  
Just distant eyes  
A blank stare, pale and cold

You said you loved them



## Reflections on Prison Writing

### Jake Carlock

The conditions one might experience in one of the more than 1,000 correctional institutions across the United States are likely to be similar to what Thomas Bartlett Whitaker describes in his essay, "The Price of Remaining Human." Whittaker speaks of the abrasive climate that continually bombards his perception of reality, describing how he has survived thus far using his senses. His ability to defend himself against the constant wearing is impressive.

I struggle with the concept that remaining human should cost anything; however, I can see how one might arrive at that conclusion. Most of those of us who have driven the path to incarceration did not end up here by accident. We have, in many cases, left a trail of harm and trauma in our wake, affecting victims, families of victims, families of the incarcerated, and of course, ourselves. The contrasting experience would be for those who have arrived at success, or have shown great love and compassion through their experience. These are the results of possessing a beating heart and all of the subsequent human characteristics that come with it. Prison is a necessary evil. But without the cries of desperation from within it, prison would be a representation of empty, purposeless servitude.

Our institutions are not operating with all of the right tools. The proper people with the proper training are not at the helm, despite the good intentions most have. I've settled on the realization that those at the helm are also just people who are working their grind, dealing with their lived experience and the harm and trauma they have both caused and been dealt.

The state of Colorado did not just plop me down in this institution, nor did it refuse my many knocks at the door—repeated attempts to end up here. The penitentiary received me as I was, with all of my imperfections and faults, into the belly of imperfection and fault, along with those who came before me. It will continue meeting people at the gates to receive them with theirs. We are all accountable for where we are and how we ended up in these places. We are equally responsible for recognizing the harm we have caused, repairing our faults, and embracing our imperfections, just as the institution is responsible for providing us the tools to do so. We cannot change or will not change with the mediocrity that we have accepted up to this point; we have to lean into the uncomfortability of change, forcing ourselves to take step after step in the right direction.

Reference: Thomas Bartlett Whitaker, "The Price of Remaining Human," in *The Sentences that Create Us: Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison*, ed. Caitis Meissner (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2022), 167-170, with thanks to PEN America for sending free copies of this book into Colorado prisons.

## Travel isn't Always Something you Choose

### Ryon Olthoff

Having spent the greater portion of the past 20 years as a resident of Colorado's finest correctional facilities, I have learned a few things about travel. When the time comes to travel, you have little choice. You go where they tell you to go.

It begins with an early morning knock on the cell door, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, "pack your shit, you're moving." Your first response is always, "what?" This question is asked out of disbelief, not because you didn't hear. It's simply to confirm that today is going to suck. Sometimes it's two questions squished together as one: "Why, where am I going?" The response always seems rehearsed, straight out of the textbook, like it was taught at the academy, "Not my call. You'll find that out when you get there. Now hurry up. You have twenty minutes."

Waking up to such a situation creates a high level of confusion and stress. It makes the blood ring in your ears. I imagine it is how some people feel under wildfire evacuation orders. You now have twenty minutes to cram your whole life into a three-cubic-foot bag. Anything that doesn't fit isn't going.

At those moments, priorities become very important: clothes, photos, letters, and books. As the bag fills, anxiety rolls in. The sweat rolls down your back. You ask yourself the question, "how did I end up with so much shit?" It's stuck on repeat in your head.

Murphy's Law says whatever can happen, will happen, so

prepare for the worst. The day they decide to move you always seems to come the day after you received a large order or a gift pack from loved ones. Inevitably, everything will not fit, so you are forced to monetize items in an attempt to lessen financial loss. Stuff those sausages into your shoes; fill the back of the coffee maker with squeeze cheeses; pack the carafe with anything that will fit and not break it. Every nook and cranny is occupied.

This all plays out while your celly, like a vulture, sits waiting to pick at the carcass. Your relationship, built over the time you have lived together, has been reduced to what they can gain from your departure. Even if this is not their intent, this is often how it feels. Everything is off; you are out of sorts and that is exacerbated by the manner in which you were informed of this move. Despite the items you might leave behind for your bunkie, they are about to go through it also. You are leaving, so they are getting a new celly. This has the potential to create a whole world of issues of its own.

You say your goodbyes and carry your stuff to property. Now you get to unpack all that you have just packed so the sergeant can audit and verify what you claim is yours. After that, you are cuffed, shackled, and black boxed (a security device invented by a formerly incarcerated person, which ensures you are unable to tamper with the cuffs). This box is the bane of your next three to six hours. Prisons, for the most part, are not close together, so you have a ride ahead of you.



**Safe**  
**Louis Mamo**

Nestled in my cozy mountains  
safe behind my walls  
protected by two dozen guards  
who await my beck and call

A fleet of buses always gassed  
shiny towers too  
If you try to get to me  
security'll get to you

I never check my email  
food and laundry's served  
after all that you say I am  
is this what I deserve?

I live here in my mountain  
serviced like a king  
if you count the basics  
I don't lack a thing

All I've ever wanted  
is a second chance with you  
But until I earn that second chance  
being a king will do



**Justice**  
**Gary Farlow**

Justice looks like many things  
the freedom to talk back  
the ability to find your voice  
to ask hard questions  
to take a stand for what you believe in

Our voice is our greatest power  
for justice is a song we all sing  
from the streets of Harlem to East LA  
to the dirt roads of Appalachia

True justice belongs to everyone  
as justice is not justice  
unless it is justice for all





## **Love, America** **Louis Mamo**

Dear America,

I realize how much I hurt you . . . what I took. It's irreplaceable. I hope over these years you've noticed how hard I've worked to try to make amends. I know that the debt cannot be paid. But I'm going to try anyway.

One day, I will be worthy of your trust. Can you see past what I've done? Can you remember that there's hands under this blood, and they've done more than spill? I hope you can love me again. I hope to be worthy of your love. These last 10 years have been rough, but it's worth it if it honors her memory and brings healing to those I've harmed.

America, I am more than my worst mistake, but I know that in your perfection, your tolerance is zero. I labor to earn your notice, and do the best I can, even if those who keep us apart want you to believe it doesn't matter. They tell you that I am only what I have done, and numbers are all that remain of me—numbers that tell you who I am; numbers that tell you how many years I'm paying with.

I hope we can work together again, in the land of second chances. I hope I can make you a better place with the lessons I've learned—that I can turn my folly into wisdom and let her story save lives. If only I knew then what I know now, all our lives would be different.

But I'll stay in this hole, America, so you can have your justice, so people can have vengeance, until you are satisfied and safe, or until it's not profitable for you. I'll suffer whatever it takes to be in your arms again, to have the chance to atone. I hope to see you soon. I won't let you down. I love you America, to the moon and back.

Louie

## SHOUT-OUTS TO FRIENDS AND ALLIES

*Over the years we have thanked our friends, colleagues, and allies at the Shakespeare Prison Project in Wisconsin; the Prison Creative Arts Project in Michigan; Voices UnBroken in New York; Each One Reach One in California; the nation-wide alliance known as PCARE, which stands for Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education; the team driving the remarkable newspaper, Prison Legal News; the California-based but now nationally recognized activists at Critical Resistance; the Criminal Justice Reform Coalition in Colorado; the Sentencing Project in Washington, D.C.; the Justice Arts Coalition from Takoma Park, MD; Mt. Tamalpais College in California; the Denver Pen Pal Collaborative; Mourning our Losses from Austin, TX; and both Remerg and the Reentry Initiative from Colorado. Heroes All!*

For this issue we want to look closer to home and sing the praise of Dr. Ashley Hamilton and the team at the **Denver University Prison Arts Initiative**, what us Front Rangers lovingly know as DU PAI.



Pictured above is the Artistic and Development Team (ADT) for DU PAI, all of whom have been working with DU PAI for five years and work in high level leadership roles for the program while incarcerated: Terry Mosley, Jr, Matthew LaBonte, Brett Phillips, Angel Lopez, Andrew Draper and George Chavez, with Dr. Ashley Hamilton (Executive Director of DU PAI).

But first, before we tell you about some of their remarkable work, please log on to [www.coloradoprisonradio.com](http://www.coloradoprisonradio.com), that's the homepage for **Inside Wire: Colorado Prison Radio**.

This remarkable project beams music, stories, information, and entertainment into prisons across Colorado, and broadcasts its sounds to listeners outside facilities as well, across the U.S. and beyond. Inside Wire programs are created by incarcerated media producers for incarcerated listeners. Led by the DU PAI, and working in collaboration with the Colorado Department of Corrections, Inside Wire is nothing short of a miracle—check it out!

So who are these rock stars?

The DU Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) generates creative and collaborative learning experiences that enrich the lives of people who are incarcerated and shift the conversation about prison. As part of DU's commitment to the public good, their programming opens dialogue between incarcerated people and their communities.

They empower individuals to see themselves as leaders capable of creating meaningful change, both inside prison systems and beyond. So what does this look like on the ground? It means running arts-based courses, staging plays, leading Inside Wire: Colorado Prison Radio and The Inside Report (a statewide prison newspaper), and more. Check out their details at <https://liberalarts.du.edu/prison-arts>.

## **Captured Words/Free Thoughts Publication Permission Form**

*Dear Readers, we hope you enjoyed Volume 19 of our magazine. For those of you who are submitting work to be considered for publication in our next issue, please complete this form and return it with your submission. Please send your submissions to the address that appears on the inside jacket of this magazine.*

I, (author/artist name) \_\_\_\_\_,

hereby testify on this day, (date here) \_\_\_\_\_, that I grant permission to Dr. Stephen Hartnett to publish my poem(s) and/or story(ies) and/

or other artwork, entitled (name of work here) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_, in Volume 20 of *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*.

Because this is a not-for-profit magazine, no remittance to the author is forthcoming. I understand that the magazine will be distributed for free, in both print and online venues. I, the author, hold copyright privileges, but hereby declare Hartnett and all parties associated with the magazine free of all legal recourse in the event of any consequences of the magazine being published. I, the author, also hereby acknowledge that once my work is published, it may be cited, posted, circulated, or used in any other manner consistent with standing legal principles of fair use, including in *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* anthologies.

In keeping with best practices, I also understand that while the editorial team will not change the content or style of my work in any meaningful way, they may do formatting and minor editing in keeping with the magazine's practices.

Author's Signature and Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

Witness Signature and Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

To make sure that we can contact the artist if needed, please include your current address:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## AUTHOR'S CORNER

As our community of colleagues and collaborators expands, we want to celebrate our accomplishments. Here are some recent publications by the team:

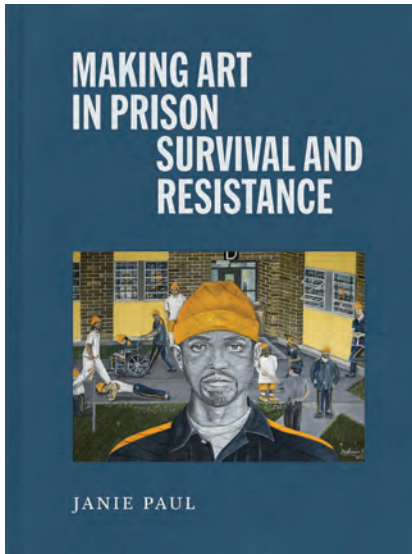


Our Correspondence Editor, Dr. Benjamin Boyce, has a new book coming out! Tracking the ways Hollywood has created the images driving the prison-industrial complex, Dr. Ben analyzes how box office profits have trumped justice, leaving the nation awash in stereotypes. You can find his book *The Spectacle of Punishment* on Amazon and at fine book sellers everywhere. If you prefer your information in podcast form, you can find Ben's terrific audio work at <https://www.drjunkieshow.com/about-the-host>.

One of the joys of doing prison work is being there for students, friends, and allies as they leave prison, return to free society, and thrive. Javonte Evans is a rock star, having left the Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility and landed on his feet with two jobs (one in food service and one in a recording studio – his true passion), and family support. He earned his Certificate in



Strategic Communication in December 2022, and, remarkably, just published his first book! *Love and Motivate Everyone (LAME)* shares Javonte's hard-won life-skills for embodying social justice values. He chose the name to undermine the prison trope of people who don't behave as expected being labeled "lame" and excluded from important social connections. This one can't be found on Amazon; to purchase a copy, write to [javonte1evans@gmail.com](mailto:javonte1evans@gmail.com).



In *Making Art in Prison: Survival and Resistance*, Janie Paul introduces readers to the culture and aesthetics of prison art communities, sharing heart-wrenching, poignant, and often surprisingly humorous artists' narratives. These powerful stories and images upend the manufactured stereotypes of those living in prison, imparting a human dimension—a critical step in the movement to end mass incarceration.

For 27 years, Janie has traveled throughout Michigan to meet artists and select work for the project she co-founded: The Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons, an initiative of the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan. Pedagogical as well as curatorial,

the project has provided crucial validation for the artists. *Making Art in Prison* features over 200 extraordinary images. We are proud to note that an excerpt of this gorgeous book appeared in *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*, Volume 18, under the title “Everyone Loves Art.” You can find this book on Amazon and at fine book sellers everywhere.



In *Ways a Relationship Rises: A Fresh Perspective on Life, Love, and Relationships*, Taveuan Williams, a resident of Sterling Correctional Facility, shares his insights on successful interpersonal communication. Focusing on self-awareness, constructive listening, empathic dialogue, and more, Taveuan encourages readers to take responsibility for their emotional landscape. This one can be found on Amazon.

(left) Taveuan receiving his Certificate in Strategic Communication in a ceremony at the Sterling Correctional Facility, Sterling, CO, in December 2022, with SJH looking on.



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