

CAPTURED WORDS
FREE THOUGHTS
#4 (Summer 2007)

**Writings from The Poetry Workshop
at The Champaign County Jail**

Including works by Jeffrey Bettis, Tristram Cowart,
Wilbert Harmon, Ernst Lillard, William Smith, Donald
Stokes, Dante Washington, Phillip Wallace,
Gary Williams, and our special guest from Michigan,
Gretchen Alvarez Vaillant

* * * * *

With Special Thanks to:

- Katie Healey and G.D. Jones, our Workshop Volunteers
- Nancy Griffin, Coordinator of Programs at the Champaign County Jail
- The Center on Democracy in a Multiracial Society for its generous support; check us out at <http://cdms.ds.uiuc.edu>

We Open this Issue with A Gift from the Past . . .

Back in 1840, Marmaduke Sampson knew something was terribly wrong with the way America was responding to crime. So Sampson grabbed his buddy, Mathew Brady, the soon-to-be-famous photographer, and they started touring prisons and jails, documenting what they saw. The result of their good work was *Rationale of Crime*, a blistering cry for justice suggesting that *prisons make more crime than they prevent*. Sampson argued that

It is a mistake to suppose that the inmates of prison are a set of outlaws and tiger-like beings lost to all good in this world . . . Too many (indeed, most of them) on first conviction, are either neglected youths thrown into the world without education and without friends . . . or are ignorant men, the dupes of artful knaves who know how to elude detection (p. 72).

Heroin, Crack, Pharmaceutical

By Donald Christopher Stokes

You woke up one morning to find yourself in a place you despise.
You promised yourself and others that you would never go back,
but you returned to the place of heroin and crack.

So you began to rob and steal, as though there was no hope.
You did anything to get more dope: you lied, you conned, you
connived, you tricked your family—man, you were sick!

*I don't love you. I'm not your friend. I've been trying to murder you
from beginning to end. But there is no shortage of suckers like you.
My name is alcohol, heroin, crack, and pharmaceutical too.*

*I'm all over the world, in the homes of the poor and rich. I don't care
if you're young or old. So to all who will try us, I swear:
you'll be dead, locked up, or crazy when we are finished with you.*

Captured Words / Free Thoughts, page 1

Informer

By Gary Williams

I know you are, I know you are
You're on people's tip
Just like a star
I want to pray for you
Instead of beating your fuckin' head in
Like kids playing cops and robbers
Who's gonna win
Informer

Holy Boldness

By Ernest Lillard

When a divine appointment is set up by the Lord
and we happen to be his spokespersons
we need lots of courage to step out and be BOLD

Special Needs

by Gretchen Alvarez Vaillant

Thirty-one years old
all over the streets
I have no money
I have nothing to eat
my friends are high on crack
scored with my last check
now it's time to deal with an abusive man
beating me with the hands that feed me
when I get my next check I'll run away
back to the crack house and my crack-head friends
but they only keep me around
until the money is gone
after two days I'll be back on the streets
in need of a place to stay
and something to eat

Captured Words / Free Thoughts, page 2

My First Love

By Jeffrey Bettis

It's time to talk about the love of my life.
Whether it's on paper or I explain it to someone,
It had to be done sometime. Why not now?
I met her in July, and she was smokin' hot, so many people
gathered 'round her. I never thought she'd go for me!
But it happened. I finally met the girl of my
Dreams. She was so nice and peaceful in the
Beginning. She gave me good dreams when I closed
My eyes at night. She would be by my side through
Thick and thin. At least that's what I thought.
When I was upset, I would go to her.
She would clear my head to brighter things,
and make me happy about myself. She was great.

But then it all went down hill
the night I got locked up.
The night my whole life changed.
I never knew jail could tear things apart so easily.
Especially us, we were so close. But it did. What am I talking about?
I'm in here because of her. Why should I care about her, about us?
First she wanted what's best for me and then she winds
up being the reason I'm in here. Wow, that's great.
Thanx. No way to visit her, no way to clear my mind about
Us. Well, I don't need her help to decide my future.
I loved her, she was everything to me. Yes, she was
My first love, but not my last. It's done, it's over.
I don't want anything to do with her. She ruined my
Life, now I have to rebuild it. Recover from the
4 ½ months of pain and suffering. I'll never forget her,
but I won't ever go back. I hope no one else runs into her.
If so, she'll ruin their life too, I promise. I trust that no one
Will approach her if they see her, so, for heads up,
Her name is Marijuana.

Crying Voices

by Gretchen Alvarez Vaillant

voices fill the air
heads hang down
in the cold of the night
blues fill the air

in every cell women talk
about their lost babies
and cry all day
and all night
and all day

we all hope for another chance
yet bitterness fills our minds
while time kicks our asses

everyone is lying, saying
this is my last time
or *everyone down on your knees*
let's say a prayer

and then a voice fills the hall:
officer, officer, I need to make call
to let my loved ones know
I won't be coming home

In Search of Salvation

by William T. Smith

Oh Lord, you say *Far too long*
have I been absorbed with
the destructive manners of man
for the spirit stands willing
but the flesh is weak
and though I am covered with sin
you peer beneath to see
the lost child running wild
running from truth salvation
and the purity of thy word
running headlong into oblivion
as if I had never heard your truths

I constantly take disastrous routes
that lead to nowhere
and sit on the bottom steps of negativity
with head hung low
pleading begging demanding
that you rescue me Oh Lord
like I have a right to demand anything!

Yet always when I fall
through devices of my own making
I assume you'll be there Oh Lord
to pick me up
dust me off
and send me about
my merry, destructive way
time and time again
until one day
it will be too late

Where Will You Turn?

by Ernest Lillard

Sin is too powerful
for anyone to tame.
It will turn on you
before you realize what's happened.
By then it's too late—where will you turn?
Only Jesus
has beaten the beast.

Trapped Between Loves

by Richard Howard

I see two women walking into darkness
one I am losing, the other I have already lost

but she came back. There is no end, only
two women walking away, heads bowed

behind them the light shatters into two shadows
cast by my trying to love two. I know I can

only love one, and recall the doors of other moments
of what was love, of what was need. And I know

now that to love is to need, but you cannot love
someone who doesn't want to be loved. We are

the heirs of love, one turning into two, and you
only love when it hurts you.

Of Hope and Forgiveness

by Donald Christopher Stokes

Fear, doubt, mistrust, uncertainty—
why can't I get this right, what's wrong with me?
Has pain torn a whole in the crevices of my soul?

I've tried so hard to hold on to that special someone
but trouble tends to creep in. . .

I did everything I could to show you my love
not knowing that it was all in vain

My only wish, my only prayer, my only hope
was that you would love me
as much as I loved you

But NO—you had to do that vile thing
you brought into our marriage a monster, a devil:
you cheated on me

Or maybe it was me
who brought this trouble
or maybe it was us

Now we argue and fuss and fight
about any and everything
because of the hurt
caused by unfaithfulness

Yeah, you said some things that made me angry
and in return I said some things that made you angry
So you put me out in the streets and called the police
and now my anger boils like the lava of a volcano
that's been waiting too long to erupt
Baby, baby, I want revenge
I want revenge
I want you to feel the agony I feel
Yet deep down in my soul I feel mostly sorrow

So do I get even with the woman I love?
Do I turn and walk away?
Do I try to learn to live and love
despite the anger and hurt I feel?

Aaah, yes, there is hope. Yes.
I can see a flickering light
at the end of my pain and anger
and that light is called hope and forgiveness

I just have to get back on my feet
and realize that prayer and time will heal
the brokenness and pain and resentments
littering my existence
Yes, yes, I will vow today, right now:

I AM A MAN WHO LOVES
I FORGIVE YOU
PLEASE FORGIVE ME

My Son

By Gary Williams

My son, my son
I look at you and see a brighter day
I am sorry as hell
Daddy went to jail
One story I might not tell
This is not my first time son
But it will be the last
Staying out in the world with you
Is the most important task

Family Relationships

By Wilbert Harmon

My relationship with my
family was once good
we had family nights
we played games
we were strong until

people jumped in our business
Lying on me about difficult things
leading me to give up
on what I wanted to do with my life
they poured salt on me

Addicted Love

by Trstan Cowart

Love is like the best drug
and the worst
To be in love is like that sweet powder
you always want it
and regret using it later
Love is like that gentle weed
the most mellow high you've ever had
Love is like crack it grabs you
and won't let go
Love is like heroin
when you can't get it off your back
but always want it back
Oh man, I'm hooked.

This Thing Called Life

by Donald Christopher Stokes

At one point in my existence,
I had lost control
of my ability to be human
I felt like an animal, wild and untamed
lacking all self discipline
My emotions got the better of me
and ravished my soul
They tortured and tormented me,
I was out of control
I was lost in total darkness, I was
blind and could not find my way
Death was tugging on me, as if the grave
had opened up to swallow me
No human strength could pull me out
of the mire I had fallen into

Then a voice called out to me, saying
*here I am, take my hand,
I'll never let go,
no matter what happens*

That voice said *believe in me
trust in me
and I will help you
make it through
this thing called life*

Change

By Phillip Wallace

Change is inevitable and strange, it can be as simple as a car switching lanes or as complex as metamorphosis—but the eyes never lie, people make changes everyday, some for better some for worse. There are so many changes taking place, the world will have changed by the time I finish this verse. Some little girls go from ugly ducklings to a beautiful swan. Such a magical transformation from a touch of God's wand. A simple drip of water changed rock to masterpiece. A person goes from addict to sober.

Incarceration's a bitch, I can't slap my wife on her sweet ass. But I will take advantage of this time I must serve and will use all of my power not to lose my nerve. So I pray to God constantly asking for His good grace, knowing with him on my side I can't fall flat. Working on myself everyday to change for better and not worse, I know all things are possible if I keep Lord God first.

To Alicia

By Phillip Wallace

As I look at my life I think of change. You see, I love the family I have been so abundantly blessed with; however, I hate a lot of the poor decisions I have made. Ones that have caused all of you pain. Isn't it staggering the bitter irony of pain? No one can hurt you like someone you love. But pain is also growth and wisdom. The key is to not make the same mistakes over and over again, which is insanity. Today I demand sanity! I claim my self respect! Lord knows I have done some fucked up shit in my lifetime, but now it's time to move on: To use all the knowledge and wisdom I have acquired during these years I have walked the earth. To make a change for the better. My vow to you My Baby Girl is that I will always be here for you until the Day I Die. You have always and will always be My Heart. All My Love.

Love Ambivalence Love

By Phillip Wallace

Love is such an extreme emotion I have often wondered how can ambivalence exist? A love/hate relationship? Two extremes seemed more like a contradiction to me however going through many trials and tribulations in my life my perception of certain situations in life have drastically changed love/hate being opposites are a contradiction for love has a tendency to be contrary Wow! pleasure and pain, love personified in the raw I have never been so upset with anyone more than the person the good book says is supposed to be one flesh with myself By the same token I have never experienced such pure bliss from anyone either Heaven and hell hot and cold land and water pleasure and pain love and hate All of these antonyms are synonyms to me Love Wow! Crime of passion People considered insane Witnessing their lover do the act with another? A father finding someone has hurt his child Emotions run wild! It was love that made me do it! It was love that made me sacrifice my life It was love that made me take a life Love is used so loosely time and time again What a travesty! What an abuse of power There should be a law against fraudulent use of the word Against immature phony people using this word who haven't a clue that Love is a four letter word capable of changing lives Do you know the meaning of the word used so nonchalantly? Love is selfless not selfish Giving of myself not taking of your heart and soul and making a mockery of someone else's feelings My wife tells me I slept with someone else Will you get mad and leave me if I were to get her pregnant? How deep do the parameters of love go? Am I the compassionate one or the fool? Do I feel empathy or disgust? Betrayal by one that is supposed to be a part of me? Love such a dangerous emotion one which should say "caution, enter at your own risk Not recommended for the weak, naïve, or close minded" a roller coaster of emotions if you are ready for it Can be rewarding can be devastating.

I am a Hero

by Gary Williams

I am a hero, you can't stop me
God is on my side now
I tell you who I be
all you gangstas
hanging on my jock
Living the good life now, rollin' on dubs
 But no more slinging rock
 I am a hero
And not leaving the hood
c-notes in my pockets
 I'm going to do some good
 if you fall down
 get back up
 you're a big dog now
 no more a pup
 hit 'em hard player
 hit 'em hard
 hero

Learning to Change

By Jeffrey Bettis

Where am I? I've never been here
before. How did I get here?
These walls won't move. I can't see the
Sun nor the moon. The doors won't open, I see
An exit sign yet can't walk out.
I feel illegal because there's no escape.
I did wrong, God forgave me, why can't they?
I UNDERSTAND NOW.
They want me to change, I want to change.
Been here four months, I'm starting to learn.
Have wisdom, have faith, endure the good things.
Never give up hope.

Captured Words / Free Thoughts, page 13

My Clock

By Jeffrey Bettis

When I'm out, in the free world, time doesn't bother me.
Now I'm trapped by these four walls, agonizing over every second
that goes by. I wish I could be with my family, my friends, my fresh
air. But I messed up and so I have to deal with all this time
on my clock. I don't sweat it, though, it's only a phase. But I have
to remember that in this jail; *it's only dead time on my clock.*

Eagle Fly Away

By Wilbert Harmon

I would love to be like an eagle
and fly around the world without
any worry or any care I'd fly high
in the sky away from everything
and wouldn't get into no trouble

Lady, I call Mom

By Dante Washington

Me and my mom used to get along
Now that I'm gone everything went wrong
My mom used to hug me and kiss me
Now all she says is how much she misses me
I'm in jail for something I didn't do
The judge is trying to slam me for something that ain't true
I want to go home and lay in my bed
And have my ex-girlfriend braid my head
Maybe I could go home and eat cocoa puffs
some ramen noodles or some reeses puffs
Man my mom used to cook some good eggs
Now all she can do is lay in the bed
wondering what happened to her son

Captured Words / Free Thoughts, page 14

This is a quarterly publication, made possible by the love and sweat of our volunteers and the hard work of imprisoned men, writers who have sought empowerment and solace in the strength of *Captured Words / Free Thoughts*.

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

Stephen Hartnett, Associate Professor of Speech Communication
University of Illinois, 244 Lincoln Hall, 702 South Wright Street
Urbana, Illinois 61801, (217) 333-1593
Hartnett@uiuc.edu

* * * * *

If you would like to join the movement fighting for a sane criminal justice system, then please contact:

THE SENTENCING PROJECT: www.sentencingproject.org
CRITICAL RESISTANCE: www.criticalresistance.org
CHAMPAIGN URBANA BOOKS-2-PRISONERS: www.books2prisoners.org
THE ANTI-WAR ANTI-RACISM EFFORT: www.anti-war.net
THE PRISON ACTIVISTS RESOURCE CENTER www.prisonactivist.org
THE JOHN HOWARD ASSOCIATION: www.john-howard.org

* * * * *

Generous support for this magazine was provided by
**THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS CENTER ON DEMOCRACY
IN A MULTIRACIAL SOCIETY:** www.cdms.ds.uiuc.edu



CDMS

Center on **Democracy**
in a **Multiracial Society**