

CAPTURED
WORDS

Free Thoughts

Writings from The Poetry Workshop
at the Denver Women's Correctional Facility

Volume 6, Spring 2009

AWAITING DAYS, *by Tabitha Furlano*

Close in my heart, but unable to reach,
You're the family I want to keep.
I made Mistakes, I should have known,
Yet this has helped me grow.
Pleading to you with these helpless cries,
You told me I shouldn't have lied.
Times have changed and the end is almost here,
I can't wait for this to clear.
Promises made, I hope to keep,
Now, Now, Mom, don't you weep.
The day is nearing,
So why are you tearing?
I promise you this:
No more lies until I die.
Knowing now what wasn't shown
Is a mark of how much I've grown.
Still, my family no longer sleeps,
Awaiting days to be complete.

A PRISONER'S WAGE, *by Tabitha Furlano*

Can you live off of twelve dollars a month?
I am staying temporarily at the Denver
Women's Correctional Facility, where I was
told that \$13.00 a month is an exceptional
wage; they told me I am "privileged" to earn
that much. We work full-time jobs in laundry,
maintenance, and kitchen crews--I was
"privileged" enough to work in the kitchen.

I cooked using a pot big enough to climb
in and hide. Stirring oatmeal, soups, and
noodles with a ladle that looks like an oar
you could use to paddle a boat. I also worked
on the serving line, preparing trays and
sliding them through a hole to reach the six
hundred plus women who entered the chow
hall. I would pick up and carry hot four-inch
stainless steel pans filled to the brim with
the meal of the day; to protect my hands, I
used oven mitts that were full of holes. I was
cooking with equipment that was used one
time too many, and cooking in a dirty kitchen
that doesn't know how to pass a health
inspection. But it doesn't get shut down, for

obvious reasons, and instead is only told to
fix the "problem" for next time. This is a full-
time job at the D.O.C., so we work five days
a week, eight hours a day, and while we work
just as hard and long as outside employees,
we are paid roughly 23 cents a day—and this
is a "privilege."

We slave away, working jobs that help the
DOC run smoothly, and wait for earning
that are supposed to be paid no later than the
second week of the month, but our pay has a
tendency to be delayed until the third week.
Who is here to enforce the rules when it's the
enforcers who break them? When my pay
finally gets deposited into my inmate banking
account, only \$10.40 is available to me. That's
because 20% (\$2.60) is taken off the top of
all inmate pay to be given for restitution: this
supposedly covers court costs, sentencing
expenses, and other fees paid to unknown
sources, allegedly to victims.

So the question is, how can you live on
\$10.40 a month?

Have you ever paid attention to how much
toothpaste you use a month, or how much
shampoo, conditioner, and deodorant? How
long does a bar of soap last? These are the
bare necessities a person needs to maintain
good hygiene. I find that without excessive
use, I go through three bars of dial soap
to wash my body and one separate bar to
wash my hands after using the restroom. I
use one bottle of shampoo, but two bottles
of conditioner and approximately one tube
of toothpaste. The cheapest shampoo and
conditioner costs just less than one dollar and
fifty cents and the cheapest toothpaste costs
just over a dollar. I use the anti-bacterial soap
that is twenty cents more than the cheapest
41 cent bar of soap. So, in order to supply
myself with the bare minimum of goods
required to maintain good hygiene, I spend
\$7.57. That leaves me \$2.83 to live on for the
rest of the month.

Although little voices from home can
brighten a dark day, those gifts are banned
if you are not allowed to call collect. And
in this prison, a pre-paid twenty minute call
costs you \$3.85. But you only have \$2.83
to spend, so you buy yourself a pen, a tablet
of paper, and a group of envelopes that cost
\$2.19. You are now left with too little money
to buy even two stamps. Because writing
home to my children makes me feel close to
them, I write often, but I am limited to how
many sheets of paper I use. Did you know
that seven sheets of paper in one envelope
will cost one stamp, but eight sheets of paper
will cost two stamps? And so my prisoner's
wage means that I work a full-time job but
cannot afford to write to my children, let
alone call them and my other loved ones.

So now I am broke, but I haven't even
discussed q-tips, razors, or lotion. How about
a soap dish, shower shoes, toenail clippers,
or a wash cloth? These items are not supplied
to inmates. Toilet paper and female pads are
issued, but if you use more than the allotted
six rolls of tissue and one twenty count of
pads, then you must buy them from the
canteen. Sharing is forbidden, so helping
out another inmate is not an option, for
that action can gain you a write up and will
result in longer prison time. If you are put
on restricted privilege status for 90 or more
days, then you can't work—so basic forms
of human kindness like sharing and helping
others are punished, cutting even further into
my prisoner's wage.

Across the United States, each state has a
law protecting an employee's rights to a
minimum wage, which is understood as the
bare minimum for a person to survive on.
When the cost of living goes up, the minimum
wage is raised as well. Yet the prisoner's wage
at the D.O.C. was decreased five years ago.
Formerly inmates could work their pay up to
\$39.64 per month; this would enable them
to maintain good hygiene, write extra letters,

and buy a few little extras to make life more
bearable. With the economy sinking deeper
and deeper into recession, receiving help
from the outside, for those of us who still
have family, is limited. Any spare change our
families have goes to our growing children,
not to us. So where's our source for help? Is it
so wrong to ask for even a dollar more a day?
We work in our own facilities, so there would
be no need to pay an outside employee \$6.75
an hour to do our laundry, mow the grass,
fix plumbing, cook, and serve food. Paying
inmates a more reasonable wage could also
raise the amount we pay for restitution.

So now that I have described to you my
prisoner's wage, let me ask you this: What
do you spend a month? Could you live on
\$13 a month?

PERFECT DARKNESS, *by Erika Baro*

The word family places me far away from
where I stand. A continuous and vivid picture
runs through my mind of me standing in the
middle of nowhere. I chose to block my loved
ones out as they tried to correct the flaws
that make me who I am. And so I became the
missing piece to the puzzle, the hole in the
only family that I have—now I'm as gone
from their lives as they are from mine.

A thundering roar stirs deep inside of me, as
my heart pounds away at the wall of my chest.
A small pool begins to fill in the corner of my
eyes. I try my hardest not to let one drop fall,
as a flame rises to my throat and chokes me.

Taming this rage is fucked up, but by now
I have grown accustomed to running into it
every day. I wonder what this makes me? Can
it scar me with time, or will it slowly begin
to sew itself into my skin? Will the reflection
that lies in the mirror be different next time?
Will a stranger suddenly appear and take over,
possessing who I was yesterday?

These endless questions devour me inside,
and break the perfect shield that I have built.
Family, this word has its way of seeping
through my pride and disturbing the emotions
that are hidden in my perfect darkness.

ANOTHER DAY, *by Erika Baro*

Laying in a pool of tears
Hidden by darkness
I wander lost between the hundreds
Of stars that decorate the night sky

As my voice whispers strangely
Driving me deeper into a madness I cannot escape
I drift farther and farther away
On an infinite path to nowhere

But just as the last drop of hope slips away
A faint ray of light falls on my face
The sunrise dries my tears
And I realize I've survived
I will live another day

YOUR EYES, *by Erika Baro*

The beauty of the sky
is found in your eyes
a perfection that cannot be described
painted by God's hand
an amazing revelation
seen with such depth

A REALM OF HELL, *by Candace Calvin*

As if it wasn't hell enough from the very
beginning, you separated me from my friends
and family and then you corralled me and a
herd of dirty whores into a cramped room,
where we waited for the inevitable. I was
stripped of my pride and thrown into solitary
confinement, with nothing but my thoughts
to question my very existence. I lay there and
wondered why I could not wake up from this
nightmare, which was consuming me like an
animal ravishing its prey. Then I was released
into a cage with animals, where I was treated
like a dog with rabies.

Now, I am no longer a human being with any
rights or dignity. The scum on the bottom
of your shoe has more rights than me. They
torture me with threats of never seeing outside
again, and tell me it would be easier if I didn't
have any family or friends. They think they
are Gods, and feed me this shit called food,
like I'm a cow at a feedlot. They think they are
puppet masters, but I am not their puppet.

I am not a wild animal that they can tame; I am
still a proud person whom they will never change.
They are miserable and I will never be brought
down to their level. They are not my God and I
will not succumb to their will. They cannot steal
my soul like the grim reaper, for I have walked
through the depths of hell to learn that their
inconsistencies only feed my fire of rage.

I once was lost like a character inside a
Quentin Tarantino film, but now I am found. I
will leave this place, but this place will never
leave them. Why? Because my pride and
dignity was never theirs to take.

LIFE ON THE EDGE, *by Raven White*

My family is like any other typical American
family, but with a spin of dysfunction. I grew up
with my twin brother and another brother two
years younger than us. We lived in a remodeled
1912 school house located on a few acres of
land, on a working horse ranch outside of a small
mountain town near Vail, Colorado.

Both of our parents were abusive alcoholics.
By the time we were thirteen, our family had
endured so much hate that our father moved out.
At first, my twin was the only one to go with him.
My little brother and I were stuck with the witch,
so we always got the blunt end of her moods. On
one of her bad days she was yelling, screaming,
and beating us with a belt. After she let us go
to our rooms, he got his backpack and bike and
snuck out the driveway. At 11 yrs old and with
nerves of steel, he got on that bike and rode 6
miles into town. He called our Father from a
payphone and never returned to the ranch.

Between the yelling, the screaming, the
comparisons to "white trash" or worse, and the
lashings from a horsewhip, my Mother was out
of control. The daily advantage of living with her
was that I rode horses every day, so I endured
the abuse. By the time my twin brother and I
were 15 we gained freedom from our personal
hells and became close. He returned to the ranch
with me because our Mother had found another
fascination—she was infatuated with her new
boyfriend, and so they spent a lot of time away
on trips, leaving us to manage the ranch.

The bond between twins is stronger than
any other; we became each other's fuel and
substance for survival. We were inseparable;
we lived together, worked together, and partied
together. I was always the leader and he was
the follower, which was OK until he started
following other people. I was fighting fires and
he had fallen susceptible to a world of drugs
and a life on the edge. I chose to fight the very
fires of hell while he let them penetrate to
the recesses of his body. I was perplexed. He
became emaciated with a bloodless complexion
of paleness and unceasing gloom. This was not
the brother I knew, with filmy dull eyes that
conveyed a corpse. His habitual drug use became
a life without reason to exist. I was saving
hundreds of dollars while he was spending
thousands. I was driven to save the life of others,
but could not save the life I valued most.

We were once each other's heroin, but those
days are gone. But my feelings of love for him
will stay with me forever, so I will dry my tears
and let him go, because he will always live his
life on the edge, and that's a place I can't go.

THE MUSEUM, A SNAPSHOT -or- IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING, *by Christopher Phillips*

Hanging helpless, suspended in despair,
strokes luminous with sadness' shading.
Loneliness in a room full of lonely others
decorated with smiles in vain irony.
Electricity fawns across the ridges of their faces,

but the barriers still stand, inflicting
their own strange twist to the lament.
With what perfection these staid creatures
endure, fulfilling the torture of timelessness.
In spite of everything, even their
creators, bravery remains intact,
existence becomes rebelliousness incarnate.
These masterpieces, expressed or otherwise,
challenge, even in their oils, even
in ways brush could never conceive, the
convention of ugliness; even when ignored.
Though the hand that brought them life
attempted to define it, they transcended.
Even now, set apart, these valiant
masterworks will be neither dominated, nor
understood. They are, themselves, the
subjects of their own inspirations,
only to be again forgotten of true value.
These fine fellows, cordoned off from
even their own public, overcome
even the most brutal observation: they exist;
In spite of everything, they live.

LIFE'S STORYBOOK, *by Christopher Phillips*

Through the depths in dreams' grasp,
Nightmares choked with angered laughs,
Wishes lost to a starless night, and noble man
with peasant's plight,
Innocents thrust into the harm,
Rotten luck despite the charm,
We understand the weeps and wail,
And see the real world's fairy tale.

Broken hearts and broken dreams,
And Pegasus with broken wings,
Broken princess without a crown,
And broken castles falling down,
Where lovers' hearts can't conquer time,
And lovers lost will never find,
A sleeping damsel struck to bed,
Her hero prince is surely dead,
And all the lives the wicked took,
Trapped in life's real storybook.

So dream you knights, and kings, and
Serfs and pages, see the lights in heaven's sky.

Take these words of simple warning...
Surely life will make you cry.

THE DAY IT ALL STARTED, *by Crystal Westbrook*

On August 28, 2008, I woke up at 6:15 and started my day off with a cigarette and a shower. Looking outside, it seemed like it would be a nice day, as the sun was shining through the window and dropping rays upon my pillow. While my boyfriend was in the shower, my grandma called on the phone and asked "Are you up? Are you getting ready?" My nerves were beginning to go wild as I waited for the time to come. About 30 minutes later, I was ready to go, with my boyfriend at my side. We stopped off at McDonalds to get a quick bite before heading to my destiny. My family waited for me to arrive, and then we all sat outside and smoked one last cigarette. I did not know exactly what was going to happen, but I thought I was ready for whatever fate was headed my way.

My family and I headed into the Larimer County Court House to await my sentencing. My attorney had told me that I would probably get probation, again, but with stronger stipulations. Never in our wildest imaginations did we expect to hear what we heard. I began to cry immediately. I had the same feeling that you get when you are interviewing for a job you really want. I stood there as the judge asked questions just like at an interview, except that the judge had total control over my freedom. I tried to avoid thinking about the future and stayed focused on the questions. But like grass pushing through concrete, the repressed feelings and fears began to poke through my resolve.

I stood there with great remorse for what I had done. I was praying that the judge would look at the case through my eyes. Then it happened: he looked me in the eyes and asked if I was capable of understanding what

he was about to say, and after I said "Yes," he said "Miss Westbrook, I hereby sentence you to two years in the department of corrections with 2 years parole."

My knees felt as if they were going to buckle; my mind went blank; it felt as if my life was over. The courtroom got so quiet that all you could hear were the cries of my family, as they realized they would be leaving the courthouse without me. Tears began to well up in our eyes and our hearts seemed to explode like a flash flood. Everything around me disappeared, except my family—I blew them kisses and waited to be pulled away. The officer slapped the cuffs on me like I had beaten-up a cop, and that was the beginning of my nightmare.

CONVICT, *by Denise Briones*

"Convict," what a label. Here in the penitentiary, we have all inadvertently acquired it for ourselves. Some of us earned the name before we were even adults, and now we can never shed the label or the stares. Are we doomed for life? Do we have a realistic chance to survive in the free world when we're applying for a job next to someone who checks the "no" box at the end of the application, where it inquires about having any prior convictions? No, we don't, we don't have a chance in hell, we are doomed.

Convict.

We are frowned upon in the judicial system; we are belittled in the DOC; we are doubted in the parole office; we are overlooked in the job market; and we are whispered about at the office. I am not minimizing what I have done, I broke the law—most of us deserve to be here for one reason or another. And so the life-altering mistakes that we have made will haunt us for the rest of our lives. The name and number we bare on the left breast of our shirts will never change. In the eyes of any respectable employer, judge, or even

police officer making a traffic stop, we will forever be suspects.

Convict.

MY MOTHER'S DENISE, *by Denise Briones*

This is not the life I'm destined to lead
Although imprisoned I'm somehow free
I've finally caught a glimpse of life's reality
I was so lost out there and too dazed to see
Got slapped in the face by the Apostles' Creed
Reminded and awakened by what I am meant to be
So shamed when priorities were overcome by
selfish greed
In my little girl I've planted a seed
I need to wake up and give her what she needs
Realizing this oh, I'm on bended knees
Praying for God to save me please!
Mold me into your likeness, my mother's Denise
Heal me oh lord so I can return to Haley
I surrender to God, come rescue me!

YOU TOLD ME, *by Denise Briones*

You told me I wouldn't go down for this
I've been down so long I can't remember our
last kiss
Three years now, I've existed in this solitary abyss

You told me that you would come and get me out
I bet that's something you conveniently
forgot about
This place now so familiar, I know every grain
in the gROUT

You told me you were responsible for my
addiction
So why couldn't you learn from my affliction?
Your oblivion and ignorance are like classic
pieces of fiction

Now there are so many things I'll never get to do
Things I would have accomplished, if not for
meeting you
Sad and selfishly, my aspirations are of no
importance in your view

You told me you'd love me until your dying day
But you're still alive and probably never even
think my name
I reap this heartache and you're laughing—to
you this is all a game

I thought your love was heaven sent
Until the real you shined through hell-bent
and spent
Everything about you, I've come to resent
You're two different people, a morbid Clark Kent
You played with my heart and affection came
and went

My biggest regret is the day we met
I wish this was a dream that I could simply forget
I wish this was a game, I would press reset
I wish somehow, somehow, you'd pay your debt
My past, my future, I would then collect
In reality I sit imprisoned to recollect

I remember a time when I considered you my
best friend
I remember thinking my love for you would
never end

How could I have been so wrong?
How did I endure such misery for so long?
How did I mistake utter hatred for being fond?

Confined to my consequences I compose this song
In which melody, you'll never hear, nor sing
along—
Tell me, what would you pray for if your
every prayer would go along?
I'll tell you what I'd do, I'd pray to forget you
as certainly as eternity is long

FAMILY LOVE, *by Crystal Westbrook*

My family is my reason for living. To be
connected as a mother, a wife, an aunt, and
as a cousin means more than just the title,
because my life revolves around them. My
grandparents, Lois and Gene Sharp, are the
most amazing people in the world. They have
always supported every member of the family,
no matter what the situation was, and have

never turned their backs on us. God bless their hearts, I think of them as my guardian angels—I love and miss them very much.

God also gave me two other blessings, my children, who tickle my heart and warm my soul. Nevaeh Tana is my 7 ½ year old daughter, and Dominic Anthony is my 4 year old son. I sometimes call Nevaeh “My Little May Flower,” because her birthday is in May; I call Dominic “My Turkey Boy” because his birthday is in November. My children mean more to me than the air I breathe.

My fiancé, Buddy Lee Barker, is the love of my life, and I plan to spend the rest of my life with him. Buddy came into my life during a time when I was feeling alone and depressed, as though my life was drifting away from me, but when I met Buddy he made me believe that we could have a better future. We plan to be married soon, and when we do, I will gain two beautiful step-children, Kaylee and Kaleb, whom I love as my very own, for they are my prince and princess.

I also feel blessed to have a sister and brother in my life. My sister, Heather May, is a strong willed woman who has been battling M.S. for a number of years. She lives her life without letting the illness get her down, and seems to do well despite it. My brother, Jeremy Ray, is my hero. I grew up without a dad, so he was the father figure I could turn to. I love him with all my heart. My brother and sister have blessed my life with six beautiful nieces and two handsome nephews.

Although we have endured many struggles over the past eight years, I believe they have made us stronger. Seven years ago, my brother was arrested and he is in prison serving a thirty-six year sentence. Not long before his arrest, we lost our mother, Edith Lowell. I like to picture her in heaven, sitting next to our Lord Jesus Christ, with a big cheeseburger smile on her face. She was a wonderful woman and I miss her—God bless her heart.

Family means that you have good days, bad days, and sometimes weird days; but we are still family, we will always love each other very much, we will always be there for each other.

BEING PREGNANT IN PRISON, *by*

Georgiana Valdez

Being pregnant is supposed to be the happiest 40 weeks of a woman’s life. Some of the joys of motherhood are finding out you are pregnant, feeling the baby move, learning the sex of the baby, choosing a name, and shopping for baby clothes. Yet I am where I never imagined I would be, locked up in prison, pregnant, and surrounded by 900 other women whose crimes range from murder to child abuse and everything in between.

I imagine that people reading this essay would like to know more details about my life inside. Well, I live in a housing unit with three floors and two offenders per room. Each cell has 2 metal desks, 2 metal trunks, metal bunk beds, a hard 3-inch-thick mattresses, 2 plastic chairs, a metal toilet, a metal sink, cement floors, and two 2ft.-by-2ft. windows. It’s the most uncomfortable living situation I could imagine.

We work 40 hours per week in either laundry or kitchen, where we are paid 60 cents a day, 43 cents after restitution is taken out. I work in the kitchen from 3:30 am ‘till 11:45 am. Kitchen work includes cooking for 900 women, cleaning pots and pans, working on the serving line, and handling food preparation—and I am expected to work until the moment I go into labor.

I am fed 3 meals a day and given a p.m. snack. However, I am not given any extra food because I am pregnant. Like all pregnant women, I have food cravings, but the only way to satisfy them is by ordering food from the canteen. But that is only if my family sends me extra money. And so the cravings I have for ice cream, watermelon,

kiwi, strawberries, and Chinese food have to be satisfied with what I can scrounge up here: inedible bread, stale crackers, rotten eggs, pink chicken, maybe a candy bar if I’m lucky.

Mentally, it’s hard here in prison, especially when pregnant; I feel like I have no one supporting me. I have built a little family of friends during my time here, but it’s easy to get depressed because I feel so isolated from the outside world. I hate being pregnant in here, and so I get sad and cry out of the frustration and loneliness caused by being deprived of enjoying my pregnancy with my loved ones.

The prison’s medical staff has tested me to see if I am lacking iron or if I have gestational diabetes, but I don’t feel that they try very hard to discover any other medical issues. I am given prenatal vitamins, needed for the baby and me, as well as iron, but not calcium. I have had firsthand experience at being denied medical care, twice already. In fact, unless I am in active labor or short of breath, I am told to put in a KITE (a request to be seen). But my issue has been going on for a month: I have hives or a rash all over my legs and arms. I have no idea why I have this rash, but since I’m not dying, I’m told to put in another KITE. I am treated like an animal and I don’t have family to come here and complain on my behalf. My only hope is that whatever this rash is, it doesn’t harm my baby.

The final insult is on delivery day, when I will be driven to the hospital in a D.O.C. van with my hands and feet shackled, escorted by a gun-toting guard. Even during the delivery, and even if I on serious pain medication, my hands and feet will be cuffed to the bed. When I go into labor, I will not be allowed to tell my family, and they will not be allowed to come visit me and my baby in the hospital. Once my baby is born, I will be allowed to spend a short time with him before he is taken away from me and given to someone else—all I will have are some pictures. Then

I will be sent down to “Unit 18,” where, even while recovering, I will again be shackled to the bed like an animal.

Being pregnant in prison is therefore mentally and physically exhausting. I hate being treated like this. I am a Mother-to-be and think that my child deserves better treatment—I committed a crime, not him.

I WANT THE POWER, *by Georgiana Valdez*

I want to be a street light
Standing strong and holding its ground
I want to be water
The fountain of life
I want the power

I want to give the orders and pass out the manila folders
I want to sign the paychecks, not take the rain-checks
I want the power

I want to feel confident like a big momma bear
Protecting her cubs
Not like a coward prowling
Through dingy night clubs
I want the power

I don’t want to be another statistic that didn’t get the job
I want to be the one who says “Yes, I am in charge”
I want the power

NOT JUST THE ROTTING ONES, *by*

Georgiana Valdez

My pulse quickens
My breathing gets faster
My cheeks flash hot
I grit my teeth and clench my fists

It’s like a poison

But then again sometimes I feel
Like a fresh ripe peach
Not just the rotting ones

My father always told me
"Be good to each other
'cause you are all you have in life"

But that advice wasn't strong enough
To stop the poison
From sending me here

RETURN, by *Isabel Elliott*

Ten years ago, when I was five, my father was murdered in front of me. The case was never solved, but the police believed that the murder was part of a gang initiation. Now, new information is opening old wounds. . .

After five years you left me defenseless
After five years you disappeared
I was left broken down like a car on the side of the road
Engine wheezing
Tires burst
Too spent to keep going

Growing up too fast had to catch up with me
I didn't have thick skin, I was bulletproof glass
This modern war touched close to home
The blue, the red, the purple
What color am I allowed to wear?
I hope you understand that your bullets will have no more effect on me

You took a melon baller to my heart so the hole would be more symmetrical
I didn't realize it was gone until I needed to love someone
Until I didn't have anymore to dole from my levied back up devices
I was sent to therapy with no purpose
Even at five you can manipulate a shrink and not give them any information
Chutes and ladders never seemed so futile
I go down a chute, "What's something you don't like?"
"Spinach"
"What makes you sad?"
"I don't know. Can I take a rain check?"

Today I found out they have evidence
Today it got a little bit harder
Today I realized I might have to face the person who ended your life
I might have to see them
After 9 and a half years of a logical explanation, my logic is failing

Tomorrow I'll find out they think someone paid to have you killed
The next day, I guess we'll have to see I've locked my monsters in the closet for nearly a decade and now they're coming out
I thought you checked the closet
The night-lights aren't going to keep these away
Soon I'll have to face my fears and jump

Jump into a brackish water of mass uncertainty
Justice handed to those I least expected
My logic has died; I have no witty solutions of helpful advice
No doctor's prescription to give myself
I can't think of anyone who would make a conscious decision to take you off this planet
Soon I'll have to look at pictures
Although I will sign a paper saying that I can't tell anyone what I saw
And although I wasn't helpful
I wish I could have been
This emotional war needs to come to an end
I'm not just blaming bad moods on you to make it easier anymore
I'm fighting
You locked me in with no choice but to bare these arms of flesh and bone
I don't do well with talking and I'm not very compassionate
Which seems to be becoming my problem
I can't just let you go like a balloon to the wind
I can't just watch you float further and further away
It's not that easy
But for now, I'm giving you back your murder
Today, you can solve it

JANUARY 3RD 2009, by *Nicole Monahan*

It all started at the mouths of others: the bad news was delivered like an airplane plummeting to the ground. It hit hard, devastating everything and everyone around it—the pain instantly filled my chest. I felt my heart shatter like a glass being thrown against the wall in a fit of anger. "No, this can't be," I said, trying to find some way to convince myself that this was not real, but I knew inside it was. I found it hard to stand on my own two feet, and as I felt the weight of the news, my tears changed from a stream to a gushing river; for days the river was filled with rapids. Even as the shock settled in, my new reality was clouded by disbelief; I found myself refusing to deal with the grief. But deep inside I know that life will never be the same, for a life has been lost too soon. A young man of only twenty-nine years is gone forever. A mother and father have lost their only child, their only son. Three little girls have lost their beloved daddy; a little boy will never get to play ball with his father. And I have lost my best friend, my soul mate, my husband.

THE BINDER, by *Jenifer Park*

My favorite day so far at Denver's St. Francis Homeless Shelter was the day I saw that binder. Sometimes random things will show up on the women's drawer. Last week there was a CD case of an obscure, pretty singer with long curly hair, and inside that case was a burned copy of a Lamb of God album. Right next to it was a small coin purse with snowmen. But on my favorite day, I saw that binder: it was grey, like office supplies grey, and it was dirty like someone had spilled spaghetti on it and wiped it off after he or she was done eating, dirty like someone stepped on it because it was knocked off a table and no one bothered to spend the effort of bending over to pick it up. But that binder was also lovely because a stack of wide-ruled paper was clipped in, but upside-down.

On the back, someone had written a line of Japanese and the word "arithmetic." And on the front was the gift that sparkled:

CONTEMPERARY LITERATURE

Don't ever let her go, she's already 2000 lightyears away

I work with a lot of older individuals, a lot of them retired teachers, and one day a lady brought that lovely binder into the laundry room to complain about the spelling error to the others. I thought, "a spelling error is all you got?" What about the beauty? The poetry? I wanted to take it; I wanted to fill its pages. It seemed like that binder held the magical potential for heartbreakingly large possibilities.

I wonder where you are, where you're going.

But I'm afraid someone who sees only that wrong "e" has thrown you away. I only hope someone has picked you up and is writing in you like I am writing in this. Maybe this someone is already 2000 lightyears away.

What does it feel like to be so far away from the drawer where I saw you first?

The sidewalks of cities

layered with

spit

fingernails

puss

& flakes of flesh

where vomit steams

& scraps of things
forgotten in the act
of forgetting other things
roll
are more clean
than us

what star at night tells you
the distance between men?

do we share that shining ant?

can you see it

rolling

the sidewalks
 grinding it down to cardboard
 food?
 doesn't it seem like a pigeon
 could reach it quicker than
 you or me
 in a rocket?
 only when we walk
 the sidewalks
 can we hear
 that whispering of stars
 that metal melody
 screaming
 themselves
 into daylight
 we look at stars
 without telescopes
 & we think
 we need
 microscopes
 to see one another
 because the distance
 between us
 is a feeling we want to feel more
 than the feelings
 that feel more
 I made you
 2000 lightyears away
 & I will bring you
 on paper
 in a shape of
 a star
 5 corners
 touching all of us.

DARKEST DAYS, *by LeAndrea Tsosie*

The feeling of warmth a nice bright sunny afternoon brings is ripped away as you are yelled at to “keep walking,” “keep moving,” or “get inside.” An uplifting conversation consisting of much-needed hope with a loved one brings rage when you are told to “lock down now.” A visit, which you have been anxiously awaiting, is cut short due to an error

made by a guard, which they only catch after they have let your visitor inside the facility. These errors are made when they fail to properly file applications or forget to correct certain mistakes made by their coworkers, who are off for the rest of the weekend. Angry thoughts fill your content mind when you patiently stand in a long line to receive an item you're entitled to, but just when your turn comes, an obnoxious person cuts in line to make you wait even longer, with no acknowledgment of their lack of compassion and respect. Day in, day out, I hear bitching by people who create the same chaos they won't claim responsibility for. Being forced to interact with people who have no common sense or common courtesy gives me no understanding of that way of life. The result makes me question the way they were brought up in life. Were they taught moral values? What kinds of lessons were they given? Did their parents talk to them? Do they even have parents, or any positive role models?

Living in an environment full of people who criticize everything brings me only guilt and shame. Enjoying a moment of laughter and fulfillment with an acquaintance who provides stability in your little world is taken when you are directed to lockdown due to a fellow inmates' disruptive behavior, like when people are fighting with each other or harming themselves. The feelings of euphoria brought on by visiting with family and friends are violated by being strip searched, or having to experience the same violation because another inmate misplaced a D.O.C item.

Anxious feeling made up of hope, dreams of a second chance to be accepted into a community, or to be paroled on the condition that you complete programs and classes, are replaced with distraught devastation when your case manager tells you that “you are denied,” “you have been set back,” “try again in six months,” “they feel you have not done enough time,” or “they think you are a public risk.”

Good days, bad days, good thoughts, bad thoughts, sadness, happiness—they all come and go with life in prison. But I always come back to the realization that I got me here, no one else. So the only thing to do is to woman up and to try to learn some wisdom from the destruction I refer to as my past.

BEAUTIFULLY INDEPENDENT, *by LeAndrea Tsosie*

In the summer of 1990, I played house with my cousins. Frankiana would take the role of the younger and troublesome sister or daughter, while my cousin Darwin would be the dad, and I would take the role of the mom. We would pretend we were a family, and we would make my playhouse into our real home. Our bikes were our cars. I would dress up our dolls and tell Frankiana that she had to babysit her little sisters. Darwin and I, as mom and dad, would act as if we were going to work. We would peddle away to the garage as our imaginations ran wild with thoughts of what we would be when we grew up. When my turn came, I said I was going to be a doctor or a nurse. As I grew older, I would always fall back on the idea of working in health care.

Eleven years later, I started attending certified nursing aid classes, which I completed and enjoyed very much. As I made my way through high school, my brothers told me to go to college, to do something for myself, and to make my future better. My parents always told me to keep up with my education, and to this day they still encourage me to increase my knowledge and to continue with my studies. These words of motivation keep me focused to move forward in nursing.

As I look back on my younger years, I try to find where I lost my true ambitions. I believe it was during my junior high years, the age when girls are trying to find their identities, who they want to hang out with, what kind of

style to maintain, and where to fit in. During that period in my adolescence only the present mattered, not the future. Self-gratification filled with joy, laughter, and excitement was the only motive at that time in my life.

Today, I see myself as a 25-year-old who grew up too fast. All the things a 21 year old would do, I had already done by the time I was 18, but not the good things like completing college, having a home, a career, or a stable financial status. Instead, I was buying alcohol while underage, sneaking into local bars, and supplying my buddies with drugs. I had accomplished the party years! I had been carried away with living on impulse, and reckless behavior, and shit, I had some good times! But just one of those good times landed me here, incarcerated, for the past five years.

Now, I do my best to gather some wisdom from each situation I face. I want to make up for the past five years, become a registered nurse, and mature into an individual filled with compassion, education, and good bedside manners. I want to be the loving wife, caring mother, giving daughter, patient sister, strong granddaughter, wise niece, understanding aunt, and joyful cousin who will never make the same mistake twice. Most of all, I want to be beautifully independent.

A GIFT TO BE CHERISHED, *by Nicole Monahan*

Instantly after conception, your baby is alive and growing, needing nutrition and love. Only twenty-one days later, he already has a heartbeat and brain waves. You most likely don't even know that this tiny being has sprung to life.

As parents, it is our responsibility and desire to protect, nurture, and care for our children. So, my question is, why would anyone take away their child's life through abortion? I could only assume it is because they do not

know just how soon their baby is already a living, breathing, little person.

I believe that if someone is having sex, then she needs to be responsible about it. It is not the baby's fault that contraceptive measures were not taken, and therefore the baby does not deserve to have his life destroyed.

If a person does not feel ready to have a child, there are many good families who are ready, families who otherwise may not ever have the privilege of having children of their own. After all, that is exactly what children are, a privilege—an amazing gift to be cherished.

MY ADDICTION, *by Sioux Nightwalker*

In the end, my addiction will probably suck the last breath from deep down inside my soul. Now I'm lost in this cold, dark steel world, without the poison in my veins, yet these have been 103 of the longest days and 2,512 of the darkest hours of my life. How much longer will I suffer without you? Will the strength ever emerge for me to leave this sickening love affair?

I know deep down inside that I will not allow this addiction to be everlasting. On more than a couple of occasions I've pulled the strength from within to escape the burning hell. But in the end, I stray again, burying myself deeper and deeper in the bottomless black hole.

This addiction has already taken many of my peoples' lives. Native Queens are always so strong, but when it comes to this poison, we have no will power. I've already buried a sister because of her addiction, and now I've inherited it too.

My soul is full of hatred, because I've been abandoned in my time of need. My only symptoms of withdrawal were the tears; at first, they fell from my eyes like Niagara Falls; now, they fall like the water from a dried up well in the middle of nowhere.

When I think of all you've done to me, my hatred boils over, and so I let my weakness show, and once again the tears fall. After everything I've given to you, and all the love, all I've ever received in return was a cold shoulder, another set of lies, and more promises of how it will change:

No more black eyes
No more busted lips
No more bruises

And then you promised me more affection and no more jealousy.
You promised me you would stop living the fast life with the fast money.
You promised me you would stop all the damn lies.

I have so much hate for you, but more for myself, because I fall for the same lies, over and over again. You'll never love me like I love you, because you have no clue what love is or how to love anybody other than yourself.

Still, at times, you treat me like a Queen, like your Queen. If only we could stay focused on us and our love, I know we could make it. You are a good man, with a good soul; we have good memories, and maybe someday we will share more good times. We have to bring them back for Neveah Angel—the innocence we made together.

BEST OF THE BEST, *by Sioux Nightwalker*

While I was growing up
I was given the best of the best
The prettiest Barbie dolls
New clothes almost everyday
Newest rides to school
We went to the best restaurants every night
My mom always made sure
That we had everything we wanted
All the other kids were jealous
Following my mother's footsteps
Was all I ever wanted
I hoped to supply Colorado

I yearned to give myself
The best of the best

But then I fell into
The fast money, the fast life
I wanted it all
But I didn't want my doors kicked in
My windows busted
Men in black entering my house
With a piece of paper
Giving them permission to ransack my life

My thoughts have changed
Dramatically now
I will give my daughters
The best of the best
But the best of the best of me
I want to wake up and look out the window
And see that little white picket fence
Hear the footsteps of my daughters
Running to say good morning
And that they love me
The best of the best

I will do whatever I have to
So I can kiss them every morning and night
My daughters will have
The best of the best of ME

NOT LET IT GO, *by Shuntille Huff*

As I sit in my cell, I look out the window.
The only thing I can see is a woman who resembles me. She seems to carry a lot of power and has an energy in her eyes that I know well: it's the picture of eagerness. I can see that she is wealthy, for she has the swagger of elegance—I see myself becoming her one day.

I want so much for myself, and especially hope to open my own beauty spa. I see myself as smart, intelligent, independent, and as a woman who can tackle any challenge that comes my way. I have high demands for myself and will reach every one of them, because I know that the only person who can stop me is myself.

Sometimes, when I think about what I want, I become overwhelmed. Eventually, I want to help teens to build better lives for themselves. To achieve this goal, I will help teen mothers who don't know what to do. I will become someone they can talk to about anything and will look up to. I know that to become this woman on top of my world, I will need to stay on the right path and have to keep myself doing what is important. It's easy to say what you are going to do, but it is hard to do what you say you are going to do.

But if I work hard, I will reach my goals: I will own my own spa, I will give teen mothers jobs, and I will help them, as much as I can, to not go down the same path as me. Because no one can make me happy until I make myself happy, I will do my best at everything I do. So that I can make a better life for myself and my family, I will never give up.

Now that I can see what I want from this woman in the window, I will not stop until I get it, for the picture is clear—I will not let it go.

THIS IS DEDICATED TO MY FRIEND: LEANDREA TSOSIE, *by Veshelle T. Howell*

You touched my life in such a way
I don't quite know just what to say
I thank you for everything that you do
A smile, a hello, a glance from across the yard
A kind and passionate ear when times are hard
I want you to know I appreciate you
I haven't met many who are so kind
You are a friend who is quite a find
You mean a lot to me
And I'll hold it close to reach my destiny
You've always been there to lend me a hand
When not many people could give a damn
So thank you again for being my friend
And if you ever need me,

I'm here till the end...

This is a quarterly publication, made possible by the love and sweat of our volunteers and the hard work of imprisoned women, writers who have sought empowerment 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:

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OPENINGS & THANKS

During the Winter and Spring of 2009, a group of us gathered in the Denver Women's Correctional Facility each Monday night and alternating Thursday nights to read, write, and edit essays, memoirs, poems, and other works. The pieces printed here are but a sliver of the materials we produced, but they offer a glimpse into the heartbreaks and hopes of everyone involved.

OUR IMPRISONED WRITERS WERE:

Erika Baro, Denise Briong, Candace Calvin, Fabitha Purlano, Shantille Huff, Nicole Monahan, Sixty Nightwalker, LeAndra Eosie, Crystal Westbrook, and Georgiana Valdez

OUR GUEST WRITERS ARE:

Jennifer Park, Isabelle Elliott, and Christopher Phillips

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