

CAPTURED  
WORDS

Free Thoughts

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

*Volume 8, Fall 2010*

## OPENINGS

During the Summer of 2010, a group of us gathered in the Denver Women's Correctional Facility (DWCF) each Tuesday night and alternating Thursday nights to try to master the basic skills of public speaking. Whenever a speech went especially well, we would then try to turn the speech into a piece of writing, either as an essay, a memoir, a poem, or some other form of communication. The pieces printed here are but a sliver of the materials we produced, but they offer a glimpse into the heartbreaks and hopes of everyone involved in our workshop.

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

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## THIS ISSUE FEATURES WRITINGS FROM THE DWCF BY:

Susan Zalatan, DeAnna Albright, Claudia Manriquez, Anita Montoya, Sayde Page, Jacquelyn Bond, Laura Martinez, Stella O'Neal, April Murphy, and Tina Olmstead.

Special notes of thanks are due to Arlie Hiltz, April Kittinger, Jennifer Brown-Sullivan, and Pancea Morris, who delivered rousing speeches that were too long (multiple dissertations on environmentalism in April's case) to print here.

### **Our guest writers from the Federal Prison Camp, in Phoenix, AZ, are:**

Twila D., Dharma McRyehew, J.H., Tanya Cerda, T. Davis, and Erin Ahearn.

### **Our guest writers from the University of Colorado Denver are:**

Linda Guthrie and Shontel Lewis.

## SPECIAL THANKS TO:

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- Jim Bullington, who directs the Adams State College program than sends college classes into Colorado's prisons.
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## THOSE IN PRISON

*by Susan Zalatan*

We want them to be responsible  
So we take away all responsibility

We want them to be positive and constructive  
So we degrade them and make them useless

We want them to be trustworthy  
So we put them where there is no trust

We want them to be nonviolent  
So we surround them with violence

We want them to be kind and loving  
So we subject them to hatred and cruelty

We want them to quit being the “tough guy”  
So we put them where only the “tough guy” survives

We want them to quit exploiting us  
So we cage them where they exploit each other

We want them to take control of their lives  
So we make them dependent on us

We want them to be a part of our community  
So we separate them from our community

You want us to have self-worth  
So you destroy our self-worth  
And call it “corrections.”

# WOMEN'S OPPRESSION AND A CALL TO ACTION

*by DeAnna Albright*

We women are the most oppressed group on the face of the planet. In every culture, nation, and religion, we are second class citizens. In our male-dominated society, we have had to fight for the right to vote, to work, to own land, to divorce, to not be treated as the property of our fathers and husbands. We have been abused by patriarchal forces since the time of Eve! We have been subordinated by men, dominated sexually, and deemed biologically inferior and suitable only for sex and reproduction.

*But we have always been far more than this.*

In 1968, the first Miss America pageant was held in New York City. The women's movement was there. In fact, this was where the feminist bra burning myth began! The movement asked the fundamental question: "Can make-up mask the scars of our oppression?"

The beauty fanatics crowned a 16 year old child Miss America, declaring that a teenager exemplified the pinnacle of beauty and womanhood in the United States. This industry created and enforced standards of beauty that are upheld to this day.

A national survey conducted by Rita Freeman, author of *Body Love*, asked 200 women the following question: "If you could change one thing on your body, what would it be?" Not a single woman answered "nothing." The survey also asked "At what age do women reach the peak of their attractiveness?" The winning answer was 33—apparently it's all downhill from there!

Whether we want to admit it or not, women are active players in the beauty game. We lower our own self esteem, as well as that of other women, by absorbing the unattainable ideal of beauty fashioned by the beauty industry. We then compare that falsehood to our actual appearance.

So here is how I propose that we begin to solve the problem:

1. Boycott the practice of comparison.
2. Start a letter campaign protesting the small range of women's sizes and shapes depicted in magazine advertisements marketed towards women.
3. Resist the wide range of plastic surgeries, including labium plasty, otherwise known as "designer vaginas."
4. Raise awareness of the social and medical risks of plastic surgery. With each surgery, we bow down to the societal abuses we've fought against, allowing ourselves to be identified exclusively as sex objects.

And now I need to ask you to start to visualize a different you . . .

Picture your ideal self... Maybe you're 20 pounds lighter with shapely lips, or 10 years younger and have a flatter stomach. Or maybe you're big breasted with thin thighs...

*Now tip that mirror over and shatter it.*

See yourself instead in your every day appearance--that's beauty.

The Immigrant in search of freedom and prosperity, holding a child in her arms--that's beauty.

The 56 year old career woman who speaks four different languages and closes multi-million dollar deals--that's beauty.

The woman with a scar on her knee from partying too hard at Pride--that's beauty.

The woman who can give you laugh lines with just the thought of her--that's beauty.

So let us start now: love your body, love your mind, learn our histories, because women, *we are so beautiful.*

## **UNA MUJER DE VALOR**

*by Claudia L. Manríquez*

Aquel que busca la voluntad de DIOS en toda decisión  
Es un ser humano guiado por el Espíritu Santo  
Ya no vive para si mismo, vive para agradar a su SEÑOR  
Piensa antes de hablar y actuar, porque ya es alguien sabio

Aquel que sabe lo que es sufrir y esta arto  
Que ya no pierda el tiempo y tome ese paso  
Pongase ante los pies del que puede restaurarlo  
Solamente asi podra recibir sanación y moldación

Todo ser humano necesita guianza y estructura  
Si ve que su manera lo ha llevado a una vida de tortura  
Obviamente esta perdido, que busque la salida  
Sola hay una forma de obtener paz y alegría

Esto viene de alguien que en lo mas profundo se undio  
Cuando dijeron que pasaria el resto de su vida en una prisión  
Si hera yo—yo no pude sola pero DIOS me rescato  
Primero cambio mi mente, alma y corazón.

Luego cambio mi sentencia ~ Gloria a DIOS  
Hoy soy una mujer fuerte ~ llena de valor  
Una guerrera que trai almas, honra y Gloria a mi SEÑOR  
Un día vivire para siempre con el dueño de mi corazón

## HOW TO BE FREE

*by Anita Montoya*

Dark Cultivates Pain  
Pain Cultivates Addiction  
Addiction Cultivates Loss  
Loss Cultivates Mourning

Mourning—Loss—Addiction—Pain

This was my life  
Before I landed in the system  
Stopped spinning out of control  
And began to find myself

Sunlight Cultivates Struggles  
Struggles Cultivate Strength  
Strength Cultivates Hope  
Hope Cultivates Love

Struggles—Strength—Hope—Love

This is my life  
Now that I've learned  
I control my destiny

Strange, isn't it?  
I had to get thrown into prison  
To finally learn  
How to be free

## LOOKING OUT FROM MONA'S

*by Shontel Lewis*

Looking out from Mona's  
Wanting more for my people  
Why aren't we able to unite?  
Ignite an uproar  
That will demand the attention of the world

I adore my people  
How deep can we go  
To reach our full potential?  
Wishing community unity was a given  
Not a hallucination  
Or just a saying  
Wondering where my place is in this dream  
I need the right team  
So we can be a powerful machine  
Spread our wings  
And achieve  
The Black American dream  
Give our community the means  
Necessary for healing  
Cultural uplifting  
Erasing self-hatred  
And remember that this very spot  
Was the epitome of blackness  
Business, expenses, parades, celebrations  
A collaboration of our people  
United as one to achieve  
The Black American dream  
How will we achieve that?  
Looking out from Mona's  
I see my people hurt, confused  
Lost in this poverty lifestyle  
Wondering as to how  
I as a child  
Hung out with this same crowd  
Yet avoided the life of my friends  
Addicted to drugs  
Used like rugs  
Trapped in a gang  
Loss of their real name  
Being called "Lil C Loc Cuz"



Looking out from Mona's  
I wonder how this family business was able to strive  
When everyone suffers hard times  
And Blackberries still remains in our minds  
Where the corners are all lined  
With our youth  
Decked in their true blue  
Chasing the dream they have been shown  
On the videos  
Alone in their homes  
Parents gone  
Grandparents step in  
But when will we step up?  
My people must get up  
Wake up  
And no longer accept defeat  
I wonder what they see  
Hopefully the same conviction as me  
While looking out from Mona's

*Editor's note: Mona's is the soul food landmark in Denver's Five-Points neighborhood, the historical center of African American Denver. Blackberries was a local, alternative coffee shop that closed in the Summer of 2010.*

# LEARNING TO LIVE WITH THE VOICES IN MY HEAD

*by Sayde Page*

Why is it that when people talk to God it is called prayer, but when voices speak to us it is called schizophrenia? In reading this essay, I would like you to have a change of heart about people suffering from an illness called schizophrenia, a disorder that strikes one percent of Americans. I hope that after reading this essay, you will take a stand to help people suffering from this illness.

First, I want you to envision a fourteen year old girl, one who did not have medication to help her deal with the voices she heard. The voices always told her that someone was trying to hurt her. She was scared because she did not know where the voices were coming from. One day her voices were really bad. She stood outside, throwing rocks at her house, trying to make the voices go away. Her grandmother, who had been a loving mother to her, came outside to tell her to come in and to stop throwing rocks. The girl saw that her grandmother had a broom in her hand; the voices told her that her grandmother was going to hit her with the broom. The girl picked up a rock and threw it at her grandmother, hitting her in the head and busting it open.

Can you imagine an illness that can make a little girl do something like that to someone she loves? That girl was me. Now envision me at the age of twenty-six, being harassed by a police officer. It happened on July 29, 2005. I was arrested on a warrant for not paying my fine. I was going through a particularly rough time in my life, and had been using drugs to ease my voices. The arresting officer knew about my illness from reports on his computer. Moreover, police officers are trained to use great caution when dealing with people with mental illness. Nonetheless, the arresting officer began calling me names: He called me *bitch*, *crack head*, and other unprintable things, and his verbal assault triggered my voices. They told me that the police officer was going to hurt me, so I kicked the arresting officer in the groin and then spit on his partner. After they wrestled me into the car, I started ramming my head into the window in an attempt to stop the voices, but I ended up busting my head open. An arrest for a stupid hundred dollar fine led to an officer dehumanizing me, which led to me assaulting two police officers and receiving a charge of criminal mischief for knocking the police window loose. The final result: I landed in prison with a four year sentence.

Having told you about how my voices landed me in prison, I want now to share with you ways that you can help support people with schizophrenia. First, if you share my illness, you can go to a meeting of Schizophrenia Anonymous, a self-help support group for people diagnosed with schizophrenia or schizophrenia-related illness. The group encourages members to take positive steps towards recovery from their illness. Second, anyone can volunteer at a Drop-in-Center for people with chronic illness. Such facilities offer housing and clothing, eyeglasses, haircuts, and other daily needs. Third, you can show your support by letting people suffering from schizophrenia know that you care by being there for them and listening.

Finally, I want everyone who reads this essay to know that I am now a changed woman who is able to control her voices by taking medications on a daily basis. I have also learned new coping skills to block out my voices. I have built a circle of friends who support me when I am down, so I am not alone anymore. As you can understand, the more support a person has with this illness, the healthier she will be.

As someone who has learned to live with the voices in her head, I want to close by asking you a favor: Please have confidence in those of us who suffer from schizophrenia, and we will confide in you. Find a friend, be a friend.

**Editorial Note:** To learn more about schizophrenia, visit [www.schizophrenia.com](http://www.schizophrenia.com); to locate a Schizophrenia Anonymous meeting near you, go to [www.sanonymous.org](http://www.sanonymous.org); to find a Drop-in-Center, go to [www.charg.org](http://www.charg.org).

## VIOLENCE & LOSS

*by Jacquelyn Bond*

A life inside slowly began to die, even before taking his first breath in the world. With every beat of my heart and every blow from their hands, Death was ticking closer and closer. I tried to curl in a tight ball and I prayed for God to keep me and this child safe. While he clung to life, still inside my womb, I began to foresee his death, and possibly my own. Questions ran deep through my mind, and in my heart I was screaming *"I'm sorry, my child, no more fight can I find!"* In the end, my son did not escape death that fateful night, and even though I am alive today, a part of me died with him.

To place your child into the ground knowing that you will never hold his hand or watch him play is the hardest situation a mother can face. A mother's primal instinct is to protect her child no matter what the situation, but I must tell you that there are some situations so out of our control that no matter how much we would wish to trade our lives for our children's, it can't be done, the power is not in our hands. This happened to me. It is my loss and my tragedy.

This is my story.

On October 10, 2009, I was nine months pregnant with my second child. I was the wife of a street hustler and drug dealer, who was also my best friend. I was five days away from my due date and was supposed to have been out of the state, in Indianapolis with my husband. Instead, I stayed home because I was having pre-labor contractions. My husband and a partner of his had quarreled a few months into my pregnancy, and there were a lot of threats in the streets between the two of them. On the night of October 10, I was home alone, just getting out of the shower, when two men broke into my townhome and proceeded to rob us. One of the men was my husband's ex-partner and the other was an acquaintance of his. My presence startled them. They clearly hadn't expected to find me there, assuming I had gone out of town with my husband. Because I had seen their faces and would be able to identify them, I would receive the most dreadful beating one could ever imagine. The two of them pistol-whipped me and beat me into oblivion. I could hardly hold myself together with all the blows. Even so, my primal instinct kicked in and I did everything in my power to protect my child. I would not give in. I remember one of the guys saying, "Hey man, she isn't going down without a fight and I am not shooting her. I'm out!" The other man kicked me in the back and I fell hard into the corner of the sink, slamming the middle of my nine months pregnant belly. I immediately felt fluid running down my legs. I clutched my stomach and all I remember from that moment was that I was on my knees praying for God to save my child and me.

The next thing I remember was being told that my child was brain dead with a severed spinal cord, and that the surgeon had almost lost me due to the blood loss.

I held my child several days later. He was swathed in a powder-blue jumpsuit and wrapped in his blanket, as if he were only sleeping. For two hours, during his celebration of life ceremony, I held this innocent child who had lost his life to a vicious death. I placed my child into the casket instead of a bassinet; I put him into the ground instead of into the car to go home.

I still feel loss, I still grieve, I still wake up clutching my stomach with silent screams. I have been through grief and loss counseling and I have sought out emotional release. And even though my child is dead, I remember that he still breathes in my soul and lives in Heaven. Somewhere, Dequarius Ke'Shawn Marques Bond is free. He is my angel, always watching over me and his family.

*continues on next page*

Having been a victim of violence, and one that resulted in death, I pledge to walk out of these fences and take my place in "Stopping the Cycle of Violence." I will find somewhere that I can volunteer, speaking to, and maybe even counseling, youth at risk, gang bangers in juvenile halls, or kids in group homes. I will enlighten them on recognizing the needless violence behind the "dope game" and the "street life." They too are someone's child, once innocent in the womb. The fact remains that we are guaranteed only one thing after life is created, and that is death, so let it be timely and arrive only after much living. Don't let it happen from needless violence done to someone you love, or to yourself.

So please, take a stand with me against violence by helping to promote peace and understanding.

## GUEST AUTHORS FROM THE ARIZONA FEDERAL PRISON CAMP

The texts included here were written by women enrolled in a creative writing and communication class at the Federal Prison Camp (FPC) in Phoenix, Arizona. This class is taught by Dr. Kristin Bervig Valentine, Professor Emerita of Communication and Women's Studies at Arizona State University. Strong support for enhanced educational opportunities for the women incarcerated at this facility is demonstrated by Associate Warden Steven Southall, Supervisor of Education Karrie Martin, Unit Director Michael Jenkins, and Education Specialist Stephen McVey. The college program in general, and the creative writing and communication class in particular, has also benefitted from the work of volunteers from Arizona State University and from Heidi Jaeger and Dr. Jo Jorgensen at Rio Salado College in Phoenix.

### GOING HOME

*by Twila D.*

I pull open the shade next to my window seat. Outside the rain pelts the pane like a thousand confused insects. I am as giddy as a child on Christmas morning. Over the speakers I hear the officious voice of a flight attendant saying "please fasten your seat belts in preparation for landing." As the aircraft descends, the pressure in the cabin builds, making my ears pop and the butterflies in my stomach dance.

To relieve my apprehension, I observe the other passengers for the next few minutes. Smartly dressed in the latest styles, and in a rainbow of colors, they all look so confident that I feel inadequate, as I am dressed in a pair of gray sweatpants and an equally gray t-shirt. With no forewarning, I am overcome by fear and doubt. I haven't seen my family in over eight years. What if they don't recognize me? Prison life has aged me so much that they might not. Worse yet is the next thought: "What if nobody comes to pick me up?"

The plane lands without incident and I gather my meager belongings, consisting only of a scantily packed gray mesh bag and a well-read paperback novel. As I de-board the plane onto the tarmac, I am overwhelmed by the sense of home and stand for a moment in awe of the majestic mountains and dense rugged terrain. The clean crisp air of southeast Alaska carries the scent of Sitka spruce, hemlock, and cedar trees. The sea spray tastes salmon rich. Overhead the seagulls caw as they compete for airspace. In the distance a tugboat blows its horn as it leaves the harbor.

Alone on the tarmac, I stand still in the rain. I close my eyes and inhale deeply, breathing in memories of such a long time ago that, for the moment, I am perfectly content and my spirits begin to lift. When I open my eyes again, I see my brothers, looking more distinguished than I had remembered them, or maybe it's just their gray hair. Behind my brothers, my heart jumps at the sight of my three sons, looking like younger versions of their uncles. Mere teenagers when I went away, they've grown into strapping young men with their charming wives and offspring gathered around them. My grandchildren are all dark haired with light skin and mystic cloudless blue eyes, as alluring as a glacier in the sun. I smile when I realize they look like me; all my fears and doubts disappear as my family welcomes me home.

## HAIKU

*by J. H.*

Thoughts without action  
Daydreaming is what it's called  
Premeditated

Find yourself they said  
Self is not something you find  
Self is created

Action without thought  
Wouldn't that be a nightmare  
Lunatic state?

## HAIKU

*by D. McRyfew*

The day was hazy  
The girl sat upon the rock  
The smell of daisies

The taste of candy  
She licks her lips and smiles  
And wishes for rain

## HAIKU

*by Tanya Cerda*

Feelings so intense  
My love, my one and only,  
4-sure, SOMETHING FIERCE!

Gazing in your eyes  
I see deeper than you think  
Why do you hold back?

Early morning skies  
So peaceful, the pink sunrise  
Watching the birds fly

## HAIKU

*by T. Davis*

Totems stand, pride of  
People from long ago whose  
Legends never die.

My budding beauty  
Like an incessant vine  
Will entwine the world

## HAIKU

*by Erin A'hearn*

I can taste Freedom  
Tangy sweet morsel of hope  
Savoring the taste

## MY BEAUTIFUL CHILD

*by Laura Martínez*

I can't be there  
Because of choices I made  
I knew they would hurt you  
But couldn't stop  
Because of my addiction

The only thing I can ask you  
Is to please learn from my mistakes

Make the right choices  
And surround yourself  
With caring, positive people

I'm not mad at you  
I'm mad at myself  
And even though I'm not there  
I will always love you  
my beautiful child



## DRIVE-THRU DEATH

*by Anita Montoya*

I offer a slow hard death  
But to parents on the move  
I'm an innocent quick fix:  
Fast food, drive-thru,  
Supersize me!

I'm a bad habit that sticks.

I'm so easy  
I make it effortless  
And you all seem so eager  
to destroy your own hearts.

I like to start 'em off young and  
School the youth in instant gratification,  
Hence building a consumer culture  
basting in buckets of gravy—that's me!

I've got a license to kill  
But never get my fill.

I attack children and eat their self-esteem  
While devouring adults' hopes and dreams.

They allow me to shorten their life expectancy.  
I've found fertile ground in their complacency.

## SHADOW ON MY SOUL

*by Linda Guthrie*

My love rented me a ship with crew and  
we sailed through San Francisco Bay.  
Cloudy Skies, threatening rain, and a cold,  
wet dark chill settled deep in my bones.

We sailed underneath the famous Bridge and  
stopped exactly where the bay met the sea.  
I stood with the dense small box grasped tightly and  
waited, wet, while the Captain turned the ship upwind.

I walked alone to the edge of the gangplank  
Where Captain caught my eye  
uncertain if I would jump.  
My words already said, tears falling soundlessly into the open box.  
Is here OK? Not under ground in the dark.

Surprised by bits of bone, not just fine grey dust  
Lifting you on a breeze, I see why we turned upwind  
or you'd blow and dust our Captain's deck  
Set with teak tables, fine wine, linens white  
and food that goes uneaten.

This one last act is mine alone  
for I brought you in and I shall see you out.  
Scattered out far as I could reach, then sinking into deep dark blue.  
My fingers dip and stretch outward as you slip between them.  
My small boy made smaller still.

The sun dared come out  
and just in time  
to sear the darkest moment's  
shadow on my soul.

## **STRENGTH UNKNOWN**

*by Laura Martínez*

For all the pain that we suffer  
For every sickness that we endure  
The Lord gathers our tears

He remains near  
And never lets you go  
He's there to hold every doubt  
About life's mysteries  
In his loving hands

Sharing with the world  
His strength unknown

## PROBATION

*by Shontel Lewis*

The rules of probation encourage me to disengage  
Internal emotions rampage  
Frustrated because my PO sets the stage  
As if she knows what is best for me  
If you are so smart, “just what might that be?”  
All these silly classes I do not need  
Your supervisor agrees  
But you see my wings  
My chance to be free  
So you hold me in captivity  
You want to keep me in this system  
No support of successful completion  
Just the depletion  
Of every positive thing I have going on for me  
I would coin it jealousy  
But I’m afraid that you may be  
Institutionalized  
To no one’s surprise  
You try to disguise  
The reason behind your lies  
in the “scope of your work”  
You fool me not  
I don’t use dope  
I don’t smoke  
Yet everyday I’m forced to call the UA hotline  
On my own dime  
You waste my time  
I sit and wait hours for our meetings  
This is not in my best interest  
But yours  
If this was about me  
Then these meetings would NOT compromise my academics  
No games no gimmicks  
Just the desire to mimic  
What a productive member of society provides  
I want to be more than just on probation  
In contemplation  
Under your control  
This life I choose  
But does not define me  
It is temporary  
But in my record I will also carry this mess  
I want to be successful, I will be successful  
But how can you help me become successful  
When I’m trapped on probation?

## INDUSTRY OF BEAUTY

*by DeAnna Albright*

I want to raise some questions about what is most important to women in our society. For even sitting here, in prison, women are torturing themselves over their self image. A fellow prisoner told me about a friend of hers who lay in bed paralyzed and fearing death from drinking too much baking soda, a prison remedy for triggering rapid weight loss by inducing vomiting or diarrhea.

What I want to ask is this: what's so wrong with our natural bodies? Why do we succumb to a homogenized image of what a woman should look like, no matter what her race, creed or color? As thought provoking, brilliant women, why do we continue to take shots at our health and self esteem by following this sexist industry? And what is the future of this insulting and harmful "beauty" industry?

Plastic surgery is the most extreme measure. If beauty is only skin deep, then why do we cut ourselves to obtain it? Cosmetic surgeries are readily available. Liposuction costs eight thousand dollars; breast augmentation costs between five to ten thousand (depending on the damage to your breast). The local newspaper now advertises a package product called the "Mommy Make Over." I am insulted as a woman and a mother. What is wrong with a mother's body, whether she has breast-fed, gotten stretch marks, or gained weight?

Instead of celebrating our power and knowledge, women are making a collective decision to erase the natural changes brought forth by motherhood. The same self intolerance is evidenced by the profusion of procedures to erase the effects of aging, including face lifts, breast lifts, and removing age spots. This non-acceptance of one's self has also spread to ethnicity: Asians have their eyes rounded; Blacks have their noses narrowed or thin their lips; white women remove bumps on the bridges of their noses. I can't even look through the *Denver Post* without seeing our perfect imperfections exploited--all to profit an industry built upon damaging our feminine spirit.

Have we become so vain that we are no longer able to accept what is natural for us as human beings? At what point will women become insulted by the beauty industry's constant poking, prodding, and ridiculing of our physicality? When will women refuse to buy into this industry's artificial standards of what is beautiful?

In the next ten years the image industry will take advantage of medical advancements being made in stem cell research. Because a stem cell is a blank slate, it has the potential to be turned into a nerve, a muscle, a retina, or breast tissue. The industry's idea of progress will be to use stem cells to create new collagen to cure wrinkles, to grow new hair, to "cure" gray hair, and to restore skin pigmentation. We will become walking petri dishes.

What I fear most, however, is that when the industry has finished with us women, it will move on to our children. The future of stem cell research and gene splicing suggests that designer children are on the horizon.

## **SCHOOLS, RACE, AND THE MIDDLE CLASS ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

*by Stella O'Neal*

Our nation's schools are failing our children. Black students lag behind white students from the very first day of kindergarten, a disparity that is as evident among suburban middle class children as it is among their inner city peers.

For example, let us consider Teaneck High School in northern New Jersey, which sits in a middle class neighborhood just a 15 minutes drive away from New York City. The school serves approximately 1,350 students and reflects America's rich diversity. It provides academic advantages usually reserved for the elite private schools of Manhattan. About 28 different languages are spoken in the halls and Black, White, Latino, and Asian students from all walks of life mingle in the cafeteria. The African American students, making up 54 percent of the student body, claim as many advantages as any other group. Some are children of cardiologists, college professors, lawyers and corporate executives. One might believe that the national educational gap between Black and White students would not apply in this largely middle class setting. Unfortunately, that is far from the truth.

According to Teaneck's principal, Angela R. Davis, an African American, test scores indicate that about a third of the Black and Latino students do not perform as well as their White schoolmates. Even more surprising, this achievement gap persists even for those Black and Latino children who come from affluent households. Thus, even with no income disparity, the Black and Latino students have more academic struggles than their White peers.

A 2009 study of same age students backs up the data from Teaneck High School. It found that White students significantly outperform Black and Latino students, regardless of the income level of their parents. The study also noted that poor White students tend not to do as well as rich White students, but perform on almost the same level as wealthy Black students. The low-income Black students are thus the furthest behind academically.

Statistics from a 2009 report from the National Center for Education show that Black students scored an average of 27 points lower than their White peers on fourth grade reading and 26 points lower on eighth grade reading. On math tests, Black students trailed their White schoolmates by 26 points in the fourth grade; the gap rose to 31 points by the eighth grade. These results are based on tests administered in 2007 and reveal an achievement gap in almost every state in the union. It is no wonder that leaders like President Barack Obama have declared the educational situation in this country a national crisis. Some experts have even called it the greatest civil rights challenge of our time.

What causes this achievement gap?

A 1995 study showed that by age 4, children of professional parents hear about 45 million words on average, while children of working class parents hear about 26 million, and children of welfare parents only hear 13 million. Research by Ronald F. Ferguson shows that only 47 percent of college-educated Black parents read to their kindergarten children daily, compared with 60 percent of similarly educated White parents. In addition, college-educated Black parents on average had about half as many books in their homes as similarly educated White parents.

It is never too early to start to support our children as learners. Something as simple as a bedtime story matters in creating teaching moments. People may think it is cute when you read the same story every night, so that your child can recite a book back to you, but this doesn't add as much to your child's cognitive growth as reading different books. It is more beneficial to utilize a variety of stories, and to engage your children in discussion of their contents.

Fortunately, many Black parents are radically rethinking the roles they can play in their children's school lives. Whether they are struggling in cities or living in comfortable suburbs, they are taking education initiatives rather than waiting for a broken education system to right itself. They are enrolling their elementary school children in foreign language programs; taking their middle school children on college tours; and forgoing trips to theme parks and instead traveling to historic sites and nature preserves. In other words, they are adopting the aggressive, proven strategies for boosting performance that many plugged-in, affluent White parents take on almost as soon as their children are born.

Medical experts agree that the critical years for child development are from birth through age 3. These formative years impact future learning. Edmund W. Gordon, a retired Yale professor and co-creator of the Head Start Program, engages in what he describes as "School Marketing" to convince Black parents that supporting their children's educational development is just as important as getting them to school. He advocates the need for supplementing Black children's education at home, in much the same way many White middle-class parents do.

We need to make our Black children fearless and courageous academically. Phillip Jackson, founder of the Black Star Project, once said, "Too often we teach our children to be passive and obedient, and they are getting destroyed." He continued with a poignant reprimand, "In the year 1908, if you were Black and you were not passive and obedient, you could get killed. Now, if you are passive and obedient about education, you will die." Take this to heart.

## **I HAVE TO LOVE MYSELF**

*by April Murphy*

Hope was gone  
Only faith was left  
For the love I needed  
Was lost doing meth

Now I've had four years in prison  
To contemplate life  
And have learned  
That the love I want  
Won't come without a fight

Now I know  
The love I need  
Has to start with me  
*I have to love myself*



## THESE FEET

*by Tina Olmstead*

These feet have walked miles  
To get to nowhere important  
These feet have run through empty streets  
To get hold of something potent  
These feet have walked down cold hallways  
In shackles and jailhouse sandals  
These feet have kicked, and broken, and hurt . . .

Yet these feet still survive today  
And are ready to walk for miles  
With the lost and lonely hearts

I was sent to tell them of a King  
Who can make a torn life  
Into beautiful art

I was sent to walk the streets  
Where hope and love are rare  
To tell the world that Jesus cares

I was sent to be a soldier  
To show the doubtful people  
That faith is not just a façade

## BIRTHDAY ROSES

*by Yvonne Mabry*





I study



I write



I excel



I discover



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## **BY HEART:**

### **Poetry, Prison, and Two Lives**

Judith Tannenbaum and  
Spoon Jackson

*“A boy with no one to listen becomes a man in prison  
for life and discovers his mind can be free.*

*A woman enters prison to teach and becomes his first listener.*

*And so begins a twenty-five year friendship between  
two gifted writers and poets. The result is **By Heart** –  
a book that will anger you, give you hope,  
and break your heart.”*

— Gloria Steinem

Judith Tannenbaum and Spoon Jackson met at San Quentin State Prison in 1985. For over two decades they have conferred, corresponded and sometimes collaborated, producing very different bodies of work resting on the same understanding: that human beings have one foot in darkness, the other in light.

In this beautifully crafted exploration – part memoir, part essay – Tannenbaum and Jackson consider art, education, prison, possibility, and which children our world nurtures and which it shuns. At the book's core are two stories that speak for human imagination, spirit, and expression.

Learn more about *By Heart* — and about Judith and Spoon — at  
<http://www.newvillagepress.net/book/?GCOI=97660100959910>

Watch the book trailer here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8684AjtFYU>

And here's the link to Spoon reading from the book:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaVfMYph9Yk&feature=related>

You can see upcoming readings and more information on the home page  
of Judith's website: <http://www.judithtannenbaum.com>.

You can also read more about prison arts and teaching arts on this site.