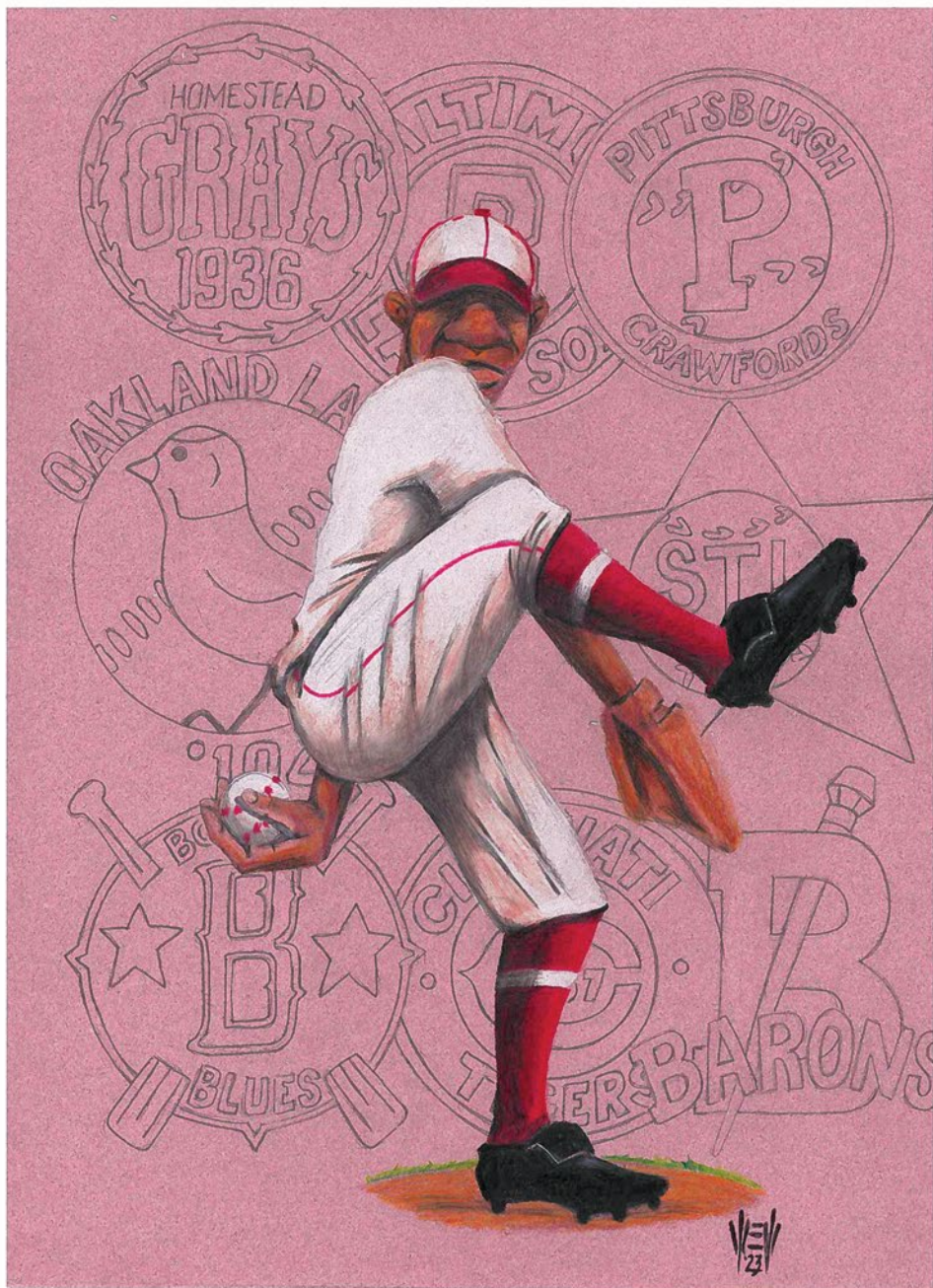


# Captured / Free Words / Thoughts



**Writing & Art From America's Prisons**  
**20th Anniversary Edition - Winter 2024**

**CAPTURED WORDS/FREE THOUGHTS**  
**—Writing and Art from America’s Prisons—**  
**20th Anniversary Edition, Winter 2024**

*Captured Words/Free Thoughts* offers testimony from America’s prisons and prison-impacted communities. This issue includes poems, stories, letters, essays, and art made by colleagues incarcerated in Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

Volume 20 was compiled and edited by Benjamin Boyce, Meghan Cosgrove, and Stephen Hartnett. Layout and design were handled by Julia Beverly. Mailing-list management and financial responsibility were handled by Michelle Medal.

**MISSION STATEMENT**

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

**THANKS**

- Our work inside Colorado prisons has been funded for the past three years by a generous grant from the University of Colorado, with great thanks to President Todd Saliman and Vice President for Academic Affairs Mike Lightner. CU Regent Sue Sharkey has been a tireless advocate. At CU Denver, thanks to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Pam Jansma, and the Director of Continuing Education, Laurel Dodds. Kristen Salsbury has been a relentless trouble-shooter. Liz Blazer and Krystal Fox have helped us navigate the CU system while Shana Medah and Cecilio Alvarez have offered expert academic counseling to our students. Provost Constancio Nakuma and Managing Director of Partnerships and Innovation Anthony Graves have offered expertise and encouragement.
- Thanks to the CU Denver Department of Communication Chair, Dr. Lisa Keranen, for her support for this project, and thanks to the Department’s awesome Program Assistant, Michelle Medal, for all of her support on this and so many other projects.
- Thanks to the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDC) for supporting our project, with special thanks to everyone at the Education Department, especially Melissa Smith and Leigh Burrows. We are grateful for the good work of everyone in Faith and Citizen Programs—thank you.
- At the Sterling Correctional Facility, thanks to our education liaisons Melinda Saffer, Nicole Armstrong, Kelli Reyes, Kelley Harms, Jill West, Sally Marx, and Troy Null.
- At the Territorial Correctional Facility, thanks to our education liaisons Emily Bell-Lujan, Dylan Lile, and Kirk Snyder.

- At the Four Mile Correctional Facility, thanks to our education liaisons Kayla Prosser and Jacy Freeborn.
- At the Trinidad Correctional Facility, thanks to our education liaisons Angela Hadaway and Martin Jiles.
- At the Skyline Correctional Facility, thanks to Warden Steven Bourne and educational liaison Joseph Wood.
- Thanks to Dr. Kamran Afary at California State University, Los Angeles, for his work inside California prisons and for sharing his students' work with us.
- We are grateful for the good work of the Justice Arts Coalition (JAC), where we send our thanks and solidarity to Wendy Jason, Joslyn Lapinski, and their team.
- For their leadership in emerging conversations about education and arts in prisons, and for supporting this project in particular, thanks to Allan Wachendorfer and Amanda Nowak of the Vera Institute for Justice and to Mary Gould and Edén Cortes of the Mountain West Equity Collaborative.
- From the emerging network of Colorado educators working to build better futures, thanks to Jim Bullington and Lauren Reed from Adams State University; Samantha Kalinowski from the Colorado Community College System; Carol Neal from Colorado College; Ashley Hamilton and her team at the Denver University Performing Arts Initiative; LiAnn Richardson from Trinidad State College; Amanda Corum from Pueblo Community College; and Bryan Hall from Regis University.
- For their generous financial assistance helping us to print and distribute this magazine, thanks to the Max and Anna Levinson Foundation (<https://www.levinsonfoundation.org>), where they bring a joyous energy to working for social justice.
- Many of the pieces published herein are the result of partnerships with arts and education colleagues doing good work in facilities around the nation. Dr. Jo Metcalf, visiting from the UK, and Dr. Kristen Drybread, from CU Boulder, have been facilitating writing programs in Colorado and California. At the Lompoc Federal Facility in CA, they work with Jolene Vandiver; at the Santa Barbara County Jail, they work with Alice Perez. We are grateful to these colleagues for their leadership and for encouraging their students to share their work with us.

### **CONTRIBUTORS & SUBSCRIBERS**

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

We want to share our great thanks with everyone who contributed work for this issue, including the many authors and artists whose work does not appear herein. We are a volunteer operation, and we are stretched thin, but we try to write to every contributor with notes on our decision process, and we hope

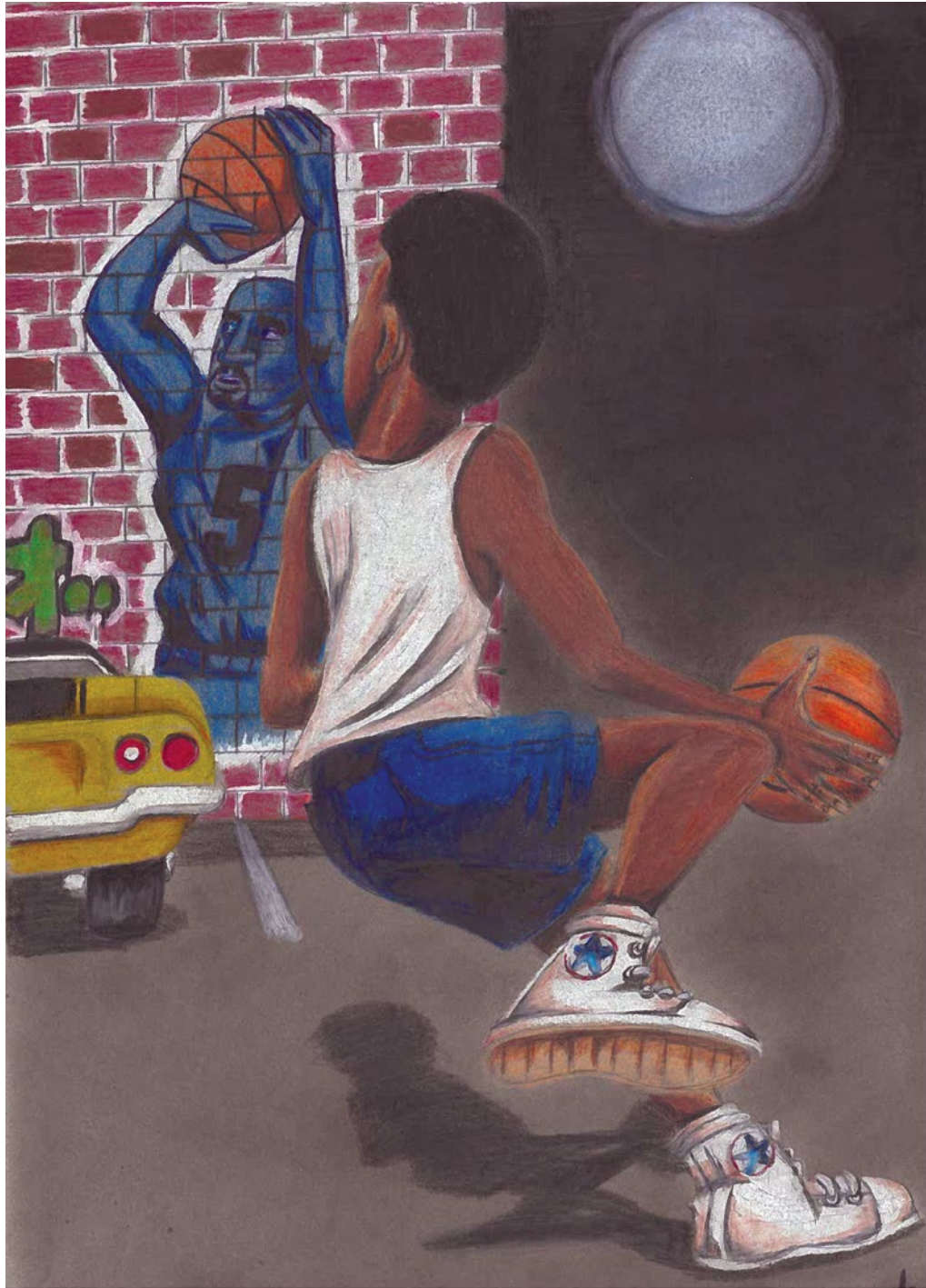
those notes are helpful as you think about ways to revise your work. Keep sending us your drafts and we will do our best to respond in a timely and encouraging manner.

### **BACK ISSUES & ACCESS**

For those of you who would like to use *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* in your classes or for other purposes, you can access volumes 1 through 20 by logging on to the CU Denver Department of Communication webpage: <https://clas.ucdenver.edu/communication/research-creative-work/captured-words-free-thoughts>

### **NOTES ON THE COVER**

Warren Worthington's "Satchel Paige" honors the legendary pitcher who helped break the color line in professional baseball. With a Hall of Fame career spanning the mid-1920s through the 1950s, Paige was a titanic figure who won games with a screwball windup and an abundance of charisma. Working the mound with a showman's flair, Paige is rumored to have commanded his fielders to sit down on the job, taunting batters who would then strike out. While historians and fans celebrate Jackie Robinson as the first African American player to begin the process of integrating the Major Leagues via his 1947 debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Paige's 1948 performance with the Cleveland Indians marked the first time an African American took the mound in the Major Leagues. Worthington works here in a style reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance, which celebrates fluid motion, energetic lines, and an almost cinematic sense of action. Alongside his work depicting African American athletes and musicians, Worthington is the artistic genius rendering the covers of the children's books profiled in our "Authors' and Artists' Corner" feature, which begins on page 90. The cover image is copyrighted by and used with the permission of Worthington.



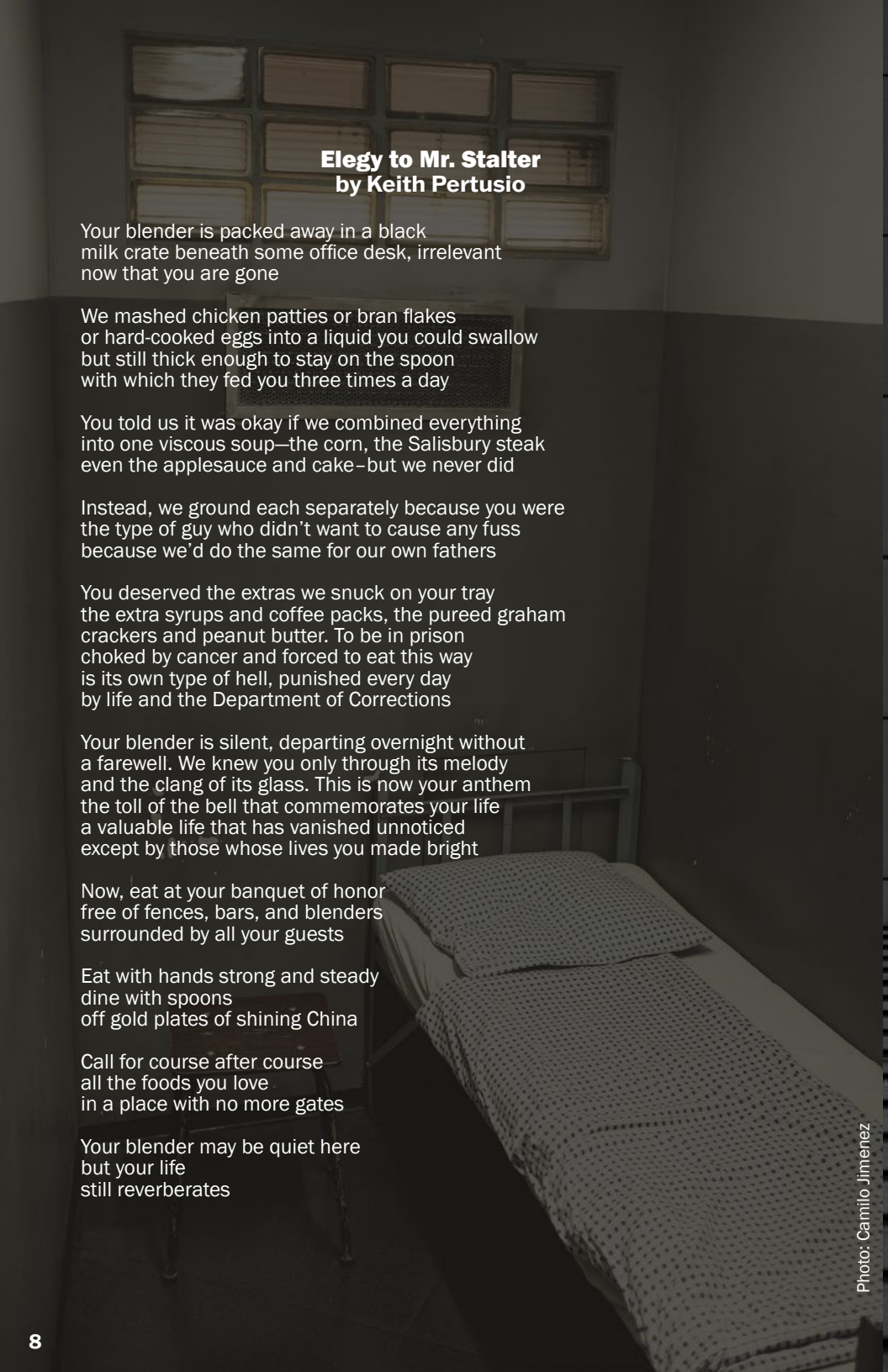
(above)  
"Honing the Craft"  
by Worthington



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**Elegy to Mr. Stalter**  
by Keith Pertusio

Your blender is packed away in a black  
milk crate beneath some office desk, irrelevant  
now that you are gone

We mashed chicken patties or bran flakes  
or hard-cooked eggs into a liquid you could swallow  
but still thick enough to stay on the spoon  
with which they fed you three times a day

You told us it was okay if we combined everything  
into one viscous soup—the corn, the Salisbury steak  
even the applesauce and cake—but we never did

Instead, we ground each separately because you were  
the type of guy who didn't want to cause any fuss  
because we'd do the same for our own fathers

You deserved the extras we snuck on your tray  
the extra syrups and coffee packs, the pureed graham  
crackers and peanut butter. To be in prison  
choked by cancer and forced to eat this way  
is its own type of hell, punished every day  
by life and the Department of Corrections

Your blender is silent, departing overnight without  
a farewell. We knew you only through its melody  
and the clang of its glass. This is now your anthem  
the toll of the bell that commemorates your life  
a valuable life that has vanished unnoticed  
except by those whose lives you made bright

Now, eat at your banquet of honor  
free of fences, bars, and blenders  
surrounded by all your guests

Eat with hands strong and steady  
dine with spoons  
off gold plates of shining China

Call for course after course—  
all the foods you love  
in a place with no more gates

Your blender may be quiet here  
but your life  
still reverberates





**Incarcerated but Inspired**  
**by David Richardson**

Succeed, I will! At all costs  
I refuse to settle for less  
Incarcerated as I am, inspired nonetheless

Indomitable. I am!  
Determined to strive for more  
Incarcerated, though I am, I am inspired to the core

I am the current that carves canyons  
I am the wind the world wields  
I am the pull propelling planets  
I am the fire feeding the fields

So, I ask, what door is there that  
can remain shut before me?  
Incarcerated, though I am  
Inspired, you will soon be

**There is no i**  
**by Timothy Byrne**

There is no i on the outs\_de  
Only on the inside  
does i exist?

Were you my only?  
I would die from this disease  
if only in myself

In scenes of inability  
distances and sighs

**These Dark Nights**  
**by Timothy Byrne**

These dark nights that rise  
that tear and take from time  
from souls all that has been hidden so well  
move without measure  
but deliver us forward until  
the reflections begin to roll and toss our  
losses like wreckage  
across an untouchable world

Though all we observe but fail to grasp  
of distant times distorted  
of things we have fashioned  
by thought or perception

We clear through painful moments  
of introspection

**To Imprisonment**  
**by Eric Perez**

What better way to learn to live  
than to be stripped of your freedom  
I committed no crime  
Okay, that's a lie  
But how am I to recover  
when given no reason  
no purpose to be something more?

But what luck—what fortune!  
I do have a purpose, a reason  
to help my fellow chattel  
look beyond the cowl of apathy  
to the day when they will be seen  
as beasts no more

**No**  
**by Eugene**  
**"Tsunami"**  
**Miller**

No visits  
No calls  
No mail  
No yard  
No worries  
So what?  
I'm still doing time!

## **A Birthday in Prison** by Keith Pertusio

He watches his grown daughter on  
the video screen. It's her thirteenth  
birthday and she scheduled  
this visit just for him

She holds up a white frosted cake  
then some colorful candles. She sticks  
each candle into the sweet icing  
and lights them one by one

"Daddy," she says, "All these years, you could not be with me on my  
birthday. So I want to blow out these candles when you can watch,  
like you're right here beside me."

She is crying as she takes a deep  
breath and blows them all out  
Everyone around her is crying too  
But he is not

He has forgotten how



## **My First Day on Death Row** **by Anthony Enis**

Walking into the prison felt like walking into a medieval castle at the height of the dark ages. I couldn't help but wonder if I would ever leave.

The humiliation of "processing" was surpassed only by my fear of the unknown. I had never been to prison, and now not only was I going, but I was going to death row, the home of men like John Wayne Gacy and the so-called "I-57 Killer," among others.

Until then, I had only read about such men in newspapers or seen them on television. I never, even in my worst nightmare, thought I would be counted amongst them, considered one of them. The reality of the situation smacked me in the face so hard I could almost feel the sting. This was worse than when I came to grips with the fact that I was in a life-and-death situation.

These men were hardened killers, and I was now among them; I meant nothing to them. At that moment, I decided they wouldn't mean anything to me either. I was ready to do whatever I needed in order to survive. I hardened my heart and dismissed all thoughts of the outside world. My only reference material was movies I had seen, and in all the movies, the convict-guy acted as though the outside world didn't exist. It sounds funny now, but when you're twenty-one and have never been to prison, you cling to whatever works for you, and that worked for me.

I took a deep breath, lifted my head a little higher and walked to the cell that would be my new home. I was expecting to hear all kinds of prison noises—you know, the names and catcalls that always seem to happen on television when the new guy gets to prison. To my surprise (and relief), there was none of that.

I arrived at my cell, and as I watched the key being put into the lock, it all seemed to be happening in slow motion... the door sliding open... my bedroll being placed on the bunk... the door sliding shut... and the worst sound of all... the door being locked behind me.

## Quiet Night by Anthony Enis

It was an unusually quiet night, the normally blaring TVs and radios were all off. The typical long-distance conversations between inmates yelling back and forth from several cells away and the blustorous sound of someone triumphantly declaring “checkmate!” were absent. On this night, some of us were preparing to say good-bye to a friend for the very last time.

Hashi was making his rounds, saying his final farewells to those that mattered to him. It was a ritual that played out each time someone’s “death date” was upon them...upon all of us, like some Shakespearean tragedy. That’s life on Death Row—a series of greetings and farewells.

My turn to say good-bye was approaching faster than I wanted it to.

I could hear Hashi drawing ever closer to my cell, and I steeled myself against the emotional onslaught that was certain to come when I looked into the face of my friend—a “dead man walking.” I needed to be standing when he got to my cell. I felt it would be inappropriate and disrespectful to be sitting, but I also felt like I had a ton of bricks strapped to my back, and I struggled to rise to my feet. As I did, my solid resolve began to melt away like ice cream on a summer day.

Within seconds, Hashi was at my cell, his hand thrust through the bars in search of mine, and in that one gesture, my resolve dissipated to nothing. I grasped his hand with mine and reached my other arm between the bars and hugged him. “I love you, brother,” is all I could manage. The dam broke, and my eyes flooded with tears.

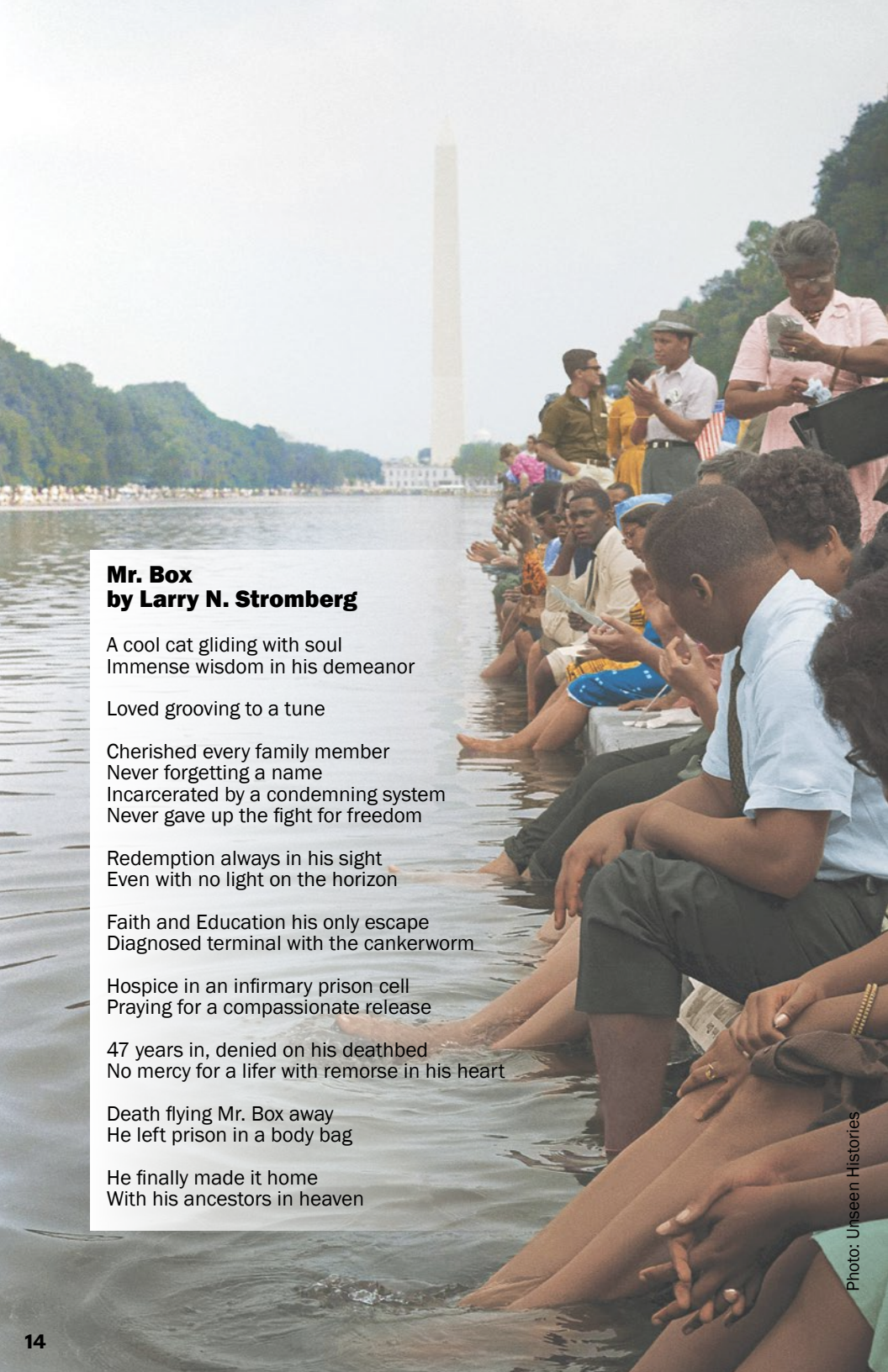
Hashi squeezed my hand one final time and told me, “I love you too, little brother,” and walked away. In that moment, there was a dignity and grace to him that I had never seen. Even in what were to be his final days, he was still teaching, and I was still learning. I sat back down feeling a little lighter and sat vigil for the next three days.

We all knew that Hashi had about 72 hours to live. And as it is with all who are transported to the “death house,” we prayed for that last minute stay of execution, but God decided to say no this time, and at 12:07 a.m., Hashi was pronounced dead by lethal injection.

Several years later, God would say yes to me. I am alive today and no longer on death row. Now, if I could only get him to say yes to easing this never-ending pain and loss.

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** For readers seeking more information on the death penalty in the U.S., we encourage you to go to the *Death Penalty Information Center*, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org>. For readers seeking historical background on this issue, see *Stephen J. Hartnett’s 2-Volume Executing Democracy: Capital Punishment & the Making of America*.



A group of people, including men and women of various ages and ethnicities, are sitting on a boat on the Potomac River. They are looking towards the Washington Monument in the background. The scene is outdoors, with a clear sky and green hills in the distance. The Washington Monument is a tall, white, obelisk-shaped structure. The water is calm, and the boat is moving slowly. The people are dressed in casual to semi-formal attire. Some are looking at their phones, while others are talking or looking out at the monument.

**Mr. Box**  
**by Larry N. Stromberg**

A cool cat gliding with soul  
Immense wisdom in his demeanor

Loved grooving to a tune

Cherished every family member  
Never forgetting a name  
Incarcerated by a condemning system  
Never gave up the fight for freedom

Redemption always in his sight  
Even with no light on the horizon

Faith and Education his only escape  
Diagnosed terminal with the cankerworm

Hospice in an infirmary prison cell  
Praying for a compassionate release

47 years in, denied on his deathbed  
No mercy for a lifer with remorse in his heart

Death flying Mr. Box away  
He left prison in a body bag

He finally made it home  
With his ancestors in heaven



## **Can't Breathe** **by Larry N. Stromberg**

It's a hell of a thing when you can't breathe anymore.

This is how Grandfather must have felt on the day he went under the Delaware River.

I never met the man. He died before I was born. Mother told me his story. It feels like I've known this man all of my life.

His vessel capsized and deadly currents dragged him down. When they pulled his bloated corpse with only his boxers on three days later, it was evident Grandpop fought for every breath. He had applied his training methods from the U.S. Navy, trying to use clothing as life saving flotation devices, but now, soaked and deflated, the rags wrapped around him.

To no avail, the currents were too powerful.

He didn't breathe anymore.

Maybe being incarcerated with a life sentence is almost the same thing.

Trying to survive, hoping to stay alive.

Dreaming of a second chance.

Fighting for every breath.

Anxiety  
Confusion  
Panic

Drowning, but still conscious.

Riding the currents till you can't breathe anymore.

**The Beast in the Mirror**  
**by David Zenquis**

The man staring at me  
Is not the one meant to be  
The mirror counts sheep  
Every time I take a peek  
Opportunities I failed to conceive  
In order to be the man I want to be  
Now all I see  
Is the Devil's hold of me  
Illusions and visions of a mere beast



**Living are the Dead**  
**by David Neff**

The wood is sensuous beneath her hand  
She climbs the stairs, the railing a sensation she is denied  
unless she steals it in private moments

From those who deny her  
who keep her as all objects are kept  
by careless people—the rich—  
who can always buy  
another & another

Her thoughts  
all secret in her head  
the trailing of her hand  
a sensation she is denied

The wood  
sensuous, smooth  
stolen pleasure  
hidden thoughts are all she has  
for all the world  
all she has

She ducks her head to hide  
the smile she is not allowed to wear  
will reveal the thoughts  
she is not allowed to think

And careless pleasure  
Stolen  
Under  
The  
Whip

Always she remembers  
She  
Is  
Not  
Free

Her hand  
Her lips  
Heart, breasts, soul

Tremor

Those who betray their position  
crumbs given as abundance  
are crucified and hung  
upon a wall  
on display

Hoods cover faces  
stripped of life  
of character

Their only crime  
the very fact they could only be  
themselves

You tell us that we're privileged  
You tell us that we're blessed  
Blessed are the meek  
Living are the dead

All of this is ordinary  
Ordinary  
All of this is ordinary  
Ordinary  
Ordinary  
All of this is ordinary

## **The Human Toll of Jail** **by Gary K. Farlow**

Nothing in life could've prepared me for going to jail. Coming from a family with a tradition of law enforcement, I never expected to find myself on the other side. Yet when the gavel came down and I felt the cold steel of cuffs around my wrists, I knew the life I once led was over.

The jail in my county is connected by an underground tunnel that runs beneath a busy downtown street leading to the courthouse. As I descended concrete steps into the subterranean passage, I conjured images of Hitler's bunker, Cold War fallout shelters, and scenes from old horror movies, where Earth's last inhabitants were forced underground by radiation-ravaged mutants. Little did I realize that the horror movie was truly about to begin.

At the age of 30, I had led a charmed life. Active in local, state, and even national politics, I kept my secret buried beneath multiple layers of civic involvement, church attendance, and social functions. You see, I am gay. And during the Reagan years of the 1980s, and even prior, a gay politician had a short lifespan in the South.

My crime burst that bubble and I suddenly found myself in the news for a very different reason. Processing took only minutes, but as I removed the pinstripe suit and tie that was my *de rigueur* outfit in the world, I broke down. The processing detention officer, who knew my police officer brothers, stood patiently while I wept.

I was deemed a suicide risk and was taken up to a third floor cell with a single bed mounted to the wall, no sheets, no pillow, just a paper "gown." This was in August, and the typical Carolina dog days of summer were offset in the jail by fierce air-conditioning, which my paper gown was ill-equipped to deal with.

Inside the 6x9 concrete cell, I sat. No window. A metal toilet and sink combination. Nothing else, not even a Bible. I was mentally and emotionally exhausted, and still on a prescription of Buspar and Paxil, so I fell into instant sleep.

My cell had a "watch" window into the corridor for the detention officers to monitor me in case I attempted suicide. Any jail inmate traversing the corridor could also "monitor" me. So it was my first morning, when I was awakened by a pounding on the plexiglass and an angry face pressed against it saying, "It's your ass, faggot, when you come out." I was 130 pounds at the time, and

aside from an occasional aerobics class, I was far from athletic. I had never been in a fight, never fired or even owned a gun, and never anticipated such animosity. But here it was.

This became the daily routine of my stay in jail while awaiting sentencing. A pounding on the glass, yelled profanities, and being asked to lift my paper gown and show “what I am working with,” inmate slang for dick and ass. I did not oblige. This only further enraged my visitors, and I was promised untold horrors to come.

The county jail was a six-story building containing a virtual warren of passages, corridors, cells and hallways. My cell was part of a block of 12 in which all the detainees were to be kept separated. We were each given 1 hour a day out in the dayroom to shower, use the phone, and exercise. The specific hour varied daily: one day it might be at 10 AM, the next it might be 1 PM. This made using the phone a real burden for the party you wanted to call.

As the jail was overcrowded and staffing was short, the detention officer would open multiple cells for time out—a real no-no in my cell block—but one afternoon all 12 sliding doors suddenly opened and I found myself being rushed by four hefty guys who punched, slapped, and threw me around. They took my commissary items, destroyed the artwork I had done, and were in the process of trying to force me into a sexual act when the detention officer happened to walk past.

The melee abruptly stopped as a whistle blew and several detention officers rushed in and carried me out. I was medically examined, but aside from a black eye, bloody nose, and cut lip, I was just sore. The nurse said, “you’re lucky.” I suppose I was, but nothing was said about the actions of the officer who set the stage for the attack. I later learned that one of my assailants had gone to high school with that officer. It’s hard to not wonder if, as my arrest and trial made the news, he had asked the officer to “mistakenly” open all the doors at once.

No charges were ever filed. I was warned to “drop it.” Before nightfall, I was moved to a different facility.

Freedom is precious. If it is true, as Solzhenitsyn claims, that a society can be judged based on its treatment of its incarcerated, then our nation stands indicted as one of history’s cruelest perpetrators of brutality on its own citizens. Years have passed, but that short stay in my county’s jail is a nightmare from which I can never truly awaken.

## Pledge of Allegiance by Gary K. Farlow

Here in the land of cotton  
where the first shot was fired  
in a war that would see more American blood  
spilled than in any other conflict  
we sit in darkness  
images of freedom and loved ones  
swirling into a miasma of pain  
the intercom recites  
the Pledge of Allegiance daily  
“with liberty and justice for all”?  
our liberty is two five-minute phone calls  
and a shower once a week  
otherwise, it’s twenty-four-hour lockdown  
three people in each 7x9 cell

“And to the Republic for which it stands”  
this is our republic  
with shades of Abu Ghraib  
and injustice for all  
as water slowly drips down the cinderblock wall  
every time a toilet upstairs is flushed.  
the cell reeking of urine and humanity  
while the intercom urges hygiene  
and keeping the cells sanitized

“One nation”?  
“under God”?  
don’t make me laugh...or cry

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** Farlow compares his experiences in southern prisons to the atrocities committed in the Abu Ghraib prison, in Iraq. In 2004, photographs smuggled out of the facility showed U.S. Army personnel engaging in torture, sexual acts, and other human rights violations. The revelations shocked the world and called into question U.S. claims to be building democracy in Iraq. For more information, see the Human Rights Watch report at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/06/09/road-abu-ghraib>



Photo: Bradley Dunn

## **Black Boy Dark Child** **by Daniel Mopkins**

A Black Boy, he sits alone, middle of class  
Afro swaying he works alone  
Head band he loves rock-n-roll  
Panic switch  
Page after page scribbling mad  
Floating sheets never touching the ground  
Paper planes go MIA  
No need for sustenance  
Little guidance or direction, no discretion  
Teacher keeps a close eye  
Crayons and markers, colored paper  
Undefinable weapons  
He alone is self-sustainable  
Overalls and untied shoes  
Striped shirt and underoos  
Sometimes he never moves  
Looking out the window at giraffes and kangaroos  
Pelican perched  
Dark child makes all the rules

In truth, he is not boy nor is he Black  
Entirely like you and eye  
Periodically checking his elements  
Sorcerer revolving in orbit  
He works alone, sorcerer and stone  
Black boy is my precious heavy metal  
Drumming in my chest  
Refusing to let me rest

## **Lockdown** **by Gary K. Farlow**

It's almost summer  
The grass is green  
And I long to feel  
The sun on my face

The grass is green  
As I press against the window  
The sun on my face  
As clouds begin to gather

As I press against the window  
A raindrop splatters on the glass  
As clouds begin to gather  
And the sun fades to darkness

A raindrop splatters on the glass  
I think of how long I've been inside  
These walls and the sun fades to  
Darkness like my life slowly slipping away

I think of how long I've been inside these walls  
Losing touch bit by bit  
Like my life slowly slipping away  
In this southern cinderblock hell

**Convict Chronicles: An Ode to Time**  
**by Leo Cardez**

Time is the only constant in the universe, ceasing for no man  
So ubiquitous we forget we're losing more and more of it every day  
And we can never get it back  
An alarm bell rings, another day at work  
Count lights flicker, another night of TV binging

Then one day we look in the mirror and fail to recognize ourselves  
Wonder when the wrinkles set in or the gray started to appear  
Where did our 20s go...our 30s?  
What have we done with our lives?  
Would you even call it a life?

But wait. There is hope on the horizon  
Every sunrise is the dawning of another opportunity—we can reverse course  
To hope, to pray, to love, to give, to change our world  
Lean into the day and ride this crazy rollercoaster screaming

Time's constraints will keep us moored to our routine if we let them  
Learn to embrace the darkness of the unknown with a brave heart  
Look time in the eye and dare it to catch you  
And here's the pay-off  
Our spirits will soar, minds expand, and our legends grow  
Then, and only then, can we say we have truly lived



## **Number One** **by John Shinault**

The old man never knew what would trigger the memories of that horrible day. Was it the glint of the sun off the razor wire on top of the fence? Was it the aroma of standing water in a prison in Louisiana that smelled so much like the delta? Or was it just an old man again trying to come to terms with a time so long ago, but still so vivid?

He remembered it like yesterday, no mean feat at his age: three months past his 18th birthday, foot on the rail around the top of the Berthing Barge with the setting sun painting the Mekong Delta gold and purple. The Senior Chief stood next to him, placed his arms on top of the rail and said, "Heard you had a rough day today. Got your Number One." The kid asked him what he meant by that. The Senior Chief said that some of the tribes in the mountains believed that the first time you defeated a man in combat and he died, you became the holder of his soul. That soul was yours to take care of for the rest of your life. It was your Number One.

The kid thought back to that morning, going up the canal, knowing that they were in a bad place, all guns manned and ready. He was covering the starboard side with the aft .50 cal. when he saw the shadow move near a large tree. When the man popped out from behind it with the RPG, he was ready. As he pressed the thumb trigger, all he could think of was 3 to 5 rounds, like his Chief had drilled into him for the past month. Now it was happening on his first patrol. He wasn't prepared for what a .50 cal. round could do to a man at 75 yards. He wasn't prepared for the look on the man's face—a look he knows he will never forget. The Senior Chief assured him he did good; he even said he was proud of him. None of it helped.

The old man sat on the softball field bleachers and went over that conversation for the millionth time. He knew that the soul of his Number One had been with him throughout his life. His Number One was there for the rest of his time in the delta. His Number One was there during his recovery from his wounds. His Number One was there when he met and married his wife. His Number One was there when he learned of the birth of his daughter. His Number One was there during all his years of serving his country, and his Number One was also there during all his years in prison. His Number One was there when his daughter had to tell him that his wife had passed. And as all these things happened, one of the first thoughts in the old man's head was, "I wonder how my Number One would have faced this if he had lived as long as I have?" It was a question the old man asked himself on a regular basis. It was also a question he never had an answer for.

The sound of the recall whistle jerked the old man out of his memories. He looked across the yard and watched the movement toward the gate. With a pat to the bench next to him, he said, "Come on Number One, time to go." They rose and walked away together.

As he crossed the field, the old man thought back to his days in that small country that no one seemed to care about, that war that everyone wanted to forget, and all those times he had repeated that mantra, "3 to 5," as he fired his weapon. The thought came as it always does: why had the Senior Chief told him what to do with Number One instead of what to do with the other twenty-one?



## **A Better Way by Todd Broxmeyer**

There must be a better way  
Maybe when you were a child  
Being sent to the corner for a timeout  
Was effective and a lesson learned  
But no walls were built around you  
And if someone did, even emotional ones  
They were wrong, there was a better way

As we grow, Mom becomes a jury and judge  
And the corner becomes a cell  
15 minutes becomes 15 years  
Unfortunately, a better way eludes our society  
Lives become wasted, minds get lost  
Human potential that can shine so bright  
Forced to dim in despair  
All the while society is being told a lie  
"There is no better way," BUT  
You are safer now that the bad people  
Are locked away with many never  
To be seen again. Do not worry  
What happens to them. They are the worthless  
The ungrateful, lost souls whose purpose  
Cannot be redeemed. An effective lie

But still a lie because there is a better way  
A wrong was done, a debt owed  
But when the debt owed exceeds  
The ability to pay, bankruptcy occurs  
Here we are, bankrupting souls  
And not just those who have to stand in the corner



A decorative background image of pink flowers on a branch, partially obscuring the text.

## Today, Tomorrow, Last Night by Eric Perez

Michael, Mike to his friends, sat on the back porch of his house. The porch was partially enclosed against the nastier bugs, and from within its dark shadow, he peered through the rusty mesh and onto the vast pasture of his life. He found himself grazing more and more among his old memories, finding comfort where Lela still lived.

It had been five years since his wife died, five years since he became a widower at seventy-four. Six years since time had begun to slip away from him. There were times when he would wake to her warmth, to the scent of blueberry in her hair, to the soft hiss of her sleep apnea machine. It was hard to let her go after sixty-years of being together, and his struggling mind made it even harder to let go.

Tonight, his mind had been as clear as the sky, and he followed the flickering light all the way back to the day he first saw her, really saw her, at a school dance wearing her pink dress and white shoes. He could see her clearly, as if she was standing on the porch with him, but something wasn't right. The image didn't feel right. He played the memory forward and back, peering at her from different angles until he finally understood what was wrong.

Lela hated pink. Carol loved pink.

"Carol," he said to the two dogs asleep on the porch floor. Old chuck flicked his tail in angst, as if to say "Of course," then settled back to sleep.

Carol had been Mike's first love. She had given him his first kiss, and she would have been his first girlfriend had he not been such an ass. Mike had always wondered what would have been, and with nothing holding him to this work, and within the midst of his sorrow, he undid sixty-two years of regrets.

He took Carol on their first date, a midday trip to the park where they watched baseball and ate hotdogs. He did not know if she liked baseball or hotdogs, but in the microcosm of his mind, she did. She enjoyed most of the things Lela did, and a few things she didn't, and Mike took Carol on many of the same trips that he had taken Lela on.

Life with Carol was fun, but he eventually ended the affair in college. He left her in that world that was and wasn't, and slipped into a new reality. He tried his hand at college, bypassed years of study, and became a lawyer. He was an exceptionally good lawyer despite his naivety of its complexity—right up there with Perry Mason and Atticus Finch. He saved countless innocent lives from false prosecution; he saved thousands more as a doctor, a fireman, a forest ranger.

In every dream, he was and wasn't Mike. In every dream, he was and wasn't living a real life. Some would call them fantasies, but to Mike, they were glimpses of his other selves. He did not understand how it all worked, but he did have a recollection that reality came from perceptions, simple electrical impulses that criss-crossed our bodies, sending sensations to and from our brain. He had heard of ghost limbs and false memories on *60 Minutes*, and with his own failing memory, he knew the mind could not be trusted.



## **X On My Window by John Johnson**

We have a major shakedown in progress.

Guards mark an X on my window for reasons unknown. Two male guards open my cell door, demanding I remove my clothes, starting with my necklace, then on to my white T-shirt. "Now, your shorts... your underwear... your socks... Lift up your testicles! Turn around and show me the bottom of your feet... Squat! Spread your bottom. Now cough, cough AGAIN!"

The guards handcuff me. They escort me outside and sit me in a chair amongst a row of other incarcerated residents. An hour passes as the sun showers me with its beautiful rays. The others who are handcuffed beside me chuckle amongst each other, giggling and cracking jokes as if this is a fun day at the park. All I can do is think about how much I feel like an enslaved animal.

Handcuffs cut off the circulation around my wrist; my arms remain bent behind my back while hateful men in gray and black eye me with superior smirks. My eye catches the beautiful, green grass underneath my feet. One of my neighbors whispers, "Keep your head up big homie."

A few minutes later, I'm taken back to my cell, which has been completely destroyed. My belongings, paperwork, family pictures—everything is scattered and tossed across the floor. But why? Who knows. A cup of coffee I sipped prior to the invasion is now all over my clothes. The shock is punctuated by the slamming of the cell's steel door, so hard I feel the collision in my toes.

I take a seat on a flipped-over trash can and attempt to gather my thoughts, to reign in my fiery emotions before I crack. For a second I feel as if I'm about to crumble, but as I bawl my eyes and fists, I force myself to breathe.

They might be able to rob me of order and cleanliness, but they cannot rob me of joy. They cannot steal my dignity, my pride. They will not dismantle or handicap my spirit, they won't kill my faith. These things can't be confiscated so easily.

I spend hours reorganizing, cleaning and salvaging what I can. It actually looks pretty damn good when I'm finished. If I didn't know better, I'd guess it never even happened...except for the X on my window.

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: If you've enjoyed "X On My Window," and would like to reach Johnson for comments, feedback, or collaboration, please contact John Johnson #631054, BCF, 3924 Wadaga Rd, Baraga, MI, 49907, USA.*

## **A Bedside for Two by Christopher Hall**

I got a call. They said to hurry, that it was urgent  
No time to think—what is it? Who is it?

A love...that love...my love was passing away  
My passion begins to fade, slowly dissipating as I sit at her bedside

I cannot swallow whatever it is bottling up inside  
I grieve. I endure. I watch you lay motionless  
Is this what it's all come down to?

Unconsciously my eyes venture to the source of a sound  
Tick, tick, tick—the clock progresses  
I am utterly alone, at your bedside but  
No longer with you...no longer with me

Who will mourn my mourning?  
I lie quietly next to you, for now I see you  
mentally, emotionally, a bedside for two

Now I see you as I did long ago, when we first met

There is no longer any need for me  
My life has moved on with yours  
I remain, yet I am  
no longer who I was

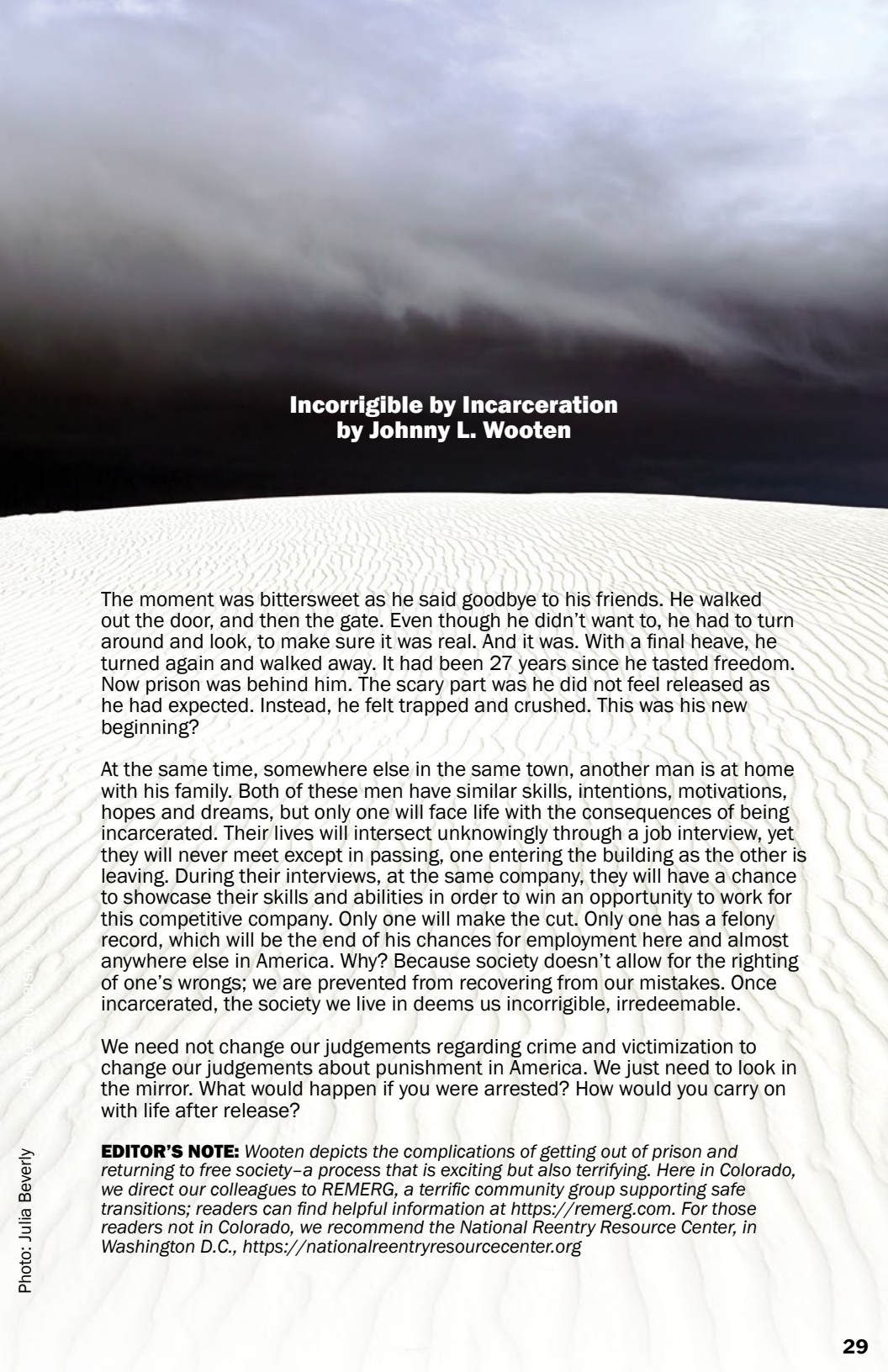
## **Loving a Convict by Debbie Magee**

Loving a convict comes with a price, one you pay more each day. It's mostly from having no one to hold. It's being young yet feeling old. It's not having your son tell you "I love you" everyday so you can tell him back. It's reluctant and painful watching him go back to cell block row, eyes filled with tears and a heart full of sorrow. A simple kiss with a promise to wait, knowing that the state is holding his fate.

Loving a convict rips open all dreams. Days go by without any mail. Your heart stays hopeful while your mind drags you to hell. Once in a while you can't stop the tears. Weeks become months and months become years.

Loving a convict brings bitterness, pain, and loneliness with no sense of gain. Then someday it will be in the past and your loving convict will be home at last.

It is true that loving a convict is not all fun, but it is well worth the price when our time is done.



## Incorrigible by Incarceration by Johnny L. Wooten

The moment was bittersweet as he said goodbye to his friends. He walked out the door, and then the gate. Even though he didn't want to, he had to turn around and look, to make sure it was real. And it was. With a final heave, he turned again and walked away. It had been 27 years since he tasted freedom. Now prison was behind him. The scary part was he did not feel released as he had expected. Instead, he felt trapped and crushed. This was his new beginning?

At the same time, somewhere else in the same town, another man is at home with his family. Both of these men have similar skills, intentions, motivations, hopes and dreams, but only one will face life with the consequences of being incarcerated. Their lives will intersect unknowingly through a job interview, yet they will never meet except in passing, one entering the building as the other is leaving. During their interviews, at the same company, they will have a chance to showcase their skills and abilities in order to win an opportunity to work for this competitive company. Only one will make the cut. Only one has a felony record, which will be the end of his chances for employment here and almost anywhere else in America. Why? Because society doesn't allow for the righting of one's wrongs; we are prevented from recovering from our mistakes. Once incarcerated, the society we live in deems us incorrigible, irredeemable.

We need not change our judgements regarding crime and victimization to change our judgements about punishment in America. We just need to look in the mirror. What would happen if you were arrested? How would you carry on with life after release?

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *Wooten depicts the complications of getting out of prison and returning to free society—a process that is exciting but also terrifying. Here in Colorado, we direct our colleagues to REMERG, a terrific community group supporting safe transitions; readers can find helpful information at <https://remerg.com>. For those readers not in Colorado, we recommend the National Reentry Resource Center, in Washington D.C., <https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org>*

## The Apprentice Writer by Christopher Rader

I became a writer because I fell in love with words. When I open a book to the first chapter, I am always waiting to be swept away. It doesn't matter where you are in the world, the words in a book can take you somewhere else. You could be listening to the howling wind beating against the shutters of your Denver home and those captivating words can take you to the Sahara Desert, the sun beating down on you, your mouth parched, your throat dry. You could be sitting in first class on a transatlantic flight to France, and those words can take you on a journey that you never planned.

Later, when your family and friends ask, "How was your flight?" you'll smile from ear to ear and say, "it was hell." The words evoke sensations you thought you'd never feel again: what it's like to be young, for instance, startled by the world's variety. You could be propped up in bed, nibbling a PB&J sandwich and the words can place you right in the middle of Hogwarts fighting Lord Voldemort.

Let's say for a moment that life makes sense. Let's assume you like it that way. Still, the words lead you to a world in which nothing is sure and all that is solid melts into air. It doesn't matter that your rent is due, that the roses need watering; your life comes into focus, the edges less blurry. Someone is speaking directly to you, their mouth at your ear: "call me Ishmael." It's just you and the writer. You can almost smell their breath. Maybe you want to turn away, but this is what you craved, to be held by some sort of truth that you couldn't imagine before. You want to know things, experience things—personal things that aren't normally talked about. And sometimes, the words can change your life.

I do not remember the first words I ever read or wrote. What I do remember is the nervous feeling I had sitting in my room with a blank piece of paper when I was 12 years old. I began to write a story, not for a school project, just for myself. I printed the letters neatly so they would look like the words in a real book. When I was finished, I titled it, "The See-Through Boy."

Back then, my mother and I were the product of abuse. Writing became an avenue to hide my pain, and books became my escape. My mother went on to publish a poem called "Survivor," and that's when I knew that I wanted to be a writer.

Doubt filled my mind—the fear of failure, the anticipation of success. What if I make a fool of myself? What if something unexpected happens? Something terrible, something great, something ridiculous, or something marvelous? Then what? And if it's amazing, would I be able to pull it off again? Those were the thoughts that danced inside my mind. How I longed to have my family and teachers grant me the attribute of talent. All I needed was a pat on the head and the declaration, "look how talented you are!" I went looking for those crumbs of praise. It was my Holy Grail, for without the gift of talent, all would be lost.

Like so many kids who could draw or play music, I was proud of my ability to bust out words on paper. However, I watched as others achieved, through focus and hard work, what was beyond my own efforts. I saw them take chances. I saw them achieve greatness through accidents of process. I saw them fling themselves into the void. I witnessed how some avoided risk,

relying purely on innate talent capable only of making them good. That's what I now settle for; to be good all the time. I don't write only for myself. I want my work to go out into the world, to find an audience, to be seen and heard. This goes back to childhood—many who create do so because at some point in their childhood, they were not seen, nor heard. Sometimes they were forced into invisibility, battered into silence. Whatever the origins of the creative impulse, art is a way of saying: "We are here. We matter." But I have a goal that goes beyond that. Playing without a goal in mind is what children do; they quit when the play is no longer fun. The immature artist, like a child, is driven to play, to make something. The wise artist combines the work ethic of the adult with the playfulness of the child. Having a goal in mind, then putting that goal aside to play is what the artist does.

Finally, it's not enough to speak, to be heard, or to be seen. We want to rise up and make something that will stand apart from ourselves, something that will live beyond us. Ultimately, my goal as a writer is to be a voice for the voiceless, to show the lost that there is always a light at the end of the tunnel.

I leave you, my fellow writer, with an important question: what gives you the passion to write?

## **I Wonder by Jordan Primm**

Why, when our minds are in our heads, do they tend to wander off into open air? I don't know, but it makes me wonder why we have so many thoughts. Have you ever thought to wonder, or wondered what it would be like to think? But I wonder if you actually thought about what you were thinking, would it make your thought process change?

Man, I wonder. I wonder if you thought to stop thinking, where would your thoughts go? And if your thoughts were gone, would your mind stop wandering? Is it your thoughts that think your mind into wandering? And what if when your mind is wandering, you find something strange that actually made you think about the last thing you thought about?

Shh, all this thoughtin' got me thinking: why in the hell is my mind doing all this wandering? Ha, now it has me wondering what I was thinking and what I thought I just figured out.

If you wondered into many thoughts, how much thinking would you do? But if you stopped to think about what you just thought about, how much less wondering would you do? It's incredible! I bet you thought you could never think yourself into all this wondering.

At the end of the day, do you wonder yourself to sleep only to awaken to a new day and wonder, "did I thank Him for another day?" When I asked the creator why He allowed me to think all these thoughts, the reply came: "You've always wondered what your life would be like, so stop wondering and start thinking. Let your new thoughts of change make you think yourself into action."

Now I wonder where all this thinking will take me. I honestly don't know; it's all just a thought, but it still makes me wonder.

## Lockdown Coffee by Brian Zater

I awaken to yesterday. Or is it tomorrow? Either way it's the same. Groundhog Day is paradise compared to this repeating hell. It's another morning on lockdown, 24/7 in a six-by-eight cage made of cement and steel. The wire mesh covering the slit of a window splinters dawn's early light, the room's gray walls reassembling it into shadow.

I escape the weight of the cold, hard bunk pressing against me by jumping feet first into the anesthesia of routine. The morning ablutions of body and teeth serve as prelude to this forever day's saving grace: coffee.

Like a Samurai Tea Ceremony, I sit meditation-style, organizing the accouterments for breakfast prep on the cement floor beneath the sink's "S" curve plumbing. With safety scissors, I cut the top off an empty aluminum can. Then I snip the can's sides into strips down to the base. Setting this down, I pick up a blanket, tearing from it an eight-inch segment to be my wick. I wrap this around an empty toilet-paper tube like an ace bandage, leaving one end of the tube open.

My concentration fades as awareness brings me back to my cage, consciousness triggered awake by the screams of broken social beings looking for human connection through the open food-tray flaps in the cell doors. A familiar pressure in the middle of my chest forces me to sigh a deep breath, driving my focus back to the task at hand. Like a camera lens, my mind's eye zooms back in, cropping out the echoes, fading their volume into the background once more.

Like closing together the petals of a flower, I group the can's sliced strips, feeding them into the blanketed cardboard tube. Together it stands on the floor like an aggressive candle supported by an inverted girandole, requisite air holes present at the base.

I grab from my collection another empty soda can, standing to fill it with sink water. Per usual, my right leg fell asleep, rapidly going from numb to a swarm of bees. Ignoring the discomfort so long as it fails to rise to the level of past pains, I fill my can and then sit back down. I thread a pair of once-white shoelaces now colored coal through the eye-hole of a tab that'll never see a Ronald McDonald House. I suspend the water can, hanging it from the sink's "p" trap above my mini cardboard and blanket tower.

Using a razor blade broken free from the housing of its plastic handle, I cut into tiny strips a Ramen soup's empty foil spice





packet, peeling off its invisible film then folding each strip in half to create a crease in the middle.

Now, I use the razor to shave off a patch of the plastic protective covering near the negative end of a AA battery. Momentarily setting it aside, I tear off about four squares worth of toilet paper, tightly twisting them like a piece of licorice. I balance this on the toilet-seat's edge. Retrieving the battery and one of the foil strips, I press one end of the foil to the battery's negative connection and the other to its exposed side, causing a rapid buildup of electrons at the foil's crease point. As it starts to glow red, I press the hot metal into the coiled toilet paper.

The foil sparks a flame, igniting the paper. In an act that always makes me think, "One flame can light another," I hold the fire to the top of the wound blanket, creating a caveman's bunsen burner. It burns smokeless, a good thing, considering the room's sprinkler and unwanted detection from officialdom.

It takes about two minutes to bring the water to a boil and the cardboard/blanket combo to a pile of ash.

Quickly, standing, using a moistened rag as an oven mitt, I carry the soot-covered can to my plastic coffee cup, pouring steaming water over grains of instant Folgers. As always, I sing at a whisper, "The best part of waking up is Folgers in your cup."

The first sip, infused with campfire nostalgia, is the highlight of my day. Always, I think about how the free make their coffee this morning. Then I blink and tomorrow becomes yesterday.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The editorial team running this magazine debated whether we should publish this remarkable essay, as Zater depicts a series of actions that violate Department of Corrections rules. By publishing the piece, we risk running afoul of prison staff and administrators, whose cooperation and support we rely upon and are grateful for. Yet we decided to publish the essay because it functions as a new entry in the long-standing genre of incarcerated writers offering "how-to" tips for fulfilling a need in the face of deprivation. The essay honors and refreshes the long history of prison writing in America, which is based, in part, on this genre of "how to survive" stories, as seen in Prison Writings in 20th Century America, ed. H. Bruce Franklin; Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing, ed. Bell Gale Chevigny; and Little Boy Blue by Edmund Bunker. We read Zater's essay as a contribution to this genre of work and hence as a piece of writing that merits our support and gratitude.*



**The Man Not Taken  
by Christian J. Weaver**

Had they fathomed the power  
these chains would unleash  
they'd have left me to die  
on the street  
on the street  
They'd have left me to walk through this valley alone  
far from home  
babydoll  
far from home

Had they fathomed the power  
these walls would unfold  
they'd have fashioned their chains  
for my soul  
for my soul  
They'd have left me to die with a needle in hand  
neverland  
babydoll  
neverland

Had you fathomed the power  
this pen would unfurl  
you'd have always remained  
just my girl  
just my girl  
You'd have watched me arise from my very own ash  
in a flash  
babydoll  
in a flash

## **A Letter to Remember** **by Sufia Rizvi**

A letter to remember  
how we came together  
doing the time of our lives  
falling in love on the inside  
good days, bad days, peaceful days, crazy days  
they all run the same  
the joy in our love is to blame  
counting down the years, distant but near  
no worries, no fear  
true love has met here  
that part is clear  
yet I wonder, why do I see you  
when I look in the mirror

2 different people share the same taste  
2 different lifestyles moving at the same pace  
somehow we always end up meeting on the same page  
this love, peace and happiness can never be replaced  
I guess you can say together we found God's grace

I need you like you need me  
hearts locked 'til we both gave up our keys  
without you aint no telling where I'd be  
our love is real, this I know you can see

So let us love each other  
every January to December  
and let these words  
be our wedding vows  
or even better  
a letter to remember

**Sterling Student Graduation Speeches**  
**Reflections by Don Warner, Manuel G. Sisneros Sr.,**  
**Joshua Huckelberry, Chantry Loewen, Phillip Carter,**  
**Taylor Doucet, & Nicholas Hall**

In December 2022, the students pictured below earned their Certificate in Strategic Communication from the University of Colorado Denver's College-in-Prison Program. To complete the certificate, students took seven classes across two years, studying public speaking, leadership, community engagement, strategic communication, and more. We received tremendous support and collaboration from our educational liaisons and staff at the Sterling Correctional Facility, the Territorial Correctional Facility, the Skyline Correctional Center, and the Trinidad Correctional Facility. At our Sterling graduation ceremony, each student was asked to speak about their experiences in the program. The following entries offer highlights and excerpts from that day.



*Pictured below, in the front row, are students Taylor Doucet, Manuel Sisneros, Joshua Huckelberry, and Don Warner; in the back row, David Torrez, John Carey, Chantry Loewen, Philip "Push" (Perseverance Under Severe Hardship) Carter, Taveuan Williams, and Nico Hall. UCD personnel, from left to right, are Laurel Dodds, Meghan Cosgrove, Ben Boyce, and SJH. CDCO personnel, on the far right, are Melinda Saffer (back) and Nicole Armstrong (front). While they do not appear in the photo below, thanks as well to Sterling colleagues Kelli Reyes, Kelley Harms, Jill West, Sally Marx, and Troy Null. Thanks as well to the family members who joined us on the Zoom feed.*



**Don Warner:**

Just as the Scarecrow said in The Wizard of Oz, “I am now a Dr. of Thinkology.”

Hello everyone, thank you all for being here, and thank you for all the effort you put forth to get us here today. I am truly grateful and appreciative for your time. Much like the Scarecrow, I was born with a mind and a voice that became muted somewhere along the way. My fellow classmates and I live in an extremely marginalized community—one wrought with authoritarianism and censorship. But the take-away from that claim is the word community.

In the C.U. Denver Strategic Communication Program, aside from the education received, we built a community, not only in these walls, but to a larger extent, into the outside world. This community was built through hard work, determination, and, of course, communication.

This program helps us all realize we are not alone. We are seen, heard, and in some cases, published writers. We write. We read. We are connected and communed with our readers. We are exposed to a world, a society, that we are far away from, yet still within. This program and others like it help both us and society alike, making informed citizens out of deniers.

This is why I hope academia continues to rise and fill the gap in programming currently experienced by many incarcerated people, not just to keep us busy, but as a substantive effort in the rehabilitation of incarcerated people. We want citizenship and all its offerings, not dispossession and recidivism.

As we move into the hope of tomorrow, I am grateful for this day. Thank you all for your time, effort, and presence. Without this program, we wouldn't be here today. Take a moment and breathe that in... (Pause) Without you this celebration would not be possible. We are here planting seeds for a better tomorrow.

**Manuel G. Sisneros Sr.:**

I stand here with nothing written, having convinced myself that if I didn't write it up, I would have an easier time controlling my emotions. Easy to think, but as I stand here now, I realize this plan is not going to work.

When you put in as much work as we did, it is hard not to have such intense emotions. Ben, Stephen, and Meghan said I had a few minutes to sum up the journey we have taken over the past 18 months. But even with an hour to speak, I could never truly describe the rollercoaster ride this journey has been. Someone mentioned earlier our dedication as a team—how we would meet outside on the bleachers just to hold classes when the facility said they couldn't accommodate a classroom for us because of COVID. I'm not sure everybody truly understands what it takes to hold class outside up here in Sterling, Colorado, or just how windy it really is up here. It was hard. But we did it. We held each other accountable; we kept each other on the same page. Through COVID lockdowns and staffing shortages, we continued to push on.

Like many others, I couldn't have done this without the help of my loved ones. They believed in me when I felt like I wasn't smart enough to enroll in higher education. My wife has been in my corner since the very beginning, even as she herself is going through college classes, working, running our home, and helping raise our grandson. I had the support of my children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. I can remember sharing with my nephew that I was in college classes and hearing him exclaim, “You're in school, uncle?”

Huge thanks to my writing tutors, Wayne and Alice, for their assistance with my papers, spending time on the phone as we went over my assignments (nodding to our guests on the Zoom feed).

Thanks to all the staff who helped the program keep going during the many obstacles that continuously popped up: Major Reyes, Ms. Saffer, Ms. Armstrong, Ms. Harms, and to the many others that have helped us along this journey. I also want to thank all of our professors from C.U. Denver, along with Laurel Dodds, Stephen Hartnett and all of the program donors, for without you this wouldn't be possible.

In closing, I want to celebrate how this program has truly helped me to believe in myself and to overcome my self-doubt. As I stand here and look out at you men here today, I can't help but feel pride at our journey. We know where we've come from, but more importantly, now we know where we are headed.



**Joshua Huckelberry:**

Good afternoon students, faculty, staff, friends, family, and graduates. I want to thank you all for being here today to celebrate this achievement with us. I never thought I would be at a podium giving a speech at a college graduation. I never thought that college was for me. When the announcement was made for those interested in applying to the Strategic Communication Program at CU Denver, I figured, "why not? I probably won't get in anyway." Much to my surprise, I did get selected.

This program changed something in me for the better. I found purpose and knew it was my chance to stop settling, to go for something greater. But as they say, no good thing comes easy. Despite the challenges of COVID, we made it happen, even when staffing issues made class attendance tricky. We made it through. We never gave up in times of adversity, and we kept working hard to reach our goals, despite rain, snow, or COVID. Sometimes we students were forced to hold our own classes outside, but we did that, and we did it with pride and determination.

I'd like to take a moment to give a shout out to some friends who are also fellow classmates that helped make our success possible: Don Warner, if it wasn't for you, your patience, resilience, and dedication to helping others, I'm not so sure I would have passed this class. Manuel Sisneros, thank you for all the time you took to read over my papers, edit, give feedback, and help push me to do better. My friend Chantry Loewen, thank you, brother, for the support.

I want to express special gratitude to the staff who held classes with us: Ms. Armstrong and Ms. Saffer on the East side and Ms. Harms on the West, you guys are amazing. Thank you. To the professors, Dr. Boyce, Mr. Braxton, Mr. Hatcher, Dr. Loker, and Ms. Cosgrove, you guys are the best. A huge shout out to the one who made all this possible, Dr. Stephen Hartnett. It means so much to me, to everyone, that you all took the time and had the patience and understanding to work with all of the issues we had here at Sterling—but you, all of you, you stayed with us.

I am so proud to be standing here today graduating this program. Thanks again to all who showed up for this.

Finally (looking at the Zoom feed), Mom and aunt Diane, I love you guys.



### **Chantry Loewen**

Education lifted the label of prisoner, helping to make me a person again.

Well, here we are, and I trust not for the last time. I wanted to share a little something with everyone, but before I get to my presentation, I wanted to echo the theme that this education program has awakened something within me that I thought was long gone. That something is my passion for writing. I write as a hobby. I write as an outlet. One day, with continued personal dedication and a continued collegiate education, I hope that I will be blessed to write in one form or another as a career. Without further ado, I give you something I prepared for today, I call it “Seeds of Dreams”:

Greetings families, friends, teachers, staff guests  
To express myself in just two brief minutes, seems to be my given test  
Assignments, videos, readings, required compositions  
Lockdowns, separation, quarantine, just a few of our complications  
Behind these walls, held within captive scenes  
a well-founded cause of celebration—a re-defining of what the convict label means

Never to forget who I was, as I shall always be who I am  
Implementing the lessons I have been taught, to now live the life of a better man  
For the longest time, my thoughts of the future were often amiss  
I chose to embrace concrete, wire, stone, but then a twist  
I learned of definitions, I heard of unseen chains placed upon us all  
“Felon, prisoner, guilty” are what I have so often been called  
My acceptance was a must, as these words do indeed define me  
author, student, educated. Some new titles that I now find myself to be

In the using of what I have gained, through my pursuit to benefit others  
I find there is no wasted youth, only sons, daughters, sisters, brothers  
Within these lines, I trust my vision may yet shine through  
A new aspiration, to carry those who now stumble in my old shoes  
When they who oppress say I remain only and always what they see  
I know now that I am far more than what for so long I was told I could be

As I stand here today  
Despite this prison scene  
I thank you for sharing this joyous event  
And for witnessing the sowing of my seeds of dreams



### **Phillip Carter**

OK, fellas, how do you find Will Smith in the Snow? Fresh Prints...  
*(laughter from audience).*

That’s a joke from the archives of my daughter, so thanks for laughing. She would greatly appreciate that. And I hope our teachers will notice how I opened this speech with what you all taught us is called “an attention-getting opener.”

But seriously, thank you all for being here, families and friends, prison staff and administrators, CU Denver friends and colleagues. I was just talking to Yeska about how I might sum up 18 months in a two-minute speech. We surmised that it would be almost impossible, but thanks to our illustrious Professor Meghan, who recently showed us how to do the three-stage copy/edit process in our media writing class, I’m prepared to truly put her lessons to work.

So, first, I want to thank our professors, Dr. Boyce, Tyrone Braxton, Emily Loker, Rob Hatcher, and Meghan Cosgrove. You guys have truly been the best. Thank you.

Second, to our always-working education liaisons here at Sterling: Ms. Armstrong, Dr. Lindsey, and Ms. Saffer—thank you. Ms. Harms and Major Reyes, wow, you get an award for jumping over and running through all obstacles in the effort to make this all possible.

Third, I want to give a very special thanks to Dr. Hartnett for making this a reality. You once said that this pilot program was paid for by donors. No one has ever cared enough to pay for my education. There are no words to adequately express my humbleness as well as my gratitude. Thank you for this possibility.

Now, moving from thanks to philosophy, there is a term that South African President Nelson Mandela made famous: “Ubuntu.” It means “I am, because we are.” It is impossible for me to be standing here at this moment without all of you who contributed to make this happen. I am here because of all of you. And for that I thank you all, from the bottom of my heart.

When Dr. Boyce gave me a B, I took it and did better because he has walked in my shoes and he believed I could do better. Thank you for pushing me.

Every day my purpose is simple: to become a better version of me than the day before. Every day I chase redemption, attempting to rebuild what I once broke. I can only do that through my actions, not my words. So thank you all for being a beacon in the midst of so much darkness.

Finally, as for my classmates: man, thank you guys for pushing, scratching, clawing, and fighting to get the work done. Dr. Hartnett just gave us some good news a couple minutes ago. He said we will be continuing this educational journey with another round of new classes—so in the words of the great Kobe Bean Bryant, “The job is not done.” Let’s get it. I’m Phillip Carter and I thank you all.

### **Taylor Doucet**



Let me start off by saying how honored I am at the opportunity to be able to participate in this program. Thank you to you all, to everyone here in this room and to everyone back on campus, or at DOC headquarters. We students know our accomplishments are made possible by all of you working together, building a community of learners—so thank you.

I want to share two statistics related to incarceration and higher education. This topic brings two numbers to mind. The first number is \$26,027. That is the average annual tuition cost for an undergraduate college program in America. The second number is \$39,000. That is the annual cost of incarceration for someone housed in the Colorado Department of Corrections.

So you’re probably wondering: If it costs more to house someone in prison than it does to gain a superior education, why aren’t we able to rehabilitate people who get locked up? The main goal of the Criminal Justice system is public safety, but why can’t we go beyond that and expect that by the time people are released, they are prepared to give back to society? This would require two things that, luckily, the Strategic Communication Program has given me throughout the last two years: passion and purpose. If you want to reduce recidivism, give those of us in prison passion and purpose, a connection to something bigger than ourselves.



I want to thank everyone involved in this program for enabling me to find passion and purpose. I can only hope that this program's success breaks down the door for others who are also looking to change their lives for the better.

### **Nicholas Hall**



First, I would like to send a sincere thank you and warm welcome to all of those in attendance. I appreciate your show of support for the remarkable achievement attained by me and my fellow classmates. We have worked and struggled as a community, and today we celebrate as a community.

My name is Nicholas Hall, and I am one of the west side residents who began this journey 18 months ago. I must say, the resilience of the men joining us today is nothing short of astounding. For me, the opportunity to not only receive college credits from a premiere university such as CU-Denver, not to mention an opportunity to potentially attain a bachelor's degree, was an unexpected gift. I hope to see this journey through, to get my Bachelor's Degree, and to create opportunities for those who come after me.



*The graduation ceremony for students at the Territorial Correctional Facility, December 2022, when they earned their CU Denver Certificate in Strategic Communication, with family members joining the event in person. Great Thanks to our CDOC colleagues at Territorial for making this possible, especially Emily Bell-Lujan (front center), and Dylan Lile and Kirk Snyder (not pictured). UCD personnel here are Laurel Dodds, Lisa Dicksteen, SJH, and Ben Boyce. The graduating students are Cedric Jackson, Andrew McClay, Delano Medina, Geordan Morris, Tanner Flores, Donald Stookey, Kean Davis, Jacob Carlock, Valentine Sitchler, Louis Mamo, Kenji Jones, Sean Mueller, and Ryon Olthoff.*

## Meaningful by Taveuan Williams

In borders of cement, where shadows cling  
A quest for knowledge, a soul takes wing  
In prison's grasp, a journey true  
The mind's escapes the heart anew

The pages turned, the spirit soars  
In learning's embrace, hope restores  
Each word a key unlocking fate  
In darkness, wisdom liberates

Though bars may bend and days seem long  
The quest for truth keeps the spirit strong  
For in the pursuit of knowledge's birth  
A life redeemed is a soul's rebirth

In prison's depths, a spark ignites  
And in that light, a world takes flight  
For educating oneself with zeal  
Makes this journey meaningful

## Rock Love Hard by Amanda Valenzuela

And when it was  
over only pain  
in my heart and the  
feeling of trepidation  
as my love turns to  
fear and anger over  
the days, over the months  
over the years

## Alien by Brian Anderson

I think I'm an alien

I think I'm from a different planet

I don't belong here, so stop acting like you know me

We are two different species

Stop telling me your lies!

Stop showing me your style!

I don't care no more. I'm just waiting for my spaceship to come, to take me out of this world. I hate being here. I hate seeing you. Don't look at me. Don't talk to me. You be you, I'll be me.

## Feel My Pain by Brian Anderson

Who is he? What is he thinking? We can't understand why he's so quiet. Why is he so sad? Why is he so lonely? Is he crazy?

Let me tell you

The sickness runs deep inside my heart  
The pain floats above my soul  
Tears run down my face  
Y'all think I 'm crazy?  
Ha! I'm paranoid schizophrenic, can't nobody understand me!

Look at the way I think, speak, and act  
Y'all thought I was playing?  
Y'all thought I was acting?  
Y'all can't help me  
Y'all can't relate to me

You think 'cause y'all psychiatrists you can understand me and know what I go through?  
Y'all ain't the one who feels boxed in whenever he's around people  
Y'all don't hear voices and see things that aren't there  
Y'all weren't mentally, sexually, and physically abused by your own friends and family  
Y'all don't wake up every day thinking of ways to die

Y'all never saw the pain I saw  
and y'all never lived the life I lived  
So how can y'all feel my pain?

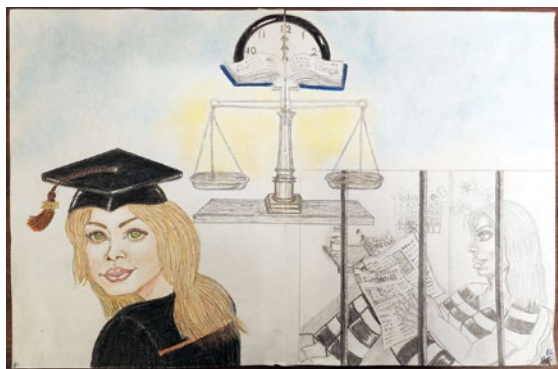
EDITOR'S NOTE: *In prior issues of Captured Words/Free Thoughts, authors have addressed the correlation between schizophrenia and incarceration, often sharing scenes of confusion and pain like those described here in the two pieces by Brian Anderson. For readers seeking more information on this issue, the National Institute of Health runs a National Library of Medicine, which includes a wide array of articles, including this one: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3612963>. For readers seeking activist alternatives, please see the resources offered by the Treatment Advocacy Center, <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org>.*



(above)  
Frankie Munoz "Collie and Flower"

(right)  
Hector Castillo

(below)  
"Balancing the Scales"  
by Heather Taylor





(above)  
 "Negative Energy"  
 by Steven Tucker



(right)  
 "CWFT" by  
 Roderick  
 Finley

(right)  
 "Life Sons"  
 by  
 James W.B.  
 Jackson

Life Song

James W.B. Jackson  
 1841711  
 Polunsky Unit  
 3872 FM 350 South  
 Livingston, Texas  
 77351

There's a melody in my soul  
 That must be set free  
 So Lord I ask you to help me let it go  
 Or either let go of me or rather let me go  
 I'm aware now that everything is bigger than  
 What I can actually see  
 And that I've been acting out the evil lessons  
 My former masters had taught me  
 And the melody goes mute  
 And the stench of my false selfish decency  
 Why did the people who were supposed to  
 Love me; mislead me?  
 Why were the abusers given access?  
 The abusers are always given access  
 And the melody returns on cue  
 Beginning with its foundation  
 As I begin to regain  
 Strength from the purity  
 Of Gods Love  
 So now I'm standing on a  
 Stone cliff, overlooking a  
 Mountainous horizon  
 A rugged path I can admire  
 For its beauty  
 Oh... OK, so the rough path is  
 Beautiful  
 But only from the perspective of  
 Overcomers  
 So now I'll still the pen and groove to the  
 Melody within and contemplate our Freedom  
 - James Jackson





(above)  
"X Out" by Jake Carlock



(above)

This tapestry was painted onto a 20ft x 10ft strip of linen by Cedar Annenkovna. It is used as a backdrop for Open Mic concerts, a peer-led development program within Denver Women's Prison where women in general population work with women in closed custody to create shared testimony, music/rap, and to perform spoken work for general population. The red curtain symbolizes the stages of life. On one side is the good life, symbolized by the tree of life (with music notes as fruit), its roots cradling the earth with an angel warrior and the lion as defenders of light and truth. On the other side is Santa Muerte, or death (with biohazard symbols on her robe—toxic! Stay away). At her feet are the choices that lead to despair. The hourglass symbolizes time stolen. The incense burner symbolizes the haze that clouds one's vision. In the center is the pillar of faith that love stands upon. I attempted to highlight the tension between light and dark, life and death, salvation and destruction.

(right)

"Where We Dwell"  
by Steven Tucker





## Slaughterhouse Gulch Kicks by Darin Ninneman

Once upon a time in a land far away, there was a child, and he was the only child in the household shared with his two parents. The family occupied a third story apartment in a four building complex. It wasn't nice, but it wasn't terrible either. The child was young, four or five years old. Innocence was bliss. The child never questioned why the household furniture consisted of a queen size mattress on the living room floor and a twin size mattress with no sheets in his room; he was happy to have a radio that would play "I'm dying in your arms tonight." The boy didn't question why adults never slept, or why his family would go shopping late at night in the Goodwill parking lot when nobody else was there. He didn't understand why he was so special to be able to attend a new school every month or so—he was privileged.

The child was content to play in the dirt on the edge of the blacktop parking lot because there were ants and rocks and sunlight. He had a love for his dad and he looked for any opportunity to spend time with him. Dad was always rushing off to work at odd hours; he was fast. One time when the little boy asked to come along, dad replied, "No son, you can't come to work with me because you haven't brushed your teeth and we are out of toothpaste, but I will pick some up today." Seems like a valid reason ... right? The child thought so. The blow of the denial was softened as he watched his dad shaving in the bathroom mirror, and he didn't question why his dad could go to work without brushing his teeth—after all, he was in the presence of a superhero, his dad.

On one unsuspecting day the dad said, "Son, come on turd bird, and let's go get you a pair of shoes." "But it isn't dark?" the son thought as the journey began. To the child, the walk to the shoe store was exciting because it was through Slaughterhouse Gulch, on a dirt path that wound down by the creek that had leeches under the rocks. He was forbidden to go there by himself, but that's another story for another time.

He left an hour later with a new pair of white-laced, low-topped tennis shoes—exactly what he'd wanted. But it was the journey back home that reminded him his world was so good, so beautiful. He ran fast, jumped high, danced in the air as his dad cheered him on...his dad, the best dad in the world.

Free from all rules, even gravity, it was near the end of the path that the unexpected showed its ugly face in the form of a broken coke bottle laying in the dirt path. In an instant the experience turned from breathtaking to heart-sinking confusion, dark and heavy. The coke bottle levered up and sliced the boy's ankle. It bled a lot, and his new shoe became warm, wet, and sticky. Soon it was rough, scratchy, and ruined. That day was the end of the child's first pair of new shoes.

37 years later, the boy is a man. He no longer wears the shoes on his feet; he wears them on his sleeve.

**To My Trans Brothers (My Incarcerated Word)  
by H.L. Tapia**

I sit on the sidelines  
In support  
Questioning  
How?  
Do you want my help?  
I do not see you as the novelty you are treated as  
Shaved head-lesbian  
Coupled up-gay for the stay  
Beard-transman  
The new evolution of diversity for the incarcerated  
We are all animals on display in this zoo  
You are unique  
Same/similar parts  
Yet you are the one with such courage  
Still struggling to feel okay  
A part of the more accepting expectant criminal element  
Yet do you accept your status on the yard?  
Your brothers have the same fights here  
Respect?  
Acknowledged?  
Existence?  
Second chance?  
Your sisters come in packs  
Climb all over you,  
Taking a piece of you as they move on  
A souvenir  
Bit by bit you shrunk  
The hormones fade  
The beard remains  
Stand your ground  
The COs abound  
Focused on your demise  
They seem to not sympathize  
You-are beneath them  
You-are a threat  
Smile and nod  
We all play the game  
Stand up-be strong  
It got you this far  
Special hybrid expression of beauty-light  
Hold firm, son  
You have won

**Creation Power:  
An Ode to  
Langston Hughes'  
"Lament for Dark People"  
by H. L. Tapia**

I am a woman  
many colors of diversity  
but the white men came

I am a woman  
a feminist, a leader  
but the white men came

I am a woman  
rising through my cage  
but all the men came  
they surrounded me  
with cat calls  
pulling at my shame

They might have made  
the cage I am in  
but the rest is  
now on me

The beat of the abolitionist's song  
the cry of revolution's through  
the white men might have come  
yet they can not exist  
without me

## **My Cometa Libertad by Monica Petrosian**

Voy en un largo viaje  
no tengo nada en mi equipaje  
No voy a ver ningún paisaje

Viajo en el camión de los sueños rotos  
De los días que serán reservados para la posteridad

Aprendo a reirme entre lágrimas

Voy en un largo viaje  
no tengo nada más que mi propia fuerza  
Quiero que el tiempo pase muy rápido, en un instante  
Quiero ser valiente y no desfallecer

Voy a un largo viaje  
En el que no tomo fotos  
No comparto sonrisas en la red,  
El viaje es interno

Me quedo con lo que puedo  
Arañar al benévolo día  
Aún no muere mi fé

Quiero dormir profundo y olvidar lo que fué

Destellos de lo que soñé ser se van enredando  
En el hilo de un cometa  
Con el que encadené mi alma y la isé

Voy en busca de ese cometa multicolor gigante  
Que por la vida y sus vientos me llevó tan lejos de lo que siempre amé

Voy caminado entre la maleza  
más alta que yo y me araña la piel

Doy pasos ciegos sin saber a dónde voy  
Solo sé que quiero de vuelta mi cometa gigante multicolor

Mi alma aterrada  
Mis ojos cansados  
Mis manos frías  
La seguiré buscando

Las noches no terminan en este largo viaje  
en un camión sin ventanas  
Como animal de un circo  
Voy en un vagón sin luz

La vida duele, la sangre se congela

Voy en un largo viaje  
El dolor no termina con la mañana siguiente

Uno tras otro  
Estos días me han dejado sin ver  
¿A dónde se fue mi cometa?  
¿y cómo la dejé perder?

EDITOR'S NOTE:  
*The following poem was written the day the author received a sentence of 15 years in prison. The original was written in Spanish, which we include here, with an English translation below. For help checking the Spanish, thanks to Dr. Javier Acevedo De La Torre and James McNeil.*



## **My Freedom Kite by Monica Petrosian**

I'm going on a long journey with an empty suitcase  
I won't see any landscape on my way

I'm traveling on the bus of broken dreams  
From the days that are going to be postponed

I'm learning how to laugh  
In the middle of my tears

I'm going on a long journey  
With nothing but my own strength  
I want the time to go as fast as an instant  
I want to be brave and not fade away

I'm going on a long journey  
But I'm not taking any pictures  
Or sharing smiles on the web  
This is an inner journey

I hold on to the good  
I can steal from the generous day  
When my faith prevails

I want to sleep deeply  
And forget all that was before

Flashes of lost dreams are still tangled  
On the line of the kite  
To which I chained my soul and let go

I'm searching for that giant multicolor kite  
That stormy winds swept away from all I ever loved  
I'm walking into the tall grass  
That towers over me and scratches my skin

I'm taking blind steps  
Not knowing where I'm going  
I just know I want back  
My giant multicolor kite

My soul is wounded  
My eyes are red from crying  
And my hands are cold  
But I keep looking

The nights never end on this long journey  
On a bus with no windows I feel  
Like an animal who is taken to the circus  
In a wagon with no light

Life hurts, blood freezes over  
I'm going on a long journey  
Where pain never ends the next morning

And one after the other  
These days have left me blind to see  
Where is my kite?  
And why did I let it go?



## **Prison World** **by Larry N. Stromberg**

Trapped in the bars of my mind  
Addiction has feasted on my soul  
Obsession controlling my thoughts  
A dark cloud hovers over me  
Almost demonic  
Held captive as a child by the sickness of abuse  
The past suffocates me  
Tormenting my inner being  
My thoughts wrapped around the razor wire  
It cuts my spirit  
Prison World  
I gotta break free, plan my escape  
Release myself from the bondage  
Riot my emotions  
Sound the alarm!  
Next stop, Death Row, if I don't break the chains  
Of oppression, addiction, and the depression in my mind  
I'll never forget the caged beatings  
Psychological isolation  
Abandoned by society, they keep on depriving and eyeing me?  
My remorseful existence  
Accept rehabilitation and embrace my recovery  
Learn to forgive all, including myself  
How can I find my redemption?  
It's a lifelong spiritual journey  
A tall task to endure  
Getting an education has given me a purpose  
Accountability and responsibility is my motto of truth  
A heart of remorse  
Therapy days  
Atonement lays at my feet  
Honestly standing now  
Freedom calls my name



## The Uncaged Writer: Freedom of the Creative Spirit by D. Razor Babb

I was off in a secluded corner of the gym, a place of temporary solitude away from the clamor of a crowded yard of around 800, when I noticed an acquaintance meandering in my direction. He was a person I've known for several years, a writer. The first time we met he asked if I'd take a look at some pages he'd written. When I returned them, I said, "If you're not spending your time writing, you're wasting it." He took the suggestion to heart, and over the past two years has completed two novel-length manuscripts.

It seems sometimes that the most gifted individuals—those with the ability to cross over into the higher realms of unobstructed, creative clarity—can seem so different, so eccentric, so often misunderstood. Maybe they are just so overcome with their genius that others see them as rascallions, nonconformists, or difficult. The savage beast of genius can be resistant to attempts at control and conformity. Being proper and polite don't always mix well with the creative spirit. Perhaps the more in-touch with genius one becomes, the less the earthly bounds of conformity hold them captive to cultural norms, and society feels the need to punish them for their special talent. That's the debt to be paid for the gift of inspired insight. My friend is a prime example of this great obscene social dynamic. In this place of control through fear and intimidation, amid the insipid need to force conformity or be beaten down, he frequently has difficulty navigating a world where mediocrity is celebrated and excellence is bartered in favor of those who enforce the rules someone else has written.

As he approached I could see he was angry, agitated, frustrated, and his first words echoed against the cavernous gym walls, "Man, I'm so tired of this, these..." followed by a description of an interaction that had him banging his fists on the table, trying to talk sense to people who make no sense at all, reciting rules and dispensing penalties for infractions imagined and conjured out of vagary too ridiculous to reason.

"I've just had it," he said. "I don't know if it's even worth it anymore." It was a comment veined with intention, or at least the consideration of intent of the darkest nature. The life sentences we face, the brutality we see and have been a part of, the hopelessness and despair—it adds up over the years. It's not something we talk about regularly, not something we even think about; at least not in the daylight hours. Those thoughts are left for the twilight and beyond, only visited on rare occasions when our guard is down or our dander up. In those moments, wise reason can be elusive. Sometimes just being able to talk with someone can help, if you can find someone you trust.

In the long, suffering silence that followed, as I struggled for something to say that could be of any console, I found that the well of wisdom was dry. But from some unknown place words fell from the rafters and broke through the hazy gloom of concern and confusion. I heard more than said, "Why don't you write about it?"

The next morning I ran into my friend at breakfast. He was reenergized and inspired, hungry to create, knocking out 8 pages the previous night as the unleashed beast of creativity devoured the fetid waste of repression and angst. He steered into the maelstrom of despair and applied the one thing he knew was equal to the task, his imagination. In doing so, he ascended to greater heights where literary wonder awaits, locked within, yearning to be uncaged.

In accepting the 1950 Nobel Prize for Literature, William Faulkner said it best: "...problems of the human heart in conflict with itself alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat." In this way, we do not seek to escape our suffering, but to experience and examine it, reflecting rather than deflecting a life worth living. It is a freedom elusive and untamed, and when discovered it can change a life. Sometimes it can even save it.

## **Finally** **by Manuel G. Sisneros Sr.**

When asked what I find in writing  
My response is complicated

Sometimes I find an out, an escape  
Into another world, where creativity is endless  
Finally a place where my hurts, pains, fears  
And worries can be put to rest  
A place where I am in control

But then I wonder  
How far have I come if I make no sense to myself?

Yet I say this with pride  
I am who I've always wanted to become  
A LOVED Man!  
I can also finally say that I love myself

Have you ever neglected yourself to the point of being lost?  
You have a friend in me, for we have walked the same path  
lost and undeserving, or so we thought

I write because it gives me freedom  
Because what I have to say matters  
Finally, I write

## **Dear God** **by B. Nathaniel (N. Siris) Harbin**

I started out young with hard times  
Poor and unloved with a simple mind

Though I was hurt I did not cry  
But I often ask myself why?

Why me God, what did I do?  
I thought you loved us all if what the Bible says is true

I've been from house to house, and home to home  
But I still find myself all alone

No one I can talk to, no one who can relate  
Nowhere to run because there is no escape

Where was my father? He wasn't there  
Where was my mother? She didn't care

Totally self taught, not one full year of school  
I'm fortunate I didn't turn out to be a complete fool

I've done many things I truly regret  
I've made many mistakes I'll never forget

I know right now my life is in your hands  
All I'm asking of God is one more chance



## **This Poor Man Cried** **by Clarke Cayton**

Over time we all succumb, to the trials we know not from  
    this poor man cried  
Heaven burdens on our shoulders, fear and worry are massive boulders  
    this poor man cried  
Feeling desperate when alone, wasting away to skin and bone  
    this poor man cried  
Look not to worldly resolutions, from God alone comes life's solutions  
    this poor man cried  
Into your hands my spirit commends, in eternity my souls will ascend  
    this poor man cried

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

## **Admiral William** **by James Schmidt**

It's the summer of 1803  
All around flowers are blooming  
    William has just been married  
    His vessel is the Hotspur  
    It's a mighty ship with many cannons  
He sets sail in hopes to sink a French vessel

It's only been a month at sea  
Off in the sunlit horizon lies a French vessel  
    The high seas have been kind to William  
    9 pound cannons are fired on both sides

The French cannons take down the Hotspur's center mast  
    Admiral William's body is crushed

He closes his brown eyes to his wife  
    Sees them dancing in a ballroom  
    He sees his wife's face filled with happiness  
Sees them standing together under a full moon

Admiral William opens his eyes to see the sails  
He sees the French flag flapping in the cool breeze  
    Sees the British flag being lowered  
    He sees men jumping into the sea

Admiral William closes his eyes to see a starfish  
He sees a huge sea turtle floating in the waves  
    Sees a large seal lion on the beach

Admiral William won't open his eyes again  
He has become that sea lion on the beach  
    His days are now spent lying in the sun

**Audre Lorde Haiku**  
**by Amanda Valenzuela, Brandy Flores,**  
**Adelain Ibarra, Pauline Macareno, & Tanya Austin**

A woman of feminism  
Break through walls built by white men  
Fighting to be heard

**Nana**  
**by Tanya Austin**

I can smell the rose garden through the open window above my bed, the cool crisp air wafting in the sweet fragrance of her prize-winning red, yellow, pink, and white roses. The smell covers me in a blanket of nostalgia. The earthy smell of fresh soil clings to her hands like the day after the first rain of the season. Tucking my hair behind my ear and whispering to me, “close your angel eyes, little one.” When she speaks, I am immediately intoxicated by the hint of “Obsession” by Liz Taylor. Her housecoat drapes her in aromatics of stale Benson & Hedges cigarettes, French vanilla coffee, and the pot of tomato sauce simmering for tomorrow’s meal. This scent is forever locked into my memory.

I close my angel eyes and return to my favorite place, dreams of my Nana forever comforting me.

**She Is Queen**  
**by Brandy Flores**

A perfect silhouette. Amelia has the hands of an artist, delicate, slim, and sleek fingers. Her hair is dark chestnut brown that is soft as silk, cut to a shoulder length A-line bob. At first glance, her features appear soft and subtle, yet her side profile is perfectly chiseled. She has big, round eyes the color of deep brown—so deep you can see through her soul. She carries wisdom far beyond her age of 23. She hides her vulnerability behind eyeglasses that seem to be just a tad too big for her small, round head. The canvas she paints on depicts characters and objects that are bold, resolute, and daring—the complete opposite of her unsure and fragile nature. Her apron is usually smeared with streaks of paint and covers her slim-yet-curve figure. In her work she gets lost, existing in whole other worlds of her making. However small and unimportant she feels in this world no longer matters. When she escapes into her paintings, she is queen.

## The Andrews Manor Massacre, 1973 by Vaughn Wright

It was dusk, curfew, as we cut through the courtyard, staccato screams coming from one of the apartments somewhere on our left. It was a young voice, one of ours.

“Who lives over there?”  
“Derek, I think.”

We felt embarrassed for him. Someone should’ve shut the windows, but it was summertime. We kept walking, ears eager. The shrieks got louder, more murderous, threatening to burst the seams of that pocket of the complex. I winced.



“Damn.”  
“Yeah.”

Given the right day and offense, we might be that voice . . . had been that voice. We wondered what he might have done, but not too much. “Whatever it was, I betcha he don’t do it again.”

Maybe. Maybe not. We were kids. We always thought we’d never get caught.

**Pain**  
**by Shawn Harris**

There is a purpose in the pain  
A tapestry in the scars  
A rhythm in the screams

The misery coddles my dreams with haunting lullabies

I learn to fabricate smiles and laughter from scratch

I nod my head and shrink into obscurity

My wounds are works of art  
They splash across my canvas of flesh and bone  
By artists known and unknown

So I am the portrait of pain and struggle  
On display for all to ogle and wonder

**Prison is not a Depository**  
**by Abdullah Muhammad**

Prison is not a depository where your loved ones sit  
until you sacrifice your time for a visit  
where credits are applied to accounts overdue  
where we sit until the books are opened and accounts are balanced  
but a place of banishment for the hearts and souls of mindless men  
a place where ledgers are torn apart and years credited to eternity

Prison is not a depository  
but a place where the balance owed is never reduced  
a place built by the illusions of men in black robes with white painted faces  
an imitation of justice where numbers are counted and counted again  
a mass of black men with twisted grins and distorted faces  
a place where life is swallowed up by the horrors of fallen angels

Prison is not a depository  
but a place of misery and pain  
a place of eternal reckoning where daylight is shut out by ignorance  
justice perverted to truth, truth to punishment, punishment to torture

Prison is a succession of years spent in madness  
Prison is not a depository

## **Night Thoughts** **by Timothy Byrne**

These cheerless nights  
open  
all that we've hidden so well  
but move without measure  
and deliver us forward until

the reflections begin to roll  
and toss our losses like wreckage  
across an untouchable world

And all we observe yet fail to grasp  
of distant years distorted  
by pills or false emotions

sessions of self-critical questions  
make clear our acceptance to  
acknowledge what remains

## **What's In A Name?** **by Gary K. Farlow**

Paris, who had never been to France  
Bone Crusher, who had never hit another human being  
Professor, who didn't finish high school  
who dreamed of driving a Datsun  
Strawberry, who despised his given name of Walter  
Big Mo, who had a heart of gold  
Chante', Who wanted to be America's Next Top Model  
September, who loved the Autumn  
Dove, who was so named by 1960s love-child parents  
Rabbit, who was scared of his shadow  
Cat Man, an inmate version of a "crazy cat lady"  
Chemo, who wanted to be a pharmacist  
Tiny, who at 310 lbs was anything but  
Disco, who used to enjoy Saturday Night Fever  
Prophet, who swore he could foretell the future  
Poppa Smurf, who claimed to be the oldest inmate inside  
And to all the countless Jerseys, Phillies, New Yorks, Cowboys  
D.C.s, Preachers, and Calis—what's in a name?  
In prison you never can tell

## **Taking Stock** **by Dylan Lapointe (DJ)**

In this season of darkness  
I take a long look at my life  
and what it's come to

I've steadily followed a path  
of drugs, fast money, fast women  
thinking for years that I was content  
that it was what I wanted to do  
where I wanted to be

But I was blinded by delusions  
and learned, albeit too late  
that this road only takes you to two places  
prison or death

## **The Birth of Madness** **by Ira "The Statesman" Johnson**

It's been said these walls can talk  
and that I'd be surprised  
by the tales they'd tell  
of the men they've held  
until the day they died

I swear  
I hear their voices echoing inside my head  
particularly at night  
when all is quiet  
while lying upon my bed

Please  
if these walls are speaking  
I beg you, set me free!  
return me to a time and place  
where the walls don't talk to me!

The background of the page is a dark, atmospheric photograph of an interior space. On the left, there is a window with a dark frame and a metal grate at the bottom. The walls are a mottled, light color, possibly white or light grey, with some shadows and textures. In the center of the room, a person is sitting on the floor, their back to the camera. The lighting is low, creating a somber and contemplative mood.

## **Attempting Sobriety by Dylan Lapointe (DJ)**

Tossed about on a sea of fear  
Feelings of doubt and inequity forcing me under the surface

I'm drowning, choking  
Gasping  
Struggling for air

My addiction  
An insidious temptation, lurking  
Creeping in like a shadow  
On the periphery of my vision  
Trying to find my weakness  
Ready to pounce the moment  
I begin to feel like I'm in control

## **Methamphetamine by Dylan Lapointe (DJ)**

These streets are the battlefield in my personal war  
This glass pipe is my weapon  
This baggie my armor  
the tools that allow me to forget reality  
even if it's only for a few minutes  
to make myself feel better  
to feel invincible  
unable to ever be hurt again

Yet at the same time, causing me to hate myself  
These things I do—they hurt the people that care about me

But with the people surrounding me, the prevailing attitudes  
each day becomes harder than the last  
bringing yet another battle between myself and my demons  
smoking more to cope with this lifestyle I've chosen  
creating a vicious cycle that never stops

## **On Safe Transitions, the Power of Meditation, and Moving Forward: A Captured Words/Free Thoughts Interview with Don Warner**



A new feature in *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*, each issue now includes an interview with one of our correspondents. For our first interview, published in Volume 19, we spoke with Roderick Finley, one of our longest-running correspondents and a Texas-based writer who, over almost 20 years of collaboration, has become a friend and inspiration. For our second interview, we have turned closer to home to speak with Don Warner. An alum of our CU College-in-Prison program, Don is now a successful student at CU Denver, where he is becoming a community leader. We believe his story of making a successful transition from incarceration-to-campus will be inspiring for our readers.

*CW/FT: Brother Don, congratulations on getting out and making a safe and successful transition back to free society! You've got a great job, you're living with friends (and their adorable dog!), and you're enrolled in college classes, way to go. I am sure our readers will want to know, what were the hardest parts about getting out, and how did you tackle those challenges?*

Don: The obstacles are unique to every individual, but in my case the biggest challenges were housing, money, and transportation. Due to the kindness of friends, I was able to tackle the housing issue. The transportation issue kind of fell into place because of that housing issue being settled, and the money issue too fell into place over time. But without that housing, I think I would have faltered. I wouldn't have been able to do school because housing would have become my central focus. Stability is necessary for success.

There is this huge gap between "you're such a bad person that you're going to prison and you have to stay here" to "okay, you're back on the street; get your 40 hours a week, pay your rent, get there on time, buy your lunch." Like, "wait, pay what rent? Buy what lunch? I don't even have a lunch box!" I was lucky for what I had. I found community help. I got help from the prison program, and I got help from allies like Carol Peebles at Remerg (<https://remerg.com> for more information on that terrific community group supporting safe transitions). So, you know, a key part of making a safe transition is asking for help, finding help, and then relying on a network of friends and supporters.

But having housing that was rent-free for a short time—having a place to put my stuff—that meant I could save up money and get back on my feet. And not that I believe in God, but there was a godsend. I could get all the things I needed to succeed: a computer for school, a vehicle, a phone. When I got out, they dumped me in the middle of downtown at 6AM with a \$100 gift card. That's how they let you out the door, so I understand why so many people struggle and wind up back inside.

*CW/FT: While you were imprisoned, we met when you enrolled in our CU College-in-Prison Program. I was always struck by how you excelled in our*



*college classes while foregrounding your Buddhism within those classes. Please tell us, what does Buddhism mean to you, and how did it help you survive prison?*

Don: I don't view Buddhism as a formalized religion. Nonetheless, I meditate. I take time out and make sure I'm able to center myself. Oddly, this was easier inside than it is outside. There's just more down time when you're inside, and it takes a lot of effort and energy to keep yourself centered when you're out and dealing with the issues I mentioned above. Actually, school was also much easier inside than it has been outside. I think it has to do with how siloed we are inside. We were given just a certain amount of research material and a certain amount of content to pull from and to write from. And out here, the sky's the limit, right? It's honestly overwhelming at times. So meditation is really important to help keep me centered and grounded, to not get lost in all the noise of daily life on the outside.

One of the core beliefs in Buddhism is that everybody around you is a teacher, good or bad; every experience you have with somebody or with something is a teaching or a learning moment. That framework also helps center me; it helps to ground me and humble me. In fact, there's a certain amount of humility in all of this, right? The state could pull the rug out from under me at any time as a parolee. Buddhism keeps me laughing at this cosmic joke of life.

*CW/FT: Now that you're out and doing great work, we've invited you to serve as one of the alumni members on our prison program Advisory Board—congratulations. Please talk with us about what that feels like, to have been inside and now to be not only outside, but a leader outside, someone who is helping to advance our vision of education instead of incarceration.*

Don: You know, to be honest with you, that's one of the hardest things I've ever done. It's been really difficult to navigate all these spaces, and the one thing that often helps is school. Luckily, I was able to carry that momentum from inside to outside. Now college fills the space for me. My biggest difficulties are when I'm bored and I have a lot of free time. I get into trouble, right? College helps, it gives me somewhere to focus my energy. I've also had the help and support of a lot of people; I have yet to come across a teacher at CU Denver who hasn't been accepting and supportive. It's funny though—I would say that classes out here are harder than classes in there.

It's also a complicated identity, having been in prison and getting out but remaining in contact with a lot of my fellow students inside. I know these guys. I am one of them. All that Hollywood stuff about us being idiots or not knowing how to think—that's bullshit. We might think in a different way while we're there, often because that's what the environment requires of us. And we often get there through trouble that comes from thinking that way. We aren't too stupid; we're too clever for our own good. No one has taught us how to think critically, how to philosophize, how to weigh the pros and cons on a scale that values social justice. That's why we end up in prison.

So now that I'm out and working a job and completing school, serving on the Advisory Board is this really cool experience. It's like a formal platform where I get to share what I've learned with teachers, campus and community leaders, and students still incarcerated. I think the idea that our knowledge and skills can be converted from shame and guilt to community leadership—that is so important. It's a gift to be able to play a role in a community of shared interests and goals, to go from the isolation of prison to the teamwork of the Advisory Board—that's just super cool.

## **On Writing: A Captured Words/Free Thoughts Interview with Vaughn Wright**

Readers will know Vaughn as the author of “From this Window,” published in Volume 19. A fixture in the prison arts scene in Pennsylvania, we wanted to interview Vaughn about his writing practices, thinking a conversation with this veteran writer might inspire some of our readers who are looking for ways to share their voices with larger audiences.

*CW/FT: It can be so difficult to write while imprisoned—there are a million reasons not to do it. But you have persisted despite those impediments, so please tell us, what is your process? Do you have a scheduled routine or a set of best practices?*

Vaughn: “The shortest pencil is better than the longest memory.” I came across this quote from Mark Twain fairly early in my writing career and recognized the truth of it from the rip, because I forget shit all the time. This is why virtually everything I’ve ever created started out as a note. Whenever I get the idea for anything—a poem, short story, novel, art project, or invention—I write it down immediately, whether on a sheet of paper taped to my “office” wall or in a notebook I carry with me, because inspiration is like a ninja. It can strike anywhere, anytime, and then disappear as if it were never there. A sentence, a word, a doodle—whatever will be snapshot enough to bring to mind the original concept is all I need. And once I ‘m feeling creative, I go through my main list and work on whichever entry speaks the loudest to me.

As for a scheduled routine, who the hell does that? I mean, I know of authors who task themselves to do ten pages a day or whatever, but as far as I ‘m concerned, creativity happens when it happens. When it does, that’s when I go to work. I tend to get pretty compulsive once I’ve got a project going, sort of like a pitbull on a pork chop, especially if I know what the substance of it needs to be or how I want it to end. In that case, it’s simply a matter of figuring out an A that’ll get me to B. Other times I just start writing with absolutely no idea where I’ll end up until my muse gets me there. It can be a bit of a challenge, but the twists and turns I get carried away on are always an adventure.

*CW/FT: Now that you have been working with other artists and authors on their work, what tips would you offer those struggling to get started or who are interested in trying out an entirely new activity?*

Vaughn: I’ve actually been working with other artists and authors in this prison for decades, and my advice to them never has and never will change when it comes to getting started: Put it on paper. It seems everybody and their cellie in these camps has a story they want to share with the world. Unfortunately, most of them drag their feet about getting real with it for all kinds of reasons, most commonly, “I’ve got it all right here in my head.” “Sure,” I tell them, “the only problem with that is nobody can read your mind, and nobody will pay you for what’s in your head except a medical college.” Your story dies with you unless you put it on paper.

If you’re a creatively active person interested in exploring a different art form, work your way into it from a point of familiarity. Take a piece you already have and alter it. Want to try your hand at a short story? Expand one of your poems. You want to learn how to do scripts? Then turn one of your stories into a one-act play. You’ve only ever done art? Write a poem about your favorite



piece, or maybe write a short story about the one you like the least. Believe me, you'll not only be surprised at how kick-ass it turns out, but it'll swell you with pride and self-confidence at having conquered something new. When have you ever not needed some of that?

*CW/FT: In your piece from volume 19 of Captured Words/Free Thoughts, "From This Window," you described in vivid detail your view from prison. How do you go about creating pieces like that without letting the dreary, all-gray tone of prison infect your writing?*

Vaughn: Funny thing, that. "From This Window" is one of the scores of pieces that wouldn't even exist if I had kept to the mandate I put myself under when I first started writing creatively back in '97. At the time I was determined not to write stories about being in prison. Being in prison sucks. Everyone who's ever been in one knows this, and anyone who hasn't should try at least a month of it to get an appreciation for why. My primary concern, however, was that my "voice" would be drowned out by the stigma of being a "prison writer," so I decided I'd write on as many other subjects as my muse would give me.

But let me tell you something about incarceration. It is all-encompassing. It truly does infect every aspect of a prisoner's life, so much so that it eventually brought me to the realization that I couldn't continue to take this writing thing seriously without exploiting the influence of my circumstance in my work. All I was doing was standing in my own way. Besides, I reasoned, the state was already holding me captive. Why voluntarily shackle my imagination? So, prudently, I stepped aside and let my muse loose. It's been thanking me ever since.

## **Crack da Sky** **by Roderick Finley**

Mountaintops are never reached when we remain handcuffed in the valley  
Life has so much to teach us, we should seek deliverance, self-dedication  
And don't forget to hit your knees, keeping your heart humble  
Depression creeps around every corner, pressing to leave us weeping  
Instead of pressing through and finding ways to keep on thinking

Look deep within, letting redemption write over a purple heart  
Like an ink pen bleeding truth. Watch your wounds and scars  
Begin to mend, never perfect but always better

Stretching, pushing, striving to keep going  
Self-motivation 101  
We must not die

Empty eyes become weary eyes  
When there's no tears left to cry  
Struggling with our inner selves to survive, to get by

Reach deep  
Breathe deep  
Look deep  
And crack da sky

## **Sepstina Godspell** **by Timothy Wakefield**

Six months in prison became a theater, uniforms just another costume. Not knowing that all of life is a stage, every man became a star to the director of voice-cacophony in song. Expectations changed the meaning of the dance.

Soon this chaotic troop began to dance together, breathing freedom into theater. Even the gods came to absorb their song. Commitment was fit to wear the costume guided by the light of the director. All of his tender loving care set the stage.

A DOC bus transported actors and stage to places where even the law could begin to dance with shackle and chain, requested by one director whose eye was trained on a different theater, attempting to restrain men in costume while each sang the same song.

Unforgettable nights echoed in their song. Ancestors followed footprints to the stage where reality wore a different costume, the love of family improving the performance: expectations changed the meaning of the dance. Never before had home become theater, except in the heart of our director.

Five shows meant oneness with their director, a certain harmony in their song that could be felt in the vibrating theater night after night. Hugging hands joined families on the stage where every soul entered into the act, improving the love dance and stripping away Lucifer's green outfit.

In the next act, gone was every costume. Filled with satisfaction, our director coordinated the tear-down dance of this newly formed society's song, echoing in their love of theater. Their hearts will never leave that magic stage.

Empty feels the dance without the old song, and the costumes feel senseless without a theater, without a director on this stage of life.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: In December 2022, DU PAI hosted a performance of Godspell at Colorado's oldest prison, the Territorial Correctional Facility in Cañon City, CO. Wakefield's reflection is based on his serving as one of the actors. The performance was covered by the local press, [https://denvergazette.com/arts-entertainment/godspell-the-story-of-jesus-told-in-a-prison-john-moore/article\\_6fe9aba4-8316-11ed-8716-e7584d9c7bf0.html](https://denvergazette.com/arts-entertainment/godspell-the-story-of-jesus-told-in-a-prison-john-moore/article_6fe9aba4-8316-11ed-8716-e7584d9c7bf0.html), and by the national press, <https://www.today.com/parents/family/university-denver-prison-theater-program-rcna62396>. For more on DU PAI, see their website at <https://liberalarts.du.edu/prison-arts/our-work>.*



**Actions**  
**by Michael Zeigler**

Moving with a purpose, striving toward my goals  
In my own land with tunnel vision  
Locked in, no time to get off track  
This isn't a race  
It's important to move at your own pace  
To speak with your actions and not just your words

**We Return**  
**by Christian J. Weaver**

Raise your quill to the sky like a madman's harpoon  
Supertempered in blood and the blackest of wine  
Is the blade of our mania, flashing and white  
As a lightning bolt fresh from the night

Raise your quill to the sky like a madman's harpoon  
Dare the lightning itself to descend with a flash  
Raise thy sword to the heavens, as fearless and brash  
As a thunderbolt's terrible crash

Raise your quill to the sky like a madman's harpoon  
Though as fated for death as old Ahab himself  
We return from the womb of that watery hell  
With unsinkable riches to sell



**Bound  
by Christian J. Weaver**

He holds the chain and jerks it tight  
an inmate on the other end  
He beams with pride and glows with hate  
the feel of power in his hand  
Betrays a grin, he turns to leave  
Alas! The chain resists

**Going Through the Motions  
by Finley**

Going through the motions  
that seem bigger than an ocean  
wrestling with thick waves of pressure  
that seem to come deep without measure

All hope is lost does not cross the mind  
hope and faith are the treasures I find  
striving to construct an identity that's mine  
self-defined  
courage emerges as I strive and climb

Above defeat  
God's strength keeps me from being weak  
I've got a destiny  
big as this epiphany

## **Observations over Time: An Overview of the Illinois Maximum Security Prisons as Lived by Your Typical Disgruntled Inmate Over the Last 50 Years**

**by Mark A. Smith**

When first taken to prison, I knew I was facing a lengthy sentence. What I didn't know was the tremendous amount of change that would transpire as I grew old while being there. I was initially taken to a place called "The Annex" in Joliet, Illinois, where I waited for a few weeks while they decided where to send me.

The Annex was closed years ago, and none too soon. As a result, I was transferred to a place called Stateville Correctional Center, a huge prison by any standard with five large cellhouses and two smaller units. My journey began in cellhouse F, where I worked in the bakery and as a "cellhouse helper"—a glorified term for cellblock janitor. I also worked with the Bureau of Identification, the portion of the prison where new arrivals were photographed and fingerprinted.

Eventually I landed a good job in the Malaria hospital. An inmate could sign up for this volunteer program and, for a few dollars, he could choose to be a member of the latest drug study, or he could stick his arm into a screened box full of mosquitos and come down with malaria so that the U.S. Army could test some new drugs they were developing. This was normal in the 1970s, but it was still strange to serve time in the basement of a building full of rabbits and monkeys who were also test subjects (although I doubt that they were volunteers). The animals were fun to play with whenever the officer on the door would allow us in there. My job was to do bench chemistry and to test the volunteers after they got sick or took the latest drug.

Nowadays, few people inside even remember the program; the wing of the building where it was housed no longer exists. The cellblock where I worked all those aforementioned jobs has been condemned for several years due to mechanical instability and a thick covering of black mold. There were three other cellblocks just like that one: C, D, and E. They no longer exist, having been bulldozed under more than twenty years ago. One of the smaller units where I used to work is also condemned and used for storage.

The prison itself is a square, roughly a quarter mile long and wide. It currently contains just one fully functional cellblock, a fact that seems to have escaped the notice of budgeters concerned with efficiency. It is fully staffed: correctional officers, their bosses, counselors, food service people, etc., even though it is now merely a ghost of its former self, much like me.

After four years studying Stateville, I was transferred to the Menard Correctional Center. Nestled against the Mississippi

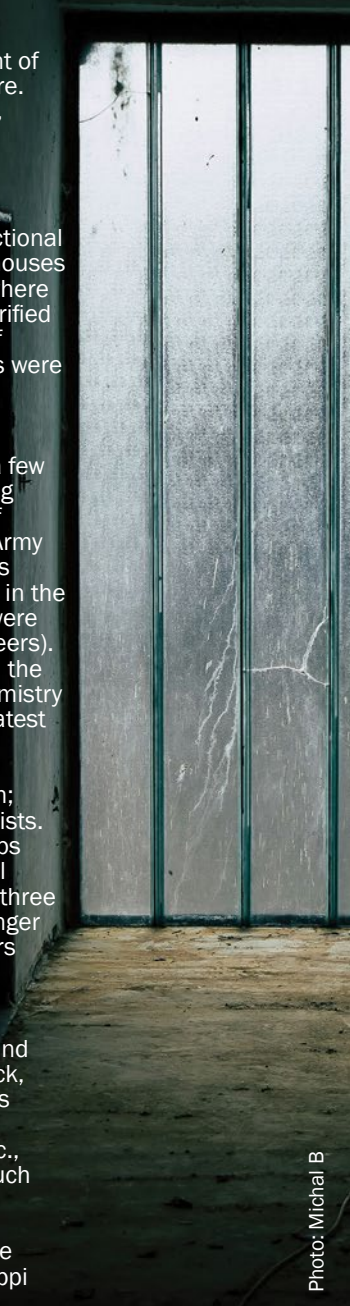


Photo: Michal B





River between St. Louis and Cape Girardeau, Missouri, Menard sits in an old quarry from which the large, yellow sandstone blocks that the place was constructed from were originally cut. Some say it was used during the Civil War as a holding place for prisoners from both sides. It had plaques dated from the 1800s mounted to the wall in several places, but few agree exactly when it became the prison it still is. The facility has been selectively rebuilt one or two buildings at a time, a trick that seems to have kept it open and functioning even though most buildings are broken, giving the entire place an air of that same sadness. One of my first jobs down there was to use a cutting torch to cut the manacles and shackles from the walls of the “Dungeon.” There were twelve to fifteen sets of these in the dirt-floored basement of a place known as the IPO dorm. That building also housed the state’s functioning electric chair for many years. It was kept in an upstairs room in that same IPO dorm where I lived. I spent many hours sitting in the chair and reading, as it was the quietest place in the area.

Now that building is long gone, paved over as a yard for current security threats. The electric chair now likely sits in someone’s macabre, private collection. Nothing is as it was. Despite the major overhauls, the prison operates much the same as it has since I arrived. The cells in two of the buildings are still so small that an adult man can’t walk to the back of the cell without turning sideways to fit between the bed and the wall. These cells once held two men and everything they owned.

When I first arrived at Menard, there was no hot water in the cells (only a cold water spigot and a toilet). A gallery porter would come down the gallery after everyone was locked up shouting “hot water,” and as he walked by, you could fill your largest container with hot water. This was usually used for a cup of coffee, and sometimes I’d have enough left over to mix the rest with some cold water from the sink and take a sink-bath. On a really good night, he may have enough time to make a second pass with more water. The porter would get water from a slop sink at the end of the gallery—the only hot water in the building. Hot water was one of the only things we had to look forward to. Showers were doled out once a week, offered in the dark basement of what was, by day, the barber shop. The correctional officers took one gallery at a time (approx. 50 inmates), then locked the door after yelling that we had “ten minutes.” People who had enemies there or were known to fraternize with the staff would stay in their cells. There was seldom more than a day or two before the next “incident,” which could range from a simple beating to a murder, stabbings being the most common form. Even if you were a “stand up” inmate with few fears and no enemies, you learned to shower facing the front with one eye open. I lost several good friends throughout those years to the system that society calls “corrections.” There are many more stories generated by the prison called Menard,

but I would like to move ahead to my next major transfer or assignment.

I was sent to a place set in the center of a quaint, old town called Pontiac, Il. You might think it must be a better place than the other offerings, but you would be wrong. Pontiac was referred to as the “Thunderdome” by inmates and staff alike. It was eventually deemed too violent to be left as it was, and the Department of Corrections had it redesignated as a segregation facility. It had a particularly depressing feel about it that left virtually no one untouched. Imagine living day to day, for many years like that! As a designated segregation unit, all inmates who needed to leave their cell were handcuffed behind their back and bound with leg chains. This made the officers feel much safer, but it changed little for the overall oppression that gripped the inmate.

My goal isn't to make a spectacle of the sick and twisted stories of many warped psyches you will encounter in places like these. Nor am I talking about the many decent, well-meaning men that should never have been sent to these places in the first place. I'm talking about the places themselves, cell blocks that eventually turn to rocks and dust after having hosted so much fear and terror for many people for so long. I can only wonder who it was that thought this was a good idea.

Nowadays, things have improved, at least in the sense of housing and treatment. But there is still a serious gap in what is being done and what needs to be done to solve the problem. For instance, everyone who works in the corrections field knows that the most likely person to “make” it on the outside is the long-term offender. It's one of those statistics that is used frequently. But a long-term offender almost always has violence attached to his crime. Any time there is a bill or a law passed related to sentencing, it tends to apply only to the non-violent or first time offender (cuts in time, extra good time, early release, etc.). Politicians hesitate to do anything for formerly-violent offenders. It's all the short term purse snatchers and smash-and-grabbers who are using the so-called “revolving door or prison.” The return customers are the ones costing you billions of dollars in “correctional” budgets, not the long term offenders who do their time and get their act together. Politicians frequently ignore this obvious problem. Those of us here for long sentences have little recourse for changing this groundhog day's worth of ignorance known as incarceration.

Until public sentiment changes, politicians will continue on with the stand that anyone with violence in their past is either unsalvageable, or not worth the effort. It's public sentiment that allows this to continue. Only we can change it.

## **TWO EDITOR'S NOTES:**

*First, Smith claims herein that recidivism rates are correlated to length of sentence. This argument reflects the general understanding that prisoners who carry longer sentences tend to be older when released from prison, making them less likely to fall into the revolving door of recidivism. For data and analysis of this immensely complicated issue, see *Length of Incarceration and Recidivism, a 2022 report released by the United States Sentencing Commission*, [https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/research-publications/2022/20220621\\_Recidivism-SentLength.pdf](https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/research-publications/2022/20220621_Recidivism-SentLength.pdf).*

*Second, scholars of the history of prisons have long pointed to facilities in Illinois as especially backward, precisely as Smith chronicles here. Activists have accordingly focused on Illinois as a space of advocacy; readers can join this movement by connecting with allies at *The Illinois Prison Project*, <https://www.illinoisprisonproject.org>; the *John Howard Association*, <https://www.thejha.org>; and the *Illinois Prisoner Rights Coalition*, <https://www.prisonactivist.org/resources/illinois-prisoner-rights-coalition>.*

## A Departing Gift by Anita Mobley

Today my friend was released from prison, and it was a glorious occasion! Sharing in his experience and hearing his name called out for the last time by the officer on duty certainly carried an entirely different resonance this morning. As my friend's name was called, the officer's tone of voice carried not a hint of condemnation. This morning, my friend was no longer called offender or inmate. He was a just a man—a free man who was also hearing his name called with the dignity and respect that was now well-deserved, no longer reserved. He had not heard his name spoken in this way in twenty some odd years. For just a few moments, it felt like someone had drawn an imaginary blank line and left it hanging in midair, allowing us inmates the opportunity to hypothetically insert our names on the dotted line signifying our own release or pardon. For everyone in the room this morning, the intensity was palpable; to some degree, every inmate in our cell block was living vicariously through my friend as he prepared to go home.

His release and homegoing were surreal. Secretly, each of us had silently been counting down the days for several weeks. But even now, I can't imagine how he must have been feeling or how he processed all of this. A whole new world awaited him with as much anticipation as he had, having missed out on so much of his youth. No longer the young, dark haired, smooth complexioned child that entered prison so long ago, he headed home a full-grown adult, sporting long salt and pepper dreads flowing illustriously down his back. I can't imagine the fear and anxiety that crept into his thought patterns. I pray that he is up to the challenge, because his debt to society has at last been paid in full. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, "free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty (my friend) is free at last!"

Anytime a fellow prisoner completes their mandated sentence and is released, it gives other inmates hope. It reminds us that once we have done our time, we, too, will be released. Regardless of the sentence, every inmate has a release date in one respect or the other, and we gladly await it, knowing that we must prepare to go home both physically and spiritually. Today marked the end of twenty years of confinement for my friend. Each mile of his journey shaped him into the man that many of us came to know, love and respect. He was a spiritual mentor and loyal friend. I am so grateful for the words of life he spoke into me before his quick departure today. In his sage-like manner with a soft-spoken demeanor, he paraphrased life's verse with the words of King David: "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, walk in them, and don't be afraid to ask Yahweh for His help and support in following the steps that He orders for you" (Psalms 37:23). I know that I will honor, cherish, and model my friend's final words of advice because I believe them to be true. I just pray that upon my release date, I too will inspire others through my words and actions.

## Imagine Change: Keeping Prison from Destroying Our Nation's Families

by Elecia Bisesi

Having experienced the dilemmas of being incarcerated, being stereotyped, and kept away from my children for years, I have spent a lot of time imagining change. Knowing that the cycle must be broken, I've put my mind to work. Through research, I have learned that children with incarcerated parents are in severe danger all over the nation. A large percentage of the US population holds the opinion that those who break the law no longer deserve the privilege of raising their children. Let's stop and think about this for a moment.

Who is really being punished in such a system, the parents or the children? Parents are sent to prison; children are left behind. Any time a child is separated from a parent, it can be catastrophic. But imagine a world where we hold parents accountable without throwing them in prison, allowing them to continue raising their children—to continue being accountable to their own parental responsibilities. I dream of a world where we value family networks, put children first, and work to reduce the recidivism rate of parents. We can take our communities back without throwing our citizens away.



Photo: Mi Pham

Incarceration punishes children as much (or more) as the parents. Of course, losing our freedom is awful. But becoming a resident of a prison also means no longer being responsible for washing our own clothes, cooking our own meals, or cleaning our own living areas. Those responsibilities become jobs for other residents who have earned the opportunity of getting paid near-zero wages to do them. In prison, residents don't have to make medical appointments or be responsible enough to get places on time. The officers become our secretaries and our alarm clocks, assuring we arrive on time. Each shift of officers has a different set of rules, so we struggle to find consistency. Thousands of people are arrested every year in the United States, and thousands are released. They are often unprepared for successful reentry.

It's even worse for those of us with children who are incarcerated for long periods. Prison sentences have exempted parents from the responsibilities of raising their children, and our children are the ones who pay the price. Approximately 2.6 million U.S. children currently have a parent who is incarcerated, and by the age of 14, one in fourteen U.S. children will experience a custodial parent leaving for jail or prison (Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021). In one study from 2020, 33% of state prisoners had an incarcerated parent, and 69% were parents (Wang, 2022).

Nearly half (47%) of the approximately 1.25 million people currently warehoused in state prisons are parents to minor children, and about 1 in 5 (19%) of those children are age 4 or younger. To no one's surprise, research indicates that children of incarcerated parents face alarming cognitive and health-related challenges throughout their development (Wang, 2022).

Intervention is possible. In fact, deviant behavior should be addressed before the crime is committed. If we want to fix our society, we must invent a roadblock to criminality, rerouting these broken families who might otherwise be impacted by incarceration over a

bridge to success. The state of Oregon has created a family sentencing pilot program which has kept 400 children out of the foster care system over a five-year span (Wang, 2022). This program has led to lower recidivism and revocation rates for participant parents compared to similar non-program participants. Implementing similar programs nationwide is a good starting point.

Imagine an institutional family apartment complex run by the Department of Corrections, separated into various levels of security with restrictions and benefits in place at each level. High security residents would remain on premises at all times. On Friday afternoon, the children would arrive for weekend visits. At high levels of security they might stay for a few hours, or perhaps overnight. At lower security levels, children might become permanent residents in a home run by an incarcerated parent who continues to serve their time. We could even charge some form of rent to cover any overhead costs to the state, as long as that rent is based on a sliding income scale. We could incentivize higher-level residents to work their way down the security levels until they are eligible for community-based jobs. At some point they might even be allowed to leave daily for work.

Along with other mandated rules and regulations, I believe such a system would break the cycle of children being left behind, labeled by society, falling victim to an overburdened social work system. Designing such a program would improve child health and safety, reduce recidivism rates, and reconcile families torn apart by crime and punishment.

#### References:

Poehlmann-Tynan, J., & Turney, K. (2021). A developmental perspective on children with incarcerated parents. *Child Development Perspectives*, 15(1), 3–11. doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12392

Wang, Leah (2022). *Both sides of the bars: How mass incarceration punishes families*, Prison Policy Initiative, August 11, 2022, [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/08/11/parental\\_incarceration](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/08/11/parental_incarceration).

"Inner Child, Inner  
Darkness," pencil sketch  
by Terry Olney



**Not Useful, Used  
by Terry Olney**

I've tried to hide in the dark  
hide myself from your sight  
so you will not see me  
and see that I am not right

"You're a worthless degenerate  
a human piece of shit  
that's all you are  
that's all—that is it!

You should be removed from light  
out of sight and unseen  
you're unwelcomed, unwanted  
unnneeded, unclean.

You're a nothing, a no one  
you should never have been  
you're a born loser  
fated never to win."

This is the voice  
that I hear in my head  
I wish it would stop  
it clearly wants me dead

So I try to stay unseen  
not noticed at all  
I hide inside my darkness  
with my back to the wall

I am life's disappointment  
with a heart broken and bruised  
I'm not beautiful like you  
I'm not useful, I'm used

## #6

### by Timothy Byrne

There never really is much to begin with  
maybe a thought makes it to paper  
only to end in erasure

Or a sentence may rest in approval  
for an hour or two  
until a fresh set of eyes  
and another revision  
shape it  
into a shorter  
lasting arrangement

Such are the days of a poet, who  
with aching back under failing light  
works the longest hours  
not for pay or accolades  
but to still the voice he knows within  
will quickly say “unfinished”

### Observations by Timothy Byrne

Some of them swim  
Some of them fly  
Some of them  
slither along to their ending

However they move  
they eventually stop  
one minute moving  
the next minute not

Some of them crawl  
Some of them walk  
Some of them stumble  
to their last arrangement

However they move  
they eventually stop  
one minute mobile  
the next minute not

## **Growing from Time by Robert Vallianatos**

As time has gone by and I continue to get older, things have begun to change. It seems like I am watching my life slowly pass by from a window. Strange feelings come over me. I don't know how to make them go away—like I'm on a roller-coaster ride that won't stop. I can scream all I want, but it won't matter; the feeling of despair has me in its grip. I am stuck on this ride for as long as it lasts. Can you picture being on this ride for twenty-three years? A nightmare in anyone's imagination!

One slow day in 2010, while sitting on the stairs of the housing unit, another incarcerated person asked me, "Why don't you go to school?" At the time I had no response to his question, and it nagged at me. Before long I was enrolled in Danville Area Community College (DACC), attending courses at the Danville Correctional Center. Once in the student frame of mind, I began the journey of transforming myself. This was the greatest decision I ever made.

What comes next, after the ride is all over, is up to each individual. When released from prison, most people are on their own, with nobody to help with the transition phase of the sentence. But the transition phase is where the real turmoil often begins. Many people in prison never get past a sixth grade reading level (Michon, 2016). These poor individuals are asked to be productive members of society when, in many ways, they don't know how.

The public often expects incarcerated individuals to learn by themselves. Where is the incentive for these individuals who are stuck in a system designed to keep them locked up forever? While the prison might be responsible for allowing programs inside, the responsibility for bettering oneself falls squarely on the shoulders of the individual. Once I realized that to get anywhere in life I had to do it myself, I began to grow.


There are no shortcuts in life. It took me many years of hard living to learn this lesson. But eventually I began to make the necessary changes for my success, starting with my perspective. I demand more from myself now than I ever did when I was younger. Back then, my attitude was about getting things by any means necessary. That perspective has changed.

Thinking critically means acquiring a skill set that allows one to understand the laws that govern



Photo: Aron Visuals





society. There are two ways of learning: 1) being fed information and then regurgitating that information, or 2) receiving information and thoughtfully interpreting it in a way that makes sense to you. Both forms of learning have their place. The first one is good for teaching the core fundamentals, but the second one allows each individual to deviate and create their own path.

The responsibility to receive an education is mine; it is entirely up to me to get involved in any program that would increase my chances at a better life. Who else can do it for me? I have to put stock in myself. I was given an incredible opportunity from the Education Justice Project (EJP) to invest in my future. It only makes sense to get a head start on a new life.

I don't know if and when the programs that are being offered by EJP and DACC will disappear. Until then, all I or anybody else can do is try to stay positive and do the best we can to educate ourselves with the limited resources offered to us.

My future is looking brighter because of the education that I have achieved in prison. I now have an Associates Degree in Science and Arts from DACC; no one can ever take that away from me. Believe me when I say I put in the time and effort to make it a reality.

My time on this planet is limited and I have wasted enough of it already. It's time for me to be the person I now want to be. No more giving up when things get hard. No more ignoring my problems as if they do not exist. I have taken the responsibility of rehabilitation unto myself. I'll be returning home soon, and I'm ready to be a productive member of society.

I would like to thank all of the people who have been instrumental in helping me obtain an education. I could not have done it without them. I owe all of the professors and volunteers who have so graciously given their time and energy to me. They have helped me succeed in my endeavor to achieve an education, become a better person, and to finally be free.

References: Michon, C., "Uncovering Mass Incarceration's Literacy Disparity," The Prison Policy Initiative, April 1, 2016, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2016/04/01/literacy>.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Vallianatos celebrates the good work of our colleagues at the Education Justice Project, run out of the University of Illinois and accessible at <https://educationjustice.net>.

## The Gunfight by Matthew Patterson

Tom Raphy's mind was made up. He was determined to face Jim Clay at high noon with a gun in his hand. No one would have ever described Tom as a good man with a gun, but they would have been quick to say that he was stubborn as a mule. Once he made up his mind, you might as well try to convince a tree to uproot itself as to try and convince him to take a different course of action. In fact, it was a point of pride for Tom that once he made a decision he never reconsidered. He felt that only weaker men second-guessed themselves.

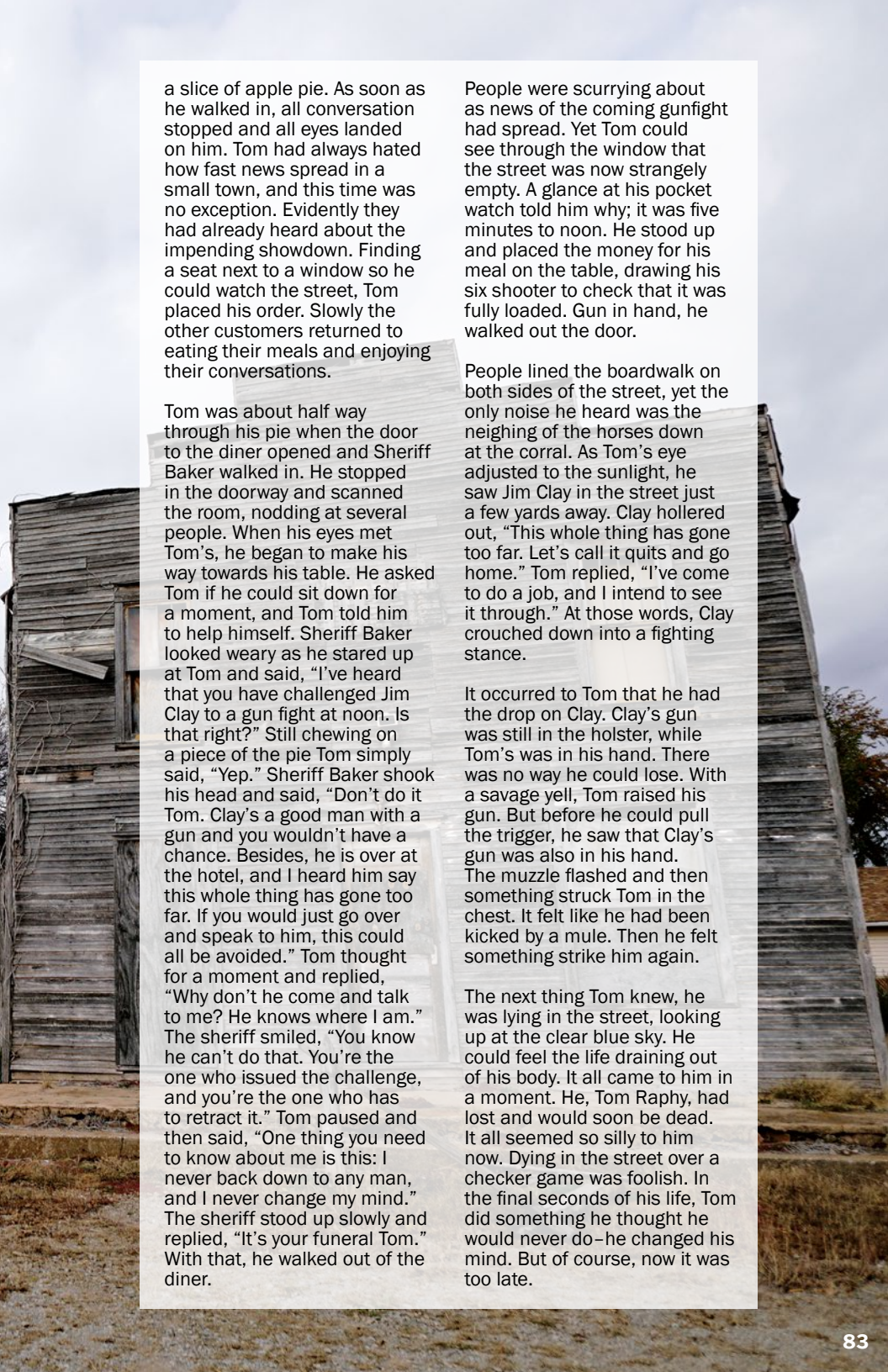
Just this morning, Tom had ridden into the small town of Dry Springs to buy some supplies for his homestead. The sun had risen early, and the dusty streets of the town were hazy from the humidity. When Tom walked into the coolness of the General Store, there was already a checkers game underway between Jim Clay and Albert Morrison. It irritated him that grown men would waste their time on a game so early in the morning. Real men got up at the crack of dawn and worked until the sun went down.

The clerk took Tom's list and hurriedly gathered the requested supplies. He set them on the counter and said, "Here you are Mr. Raphy. Anything else I can do for you?" Tom shook his head and laid several gold coins on the counter, grabbing his bag and heading out of the store. He had to go around the checker game which was blocking part of the aisle. In his frustration, he bumped the table, knocking the game to the floor. There was the sound of checkers clattering and then nothing but dead silence. Everything came to a stand still. All eyes were on Tom.

Jim Clay slowly looked up at Tom, and after studying him for a moment, he said, "Mister, you ought to be more careful about where you're walking." Tom replied, "You ought to be more careful about wasting your time on childish games." The expression on Jim's face immediately changed, and in an instant he looked like a coiled cobra ready to strike. He said, "I am going to forget that you said that. All I ask is that you pick up the game and place it back on the table." Tom knew he shouldn't say it. He recognized that the man he was speaking to was dangerous, but he allowed his temper to get the better of him. "I'll meet you in the street at high noon with a gun in my hand before I pick up a single checker!" Jim shook his head and said, "It's your call mister. I'll be in the street at noon."

A cold chill came over Tom as he walked out of the store. He had a strange feeling—like someone had just stepped on his grave. He did not know much about Jim Clay, but he had heard talk that the man was a sure thing with a six shooter. But what did that matter to him? Tom Raphy backed up for no man, and what he lacked in gun skills he would more than make up for with courage. Today, at noon, he would show the whole town how a man should conduct himself. Everyone would soon respect him as someone who was not to be trifled with. Just the thought of the look in the eyes of the townspeople when he gunned Clay down gave him renewed confidence.

There were still two hours to kill before noon, so Tom headed over to the Chuckwagon diner. He figured he would pass the time over a cup of coffee and



a slice of apple pie. As soon as he walked in, all conversation stopped and all eyes landed on him. Tom had always hated how fast news spread in a small town, and this time was no exception. Evidently they had already heard about the impending showdown. Finding a seat next to a window so he could watch the street, Tom placed his order. Slowly the other customers returned to eating their meals and enjoying their conversations.

Tom was about half way through his pie when the door to the diner opened and Sheriff Baker walked in. He stopped in the doorway and scanned the room, nodding at several people. When his eyes met Tom's, he began to make his way towards his table. He asked Tom if he could sit down for a moment, and Tom told him to help himself. Sheriff Baker looked weary as he stared up at Tom and said, "I've heard that you have challenged Jim Clay to a gun fight at noon. Is that right?" Still chewing on a piece of the pie Tom simply said, "Yep." Sheriff Baker shook his head and said, "Don't do it Tom. Clay's a good man with a gun and you wouldn't have a chance. Besides, he is over at the hotel, and I heard him say this whole thing has gone too far. If you would just go over and speak to him, this could all be avoided." Tom thought for a moment and replied, "Why don't he come and talk to me? He knows where I am." The sheriff smiled, "You know he can't do that. You're the one who issued the challenge, and you're the one who has to retract it." Tom paused and then said, "One thing you need to know about me is this: I never back down to any man, and I never change my mind." The sheriff stood up slowly and replied, "It's your funeral Tom." With that, he walked out of the diner.

People were scurrying about as news of the coming gunfight had spread. Yet Tom could see through the window that the street was now strangely empty. A glance at his pocket watch told him why; it was five minutes to noon. He stood up and placed the money for his meal on the table, drawing his six shooter to check that it was fully loaded. Gun in hand, he walked out the door.

People lined the boardwalk on both sides of the street, yet the only noise he heard was the neighing of the horses down at the corral. As Tom's eye adjusted to the sunlight, he saw Jim Clay in the street just a few yards away. Clay hollered out, "This whole thing has gone too far. Let's call it quits and go home." Tom replied, "I've come to do a job, and I intend to see it through." At those words, Clay crouched down into a fighting stance.

It occurred to Tom that he had the drop on Clay. Clay's gun was still in the holster, while Tom's was in his hand. There was no way he could lose. With a savage yell, Tom raised his gun. But before he could pull the trigger, he saw that Clay's gun was also in his hand. The muzzle flashed and then something struck Tom in the chest. It felt like he had been kicked by a mule. Then he felt something strike him again.

The next thing Tom knew, he was lying in the street, looking up at the clear blue sky. He could feel the life draining out of his body. It all came to him in a moment. He, Tom Raphy, had lost and would soon be dead. It all seemed so silly to him now. Dying in the street over a checker game was foolish. In the final seconds of his life, Tom did something he thought he would never do—he changed his mind. But of course, now it was too late.

## From Gutter to Glory by Manuel G. Sisneros Sr.

During a Restorative Justice class being held in the Honor House, the question was asked, "What was life like before you got arrested?" The following notes are what came to me as I thought back some 12 years ago.

To begin to describe what my life was like before I committed my crimes would be like putting your head in the washer after placing it on spin cycle. Absolute chaos, making no fuck'n sense.

I'd like to believe that a poor upbringing and my chaotic childhood was the root cause of all my problems. The reality is, I've used these excuses long enough and it is now time to be real with myself.

Drug addiction and poor choices were the reasons for my failures. I stopped caring after life threw me a curveball. Losing my children in court gave me the perfect excuse to give up. Not only did I give up on trying to prove the courts wrong when they told me that I was an unfit parent; I proved them right.

As each day passed, I sank lower, until I was so low that I had to start digging. I dug such a deep hole for myself that the only way out was to live by any means necessary. I would drink myself into oblivion every day. I contemplated suicide believing that I was unworthy of the very breath that entered my lungs.

Addiction took hold of me. I started to believe I was unworthy of love. I had no regard for humanity and the devil began to take over. The combination of untreated mental health problems and addiction became a perfect concoction for unhappiness. I brought misery to everyone who crossed my path. Innocent bystanders became victims by no fault of their own. But eventually my reign of terror would come to an end.

Months down the road, I was handed

a prison sentence. It wasn't until this point that I started to snap out of the nightmare I had created not only for myself, but for many people around me. It took hitting the lowest point in my life before I would eventually pull myself together and come to my senses. I realized then that my obligation was to focus on my future. This came to me as I saw my children in the courtroom, walking towards the exit, too young to comprehend how long their dad would really be gone. I had two choices: continue to spiral out of control, or use this 24 year sentence to become the man I was capable of being.

Although 24 years may seem like a lot, it is nothing compared to the tumult and fear I brought into many innocent people's lives. From the moment I got sentenced, I made a promise to myself: I would rise from the ashes a completely different person. I am proud to say that I am delivering on this promise, maturing into the man my family deserves.

During my time incarcerated, I have committed to self-improvement. I landed a 6000-hour apprenticeship through the Colorado Department of Labor for Automobile upholstery, and I received an undergraduate certificate in Strategic Communication from the University of Colorado-Denver. Today I stand a new man, proud of many things, but most of all, proud of finally becoming the father I was always supposed to be. Along this journey I have also become a grandfather 5 times over, and I am now married to an amazing woman who has had my back since the moment this journey started.

Although looking back on who I was before I committed this crime can be painful, it is also relieving to me. I have now come to the conclusion that my life is worth living and my story is worth sharing. There is always hope. I'm living proof of it. From gutter to glory, I now live in grace.

## Letter to Young Brandon by Brandon J. Baker

“Brandon Jamal Baker, I sentence you to 75-years-to-life. You are now property of the California Department of Corrections. It is my intent that you spend the rest of your natural life in prison.” Boom! The sound of the gavel will haunt us forever. Nene’s crying plea to the judge will often recur, but momma’s stone face reaction will become a blur.

That scene will play out in your future. If you don’t believe me, just look at the envelope this letter came in. I’m you. The only difference is numbers. I’m 41 and you’re 15. I also have something that you don’t have yet: CDC #P94317. I want you to know that I love you because you’re feeling unloved right now—remember. The people around you think you’re callous and cruel, but they don’t know you like I do. So let me share with you some thoughts:

I remember crying ourselves to sleep watching momma get beat  
Remember the fear in our heart every time we heard gunshots in the street  
I remember good times too, although they were only a few  
There was Christmas ‘88, when we and Gary got a Nintendo  
There were Saturday morning cartoons  
There was the best time of our life, going to Houston the summer of ‘92!  
It was all so simple back then; it was only Uncle Darnell in the pen  
It’s gonna be us one day, and it’s breaking my heart  
Your incarceration is gonna tear our family apart  
Not just prison, but Juvenile Hell  
You’re 15 now, so you know that place well.  
It’s your first time in camp, in the Violent Action Program (VAP)  
Within two months of your release, you’ll be going back

Years later, let me give you a roll call  
Tabari, rest in peace. Steven, rest in peace  
You thought Dante was gonna be your only homie that died in the streets?  
Anthony, rest in peace. Ramon, rest in peace  
Ciron, George, Ervin, Lamar and you are serving life in the Belly of the Beast  
Take a look at your crew from a wise man’s view  
Not me; it was Pops Thomas that already knew

He would give us the game and we always got mad  
Our only response was “You ain’t my dad”  
You won’t accept him as yours, but I gladly call him mine  
These are all things you’ll understand in due time  
The greatest lesson for you to learn is love  
The ones you thought didn’t love you are the ones who love you the most  
And the people that you would die for  
Will leave you for dead on March 19, 2000  
Rest in peace Maniac.

Today I write you as the true, authentic you, Brandon Jamal Baker. We are a Christian, a college student, a youth mentor, a motivational speaker, and a published writer with a bright future ahead of us. I am a man full of compassion, humility, peace, love and joy, everything society told you not to be. I write you not as a changed man, just a reconnected version of you, the person you were created to be.



**Doe**  
**by David Antares**

Doe, a deer  
a female deer  
blazed to ashes  
dead and done

We, to blame  
for climate change  
raging fires  
on the run

Glaciers melting  
rising seas  
caused by dirty  
energy

Hotter summers  
burning trees  
which will bring us  
back  
to doe

NO

## QUO VADIS? by Troy Brownlow

As the title infers, where are you going?

In the nearly two decades I have spent as a resident of the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDCO), I have learned several redeeming truths. A couple of the more preponderate ones that have elbowed their way to the threshold of my consciousness concern the calculus of power and agency. Prior to my incarceration, these concepts were foreign and elusive ideals that sat dormant in the caverns of my mind. As I continued to walk through the carceral landscape of calendars, I soon began to realize that where I wanted to go in life could prove just as relevant as why I came here. Even though I am in prison to account for the indefensible harm I caused society, for a long time I sincerely doubted that I could ever achieve a sufficient measure of punishment and rehabilitation—that I could ever satisfy everyone who had a stake in my incarceration. Fortunately, this seemingly impossible task never deterred me from trying to be a better version of myself. As I continued down this road, I did so with a heart full of gratitude for the lessons I learned along the way.

Involving myself in the pursuit of higher education inadvertently brokered a deal between my past, present, and future. The guilt, shame, anxiety and even the hopelessness that dogged my karma began to subside. I became infused with a newfound sense of confidence, and one by one, I put society's judgments and institutional indictments to rest. On occasion I hear society lament that prisoners are not worthy of an education, but I never give my energy to any proposition that runs contrary to the spirit of transformation. I believe it was Dr. Martin Luther King who said, "Power is the ability to achieve purpose and effect change." This is precisely the residual impact that continuing education breeds, so I implore my contemporaries to press forward with their studies. Self-reliance and personal responsibility are the results of education. Here I am, 18 years later, and for the first time in a long time, I feel as though I am the captain of my ship. Today I know how to stand my ground in the face of adversity because I learned how to cultivate an inner integrity that fortifies me against the tide of negative influences. Now when I act on something, I do so with the better part of my nature.

Once again, where are you going? Too many of us leave that decision to other people. Most of us do not march to the beat of our own drum, not because we do not know how, but because we lack the courage and vision to do so. Education is a resource that can never be rescinded by anyone; if you retain enough knowledge, you will be able to contribute something worthwhile to the grand mosaic of being. Pursuing an education is one of the highest forms of integration, or what the Greeks called "Becoming whole." We do this by combining our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors so that they are in concordance with what we have learned in life. I would encourage all of you to embrace the power within you and dedicate yourself to something bigger than yourselves; this is how we make the world better.

You can't go back and you can't stay here, so again I ask, where are you going?



## SHOUT-OUTS TO FRIENDS AND ALLIES

Over the years, we have celebrated friends, colleagues, and allies in a section we call “Shout Outs.” The idea is that we want to share information about the folks doing good work on the frontlines of social change, enabling our readers to contact—and hopefully support or work with—these terrific organizations. In the past decade, we have profiled:

- The Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition, <https://www.ccjrc.org>.
- Critical Resistance, a national group headquartered in Oakland, CA, <https://criticalresistance.org>.
- The Justice Arts Coalition from Takoma Park, MD, <https://thejusticeartscoalition.org>.
- Mourning our Losses from Austin, TX, <https://www.mourningourlosses.org>.
- Mt. Tamalpais College, outside San Francisco, CA, <https://www.mttamcollege.edu>.
- PCARE, the nationwide alliance of educators working on Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education; join the conversation at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/45471852149>.
- The Prison Creative Arts Project in Ann Arbor, MI, <https://lsa.umich.edu/pcap>.
- Prison Legal News, the national newspaper, based in Florida, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org>.
- Remerg, the safe transitions NGO from Denver, <https://remerg.com>.
- The Sentencing Project in Washington, D.C., <https://www.sentencingproject.org>.
- The Shakespeare Prison Project in Racine, WI, <http://www.shakespeareprisonproject.com>.
- The University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI), <https://liberalarts.du.edu/prison-arts>.

For this issue, we want to celebrate two national groups doing terrific work.



**The Freedom  
to Write**

First, thanks to everyone at **PEN AMERICA**, <https://pen.org>, and especially to the allies who run the Prison and Justice Writing programming at <https://pen.org/prison-writing>.

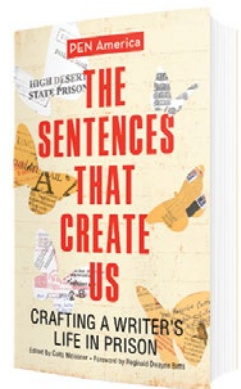
Here’s what the PEN website says about the organization:

“PEN America stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect free expression in the United States and worldwide.

We champion the freedom to write, recognizing the power of the word to transform the world. Our mission is to unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible.

Founded in 1922, PEN America is the largest of the more than 100 centers worldwide that make up the PEN International network. PEN America works to ensure that people everywhere have the freedom to create literature, to convey information and ideas, to express their views, and to access the views, ideas, and literatures of others.”

We are particularly grateful to PEN for sharing with our incarcerated students two free boxes of *The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting A Writer’s Life in Prison*, edited





by **Caits Meissner**. Here at the University of Colorado's College-in-Prison Program, we've been using that book in our classes for the past three years, savoring its lessons and encouragement. THANK YOU, PEN, for your vision and leadership!

# Vera

INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

Second, we want to thank our friends and allies at **The Vera Institute of Justice**, [www.vera.org](http://www.vera.org).

Here is how their website describes the organization:

“Vera is powered by hundreds of researchers and advocates working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they're fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn't determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone in the system is treated with dignity.”

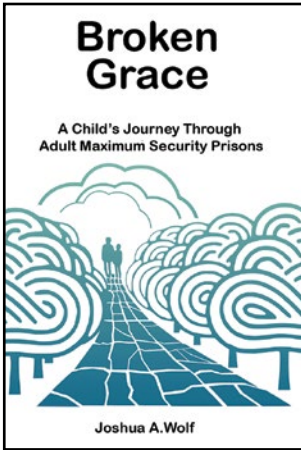
As many of us who work in prisons figure out how to support our incarcerated students as they access federal Pell Grants to pay for their educations, Vera has become a crucial ally. Allan Wachendorfer, program manager with Vera's Unlocking Potential Initiative, has spent hundreds of hours on informational web chats—thank you, Allan! Dr. Amanda L. Nowak, Senior Program Associate, now runs a must-read monthly news flash that offers information on education in prisons. To sign up, you can write to her at [anowak@vera.org](mailto:anowak@vera.org).

## AUTHORS' & ARTISTS' CORNER

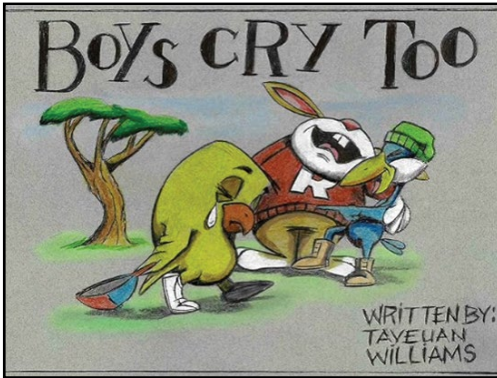
As our community of colleagues and collaborators expands, we want to celebrate our accomplishments. Here are some recent publications by the team:



In Volume 19 of *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*, we were proud to publish “Trans is Beautiful and Healthy,” a drawing by Jamie Diaz. A Mexican-American trans woman and self-taught artist who has inspired many in the LGBTQ+ community by conveying the resilience of the human spirit with messages of love, hope, and beauty, Jamie is currently incarcerated in Texas. Readers can see the full range of Jamie's work at [www.jamiediazart.com](http://www.jamiediazart.com). The book shown here, *Queer Angels and Devils: The Table of Immortals*, is Jamie's first full-length comic book, which follows a trans woman and visual artist on a journey to attain immortality through art. Get your copies at <https://www.abocomix.com/store/p305/queerangelsdevils.html>.



In *Broken Grace: A Child's Journey through Adult Maximum Security Prisons*, Joshua A. Wolf chronicles the long road from alienation and tragedy to redemption and purpose. Formerly working with Unlocked Labs out of Washington University in St. Louis (an NGO sitting at the intersections of social justice activism, prison education, and cutting edge technology, [www.unlockedlabs.org](http://www.unlockedlabs.org)), Joshua is one of a handful of students to earn a Master's Degree while incarcerated. You can find this one on Amazon.



A founding member of our University of Colorado College-in-Prison Program Advisory Board, and a regular contributor to our magazine, Taveuan Williams is a writer on fire. He's cranking out books for kids, poems, letters, and more. Here we celebrate one of his books for children. As he said in a recent interview, he's trying to work from trauma toward understanding and care, writing allegories of forgiveness and redemption.

In *Boys Cry Too* we follow an adorable cast of critters as they learn about friendship, responsibility, and gender roles. Readers can order this and other kid books by Taveuan on Amazon. The cover art is by Warren Worthington, the

same artist whose work graces the cover of the magazine.



*The photograph at left shows Taveuan and PhD candidate Meghan Cosgrove, following a recent meeting at the Sterling Correctional Facility, in Sterling, CO.*

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

*Dear Readers, we hope you enjoyed Volume 20 of our magazine. For those of you who are submitting work to be considered for publication in our next issue, please complete this form and return it with your submission. Please email your submission(s) to [stephen.hartnett@ucdenver.edu](mailto:stephen.hartnett@ucdenver.edu), or mail them to the University of Colorado Denver Department of Communication, 1201 Larimer Street, Denver CO, 80204.*

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

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

\_\_\_\_\_ ,

in Volume 21 of *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*.

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\_\_\_\_\_

To make sure that we can contact the artist if needed, please include BOTH your current address and a contact on the streets:

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**A warm thank you and  
sincere congratulations**

**to all the incredible  
contributors.**



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