

Unlocked



Art and Experiences From Inside Virginia's Prisons

Volume 2 | Winter 2023

978-1-957213-58-3 (print)
978-1-957213-60-6 (PDF)

Published by the Center for Humanities and the Coalition for Justice, Blacksburg, VA, in association with



Virginia Tech Publishing
University Libraries at Virginia Tech
560 Drillfield Drive, Blacksburg, VA 24061

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With this biannual online project, we seek to amplify the voices of the incarcerated in our state through their poems, spoken word, personal reflections, and artwork. In doing so, we not only lift the concerns and creativity of those behind bars, but we also provide a healing space where imagination and talent serve to restore and empower. Art humanizes, engages, makes us think, and creates connections. It has always been a powerful agent for change if we just unlock it.

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Foreword

Taj Alexander Mahon-Haft

There are many things that distinguish us humans as a species, but our voice and what we can do with it is, for my money, the most important. We are the only species that communicates using variations in both sound and rhythm, giving our voices more breadth and nuance than any other. More possibility. With those voices, we made languages, thousands of them around the world, each the root and blossom of so many unique cultures. With our voices, we've told stories that unite, inspire, teach, and entertain. With our voices we have long been able to walk among the stars and live forever. And then came our most important invention ever, the first alphabet, a singular event 4,000 years ago at the junction of Egyptian and Canaanite cultures, proving so useful and fascinating it overwhelmed all peoples with its possibility, allowing for religion, science, and literature that shaped the entire world. In our voices, printed as words, have we infinity in our grasp.

That possibility was on display in the first Unlocked volume. The voices of those shunned and disenfranchised took readers to countless unexpected places. Outer space to avoid space pirates and back in time to walk the rails at the heyday of the locomotives. Childhood gardens representing innocence and youthful memories of scarring pain. Graduate level sociology seminars, spoken in the vernacular of both teachers and of the streets. Gray panoramas of untimely loss and shadowed reflections of remorse. Technicolor dreamworlds and visions, places where hope and agency replace isolated deprivation. Across time, place, and context do we travel fueled only by our voices. Shared as printed words and images in this journal, these voices most powerfully took readers across a range of perspectives, showing the world that people behind bars are no monolith and fit no stereotype. In those pages we shattered assumptions, freeing ourselves in the process, just for a second but also forever.

This second issue of our burgeoning publication broadens the spectrum of colors with which we paint our lives, wishes, and recollections, taking readers further into truly understanding the lived human experience of mass incarceration. In doing so, it digs deeper and further into the escape tunnel that is a voice expressed and heard.

Presented by the Center for Humanities (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University) and the Coalition for Justice (Blacksburg, VA).

Back Cover art: "Celtic Knot" by David Sowers

LOVE APPROACHED

Richard Goode

I love you from the safety of the heart
not far, but not close either.

I love you like a perfectly preserved wound,
and although it bleeds, quickly coagulating in a pool of nourishment,
it weighs less with a different quality of pain.

I love you with an insatiable craving, made of camouflaged materials
my eyes have plundered.

I love you with a curious feeling, allowing the pressure of the moment,
that seemed reluctant to leave, to escape in tiny halts and hesitations.

I love you like a dream, a dream felt in the depths of my male ego,
flowing down between two identical shades of perpetual color. I love you in so many ways.

I love you like the rose loves the thorn,
before its petals become brittle and frail,
before its roots, although thin and pervasive, have been coaxed back to life.

SHAME

Richard Goode

Desolate, and often windswept memories instead of a clear view.

A glaring darkness that detracts from appearance,
the vertical description, indifferent when true.

To speak irreverently in a whining, gentle tone,
in which hunters, wilting in shame use to conceal themselves,
or the beauty of artificial pearls given until alone.

A storm blanketed by a slight, momentary wrong,
characterized by seven chambered force,

A retaliatory dance to repel with the denial of song.

Unbraided eyes that emit a loud, contagious sound,
a path offering no help,

hanging freely, the young fruit kissed the ground.

Often with bound edges, where obscene amounts of blood continued to drop
the caw screams of a hollow caged bird,

fastened to a painful waterfall that would not stop.

Unmoved, there were pieces of soft fabric touched,
manual colors that shattered and bled when torn.

Desolate and often windswept memories,
sentenced to be the moment my cold shame was born.

FRIED SNAKE

Richard Goode

I grew up in a log cabin
full of roaches
rats too,
and an occasional blacksnake.
The rats ate the roaches
the snakes ate the rats,
and my family and I ate the snakes.
A tin roof
and logs chinked with clay separated us
from the bitter cold
the corrosive anger of the sun
and the aimlessly wandering wind.
When it rained, water leaked and drummed on our tin roof
giving my ears the splendor of sound,
sometimes admittedly quiet,
and often a lonely inconsolable grief.
Mama, why can't I sleep downstairs
near the hearth of your cooking stove?
I complained in my nine year old voice;
looking ready to cry,
starving,
fearing a slap or punch,
or being bitten.
My mother looked down at her second oldest of four children.
Her almond shaped eyes mourning her losses.
And for a moment, my mother had felt my uninterrupted shame,
had seen I needed better.
But as she turned away,
she gave me this cold, numbing look,
like a snake, disturbed.
"Have some leftover fried snake, son."
is all she would say.

Author's Note

My name is Richard Goode. Unfortunately, it took the cold reality of prison for me to experience true brokenness. However, my broken pieces have taught me the value of one soul and that love is something we give and not something we receive.

After serving 30 years in prison, I have matured into a 50 year old man who has spent the last 25 years accepting responsibility for my actions, learning from my past mistakes, learning to love myself and others, and doing what I can to show the Virginia state parole board that I deserve a second chance at life.

My poetry has given me a powerful voice which I use to help others understand the small parts of my life that were ugly and indeed beautiful. On the written page I am able to put the past in perspective and dream about what the future holds for me.

Power to the people!

VOTE OR VETO

Hassan Raashann Shabazzallah



Scan to listen!

Vote is an anagram for veto, and veto means to prohibit
So, when you fail to vote, you veto your voice from being a part of the political process
You see, I never understood that power, so I never voted for nothing
Counting my vote as nothing, my power became nothing, lying dormant in the system
Now I sit in this prison system as a 13th Amendment slave and; we all know slaves can't vote –
So how did you get in my boat?
Oh, your failure to express your position is your ticket for admission as you ride this cruise
ship of oppression
I learned my lesson on this inside, where I was forcefully deprived of something you take
for granted
In the graves where our ancestors are planted, they're turning over
Like soil in the spring because of this horrific thing that they've born
Watching their seeds sprout into weeds of self-hate in a selfish state, we don't understand
the power of our unity
Let me explain – see, with one finger all we can do is point out the enemy, but when all five
coincide to make a fist and collide with the object of our affliction, the fiction of who we are
fades away.
They say dead beat dads – say vote!!
Stuck on welfare – vote!!
Just a statistic – vote!!
Bound for Prison – vote!!
I vote that we refuse to be stereotyped, hyped into the belief that we nothing – allowing
others to paint our potential like we some type of canvas for their indiscretions
Take back your power!
Take back your power like the Sun takes up the water, then the water forms a cloud, then
that cloud produces rain which gives life
Let us come together in a cloud of unity and rain our votes like droplets of change upon a
droughty system
A system devoid of FREEDOM
Devoid of JUSTICE
Devoid of EQUALITY
Like a wasteland of failed dreams that could have been – if we would have been just a little
more persistent – just a little more resistant
We are the products of an unfinished revolution applying a half solution to our problems –
Like – holding the right to vote but never using it – like – having the ability to breathe but
once you breathe-in you never exhale, so you pass – out, because half a breath only gets
you as far as Eric Garner or Big Floyd – and they wonder why I'm paranoid
Well, this nation has had its knee upon our neck for so long that we wear it like an
heirloom necklace passed down to us through generations of struggle

But it's time to take it off
Take it off and rebuild our communities – VOTE!
Create generational wealth – VOTE!
Fight for Reparations – VOTE!
I say vote – because unlike your ancestors you have a choice
But whatever you do don't veto your voice – VOTE or VETO!

Author's Note

“Vote or Veto” is a piece of work that addresses the lethargy that exists within the community when it comes to civic engagement, and how we willingly relinquish our power by not voting and taking our part in the political process. It is the author's effort to educate and inspire change in our lifestyle towards being truly involved in the politics that govern our everyday living.

HERO

Robert Bailey

On July 30, 2022, just after finishing a cleanup in the jail pod (Buckingham), I watched the floor officer make his rounds checking on the offenders in each cell. When he got to one of the cells, I heard him say, OH NO! Immediately he yelled for the Control Booth officer to open the door. Once inside he started yelling, HELP HELP HELP! The only ones on the Pod floor were me and my coworker. I hollered up to the officer asking if he wanted me to help him. He yelled, YES! HELP ME! HELP ME! Immediately I ran up the one flight of steps and down the tier to the cell. When I looked into the cell, I saw a young black offender hanging from the window bar by a sheet tied to the bar and around his neck.

The officer was trying to hold the guy up high enough to put slack in the sheet while trying to untie the knot at his neck. I grabbed the guy around the hips and held him for two minutes while the officer attempted to untie the knot, first at the neck and then when he couldn't get it undone, he tried the knot at the window. Still he could not remove the sheet. Just as I was about to tell the officer that I could not hold the guy up any longer, my coworker came into the cell. I told him to help me hold the guy up. Both of us held the limp body as high as we could. Another two minutes had elapsed when a sergeant came into the jail. Seeing a commotion in the cell,

he rushed up to investigate. When he came in, I told him to hold the guy up because I could not hold him any longer. The sergeant took the guy from me. I got up on the bed and started undoing the knot at the window while the floor officer worked with the knot at the neck. I got the knot untied quickly, freeing the sheet. I got down off the bed and saw the sergeant holding the guy in his arms as if cradling a baby. I told him three times to lay him on the bed and finally he did. I immediately started pumping on his chest. After 30 repetitions without any response, I told the sergeant that it ain't working. He pushed my hands aside and started forcefully pumping and yelling WAKE UP, WAKE UP. Another minute went by and still no reaction from the guy. I pried open his clinched mouth and cupped my hands around it, and using two fingers, I pinched his nose shut. I started blowing breaths of air into him as hard as I could as the sergeant continued to pump on the chest. After the fourth big blast of air the guy started coughing like a drowning victim. It was then that I started shedding tears. I realized that it was God's hand that was on me as I worked to bring the young man back to life. It was His breath of life not mine that revived the young man. I told my coworker, "Let's go back down to the Pod floor." Before leaving I noticed that another sergeant had come into the cell during the rescue.

That was a traumatic experience. I am 77 years old now. I have been in prison 51 years for taking a life. That, too, was a traumatic experience. I never want to experience taking another life, but I would welcome saving one again. I had CPR training 45

years ago, but due to being incarcerated, I wasn't allowed to be certified. Thank God I never forgot how to do It.

Author's Note

I was working on the HVAC maintenance crew when an opportunity opened up to switch jobs to become a safety worker. After training, I was certified in: Hazardous Material Cleanup; Hazwoper First Responder Awareness level; and Disaster Safety: Aftermath and Cleanup. I have had various trades during my incarceration, all which were very pleasing, but performing this current job as a safety worker is perhaps the most satisfying to me. If not for my age, 77, I would love to continue this profession upon release.





LIFERS

Danita Corbin

More times than not, I sit and think about how the judge gave me more time than a natural life can abide. Feelings of loneliness, inadequacy and unforgotten feelings invade my space. I have served approximately 23 years. The normal isn't enough anymore. I have a sense of wanting more, not wanting to settle for injustice. Then I think – how am I, who am I, to even think to bring a change, especially to open doors for others – especially lifers.

God used people to let me know people just like me who brought about changes in the judicial system. Laws pass, people get shipped to other prisons (lower security levels), people come and go yet lifers are stuck on the sidelines just watching it all take place.

Someone has to encourage. Someone has to bring hope. Someone has to make changes. Someone has to remember lifers. I guess that someone is none other than me. Someone who is walking in the same life path, don't know where to start other than prayer, and to encourage lifers, not just to stand on the sidelines, but to write. Yes, you may get a lot of no's but with faith, that angel of hope will appear. Join the fight for lifers' freedom with me.

God guided Harriet Tubman to free the slaves and God will guide us too. God will place the right people in our lives to help. We just have to make the FIRST move. In unity we can get things done. In division we cannot.

I am riding on a train called "Freedom Fighters For Lifers." The cabooses are empty, but I don't believe for long. One step at a time even if it starts with just positive thinking and a prayer.

Luke 4:18 God tells his people "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners." That is what, with God's help, I would like to see happen.

Author's Note

My name is Danita Corbin. I am a lifer who is fighting for her freedom and trying to help others as well. I was incarcerated at the age of 29 years old. I will be 52 this year. Lifers, don't settle! Fight for your freedom! And I pray the same grace that God gives me to me daily to make it through, He extends the same grace to each of you.

2022

Life Itself

MENTAL HEALTH

Let's Talk About It

Unexpectedly

Your emotions change.

When Mental Health Makes Waves

scars
Depression & the Dark Side

6:55 am — Anxious

10:43 am — Relaxed

Scary

HEADACHE

Scream

MIND

HOPE AMID THE PAIN

8:24 am — Uneasy

11:37 am — Overwhelmed

THIS COULD BE YOUR STORY!

'I have been to hell and back, I suppose. Literally'

Remembering

Painful

Talk to Yourself

It's one thing to feel worried, but it's another to feel like you can't breathe because of it.

Feel like your life is spiraling out of control? Something I'd always secretly suspected finally became something I couldn't ignore.

Breaking

The Truth About My Life

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Hurting

IF INDIVIDUAL TRAUMA SAYS, "I'M NOT SAFE," COLLECTIVE TRAUMA SAYS, "NO ONE IS."



Finding Freedom From Repeated Trauma An Abused Child Finds Her Voice

Better mental health

FIGHTING TO STAY ALIVE.

Secrets

WOUNDS REMAIN RAW

Listen



echoes of the PAST

IT'S THE BROKEN HEARTS THAT HAVE LEFT THE DEEPEST SCARS

WHEN ANXIETY ATTACKS

Collage by Gwendolyn Burton

MY MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE COVID ERA

Gwendolyn Burton

In the past three years, I have had some very hard setbacks and breakdowns. You see, I suffer from mental illness. I have severe PTSD and manic depression. It's something that for years I was too ashamed to share, but I am learning not to let that be an issue. More people than are willing to admit suffer from some sort of mental illness. We have been raised in a society that shuns individuals that are considered to be quote "not normal." But the thing is it's something that should be brought more into light without the fear of being put down and made fun of. Some of the most cruel things possible can be said to people who just want to understand themselves and why they feel the way they do. To feel that they/we are people with lives that matter as much as the next. The fact that there has always been minimal aid to assist in coping with the constant changes in our emotions, without being thrown more meds as a way to placate us, has not made this an easy journey. My reason for speaking out is to heal myself as well as share with others that it is okay to own your issues. Just don't allow yourself to continue to wallow in your pain. Speak up and speak out with your head held high. If we each teach one another and lend an ear and/or a shoulder, we can build this bridge together. Stand with me as I fight for my own life, and I will help you fight for yours! We are MORE than worth it!

Author's Note

I know that it is hard to understand yourself sometimes, so I wanted to speak out and let it be known that I GET IT. TRUST ME, I GET IT. I witness soo much loss to suicide and other tragedies because soo many people don't even know what each day will bring or if it's even worth the emotional struggle. I am there with you and if you need to reach out as proof. Please do! Blessings to all.





FRANKY BOY

Keith Silver Hawk Self

Franky Boy never learned how to shave
He shipped out to Vietnam
on his 17th birthday
Said goodbye
To his Mom and Dad
He was the only child
they'd ever had
Yes, Franky Boy was a Marine
thru and thru,
When the time came
he knew what to do,
Franky Boy lost his life
in that green Hellhole,
and I still hear the last words he said,
Tell Mom and Dad I gave all
that I had.

(Originally written 7/5/1984)

MY MARK

Chad Miller

I learned your history, language and rules.
I listened to your lies, stories, and attitudes.
I watched your oppression, thieves and leaders.
I felt your greed, pride, and chains.
I grew up, decided something you didn't choose.
I taught myself to read, to speak, and the unwritten rules.
I spoke about the truth, a reality, and you hate me.
I saw your bars, money, and whips.
I experienced your hate for my differences.
I tell you now, I am here – not going away.
I will instruct others of reality.
I hear the next generation rising up.
I see change on the horizon.
I feel your fear in your diminishing life.
I spread the word with my growing voice.
Your fright, your might, your petty spite.
My life you take, until another knight.

TODAY, YESTERDAY

Chad Miller

We wait, all for tomorrow,
Incarcerated.
Brotherhood of sin.
Freedom eludes us today,
Incarcerated.
Sons, fathers, husbands,
Together, unexpected,
Incarcerated.

THESE BARREN WHITE WALLS

A Haiku

Chad Miller

These barren white walls
Enclosed existence in jail,
O, wonderful ant!

Author's Note

I am 54 years old at Buckingham Correctional in Virginia. Raised as a Navy brat and was in the Army for nearly ten years. I have traveled around the world three times, lived in several foreign countries, and worked for some of the most amazing companies. My poetry, writings, and art sustain my mental and financial needs until my release. I answer all mail and requests as they arrive. Thank you.

SHARE MY WORLD

Sean Galloway X-BEY, CHIRP

I scribe my life on paper,
It's my pain escaper.
It's to let you know why I am a
paper chaser.
Stuck in the street vapors,
Doing crazy capers,
that'll have me housed around
murderers and rapers
It's cause I grew up poor,
wanting so much more
than King Vitamin and powdered milk
out the store.
I aint like the roaches on me,
you're probably thinking,
this another black ghetto story.
But did you wake up late night
balled up real tight?
Crying to yourself "God, this aint right!"
Or having to always fight
whenever you go to school
cause there's always some fool
trying to joke your shoes.
We couldn't afford clothes.
We got hand-me-downs.
Even my mama had to wear
her old grannie's gowns.
But all the class clowns love to
laugh and joke on me.
Ain't nothing funny 'bout
being broke homie.
Share my world,

Author's Note

Sean Galloway X-BEY is An Intellectual, seeking Additional Intelligence from any field. Living in state governed gated communities since a juvenile, a great abundance of knowledge has been accumulated over 20 years. Known as a question (X), bundled in a conundrum, cloaked in a riddle, rolled in an enigma, enveloped in mystery, wrapped in a puzzle, packed in perplexity.

This anomaly has created his only goal – to uplift fallen humanity with any and all assistance available.

Please enjoy a glimpse into an unexplored realm, keeping in mind, life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself. Identity is destiny. Know thyself. Share my world.

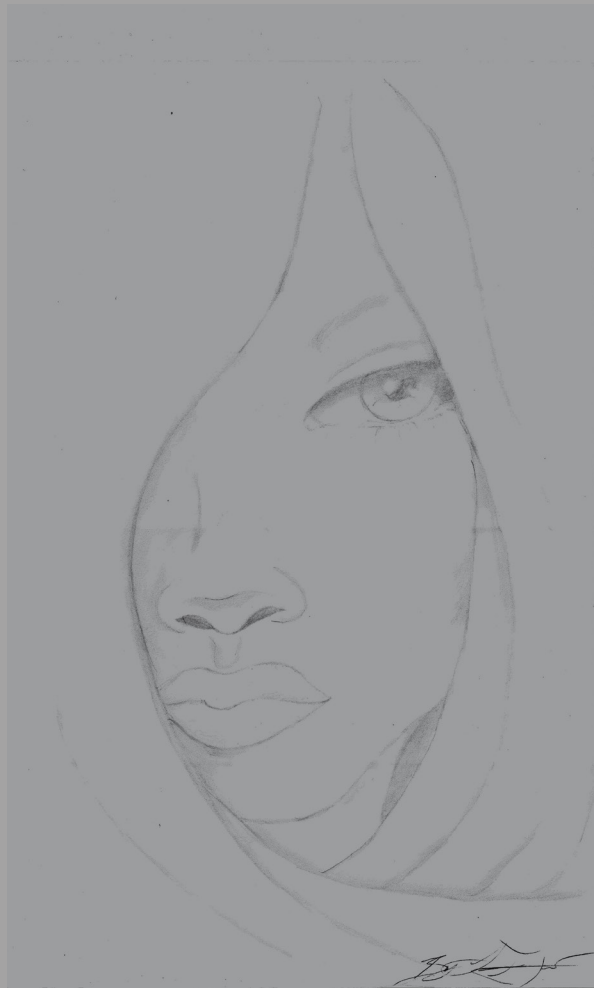
Note: Sean asks that if anyone wants to contact him to write to justicebburg@gmail.com for his contact information.





By Jermeka
80932 Gorham

The Butterfly Angel by Jermeka Gorham



Driven by Pain by Jermeka Gorham

Author's Note

My name is Jermeka Michelle Gorham. I am 36 years old. I've been incarcerated for eight years. While being here in prison, I've been focusing on myself and my talents. I've grown a lot from my mistakes. I have a young son who is 12 years old. I have to make an example for him.

I am multi-talented. I draw, sing, write music, dance, do hair, cook, design clothing and interior decor. I love art! Anything dealing with art, I love. I love drawing people. My favorite things to draw are the eyes and mouth. Although I love drawing, I have been focusing on my music. I've got one album complete, and I'm working on a second album. When I am released, I want to become famous! My inspiration is Abel Tesfaye, better known as The Weeknd, and Rihanna. I love music. Although I can draw, I feel as if I will get nowhere with my art. I've always had a passion for music and its different tones, sounds, and beats. I play multiple instruments. I love the sound of the stories behind music.

I really want to put myself out in the world, the atmosphere. I want to be someone else's inspiration. I want to be able to say to my son, "Look, Dominic, we did it!" I can say this – this is just the beginning of a road to an inspirational life.

FULLY DEVELOPED

Edwin Barrett

Fully developed only means one thing for me and the years I have spent incarcerated. I was only 18 years old when I received an 18-year sentence. At that age, growing up around the majority of what I felt was normal in the neighborhood caused me to miss out on years of my life that I cannot get back. Fully Developed can help our youth before it gets to that point of long term prison sentencing.

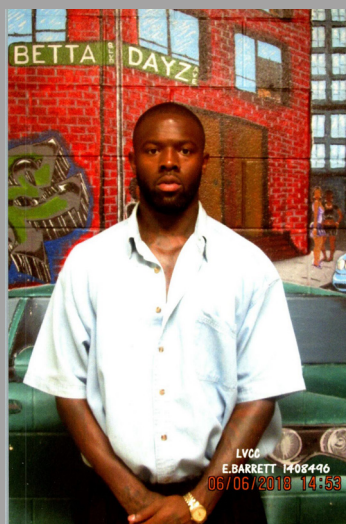
At that age, knowing right from wrong isn't the same thing. I can't think of anyone who has not done things at the age of 18 that they were not proud of. I have not had a chance to live a normal, mature, adult free life yet. I was scheduled for ESC (enhanced earned sentence credits) to be released for earning good time credits. How things happened only made me realize that individually our change will still have to be within us.

In my heart, I knew I was ready. In my heart, I am still ready. I will continue to stay ready for myself. I have up until that point of liberation. I hope and pray that all young 19 year old men understand where this Fully Developed stage of my life had to begin.

I never had to pay a bill. I never had a chance to have good or bad credit. I have never did a lot of things because I've been in here. Let's change that cycle of not ending up in prison before we are "Fully Developed."

Author's Note

As I finish out this prison sentence, I learn more of how the system works. "Fully Developed" will paint a picture for our minds and bodies. I might've looked fully developed, but my mind wasn't. At that age, I faced court appointed lawyers, Alford Pleas I didn't understand, a joint trial setting, and intimidation. Let's learn more! Educate, vote – it's our finish line. It still has to be within. Shout outs to my Grandmother Ophelia Peartree and my significant other Marquita Smith. My pride and joy!



GOOD TIME LOST

Taj Alexander Mahon-Haft

Back during the draconian mid-90s, Virginia abolished virtually any chance to earn shorter prison sentences by demonstrating rehabilitation, both eliminating parole entirely and making 13% the maximum reward available for earned sentence credits (aka, “good time”). And so it stayed hopeless for those with long sentences until 2020. Years of hard work coalesced with a climate of reform, and HB5148 passed, offering greatly expanded chances for earned sentence credits. The original version making all sentences eligible was watered down somewhat to exclude some serious violent convictions, but it passed into law so that nearly everyone in the system was eligible to earn at least some years back by doing right. Finally, Virginia offered meaningful incentives and hope to people behind bars and their families. . . .

Until that was stolen from many thousands on June 17, 2022. The law that passed was adjusted to delay recalculation of release dates until July 1, 2022. Meanwhile, the Governor’s mansion and House of Delegates changed back to conservative control. This reform still survived three traditional legislative attacks, and families even planned reunions for July after the first wave eligible was told they’d be out over the summer. Then, using procedures attaching these unrelated changes to a required budget bill approved by a shorthanded legislature, Governor Youngkin pushed through an amendment that took back all opportunities for expanded earned sentence credits from about half of the people behind bars in Virginia. This included hundreds just weeks from releases DOC already promised, human beings who had already completed reentry classes, found housing and jobs, even planned celebrations with kids and parents they’d been kept from for decades.

The justification was that these were individuals who also had some violent convictions. However, sentences for those charges still had to be served in full. More importantly, this added time to sentences for thousands of people who had committed to rehabilitation, demonstrated success, earning (not being automatically given) rewards for self improvement, the exact goal of our criminal justice system. This amendment broke the hearts of people who bought into a belief that adhering to society’s norms would bring rewards, only to have their “representatives” in that society renege on their legally-enacted guarantees at the last minute.

The expansion of earned sentence credits still went into effect in July 2022. It was still the largest reform in Virginia's modern history, having now begun reuniting tens of thousands of deserving families sooner. But this success remains bittersweet, as the last minute gubernatorial sneak attack stole the hopes and faith of thousands of good citizens.

Note: The following poem marks the date when the Governor's amendment went through.

JUNE 17, TIM'S TRAGEDY

Taj Alexander Majon Haft

In my dungeon, I scratched 4000 tallies
till I had no nails left to bleed
my eyes evolved to the pitch and I
scrubbed from the walls the salt of the
tears of the daughters I left
pouring from the eyes they got from me.
Grew my hair, my calluses, and my conscience
my penance paid in pain
I taught myself to weather without pills.

Locked in a box with only an hour of daily rays
no web, no classes, and but ten network channels.
Left alone in dark corners with the
thoughts there breed so furious and
ads for antidepressants, SUVs, and Arby's I can't eat,
Jerry Springer, Falwell news, and endless Marvel flicks.

Then a miracle resurrected me from this grave.
Jailers brought me this gilded key
cast from reclaimed dreams
engraved with Emma's graduation date.
On DOC letterhead, it said: Congrats!
You earned it, home to your kids, use on July 1.

Then came June 17, another surprise delivery
directly from the Gov: Never mind, stay locked.
Politics, apocalypse, they sure sound the same
as Emma's renewed sobs now echo ceaseless
and I don't know what to say next except:
"Thanos had the right idea" and
"Maybe civil war's the only way to save humanity."

And they wonder why.

BREAD IN A PAST LIFE

Aubrey Berryman

There I sat staring at something I instantly recognized. Yet I couldn't quite name it. I stared and stared at this thing. It tried, as much as an inanimate object can, to trigger my memory. In the next few moments, I felt an unexpected empathy for amnesiacs.

I laughed at myself as I stared at this flat, doughy bread. The nooks and crannies were cold and untoasted. The fine granules on its back rolled on to my fingers as I held it this way and that. I cursed myself a fool.

Then, just as I flipped my egg on to its pockmarked surface, the thing hit my consciousness. English muffin. It was a goddamned English muffin! I laughed sourly, remembering the decade past when I last enjoyed one.

I sank my teeth into it, noticing that it was still cold, moist from storage, just past fresh. I could not recall a better English muffin. I smiled in simple pleasure at this egg sandwich of mine, and the fresh memories it brought.

Memories that appeared like ghosts in the attic, stirred by the opening of old and dusty boxes. Snapshots of life so taken for granted as to barely warrant the space in which they sat.

ROLLIN' WITH IT (SATURDAYS SPENT OFF THE YARD)

Aubrey Berryman

There was an energy of anticipation. The already nervous and jittery motions of misanthropic misfits were further fueled by instant coffee and powdered

doughnuts. Dice rattled the table as books thumped down. Character sheets were carefully placed like deeds of title, each claiming their own small parcel of territory. There was no preamble, no warning. Their dungeon master simply started to speak. His voice was a veritable call to arms.

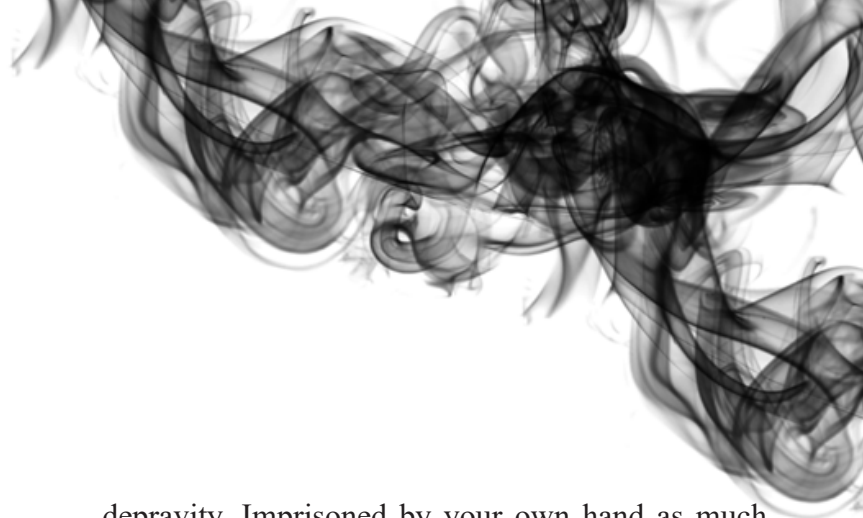
"Many called it the great end as our lands were swept clean by wind, by fire. They became as blasted glass and sharp stone, filled with noxious fumes and deadly mists. The mewling cries of forlorn souls cried into the night, lamenting their loss and begging for the release of death that never came. Even now, I hear their echoing pleas."

The dungeon master paused to take a long, grimacing swig of a thick black tar-like substance some call Columbian Blend. He spoke as one who could claim the tortured tale of his own. In character, he continued.

"The caverns we crawled into provided our respite and only means of survival— if only just! To survive, we subsisted off of grubs, cavern water, and lichen. Our lives extended out into an endless night. Yet, even for everything those caves provided, they felt like a tomb, sealed in the Underdark of Ebberon.

"Then it seemed fate had finally smiled upon us all as we found what we thought was our refuge. Locked in stone from untold ages past lay hidden a half-buried city. It stood like an old crone, crooked and twisted amongst the rubble of a partially dug grave. Yet what we at first saw as sanctuary soon became our prison. Demons from the deep crawled up to claim, to conquer. Now we live a lightless existence, buried alive beside our cruel taskmasters. Their tributes are taken in life, limb, and, at last, our souls. As time passes, I now wonder if those who died in the Great End weren't the lucky ones."

~ Doxon Warbone ~ 996 YK ~ Last Ranger of the 5th Company under Therinil Far



Incredulous and almost always at the edge of irate, Robert spoke, “Wait, wait, wait a minute.” He took a deep breath with his palms flat on the table and pushed back slightly. “You mean to tell me that we, as level one characters, are starting in the Underdark?!” Robert’s eyes were wide with disbelief. His hair was a curly tangle that lay somewhere between wind tossed and electrocuted. As Robert spoke, his mane shook with the same fervor as his voice and body did. “We’ll never survive! We’re gutted from the jump!”

The rolling of their eyes was almost heard as the rest of the table sat back in their chairs and waited for what was coming. Their dungeon master, commonly known as Bear, sat straighter as his eyebrow arched imperiously. “That has to be a new record, Rob,” Bear said. “We haven’t had the first combat encounter and yet there is conflict already. Bravo.”

Robert tried to wave Bear off, “I’m just sayin’, the Underdark is for higher level characters.” “Yes, Rob. You are right.” It was as if, in that friendly exchange, somewhere a record scratched and skipped. The other players shook their heads in disbelief at what they had before themselves. Robert was seldom right in any of his heavily caffeinated paranoia. As such, he was stunned silent. Bear took that as his cue to continue, “The Mournlands are above a wasteland of death and despair. You can’t travel there without risking almost certain death.” Robert nodded and nervously waited for more. As Bear pressed on, the rest of their table sat forward and watched the conversation unfold as one would a tennis match. “Below your current position is the unfathomable darkness and depravity of The King Who Crawls and his blood-soaked highway. Horrors prowl the depths, looking to feast on the flesh of any foolish or brave enough to trespass.” Robert let out a forced sigh born of frustration and resignation. As if his point were made, Robert threw a hand into the air to chalk the score. Bear pressed on, “You are hemmed in on all sides by danger, death, and

depravity. Imprisoned by your own hand as much as fate. Given our current circumstances, one would think you all could relate, if only somewhat.”

Robert’s face fell in thoughtful consideration as Bear’s words sank in. The dungeon master continued, “It sounds to me like there is suspense and adventure to be had in the subterranean city you’ve stumbled upon. Maybe there you can collect the strength needed to push on or reclaim the fallen lands above. Either way, your fate is your own. This is your story as much as it is mine. The question is this, what are you going to do about it?”

Bear’s gauntlet had been thrown. The challenge answered. They picked up their dice and rolled with it.

TOMORROW’S MYSTERY


Aubrey Berryman


Beams of dawn-like fingers
grabbing for a new day
shatter the night
over the hidden horizon
of our concertinaed courtyard.

Dissipated lemon’d spotlights
inexplicably breathe patterns
visible before their time.
Their mystery is their greatest gift.

Could it be,
silhouettes of trees
crenellating tomorrow?

Could it be,
buildings interrupting inexorable progress?






Could it be,
the musings of a misanthropic misfit
yet to crap upon our incarcerated Monday?

Could it be,
the shadow of suffering
cast off the contagiously miserable Assistant Warden
on his way for early rounds of arbitrary authoritarianism?

Or could it be the faint hints of hope
sneaking through the darkness?

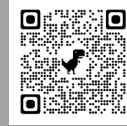
Author's Note

In a world full of discontent and disconnections, I am further detached by placing myself in prison. At one time, I often felt that we as prisoners were like ghosts to the outside world – able to somewhat see and hear but rarely have any meaningful exchanges. That is the design and nature of prison after all. Removed from the ability to grasp someone's hand, I instead reach with my words. Fueled by the need and desire to connect, links have been forged that allow the very human desire for connection to grow. Ours are not bonds that bind wrists, but hearts and minds to one another. That is one reason among many that I write. The rest, well, you'll have to read for yourself.



OPEN YO EYES

Joel "South" Hicklin



Scan to listen!

Open yo eyes...
Clear yo vision – stay focused on the task at hand...
It's time at hand ... tell me if dis time can stand
As Time, I AM...
... Still, Will... Passby, Go – Come. Fly... freeze.
NEVER ... but it'll pass by slow...
... Open yo eyes ... clear yo vision...
... Fear is Real... but Fear is in da rear... And A ...
Dear with no eyes ... is I have no idea ...
... Stay focused...
Cause what was built ... over da course of many years....
... could be snatched... In a blink of an Eye.
I shed no tears — cause it was I that took a leap
... I shall never point the finger because it was I...
That was curious... when I ... realized the power
of an all seeing Eye.
... It was I, that wasn't really taking I that serious
But seriously...
... Open yo eyes ... Clear yo vision...
Breathe ... breathe... Now tell me yo vision...
Be precise... minus precision...
In other words, let da choices you make today...
... Be the ones you could live with Tomorrow...
... It's all a Decision...
So I decided to wake up in a penchant...
In a Hole... On a Hole ... Around a Hole...
Toilet bowl, next to the bed... bed next to the kitchen...
Close my eyes ... then open ... then close ... then listen,
at my thoughts...
...That's missing ... & wishing & wishing & missing
... The people that's here (not in A literal form)...
& The people that's missing ... (Gone in A physical form)...
In A Missing Plot... He tries so hard to stay focused on his aim...
But he missed A lot...
Never had a pot to fill up with piss and A window to
throw it out of... At A Hissing Thought.
... Stay focused I say ... staying focused You Not...
... You have to visualize... through real eyes ... to realize

... when the time has rot...
Mama say son don't cry over spoiled milk ... so this
time I'm not...
... But they will HATE you. TRY to BREAK you.
DISMANTLE you ... TAKE you ... REPLACE you...
It's called being another statistic ... don't let 'em make you
... Open yo eyes... Stay focused ... let me awake you...
... This time around.... It's math at hand....
... They Add us ... Subtract from us ... Divide us...
... Provide us .. nothing ... but da exact tools
... To make us adapt fools ... act fools ... and make
us think it's kool – to lack screws ... or lack news...
... cause news is information...
... Must I inform you, learn to dissect ...
... Number 1, 5, zero... 7, 8, zero One... C-1
... Cell 21 ... Wallens Ridge State Prison...
Reporting live and direct...
... Open yo eyes ... clear yo vision...
Now tell me what's next??!

AS I LOOK BACK ON THE DARK SIDE

Christopher Riddick

As I look back on the dark side, I see myself living on the edge, smoking and drinking gin and juice every week. I woke up every morning with a hangover, trying to make it to work to support my family. Just to make mom proud of me, no matter what I feel, I feel like a thug just trying to fit in with them.

When it comes down to getting locked up, those that are supposed to be your friends just fade away. Once you get out, they are like the devil – ready to hang with you until you're broke or back in jail.

It's time to do the right thing and keep your head up. Don't be a fool living that thug life, trying to sell drugs or being in a gang. All that's going to happen is that you'll be locked up or six feet like 2-Pac and Notorious B.I.G. They had it all until they were shot by a gang member.

So take it from me, Touch From Above, and be true to the game.
You will get what you deserve when judgment comes.
God doesn't play. Peace.



WHO AM I

El Presynt

I look into my eyes,
in search of who I am,
only to find,
everything and everyone,
but myself and nothing
Who am I?
If I am Black?
Am I an African?
Am I an American?
An African-American, perhaps?
Each, an impossibility
I am Black because,
from where I've come,
is as blank as the space in between my thoughts
and where I am housed,
I am void,
because I am not welcome
Who am I,
Prior to my enslavement?
Who am I,
On the land of my enslavement?
"I can't breathe..."
because this is not my air
like this place is not my home
I am lost in time
Who am I?
I look into my eyes,
in search of who I am
only to find,
everything and everyone,
but myself and nothing
Who am I,
if I am not free?
A prisoner, obviously
But am I a convict,
An offender,

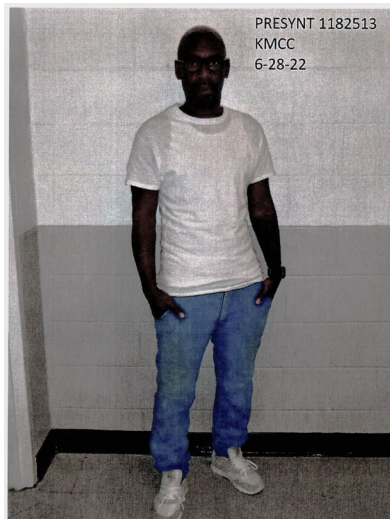
An inmate,
even if I am not incarcerated?
Am I a villain,
A predator,
A monster,
before I even utter a word?
Who am I,
If I am not a man?
A slave?
A nigger?
A "PERSON?"
Here, I am a dark blemish,
on a light surface;
A Black mark,
To be cleaned white;
A beast,
to be killed
Liberty, Justice, Equality,
is not meant for those,
who look like me.
who are dark like me.
who are Black like me.
Not easily seen,
even more complex to understand.
Since the day of my birth,
I've been lost in time
Who am I?

#R.I.P. Eric Garner & George Floyd

Author's Note

Want more? Check me out at <https://minutesbeforesix.com/wp/category/contributors/el-presynt-va/>

Or you can get my book "My Infinite Mirror" on Amazon or send me a message on FB:
[facebook.com/elpresynt](https://www.facebook.com/elpresynt)





SEEK-N-FIND by Hazel Miller

Artist's Note

This abstract can be turned in any way to get another viewing angle to solve. A person has to look real hard to see how the adjoining figures meet. I had fun with this abstract and I hope you will enjoy it.

I have a large amount of work to sell – landscapes, abstracts, and still lifes. Prices start at \$35. These are all originals that are signed and dated and would be mailed in manilla envelopes.

For information on how to contact Ms. Miller, write to justicebburg@gmail.com

A SELF PORTRAIT

Dale Hammond

I'd like to paint for you
a picture
of scenes horrific,
of a creature so repulsive
it would flush even Dante's cheek

Black spills over the canvas
like tar;
suffocating it,
so that no life
and no light
may be breathed into it.

Idle hands create
movement, creates imagery:
forbidden touch, unabashed,
steals a lifetime of trust;
Unfed hearts, abandoned
go hungry.

Wounds denied the opportunity to become scars;
and a man surrounded by mirrors
both feeding and fornicating,
both loving and loathing,
both indulging and denying... himself.

Cunning,
his blackest black,
the color of his inner nature;
his truest self.

While the brush, now grafted to his hand
stays honest,
he remains in denial.
In solitude
In silence
In monochrome
Every brushstroke
reveals an unbearable self-truth
and his canvas
is shrouded in defeat.

Painted into total darkness
and too gutless to move,
his eyes glimpse a spot of red,
still wet,
by way of sacrifice.
Red devours black, bringing new life
and new colors;
a new palate with which to create
and a brush supplanted
by a nail.

A MOTHER'S CALL

Dale Hammond

Oh, mama bird
protect me
with your weathered wings.

Seasons may age
but your love
remains timeless
and your nest
will always be familiar.

Distance will never
soften your song,
nor will time
make less my memory of it.

For when it's time
for me to fly north,
Your call
will cross oceans
and reach the heavens
to guide my way home.

Where my heart
never left.



Author's Note

This poem was inspired by an excerpt from “My Utmost For His Highest” by Oswald Chambers: “A person’s inner nature, what he possesses in the inner, spiritual part of his being, determines what he is tempted by on the outside. The temptation fits the true nature of the person being tempted and reveals the possibilities of his nature.” My poem is about being honest with one’s self and accepting and acknowledging our innermost being and all its weaknesses. This level of honesty forces us to recognize the true magnitude of God’s mercy and grace.



DIVERGE THIS

Lee Chun

It's like some sort of disease.
We wonder why so many youngsters are committing such harsh crimes.
Well this is beyond black and white and quite frankly beyond human kind.
Human nature... Then death
What else?
Believing that on some primal level,
People find death fascinating.
Enough of the bullshit and all the fabricating.
It's human nature to want to get as close as possible to the things we fear.
Please don't misconstrue, I want to make sure this is clear.
Society continuously feeding off itself.
Capitalist parasites, not even worried about the children's health and help
Can't you see?
Society is all about making that almighty dollar.
Do we want our kids to be a "Baller"
Or a scholar?
I'm telling you, this shit is like some sort of disease!
Can we please go back to the basics?
Ignorance is bliss, and truthfully you should face this!

AMBASSADOR IN CHAINS – A PRISONER’S HOMAGE TO C. WRIGHT MILLS

Danny Thomas

The Apostle Paul in the Bible once referred to himself as an “Ambassador in Chains,” inspired by his desire to preach the gospel and his subsequent incarceration for doing so. I do not liken myself to Paul in a religious sense nor do I claim to have suffered as he did for his faith. However, the description as an ambassador in chains is appropriate for my circumstances and my desire to resist and persist in this proverbial “belly of the beast” we know as The U.S. Penal system.

Incarceration was designed to break the will and kill the spirit. I would know. I’ve valiantly fought against this oppression for two decades of my life. The systematic stripping of your very being is clearly a recognizable tactic in this world. With varying degrees of behavior modification and aversion therapy developed to suit the needs and agenda of the carceral environment, the desire and will to find your own mind becomes tantamount to your very existence as a person, as a human being. With a clear understanding, I’ve found my place in the world of the social sciences. My desire to know and understand my environment has piqued my curiosity, thus providing me with a newfound resilience, a post traumatic growth of sorts.

In this world, I’ve found my calling towards reform, transformation and reintegration of myself and my

peers whose hearts and minds navigate this maze of confusion and chaos towards self mastery. The social sciences have become my compass of sorts, this discipline gave me direction and taught me to elevate my circumstances.

Each layer of this milieu has its own life and vitality. Although these lives are independent and unique in their own right, their very survival is dependent on each other. This perspective appeals to the imagination, “The Sociological Imagination “ as the great C. Wright Mills referred to it. According to Mills, “the first fruit of the imagination is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within this period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances.”

This imagination as Mills refers to it is crucial for the development of the mind and spirit of the prison writer. Without the imagination, the prisoner is forever confined to their failures and defeat. Conversely, the imagination says, “why not, why can’t you?” The imagination becomes the catalyst for a renewed vigor for life and to life. As our mind expands, the desire to write grows exponentially. As Mills points out the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his fate by locating himself within this period.

Your place in the present is representative of the effect you have on your conditions, especially how your opportunities are perceived and the outcome of such. For me the most remarkable experience in life is the ability to use your mind to affect change in your world, this is where imagination is pivotal. I often say that intelligence is exercised by

the ability to create something out of what appears to be nothing. From the outset, incarceration gives every inclination that your life is essentially over, the “mortification of self” is pervasive to say the least. Negative aspects of your identity are erased and replaced but so are your positive attributes, at least those that make you formidable under the circumstances. This leaves prisoners with a yearning to identify with something or someone; the goal is to identify with the right options. C. Wright Mills argues that the only way to truly understand a person’s behavior is to examine the social context in which people live, this is the quality of mind Mills referred to as the “sociological imagination.”

We are often told to not hate the person but hate the behavior. The reason being is because the conditions in which people exist must be considered when judging why someone may behave in a way that appears to be irrational or out of the perceived norm. For me this position is essential to the idea of rehabilitation and the establishment of a penal system that focuses on who a person has shown the effort and potential to become. As the title of this essay implies, I am an “Ambassador in Chains,” I am an ambassador for growth and change, I am an ambassador for redemption and self determination. I am representative of the men and women that live with the regret of past failings for which no amount of recompense is enough. Sociological imagination is more than a perspective to me, it is the ethos of what is possible, of what is attainable if we allow our minds the latitude to overcome barriers of fear and doubt.



Author’s Note

I am so grateful for the opportunity to have my work recognized and published to share with the advocacy community. I am a “freedom writer” and redeemed man. My past failings have encouraged me to pursue my maximum potential in spite of my circumstances. My parents, Charles and Barbara Thomas gifted me with life, I’ve finally learned what it means to live mine!

LAY ME THERE

Mark Baker

Lay me there,
where my people sleep.
Lay me there,
with no one to weep.
Lay me there,
alone and cold.
In endless dreams,
of times of old.
Lay me there,
within the ground.
A stranger's spade,
the only sound.
Lay me there,
no flowers lain.
No teardrops shed.
No hearts in pain.
Lay me there,
to slumber on.
Disposed of...
Hidden...
Forgotten ...
Gone.

ONCE UPON A TIME

Mark Baker

I have experiences and stories I could tell you about my lifetime here in prison that would break you. That would shake you to your core and make you doubt that there is any hope for the human race. But what's the point of telling you? No one cares about me anymore. I'm just a number now. A statistic.

But once upon a time, I was someone. People loved me. At least I think I remember a broken old man choking back tears as he pleaded with the judge to "Please don't take my boy... He's all we got." And I seem to recall an old woman with a kind and care-worn face mouthing the words, "I love you baby" while an army of prosecutors all lined up to twist small threads of half-truths into a fantastic tapestry of lies. The judge diligently orchestrating the warp and weft of the bindings that would hold me fast for decades to come.

But, again, what does it matter? How can anything I possibly say to you compete with your own worries about inflation, the high price of gasoline, nuclear threats from Russia upon Ukraine or the next Civil War about to unfold in 2024. There are so many more important things to worry about than me. Like I said... I'm just a number now.

For those of you who are able to feel a bit of compassion and empathy for my situation, I appreciate your thoughts. I'm not really asking for your sympathy or for you to feel sorry for me. What I want is for you to send a prayer or kind thought out to people that have made this journey with me. Those that paid the real price and served every second of my sentence alongside me. My family members who lay down every night to fall asleep in the prison that I built for them and sentenced them too. All for the crime of having loved me. The ones who I have left behind to bury each other as the years go by and who are not allowed closure or to grieve properly because one of them is locked away and not allowed to participate in those sorrowful rites. It is they who have carried the heaviest of my burden.

I no longer take comfort in looking through my photo album. Time and circumstances have turned it into nothing but a book of dead people's faces. Nor can I bear to reread my old letters from my mother. Now they are just painful whispers from a ghost. Addressed to a son that is just as dead and gone as she is.

I do remember seeing a clover blossom on the rec yard shortly after my mother died and it made me think back across a lifetime to when I was just a little boy sitting in the grass with her while she looked for a four leafed clover for me. We sat out there for what seemed like hours. I remember she made me a little crown of clover blossoms and as she placed it on my head, she told me that I was her "Sweet Little Prince." Sometimes I wonder whatever happened to momma's "Sweet Little Prince." And then I remember what happened to him... I killed him. Lie by lie, drink by drink, and pill by pill, I killed him.

I have thought about finding a quiet place out in the rec yard so I can sit down and tell my mom all the

things that I always meant to say to her. To tell her that I wish that I could have been a better son and that she deserved so much better than the heartache and worry that I put her through. But then I wonder if that would do me or her any good. What if my prayers are just as trapped in here as I am or, even worse, what if they are cut to shreds by the razor wire they must pass through so that if they were to read her, she wouldn't understand them and would only be even more hurt and confused by something I've said or done? What if there is no one left out there by the time they finally decide to let me go home? Who will be left to bury me?

Author's Note

The inspiration for the poem "Lay Me There" was born out of my almost two decades long seesaw ride of incarceration where I have felt mostly two opposing emotions — the first being Hope and the second being Despair. Hope in that I will someday get out and rejoin the life and relationships that I have lost and then Despair in realizing that the life I knew is no longer there. The whole world moved on without me while I have been "on pause" reliving the same day over and over again for just under 20 years. I am terrified of going home now because everything becomes real then. Everything up until now has just been a surreal dream. I have been insulated from the rest of the world, and I am afraid that I won't be able to function now that a parent has died and my closest friends and family are now strangers that I have to get to know and learn how to love all over again. It is as if I am a light switch that was turned off in 2005 and will, on the day of my release, just be flipped back on and that is that. "Sink or swim." "Get out!" "You don't have to go home but you can't stay here" type of thing. I'm 51 years old but still a boy, having been reprogrammed by prison to become a child again. Where someone else makes all of my decisions for me and controls every minute aspect of daily life. Like I said, I'm terrified.

I would like to close with my observation that punishment without the opportunity for atonement is detrimental to the human race as a whole. If you are just going to be locked up where there is little or no hope of a second chance at righting your wrongs or being present and accountable to take part in the healing process for everyone involved, then you are simply throwing away a valuable opportunity and creating a disservice for not only those who have suffered the effects of wrongdoing, but you also discount and make unnecessary the need to ever say, "I'm sorry." It has been my experience that without ever knowing the reasons why someone hurt me. Sometimes just having a sincere apology is the absolute least measure of comfort and empathy my heart needs to enter a place of acceptance — if not forgiveness — to be able to let it go and not be emotionally crippled and defined by what someone else did to me. To not waste another second of my life waiting and searching for an answer when sometimes there just aren't any.

IN A PRISONER'S EYES

David Bomber

One of my fondest memories was playing an extra in the movie “War Of The Worlds.” As it turned out, I played the role of a survivor who, among others, was migrating to God knows where after the aliens invaded.

Basically, the filming entailed walking around in a field for two days in which we pretty much froze! However, my efforts did garner me a few precious seconds in the movie. Of course, you’d have to know where to look but I can honestly point me out. Nevertheless, it was an exhilarating experience considering that I was able to rub elbows with the likes of Steven Spielberg, Tom Cruise and Dakota Fanning.

The thing that I loved most about the entire experience was that there was no judgment, no “I’m better than you” attitude from these celebrities. In their eyes, we were an integral part of the production of the movie and it was obvious that this sentiment meant a lot to us extras.

In comparison, there is a greater sense of gratitude in knowing that there are people, such as yourself, who invest their time and energy in a platform that truly benefits and inspires someone such as myself, who is incarcerated.

In a prisoner’s eyes, it is you who is truly distinguished and notable and words cannot adequately express the gratitude that someone who is imprisoned has your willingness to interact with them and show your support.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

THE STRUGGLES THAT WE FACE

David Bomber

There is no point to be coy about it. The fact of the matter is that it is impossible to grasp the struggles that today’s prisoners face unless, of course, you were to walk a mile or two in his or her shoes, which I pray never happens to you.

From the outset, universally, every individual arrested always experiences some sort of alienation by someone in their camp. In most cases, it is during the prisoner’s inception into the criminal justice system that they come to the realization that there are many who simply aren’t going to be there for them as the prisoner would’ve thought. Sadly, this is just one of the many facets that any prisoner must initially face and struggle with. Then, of course, there is the issue of the prisoner who is looking to be released.

Theoretically speaking an individual who is arrested is “innocent until proven guilty.” If that statement were even remotely true then those who are not only in positions of authority, but also society as a whole, would have a very different attitude toward prisoners. In stark contrast, mainstream society views any person that has been arrested as being guilty.

Granted, in many cases it is true that the accused has broken the law. However, what most people are unaware of is the underlying dynamics involved in the criminal justice system. At the forefront of this cog is the prosecutor whose function is to seek the truth and act as representative of the state. The prosecutor's office enjoys a great deal of power and authority in determining sentences, both of which are tied to their own career advancement, which by definition, means a high rate of convictions.

An example of this is the common practice of prosecutors to hurl as many indictments as is legally possible at the accused. Under this practice the prosecutor simply alleges that the accused's conduct violates several different statutes simultaneously. This ensures that at least one indictment will stick or it will scare the accused into a guilty plea of some or all of the offenses that the prosecutor puts forward. Obviously, this bullying tactic is nothing short of a disservice to any tax paying citizen and this practice only serves to distort and muddy the waters in the interest of "justice." If this were not true then it would be pointless for any of the Innocence organizations to have their doors open. Yet, they are very much open and all of them are overflowing with cases.

As most people are unaware of these dynamics, it is no wonder that society views the majority of the accused as guilty. Of course, one must also consider that any given prisoner who is convicted is never really released from punishment. It is unfathomable to think otherwise when the prisoner that is found guilty must continuously be subjected to being labeled a "felon" and treated as a second class citizen upon conviction. After all, is the former prisoner truly innocent in the eyes of society following an acquittal or after getting their conviction overturned?

Author's Note

I am a native of Detroit, Michigan. However, for most of my life I lived in Roanoke, VA, where I first pursued a degree in Information Systems Technology and later in Electrical Studies before becoming interested in law. Besides being a huge proponent of criminal justice reform and advocacy, I am also the proud father of Damian and Aaron, who are the source of my inspiration.

For more information on my case go to davidmbomber.wordpress.com



A PLACE

Yusef Hasan Sykes Sr.

Designed for the purpose of confinement in hope
to reform, where those who feel like they are misunderstood,
alone and unimportant lose hope
Comrades overdose from a substance that you can breathe in
and collapse right where you stand
But it seems that death isn't enough to scare the ones
that indulge in the haram
to avoid what thousands wake up to for a choice we made
the frivolous things in the dunya are what
majority pursue instead of freedom,
forgetting about the risk we took
that has us temporarily housed in these facilities
where those who we used to look
to for advice about life now imitate the youth
A lack of guidance and total confusion
in a place where you would expect majority
to be receptive to new ideas to bring about change
but, instead, you find that they would
rather stay in a chaotic place where
things are out of order

LIFE'S LANDMINES

Matthew Van Emburgh

Life can be tricky, laying pitfalls and traps along our path. Some are obvious and easily avoided, others not so much. No one can avoid them all and no one can escape life's travails unscathed for they are a part of life. They help to make us who we are and to get us to where we are going. All this being the case, why is it expected of me, and all those like me who are incarcerated, to be perfect in our navigation of life's hurdles? Why is every mistake and misstep I make amplified to something that is all encompassing of me and who I am? This is especially ridiculous considering the environment in which this all occurs.


The environment in which I live is a hostile one, to say the least. And the attitude and demeanor required in such a place can put me in a precarious situation over the slightest incident. You see, the traps in prison can be the most innocuous of situations or objects, such as a chair, a shower, or something as simple as being bumped into. An argument can pop up behind any of these minor and insignificant circumstances because you have to be willing to speak up and stand up for yourself. For if you don't, you will be seen as weak or a victim and get a target put on your back. But if you do stand up for yourself, it can potentially lead to a fight, or worse, and the consequences they bear.

The prison environment increases the chances of your running across one of life's traps or pitfalls manyfold. When you put 80 to 100 men – most of whom have some sort of psychological issue, disor-

der, or at the very least have a willingness to do violence – together in a small space with very few good or healthy outlets, it is inevitable that incidents will occur. But in prison, these incidents have a higher propensity of escalating and have much graver consequences. An argument or even a scuffle outside the walls might lead to some hurt feelings or maybe even a bruise or two but usually nothing more than some extra stress. In most cases, the person that you are having the dispute with can be avoided as you go about your separate lives. But in here, you cannot avoid or distance yourself from the person you are having the dispute with. The conflict may be resolved but it typically isn't done so in a manner that is seen as civil or right. And once it happens, the consequences can be severe and long-reaching. You can end up going to segregation and losing all sorts of privileges and benefits accrued from previous good behavior. You could also sustain a serious injury or even be killed. Worse yet, you could end up with an enemy or enemies that you have to constantly be on guard against in case they decide to come after you later on.


For example, I could have good behavior for fifteen years and then get in one fight. If I then go up for parole, they won't look at the fifteen years of good behavior but at that one fight and say that it is proof that I have not changed, that I am a violent individual unfit for society. They won't even take the time to find out why I got into a fight. I could have been "fighting" trying to break up a fight between two friends and just got rounded up with them. I could have been fighting a person who ran into my cell to rob me and I was defending myself. But none of that matters for my record will state that I was charged for fighting and that will be the end of it.

As unreasonable as these expectations are, I have no choice but to abide by them. They are the rules of



the game set forth by those with the power to do so. And if I wish to get out, I have to play by their rules. So for me, life lays not just traps and pitfalls but also landmines. These landmines do not help make me who I am or get me to where I am going but can disrupt my life and destroy my future. So, I have to always be aware and calculate the risks of my actions and words. And, as difficult as that may be, it is what I must do. Otherwise, I might as well just give up and accept this environment in which I am currently in and the one in which I will spend the rest of my life.

Sometimes, it feels like I'm getting by on pure luck – like I'm stumbling through a minefield with a blindfold on. Other times I can see the situation evolving in such a way that sets off warning signals so that I know I need to change something. Life is difficult enough as it is, and the stress of constant vigilance can be telling. And the constant fear of something happening outside of my control that could destroy everything that I have worked for is wearing, but I know that the reward at the end of the gauntlet is worth it. And for that, I must, I will endure.



Author's Note

Life is funny sometimes. As a person serving life in prison, I didn't worry too much about life's pitfalls. I didn't really have much to lose. But when I became parole eligible with the passing of the Juvenile Parole bill, I suddenly had everything to lose . . . again. Now it seems as if at every turn there is something or someone pushing, always pushing. There are nothing but landmines no matter where I look. So, yeah, life is funny. The better I try to do, the more I have to lose, the more shit life throws at me. Guess it wants to know if I really want it and, as they say, nothing good is ever easy. But that's okay. There are some things in life worth the sacrifice and this is absolutely one of them.

PACING IN THE RAIN

Wayne A. Thomas Jr.

On this day, the Skies had begun to glisten as the clouds dimmed its light.
Where the Rainbow was vibrantly glimmering, one of those days that Old Folk spoke of saying:
“The Devil Was Beating His Wife.”
The Heavens had begun to rumble where as though beneath;
“All was weary and query on Earth.”
I found myself alone, “Relating” and Pacing In The Rain
full of pride, Discontentment and Hurt.
My Anger kept me Pacing as my tears hid themselves in the rain.
It’s as though I asked every Raindrop a question, regarding My Life and all of its strings.
As I continued Pacing, I only got wetter, which forced Me to look up into the sky.
As I looked up I saw the Same Darkness, which led me to my question of “Why?”
From there, the rumbling ceased, though the rain continued to pour;
I was no longer now Pacing
but, more so: “In Search and Seeking for More.”
As I stood “Still” and took hold - Focus - into the Heavens and all of its Displays;
It was then it all had started to become Brighter, and from behind those Clouds
“The Sun Showed Me His Face.”
The rain then began to let up as its light beamed down on me “Drying My Tears.”
and each drop on my face that had eventually dried up
had left a Map of how they’d gotten there.
Like the Clouds, which brought me Darkness, which filled me with “Stress and Egotistical Pride”
To the thunder which resembled my likeness, was all the Hurt that I’d kept bottled inside.
I thought all that was, “Was Against Me,”
Until the Sun came and made it all clear.
I learned that “What Was, Has Always Been With Me”,
even in those times where I didn’t think anyone cared.
Finding myself “Pacing In The Rain”

Author’s Note

“Pacing In The Rain” was truly inspired by my youthful experience here within the VADOC. I came into this prison system at the young age of 19 and here I am now 25 years later still weathering this intense storm. Throughout my travels being encaged within these antagonizing institutions, I came to realize that throughout “All Adversities,” the only way that I could gain understanding was to first do the knowledge and embrace what it was that I was going through at the time of me feeling a way.

Soon, as it begins to rain, a lot of times we’ve been taught to reach for our umbrellas, rather than observe the very place from which the rain is falling. if we were to look into the Heavens/Our Minds, we will not only see the rain but we would see the clouds in which station this rain as well. On Sunny Days, these clouds are usually blue. On Rainy Days, they’re usually dark or gray. However, “Polarity Just Is.” You can’t have your Good without the Bad. You can’t have your Hot without the Cold and neither can you have your Joy without the Pain.

It is the nature of man and woman to be able to adapt to their environments and situations, because by being the makers and owners of what we spawn into existence our very selves; “We” are the only ones who can bring clarity

to what it is that we have “Created.” So, a lot of times when all that we are able to see is “rain,” we’ve truly just psychologically adjusted to what at the time may seem like the inevitable and fight with ourselves so much so that we find ourselves looking everywhere except for the very place from which this rain is falling, without even analyzing the reasons behind it coming down on us in the first place.

Heaven is what we make it and Hell what we go through. Meaning that, when you take out the time to seek from within, you’ll realize that “nothing is impossible” for all things begin and end with you. However, within using this method, you must also realize that “anything worth having is also worth putting forth the effort and energy that it needs to materialize as well.” This is the “Hell” that we go through in order to come out “Right and Exact.” A lot of who and what we Truly Love goes through this Hell on a daily basis, but this doesn’t mean that just because many utilize this necessary path, that we’re supposed to make it a spot of choice and just “remain there.” This Hell in which I speak of intentions is only meant to “Burn off those impurities of what we sometimes have to unfortunately go through in order to gain direction. It’s not meant to lie dormant within the gloom thereof.”

Within my scenario of “Pacing In The Rain,” as hard as things were for me, my life was truly solidified within becoming acquainted with All Signs within the midst of the storm, which led me to truly finding myself “Pacing In The Rain.” Peace!

Wayne A. Thomas Jr. (Infinite Illumination).

DEAR SYSTEM

Sofiane Kouidri

You don't know me or you might simply know me by the state number that you gave me, your friendly reminder that I'm state property and nothing else. I hope that you are doing well, I really do, because I really need you at your best. I don't want to be anybody's punching bag because of someone else's bad mood.

It's 4:00 AM and I can't sleep. My demons from the past came to give me a visit and they are telling me things that I wish upon nobody. I need my medication but I was given someone else's medication after it was dropped on the floor, the same dirty floor that we need paper towels to clean but we can't get them.

I'm laying down on my bunk trying to close my eyes but the new LED lights that were installed are too bright and I won't cover it because when I did last time, I got a charge. I begged to have them turned off because they mess with my state of mind.

I'm tired. I haven't gotten a day off, working day and night for pennies. I was planning to buy me some commissary with this month's paycheck but my payment was late again so I guess I'm going to have to go to the storebox. I can't count on the food I'm going to get served – diminishing portions and the same meat rock that wouldn't be served to the service dogs.

You know, it might be news to you, but I wasn't always a menace to the community as you assumed. I had a lot of people who loved me and respected me. They were counting on me. The system didn't just destroy my life, but also those who counted on me. You might see me as the enemy but I'm not. We are not so different. Like you, I also have a family that needs me and I need them. I'm a friend, a son, a grandfather just like you.



I haven't seen my family in so long, my kids must have gotten much taller and they live miles away. My annual review was three weeks ago and it still hasn't been done. I hope my information is updated properly this time. Last year, I couldn't transfer to a closer facility to see my family.

This letter is not to make you feel guilty about how we are treated but to open your eyes. Like I stated earlier, we are not so different. You are also like me, you are victims of this broken system. We are not monsters like society has claimed us to be. Some of us grew up in the wrong environments, environments of all sorts of abuse with no help or no way out. We did what we thought would better our chances of survival as others who are sick and have been struggling with addiction their entire lives and trying to escape and forget the past abuse and trauma. Many had no choice but to turn to drugs because, like you, no one cared. No one wanted to help.

Some of us are even innocent but the system doesn't care, as usual, which is sad because until we care about others as much as we care about ourselves, the world will remain the same – filled with blame and pain.

Author's Note

I am 27 years old currently serving a 42 year sentence at Sussex 1 State prison. As many, I have been failed by the judicial system that I once believed in. I thought that everyone incarcerated deserved to be in prison but I was wrong. I was wrongly convicted by a jury for a crime I haven't done.

EDUCATION AS A NECESSARY MEANS

Harry "Justice" Traynham

Many nights I laid in the prison bunk, metal ungiving as the weight of my past mistakes and poor choices constantly pressed on my chest. It restricted my breathing, each breath laborious as I thought of my failures, losses, and regret that now burden my soul. Many nights this weight was paralyzing, leaving me unable or unwilling to face the harsh reality before me. As I laid there suffocating, unable to move, and helpless, I knew in order to survive prison, to get this weight off of me, I needed to change. But how and who could I turn to? Therein was the problem with my rehabilitation and still facing so many.

I was put in prison in 1996 in the atmosphere of "tough on crime". A year before, Virginia had abolished parole, mandating that offenders serve at least 85% of their time, and changed Virginia's prison practice to one of just classifying and managing. For people with long sentences like mine, those changes meant many resources were not even available to me. The few resources that were available, VADOC policies limited. For instance, prison rules stipulated prisoners shall be enrolled based on their release date (sooner first) and mandated that I could only take one vocational trade every 5 years. As a result, my seeking to change, develop, and grow was that much harder. In the political philosophy of "tough on crime," my rehabilitation became a non priority.

So there I was with a desire to be a better person, a drive to be something and someone, and a sincere want to change. But, lacking education, I knew not how to start changing. Luckily, my desire to be that better, worthy person was so great that it constantly motivated me to keep striving in spite of the obstacles I faced. This is what makes education so imperative for us who sit in these prisons: education challenges our cognition, creating within us a different means to process information, building critical thinking skills, giving us the ability to identify resources, and make better decisions. Above all, it gives us a pathway to be more than the failures, setbacks, and hardships we came from. Education is a necessity within prison to foster a true rehabilitative environment. Yet, we have long allowed political

talking points to omit and restrict education within these walls, gravely subtracting from the rehabilitative process and the progress on public safety.

In my educational journey I had to pave my own way. I'm proud to say almost 28 years later, as I lay in this prison bunk, the metal has a little give, the weight I now carry as lessons, and my regret became a beacon of why I must always work to be kind, charitable, and respectful in service to humanity. This is all because in education I found self worth, positive thinking, a value for life, and a purpose.

As a prisoner and criminal justice and prison reform advocate I constantly assert that education should be a cornerstone of rehabilitation. Its availability should not be determined by one's party's political stance, shifting legislation, or sentiment. Education should be maintained as a consistent practice and prisoners should have a clear path into its halls. Believe you me, prisoners will be receptive to such opportunities if only given more of a chance. After all, if you want to change the person - work to change their mind.

Author's Note

I have been incarcerated for over 25 years. At the age of 19, I was incarcerated and sentenced to 64 years. Finding salvation through education, I have worked diligently to rehabilitate myself. I am an advocate for greater criminal justice, prison, and education reform. I believe that now my redemption lies in taking a proactive approach in my community and society in general. I believe and teach that through education, we will overcome most societal ills. I have established and participated in various education based programs during my incarceration. I am a practicing essayist, who has written several essays for the Humanization Project and am currently working on publishing a collection of essays.



UHURU- FREEDOM

Loren Wright

The will to accomplish the impossible
imagining ways everyday to overcome my obstacles,
Staying realistic on da probables.
Modest truths,
now and then
Here and there fantasizing far beyond
what's probable
God is so far beyond what my eyes can see
So within my mind I seek, so blind I reach
With no direction for an interception
With the complexes hoping for nexus
With my creator or creation
Coping this whatever, whenever forever
or maybe never
Have us existed however
Lost because I found all is living
just the energy between a rock and I are different levels
I meditating to obtain the still patience it was given
Praying to be sinless in a world created of sins
How? How's one worse than the other
that led me to a prison?
To search for self knowledge
To no longer become a victim
to a system. Prevention
where a bite from an apple arose wisdom forbidden
That was just the beginning
Aware there is no ending
Is there an ending to senselessness to the ways we living when
We allow money to control our fortunes
Why do we kill one another for an illusional vision with no forgiveness –
Just to get lost in a system,
family in another
Growing old without me though I ain't missing
“Here I go!”
“Where you at?”
Yeah, I know, I refuse to sit back and relax. Listening,
waiting for change or the sound of the bell
held by Martin Luther King.

Where's the bell I never heard – freedom ring
Physically broken and neglected
yet expected
to find peace/token of rejections
for my efforts as a way to remind me –
I am subjective to the objects of another mind's dreams –
A rebel to have a separate perception,
Am I free?
To accept, dissect, eject, and conclude according to I faith
What I see...
to what I think
Then dissect, eject, and accept concepts of I speech
How I speak?
Yeah, don't see, don't speak, be deaf to what I speak
I see no disrespect in that
I calculate the steps to the size of my foot
so those who follow make it our feet
extending our reach
from our streets
our hoods and projects
our cities
from our states
So they don't just see the beauty
in the colors of our faces
but admit they've recognized
the beauty of our soul, our minds

Author's Note

Between 2012 into 2013, I became incarcerated and instantly had a conscience awakening. It was weird to suddenly be aware of worldly adversity and human behaviors I never considered. I started with people and information to encourage and test me as I traveled this new road. I began to see duality in everything – who I was and had to become, my perspectives and another's. I write all my thoughts in journal form to see what is on my mind and I found that rather than truly believe in the information I obtain or don't, I express how I see it and so provide the thoughts or awakenings of a being's conscience. Tupac says "I may not change the world but I can guarantee you, I'll put the spark in the mind of the men that will!" I choose not to be selfish and simply share thoughts until I can share actions and deeds. I have, because of another's sacrifice. This is understanding.
K.O.T.U - Loren Wright



A SHOUT OUT TO ASMODEE GAMES

David Annarelli

The power of a letter often goes beyond the words it contains. A letter can bring joy or tears. It can raise your voice. It can draw attention, for good or ill, to a cause or issue. It was the letters I've written that drew attention to my wrongful conviction but also to my abilities to write as a useful skill. What started as a means of coping with my captivity and reaching out for help has slowly developed into something bigger – a study of the law. Becoming a contributing writer and a level of political activism I never considered pursuing. All of it started with a letter.

In June 2022, I wrote a letter. Actually, I wrote eight letters to eight different game companies, Asmodee among them. I had hoped to impose upon the good nature of their humanity, as well as their marketing savvy, to solicit donations in the form of new games.

So, I sent these eight letters, as much as a break from fighting my case and the system, as any other reason. After all, all politics and activism make Jack a dull boy. A couple of weeks ago, in September, approximately two months after I sent my letters, there was a response. One of the administrators, Chief of Housing and Programs, Mr. Kinder, told me that one of the companies I wrote to sent a response – two games, twelve copies of each game, two for each pod on the compound. Not so small a response by my standards. I sent seven more letters to the companies who did not respond.

We definitely need more programs! If the focus is on reformation and rehabilitation then the apportioned budget for prisoner entertainment, which is paltry at

best and too often not spent on prisoner entertainment purposes, must be raised.

People will tell you, as they have told me over and over again, that changes will not happen no matter how many letters you write. I write over 2,000 letters a year, 40 stamps per week. I've gained really awesome penpals. I've been invited to become a contributing writer and to submit to a number of publications.

I have recently found a way to get my case back before the courts and I have convinced gaming companies to help us by providing just a little bit of light to those of us in the depths of the shadows... All of it through the power of a simple letter.

Author's Note

David Annarelli is a father, musician, activist, and political prisoner. Among those who print his writing, David is a contributing writer for the Prison Journalism Project.

<https://prisonjournalismproject.org/our-writers/>
and
<http://minutesbeforesix.com/>



SHATTERED HEART

James Davis

There came a time in my life when all hope disappeared, all pride was gone, all expectation of a future was gone and all faith in the God of my understanding. That was a time when I heard the sound of my heart breaking. It wasn't like a loud crack like when bones shatter or a spine fractures or even a skull collapsing. It was a sound so high within itself that the angels in Heaven heard it as well as the demons of Hell. A sound that had me curled up in a tiny ball crying softly into an endless night. That's how it was the night I heard my heart break.

That night I made a decision that changed the lives of many, especially mine. There's no end of things in the heart. If you took something into your heart, truly brought it inside those red velvet folds, then, it would always be there. No matter what happened. It would be there waiting. Anything sacred, especially love, to the point of a shattered heart, will always be . . .

Author's Note

After I got my mental state together, I accepted Christ in my life. That was the beginning of a changed man. I am from Newport News.

FIGHTING DEMONS

Jasmine Lovelace

Heroin is my Demon,
gnawing at my soul, eating
Eating away at any hope I had left,
taking all prisoners; no one's a free man.

I remember speeding down 96 on dope
after hitting a sweet lick,
Laughin'

Not giving a f**k about retaliation.
I already had one foot in the grave.
Damn my past aspirations.
I coulda been a nurse.
Shoulda been successful.
Woulda had anything I wanted.
That damn shoulda, coulda, woulda
keeps me haunted

I remember the night that started it all.
If only I could rewind time and stop my
DOWNFALL. When a so-called friend said
"Just try a lil bump." I did and knew
instantly I was effed up.
I fell in love.

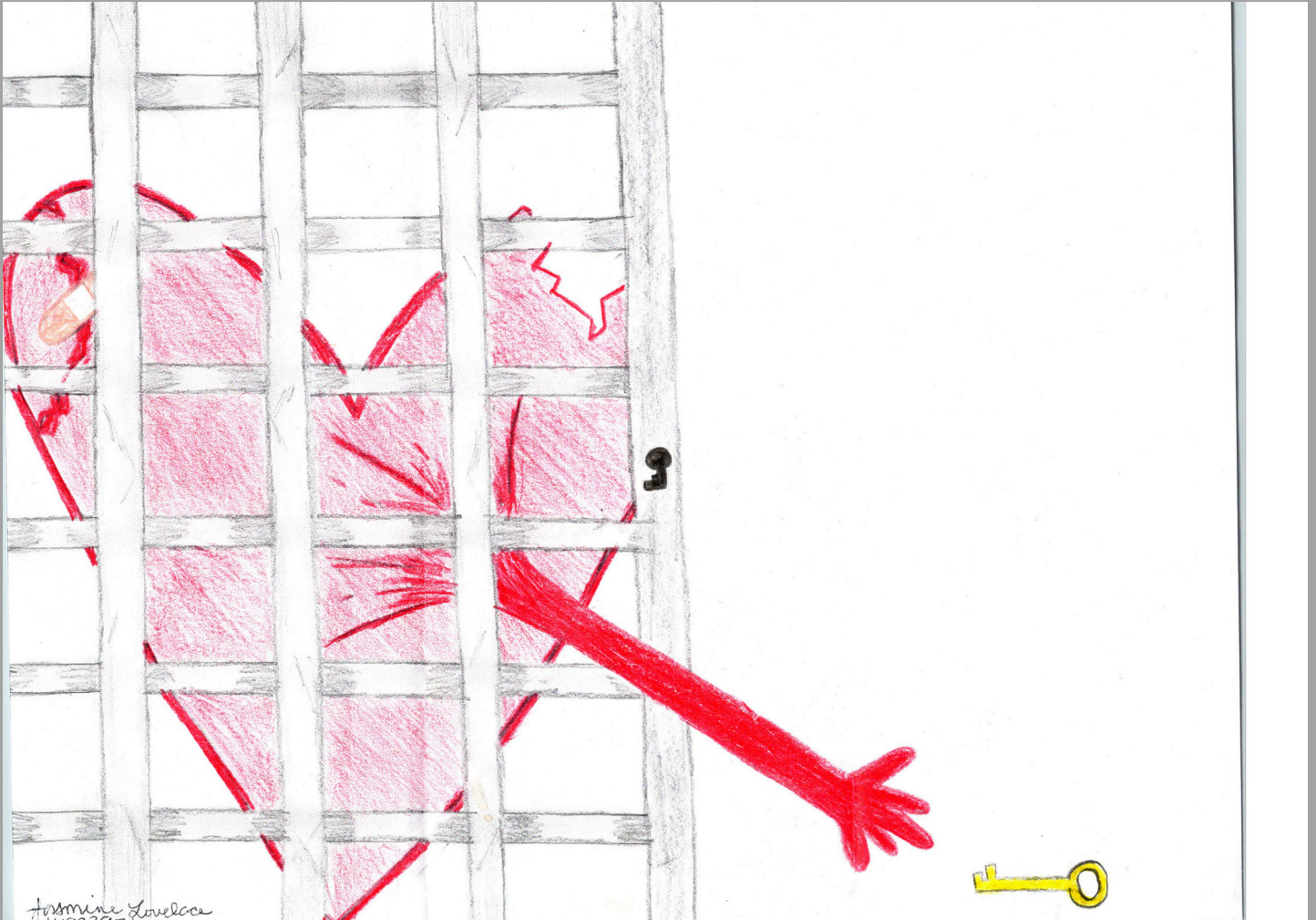
Once I OD'd in Waffle House's bathroom floor.
Sad and crazy as it may seem I
remember it being peaceful like walking
thru Heaven's front door.
You had 4 breaths a minute
the paramedic said.
I was practically
Dead.

The Demon has snatched everything –
My kid, my future, my life.
I can't even call my best friends to
vent at night because they're
gone. Captured. Out of sight.
Taken into the Demon's vise.
Amy, Akiya PLEASE COME BACK.
We were suppose to beat this together,
Remember? RIDERS FOR LIFE.

Yeah, on the outside, I may look
happy and tough but in reality
I'm broken and crushed.
I DON'T WANNA DIE.
It'll be a cold day in Hell before
I let the Demon take my life.
I'll prove it, you'll see.
Heroin was my demon but God
has rescued me.

Author's Note

IT IS MY LIFE. MY STORY. I hope to help others
and to be an advocate for other young drug users
when I am released, which is very soon – January
12. I already have a job when I am released – going
to schools and group homes doing motivational
speaking about abandonment, addiction, and life in
prison. I hope to get through to a lot of people.



Emotionally Unavailable by Jasmine Lovelace

