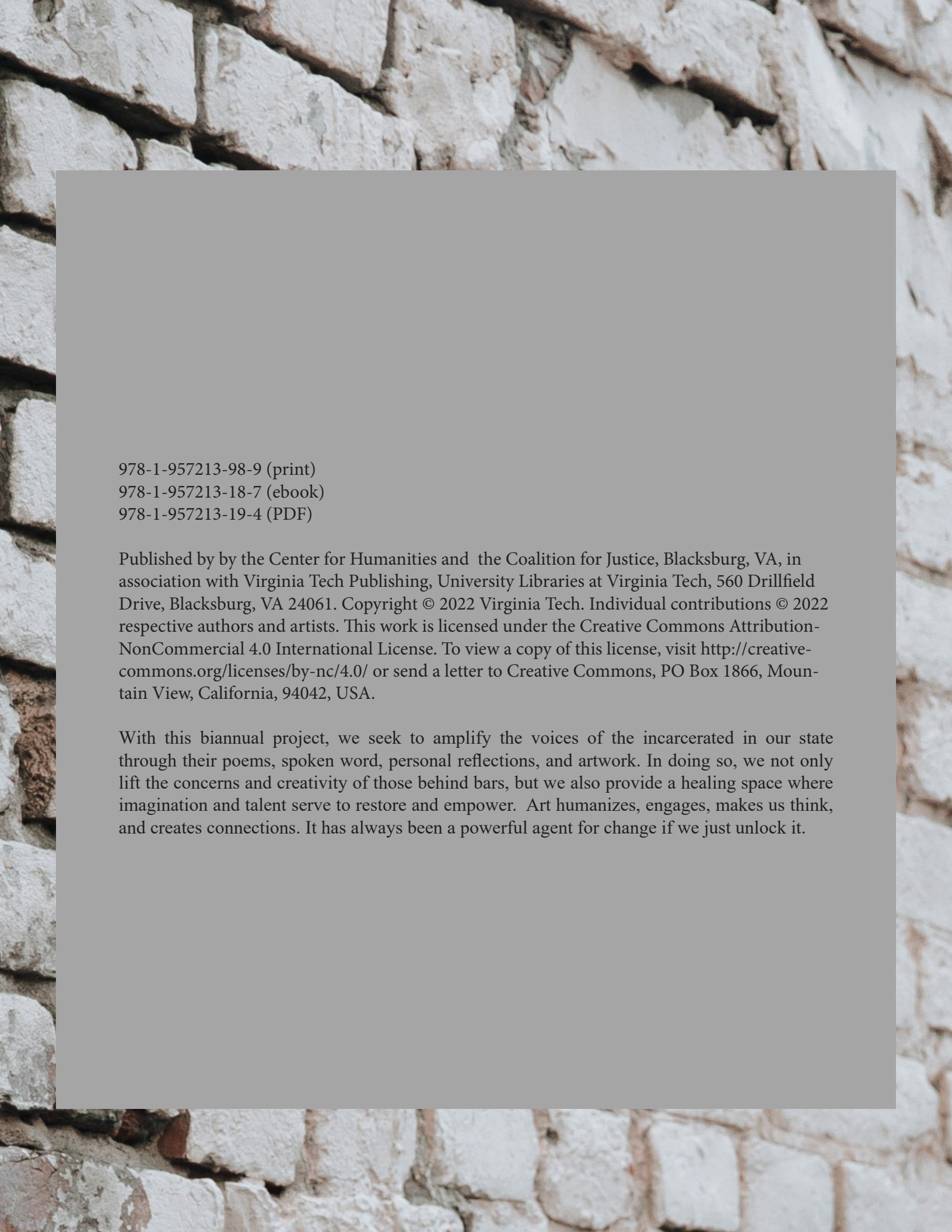


Unlocked



Art and Experiences From Inside Virginia's Prisons

Volume 1 | Spring 2022



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With this biannual 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

No less a figure than Carl Sagan called writing “the greatest of human inventions, binding together people, citizens of distant epochs, who never knew one another.” He considered it “proof that humans can work magic.” Writing, indeed, enables us to magnify our humanity, express ideas, and develop human connections. This is why writing has remained so central to humanities, as it enriches our lives and helps sustain our world.

It is in this spirit that the Virginia Tech Center for Humanities is delighted to partner with the University Libraries and the Coalition for Justice to produce this journal dedicated to publishing the writings of incarcerated authors. Among the approximately 25,000 people currently incarcerated in the Commonwealth of Virginia are mothers, fathers, siblings, and youths, who, like all other human beings, have stories to tell, ideas to share, and questions that can take on a life of their own in the way that all literature can do. This journal will be one important venue for expressive writing.

The Center for Humanities’ mission is devoted to advancing human-centered work. It is as important as ever to help humanities continue to play a pivotal role in the life of the Commonwealth of Virginia, our nation, and our world. By partnering to create this journal, which is being made freely available to the public, we anticipate that authors and readers will reap the benefits humanistic engagement can bring. If there is anything magical and inspiring about our humanity, it must surely bear some connection to the wondrous expression that writing can bring.

Sylvester Johnson
Director of the Center for Humanities
Virginia Tech

A Word from Inside

Father, partner, son, brother, friend, Hokie, hiker, road trip aficionado. Teacher, sociologist, environmentalist, justice warrior. And, yeah, I’m currently behind bars, too. In this place, but not of this place, and certainly not defined by it. Nor is that me alone. For those of us imprisoned, that is but one status in complex lives. Intent on replacing one-dimensional stereotypes with three-dimensional humanity in society’s eyes. I embrace the “Unlocked” mission, co-founded The Humanization Project, and promote empowered voices for all people. I am Taj Alexander Mahon-Haft.

A COVID Stroll

Taj Alexander Mahon-Haft

Winter shaved and moisturized this year
grooming corporate in this hipster age
so the yard saw four types of flower color February.
Then March blitzkrieged in
tipping over the terrarium
left no one
caring about a few escaped ants.
Now April and the prison's gone to seed —
Dandelions standing taller than barbed shadows reach
finding every beam streaming through the coils
with unrepentant arms like ancient craggly oaks.
Spring onions sprung their scheduled guillotine
lending each stroll a Greek salad tang.
Grass boldly showing off its chaff
as it bends lazily in the breeze
like a teen on a chair in study hall
too certain of the future to know his circumstance.
Today I found the fattest starling's feather.
If all gets worse, we're already forgotten
as unremembered hues riot from the cracks broken in
this concrete sea.
When a stolen breath
shakes all the world
how can freedom look closer
even as it feels farther away?
Might it be a spirit,
or perhaps a ghost?

In Stereo

Taj Alexander Mahon-Haft

the song played by concertina wire
in perpetual stereo
evokes emotional extremes
even in the middle
amplified mundane
and mendacity
crows screaming
dolphins sobbing
hyenas cackling
cacophony of precipice
organic cries with metallic souls
round and round
in its sharp silence
coating the walls
in shredded sanity

Author's Note

COVID's onset and all its initial uncertainty had us confined more than usual, even the grass cutting crew, and we were stuck inside our pods entirely for months. Mid-April 2020 they finally allowed a brief breath of fresh air, where the tiny island of grass was like a wild field, and it became clear that the whole world had changed with this virus. Society still seemed capable of ending as we knew it, so would anyone remember we were here? Was forgotten the same as freedom?

Due Process in the Age of Imperialism

Hassan Shabazz

According to the American Heritage Dictionary Due Process is defined as: “An established course for judicial proceedings or other governmental activities designed to safeguard the legal rights of the individual.” Imperialism is defined as: “The policy of extending a Nation’s authority by territorial acquisition or by the establishment of hegemony over other nations.” The United States Constitution is a beautifully written document but it is ultimately an elitist one. Among many of the alleged rights that are provided in the U. S. Constitution to those who are citizens is that of the Procedural Right to Due Process.

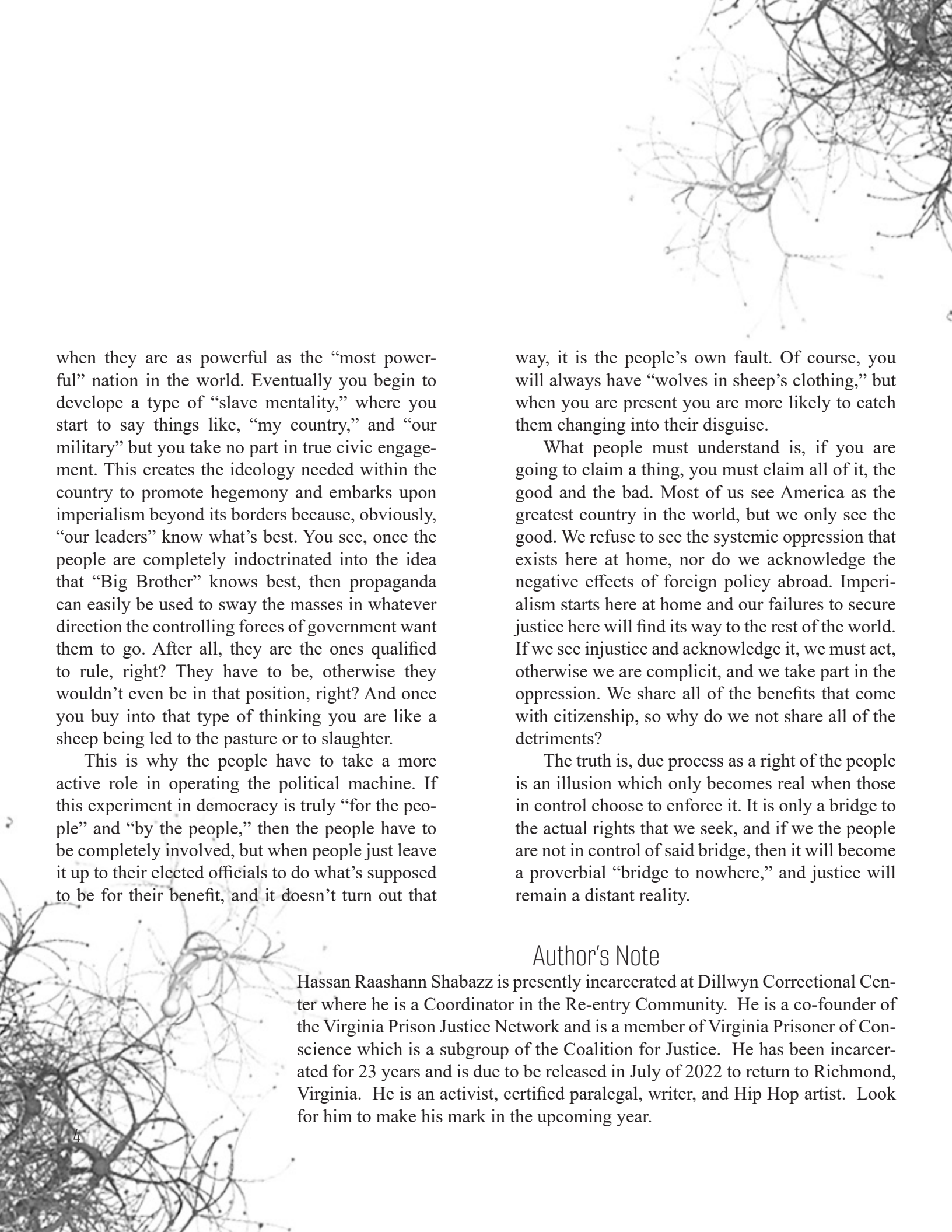
This procedural liberty states that you will not be deprived life, liberty, or property without due process of the law. Yet, a procedural liberty is not a substantial liberty. While guaranteeing you the right to go to court, to be heard by a jury of your “so-called peers,” and the right to a fair and impartial trial, it does not guarantee freedom from hunger. It does not guarantee housing, health care, or true education. It does not guarantee full employment, safe working conditions, a non-polluted earth, nor true equality and the equal distribution of resources. The Constitution guarantees us certain procedural rights and rules which state to us that the everyone can go to court just as rich folks, and even be read their Miranda Rights, but if they don’t have money, or they belong to the wrong class, while they may go through the procedure, that does not translate into justice. I was once told by a Fed-

eral District Court Clerk that, “Fairness is due process, but justice is judicial discretion.” The result is that the justice and legal establishments become the very sources of injustice and illegality. We are therefore faced with a contradiction wherein the very law and order that is written into the Constitution and the legal systems in this society are not neutral instruments; rather the law belongs to those who write it, and to those who use it to control the resources of a society.

This type of contradiction breeds a disrespect for the law, and a disrespect for those who enforce it. This is what we see going on all over the United States of America. It doesn’t matter if the law is written in neutral terms. What really matters is if the law is enforced non-discriminately; and this society is famous for writing beautiful laws which are enforced in an unequal fashion. Those who enforce the law have discretion in enforcing the law, and under what circumstances the law will be enforced, and against what people, regardless of how that law is written.

Now, when we look at this in reference to imperialism we see that under the guise of defending democracy the very same agencies of our national legal departments trample upon such procedural liberties to maintain the status quo. To keep control, they create a system that oppresses you, gives you the procedural right to address that oppression, and may even give you relief, and then congratulates itself by saying: “Oh, the system works doesn’t it?” Yes it does, because the going through of the very procedure intimidates the people and makes them conform.

You begin to say, “I don’t want to stir up the pot or do anything to threaten the powers that be,” though they may be oppressive or make oppressive policies. You see what they do to others who challenge the system, and you want no part of it so you assimilate. It’s easier to just fall in line, especially



when they are as powerful as the “most powerful” nation in the world. Eventually you begin to develop a type of “slave mentality,” where you start to say things like, “my country,” and “our military” but you take no part in true civic engagement. This creates the ideology needed within the country to promote hegemony and embarks upon imperialism beyond its borders because, obviously, “our leaders” know what’s best. You see, once the people are completely indoctrinated into the idea that “Big Brother” knows best, then propaganda can easily be used to sway the masses in whatever direction the controlling forces of government want them to go. After all, they are the ones qualified to rule, right? They have to be, otherwise they wouldn’t even be in that position, right? And once you buy into that type of thinking you are like a sheep being led to the pasture or to slaughter.

This is why the people have to take a more active role in operating the political machine. If this experiment in democracy is truly “for the people” and “by the people,” then the people have to be completely involved, but when people just leave it up to their elected officials to do what’s supposed to be for their benefit, and it doesn’t turn out that

way, it is the people’s own fault. Of course, you will always have “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” but when you are present you are more likely to catch them changing into their disguise.

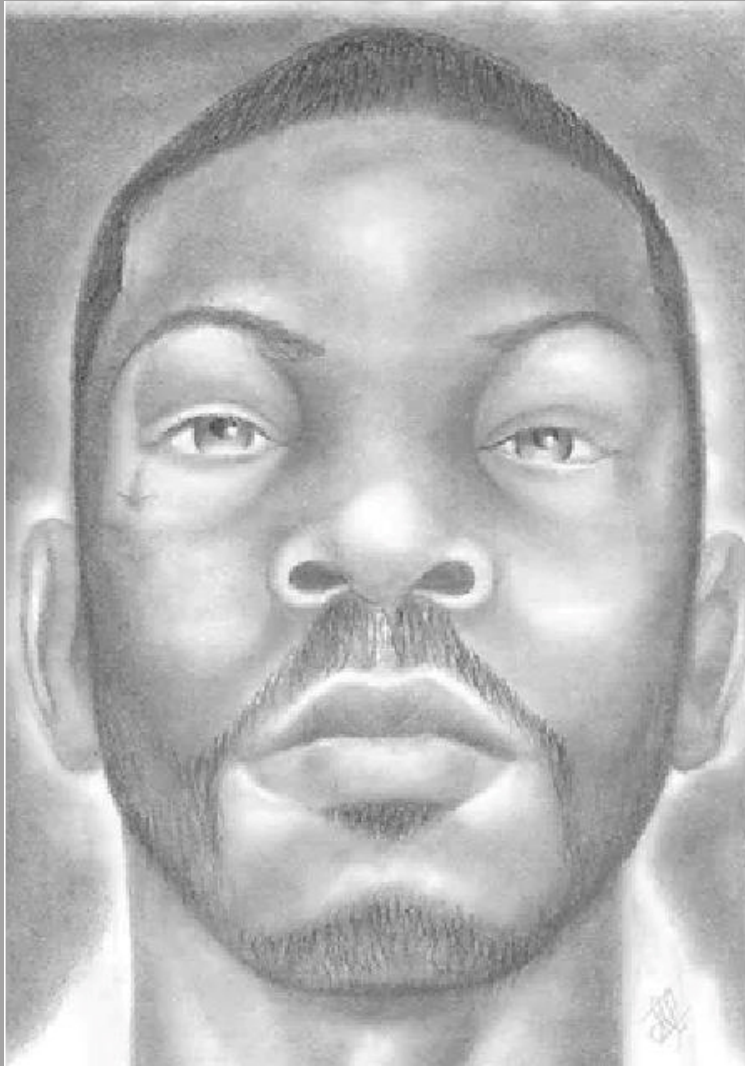
What people must understand is, if you are going to claim a thing, you must claim all of it, the good and the bad. Most of us see America as the greatest country in the world, but we only see the good. We refuse to see the systemic oppression that exists here at home, nor do we acknowledge the negative effects of foreign policy abroad. Imperialism starts here at home and our failures to secure justice here will find its way to the rest of the world. If we see injustice and acknowledge it, we must act, otherwise we are complicit, and we take part in the oppression. We share all of the benefits that come with citizenship, so why do we not share all of the detriments?

The truth is, due process as a right of the people is an illusion which only becomes real when those in control choose to enforce it. It is only a bridge to the actual rights that we seek, and if we the people are not in control of said bridge, then it will become a proverbial “bridge to nowhere,” and justice will remain a distant reality.

Author’s Note

Hassan Raashann Shabazz is presently incarcerated at Dillwyn Correctional Center where he is a Coordinator in the Re-entry Community. He is a co-founder of the Virginia Prison Justice Network and is a member of Virginia Prisoner of Conscience which is a subgroup of the Coalition for Justice. He has been incarcerated for 23 years and is due to be released in July of 2022 to return to Richmond, Virginia. He is an activist, certified paralegal, writer, and Hip Hop artist. Look for him to make his mark in the upcoming year.

Self Portrait by Rojai Fentress



A returned citizen. The Innocence Project of the University of Virginia and the Pro Bono Clinic were able to secure freedom for Rojai. He had been sentenced to 53 years in prison for a 1996 shooting. He was 15 at the time of a drug-deal-gone-bad. After further investigation and new evidence, Rojai was released in 2020. He was 40 years old.



Critical Condition

Chanell Burnette

My son's friend is in critical condition. My friend's son is in critical condition. Gun shot wounds. The nature and state of this fallen world is in critical condition. This I say because one only has to look around to see the plight which has befallen humanity. What has happened to us? Everyone is so hurried and angry. No time to slow down, calm down, and take the time out to analyze a situation before any rash decisions are made.

The surge in gun violence this year is astronomical. Lives are being cut short at an alarming rate and usually for little or nothing. Much of what has proven fatal could have been diffused if only the time and effort had been taken, but in a drug infested society, it seems that not many are able to think clearly enough to make sound, rational decisions, especially in matters where one feels their ego or self image may be in the least bit threatened.

Sadly, the majority of gun violence is stemming from our youth. Those too young to possess handguns are discharging them and claiming the lives of countless victims. Those too young to even really comprehend the severity of what they have done are currently responsible for the upswing in victims wounded or killed by handguns this past year. If the children are our future, then we dejectedly do not have one. This is unfortunate for humanity. Each time I call home to my family in Roanoke, another life has been taken. I call home daily. This is sad, people! What has happened to us? And can we fix it? My son's condition is critical as he awaits a court hearing next month for his gun violence. I blame myself. I have physically not been there. Nor will I be there as he must stand trial for a part of his future.

I've Forgotten

Chanell Burnette

Freedom is approaching
But I've forgotten the feeling.
Too many years a number,
praying for healing.
Strengthened at last and ready to go!
But I've forgotten the feeling.
How is this so?
When once before,
it was all I knew.
I took it for granted,
that much is true.
Been in so deep, it has
become ingrained.
But I've held my peace,
remained as sane.
Thank God.
He waits outside for me
to grab my hand, lead me
to destiny.
I want to remember, but I've
forgotten the world.
All I recall is, I was a
broken little girl
in search of myself for
something profound..
"I've been forgiven" began
to resound.
In search of her, I seemed
to forget,
The life I had, that I
now forfeit.

Author's Note

My name is Chanell Burnette from Roanoke, Virginia. I am, before anything else, a mother of two wonderful young men and grandmother of an awesome little boy and secondly, I am an aspiring writer who seeks to transform lives through the power of my writing in hopes of making this world a better place.



**In the United States,
over two million children
have a parent in prison.**

Racism Reform Inside Prisons

Nicole Williams

The world is under severe attack these days. The Coronavirus and the Social Injustice Pandemics continue to destroy the nation on a day to day basis. Even though we can't fight these battles on the outside, we need to focus on what we can do on the inside. Racism continues to be a major issue that affects many people today. I write this article, because reality became a part of the offenders in C-Dorm at CVCU. The use of the "N" word at a time when the world is in an uproar for police brutality, racial injustice, and political miscommunication is unacceptable. The malicious intent in which the word was used reminds me that there are many incarcerated people who unfortunately accept and support the injustice that plagues our nation today. So what are we to do when this behavior becomes a part of the lives of those behind bars? I believe that DOC should provide a help line or group sessions to educate offenders on the severity of what's going on. There are many offenders of all races that believe not only do Black Lives Matter, but that all lives matter. To call someone out of their name with such malice as was used when the "N" word was used will only bring confusion and hurt to those who actually stand for the equality of justice.

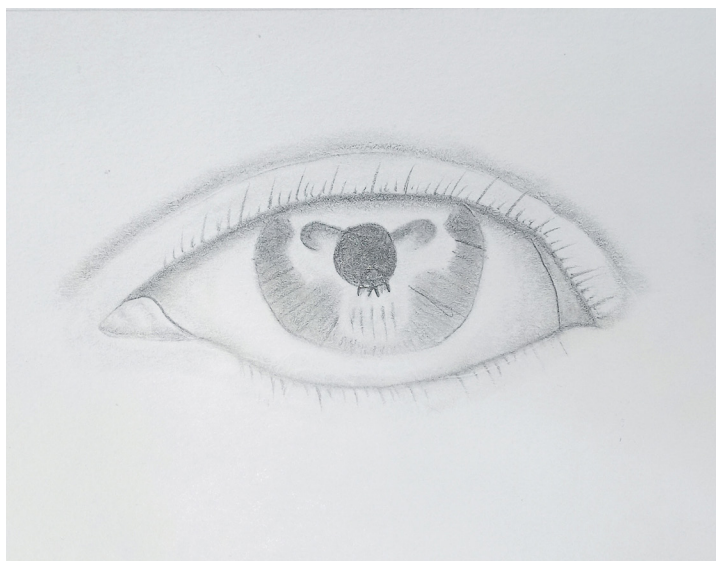
We are already knocked by society for having a criminal record. We have a job to become better people, so that when we return to society, we can take a stand to fight the laws that are against Criminal Justice Reform. Let's not add racism to the list of issues we have to face upon our release. Now is the time to learn that WE ARE ONE. We must stick together behind these prison walls. Don't let racism be a division amongst us in a world that is severely divided already when it comes to those with a criminal record. We must stand for something. We must all stand for the equality of justice, because when we do, prison reform has a better chance of succeeding.

Author's Note

I found my passion for criminal justice reform in 2019. I have written an article for the Virginia Prison Justice Network newsletter. I recently obtained my paralegal/legal assistant certificate from Blackstone Career Institute in January 2022. I am currently pursuing a certificate in a Business/Corporate Advanced Paralegal course. I would like to start my own prison reform organization that focuses on inmates reentering society as well as rehabilitation of former inmates that have already re-entered society.



Reminiscence by Joshua Clark



Inception by Joshua Clark

Artist's Note

My name is Joshua Clark, and I am 36 years old. I love to hunt, fish, draw, work out, and anything that involves the outside. After I finish my incarceration, I want to go to school to become a tattoo artist. I cut my drawing hand recently and had hand surgery. It is a little disfigured, but with determination and will, I can still draw and do other things with it. I want to thank you for the opportunity to put my artwork out there

Creativity

Infinite Divine, returned citizen

An active imagination, motivated by the necessity for being; or the ability to see that which is otherwise undefined.

A ripple which glides across the surface of a motionless lake;

A deep and passionate kiss upon the lips of one desired; and

a ladybug that climbs a blade of grass —

All allude to motion, a process of discovery and inventiveness. It's clearly like looking through a four pane window, to a place not quite reached; while whimsical mirages of proximity and anecdotal temperance belie the very thought for such a daring wish. Similar to consuming a delicious meal,

which leaves the faint blush of inspired fulfillment

upon a waking conscience.

Like a bird — sparrow — lighting upon a branch in summer, and eloquently delivering its message every day.

While an artist emotes a portrait, to capture the import from the genius of Interpretation.

The absorption of what is perceived.

Manifested reality consciously construed not to represent misplaced morality, or the enchanting spell of a shattered personality cleverly disguised.

The rotation of the Earth on its axis; the thousands of stories met and read through in a lifetime.

A compulsory drive for higher purpose or transcendence — or just

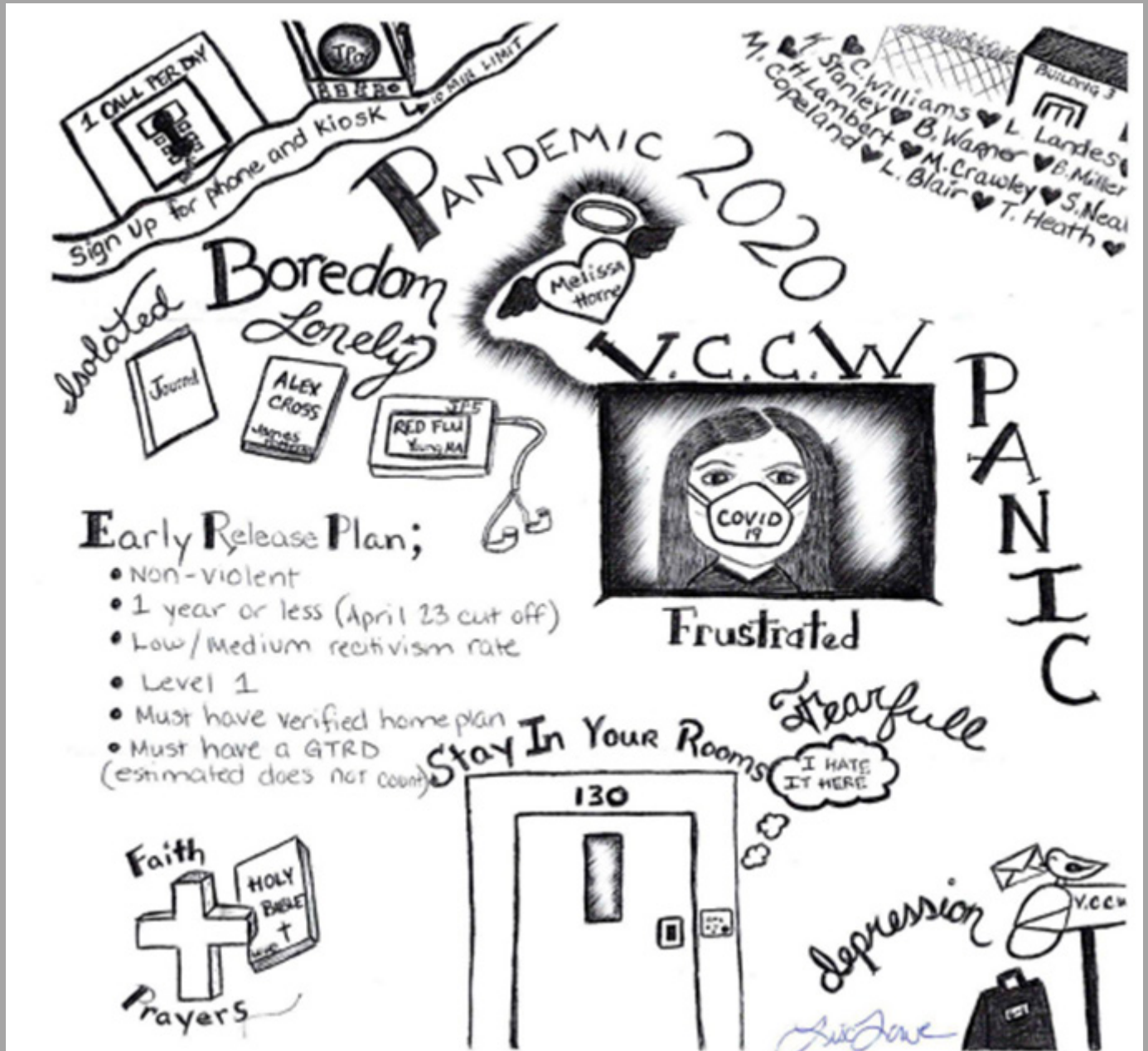
someone to believe in during moments of need and triumph. The

actual fact that one step begets another, and age is a maturation as a similitude for being, not hardly short term sophistication by fancy.

The Art of concealing while revealing all that should be known;

as a mirror can only reflect what is brought into its presence...

a locking of eyes, a heartfelt hello.



Surviving a Pandemic by Lisa Lowe

Lisa was a talented artist who, tragically, died too soon after finally being released to freedom.

Breakthrough

Marcus Barnes

The emptiness is a deep, dark hole with me inside.
All by myself with absolutely no light to find.
I call out screaming for help as loud as I can.
The only noise I hear are my own cries echoing over again. I'm
pleading to anyone to see or hear me, just give me a hand up but
there's no reply and in this miserable pit, I remain stuck. Traveling
down this long, lonely road with no light in sight. What's enough
punishment? Who should possess the power to take time from life?
How can the years of lost time taken be accurately weighed? For at
any moment, you can be called by your Maker, swallowed by the
grave.
I try to keep my head high and strive through this bleak endeavor,
having strong faith inside that this nightmare won't last forever.
Despite all the rights and wrongs, mistakes made in the past, Make
amends to lost friends, create new relationship built to last,
remember at the end of each day the final choice is up to me. Will I
allow bitterness and resentment eat me alive or choose to be free?
It's a simple notion whether on the street or behind these fences
doing time.
They can cuff and shackle your physical body but can't incarcerate
your mind.
I'll believe the dreams I once had weren't shattered to pieces for
nothing.
Rise up over this oppression, turning this bad predicament into a
positive something.

Strive

Marcus Barnes

Ignore others' skepticism concerning all your possibilities.
Go hard, stay focused on your goals, make this your one duty.
Dream big, don't allow the negative voices to bring you down.
This is yours, no one else's race to run, you can do this now.
Remember, many that have judged will never take one step in your shoes.
With respect try to humbly help them understand maybe changing
their views.
Never let this time behind these walls be for nothing all in vain.
Know that good energy and renewed optimism will most definitely
triumph over your pain.
Keep that head high, and try to take this life one day at a time.
Have faith, remain strong that one day you won't be out of sight and
out of mind...

Image

Marcus Barnes

Behind these tattoos, beneath the scars – they don't see me.
Tears flowing like a raging river, all alone inside, so empty.
There is not a particular image to others I wish to convey.
Perhaps the pain of this life has painted me in a certain way.
Love is all I cherish and for someone to try and understand.
Never judge a step in someone else's shoes,
their race, you haven't ran.

Author's Note

These words are for all the men and women incarcerated in this vicious money cycle called prison. I truly believe there is hope, and change will come... Marcus Barnes

"Jumping off da Porch"

Brandon Seward

Jumping Off Da Porch, which is a metaphor used by parents about their kids growing up & indulging into grown people shit. It needs to be a permanent Stop Sign embedded on that porch. It seems we cannot wait to integrate into doing what other kids r doing. & what seems even worse is doing what grown people r doing.

I'm going to give some reasons Y it's not so smart to mimic what has already been established.

#1 The penitentiary. That loves niggas (preferably ignorant/inferior)

#2 Our young men & women r young, gullible, influential, & naive to being socially accepted (I know a girl who contracted HIV from an older man, her decisions she made continues to destroy her life today, not worrying about the consequences of tomorrow)

#3 Death; the undertaker has enough flesh. So much it ultimately becomes a hustle.

#4 The reality;

We hear these dynamics/scenarios in our music/in our movies, so when do we aim for a change? What's on the other side of the porch? Listen to Nas "God Loves Us Hood Niggas." A lot of us r hardheaded. Sum need the experience but when 2.2 million have failed, y chase the same doctrine? This is not to include the billions on probation & parole. Then the millions with STDs & AIDS. Which in record #'s contracted every single day. In the 80s/90s the face for HIV & AIDS was a white male. Now just like everything else passed down, the black woman has took over the face. We as colored people lead the nation in diabetes, HIV, STDs, mass incarceration, high school dropouts, etc. Now we r making gigantic strides in the political field, there r entrepreneurs born by the second, we have images locked in our head of a black president, or a black presidential candidate, then many women of color taking CEO positions etc Yet I want to quote Harriet Tubman "Aint one slave free til we all r free" & without considering yo self a slave (admitting downfall/imprisonment) you can never obtain true freedom. I consider myself a liberator. I have field slave tatted on my shoulder blades, becuz of the misconception mulatos/light men & women were housed solely in the house. When like a mailbox I choose the front line, of accepting a consequence/repercussion for banging for civil/human rights/true advancement in any field. I believe in a complete removal from the system of slavocracy. When everythings "great" has the face of a white man on it. As we chase the slave masters dollar bill. Cuz without \$ we would not be able to feed our family. However when we put a "chain" (a tool derived from slavery) "whip" (a tool derived from slavery, or any frivolous thing before u feed your baby mother/children, if the shoe fits u like a clown. So u hustling for looks/notoriety. & not to provide a "crib" Well brothers & sisters a crib has bars on it. & the only difference in prison & the projects one has barbed wire on it. It's like an everlasting game of show & tell.

Now I'm not saying be a square. I'm saying I understand. Cuz we were deprived of the nicest of things for 400 plus years. & if u had these things u were divided, ruled. conquered in supremacy. But who they call the colonies? A bunch of men who determine who is born free. Or how many percent a man/woman is in their society. People who control the ghettos, the trailer parks, the shacks, the reservations, etc. While we still claim & rep tribes. Instead of seeing ourselves like the powers that be. We need to use our greatness to do things that r needed. Such as bringing the tribes to gather for common gain. We as black people \$ flies out our pocket into the hands of our opposition. Coincidence? No such thing. Just a lot of years of not educating ourselves with the proper tools. We

jump off the porch when we should be inside hitting books. It is a famous saying if u want to hide something from a negro, put it in a book. Most books we own is occupied by dust. A lot of us have no time from working multiple minimum wage jobs so our future can have something. When we end up with nothing but a block education. Social media is so strong & influential we believe in the narrative. Advertisements r investing tool to enslave our minds. Especially into transforming us to beasts. How can anyone yell blm! When u dont do nothing for yo community. U have the mind of a supremacist.

Or having us eating to obesity. How many of y'all reading know how to grow yo own food? We accept these roles. let me tell u y I care, cuz I've been in a prison since 16 years old & to c us destroying each other is identical to the old Chinese death trick, when a drop of water hits the forehead, every drop gets heavier, by making small dents in the forehead, at the end your with begging for mercy\done experienced a torturous death. The old saying goes if something ain't broke don't fix it. So what do we do when everything is broke? Our minds are potholes filled with Amerika's concrete. The governor talks of new techniques of teaching history, I'd be deemed crazy if I asked for half the country. It's all semantics. It sounds good for the moment. All they have to say is understand. When they can't. Not to say they weren't wte slaves/white people who were sympathetic to black people were savages they self. No, I'm saying it's still a \$ game. An we still hugging block. When their franchises still thrive at high levels while selling the dope. Legally, over the counter. Idk about u but Placebo's just ain't my thing. All to feel good/important in the moment. The thing about that when somebody is high on a pedestal, somebody is at the bottom of the totem pole. I get irritated when it's no leaders leading the flock away from execution. Instead we go willingly. Now I'm not sinless, I try to own my imperfections. I only want better for all. Times r changing & if we don't evolve we will be left behind. Shouldn't no soldier be left behind. We r fighting the wrong wars. We believe we r winning/we feel there's a purpose behind the veil, but we r tricking ourselves by being replicas of what they made us to be.

Author's Note

I have been in prison since I was 16 & for 19 years my only goal in life is to prevent the next 16 year old from following the same patterns due to acceptance, poverty, or peer pressure. We all need change in our lives. We r the author of our own stories. Peace





Shadows of a Pond-Time Circus by Hazel Miller

All My Friends Are Dead

Keith Werner

Candy was a stripper hustling guys
in a topless bar.

John was a stool pigeon who took
his payoffs in the back of
police cars.

Rhonda was a suburban girl, a slave
chained to her makeup and clothes.

Tom was a dedicated queen
until the day he caught a
lethal dose.

Bob and Eddy were dirty cops who
could never keep their nose
clean.

They took off the wrong people, now
they're somewhere out in the ocean
downstream.

Herman was a high priest who
picked up rough trade in bars.

Bound and gagged at JFK, his
body was found in the trunk
of a stolen car.

Maryann was a manic depressive who
jumped in front of a subway train.

It must've been one of her down days
when she couldn't score.

Ginger, my first love, was a Black girl
who worked the streets of NYC.

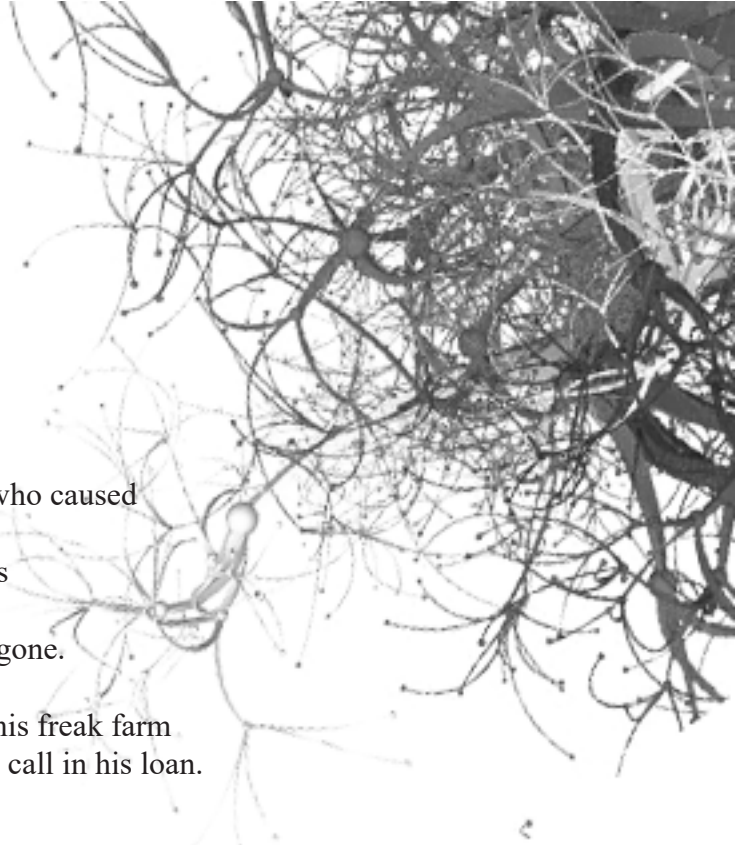
They found her body discarded
on the side of the BQE

Rick was a Hells Angel, you could
say he liked to fight.

He met his match at an intersection
after he ran a red light.

Carlos was a Puerto Rican, always
gang fighting in New York jails.

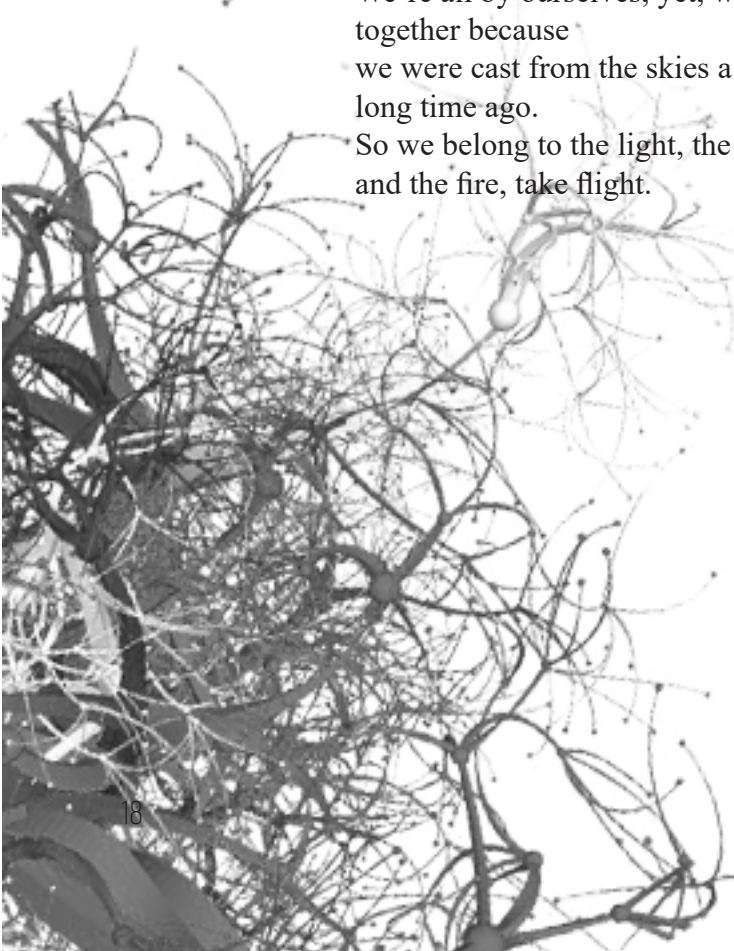
He caught a shank up in Attica,



The one day his reflexes
failed.
Tony was a self made man, who caused
a lot of harm.
His body was found in pieces
on an upstate NY pig farm.
All my friends are dead and gone.
I've been left here all alone.
I'm just biding my time on this freak farm
Waiting for the loanmaker to call in his loan.

Note from the Coalition for Justice

Keith died in prison of cancer in 2018. He left his poems to us. Rest easy, Keith. In his poem "We Belong," he wrote,



We're all by ourselves, yet, we're all
together because
we were cast from the skies a
long time ago.
So we belong to the light, the night,
and the fire, take flight.



All Truth is Obscene

Louis Ponterio

Sometimes, I
feel like an
octopus in an amphora.
Now that I've accepted
that everything is hopeless,
I can begin to relax.

It can always get weirder.

Louis describes these short pieces as things that just “come to mind.” They are followed by his poem, “All Truth Is Obscene.”

ALL TRUTH IS OBSCENE

In the dark, gray jam session of the dead,
brittle and wasting like something gone bad,
they drink to the living.
They drink to the damned.
They drink to all of us who have always jammed.
They play their music
and
they pray for grace.
They wait for the kindred spirits
to take their place.

The Rails

L. R. Ponterio

Nobody rode the rails anymore even that long ago when he was a boy. He didn't know about those stories or heard the songs, never heard Woody Guthrie's "City of New Orleans" or the bluesmen and the songs they sang.

He smelled the tar smell of the creosote that cooked in the July heat as he stepped from one tie to the next between the rails, all resting on a bed of course stone, each piece at least as big as his fist. At one time, the tracks must have been used as a commuter rail running East to West along the North shore. It would carry the city workers to the ferry where they would cross the dirty brown bay before descending into the subway, another train but underground.

He would imagine ladies in knee length skirts and pillbox hats, their hair in tight buns. The men in double-breasted suits and long overcoats with fedoras perched rakishly on their heads. Only occasionally now, a train would run on that line bringing industrial goods from the Port Authority to one of the factories that were initially built for the war effort now manufacturing who knows what. He kept a penny in his pocket for those occasions.

When he heard a train coming he would put his penny on the track and race downhill laying flat in the scrub and damn the scratches and the bugs. Everyone knew that the brakemen carried shotguns loaded with salt shot, shooting anyone they saw around their rail. Everyone knew someone whose cousin had a friend that personally knew someone who got an ass full of salt.

The train, usually, an engine, two freight cars, and a caboose would roll over the penny, leaving it about as big around as a silver dollar.

Sometimes, a thin line drawing of Mr. Lincoln would remain on one side and a picture of his monument or stalks of wheat, depending on the age of the coin, on the other.

After the train was out of range he would find his penny on the rail, on the ties or in the stone. He would collect the prize which would be put in a shoe box with the others. By now he would have six, a remarkable number, that he would exhibit to visiting friends or on certain days bring to school. They were the currency of courage. Each a badge of honor with its own story. They would be admired by other collectors and dismissed by those whose fear kept them off the tracks. He continued to walk west until the sun was in the spot that told him it was time to go home. When the street lights came on he was at the back door that opened into the kitchen.

Author's Note

I was born in NYC in the summer of 1960 to a loving family. I worked as a luthier all of my life. In 1986 I married Rita who was too good for me. I had two sons, Shawn and Jerry, who feel I wasn't a bad father. I was arrested in 2015 for crimes I didn't commit and will die in prison

The Man in the Glass

David Bonefonte

When you get what you want in your struggles for self and the world
makes you king for a day,
just go to a mirror and look at yourself and see what the man or
woman has to say....
For it isn't your father or mother or wife, spouse whose judgment
upon you must pass.
The person whose verdict counts most in your life is the one staring
back from the glass...
Some people might think you're a straight shooting chum
and call you a wonderful guy or gal...
but the one in the glass says you're only a bum
if you can't look 'em straight in the eye...
You're the one to please, never mind all the rest
for you're there clear to the end and you've passed
your most dangerous test
If the person in the glass is your friend.
you may fool the whole world down the pathway of years
and get pats on the back as you pass
but your final reward will be heartache and tears
if you've cheated the person staring back at you from the glass.

Algunos Pensamientos

David Bonefonte

Una de las razones por qué la gente resiste al cambio es porque están enfocados
en lo que tendría que perder en vez de pensar en lo que pueden ganar.

La simpleza es cuando descuentas lo obvio y añadas lo significativo que algo es.

Author's Note

As a person in prison this doesn't define who I am. This is just a consequence of my actions to which I take full responsibility for in terms of my actions. I've been blessed, fortunate to have the opportunity to use this time and reflect, grow, and depend fully on my higher power. I'm so grateful to God for giving me another shot at the title, the title of life and learning, growing and helping, sharing my experiences, strength, and hope so that whoever may be in this same position as we are it's not a setback but rather a setup for a comeback. Believe in yourself when no one cares. Remember, if it's going to be, it's up to me.

Something Within Me

Katherine Jackson

Knowledge is my strength.
Reason is my faith.
Love is my foundation.
Enthusiasm is my enemy.
Remembrance is my friend.
Fairness is my trouble.
Sorrow is my companion.
Science is my weapon.
Patience is my mantle.
Contentment is my glory.
Poverty is my pride.
Devotion is my art.
Determination and Conviction is my power.
Truth is my redeemer.
Obedience suffices me.
Character is my struggle.
Pleasure is my prayer.

Author's Note

My parents have always exhibited strength, teaching me at a young age to always stand up and fight for the things I truly believed in. As I matured into the woman I am today – wiser, stronger, and empowered – I am very ambitious and eager to fight for justice, passionate about making positive changes in this world, hoping to plant a seed and letting it grow. This poem speaks of experiences.



Untitled by Christy Beskin



The Big Bully

Christy Beskin

During this pandemic I've felt like I've been attacked by a big "Bully." That bully took away meetings, my job, and a lot of times, my serenity. Over a period of time my knee was injured, (gaining the Covid-15 helped contribute to that). That hindered my exercise. As my recovery weakened, my anger strengthened. Not that I don't know how to cope, but learning a new way to cope is very hard!

I find myself becoming angry because the "bully" keeps me down with feeling defeated. I've talked to my counselor, my Lieutenant, Unit Manager, and written numerous IMS's trying to get back to work. I've thrown around ideas for meetings, but "NO" is the answer, or "Not at this time."

I find myself depressed, sleeping more. My routine is gone. I've almost completely become a product of my environment. Angry because I want to drink the hooch. My disease is not being treated! So what do I do next... I become the Bully. I got into a fight and received a charge. No work, no meetings, now I feel despair. Cravings still around, and anger mounting, I turned to my old behavior – fighting. My bad for good, once again. I hope to stand with other addicts to fight for our meetings back. The importance of them and how much they help keep us sane. Meetings and step work are my treatment. I personally need this regimen to maintain and not to be the person I once was!

The Misadventures of Omelia Broznik: Pirate Attack

Daniel Buchanan

Omelia was getting fatigued. Her body was tired, her nerves rattled, and her mind weary. Her tiny spacecraft wasn't far from the same condition. The Ino'Si had dropped out of hyperspace and right into a nest of angry space pirates. Omelia's expert piloting had kept the tiny spacecraft from crashing into one of the much larger pirate vessels but just barely. The pirates had been shooting at each other, but with the Ino'Si being a Fleet vessel, they felt more inclined to shoot at the tiny survey craft. The pirates were well armed. Despite Omelia's efforts to get away, her tiny spacecraft had taken fire from all angles. The spacecraft was virtually indestructible, but it was too small to dissipate a lot of heat at once. Too many direct hits could roast the crew, and it was already so hot inside that Omelia and her crew had stripped to their underclothing.

"Damn it, Mel. Just jump already!" Luci cried. "We can't take much more of this!". Omelia tried to engage the hyperlight system. Once again, the error alarm sounded. The engines were too hot. The hyperlight system couldn't engage until the spacecraft cooled off. As hot as it was, it was going to be a while. "I can't!" Omelia screamed. "The engines are too hot! We're moving around too much and taking too much fire!"

Yoronika slipped into the copilot's seat. She brought up the engineering display on the copilot's terminal. She didn't like what she saw at all. The engines were close to thermal shutdown, the fuselage was discharging energy but not fast enough and the engine coolant was way overdue for a change. The nearly indestructible spacecraft was nearing its limits. "Mel. I know you're trying to keep out of this, I know you don't want to fire on them if you can block and dodge, but we're about to be roasted

in here." Yoronika said. "Just fly straight ahead. If anyone wants to get in your way just blast them." "I can't. We're not a combat crew, we're a survey team. Pirates or not, if I open these guns up, it's going to be considered an act of war." Omelia said.

One of the large pirate vessels came around ahead of the Ino'Si. It opened fire with its entire battery of forward weapons. White hot bursts of plasma filled the void of space. Omelia tried to dodge one shot only to be slammed by another. Moments later the engine temperature alarm sounded. "Mel. Just blast those pirates. They might have more guns but ours pack a bigger punch. Take one of those cruisers out, and everyone else is going to need a diaper change." Yoronika said. "I can't!" Omelia replied. "Just shoot the bastards!" Luci screamed. Another volley of weapons fire filled space.

Several shots battered the Ino'Si. One of the shots slammed the nose of the tiny craft scrambling the forward sensor array. The cabin temperature shot up to 314 Kelvin. The fuselage was well beyond that. Omelia was on a direct course straight for the huge pirate vessel's command section. She pulled up hard on the flight yoke but the engines protested with another temperature alarm. The tired little spacecraft was on a collision course, and there was nothing Omelia could do to change it. She had only two options – clear a path or come to a stop. Omelia made her choice then put it into action. Omelia slammed the throttle full forward, squeezing what little extra momentum the overworked engines would yield. She opened up with both wing mounted cannons. Electric-blue energy lit up what seemed like the whole galaxy. Explosions erupted from the pirate vessel. Fire burst from the bridge. The engine temperature alarm screamed in protest,

but Omelia stayed her course. If Omelia and her crew were going to die, they would go out fighting.

The collision alarm rang out. Omelia kept firing on the enormous starship. The flight computer indicated only seconds to impact. The gap rapidly closed. Yoronika dove into the aft cabin. Omelia took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She held the triggers as well as her breath. It was the longest few seconds of her life. There was a terrible scraping sound followed by a thud. The tiny spacecraft shuddered and bounced. The graviton amplifiers screamed as they tried to adjust. The amps popped off for a moment. The spacecraft's contents got a thorough tossing. The proximity indicator began to wane in pitch. It was an indication that the Ino'Si was moving away from something. Finally the alarm silenced. Omelia opened her eyes. Out ahead of the tiny spacecraft was nothing but the star filled expanse of space. Omelia checked her flight computer. The pirate vessels were behind the tiny spacecraft. They were moving away. A few jumped into hyperspace, all but one.

"Did you vaporize it?" Yoronika asked as she crawled into the cockpit. "Still there. We barely missed it." Omelia said as she looked over the heads-up display. "They must have taken a dive at the last second." Omelia pulled the throttle down. The spacecraft slowed enough that the flight yoke began to respond. Omelia turned the tiny spacecraft around and came to a stop. The weapons were fixed and could only be fired forward. If anything were coming after Omelia, she wanted to be ready to face it head on.

"Mel. They're all moving away. I think you scared them." Tobra said, "I know you've scared poor Luci." Omelia looked into the aft cabin. The

whole place was a mess. Gear and supplies were strewn about everywhere. Even the overhead compartments were opened. Right in the middle of the chaos was Luci. She looked almost shell shocked, Omelia thought. "Are you okay? What happened?" Omelia asked as she rushed to Luci's side.

"You... you flew through it." Luci stuttered pointing toward the exploding pirate vessel. "I did what?" Omelia asked in surprise. "You flew through the starship." Luci said. "We hit it, bounced around, got tossed then came out on the other side like nothing happened." Omelia turned to face out the windshield. The pirate vessel was engulfed in explosions and was beginning to come apart. Omelia had known something had happened, but she hadn't expected it to be a miracle. Blasting a hole through a starship and flying through it wasn't anything she had ever expected to do. That was the stuff of myth and legend. Only a daredevil like the notorious smuggler Darius Bukovski could pull a stunt like that off.

"Mel. The engines are cool enough for a short jump. I've got a course plotted to a point about a lightyear from here." Yoronika said from the cockpit. "Yori. Can you take over flight control? I've had a rough day." Omelia said as she plopped down on the fold down bunk. "And, uh, Luci is in no condition to do much either." Yoronika gave a thumbs up. She sat down in Omelia's squeaky seat and engaged the hyperlight system. The engines thrummed and the graviton amps groaned. A moment later the tiny spacecraft was enveloped by the iridescent blue fog of hyperspace. It had taken quite a beating but the Ino'Si had once again beaten the odds. For Omelia and her crew, it was just another day with the Fourth Survey Division.

Author's Note

I began writing science fiction long before becoming incarcerated. I enjoy writing and expressing my creativity, and I enjoy sharing the antics of my characters and their unique setting with others. I hope my readers enjoy reading about my aliens as much as I've enjoyed writing about them.




Ascendancy

Collin X. Jackson

Numb. Crushed beneath descending boulders.
Suffocating, with fiery dust filled lungs.
Breathless, under weighted-down bruised and bloody
shoulders. Trudging through the thickness, in the mist of the
Unsung.

Scent of carnal spoils and hazy red recondite cloaks. Horrific
delightful visions scorched upon your, impossible minds.
Tortuous pain runs through the eyes of ice cold smoke as it
burns deep with rugged shrill cries.

Patient, calculated, phantomly reticent,
and ever so tame
in the midst of a chaos so profane... just
fighting to stay sane.
Product of radiant strength and honor of generations
past, shall never let it wane regardless of this
torrent of bane rain.
Through the unbearable pain, shackles demolished, and
monumental HOPE is a tremendous gain.
With heart-thumping ambition running through my
Veins... Deep within I maintain as victory reigns.
Standing tall from the apex,
Proud, precious roars of victory at last.
Yesterday, almost broken...
Today, still bloody and bruised but determined to thrive.
But, NEVER, shall I bow out, currender, or
resign.





Nearing the End of the Street

Douglas V. Johnson II

is poised a Man of lion's
blood. At the river's bend,
in constant currents, crash upon
cold rockbed. Heightened.
Warm cheerful winds stir broken contained
branches, defying fate's chances.
Soul-virgin wings dan-sing in a renewed halcyonic peace.

Author's Note

All of my poetry is about overcoming and dominating any form of adversity. From overwhelming pain, alone, in the deepest and darkest valley, to us standing tall on the highest mountain... The depths of our pain, is ONLY an indication of the height of our Potential to Succeed in ANYTHING we set out to do. There are always Lessons in our losses... Great Purpose, in our pain... Miracles can arise out of our mistakes... Set-Up, in what seems like a setback... Opportunities, in opposition... It is our Attitude & Perspective that will ultimately determine our altitude.

Douglas V. Johnson II is a native of Hampton, Virginia, and is a third generation retired U.S. Army Combat Veteran. Douglas is the founder of the non-profit organization, Task Force CXJ III, whose mission is to staunchly advocate for mental health awareness and suicide prevention. Douglas also has a vast collection of poetry under the pen name/pseudonym Collin Xavier Jackson III.

WEARING THE MASK

Danny Ray Thomas

As the world attempts to heal from the tragedies of Covid and its variants, I am reminded of one of my favorite poems titled, “We Wear The Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar. If he were living today, I believe that he’d find a peculiar irony between his poem and the current challenge of Covid.

In the first few lines of Dunbar’s poem he writes:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile

Although there are many of us that recognize the ultimate purpose of the mask is to not only protect ourselves but to protect those we encounter from this dreaded disease. Too many have politicized the mask and see it as a means of restraint and suppression of liberty. In commonality with the poem, some actually wear the mask that grins and lies. There is a sense of burden and fear that accompanies the wearing of the mask, yet we find it in our spirit to grin and smile as if all is well, even though we watch the evening news to see the death toll continually rise as well as the potential for death as hospitalizations soar across the country and around the world.

It is quite the task to attempt a reconstitution of the lives we once new all the while realizing that an invisible enemy lurks in the midst of our most peaceful and serene encounters with our loved ones. In a sense, we almost have to deceive ourselves in an attempt to enjoy life as we come to terms with the fact that simultaneously others suffer. This reality offers a different perspective to the line that reads, “this debt we pay to human guile.” In spite of our torn and bleeding hearts we must find a way to resist and exist in the midst of this torment; we must continue to smile.

Gun Violence and the Allure of Masculinity

Danny Ray Thomas

“The finger doesn’t always pull the trigger, sometimes the trigger pulls the finger.” —Leonard Berkowitz

One of the most prominent felonies in the state of Virginia is the mandatory minimum sentencing for possession or use of a firearm in commission of a felony. The reason being is that a single incident can lead to multiple infractions. Instead of the statutory sentence of three years for the initial incident and five years for a subsequent crime, each bullet becomes a subsequent crime and each person impacted becomes a subsequent crime. Thus the three years can easily become upwards of 30 years or more. The most I’ve witnessed for a single crime was 70 years.

It may seem that I'm attempting to declare an injustice when it comes to issues of mandatory minimum sentencing. In actuality my greater concern is the allure of gun violence and the use of them as a means to resolve disputes or grievances. Moreover, the associated consequences of death, physical and emotional injury, and mass incarceration.

Guns and masculinity have been "joined at the hip" since their inception, and this connection is the result of social, cultural, and historical forces in our society. I believe that legislation plays a role albeit minimal in the reduction of gun violence. The greatest asset we have is mental health awareness. The issues of mental illness are the obvious concerns; however, the subtle danger derives from a false sense of masculinity, and thereby a standard of inadequacy is embraced, and for many the only way to alleviate this feeling of inadequacy is to mask it with an attitude of hyper masculinity. This attitude creates fear and terror in the hearts and minds of innocent bystanders.

The quote from Berkowitz gives us a broader perspective on the false consciousness that guns can often produce. For some the gun fills a void; it was never about owning a gun initially. Most bad actors seek out several means of subduing their feelings of inadequacy to no avail. When they found the gun they believed they found themselves. One of the jokes I've heard prison guards say is "they (prisoners) left their hearts and guns at the gate. Sadly, this is true for so many. The void the gun filled is now an empty space for many of my peers. They haven't found themselves because they haven't figured out what they truly want out of life.

Edwin Sutherland was correct when he said that "no subculture can be totally at odds or in total conflict with the culture from which it derives." Instead of treating perpetrators of these crimes as an anomaly we as a society must see gun violence as a social construct that festers in the hearts and minds of many ultimately leading to a tragic outcome.

Author's Note

I am a graduate of Stratford Career Institute with a diploma in psychology and social work, received certification in "offender responsibility" from the American Community Corrections Institute and am the creator/facilitator of the "Leading the Way" mentorship workshop, "The Forward Initiative" reentry program as well as the president of Veterans United for Change, "our institutional Veterans treatment program. In addition, I've written a piece for New York University's "Review of Law and Social Change" entitled "The Calamity of Sentencing in Virginia," due for publication by May 2022. I am also a participant in L.E.A.H., (Legal Empowerment and Advocacy Hub) of the Robert and Helen Bernstein Institute for Human Rights via NYU School of Law "jailhouse lawyers initiative." My motivation is reflective of the words Antonio Gramsci wrote in his prison notebooks:

"I want, following a fixed plan, to devote myself intensely and systematically to some subject that will absorb me and give a focus to my inner life."

Mission Accomplished!

TOMATOES, A PRIMER

David Sowers

My grandparents lived on a small farm in Athens, West Virginia. They were the most down-to-earth people you'd ever want to meet. My grandfather worked for the Department of Highways operating an asphalt roller while my grandmother tended to her work around the house. By dawn she'd have the chickens fed and eggs collected, slopped two hogs with leftovers from the day before, praised Ginger, their milk cow, for producing a full pail of milk, and made sure her children, those who still lived at home out of the nine she bore, completed their tasks before leaving for school or work.

Around March and April of each year, after the winter snows had melted and spring lingered in the air, they'd begin planting their garden. This was important business to them. A successful crop meant saving money and food for the table year round.

My brothers, Randy, Mike, and Jeffery, and I enjoyed our spring and summer visits with our grandparents. Visits were vacations to me. There was plenty of fun and playtime and hunting and fishing, but there were chores too that everyone helped including helping with the garden.

Tomatoes have been a favorite vegetable of mine since the first tomato and mayo sandwich I ate. Next was the bacon-lettuce-tomato sandwich. But my favorite tomato combination is macaroni and freshly canned tomatoes with a touch of butter and a dash of salt and pepper.

Paying attention to my grandparents while they planted tomato plants and listening to them talk about their techniques and secrets to having a bounteous tomato crop, would pay off as I grew older.

That was the mid 1960s. Today my appreciation for how my grandparents lived and what they processed to its fullest, has inspired me to succeed in a similar way. With the many vegetables I've planted in my own gardens, tomatoes are still my favorite. They're used more than any other vegetable and can be preserved by canning for use during the winter months.

The following tips provide "thoughts to grow by" when preparing your own tomato garden.

Avoid Common Gardening Mistakes

Failing to properly prepare the soil is where many disappointments begin. The most common is, plants struggling in unhealthy soil and producing under-developed vegetables. Healthy soil is alive with nutrients and micro-organisms that allow plants to grow almost effortlessly. To improve soil health, eliminate weeds, till the soil, add organic matter (manure, shredded leaves, fireplace or woodstove ashes) and, if necessary, build raised beds that help with air circulation and water distribution to your plant roots. If you're uncertain about the condition of your soil, have it tested.

Choose Healthy Tomato Plants

Buy tomato plants that are less than a foot in height. Plants with a mass of white roots protruding from their containers have been subjected to stress and will not produce a high quality crop. When removing each plant from its container, loosen the soil. This will free up the roots, allowing them to grow and develop into nice tomatoes. These plants like warm soil. Protect them from frost. Frost predictions aren't always correct. I like to wait a week or maybe two after the last frost, before planting.



Support Your Tomato Plants

Wooden stakes are the most trusted means of supporting tomato plants. When using this method, place your stakes at least 6 inches away from the base of your plant to avoid damaging the roots. Do not tie string to the plant! This, too, can damage plant growth resulting in a poor crop. Instead loop your string around the plant, giving it the support it needs. Then tie the string tightly to the stake. Using wire mesh is another technique that works very well for keeping tomato branches or shoots and their foliage from reaching the ground and contracting soil-borne diseases. You can make your own cages by purchasing six inch concrete reinforced wire mesh from any hardware store. Cut a piece of wire mesh three feet wide and five feet long. Roll into a cylinder and place your mesh around your tomato plant. You can also purchase these mesh cages already made at your local garden store.

Prune Tomatoes for Abundance

Pruning the first three shoots that emerge from each side of the first fork in the stem will allow six shoots to grow. Prune the six, and twelve will grow. It takes two to three weeks before the shoots reach the wire mesh. When they do, slip the branches through to the outside. Tie them gently to the wire so they'll grow straight up. Pinch off the other shoots that may begin growing. Do this before they grow to an inch in length. Do not remove any leaves from the twelve branches. They'll shield the tomatoes from sunburn.

Note: Disinfect pruning tools between cuts when removing diseased branches. This helps prevent the spread of disease on the same plant or others. (Household disinfectants or alcohol works well here).

Mom's Canned Tomatoes:

Preparing tomatoes: Wash tomatoes. Place in a large kettle with the core side up. Boil water and pour over the tomatoes to cover. When the water cools enough to handle the tomatoes, peel and core. Cut tomatoes into small pieces, filling a large pot. Cook on medium high heat so tomatoes will boil and cook until there are only small chunks. Stir and skim off foam as it foams on top. Cook to desire, adding salt to suit your taste. Continue stirring and keep tomatoes hot as you prepare to can.

Preparing jars: Wash and scald jars. Place the jars in the oven on a cooking sheet. Set temperature to 200 degrees allowing jars to heat up. Check jars for nicks at the mouth opening which could affect a proper seal.

Canning: Take one jar at a time from the oven and fill with tomatoes a half inch from the top of the jar. Have your flats on the stove in hot water. Place a flat on the jar and screen on hand tight. Set jars where a draft cannot hit them and listen for the pop that comes when the flat seals. If a jar does not seal, empty and reheat tomatoes and then repeat the canning process.



Reinstate Parole

Shebri Dillon

There are many things that I do not understand when it comes to the logic of authority. The initial contradiction being the moral high ground that is taken by those placed in positions of authority, as if caging men, women and children, and even sometimes executing them does not produce a stain on their soul. The discretions committed against the lower caste of humanity is somehow justified by the passing of the buck. It is not the responsibility of the inflictor to have a moral compass involving their actions, but rather some other entity that they have disassociated themselves from—judge, jury, prosecutor, and offender. It is someone else's fault, and they just have a job to do. No one becomes accountable and it becomes the fault of the "system".

Interestingly, that is a similar function in gangs and MCs. Many just have orders to obey and a job to do. But it isn't the same when the government performs the same work. Or is it? The government is supposed to be more humane, responsible, and honest. Yet, not too long ago, people were being strapped into the executioner's table or locked behind the doors of torture in steel and concrete cages, often with justifications that they themselves could not even explain. Don't tell me that it doesn't happen.


The job of caging and keeping a person is performed with no regard to the damage it causes, with each inflictor in the chain of injustice expecting the next person to be morally responsible, refusing to look at their own culpability in obeying the order, for the few of what reality they might face. They

all believe that this person being afflicted deserves whatever is happening to them, but rarely can anyone even tell you why.

In the meantime, we have an overly stressed system from the massive amount of people we incarcerate as a nation. Even the incarcerations that can be justified often contain excessive sentences. One could argue that the factor creating the over sentencing is the heinousness of the crime, but after looking at mounds of prisoner paperwork, I assure you that the biggest difference is in the money. The amount of time a person will be sentenced is not weighed as much on the crime as it is on the dollar amount that was spent on counsel. Don't believe me? I challenge you to take a poll in any prison. The answers you find will astound you, as most of us had public defenders. Coincidence, right? The only people that believe that a serious problem doesn't exist are those who refuse to look. I am starting to think that Lady Justice rocks her blindfold for an entirely different set of reasons.

Let me make it clear, I write not to vilify the people who work in this system. A quick overview in sociology will easily explain the pathology of the process and how good people can inadvertently contribute to moral decay. I write not to attack people but rather policy, and to shatter the illusions of what society as a whole believes transpires in the belly of the legal beast; the same illusion I had until it swallowed me whole. This belief that is held is the foundation of the issue at hand today.

Excessive incarceration does not make anyone safer. It creates a hazard. It is time to let some peo-



ple go and make it safer for everyone. The condemnation of the restoration of parole baffles me. Sure there are people within these walls that present a potential threat to society. Even though I am inside, there are people I have met here that I don't want around my grandmother or my children. I get it. Bringing back parole is not going to release those people back into society like rogue threats from Suicide Squad. A simple review of the credentials of the people on the Parole Board who are tasked with making the decisions of who stays and who goes will reveal that they are competent people who understand law, crime, and political venues. Many had prosecutorial involvement. It astounds me that their judgment was never questioned when they decided who was going to be put in cages, but suddenly their judgment and discretion come under scrutiny and attack when they decide who to let out one of them!

The experience and knowledge of these gatekeepers will not put society at risk for rogue and dangerous people to be released. Parole does not mean that everyone gets out. It means that people who do not pose a threat and can be reintegrated back into society get to do so. It also provides a safety net for the injustices that slip through the cracks, such as racial disparity, excessive sentencing, and inequality of the caste systems. It ensures that the taxpayer isn't paying to warehouse people, human beings, when it is not necessary or conducive to the ends of justice. Reinstatement of parole is a necessary reform and will make a powerful statement for Virginia.

Please do not allow manufactured fear to sway you towards someone else's agenda. Justice is the ultimate goal, and to put it simply, it is just about doing the right thing.

God Bless



Peace

Donna Hockman

Unanswered questions on
why some lives are taken
far too soon.

Overwhelmed emotions overrun
our life where we have no
more room.

Moving through all the
stages of grief, going about
our day as if numb

Wishing we could fade into
the atmosphere smaller
than a crumb.

Days turn into night and
we wonder when our pain
and suffering will end.

When without warning
we wake from darkness
and our new day of peace
can begin.



Autumn Songs

Robert Hylton

Green leaves – they twist, they turn.
They dance and yearn
for summer songs as Fall returns.
From green to red then yellow and brown –
from tree to tree their songs abound.
Look up and see them wrestle!
Hear the rustle –
the songs, the music – the melody,
the master masterpiece from dancing leaves that sing
to you and sing to me.
Blow stormy seas, crash winsome waves,
touch leaves that sway
to bated breeze in light of dawn
on angel wings drift downward
dancing daintily, drizzling lazely landward
so playfully they part with trees on breezy days.
Amazingly the songs they sang the melodies of summer's young, they
end when symphonies of Fall begin with green
then red then orange and brown leaves
falling fluttering floating down to rustled songs
as autumn songs bring Fall around bring fall town.....

Getting Information: Easy on the Outside, A Struggle on the Inside

Stephanie Angelo

I'm incarcerated in Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women. Since I've been here, I've noticed one thing that is difficult – getting accurate information on new bills, especially as well as current information. With no internet access and limited resources, inmates struggle to find information on how to get an update sheet, how “good time” works, and jail credits compared to DOC credits.

The counselors are supposed to be a good resource for these questions, yet most don't know the answers to all our questions. Oftentimes, rumors spread because of this with misinformation going around. Then, there is no resort to find out what is actually going on. Inmates start having family and friends contact Richmond by phone asking the same questions over and over. Writing to DOC headquarters, you rarely get a response and, if so, months later. With inmates not having information it leads to numerous letters being sent without enough people to answer.

Most inmates don't know how to use the law library or how it works. They also don't know what they are eligible for or how to appeal or how it works. All of those things could be addressed to inmates and make some things easier as well as making staff at facilities and the DOC less bombarded. As inmates, we should have the access to information that is vital and could help answer questions. Even staff, like counselors, don't always have the right answer. For example, when I arrived at Fluvanna, I asked my counselor about being able to do work release. The answer given was “You can't do work release from here.” Never once was I told what I needed to do in order to do work release or be eligible. Those are things to help with re-entry and making my time productive. Even policy and procedures in the facility are hard to access. Most people don't know who to ask or even what to ask. It's as if you're thrown in prison with no information on how the process works and not knowing how to get any answers.

Luckily, I am the type of person who is persistent and asks a thousand questions. Otherwise, I'd know nothing. Even memos sent out by the DOC a lot of the time don't end up being put up. This is a huge issue needing to be addressed. Yes, we are in prison but we still need access to things going on that pertains to prison, incarceration, or even court information. Things that are not that difficult to look up on the outside should be obtainable here in the prison. I hope that changes are to come to make things easier for all of us.

Author's Note

I am 35 years old with 3 children. I have a great family and support system. The time I've served, I am determined to make count. My past mistakes are lessons learned for a better future. My past will never define me.



Voices to be Heard

Angel Tanner

Young black men and women sit in a courtroom filled with all white faces. They refuse to hear what the defendants have to say. All they see is the color of their skin, dreads, wraps, or 'fros and tattoos. Uncaring that they are raising children, they throw away the key. Leaving intelligent and talented young children behind to become angry and reckless at a justice system not meant for their people. They only lock them in a place of white walls and floors; it's so bright it's hard to see. So much talent is being wasted and thrown away as contraband when seen.

The prisons hand out food that is indigestible and the medical is inadequate. Proper hygiene and clothing are in need. They pat everyone on the head and send them back to their cells. Voices always drowned out. This is where they wash the people's soiled clothes with no gloves. They clean toilets and sinks, sweep and mop floors for .29 cents an hour, and they can't even sit down for five minutes. No one wants to say it so I'll say it—the justice system is just another way to enslave the people. This is a modern version of Egypt. Another way to control and demoralize their self worth and esteem.

Tell me how can the African Americans that have come from the bottom and made it to the top do—nothing. Well, a majority say they'll fight for the people but then they climb the social ladder and get scared of losing it all if they were to do something or they see the way to get the wealth and status is to forget the color of their skin so sisters and brothers that are waiting and hoping for their broken promises. The prestigious people, too occupied with what expensive suit they each

wear and when they can get together to play golf at the almost predominantly white country club, smoking cigars, and clinking glasses of bourbon together as they laugh and talk about their upcoming cases. How is it so easy to dismiss the African American society that is often misjudged and misread yet they're full of smart, intelligent, very talented young men and women that all have dreams but they never get heard because they're all pushed aside for the next white person's dream and told better luck next time. When are we going to take a rightful stand and not a destructive one and let the voices be heard? Everyone bleeds red, has a heart, and was created by God. We were all created equal. So when are we going to see past all the colors and just see the love, the hope, and the needs—past all the hurt, hopeless, and angry children that are becoming our next generation?

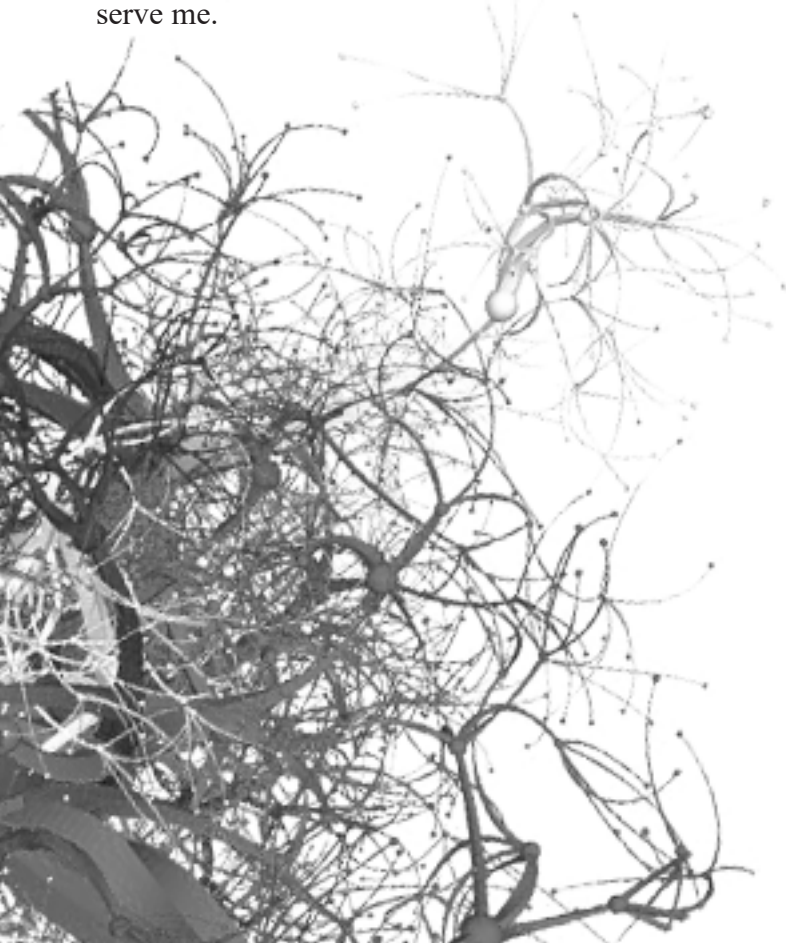
America would be great if we all came together and helped the less fortunate. There's enough to go around if you can see past your greed, lust, and hunger that creates selfishness. Pay it forward and it always comes back threefold. It don't take much at all, just a little time. So many people turn a blind eye and it's destroying the world. Everyone wants to make it to the top of a ladder that leads nowhere and you find you're all alone up there. You forget the people down there in the projects are always about family and love. They come together to celebrate and share what little they do, and have never asked for too much at all. Yet, society calls them trash and point, not giving anyone a fair chance to try to make it out.

Tell me what you see if not the reality of it all. God created everything different and colorful, the people, the earth, and the animals so what scares



you about someone's color if it differs from yours?
Do you have a voice? Oh and by the way, I am
white with blue eyes, 5'7 and thick so will you hate
me too?

Exodus 9:1 "Then the Lord said unto Moses, go
unto the Pharaoh and tell him, thus saith the Lord
God of Hebrews, let my people go, that they may
serve me.



Author's Note

I've been incarcerated 21 years and seen a lot of
injustice and I am tired of everybody being silent
on it. So, I'm finding my voice.



I Apologize

Silvester Thomas

I cried today.

Not because of sadness or in a fit of madness
but because of gladness, amazement,
in awe of the person I am today, right here,
right now, at this very moment.

I close my eyes and try to drown out the
sound of the gun firing rounds that sent
their bodies violently to the ground.

I APOLOGIZE

That is all I can say.

I can say a lot but it won't rewind and
restart that moment in time where and
when I wish I would have walked away.

Will my words wipe the tears from
their lovers', mothers', fathers',
sisters' and brothers' eyes

Or fill in the void of that

little girl or little boy's kisses and hugs
of fatherly love, letting their child or children
know that daddy is, and forever will be,
by their side?

I APOLOGIZE

I want you to know your fathers never lied.

It was a boy thinking he was a man
full of anger and pride that
wrongfully took their lives.

The Sun in Us

Silvester Thomas

Love is love, hate is hate.

But once love outweighs the hate, then hate
becomes love and that, once loved, to hate.

My past I kept as a present for the future --
a compass, the tools needed to use
and improve choices.

I made that badly shaped,
what I used to define myself...

to define my wealth.

Not knowing that not knowing only lead
to feed choices of food for thought
that would mentally and physically
and eventually decline my health.

So I had to find myself.

But first I had to find some help
and in time I closed my eyes

with an open mind and the shine was felt.


Moved by the wind and cleaned by the rain.

Awakened by the quaking of the earth
emerged a being of change.

I remained.

The lie explained.

The truth produced the facts that
the words (ignorance, stupidity and denial)
would blame.





Author's Note

I have been incarcerated since I was a teenager for terrible decisions I made. I am no longer that child mentally or physically, but every day no matter what I do as the man I've grown into - the man and role model I needed during my childhood - I live with the regret, remorse, pain, and punishment of what I've done as that child. I am always searching for ways to make things right and continue to be a better person and a better man in life with the help, forgiveness, mercy, and grace of God. I hope my poems inspire and touch all that read them in a way that provides all that they may need in understanding what it may feel like to have done a wrong that seems like no matter what you do in life no one will ever understand how sorry you are or how you feel inside. I want you to know that I do, and you are not alone.

Man in the Mirror

Traer R. Tisdale

All your life, you've been ashamed of who you are. You've been fearful of your flaws and imperfections thinking they make you less of a human. You've been trying to escape the embarrassment of the mistakes you've made in life, so to substitute the pain of it all you turn to drugs and alcohol. You moved through this world according to your own understanding, thinking you had it all figured out. You thought you knew what it took to be a real man. Money, clothes, sneakers, cars, women, became your idols. You created this mind state mantra "by any means necessary" as some code to live by, not realizing that those means wasn't necessary.

You've disrespected women, neglected your kids, destroyed families, and poisoned communities through reckless actions. The fact that you always let your emotions supersede your intelligence has left you in dire circumstances. Operating below your own level of awareness and understanding. You find yourself sitting in a prison cell. The definition of friends takes on a new meaning and they no longer around. Your family is gone and the world continues to move on. You sharing showers, being told what to do 24/7, no decent food to eat, no privacy, no sense of freedom. All you see all day long is walls and razor wires.

Trying to maintain the little bit of sanity you have left has become an everyday struggle. You feel worthless, you feel helpless, but your pride as a man won't allow you to admit it. You now realize the price you've paid is heavy. This bitterness leaks out in the smallest ways each day. Time has slowed dramatically and your cognitive thinking becomes awakened, and the question you keep asking yourself is "Was it all worth it"? Was making a decision while under the influence of a strong emotion worth it? I'm talking to you! Man in the Mirror

Author's Note

My name is Traer R. Tisdale and I've been incarcerated since 2012. Subsequently, I was sentenced to Life plus 6 years for 1st degree murder and other charges. For many years I neglected my mental health struggles, out of fear of being judged negatively by my peers, and drugs and alcohol became my way to combat these fears.

My life was in complete disarray and I've been blessed with the epiphany to understand how my actions have left so many people devastated. Facing the truth about myself has been the biggest obstacle that I can say each day I'm overcoming and using my voice and my own personal experience is my way of healing and teaching others about themselves and the decisions they make.

I can never change the nature of my crime, but changing the nature of my character and motivating and inspiring others to be different is the greatest way I can help a society plagued by violence. I hope my voice may resonate in the hearts and minds of those in similar circumstances or on the wrong path, and I pray it has a positive, perpetual, legacy.



Nothing to Lose But Our Chains

Askari Lumumba

There's a lot to be reformed in this State Prison system because we have allowed those who benefit from this system to continue to "Stack the Deck" against us. Private companies like Global Tel Link, JPay, and Keefe have sucked money from prisoners' families who in most cases are struggling to make ends meet. Yet these companies know that the love people have for their incarcerated loved ones will cause them to give their last dime to ease their hardship. Meanwhile, the state's prison environments are so "depressing" that prisoners will do damn near anything to cope. At the same time this is happening, prisoners are also working their asses off to keep the prisons open and help the state produce profits for pennies on the dollar. Yet, any attempts to organize around our labor is prohibited and hold serious consequences. The state prisons cost over 100 million dollars to build and ten million dollars a year to keep facilities open—and they don't need them!

So what the Law Makers are telling us, through their inaction, is that they will expand the prison system and produce state of the art prisons while Richmond & Tidewater schools crumble, and Amelia County schools have had to close on Fridays due to lack of funding. Why does Virginia need forty-five prisons? Why does Virginia need sixty-six jails? Why does Virginia spend one billion dollars a year to Mass Incarcerate people? They don't need

to do it!

I have been in the system for 20 years. I was arrested when I was 18 years old and now I'm 38 years old. I can tell all of you that I am definitely "Not" a threat to your Safety! I'm Reformed! They can let me go, but they won't let me go! In fact, I'm not scheduled to be let go until 2044. That's 26 more years at \$27,000 a year keeping me locked up. For what? I'm not a threat to public safety. The 18 year old version of me died a long time ago. I'm 42 years old and yet they won't let me out until I'm 60 when I actually will be a burden on the public because I won't have any property. I won't have any money. I won't be employable and I may not have any family to go home to. So who's really benefiting from this system? Because obviously the system is broken for some and not broken for others. Why else would they fight so hard to keep it open?

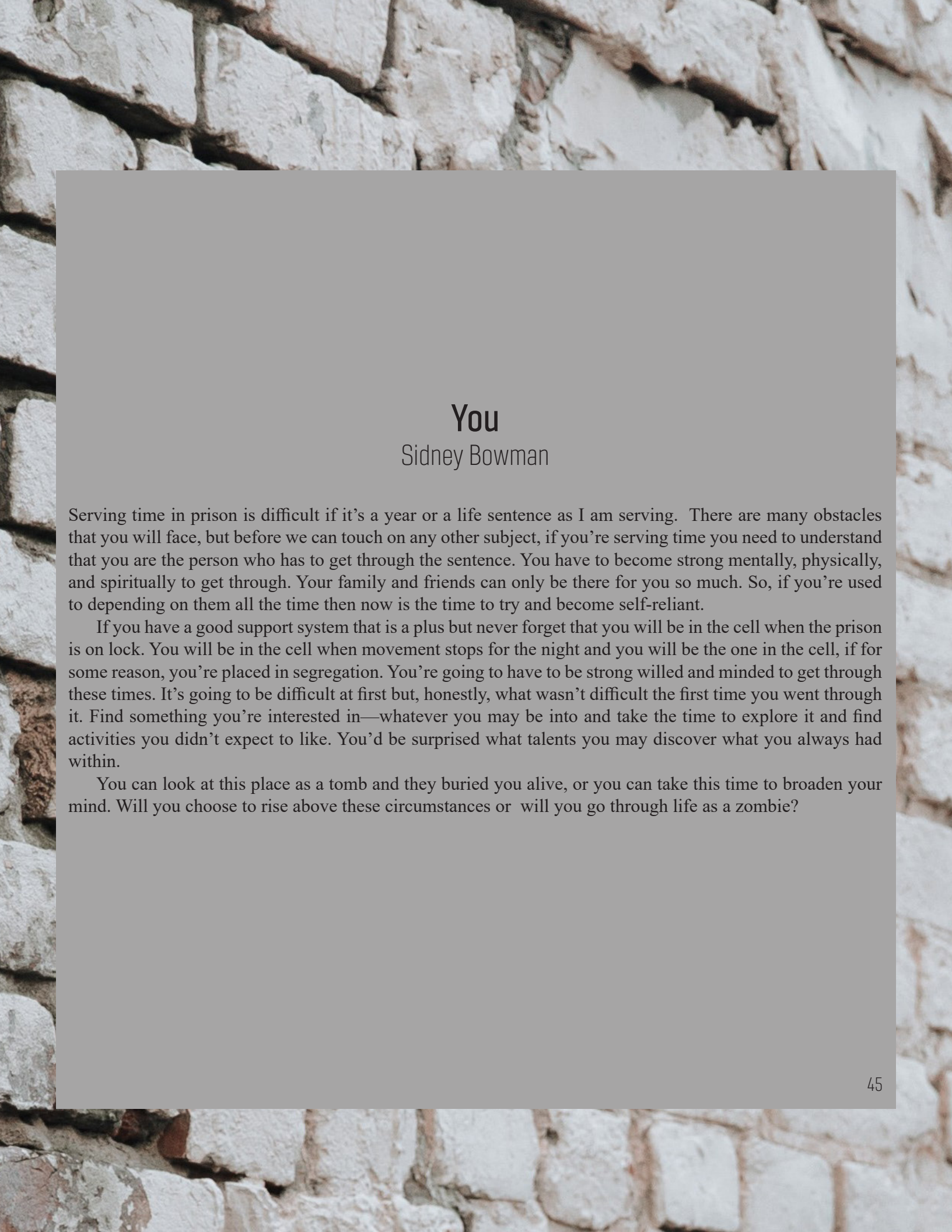
Enough is enough, and we have to begin to do the work of changing this broken system. We must begin to organize and network with one another in many different ways. We need to demand that state and local officials change laws and policies that are abusive and expensive. Most importantly they need to know that criminal justice reform means Ending Mass Incarceration! Virginia is a New Jim Crow state that punishes Blacks harsher and so Truth in Sentencing has a disproportionate impact on minority communities. We must demand that law-

makers reinstate parole so that those who deserve a chance to go back to their communities can get there. We also must let lawmakers and the Governor know that we are disappointed with the fact that nearly 70% of those in Virginia's prison system were sentenced outside of their sentencing guidelines. What about the other 25,000 of us who were given extensive sentences? Do we deserve justice? If we come together we can create real change. We have nothing to lose but our chains.

Author's Note

I am a Virginia Prisoner of Conscience, steering committee member of the Virginia Prison Justice network, member of the Coalition for Justice, and a jailhouse lawyer in the VADOC. I have been incarcerated for 24 years and am fighting for parole as a Fishback prisoner—unfairly sentenced. I am also a certified paralegal and New Afrikan liberationist.





You

Sidney Bowman

Serving time in prison is difficult if it's a year or a life sentence as I am serving. There are many obstacles that you will face, but before we can touch on any other subject, if you're serving time you need to understand that you are the person who has to get through the sentence. You have to become strong mentally, physically, and spiritually to get through. Your family and friends can only be there for you so much. So, if you're used to depending on them all the time then now is the time to try and become self-reliant.

If you have a good support system that is a plus but never forget that you will be in the cell when the prison is on lock. You will be in the cell when movement stops for the night and you will be the one in the cell, if for some reason, you're placed in segregation. You're going to have to be strong willed and minded to get through these times. It's going to be difficult at first but, honestly, what wasn't difficult the first time you went through it. Find something you're interested in—whatever you may be into and take the time to explore it and find activities you didn't expect to like. You'd be surprised what talents you may discover what you always had within.

You can look at this place as a tomb and they buried you alive, or you can take this time to broaden your mind. Will you choose to rise above these circumstances or will you go through life as a zombie?

Food Justice

Anonymous

The food is deplorable. Incarcerated citizens eat foods that are not for public consumption—mechanically separated chicken or turkey from Massapequa, New York. A lot of the medical issues that incarcerated citizens have are the result of the poor quality and the low nutritional value of the food. Diabetes is one of the leading problems because of starches and processed foods even throughout the commissary. Food is the same of poor preparedness and nutritional value. The potato chips are outdated by the year as well as the pastries. Roaches and mice make it a public health hazard.

Poor diets result in poor medical care. I would suggest the health department manage prison medical wards as they are more knowledgeable, resourceful, and can ensure that the integrity of medical service is adequate.

Note: View a Commissary page menu on the next page and note the offerings and prices. On average, people in prison earn .29/hour but many people do not have jobs or do not earn enough to support their needs so their loved ones bear the cost.

Author's Note

I am 40 plus years of age and I have been incarcerated 20 years. I am fighting for my freedom and the freedoms of others daily. I am pro righteous, and believe everyone should matter in the day to day life regardless of the situation that prison fosters, etc, regardless of circumstances, creed, color, party, or social status. Diversity and inclusion has been my latest fight to see prison as a healthy thriving environment not for just the incarcerated citizens but for the staff, as a whole, alike.

Thank you anonymously....

Commissary Price List

COMMISSARY MENU

Revised December 15, 2021

	Single \$0.15	1074	0.15	30					
	Single \$0.02 Stamp	4569	0.02	30					
OTHER	DESCRIPTION	Item #	Price	Limit					
	Aviator Playing Cards	1300	2.51	1					
	Aviator Pinochle Cards	1305	2.51	2					
	Picture Tickets	9800	2.00	1					

FOOD	DESCRIPTION	Item#	Price	Limit	SNACKS	DESCRIPTION	Item#	Price	Limit
	BC Turkey Summer Sausage	2624	2.19	10		Doritos Cool Ranch	2740	2.49	3
	Velveeta Macaroni & Cheese - K/H	2664	1.26	10		Crunchy Peanut Butter Granola Bars	2758	0.61	10
	Velveeta Cheesy Rice Spicy K/H	2667	0.65	10		Crunchy Oats & Honey Granola Bar	2759	0.61	10
	Velveeta Jalapeno Cheese Squeeze	3535	0.90	10		Nabisco Oreo Cookies 6pk K	3020	0.65	5
	Velveeta Cheddar Cheese Squeeze	3536	0.90	10		Protein Bar Cookies and Cream	3048	2.60	10
	Bridgford Sliced Pepperoni	3559	2.66	10		Cheez IT Crackers Original	3379	3.14	1
	BC Hot Beef Summer Sausage	3584	2.22	10		Moon Lodge Onion Ring Hot Hot Hot	3790	1.93	3
	BC Beef Summer Sausage	3585	2.22	10		Townhouse Crackers	3258	3.01	1
	Mackerel in Oil - Pouch - K/H	3650	1.52	10		Golden Valley Saltine Crackers	3107	1.13	1
	Maruchan Texas Beef Flavor	6018	0.34	10		Austin Cheese On Cheese Nabs K	3219	0.43	8
30 Max.	Maruchan Chili Flavor	6026	0.34	10		Austin Peanut Butter On Cheese Nab K	3223	0.43	8
Combined	Maruchan Cup of Soup - Cheddar Cheese	6042	0.87	10		Zippy Cake Mega Honey Bun K	3261	0.81	10
Soups	Maruchan Chicken	6046	0.34	10					
	Sevilla Refried Beans - K	6047	1.95	10					
	Keefe Kitchens Pre-Cooked White Rice K/H	6050	1.46	10					
	Keefe Kitchens Pre-Cooked Brown Rice K/H	6051	1.33	10					
	Chili W/Beans - Pouch	6173	1.84	10					
	Chili W/Bean Hot - Pouch	6174	1.84	10					
	Sardines in Oil - Pouch K/H	6179	1.41	10					
	Brushy Creek Premium Chicken - Pouch	6195	3.79	10		Zippy Cake Peanut Butter Wafer 6 2pk K	3333	3.76	1
	Lasagna W/Beef - Pouch	6196	2.11	10		Snickers K	4010	1.14	10
	City Cow Sharp Cheese Bar	6422	2.02	10		Three Musketeer K	4032	1.14	10
	Velveeta Ins Nacho Cheese Sauce Spicy K/H	6425	1.04	10		Reese's Peanut Butter Cup K	4035	1.93	10
	Kraft Sharp Cheese Spread	6442	2.45	10		M & M Peanut Peg Pack K	4046	2.69	5
	Kraft Nacho Cheese Dip	6444	TBA	5		Squeezer Creamy Peanut Butter	4056	0.95	10
	City Cow Jalapeno Cheese Bar	6449	2.02	5		EZ Digby Sugar Free Wild Fruit	4155	0.70	5
	City Cow Mozzarella Cheese Bar	6459	2.02	5		Moon Lodge White Cheddar Popcorn	6083	1.57	3
	Thai Palace Rice Noodles	6673	0.76	10		Moon Lodge Regular Potato Chips K/H	6100	0.46	10
	Hormel Spam - Pouch	6757	1.73	10		Cactus Annie Cheese Crunchy K/H	6117	2.38	3
	Tuna Fish - Pouch K/H	6826	1.98	10		Tortilla Chips	6119	2.38	3
						Moon Lodge Hot Chips K/H	6125	0.46	10
						Moon Lodge Sour Cream & Onion Chips K/H	6116	0.46	10
						Hot & Spicy Pork Rinds	6127	1.01	10
						Frito Lay Nacho Doritos	6151	2.49	3
						Moon Lodge Buffalo Wing/Blue Chips K/H	6153	0.49	10
						Cactus Annie BBQ Corn Chips K	6166	2.38	3
						Microwave Popcorn	6201	0.65	10
						EZ Digby Spicy Cajun Mix	6212	1.36	5
						EZ Digby Health Mix K	6213	1.36	5
						MM SS Raisin Bran Cereal	6345	0.48	20
						SS Kellogg's Frosted Flakes Cereal	6430	0.51	20
IVS ONLY	DESCRIPTION	Item#	Price	Limit		Van Holten's Mild Dill Pickle K	6501	0.87	8
	Petroleum Jelly	0221	1.78	1		Instant Oatmeal Maple Brown Sugar 10pk K	3806	2.87	1
	All Soap Powder	1470	0.61	5		Instant Oatmeal Regular Flavor 12pk K	6504	2.87	1
	Fireballs	4146	0.76	5		Cactus Annie Flour Tortillas 6ct K/H	6600	1.62	5
	Soft Tek Pro Toothbrush	0550	0.57	2		Moon Lodge Regular Peanuts	6606	0.70	10
	Med Tek Pro Toothbrush	0551	0.97	2		Moon Lodge Hot Peanuts	6607	0.70	10
						Golden Valley Cinnamon Raisin Bagel K	6612	0.76	10
						Cactus Annie Bakes Cheese Puffs	6692	2.22	3

Life in Prison

Jeffrey Gardner

What is it like to be incarcerated?

It depends on many complex factors such as physical strength, intelligence, health, race, sexuality, religion, finances, and self-control just to start. Those factors generally determine what prison life will be for an individual.

Some will be stone cold gangsters preying on the weak, taking their commissary, personal property, raping, extorting, and controlling the prison telephones. Some openly claim they were born for prison. The weaker inmates either befriend the stronger inmates through financial or sexual transactions, or try to avoid them. Then there are some inmates who are able to survive by being aware and cautious. They still have challenges though. Weak or strong, all inmates can be victimized by those who possess a big bag of dirty tricks. It is systemic.

Inmates also get neglected when they can't get a proper diet of fresh nutritious food, proper medical care, or enough exercise. This is a daily struggle. Accessing books, magazines, and newspapers is another challenge. There are restrictions on publications that make it almost impossible to read. The Disapproved Publication List excludes thousands of titles – even wholesome magazines such as Mother Earth News, Hobby Farms, Popular Science, and Popular Mechanics. We pay for publications and our families order for us too, but all too often it's a waste of money. If we are lucky enough to get a magazine at all, the inserts and information cards have been ripped out. Our library has been

off limits to inmates for two years (Covid-19) and shows no sign of opening again. As a result, over 7,000 books, more than a dozen magazine titles, and several newspaper subscriptions are being withheld from us.

All our mail is photocopied. It's a real kick in the head to get a black and white photocopy of photographs, and cards. When our families buy a \$7.00 Hallmark card they don't realize we will never see it as they do.

During the past two years, with covid, we have averaged about 21 hours a day in our double bunked cells. Sometimes we go weeks only getting out 10 minutes a day. We have to eat five feet from where we defecate and urinate. We basically live in a bathroom without a bathtub.

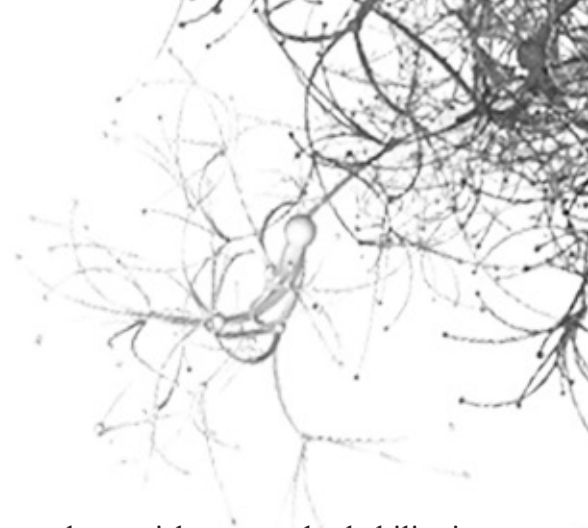
Living on concrete and steel is painful. Most of us experience back, neck, or hip pain from thin mats that really have nothing to offer as far as support.

In conclusion, prison life has been really bad for me and my family. It keeps getting worse, and I'm waiting around to die.

The Aging Prisoners

Jeffrey Gardner

A large number of the Virginia Department of Corrections prison population are older adults. Many of these people came to prison before the age of 25 and have done 20 years or more. Several of these men never had a driver's license. Most have never had a cellphone, or used the Internet. They



came to prison as a product of society, whether they came from poverty, neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, substance abuse, learning disability, or genetic disorder. Many of these people came from families with a military history where their father, grandfather, uncle, or themselves served. There seems to be a connection between poverty, military service, and conditions that lead to crime. Criminality appears to be strongly linked to youth who make poor decisions possibly due to high testosterone, adrenaline, peer pressure, and undeveloped brains.

Whatever the circumstances that brought them to prison are in the past and cannot be changed by any means, but their future could hold something more than dying in prison. And a lot of prisoners work to improve their circumstances through education, programs, and reflection in hopes that one day they will get a second chance at a life. However, this is often to no avail, and they die in prison only to take their rehabilitation to the grave.


When people do spend decades in prison, it's not always because they have left someone dead or seriously injured. A common reason given to keep a person in prison is "serious nature of the crime". A solution would be to assess the actual injury inflicted or suffered and monitor the impact on the victim's ability to carry out daily routines and live a productive life. An assessment of their lives, such as performance in academics, work, relationships, and recreational activities could provide information of any trauma so that they could get treatment and strive to live their best lives. A crime shouldn't

just be all about the punishment and rehabilitation of an offender, it should be about helping the victim as well. Careful attention may reveal information to justify leniency.

The few people who do survive decades to be released usually have health problems. Being old with medical issues doesn't make it easy to get a job or go to work. Very few of these people have any computer skills, which puts them at a greater disadvantage. A support system is hard to establish at this point if family and friends have died and leaves no one to turn to for help. Coming to prison young and leaving old leaves people without any social security or retirement. Leaving one hardship for another to struggle to earn enough to put a roof over head and food on the table. Earning \$0.27 an hour for prison labor doesn't contribute much to the savings account, since toothpaste, stamps, paper, envelopes, etc...aren't free.

Geriatric in Virginia has taken on the definition of dying soon, which veers away from Webster's definition. The Bureau of Justice Statistics, crime specific recidivism rates clearly show what categories of offenders respond best to reentering society and VDOC evaluates all inmates with the VACORIS Assessment to determine their risk. Studies show that criminality decreases with age and at age 35 the decline is sharp.

I am doing a 50 year sentence that I received at age 24 for crimes that I was accused of committing at age 21. I've never intentionally left anyone in need of a BandAid or body bag. I was offered a written plea for 7 months to serve and 5 years of probation. I was offered a verbal plea for 45 days to serve with 5 years of probation. I went to



a jury trial, and it deadlocked. At my second trial I was convicted by a jury that did not represent a fair cross section of the community based on race, sex, or age. It was 75 percent women and only one person was under 45 years old. Currently, I will be released at around 70 years old. My Treatment Case Plan Agreement is for me to become a productive member of society upon release. I can't help but wonder what life will be like at 70, if I live that long.

Author's Note

I grew up in Southwest Virginia, and was active in the outdoors. I was in the Boy Scouts, 4-H, FFA, and served in the Army. I have 3 vocational trades and I have completed Anger Management, Thinking for a Change, and Breaking Barriers. I helped start the Veteran Support Group, at PSCC, in 2013. In 2015, I helped start the first American Legion Post in a VDOC facility. I've served 5 terms as 2nd Vice Commander. In 2020, I was the first inmate to receive Legionnaire of the Year. In 2021, I became the first inmate to receive the American Legion Child Welfare Foundation- Foundation Ambassador's pin. I attended the Virginia Small Business

Association, Boots2Business seminar. I qualify for VA benefits. During 20 years of incarceration I haven't participated in gang activities, fighting, gambling, drugs, alcohol, tattooing, etc. I am VACORIS assessed; Supervision Level- Low, Risk of Recidivism- Low, and Risk of Violent Recidivism- Low.

I am my parents' only son and my grandparents' oldest grandchild. They have spent thousands of dollars for post conviction relief (\$80,000.00+/-). My incarceration has caused them hardship, especially since they have aged and need assistance with chores and errands. Labor that I once provided for free, such as mowing, cutting wood, changing oil in vehicles, and shoveling snow now comes at a cost. Right now I have a good support system to transition from prison back to society, but that support won't be there when I'm 70 years old. Maybe inmate lives have more meaning and worth than society realizes. Maybe the collateral damage of a conviction to the inmates' families should be considered and given weight in sentencing and post conviction relief petitions. Maybe some compassion and understanding by legislators could remedy this.



Boxed In

Christopher Jefferson

Ten years is a short time for a long-timer and a long time for a short-timer.

Half of 20 and more than 5. I'm only chattel and good in a box but I'm alive.

I'm serving time for something, put in a box and shipped Convicted because I was on the other side of it.

It's not confusing losing while trying to win; after all someone does every now and then.

I was taught that being the first to refute puts you in a defensive position, cause for argument sake, you'd be the first to make a mistake, which isn't the best proposition.


It's not easy to separate feelings and emotions when dealing with legal issues, because what doesn't hit you doesn't actually miss you when your petitions to the courts end with dismissals based on suspicions.

Too often those responsible for upholding the law break it. It's a different type of organized crime, a unique muscle designed to strong-arm a person's freedom in order to offer a fair exchange in the stock exchange – modern day slavery – Is that not a crime?

Cause I'm sentenced to life in prison all suspended but twenty years of which is a mandatory minimum penalty for my marijuana conviction, and I didn't even make a dime.

Author's Note

After being sentenced to Life in Prison, all suspended but 20 years of which is a mandatory minimum penalty for rejecting a 2 yr plea offer, learning all I can about the mechanics of the legal system is unfailingly not an option. Throughout the judicial process it is well known that ignorance of the law is no excuse. So I gave it my all when I signed up for the Blackstone Career Institute's Paralegal Course. The Certified Legal Assistant/Paralegal Certificate lit the match. Thereafter, I completed the Civil Litigation, Criminal, Personal Injury, Tort and Business Law courses and have been burning with positive energy ever since.



From 2012 to 2022 I remain incarcerated for a marijuana conviction. After the Richmond Times-Dispatch published a front page article on January 9, 2022 highlighting my issue seeking pardon away from the 20 year mandatory minimum sentence; I decided to start expressing myself through poetry. The book to come is a special project, where the goal is to unselfishly share some knowledge, as well as hope to an vigilant audience of readers, and hopefully some-day listeners, who are eager to learn what I have to offer from the experience.

Drug Dealing is Not a Victimless Crime

Chief Faro Three Eagles

Long ago my people were cursed with the White Man's liquor. It was terrible what happened. We Indians seem to be predisposed to alcoholism and the whiskey salesmen took advantage of that. The rum salesmen too. They sold us liquor in cups with rounded bottoms, we couldn't put them down, or they would turn over. Then the White Men would take advantage of us in our drunken stupor. And worse, because we had become addicted to alcohol, we would take advantage of our own people just to get more liquor and sometimes we would get mean and hurt people we loved. It was sad because many of my people loved the liquor more than anything else. In places like Alaska, Indians aren't allowed to have alcohol in their communities. Many reservations are like that too.

But today we have a new problem facing us. Not just we Indians, but also we People. It's drugs. They're everywhere, and many people's lives have been impacted by drugs. I know mine sure has been. It's a terrible thing, and it harms more than just a few drug addicts; it harms families and even entire communities.

Many people believe that selling drugs and using drugs is a victimless crime, but it isn't so. When people become addicted to drugs they will do terrible things to get their fix, and they will do terrible things when they're high. So truthfully, the victims are the users and the people around them.

Long ago I had a childhood girlfriend. We had been friends since we were very young, since we were just children. But one day someone put a crack pipe in her hand. She lost her mind. And I lost my cherished friend. Why, you ask? Because the drugs changed her so much, and she was barely 16 years old that she became angry and hateful. One day, she even kidnapped me and tried to kill me because she was high and I would not have her back as a girlfriend. Three decades later she is still on drugs, and she is still angry because I wouldn't take her back as my girlfriend when I was 17 years old. The drugs did that to her.

I've heard many drug dealers say things like they're just the person who sold it, what happens after that isn't their fault. That isn't true. The drug dealer didn't have to sell such dangerous chemicals. The drug dealer could have refused, could have found a respectable means to earn a living. And then these terrible things might not have happened. But then the drug dealers claim if it wasn't them who sold the drugs then it would have been someone else. Maybe this is true. But maybe it isn't. Maybe that dealer was the only dealer the user knew. Maybe they had no other source. There are a lot of possibilities. But in the end, that dealer sold those drugs, and something bad happened, even if it was only the user getting high and becoming further addicted.

And what about the families of the people who buy the drugs? How many children have been abused or neglected because of the parent's drug problem? How many children went to bed hungry because their parent spent the grocery money with the drug dealer? Is it right that the drug dealer should have a full belly while children are hungry because of the drugs the dealer sold? It isn't. And what of the battered and abused women, the girlfriends, and wives of drug addicts who get mean when they get high, or when they're coming down? And what of the victims of car crashes by people who were so desperate for their fix that they got high as soon as they got their drugs then tried to drive home? And what of the people who died from an overdose, and their families who suffered that loss? Are these people not ultimately victims of the drugs? You can't just find crack, cocaine, heroin, and other hard drugs growing on trees in the park. They come from a dealer, or a pusher, or whatever else they're called. And without these people who supply the users the drug problem and the ancillary problems connected to it go away.

So always keep this in mind. Selling and using drugs isn't a victimless crime. Everyone suffers in the end. Please stop destroying our communities. Please stop destroying lives. Please stop destroying families and friendships. Help to end the Nation's drug problem. Please stop selling drugs.

Author's Note

Faro Three Eagles is Chief of the Suali Nunnah Indians, an unofficial band of Indigenous peoples whose evidence of ancestry falls short of legal tribal enrollment standards. He has been honored in his role as Chief for many years. Although of mixed American Indian/Scottish/German heritage, he honors his Indigenous ancestors by following the Old Ways within the limits of the New World.

Mr. Herb

Tevin McGougan

Mr. Herb has been down thirty three years
65 years old, he told me his regrets with tears
He got seven more years to go, he barely remembers his crime
Lost his mother twenty years ago, never got over her dying
Frustrated he can't get parole, he doing day for day
On a 40 year sentence, truly strong because he still prays
Working the boulevard, picking up trash and shoveling dirt
Been institutionally charge free a quarter century,
Who does the state think he will hurt?
Denied pardons, clemency, ain't no retirement pensions in prison
45¢ an hour, intolerant law makers, could you make due with it?
If you can't why not invest in him the 30 grand yearly, made off his enslavement
Instead of milking him deaf, dumb, and blind, and tossing him to the pavement
Or leading him to the grave without a meaningful penny saved
This "tough on crime" initiative's getting old, it has to be a better way
The sadness I see in Mr. Herb's face is an injustice with multiple layers of
exploitation
They justify their irrational premises by inflaming images of grieving faces
Mr. Herb never met his grandchildren. His son was locked up and begged to be
with his father
Do you Mr. Lawmaker understand the complexities are not remedied by just "lock
him up longer"
Mr. Herb seen so many deaths inside prison. He don't do drugs, his only
indulgence is potato chips
If being rehabilitated is self discipline, moral enlightenment, and repentance, Mr.
Lawmaker... why is Mr. Herb still here????

Note: In 2020, the Parole Board considered 940 people for Geriatric Conditional Release but only granted it to 79 individuals, ages 60 to 83. The percentage granted—8.4%—is still relatively low but twice as high as the previous year.

One Life Saved

Tevin McGougan

Sincerely we apologize, for all the tears you've cried
Your countless nights in grief wondering why
We feel the pain, and know it's nowhere near, one in the same
we accept the blame, and for you we want to drastically change
When you see us, we pray love and forgiveness can be the chapter
between us
Not vitriol, past transgressions or any type of meanness
We know it's not easy, losing a loved one, losing money, crying on the
news and in court
Being abused by the very people, you stood as an example and
supported
No!! It is not fair!!! Your hurt of this gravity, no one should get a free
pass
Tears in our eyes we ask you humbly to repent for our past
Experiencing the ignorance of youth, jealousy, anger, while being a
purposeless fool
Poisoning our communities as result and proof, we didn't understand
the truth
Now we do, the ebb and flow of passions uncontrolled led to
disasters
Time, reflection, and trials in bondage, those who persevere become
their own masters
Finally we understand compassion, discipline, and act from a
mathematical foresight
Be able to tell a young brother, get a plan, stop beefing, because you
only get one life
One life saved, from spending their best years caged in bars
One life saved, a would be victim, can help heal Virginia's heart
One life saved, a father coming home, restoring the fabric of family
One life saved, forgiving a man from a time he couldn't see clearly
We are pleading as brothers, sons, husbands, and dads.
When we embrace tolerance and understanding, the result will never
be bad
Instead of emotionalizing a spirit of vengeance, we have the power to
change the paradigm
Thank you dear reader, love is first of the mind



Author's Note

I'm 29 years old. I'm from Hampton, Virginia and I'm a graduate of Chowan University. My family, friends, and especially my two daughters motivate me. I'm a passionate man. I grew up playing sports (football, wrestling, track) which had kept me from gangs in my youth, and the Disciples. I learned, as a starter on the state championship football team led by me, optimism in spite of apparent insurmountable odds by having faith in God in action. We all have our battles, and some we lose, but it begins in the mind. I believe we are a society of second chances, that people in all places in society can bring themselves up and make a positive mark on the world. This poem is dedicated to the Coalition for Justice. Thank you and you are appreciated – Tevin.

Locked Up and Re-Judged

Gwendolyn Burton Green

My name is Gwendolyn, and I am a convicted violent felon. The laws have basically judged and re-judged me and found me guilty by being a felon and not eligible to be given another chance. I am not being given a chance to prove that not all people are the same and that it doesn't take 15+ years for me to learn from my mistakes. I am a governmental throw away, and it seems as though I am not the only one. I wanted to let the world know that we are not all bad people! We are not contagious! We are not a waste of time!! I am just as important as any other person that made a mistake! A convicted felon does not make me less than worthy of another chance in society! I/we are people too! #don'tforgetaboutus

So let me ask you a question. Are you the same person you were a yr ago? How about 5 yrs ago? Are you making the same mistakes now as you were back then? So now my next question for you is if you feel that you have changed and could change, why do you feel that a person behind bars hasn't or can't? Are there times in your past that you've done things that could have turned out bad? So the truth of the matter is that the roles could have been reversed at ANY point and time. Maybe you should think about that while you are busy throwing the key away that could release the large amount of rehabilitated violent felons. The idea that only non-violent felons have a better chance of productivity is absolutely ludicrous! Which once again proves that the

lack of second chance or even third for a violent felon indeed has not been given consideration. It also makes no sense in the world of opportunity that we live in, that violent felons aren't allotted the same program opportunities that the non-violent felons are. No matter how you clean it up, dress it up, or make excuses, this is downrite discrimination! The people that are chosen to oversee our futures by law making are a very selfish and closed minded set of individuals. No one deserves to be looked over or shall I say overlooked the way that we in this genre of criminals have been. Judging a book by its cover, judging a food by its looks, and judging an inmate by the stamp on their paperwork is all the same. How many times do we have to be judged? When will enough be enough for us?!

Author's Note

My name is Gwendolyn Burton. I am a mother of three of the most challenging and amazingly creative children (2 ladies and a man) and my son has a 9 yr old daughter who is a very big rainbow in my eyes. The challenge of trying to be a good mother and a good person behind bars has been beyond exhausting, but worth every bit of it. Every moment that I wake up and am able to say that the reason behind most of my drive is to better myself for my family is a blessing. And the rest is to speak up and speak out for those that aren't as blessed as I am but still deserve to be heard. Freedom comes in so many forms in life, and my goal is to work towards freeing as many people in as many ways as I can.

Thank you for listening.



Should I Breathe

Corevon Copeland

Because the pressure brings me to my knees
fill with anxiety in this vicissitude society
I'm lost and confused on how we rather
abuse and misinterpret our real issues
So we pick and we choose, not knowing in
this world of cold solitude, we always lose.
We was once told pain is a blessing
but pain is only part of our confessions.



Time Will Tell

Julie Duncan

9 years
1 million tears
Infinite regrets
Unceasing reel
of shoulda coulda
wouldas and yet
more and more
I feel out of control
I feel as though
I lose pieces of
My soul
My heart has been
beaten, bludgeoned
and ripped
from my chest
I've given my life
for them
but they don't
know it yet
Will they ever love me?
Each day I try to stay strong
to give my very best
Each day, each year
becomes a test
as I attempt to glue
these pieces back together somehow
But my emotions
continue to swirl around
making me
think too deep
Will anyone stay

or will they all leave?
Who is this the world sees?
This is ME
This is as real as
it gets
years ago
Something inside of me broke
It shattered,
My heart tattered
vowed to never give up
Never again
come unglued
Now I question
every move
I contemplate
Analyze and debate
I can't afford the same
mistakes
Year after year
here I sit
for justice. I wait

I hold my breath, afraid
for that other shoe to drop
Suspended animation
My freedom a fleeting thought
How much more can I take?
How much more will I be at a loss?
How much more of me
will this life cost?