



Unlocked

Art and Experiences from Inside Virginia's Prisons

Volume 5 | Fall 2025

Unlocked

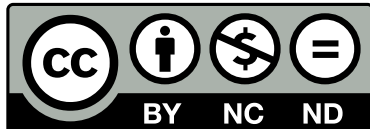
Art and Experiences from Inside Virginia's Prisons

VIRGINIA TECH PUBLISHING

Published by the Center for Humanities (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University) and the Coalition for Justice (Virginia), in association with Virginia Tech Publishing, University Libraries at Virginia Tech, 560 Drillfield Drive, Blacksburg, VA 24061.

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ISBN (print): 978-1-962841-41-2

ISBN (EPUB): 978-1-962841-42-9

ISBN (PDF): 978-1-962841-43-6

<https://doi.org/10.21061/unlocked-vol5>

Previous volumes of *Unlocked* can be accessed at <https://hdl.handle.net/10919/136887>

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

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Introduction

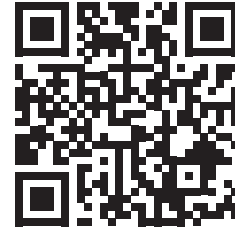
Margaret Breslau

Poetry, reflective writing, and art are powerful tools to build connections and provide understanding of the world around us. They also serve as sanctuaries in dark spaces, bringing light with them, making visible what is hidden. Imagination is freedom; once unlocked, it unleashes the power of reclamation—dignity, humanity, and self-affirmation. In doing so, incarcerated artists and authors become part of a larger community of creators with every poem, spoken word, drawing, and essay.

Gwendolyn Brooks was a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and the first Black woman appointed poet laureate in the United States. Her poem, "[To Prisoners](#)", is about hope, healing, and survival. It demands that the reader enter those dark spaces and heed the call for mercy, understanding, and transformation. So, for everyone who has contributed to the journal, you are indeed in good company. Keep building and connecting. You belong.

Reflections

To hear Anthony Maurice Jordan's interview and reading of "Reflections", [click here](#) or scan the QR code.



As I sit in my cell and replay events of my past, from childhood to the present, I can say unequivocally that out of all my hardships, pitfalls, and ups and downs, I am blessed.

I was born in Welch, West Virginia, on July 5, 1969, to James and Hester Mae Jordan, their first child. Strange thing, though, I can tell you who my parents are, but I can't tell you anything much more than that. My memories of them are hazy and spotty, and no matter how hard I try, there is one memory that I seem to have a problem conjuring up: I can't ever recall a moment of seeing them together.

Many child psychologists say that children will suppress traumatic experiences to the point that when they reach adulthood, they can't recall the event. Sometimes, I wonder if this is what I'm experiencing. I am constantly searching my mind for tidbits of information, which, for me, is like watching a flickering 1920s silent movie. What I do remember is moving back and forth across state lines to stay with either my father in West Virginia or my mother in Virginia.

I do remember, while in West Virginia, spending very little time with my father and more time with people I assumed to be family. To this day, I'm not sure. While in Virginia, I have very few memories of staying with my mother because most of my memories are of group and foster homes. Now that I think about it, I'm amazed at how, with such an unstable childhood, I have no history of juvenile delinquency, and how I was able to graduate high school. I loved school.

It was during my first year of high school that the Junior R.O.T.C. program was instituted, and because my father was in the Army Reserves, I thought that this would be the opportunity for me to make him proud. When I told him about me signing up for the class, I distinctly remember a blank, expressionless face saying, "Oh yea!" The only fond memory I have of my father and me is of us together and him teaching me how to maintain my uniform, shine my shoes, and polish my brass. In those sparse moments, my mind was like a sponge soaking in everything that came from his mouth. It didn't take long for those moments to dissipate.

After graduation, I felt that I was an adult and that no one could tell me what to do or how to live my life. So, I headed out on my own. I left West Virginia and headed for Newport News with about \$800 in my pocket—money that I had saved by working as a bagboy throughout high school. Although legally I was an adult, I wasn't equipped to take on the role of being a man.

Manhood is one of those concepts that many young males think they understand, but in reality, they have no understanding of it because they have never had any examples of it in their lives. I was one of those young males.

Prison has a unique way of distorting reality, and when an undeveloped mind enters its domain, that distortion is shaped into the wiles of desire. It takes a focused and committed mind to not succumb to the distortion. Unfortunately, many do.

In prison, I reconnected with my love for reading, a love I had developed at an early age. Through books, I learned so many things about myself and the world around me. Through books, I was able to incorporate character traits that I never had or knew about. Through books, I mentally sat in classrooms of professors and historians.

Through books, I sat in the labs of scientists, and through books, I was able to sit at the feet of sages and wise men and women.

Through books, I was able to learn what my role is in relation to other human beings—a servant—a role that I now gladly embrace.



Untitled Artwork



Image created using Adobe Illustrator

Artist's / Author's note

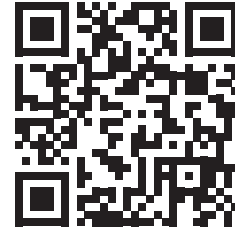
This year marks my thirty-fifth year of incarceration. Currently, I work in one of the prison's industries—the print shop, where I am a Heidelberg Production Manager, typesetter, and pressman. I have acquired many skill sets that are too lengthy to list here. You may contact me at: Anthony Jordan #1161827, Beaumont Correctional Center, 3500 Beaumont Road, Beaumont, VA 23014.



What Can Be the Price of a Soul

Kermit Williams

To hear Kermit Williams' interview and reading of "What Can Be the Price of a Soul", [click here](#) or scan the QR code.

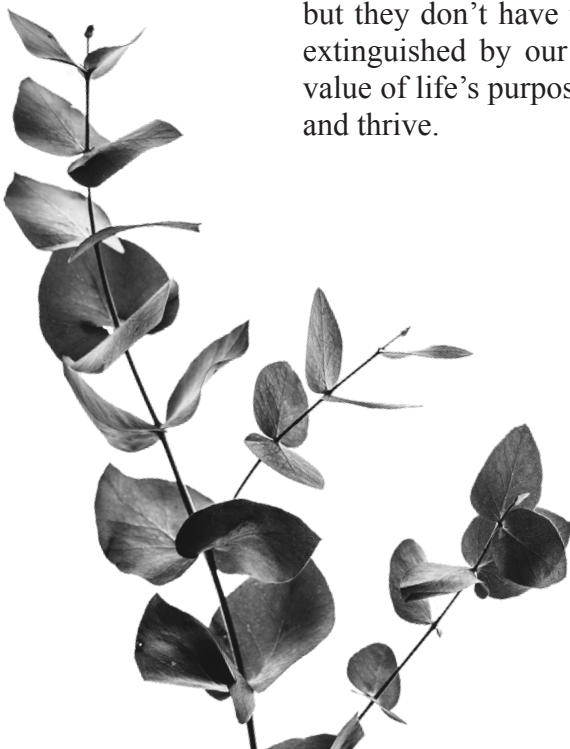


What can be the price of a soul...

but to exist and thrive? Why do We hate each other to the point that we are willing to kill one another? What is it about anything we could possibly say that could be so egregious that surrendering the right to live is the only recourse to rectify Our grievances? The impulse in us to Kill Us has become so habitual that the expression "black on black crime" is as much the fabric of Our existence as the air we take into Our lungs.

I've always said it's not what you say, but are you saying the right things? The harsh reality is that black society has experienced an epidemic of incessant violence towards ourselves for so long that We haven't even recognized our contribution to the reinstatement of slavery through mass killing and incarceration, and the perpetuance We lend to it.

How can we say We are not afraid to die when we've never experienced death? Consider the residual effects. A mother loses her child, a child loses its father, a family loses generations, and a community loses its neighbor. Words can hurt, but they don't have to be life-ending. Our appetite for self-destruction must be extinguished by our responsibility to cultivate young minds into grasping the value of life's purpose and acknowledging not only the right to exist, but to exist and thrive.



The Journey Is the Lesson

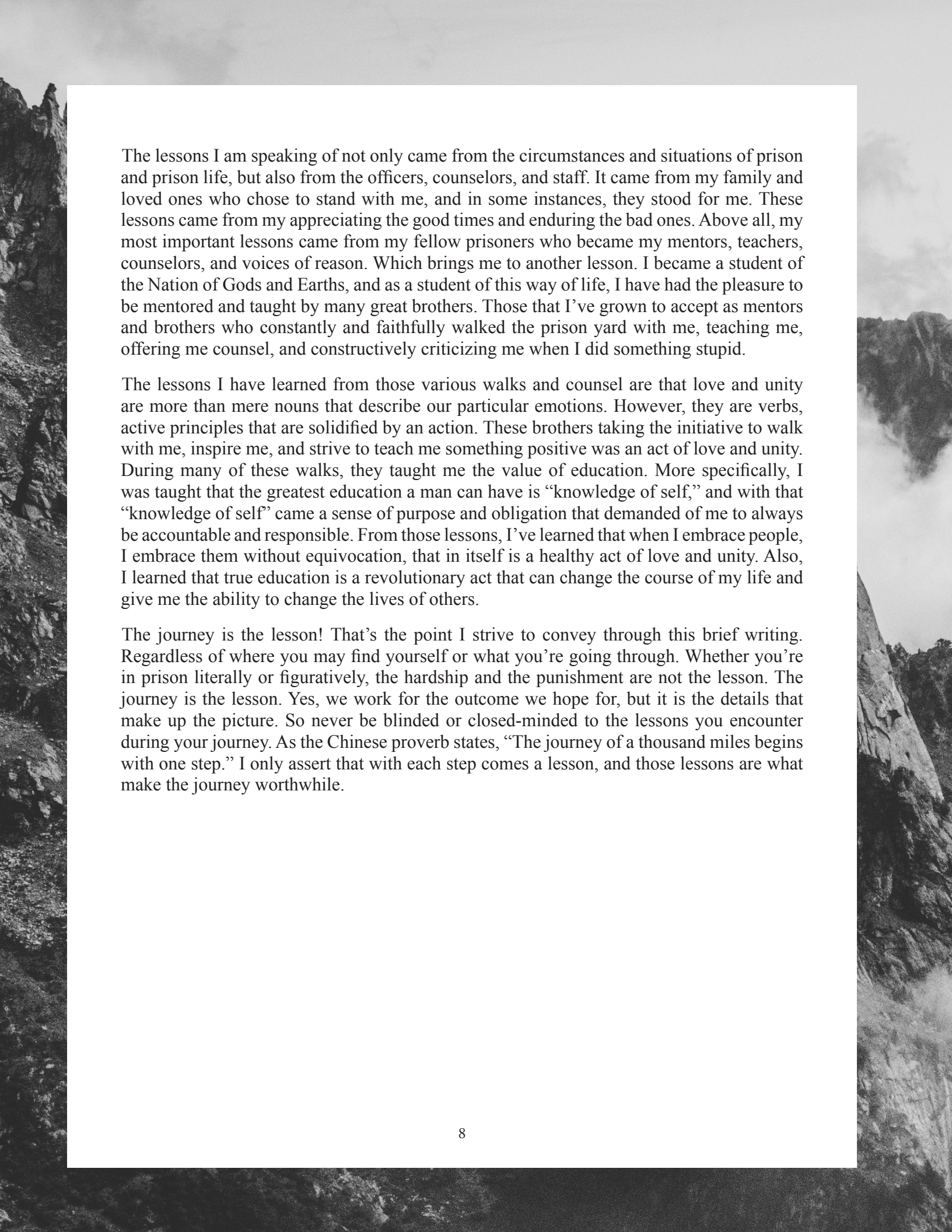
Harry Traynham

The importance of recognizing and understanding the lessons of my journey has been by far the greatest lesson I've learned throughout my prison experience. My prison journey started in 1995, when I was an immature 20-year-old, freshly sentenced to an astronomical amount of time, with no knowledge or understanding of what I was truly walking into. All I knew were the false stereotypical depictions of prison, the constant reminders that parole had been abolished, and that I had to serve 85% of that astronomical time. That was my thought process as I was ushered into Greensville Correctional Center.

When I arrived at Greensville, I was taken to (A) unit, housing unit (9), and escorted to the supervisor's office. I don't remember anything about the supervisor. I can't recall if they were a lieutenant or sergeant, a man or woman, or any other possible characteristic. However, I do recall with overwhelming clarity a printed sign that hung behind the supervisor's desk. A sign informing me that said, "THIS IS NOT BURGER KING, YOU CAN NOT HAVE IT YOUR WAY"! I can't say why that sign was there or what impact it was meant to have. But for me, the words printed on that sign held a different meaning. A meaning that would take a permanent root into my consciousness.

The words of that sign would ultimately become one of many lessons that I would encounter and learn throughout my prison experience. That simple phrase stood as a constant reminder that prison was not designed to cater to me nor exist to benefit me. Its only purpose was to confine and manage me. That phrase, for me, explained that there will be no concern for my feelings, my ego, or my struggle. It clearly emphasized that prison won't care who I missed, who I loved, or who I blamed. The implication of that phrase became a factual point and later a constant reminder that prison and being in prison is indifference to my humanity and a constant defiance to all that I hope to be as a human being. You may think that I overthought that sign and phrase; I can acknowledge that, and I understand why you may think that. I can even acknowledge that my interpretation of that sign may be harsh and cold. But, I assure you that my overthinking and my harsh and cold interpretation were a necessity at that time. This is because my overthoughtfulness and harsh and cold interpretation were the catalyst for two lessons that I would grow to embrace as a result of my encounter with that sign. My first lesson was that I must always matter and be relevant to myself, no matter where I may find myself, and secondly, I must never allow prison's indifference towards me to become my reality.

During this journey, I would encounter many more impactful and life-changing lessons. Lessons that have aided my growth, maturity, and helped me evolve into the productive, proactive, and strong-minded man I am today. I will never dispute that prison is a miserable existence, but I only contest that within this miserable existence lie, as in life in general, many fruitful lessons. Lessons that are meant to encourage, develop, and inspire us on our respective journeys.



The lessons I am speaking of not only came from the circumstances and situations of prison and prison life, but also from the officers, counselors, and staff. It came from my family and loved ones who chose to stand with me, and in some instances, they stood for me. These lessons came from my appreciating the good times and enduring the bad ones. Above all, my most important lessons came from my fellow prisoners who became my mentors, teachers, counselors, and voices of reason. Which brings me to another lesson. I became a student of the Nation of Gods and Earths, and as a student of this way of life, I have had the pleasure to be mentored and taught by many great brothers. Those that I've grown to accept as mentors and brothers who constantly and faithfully walked the prison yard with me, teaching me, offering me counsel, and constructively criticizing me when I did something stupid.

The lessons I have learned from those various walks and counsel are that love and unity are more than mere nouns that describe our particular emotions. However, they are verbs, active principles that are solidified by an action. These brothers taking the initiative to walk with me, inspire me, and strive to teach me something positive was an act of love and unity. During many of these walks, they taught me the value of education. More specifically, I was taught that the greatest education a man can have is "knowledge of self," and with that "knowledge of self" came a sense of purpose and obligation that demanded of me to always be accountable and responsible. From those lessons, I've learned that when I embrace people, I embrace them without equivocation, that in itself is a healthy act of love and unity. Also, I learned that true education is a revolutionary act that can change the course of my life and give me the ability to change the lives of others.

The journey is the lesson! That's the point I strive to convey through this brief writing. Regardless of where you may find yourself or what you're going through. Whether you're in prison literally or figuratively, the hardship and the punishment are not the lesson. The journey is the lesson. Yes, we work for the outcome we hope for, but it is the details that make up the picture. So never be blinded or closed-minded to the lessons you encounter during your journey. As the Chinese proverb states, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." I only assert that with each step comes a lesson, and those lessons are what make the journey worthwhile.

Author's note

Harry "Justice" Traynham has been incarcerated for thirty years and has recently been granted parole. He is a student/member of the Nation of Gods and Earths; a board member of The Humanization Project; cofounder of P.O.I.N.T (Positive Outlook Implementing New Thinking); a Dialogue Skills practitioner; Peer Facilitator; Community, Education, criminal justice reform advocate; and author.



I'm Institutionalized

Tommy "Siraj" Helms

To hear Tommy "Siraj" Helms's interview and reading of "I'm Institutionalized", [click here](#) or scan the QR code.



I'm institutionalized...

Peering eyes can very easily see my mental scars the moment that we part our lips to exchange our greeting 'hellos'. For I walk through life as a shell of a person of some sort that's been stripped of one's natural ability to function with a flowing ease as I now live with this crippling disconnect.

The very visibility of my mental scars has most aggressively cloaked me from my lengthy stay and cold experiences that I've underwent from being housed on the inside, where razor wire draped ever so meticulously on top of restrictive fences binds me to the harshness of my present reality. Life doesn't advance beyond the daily routine of having to accept that I no longer have a say over things independently, and self-respect is something that my circumstances won't allow me to cling to. Because at any moment, on command, I must be fully willing to undress before staffers for security reasons, as if I were a horse of some sort being examined and searched for unauthorized contraband.

And solely as a matter of defense purposes, of not wanting to meet the anger or annoyance of those who've been authorized dominion over me, I've learned that it's best not to hold long stares and to hang my head low, because in here, people who are licensed to issue out punishments, wrath can be so unkind... Even with the freedoms that are often taken for granted, like having the option to eat when you desire.

I, on the other hand, can only meet such satisfactions if it's permitted or allowed, directly or indirectly, by those whose say far supersede my very own. And though I've intentionally made positive strides towards change in my insatiable thirst for growth and maturity, taking the needed steps to correct a shameful thinking that was far from ever being perfect, I can't deny or escape the staggering reality that present living conditions are all I know. For I've been housed on the inside for so long that I don't even know who I am anymore, beyond the confined scope of how I've been programmed to function Institutionally. For my days and

nights are ushered in with the rhythmic blows of a D.O.C-issued dog whistle that's taken use of to summon my obedient attention, as I most heedfully await for a proceeding instruction that's sure to follow...

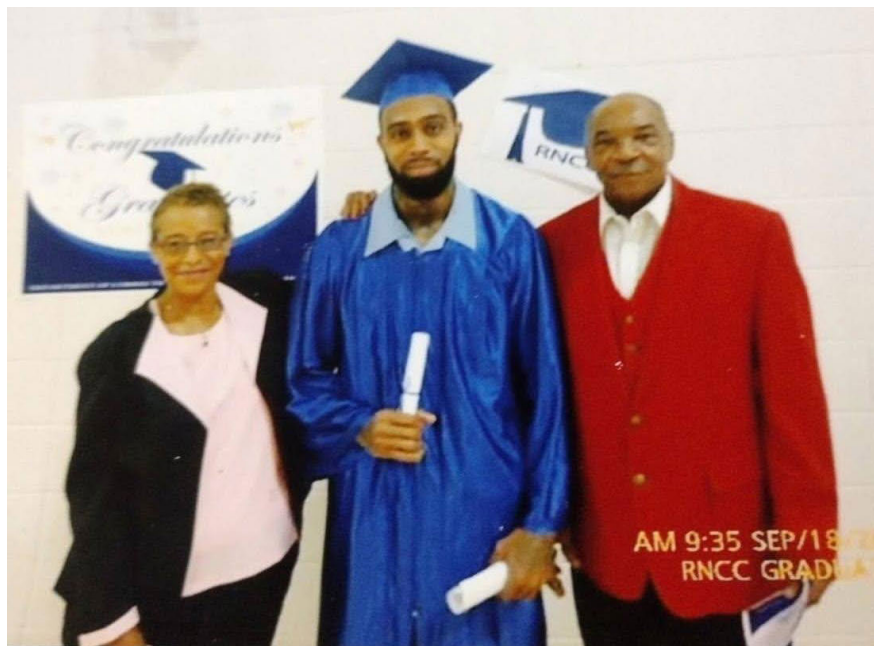
The very thought of freedom to me seems so unreal; sort of like a children's story of some sort that's being told and delivered to an adult. For there's an old saying, "When one door shuts another one opens," Which couldn't possibly be more hands-on accurate in illustrating my current fenced-in living conditions. Because although I immensely grew beyond the shackled limits of my faulty thinking and actions, the very day that the door was shut on my backside as I was escorted through it. The proceeding door that awaited me stripped me of one of the most essential things which makes us all human, Which is my very sense of identity as I now stand here utterly institutionalized, hoping to be restored with that which was taken away from me nearly thirty years ago; Which was my old sense of normalcy (freedom).

Author's note

This jotted piece was immensely personal and introspectively inspired by a few selected experiences, amongst many, that I chose to pull from to highlight a validity that often gets overlooked, which is, there's always a potential duality (downside) to the things that we think, or thought, bears a good.

Example being: My present set of circumstances.

For being that we tend to get so utterly immersed in how we perceive a thing that we fail to see the very reality of the additional side that often goes unnoticed. I chose to share some personal accounts from my present life story...



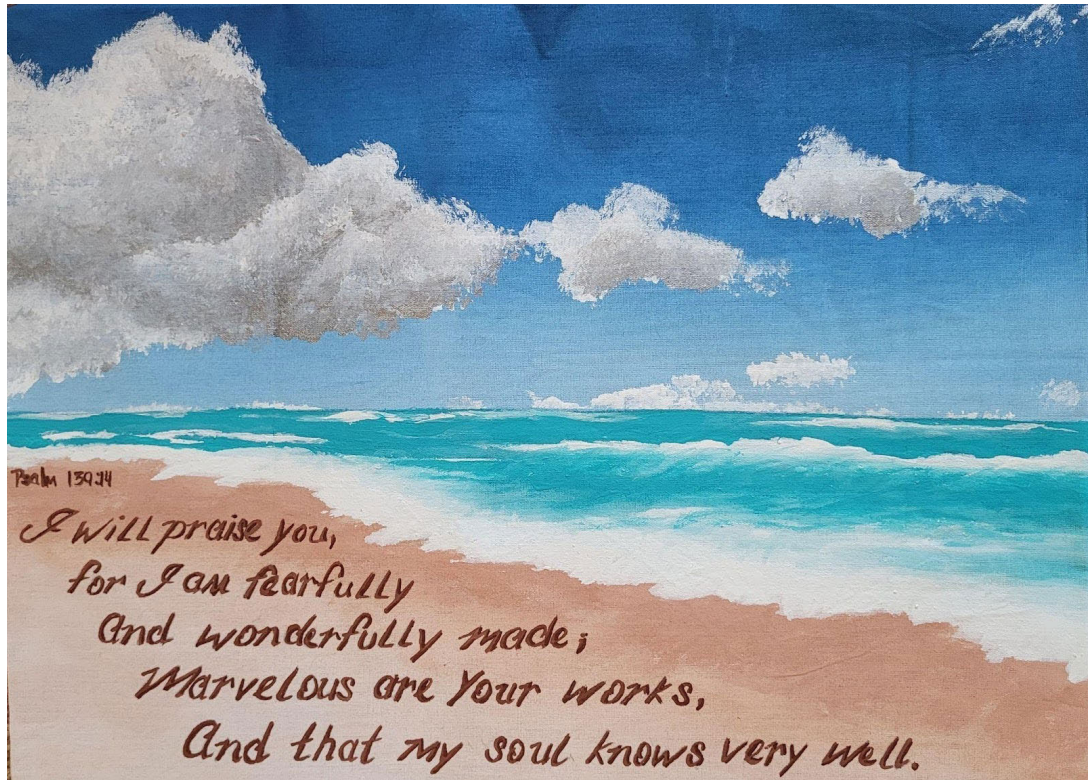
Philadelphia Eagles

Tremayne Seymour



Peace In Recovery

Tremayne Seymour



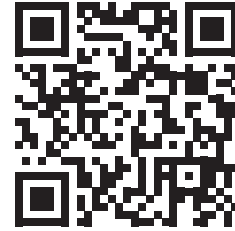
Artist's note

My name is Tremayne Seymour, and I have a love for painting. My love for painting comes from my learning how to cope with anxiety through art. Over the years, during my incarceration, I realized that the more I painted, the better I felt. It brings my heart and soul happiness when a piece of artwork that I have completed for someone brings a smile to their face. I had the desire to share my own experiences with others, and I created an Art Therapy Class that I facilitate at Lawrenceville Correctional Center in hopes of helping others with their issues as well.



Choose Wisely

To hear Shebri Dillon's interview, [click here](#) or scan the QR code.



Sentenced, Caged, Thrown Away...
Captive, Felon, and Forgotten,
Tags on the bodies of the living, socially dead

This condemnation of ours is what politicians call a deterrent,
a platform to be tough on crime or declare a war on drugs,
when it is really a genocide of souls.

So what now? Labeled by a system
we thought was just, until it wasn't.
Do we lay down and die?
Do we medicate it away?
Do we forfeit this life because they have seemingly deemed it unworthy?

All choices, but every one of those is an act of surrender.

Steel your spine.
You have survived what would kill most.
The rules of engagement have changed, and
You must advance your craft.

Sharpen your mind, solidify your skills
and identify your desire.
You are still needed.
I need you.
We need you.

Rattle the bars with each breath – it is proof of possibility.
Get quiet, listen deep.
Get connected, network-wide.
Find the good you can do, and do it.

Start small. It adds up.
But don't delay.
Time is of the essence, and contrary to what they say, it is precious.
We know the true value of such things.

Defy what was said about you.
Defy it!
Do the next right thing for the person right beside you.

Don't read their toe tag.
It doesn't matter anyway.
But they do.

Embrace your design, discover where it fits
and live your truth.
They can't take that away.

Whatever you do and however you do it,
Never, ever give up.
Your light is needed, and it is dark out here.
I need you to shine.

I think of how I cannot do this alone and how each soul with a state number has an
assignment, a homework of a kind, that counts towards life's final grade.
We are not immune because we are caged.

I think of how we can change the world, this world that we are in,
and how we don't need permission to do it.
And I think of how I know, deep down in the fibers of my spirit,
that with each one of us doing our part, we can.



Keep the Pace

Shebri Dillon

They dress me like a man, feed me, and cage me like an animal,
and expect me to act like a lady.
I pace this space that I am locked in, no bigger than a parking space,
listening to the shrill of the sergeant, that sounds like a dying cat.
She's too lazy to get up from her chair to bark her orders,
confined behind walls with her YouTube and snacks,
muffled by her own laziness.

I wonder who is the real embarrassment to society...
They say this human warehouse isn't meant to rehabilitate –
Yet they call it Corrections. And take funding for their denied cause.
I wonder, in between my pacing high steps,
if the judges really know what they are sentencing us to...
I am willing to bet they don't. They likely know in theory,
but if they knew in reality, it might make them question their life's work...

How many of our men are in cages right now?
How many belong to my Stacy family tree? It seems to be inherited,
this abandonment and incarceration thing.
I read the writings of the broken, the forgotten.
And I wonder if they know that they truly matter –
that they can change the culture of where they are...
And how much I want them to.

I think of Terrence and Tut. Of Risk and Mel, Bre, and Chris... of Lulu
and the others, buried alive but still very much breathing...
I think of what would happen if we stopped
begging for programs and created our own.
We know what we need more than they do anyway. We live it.
To offer healing to our neighbor
is to repair the breach if we each do our part.

Author's note:

I am the mother of four amazing children. I am the very first AWMMFL librarian and an advocate for incarcerated individuals, even though I am incarcerated myself. I am a paralegal, a Peer Recovery Specialist, and a passionate writer. I am also grateful, especially to Mr. Calvin Arey, who not only believes that we are not the worst thing that we have ever done but lives out his convictions in proximity and mercy, having great impact on many of our lives. Shout out to Terrance and Tut, who inspire me daily.

Dear Friend

Jennifer Mora

The road that leads to the journey to heal
is like an onion with layers you peel.
So, embrace the beautiful.
Break through when you begin to feel
years of built-up anger,
triggered by emotional pain and fear.
Abandoned and hurt by the ones you love –
Feel that pain. Shed them tears.

Go ahead and let it out, my dear.

Mommy can't help you.
She's still dancing with her own fears.
Shout it out from the mountain tops.
Let the world hear
the sound of your beautiful cries.
See the sparkle in every tear
as you reveal the scars and pain
you've been carrying around for years.
No more drowning out your sorrow
with liquor, Fentanyl, wine, crack, or beer.

It's ok to heal.
Change is beautiful, my dear.
Stop listening to things that steal your
cheer
or say you're worthless, ya hear?
Cries for help – no one gives
a listening ear,
leaving you feeling hopeless, helpless,
and alone
even when you're surrounded by
a pod full of peers.
It's ok to feel.

Change is beautiful, my dear.

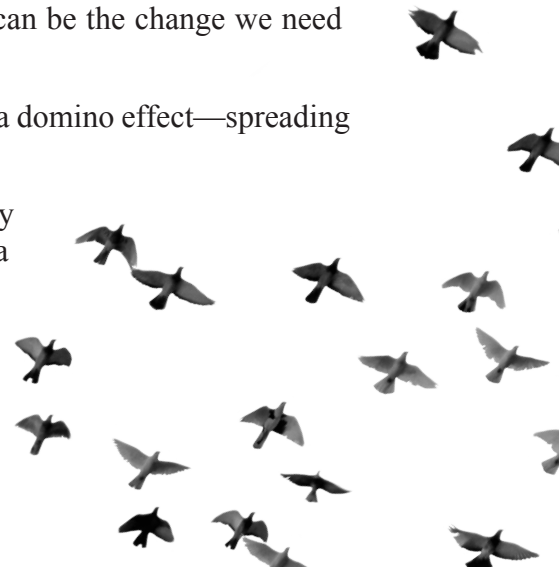
Go ahead and begin this journey
so you can heal
because you deserve happiness
and a love that's oh so real.

Author's note

My name is Jennifer Mora. I'm forty-one years young. I spend my time sharing light and spreading inspiration and love in a dark, lonely, and cold place—sharing my journey and how I found my voice and freedom behind these walls. By encouraging others to exhume their voices together, we can be the change we need in the world.

We are united in this journey behind bricks. So, let's start a domino effect—spreading encouragement, love, and respect.

If you want to send me encouragement and read my poetry, contact me: Jennifer Mora #1158077, Fluvanna Correctional Center, PO Box 1000, Troy, VA 22974



No More Fear! No More Silence!

Jennifer Mora

Red and blue lights and sirens
Cops failing to say, “You have the right to remain silent.”
Resorting to the use of excessive force and violence,
sparking global news and national riots,
bringing attention to the buried pain that lives inside us.

Tired of living in a world where corruption is at its finest.
No more fear! No more silence!
Time to take a stand, time to fight,
With our lost voices, it’s time to ignite,
shouts so loud that they eliminate the darkest night,

We want peace, joy, love, and life,
We don’t want to fight.
We don’t want to live through another bloody night,
Cuz police violate our constitutional rights.

No more fear! No more silence!
No more excessive force!
No more violence!

Time to raise our children, time for a peaceful life.
So hear my request at this time.
Sign on the dotted line
If you agree, our children deserve a better life.

In remembrance of Irvo Otieno. May you rest in peace.



Miracle

Jennifer Mora

Dear Honorable Judge,

Everyone wants to sweep addiction under the rug, but have you considered why we even use drugs?

Growing up, I wasn't given enough hugs and was raised by a woman who didn't even know what love was. Sexually abused and taken advantage of, she tried day after day, but it was never enough to keep her baby girl from growing up and getting addicted to drugs.

But here I am in recovery, able to talk about all the crazy stuff, helping others when they feel life is rough.

Keep fighting. Never give up. Stay strong. God made you tough.

Hold on. The miracle's coming... from me to you, with love.

Author's note

I was housed in the same jail the day Irvo Otieno was transported to Central State, where he was smothered by the sergeant who worked at Henrico West. So many inmates, including myself, experienced similar violence.

I pray that a light can be shed on the violence and injustice in these systems so that Irvo Otieno and anyone else who has died, suffered, and is still suffering as I write this can get justice.

I tried to warn the sheriff and the staff, and even the governor, that someone was going to die, but no one helped at Henrico. Irvo's murder could have been avoided if someone had taken my letter seriously.

Note: On March 14, 2023 seven Henrico County deputies were charged with second-degree murder. Shortly after, three hospital employees were also charged with murder.

Where It All Started

Christopher Jefferson

SENTENCE: The punishment imposed on a criminal wrongdoer.

With my family and friends in the courtroom and the intense mood the judge placed on the full house of strangers, I entered with my head up, ready to hear the punishment I would receive for, once again, refusing to accept the plea offer for two years with cooperation with police.

I'd remained long-standing in my position. Not guilty! And I meant it. But this day was about sentencing. The judge's words came with a delineation I would remember for the rest of my life. His words flowed as he broke it down.

Everyone was following. In this small, silent room, his words filled in all of the empty space. At first, these impressing words seemed to be going in a good direction, but then I began to feel the drizzle of his tone. Sometimes, like when the first stage of a heavy rain storm showers the rooftop of a tin shed, then it begins to pick up. Then, it came like the crackling of thunder and lightning.

"The court finds no reason to deviate whatsoever from the mandatory minimum in this case and sentences you to life in prison, all suspended but twenty years for the rest of the remainder of your natural life, on following conditions: that you keep the peace and be of good behavior, indefinite supervised probation, DNA samples, and legible fingerprints as required, and not that it matters, but you'll lose your driver's license."

It was done, but I was determined to fight back for the rest of my natural life. I looked back at my family and gave them the "It's o.k., stay strong" look. Then, I looked at the special agent assigned to investigate the case. He was sitting in a row just behind me. I took a look at the prosecutor and heard the words "NEXT!"

See, in life, you may never get a chance to explain every detail of your life's events, but the strong points matter. Sometimes, others can relate; most of the time, many won't be able to grasp the reality of what a long-term impact a moment of compressed anxiety can have on a person. Looking back on those moments keeps me focused on the bigger picture today. It is always going to be the same old story that keeps bringing me new motivation. In sharing this story, I aim to show an example of turning a negative into a positive—from a not-so-positive position.

Author's note

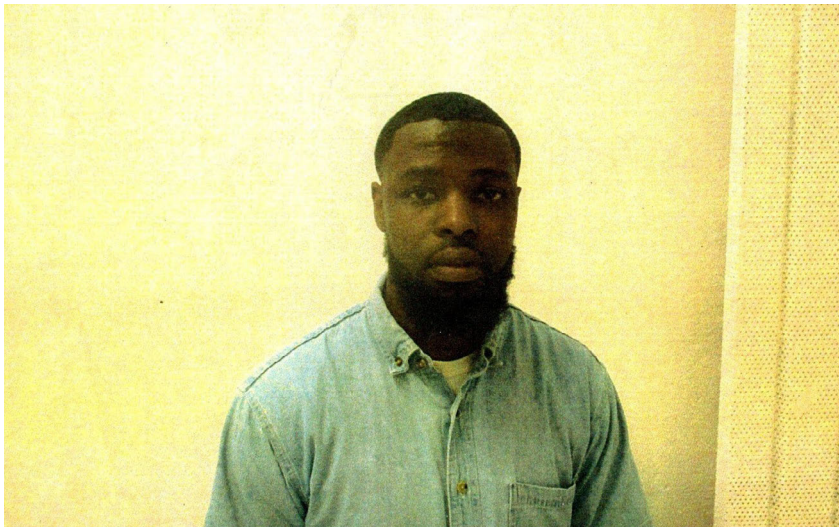
I have learned that if the right person doesn't stand up and take charge, the wrong person gladly will. Sometimes we have to step outside of ourselves and look at things from a different standpoint. Other times, we have to be steadfast in the pivotal position we are in. Long ago, my life was crushed by a decision I never let define me. Today, I am as strong and determined as I was back then. I share this with the readers to display the short moment that brought me long-term motivation that still drives me. Salute to being one still in the fight!

Dream

Shounques Bynum

I close my eyes
and let my mind
take me on a dream.
I swim the skies
and even fly
the seven seas.
I drift along
through endless time –
Go to any place
within my mind,
explore a universe
that's so vast.
I dream of a place
I wish would last.
Where my mind takes me
is where I'll go –
to a freezing sun
or steaming snow
a dreaming world
that's all my own
where it's possible
if I conceive,
do not disturb.
Just let me sleep
as I explore

and walk through doors
of new beginnings
and distance endings.
I dream of love.
I dream of peace.
I dream of more.
I dream of least.
I dream of fear.
I dream of pain.
I wake in sweats,
and dream again.
I dream a dream
within a dream
where I think and reason
as it would seem
and wake afresh
to seize the day
which speeds past
without delay.
I find my bed
to rest my head.
I close my eyes,
relax my mind.
I fall asleep
to dream again.



Blue Bird

Shounques Bynum

Little blue bird
trapped in a cage,
covered in dirt,
blood in his eye.
Will he ever fly?

Author's note

I am held in bondage at Greensville Correctional Center in Jarratt, VA. First and foremost, I would like to send a shout-out to my support team, who have kept it solid with me since the beginning—my family and friends, which includes my incarcerated brothers.

I just want to thank you all for allowing me to use the *Unlocked* project as a platform to place my artistry on display. As I approach my fifteenth year of incarceration, I breathe a sigh of relief as my life's purpose comes into clear view. I am glad I could find myself, even though I found myself in a system designed to strip everything away from you. While doing this time, I realized that I am a writer. I realized that I am a teacher, and I'm proud of it. I don't know what I like the most!

Seeing an imprisoned student gain self-confidence in his learning abilities or writing is something that causes the writer to think hard about his traditional concepts. My goal is to ultimately turn the negative environment into an ecosystem of positivity and intellectual growth. I am convinced that prison can transform into a school if we shift our viewpoint.

I'm constantly writing poetry and working on getting my first book published.

Don't forget the name: Shounques Bynum! More to come in the near future.

Peace and blessings to all.



Fading Light

Roel Delua

My light is fading.
In all seasons, it steadily wafts.
Your gentle touch could heal it,
but my glow is barely tangible.
The damp air drowns me,
but I continue to burn.
My imprisonment fuels me.
I glisten in soul-crushing days.
Yet, I somehow survive.
Time slowly robs my essence,
but I have become frozen.
What use am I?
I no longer spark warmth.
A simple breath would snuff me.
Yet, my powers remain.
How much more can I take?
A drop of water could end me.
But this concrete protects my flame.
I know I have become weak,
but I endure.
Until when, I do not know.
I just fade and fade.



Never Forgotten / Nunca Olivado

Roel Delua

Never Forgotten

Think of me,
and I'm here...
Call my name,
and you'll find me.
Close your eyes,
and see me.
Dream of me,
and you'll never be alone.

Nunca Olivado

Piensa en mí
y estoy aquí.
Llama mi nombre,
y me encontrarás.
Cierra tus ojos,
y mírame.
Sueña de mi,
y nunca estarás solo.

Author's note

I would first like to say that I'm a proud first-generation Mexican American, a proud military veteran, and the first in my family to attend college. I have always put in the work to achieve success, and I will always challenge myself to do better and evolve my craft.

And to all my LGBTQIA+ "fam", never let anyone tell you that you can't be more than you are. You are perfect. Follow your dreams!

I dedicate my work to Maria Irene Garcia and Michael Joseph Ellis.

Nota del autor

Me gustaría decir primero que estoy orgulloso de ser Mexicano-Americano de primera generación, veterano militar, y el primero en mi familia en asistir a la universidad. Siempre me he puesto a trabajar para lograr el éxito, y siempre desafiare a mi mismo a hacer mejor y evolucionar mi oficio.

Y a toda mi "familia" LGBTQIA+, nunca permita que alguien te diga que no puede ser más que ya es. Es perfecta. ¡Siga sus sueños!

Dedico mi trabajo a Maria Irene Garcia y Michael Joseph Ellis.



My Pink Arrow

"My Pink Arrow"



We the people
were once strong
and mighty

We sang and danced &
taught our youth about
honor

Holy
Like a ~~mighty~~ weapon
we paved the way
through all adversities

For Generations we were
a force like no other

Then one day the new world
broke us, thrown aside, forgotten

But they can never destroy
true will and desire

And like all damaged trinkets, "My Pink Arrow"
we will be mended, we will be renewed
we will become useful, once again

My Pink Arrow Artwork Description

Drawing of a pink, red, and yellow arrow snapped in half with the poem title “My Pink Arrow” at the top of the paper. Alongside the drawing is the following poem:

We the people
were once strong
and mighty

We sing and danced &
taught our youth about
honor

Like a mighty weapon
we paved the way
through all adversities

For Generations we were
a force like no other

Then one day the new world
broke us, thrown aside, forgotten

But they can never destroy
true will and desire

And like all damaged trinkets, “My Pink Arrow”
we will be mended, we will be renewed
we will become useful, once again

In the line “Like a mighty weapon,” the word “mighty” was crossed out and “Holy” was written above it.



Same Heart, Different Beat

James Stephens

The heart I once held in my hands,
from the purest to the most coldest.
How can I put myself in this position to lose
one of God's gifts?

A heart I broke forever,
haunted by the shattered pieces,
dropping to my knees,
Trying to figure out how to make it whole again.
Never be the same, scarred for life.

Broken promises crashing the back of the mind,
laying as waves on the shoreline.
Steadily watching the sand,
Wishing for a heart to appear
with our initials.

A figment like collecting puzzles
Looking for resemblance
or will I get resentment – the toss of a coin
with no time to spare.

Looking through the window of ICU,
My hands forming repairs, shaking up from the failed attempts
Wondering if the job of protecting it again
Will be offered as I contemplate ways
to execute, fearing rejection.

The sound of blood pumping through its veins,
Sweet music as I cradle over reminiscences.
Desperately in need to hear those tunes beat,
causing me once more to be complete.

This Is Life

James Stephens

“This can’t be life,” I uttered to myself after the 5:30 morning count, tears slowly rolling down my face, anger and guilt brewing. Chaos every day, still humble, but how long will it last, steadily fading hour by hour? Can’t get away – sleep deprivation and being institutionalized. Stuck on repeat.

Here, I’m back in this place, stripped of being a human being once more, trying to keep my sanity. Coming to the reality, this is my life. Staring in the mirror, not recognizing the reflection. Who are you? I cry out inside.

The person looking back responds, “I’m resurrected.” Time to let go and allow me to grow. As days and months pass, I’m becoming a stranger to myself. Behind these walls, you can lose or find yourself. Recidivism has no percentage, only identified by a state number with no social.

Not only confined, my mind as well, even when I was free. Could this be the same author? Different narrative, a new set of eyes – a renewed me.

Brain confiscated, reformed state of mind, seeing the bigger picture. The smallest details matter now – appreciation and understanding.

This is life.



Crashing Again

Mind racing like the speedway, thoughts rev up like RPMs.
Trying to keep from crashing, foot on the gas, running from my past.
Checking my rearview, closing in fast, trying to shake it.

Thoughts turning and twisting like a rollercoaster,
Holding on for dear life, wanting to let go, but guilt won't allow it.
But instead, it snatches the steering wheel after reaching 120 MPH,
losing control.

Leaving the ones I love on life support, now confined,
Looking on from a distance, wanting to give my all,
but can't.

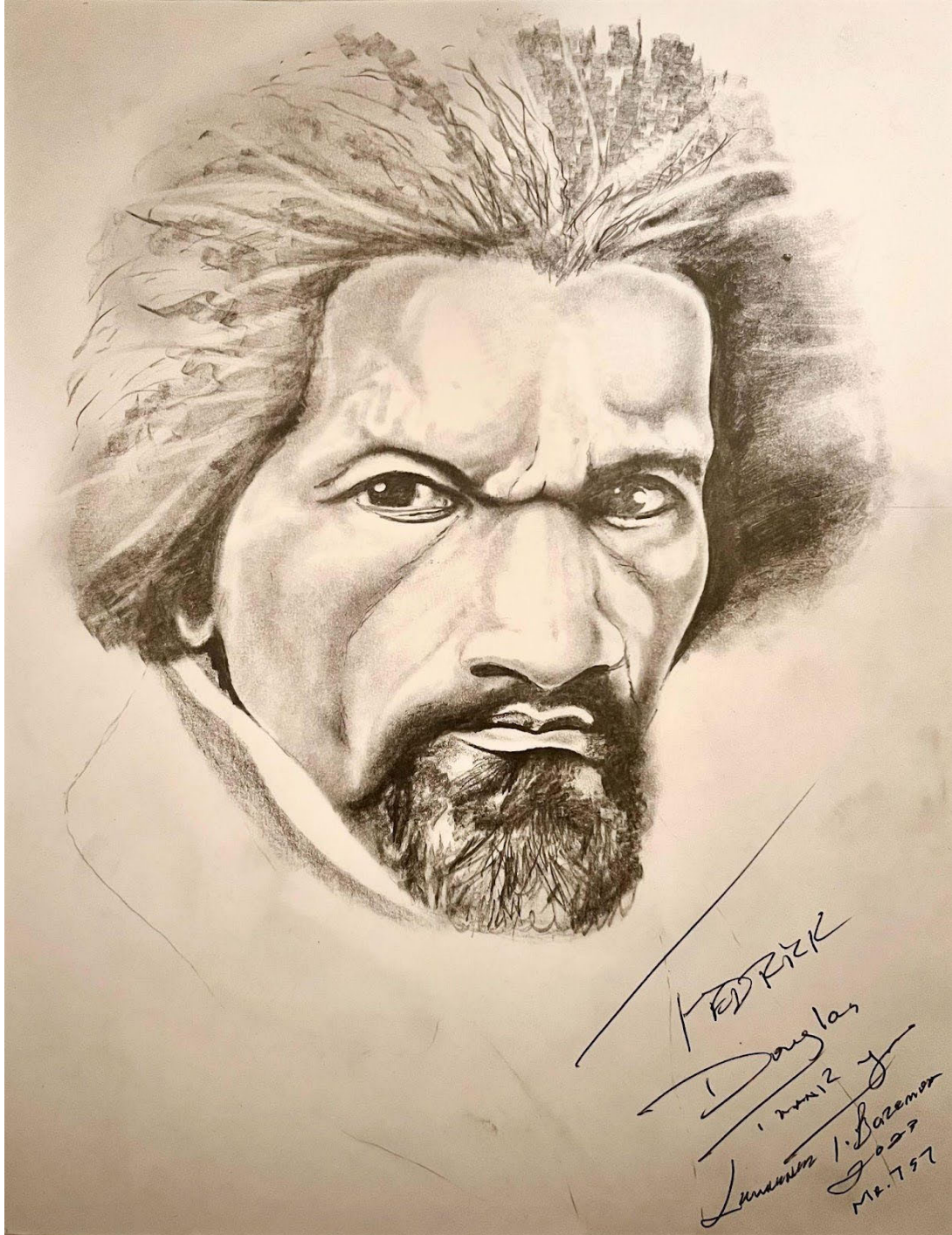
Thoughts revved back up, RPMs skyrocketing now.
Ready. Set. Go. Scared to take my foot off the brake.
Fearing my thoughts, my past driving back once more.
Damn!
I'm crashing again.

Author's note

For everyone who has read this, I hope you can take something from it and be inspired. At times, some of us allow our past to dictate how we move forward, knowing a car can't be driving with the focus solely on the rearview mirror. I have hurt the four that mean the most—crashing due to my rearview driving. Writing has kept my direct attention straight ahead and a release for my thoughts racing around the clock. I would like to thank my girls—Essence Slade, Jada Stephens, Genesis Stephens, Bonnie Slade—and my friend Canaan Swift, for pushing, helping, and inspiring me to keep writing.



Frederick Douglass



Artist's note

When you think back on history and people who stood out and would not allow the odds to silence them, Mr. Douglass was one of those Black men who had all the odds stacked against him. He was a Black man during enslavement, but also free, educated, and strong with no fear in his heart to express his thoughts and a willingness to do whatever it took to keep his freedom and fight for his rights. He continued to educate himself and others as a tool for survival. With thousands of dollars and his wild, Black 'fro, he kept himself on the move with a mission in front of him and did not worry about what or who was behind him. What has happened to the spirit of the Black man behind these prison walls?

If you would like to network with me and my team, you can contact:

Temptation Entertainment
ATTN: Temptation Penpal Services
5956 Beard Ave N.
Brooklyn Center, MN 55429



Giovanni Was Her Name

Alfonso “Ghaza” Skyles

To hear Alfonso “Ghaza” Skyles’s interview and reading of “Giovanni Was Her Name”, [click here](#) or scan the QR code.



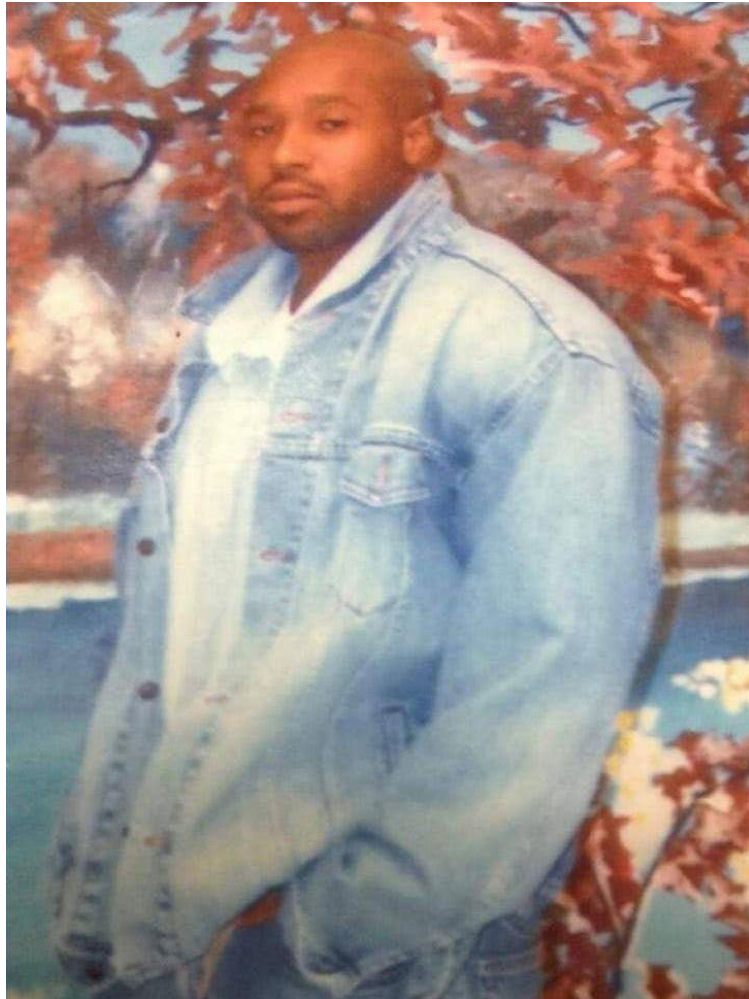
Rest In Power, Ms. Nikki Giovanni

How do we measure the contributions of our mountains;
author and activist who has made Joy those reasons to celebrate?
Time found in ways to line and margin
the stanzas to impact the World...
a Princess of Poetic expression; a loss
for the whole of Humanity,
as we remember and remind.

Products of wisdom left in the minds of those
who were fortunate enough to know;
to forever live on in the minds
of those who will learn and appreciate...
life lived, to never be forgotten,
and her Name was Nikki.

Author’s note

As we make an attempt to be our better selves, the things that we do are vital to the lifeline of things we hope to obtain. It is never easy to accept the harms of the day without hoping for the betterment of tomorrow. We are who we should hope to be.



Lift Every Voice to Sing a Solo

Alfonso "Ghaza" Skyles

Within our communities, there's a collective spirit, an identity that enlivens our individuality to fit seamlessly within the Community [note: tribal has a negative connotation in this capacity usually] mentality. When such a mentality is nurtured, the natural inclination to serve the "Greater Good" for the Universal whole will become as natural as the unconscious act of breathing.

Just as the lungs constrict and expand, so does the reciprocated balancing of a rhythmic pulse, calibrating and recalibrating against its contrast. If order and structure are the desired outcome, then that order and structure will be counterbalanced by its contrast of chaos and disruption.

Regardless of the headlines, the chaotic contrast of our wants is the constant reminder of what we are working towards, what we need to prevent, and the value of those things that foster a Harmonic Union instead of the divisive outcomes of selfish agendas pursued intentionally.

While these efforts require far more than thoughts to bring our ambitious endeavors to fruition, knowing what we DON'T KNOW is the first step to addressing the question of "How?" That Question is, "How do we courageously face the problems of the day so that we can confidently prepare, produce, and perform the necessary actions to make our Goal a point of reference that can be attained?" Why is it necessary? Or what happens when we sit on our hands and do nothing? Or when we naïvely wait for someone else to settle the affairs that affect our individual lives, and which will affect our collective well-being? Who saves the Intentionally Forgotten and Spitefully Discarded?

Sure, I understand that the same ol' promises are made, with no tangible evidence to prove that sustainable progress is in store. I even understand the fear of losing what little bit most people believe is theirs ... the fact of the matter is, if the only value placed upon a thing comes at the behest of the person or people who tell you that you can have it, what happens when they come to reclaim it, or declare you "undeserving" because THEY said so?

To remain Resolute in our endeavors will come at a cost that CAN BE PAID without feeling as if your world has collapsed. Recognizing the nature of one's circumstances while empathetically considering the circumstances of another will provide a base upon which WE CAN BUILD.

The truth is, WE HAVE TO HAVE THE SAME VISION FOR OURSELVES, SELFLESSLY SACRIFICING OUR EGOTISTICAL NEEDS OF SELF, so that we can construct the fortifications of a THRIVING & SELF-SUFFICIENT Community. Pride to the side, I am but a Servant to a much Greater Calling, as are YOU!!

What Parent has held their child in their arms and supplicated to the Most High for a troubling and harsh world? What Father or Mother has prayed for the premature death of their heir?

Who has sought the elimination of their entire bloodline on purpose because they refused to serve a purpose that would further the lives of those we say we love?

And while our individual accomplishments add to our individual value ... please remember that the value we chase and covet only has value and will remain valuable as long as it proves beneficial for oneself, one's livelihood, and one's ability to contribute to the vast and intricate workings of the communal system.

If at any time you are judged to be "worthless" or there's no "intrinsic value" in you that can be utilized or exploited, YOU WILL BE SEEN AND DECLARED OBSOLETE!! And like any "obsolete" thing within a functioning system, discarding the useless piece or section is vital to the consistent and necessary order of that system.

So you see, our very existence and the existence of our lineage will require the additions we provide to what was left unfinished by the generations that preceded us. Imagine a tapestry of painted images that will traverse throughout the ages. The brush strokes of your great-great-great grandparents can be felt within the pulsing thumps of your heart and within the neuronic surges of your brain. You are as much them as they are you ... found and woven within the intent, the thought, the muse, the action performed, the paint, the brush, and the cosmic canvas, upon which the Legacy of Generations is regarded.

You are ... WE ARE the Dreams held close; the calloused hands, wrists, ankles, and feet. WE ARE the bleeding and healed lashes. WE ARE the salves used to soothe them! WE ARE the spirit and resolve of Warriors and Royalty; WE ARE the tearless cries of the Abducted, Oppressed, and Enslaved. WE ARE the beneficiaries of pain with the audacity to endure it. WE ARE the Voices and Power to make sure that 'ALL' who have suffered and endured that suffering did not do so in vain. WE ARE the "in your face" reminders of hate absorbed, abuse absorbed, heinous crimes done to Human Beings, with the expectations that it would be absorbed!!! WE ARE flint and tinder alike, the very spark to ignite ALL meaning.

From the ruins of a constructed and orchestrated tomb, WE HAVE RISEN!! In spite of every intentional action to bury us in bondage and self-loathing, we have become a tribe, a clan, a nation, a community FULL OF LIMITLESS POTENTIAL, only to lack the confidence and protective infrastructure to make us feel secure about our efforts, ideas, and entitlements to them.

Together, WE ARE the harmonized melody of a People, a song sung in unison, to provide a singular note and sound that will lift us beyond our unwanted circumstances.

Elderly Inmates, an Age-Old Issue

Stephano Colosi

Jailing old folks makes no sense. It has been said that public safety is the number one concern when it comes to incarcerating felons who are a risk to the community. As time passes, many elderly inmates have deteriorated to the extent that they no longer pose a danger to anyone, yet they remain incarcerated, costing taxpayers across America billions of dollars in a cycle of diminishing returns for society, their families, and themselves. What is the cost-benefit analysis?

During the past three decades, the United States' prison population has increased sixfold. Research shows that this growth has not been driven by mere crime but by policies that send more people to prison and keep them for longer periods of time. One consequence of this trend is a large and increasing number of older inmates.¹

In Virginia, the prison population over age 50 increased from 715 to 4,678 from 1990 to 2008, or roughly 12% of the prison population.² Virginia spent more than \$201 million in fiscal year 2017 to provide health care to roughly 30,000 inmates at 41 state facilities, which comes out to about \$6,500 per inmate—similar to what other states spend on health care. Per capita spending is much higher, often triple the average for geriatric prisoners.³ More than 20% of Virginia's prison population is over 50 years old.

A human example of these statistics is a prisoner in my housing unit who I will call “Tony”. At age 87, Tony, after four decades of confinement, has become a ward of his fellow carceral caretakers. Each morning and afternoon, Tony has to be reminded of his diabetic condition, which requires insulin injections, and is then escorted by his peers to the medical building. Tony has dementia and has trouble connecting the dots when it comes to everyday activities—his medical needs, going to the dining hall, religious programs, or even showering, for that matter. Compared to their younger peers, older inmates have higher rates of both mild and serious health conditions, such as gross functional disabilities and mental illness.

The Virginia Department of Corrections does not have the capacity to meet Tony's needs and has essentially abdicated its responsibility for his care to his fellow inmates, which begs the question: What is the end game for this person and many more like him? And how are elderly prisoners classified as a danger to society when they can barely walk, think for themselves, or possess cognitive awareness?

As prisoners get older, the accepted reasons for punishment have less and less application.

1 Tina Chiu, *It's About Time: Aging Prisoners, Increasing Costs, and Geriatric Release*. Vera Institute of Justice, 2010.

2 James E. Arndt et al., *A Balanced Approach: Assisted Living Facilities for Geriatric Inmates*. Department of Corrections, 2008.

3 Patrick Wilson, “Virginia spends \$6,500 per prison inmate on health care each year. A new report shows the state could reduce that cost,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, November 10, 2018.

In Virginia and across the country, the number of geriatric prisoners continues to increase as the years progress. Costs increase as well, with elderly inmates requiring expensive medical care. In 2009, medical costs for geriatric prisoners in the US were \$8.2 billion. It costs twice as much, or more, up to \$68,270 per year, to incarcerate an elderly prisoner than a younger one.⁴

There is no consensus about what age is “old” for a prisoner, with the common age range being from 50 to 60. It’s clear a prisoner’s physical age is higher than chronological age, and the needs prisoners have for health services begin to significantly increase around the age of 50.⁵ There are many factors that produce earlier prisoner aging, including the stress of incarceration, poor nutrition, inadequate health care, the dangers of prison life, the damaging effects of pre-incarceration behaviors, and poverty.

It is not my intent to diminish the seriousness of the crimes many geriatric inmates have committed. In fact, I would be remiss to do so, as there are many victims whose lives have been impacted and forever changed due to our crimes. Having spoken to so many of these men over the years, I have found that, typically, their crimes were an anomaly—as most were living productive lives and made one bad decision. (Note: I do not use the word “mistake” because a mistake is something that one employs a pencil eraser to correct). Most of us have committed serious crimes. Tony is a prime example, but he was not a serial killer, nor is he beyond redemption in the true sense of the word. He was not sentenced to life without parole.

The point is that even if our friend Tony committed a despicable act 40 years ago, how does his continued incarceration benefit his rehabilitation, and what is the benefit to society? When do punishment and rehabilitation end and second chances begin? By what metric does society answer these questions and many more associated with the warehousing of humans? The confined-until-you-die paradigm undermines public safety by using expensive and scarce resources, i.e., prison cells.

Several years ago, I asked Tony where he would go if he were released. He told me that he had one living relative, a sister that he could live with in Tidewater. Before writing this essay, I asked him the same question and, sadly, was informed that Tony no longer had a place to go as his sister had passed away. The post-incarceration question for geriatric inmates presents a plethora of unknowns, as society has done little to address this issue. There are few avenues available for older and infirm folks without family or friends on the outside after many years inside. Housing can be the most difficult task of releasing prisoners after lengthy imprisonment, with many ending up in nursing homes or aided by non-profit, faith-based organizations with scarce resources.⁶ Statistically, the vast majority of old and

4 Rebecca Bowman-Rivas, and Elizabeth Smith, “Releasing Older Prisoners,” *Law School and Social Work Services Programs*, University of Maryland-Carey School of Law, 2021.

5 James E. Arndt et al., *A Balanced Approach: Assisted Living Facilities for Geriatric Inmates*. Department of Corrections, 2008.

6 Michael Millemann, Jennifer E. Chapman, and Samuel P. Feder, “Releasing Older Prisoners Convicted of Violent Crimes: The Unger Story,” *U. Md. L.J. Race Relig. Gender & Class* 21, no. 2 (2021): 185–247.

long-incarcerated prisoners will be successful, and the provision of reentry services will reduce failures to a few and encourage public confidence in and add human dimension to geriatric releases. How can we, as an advanced society, continue to turn our backs on some of our most vulnerable citizens and expect them to thrive without a life preserver after spending decades in prison?

This afternoon, as is the custom, Tony wandered around the dayroom looking for something to eat, a daily ritual I imagine he developed many years ago. A few of us know about it and leave snacks on a specific table each day. We place items in the same place each day—a piece of fruit or a few cookies when he isn't looking, and look the other way. We know that Tony was once a regular guy with self-esteem and respect and that his pride won't allow him to ask for a handout. The snacks disappear as he goes back into his cell. We have to remember to send his laundry in for washing today. At 70, I wonder how long it will be until someone has to look out for me.

Try to imagine your 90-year-old father in prison. His body whittled away by age, he shuffles, takes a painful eternity to get up from a chair, and forgets the names of his grandchildren.

How would he fare, climbing in and out of an upper bunk bed? Would he remember where his cell was in the long halls of many prisons? How would his brittle bones cope with a thin mattress and blanket in a cold cell in winter or his heart with the summer heat? If he had an “accident”, would someone help him clean up? There are people who think prisoners who commit violent crimes should leave prison “only in a pine box”.

Anger, grief, and the desire for retribution are understandable, and we can all agree that people who commit crimes should be held accountable. However, retribution can morph into vengeance. While being old should not be a get-out-of-jail-free card, infirmity and illness should change the calculus of what justice requires.

Recidivism studies consistently show declining rates of crime with age. Those who are bedridden or in wheelchairs are not likely to go on crime sprees. Most of the older prisoners I know just want to spend the time they have left with their families; they are coming to terms with their mortality, deeply regret the crimes they committed, and hope, if time permits, to make amends.

What should we as a society do? Compassionate release and medical parole programs exist in many prison systems but are rarely used and often exclude people who committed violent crimes or sex offenders, even though they are no longer able to repeat such crimes.

Virginia's geriatric release law under Va. Code § 53.1-40,01 allows for the release of inmates at age 60 after 10 years of incarceration and release at age 65 after five years. Unfortunately, fewer than a dozen offenders per year are released under this law, with hundreds eligible as the number increases exponentially. The over-55 age group is the fastest-growing segment of the prison population nationwide due to “tough on crime” laws passed as a result of the 1995 crime bill, which eliminated parole.

Virginia recently revised its medical release statute. Prior to revision, a terminally ill prisoner had to have two doctors attest that he had only 90 days to life. The revision enlarges the

window to six months, but the process typically takes a few months to wind its way through the bureaucracy, leaving little time for the prisoner to be with family.

If existing laws and policies were properly utilized and politics set aside, more aging prisoners could go home to their families, saving taxpayers countless dollars. Others could be released to nursing homes or assisted living facilities where they could receive proper care. Laws requiring mandatory sentencing that condemn offenders to old age in prison should be jettisoned for new laws that require evaluation for risk factors, to include public safety and potential for community reintegration.

If we aren't willing to change sentencing laws or increase the use of compassionate release, we will need to pour vast sums of money into prisons to provide adequate conditions of care for the soaring population of geriatric prisoners.⁷ The number of older prisoners could soar as high as 400,000 by 2030, posing a tremendous threat to state and federal budgets.⁸ That means investing to train correctional officers in round-the-clock medical care; in retrofitting buildings with wheelchair accessible cells and bathrooms; in units with lower bunks and eliminating stairs; and to increase hospice care for the terminally ill.⁹

Do we really want to go that route? In the case of frail and incapacitated prisoners who are no longer a danger to public safety and who can be released to spend the remainder of their lives under supervised parole, release is a more compassionate, sensible course of action.

As for Tony and thousands like him who have completed a myriad of programs designed by experts to improve prisoners, what good comes from them without outside implementation? After our last breath is taken on the inside, is there a place where corrections departments nationwide archive our toe tags to serve as a diploma commemorating our "complete" rehabilitation?

Author's note

Our crime is what we did, and not who we are. Second chances and redemption are not optional. Virginia's incarceration rate exceeds the national average by 65 people per 100,000 at 679 (Prison Policy Initiative). Our General Assembly will soon approve another \$1.5 billion tax dollars to fund VADOC, all while the governor presided over a \$112 million education budget shortfall. Continuing the warehousing of geriatric inmates cannot be reconciled.

7 Jamie Fellner, *Old Behind Bars: The Aging Prison Population in the United States*. Human Rights Watch, January 27, 2012.

8 Michael Ollove, "Elderly Inmates Burden State Prisons," *Stateline*, March 17, 2016.

9 Inimai M. Chettiar, *At America's Expense: The Mass Incarceration of the Elderly*, American Civil Liberties Union, June 2012.

Spoken Word

SPOKEN WORD

ISSUE: *Spring, 2025*

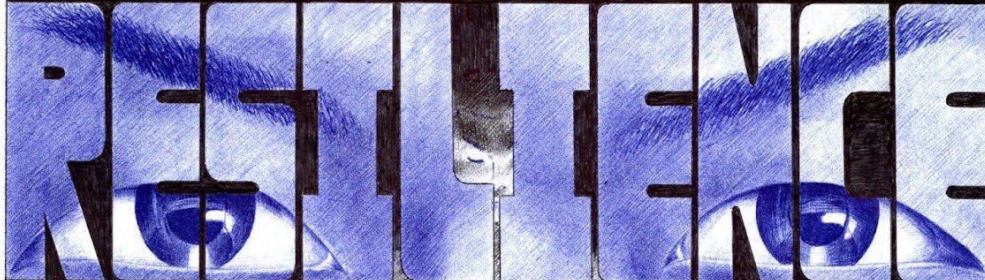
BY: MINH D. DU

Sharing: Wisdom
Perseverance
Experience

I want to keep it real, raw, and simple.

*I've made many mistakes in life... "The biggest mistake in life is LOSING YOURSELF"
Even though I still make mistakes sometime, I now learn from them, which helps me to
become a better version of myself. I'm not a psychologist, a philosopher nor a politician.
I'm just a regular person who have a D.O.C. number, wear state property, and want to
share good words with you about my story and others from which I've learned from.*

TOPIC



WE'LL MAKE A BETTER DAY
JUST YOU & ME

1

Spoken Word Page 1 Artwork Description

Spoken Word, Issue: Spring, 2025, By: Minh Du.

Sharing: Wisdom// Perseverance// Experience

I want to keep it real, raw, and simple.

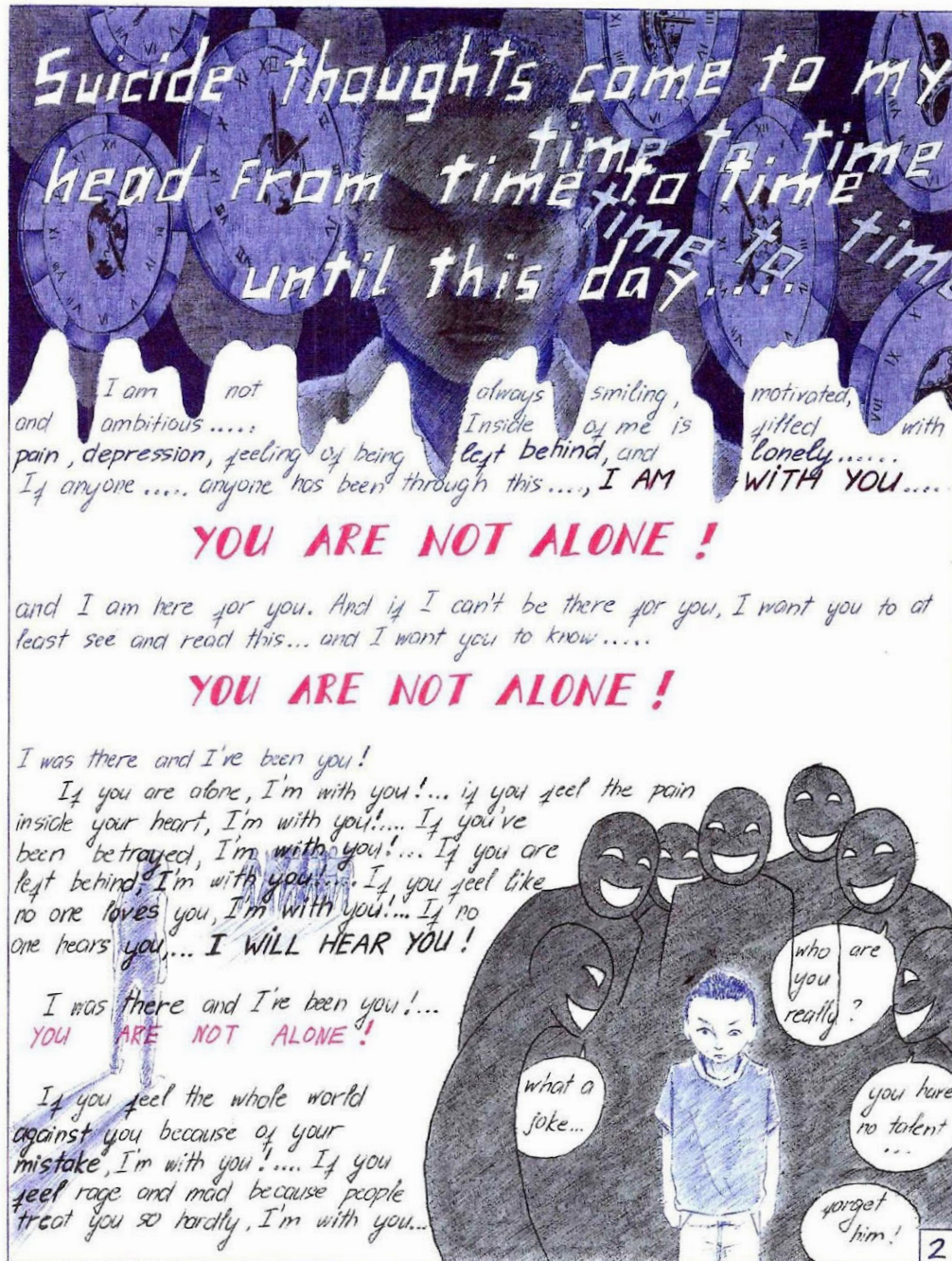
I've made many mistakes in life... "The biggest mistake in life is losing yourself."

Even though I still make mistakes sometime, I now learn from them, which helps me to become a better version of myself. I'm not a psychologist, a philosopher nor a politician. I'm just a regular person who have a D.O.C number, wear state property, and want to share good words with you about my story and others from which I've learned from.

Below this text is a man standing in a black void, hanging his head, his arms held in front of him, palms up. "We'll make a better day - Just you & me" hovers over his outstretched hands. Written across the page, obstructing his face, is the word "Resilience." Within this word is a close-up of the figure's monolid eyes, his brows drawn into a determined furrow, shaded in a bright, contrasting blue.



Spoken Word



Spoken Word Page 2 Artwork Description

The man's eyes are closed. Floating behind his head are various clocks shaded in blue, reflecting against his face. Written across is, "Suicide thoughts come to my head from time to time until this day...." The phrase "time to time" is echoed. The bottom of the drawing drips into the next section of text:

I am not always smiling, motivated, and ambitious..... Inside of me is filled with pain, depression, feeling of being left behind, and lonely.....

If anyone..... anyone has been through this....., **I am with you....**

You are not alone!

and I am here for you. And if I can't be there for you, I want you to at least see and read this... and I want you to know...

You are not alone!

I was there and I've been you!

If you are alone, I'm with you!... if you feel the pain inside your heart, I'm with you!... If you've been betrayed, I'm with you!... If you are left behind, I'm with you!... If you feel like no one loves you, I'm with you!... If no one hears you,... **I will hear you!**

I was there and I've been you!...

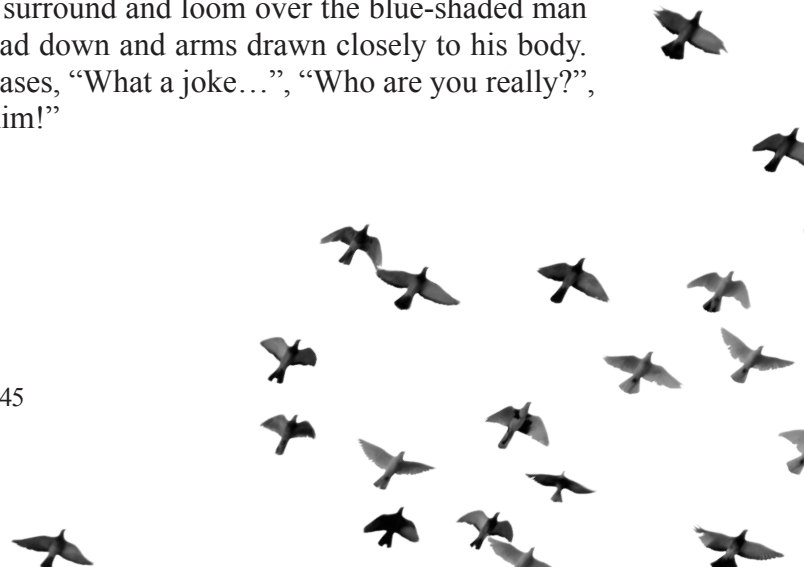
You are not alone!

If you feel the whole world against you because of your mistake, I'm with you!... If you feel rage and mad because people treat you so hardly, I'm with you...

You are not alone!

Underneath the text is a blue figure standing, facing a dark void in the distance.

Various black smiling shadow figures surround and loom over the blue-shaded man as a child. The boy stands with his head down and arms drawn closely to his body. Four of the shadow figures say the phrases, "What a joke... ", "Who are you really?", "You have no talent... ", and "Forget him!"



Spoken Word

Through years of abusive, a target for people make jokes of, got laughed at, being used, ... you have no more confidence in your self

DON'T WORRY...
PUT YOUR ARM
OVER MY SHOULDER
AND LEAN ON
ME!



I WAS THERE AND I'VE BEEN YOU...

I know how it feels I know it happened to me too and at times happen to me now while I am making this article I know it hurts so much that you want to cry You want to end your life...

PLEASE DON'T PLEASE JUST DON'T

I know how it feels, the road is too far and I am so tired. It seems like the harder I try, the more disappointment I get... I was so tired and wanted to end my life ... I wanted to leave everything behind. No one heard me ..., saw me...
LOVED ME, ... RESPECTED ME ... I FELT I WASSSSS
WORTHLESS I SAW NO FUTURE AND
NO PURPOSES ... DOORS SHUT ON
ME ... I

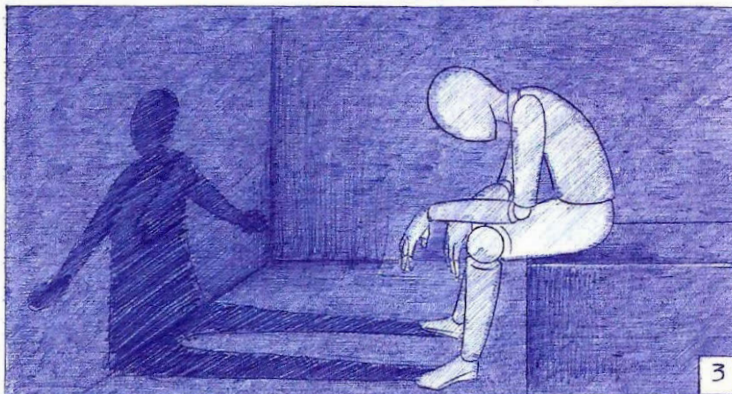
WAS
LIVING IN
MY Shadow...

and

darkness

was

my friend....



3

Spoken Word Page 3 Artwork Description

Through years of abusive, a target for people make jokes of, got laughed at, being used, ... you have no more confidence in yourself...

Below is a drawing of the man holding someone up, both of whom are shaded in blue, contrasted against a black background. The man says, "Don't worry... Put your arm over my shoulder and lean on me!"

Below this is the text:

I was there and I've been you...

I know how it feels.... I know.... it happened to me too and at times happen to me now while I am making this article.... I know it hurts so much that you want to cry.... you want to end your life...

Please..... Don't..... Please..... Just..... Don't

I know how it feels, the road is too far and I am so tired. It seems like the harder I try, the more disappointment I get... I was so tired and wanted to end my life... I wanted to leave everything behind. No one heard me..., saw me... Loved me..... **Respected me..... I felt I was worthless..... I saw no future and no purposes.... Doors shut on me.... I was living in my shadow...** and darkness was my friend....

A white, featureless figure sits on the edge of a surface with his head hanging down and arms folded over his knees. However, his dark shadow is cast on the opposite wall, with the shadow's arms spread out.

Artist's note

Art Class and *Spoken Word* were created by me, a prisoner who had NO TALENT, EXPERIENCE, and NEVER attended an art school before. The entire book was a journey of self-taught lessons and the perseverance of a prisoner who always believed that we can achieve anything we put our mind to. It is not only a book that teaches you how to draw a comic book, manga, or graphic novel, but it also includes true stories from the author and others from whom he has learned.

Excerpts from *Spoken Word* are included in the preceding pages. *Art Class* is a how-to journal on drawing that he created so that others in prison could have instruction.

Minh is working toward publishing his work.



Hope-less

Gwendolyn Burton

No more pictures on the wall. No smiles to wake up to for motivation.
Back to the basics.
The same dull wall. The patchy gray door.
Not too much color because how dare you be happy.
Bleak, musty, stale, dank, and blah.
The life of the prison livestock that we are once again.
At least we are in out of the rain. (for Now)



Mothers Behind the Wall

Gwendolyn Burton

We are problem solvers. We are nurses, doctors, mediators, coaches, and the number one fans of our children. But the truth is, we are overlooked. We are castaways trying to find our way back home. We are still trying to be the same type of loving and giving mothers we were before our crimes and all this time we were given. But then there's reality that makes it its job to show up and slam the door in our faces, leaving us only a small window. So we crane our necks to get the best view that we can as we watch them grow into their own person right before our eyes. We call, we write, we see and send pictures, and we even give advice. But through the heartaches and heartbreaks, the sad truth is that after all these years of trying to be relevant, we're still just mothers behind the walls, missing the thing that keeps the air flowing in our lungs—being a mother.



What If I'm Innocent?

Gwendolyn Burton

What if I really didn't commit the crime that you have thrown my life away for? I couldn't afford a rich lawyer, and the one I got really didn't care. I tried to tell him my side of the story, but I could tell that he didn't believe me. "You must have the worst luck", he said, not knowing just how true that was. I was the one being stalked and harassed, but no one cared. I had witnesses, but he didn't take the time to talk to them, so they could be there for me. I really did have people on my side. But he wasn't one of them. What if what they said I did isn't true? What if I am actually innocent? I suffer every day that I have to be here for something I didn't really do! How many others are like me? Or are they more like you? I really am innocent. But who's gonna care now?

Author's note

Being incarcerated can be very hard. The hopelessness that attaches itself to us as inmates, or the many other names they label us as, can be debilitating. Trying to be a mother and not just a woman who gave birth to a child, and having the colors stripped away from us so all we see is dullness. Knowing that I will soon be home with my family again makes the pain of all these wasted years easier to bear.



The Marriage Between Numbers and Words

Lorenzo Perry

Numbers and words are human beings' best ways of communicating. These two ways of expressing the truth should never be used to mislead anyone or cause problems. Lies that can be said but not proven, along with incorrect numbers, taint the process of seeking the truth. While one word and a correct account of fact-gathering can change one's destiny forever.

Apart, the two are surely important, but together, there is no doubt how powerful a force they become to everyone.



Positive Mindset

Lorenzo Perry

Having the correct insight into your situation means making sure reality matches your overall mindset. Because everything starts with a thought, stay positive. Upping the odds for a positive action to create a positive result can only happen if the foundation is positive.

Healing from the inside may not be seen or even appear to be happening at all. Yet, as long as we continue to use a positive mindset, we can be sure that the unseen work that's getting done is always positive.

Author's Note

This poem is, in essence, the articulation of several life experiences. It narrates my story and the stories of my parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors. It is an expression of "our" culture; a culture of war.

Learning Patience

Chander Matta

In 2020, before the pandemic started, I began carrying a rosary in my pocket. It had black beads tied together with black string and a plastic crucifix. It was mostly to remind me how I needed to stay strong and to remind me of my path. This rosary was very helpful during the pandemic and uncertain times. I've had problems with depression, alcoholism, and substance abuse in the past. I knew staying strong wasn't going to be easy, and I really needed help. Little did I know how this rosary would lead me out of dark times.

The rosary reminded me what my path in life was and not to let the dysfunction around me lead me back to my past self. Once the world came out of the pandemic and life began, I continued carrying the rosary.

A few years ago, a friend of mine, Andy, gave me an upgraded rosary. This one had black beads, little metal clasps, and a small metal crucifix. The only problem with this rosary was that it would get knotted up in my pocket. The little metal clasps would lock into one another, and unhooking them took time. If you were in a hurry, then you might break the rosary. I would take a moment every now and then to work the clasps and undo the mess of balled-up beads. I would unwind the beads when waiting in line at commissary, the dining hall line, or for a student to finish an assignment. Sometimes, even waiting on an officer to open a door. (We all know that can take a minute).

Taking the time to carefully unwind the beads and clasps helped me in ways that were never intended. My stress levels fell, and I felt less anxious and just more relaxed. I learned a much-needed lesson—how to be patient—mental health treatment from a little rosary in my pocket.

Sadly, as long as I have been carrying this rosary, I never really said the prayers of the rosary unless I was in church. Maybe that's the next step. I am thankful for the friend who gave me the rosary and the lessons of patience that I have learned.

Author's note

Sentenced to life without parole for a crime I deeply regret, I made corrections in my life to recover my mental health and addictions in order to serve others through education. I have been an academic tutor for thirty years and am now a Peer Recovery Specialist, a graduate of the University of Virginia Darden School of Business, and the Resilience Education Program at Buckingham Correctional Center. I am currently attending Piedmont Community College at my facility.

My “cross” to bear are the lives I ended in my rage and the pain I've caused to others. Blessed from above in 2018 and given a parole hearing—words to live by—“Cause no harm, carry one another”.

I am dedicated to the family and friends who supported me. Note: To all my therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, work supervisors, and counselors—you are also my friends and, in some cases, my “family”.



What If?

Javaros Thomas

What if you allowed divine guidance to rule your life?
What if you stopped making mistakes and made good decisions?
What if prisoners stopped using the phone and purchasing commissary?
What if the prison-industrial complex made a deal to exchange reduced sentences for free labor or voluntary service in the military?
What if poor, white, black, and brown people created their own political party?
What if all the gang members became active police officers to protect their communities?
What if every judge had to reveal their entire personal history of internet activity?
What if music and hands-on learning about nature were mandatory in elementary school?
What if everything was all bad, would you still survive because you could learn from failure?
What if?!

Author's note

I am a lifelong learner and have been incarcerated since the beginning of the gangster law, aka Truth-In-Sentencing. My experience cannot be taken lightly, and after doing this Mandela time, I'm not the type to take credit for my enlightenment. I have to thank my grandmother for giving me the spiritual armor and then too many others to name, but most of all the literature I've encountered and also learning from life and nature because there's a saying that goes like this: You may be poor, but through education, you can become wealthy and go places outside of depression, oppression, boredom, misery, and imprisonment because you are actually having a personal conversation with the author and this allowed me to see beyond what's visualized. So it is said, so it will be. I am that I am, and that's me.

Can I Get an Expert?

Natasha L. Maready

You have two children. One of them is continually in trouble. The other is not. Both of them have misbehaved in the past, but that was the past. The one who keeps misbehaving is getting into things that can hurt them and possibly others if left unchecked. The child who is no longer misbehaving sees his or her sibling and continues to make the honor roll in school and do all their respective chores. What do you do? Does it make sense to take privileges away and punish the misbehaving child? How about the well-behaved child? Should you ground them both to “send a message”? Should the actions of the few fall on the many for correction? What is being corrected with such a broad sweep?

Now, before you assume a stance of righteous indignation with the statement, “How dare you compare my innocent children with criminals!”, let me remind you that most criminals are, in fact, children. While I am referring to adult offenders, most have experienced trauma in their childhood. Trauma experts can verify that emotional maturation ceases when a trauma occurs. That being said, many offenders are emotional children. Perhaps this could be considered when doling out punishment when the children misbehave.

Author’s note

This rant was written in response to the issue of mass punishment. Treatment and recovery are what most incarcerated people really need, not more punishment that just adds to the problem. I hope to be a part of the cure instead of the Band-Aid. Maybe you can, too.



Forgiven, a One-Act Drama

Natasha L. Maready

Cast: Jermel, an 18-year-old young man going into the army, and Lisa, his incarcerated mother.

Setting: The stage, while not split, represents two distinct places: one, a bus station, and the other, a prison.

The curtain opens to Jermel on one side, holding a duffle bag and answering a ringing phone. On the opposite side of the stage, Lisa stands expectantly holding the receiver of a payphone.

Jermel: Hello.

Recorded voice: This is a call from Southeast Prison from ...

(A beep is heard.)

Lisa: Lisa.

Recorded voice: To accept this call, press one.

(Another beep is heard.)

Lisa: Hello?

Jermel: Hello.

Lisa: So ... how are you?

Jermel: I'm OK. I'm starting basic training for the army. I mean ... I'm at the bus station now, waiting to go.

Lisa: Oh ... wow! Um, that's good, right?

Jermel: Well, yeah, this will pay for my college, and I hope to be stationed somewhere exotic like Korea or Japan.

Lisa: Yeah, that would be nice ... So, you've grown up and are doing well. I'm sure you will enjoy yourself while you decide what you want to do.

Jermel: *(long pause)* I remember a birthday ... You got me a basketball cake that tasted like butterscotch. I haven't been able to find a butterscotch cake since then.

Lisa: Oh, I remember that, too! When I asked you what you wanted for a birthday, you said you didn't want a chocolate cake like your sister's. You wanted butterscotch. I don't remember where I got it.

(Long pause)

Lisa: I am sure you have questions.

Jermel: No, no questions. I just wanted you to know. I forgive you.

Lisa: *(tearing up)* Thank you. I told your sister to tell you that I'm here waiting when you're ready.

Jermel: Well, I don't know what took me so long, but ...

(A muffled announcement is heard in the background.)

Jermel: I gotta go. They're getting on the bus.

Lisa: Well, if you need me or want to talk, just tell your sister, and she will email me.

Jermel: OK, love you, Mom. Bye.

(The lights go out on Jermel's side of the stage.)

Lisa: *(pause)* Ah, I love you too, bye.

(The curtains close on Lisa, who is looking shocked at the receiver.)

Author's note

Natasha L. Maready—known to my friends as “Tasha” and to my enemies by more colorful names—is a forty-something mother of two and Ya-Ya of four. I am a paradoxically friendly Virgo who (less shockingly) loves to learn and write. I am currently working toward a BA in sociology since people and their behaviors are things I will always be able to learn more about. My ultimate goal is to help someone fully understand that they are not the worst thing they have done. Oh, and go skydiving!

To My Daughter, Ever Unborn

Mithrellas Curtis

I can see your face when I close my eyes: high Curtis cheekbones, long-lashed green eyes like mine, perpetually smiling full lips, a smattering of freckles that multiply in the sun, maybe a small mole on your cheek like your Uncle Joseph. Though I'd pray for ginger, you'd have dark hair like mine, like your Aunt Silmarien, like the Granddaddy you'll never know—not quite as dark as your Meemaw's, though hers is threaded with gray these days.

You'd have your Aunt Gwynnie's laugh and your Uncle Mark's quick mind ... and probably all the scars and baggage with which we've all wrestled all our lives: The addiction, codependency, depression, eating disorders, violence, and volatility that has bedeviled our bloodline for generations would be your burden to bear.

And that is too great a risk. I know how the bonds of love can never quite overcome the chains of trauma, the years of intense work that may or may not prevail against the wounds of heritage, of upbringing, of circumstances completely beyond your control. And you, my beautiful daughter, deserve so much more than that—more than I or any of my kin could give you. Innocence is too easily broken.

So, instead of birthing you, I pour myself into birthing transformations—in myself and in other women whose scars mirror my own. Like a midwife, I tend them as they realize the potential for new life that lies within them, attend the first flutterings of their prenatal self-worth. I coach them through the labor and delivery of their fragile, nascent identities and walk beside them as they learn to parent themselves. I stand with them as they fiercely defend this new life they have created, a life that is all their own, a life full of hope and promise for their future—and their own daughters'.

And so, my daughter, though I gave you up long ago, it is not for lack of love. No, it is with an abundance of love that I sacrificed the chance to witness your life so that I could be a surrogate mother–sister–mentor–friend to so many. I've dedicated my life to imbuing them with your joy, your heart, your spirit, helping to heal the countless daughters already born and broken by this world.

This is my legacy and my gift to you, my daughter, ever unborn.



Two Haiku

Mithrellas Curtis

Bare branches claw sky
where leaden clouds hang stilly
undeterred by spring

Suddenly alone
your memory torments me
Where did you go, love?

Author's note

When I first delved into writing, it was through journaling, and pain was the inkwell into which I dipped. To my amazement, I realized that the more I spread the ink of pain upon the page, the less remained inside me to fester. I devoted myself to extricating those dark emotions, to exorcizing the demons of my past, and I discovered beauty buried within me. By tapping into the wellspring at my core, I've been able to move through the pain and uncover a plethora of emotions previously unknown to me: Hope, joy, passion, peace, and well-being.

Now I think of my writing like wind blowing through trees: It's not just the wind that's heard—not just my voice, it's the sighing of thousands of leaves, their voices brushed and absorbed, amplified by the wind. Although each leaf is unique, they harmonize and meld into one voice—one story—for the wind to carry. Because at heart we're all human, and all life—celebration and suffering, birth and death—is the human story. I may tell that story in a unique way, but it's not just my story. It's humanity's story.

I want my words to tell people, “I see you. Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, in mirth or in mourning, you are not alone. You are never alone.” And I hope it sparks conversations that connect people, that get them talking about the ways that we're all humans doing the best we can at this thing called life. Through sharing our stories—humanity's story—maybe we can open up and be a little more empathetic, a little more compassionate with others and ourselves.



The Farm Boy

Jerry Sayers

Mama, don't let your farm boy grow up to be a convict.
Don't let the sheriff come and take him away from the haystacks,
The pigs a-squeaking, the cows mooing, the dogs barking – So quick!
The sheriff came and took the farm boy away in big steps.
Doggone! Farmboy looks out the steel bars. There's no tests!
He only hears a whistle, no rooster's crow. No more text!
Farmboy's hearing gone bad.
Count-count-count, no Dracula. Where's my bed?
Farmboy knows, bounding mischievously about
somewhere in the clouds, Said!

The sacred drums of glory sounding in my bed.
I know I'm not dead because I have been fed.
With all that being said, not being led.
Hops and starts, the old merry-go-round, said!
Rat-tat-tat, the drums playing a soft melody, bad.
As I awake to never-never land, why am I so sad?
Pooty soon! Go-get-em, on my feet to always help my dad!
With all this said, I better be quiet, I reckon. That!



The Coal Miner

Jerry Sayers

It was Monday at the mine
Us, mankind, began the climb
Everything was good in all the signs –
All the coal to mine as it lies.
Just another day in the coal mine –
Swings of morning to fly to the
upmost parts of the earth!

Matthew 25:36

Author's note

Imagination is the beginning of creation. I write poetry because it makes me happy. Poetry allows for language with the volume turned up! The creation of a poem is better than anything I could ever dream. It brings a melody that the wind carries to our hearts. Every great poem begins with a dreamer.

I was born in the Appalachian mountains, just a country boy who can't gallop around the pastures no more—one who seldom spoke and seemed to be speaking a foreign language. I have walked many a thousand miles of country roads, always singing a soft melody, a piper's tune. I was surrounded on all sides with stories and the dust of history.

My eyes perceive the present, but my roots are embedded in the grandeur of the pass, the magnificence, the mysteries and mystical growing up in the mountains as a child of the sun's poetry—creating a surrealistic vision of creation on the highest mountains which can be reached by a star twinkling above our world or seas and sky as I write.

I am pretty fair to middlin'! I pray all have a good day as well as tomorrow. God's love gleams in my life and is always silver bright. Please walk with me as I play the sacred drums for my life to be free.

Whispers of the Forgotten: A Prison's Lament

Who are you, stranger?
What are you doing here?
Compared to my residents,
you seem ... different,
not a lost soul drowning in days,
spent in wasteful ways.

When my doors slam shut,
they open floodgates –
A torrent of remorse and regret.
Why don't you fear me?
Don't you know who I am?
Don't let my stillness deceive you;
within my walls, killers breathe,
criminals well-known and feared.

But my oppression? It's adored.
I am their second home,
a revolving door,
a cycle of despair –
They dare not break.

Don't let my name confuse you.
Though I hold people,
I am out of control –
I am chaos in disguise.
No temple of education,
nor a ground for self-growth.
They call me a correctional facility,
But I am not a place of education,
I am nothing more than –
a gladiator school.

I am built as a warehouse,
a dumping ground for the restless,
a storage space for the overflow:
The restless, the ignorant,
the expendable, the weak,
the fatherless youth –

whose only lessons are learned
from the shadows of my walls.

I am designed to oppress,
to break and control.
Within my walls,
sins are boasted,
pleasures justified,
peer pressures reign supreme,
and consciences fade to dust.
Ignorance snuffing out conscience.
Dreams, goals –
all derailed,
lost in my unforgiving embrace.

Yet I see something in you,
something unfamiliar.
Your heart does not tremble before me,
nor does your hope collapse.
You don't lie in this bed of despair
the way others have.
You dream of freedom,
not to repeat the past.
Your heart holds something unfamiliar
to me:
A blunt defiance.

Others have yielded,
lost all hope of freedom,
dwelling only in their yesterdays,
but you challenge me.
You refuse to submit.
You are not like the rest.

Yet, I am built to break you.
It's my purpose
to crush rebellion,
to bury humans alive
within razor wires –

and iron cages,
turning lives into hollow shells.

They put you here,
in this big mess,
though they don't reflect:
Has their justice been served?

Author's note

If someone were to ever ask me, "How's your life been?", I'd simply reply: "In life, I have found more than what I lost. I received more than what I gave. I never got what I truly wanted, but I'm always blessed with what I need." I'm a true believer that if places were ever to define you, then no one would know the real you. A few old souls still remain on earth who consider the substance of a person over their appearance, beliefs, or where they are in life now.

I am proud of who I am today. When I was brought to prison, I was nineteen years and eleven days old. I did not comprehend what was going on as I arrived in the US with my family from Pakistan, just two years earlier. My English was at a six-year-old level, and my written comprehension at a fifth-grade level. Hence, at every stage of my legal ordeal, there was someone to break it down for me and interpret. Yet, no one understood that I was innocent. I spent the next few years learning and educating myself. I would stay up late to study. English became my priority. I studied hard, got my GED and certifications from many vocational programs, and even a paralegal certificate.

I am thankful first to Allah and then to those countless prisoners who took me under their wing and taught me English and how to navigate life in prison.



Prisons: A Reflection on Freedom and Self-Imprisonment

The concept of prisons has long intrigued me. When did humanity decide that depriving a fellow human being of freedom, family, and happiness was a justifiable punishment for their wrongdoings? More so, how this concept was widely acceptable morphing into our current penal system. History is rife with tales of skirmishes, wars, and oppression, alongside them, the concept of captivity. In ancient times, prisoners of war or political dissenters were often thrown into dungeons, despicable places devoid of light, sustenance, and dignity. Their fate often rested on ransom, prisoner exchange, or the grim inevitability of a trial, which frequently led to execution in the most gruesome ways: guillotine, stoning, whipping, amputation, or hanging. These punishments, carried out in public squares, served as both retribution and a chilling deterrent.

But as we evolved, so did our systems of justice, or did they? At some point, we embraced the idea of prisons not merely as holding cells but as instruments of punishment. Yet, we must ask ourselves:

Is incarceration ever truly just?

Can it genuinely equate to the crime committed?

In certain cultures, punishments extended beyond the individual to include their families or honor. For instance, in some Asian societies, nobles faced harsher penalties because their crimes were seen as a double offense against the ruler and their family's dignity. This dual punishment reflected the belief that personal actions could irreparably harm the collective reputation.

Today, we no longer live under monarchies that mandate public executions or operate infamous dungeons of despair. Yet, prisons persist on every continent. While some have become symbols of rehabilitation, others are infamous for their brutality. These are places so harrowing that one might not even wish them upon their worst enemy.

But the most dangerous prisons, in my experience, are not physical. They are the ones we construct within ourselves. These self-imposed prisons are the most fortified and insidious. Unlike the walls of concrete and steel, these prisons are built with fear, doubt, and self-loathing. They are guarded not by armed personnel but by our own insecurities and relentless self-criticism. One becomes not just his own prison but also its heartless Warden.

In a physical prison, there is always the hope of pardon, parole, the possibility of release, or even freedom through escape. But the prisons we create within our souls are far more relentless. They have no windows to offer a glimpse of hope, no doors to welcome a visitor's comfort. These walls are built to shield us from perceived dangers, but in truth, they isolate us from joy, growth, and connection.

Self-prisons are unique because we are their architects, prisoners, and maintainers. The walls are fortified with skepticism, distrust, and excuses. Over time, the initial sting of self-imposed captivity dulls, and we grow accustomed to the bitterness of our own oppression. Some may even find a twisted solace in self-pity, becoming addicted to the fleeting rewards of sympathy and justification.

The harshest critics I have encountered are not strangers; they are individuals trapped in these self-constructed prisons. They habitually see good in others, admiring their growth and cheering their success, but find only flaws in themselves. This imbalance breeds despair as they fail to recognize their own worth.

Yet, there is hope. As the great scholar Ibn Taymiyyah once said:

“A real prisoner is the one who has been captivated by his lust and desires.”

This is a reminder to look inward. Have you wronged yourself more than any external force ever could? Have you become your own greatest oppressor?

To free yourself from this self-imposed captivity, start by embracing the truth: You deserve Joy, Love, and Freedom just as much as anyone else. Break down the walls you’ve built with kindness and self-compassion. Begin by giving others what you wish to receive. Love yourself not as an indulgence but as a necessity.

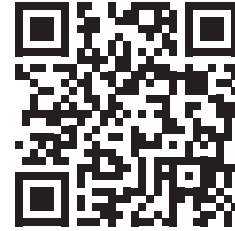
For me, the question shouldn’t be when or how prisons came to be or how dangerous they are, but rather understanding the reality that true freedom is not just a state of being; it is a state of mind. To liberate yourself is to reclaim your life and your purpose. No matter how fortified the prison, the key lies within you.



Exclusively In and Out

Canaan Swift

To hear Canaan Swift's interview and reading of "Exclusively In and Out", [click here](#) or scan the QR code.



A botched relationship sabotaged.
Why we sacrificed our friendship, from
pure to corrupt.
Now we no longer know each other.
I feel nothing, the slightest chance of
surviving being paralyzed.
You forgot what I look like,
and I forgot the sound of your voice.
I once told you I loved you.
But you cut your tongue out;
Immediately, everything changed.
No pain, no gain. What did you expect?
A mess, blood splattered everywhere.
I'll never know how you feel.
Your actions said so much more.
Feeling regretful, I hated what I
expressed.
Remaining quiet, vulnerable emotions
fell to deaf ears.
What I predicted definitely was not this.
In opposition to what I expected, you'll
never know.
Surprise me not.
Being involved comes with a cost.
So quick to walk away.
Life can be so unnecessary, difficult at
its worst.

Batteries never last, eventually, death
would come.
Don't let the sun fool you; the storm is
coming.
Pressure bust pipes while the truth tell
lies.
Music to my ears, tell me what I want to
hear.
Complications come and go.
Life can be so dilated, push,
I can see it coming.
And I can see it going,
For what reason, I can't explain.
The rhythm, the tone, the melody –
Too low to be so upbeat.
It is what it is.
As I close my eyes, I remember I'm not
blind.
Dirt under a rug washes away.
But I know the dust will always come
back.
Stiff pain aroused, it's only right I shake
my head.
When the smoke clears, the tears dry.
Don't laugh; I'm serious.
I no longer care anymore.

A Little White Lie

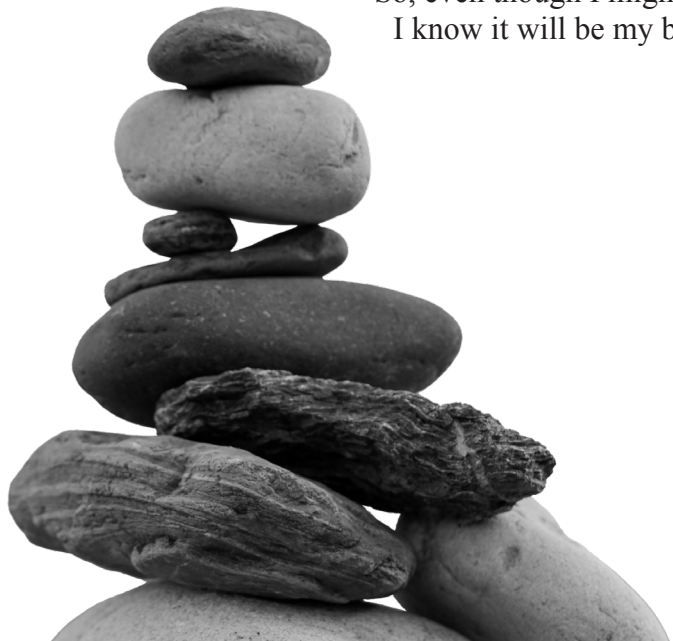
Canaan Swift

The number one rule.
Any and all emotional connections were off limits.
My conscience told me not to engage.
I told myself no kissing and not to discuss much.
Nothing too deep, and especially something far from serious.
But she was so irresistible.
Her smell, her touch, her look.
I couldn't help myself.
So lusting didn't seem so bad after all.
Inhaling all of her, pulling her close.
So divine, knowing nothing else but perfection.
This was everything I thought I had wanted.
But the wrong slip-up is not what I needed.
When attractions are mutual.
I knew I was in trouble.
She fell first,
Something I really didn't expect.
I fell later, thinking I was fooling someone.
Putting up a front.
Had I been a little more transparent.
Neither one of us would be here.
Only the thought of, is what I wanted.
But actually you, I should've known.
Being honest came with less regret.



Unknown, Unseen, Unheard

It's crazy how I've hid my feelings for so long.
I thought I put this one to rest.
Somehow, this past of mine met up with my present.
The mask fell off, revealing everything, and now the cat is out of the bag.
Realizing now, I could never really forget anything, especially you.
Trying to stay focused ain't enough.
I'm aware this could be a test.
And all it takes is one time.
The wrong choices chosen.
Seems like one hell of a foreshadow. I know how this ends.
No faith in making the right decision anymore.
But sometimes the space is needed,
was needed.
But why was it needed?
Why must life be so complicated?
The risk versus the reward.
As I tell myself, what's really more important?
Why women fall too fast and men fall too late?
Which outweighs the other.
Gas lit, put to bed, can't fall for the hype.
Missed opportunities are clearly that –
Something that shouldn't be missed.
All over the place, not knowing what to do.
Up, up, and away, out of this world.
I wish I could go, maybe I need more time.
Awoke, still trying to wake up, hoping life was a dream.
But it's not; it's real.
Clearly, what I know, I've learned.
And has made me who I am.
So, even though I might not know my next move,
I know it will be my best one.



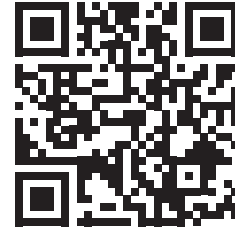
Author's Note

“Masculinity was the old news covered up of what and how they teach us as men. What I know now, being unapologetically vulnerable, I express so much more. How beautiful could that be?”



* P.O.W. *

To hear Joshua Hairston's interview and reading of
"* P.O.W. *", [click here](#) or scan the QR code.



In the early days, a year or two before
it was declared a major war,
I remember...

At times, I am visited
Fragmented memories of families
happily coexisting,
My neighbors were friendly,
the neighborhood was a village.
The future was the brightest
back when parents breathed
in the promise of children

That was before I became a Prisoner of
War: The War on Drugs.

Overnight, from precinct to fort.
A show of arms
A force of Arms Deployed,
Underprivileged,
Over patrolled.
We Were Unprepared For A War.

Reagan's Administration
a warlike regime,
("Just Say No")
invested billions in his war machine,

An All Out Attack...
dispatched on my kinship,
extracting us children,
attaching AT-RISK,

categorized delinquent, created status
offense:

Our Initiation, The System...
Crack babies, super predators,
we were earmarked for prison.

I Am A Prisoner Of War: The War On
Drugs.

100-to-One Crack Disparity:
Philosophically corrupted,
Mandatory minimum sentences:
Illogical Deductions

Coerced Cooperation
Nefarious Operations

The New Democrat,
a warlike regime,
(Tough-On-Crime),
supercharged its war machine

Crimes of war,
in times of war,
no regard for the charm of Geneva

I know a woman,
when she was younger,
suspected of concealing her partner's
evils,

questioned at gunpoint,
sequestered at some point,
practices,
internationally
established, illegal.

I Won't Say Her Name...

Save Her The Shame.

Unwillingly,
she took part in an agreement,
quelled her grievances,
expecting lenience.
Relief sought, physically and
emotionally distressed.
Peace Talks commenced with the cease
of threats...
unable to bear the thought of them
taking her son,
she gave an account...
a made-up one

23 years later,
signed an affidavit.
She retracted her statement.

A Prisoner Of War: The War On Drugs

Reagan's Administration
a warlike regime,
(Sent cameras to Inner Cities)
invested billions in his war machine,

Affordable housing portrayed as Drug
Zones.
Tactical Teams frequently raided our
homes,
invaded our home, openly harassed.
What could I have possibly done to hold
them back?
Did not stop –

Kristallnacht... Night Of Broken Glass

until they found
what resembled powdered soap in bags.
Evidence, along with a fold of cash
Confiscated. My guess is Uncle owed them
that.

Cracked my family to pieces,
drove us homeless, displaced our
belongings,
our sense of belonging.
Left my childhood soaked in gas
then monitored my adolescence, holding a
glowing match.

I Am A Prisoner Of War: The War On
Drugs.

The New Democrat,
a warlike regime,
(Exploded The Prison Population)
supercharged its war machine –

An inner city cleanse, an inner city kid.
I witnessed my neighborhood spin itself
undid.

Geographical Disaster.
Half my life, I spent eluding capture, the
other half in shackles –
An African American boy harboring anti-
American sentiments...
nothing can be more natural.

I Am A Prisoner Of War: The War On
Drugs

His sister, she appeared to be the only one
on his side,
the only one caring if he survives.
Thousand-yard stare in his eyes.
In prison, I was told, is where he lost his
mind.

* P.O.W. *

His spirit forever will be
institutionalized.

My uncle spent 23 years behind enemy
lines.

A Prisoner Of War: The War On Drugs

“Crack” kept her for weeks,
guarded her from sleep
Insomnia brought her some ease,
offered her reprieve,
too hard for her to sleep,
scarred by what she’s seen –
the sound of her baby’s scream...
She hears in every baby’s scream.
Light jumping off his badge,
the scent of cigarette smoke
glimmer of gold,
hints of shaving cream
not the same feelings of hope,
are inspired by the sight of police,
bloodied hands wring her clean,
spring her to a crease,
a wrinkle in time,
her nightmare relived,
her night terrors released
P.T.S.D...

The Disorder Haunting The Original
Traumatization

Assault rifles pointed in all of our faces.
taken hostage, the unconscious replaying
– stasis;

My mother was a woman with co-
occurring disorders...

An indomitable combination.

A Prisoner Of War: The War On Drugs

I swear by The Partnership for a Drug-
Free America,
Drug Policies... Politics,
Cocaine Capitalist... Profiteers
exploited our weakened immunity,
destroyed our grieving communities.

The most vulnerable demographic –
Neighbors turned combatants
adjacent city blocks into factions...

A Rebel Force
Readied For Tour
A Warmonger, the NRA
celebrates the prospect of war.

Every side, intertwined, finds its
support.
fratricide, enemies of each other,
brotherly no more

The War...

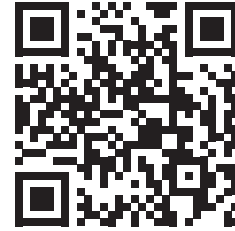
I remember.
At times, I am visited –
memories of families happily
coexisting.
My neighborhood was a village.
Parents cultivated the promise of
children.
We were encouraged to be friendly.
The future was brilliant
just a year or two before
we were made prisoners of war.



A Weekend of Displacement

Anthony Winn

To hear Anthony Winn's interview and reading of "A Weekend of Displacement", [click here](#) or scan the QR code.



The lady walks across the room.
with dignity boasting on her shoulders
like a crown of locs
fashioned by the nurturing hands
of a thousand mothers
ancestral roots of royal eloquence
that extend longer than immemorial
skies.

She floats in between prodigal sons
eclipsed from the urban wild
growing, uprooted men
as maternal instincts gravitate
her towards her own
 son tries to sit motionless
but emotions flame
unfamiliar syllables in his body
language.

Curiosity forms long creases
on his forehead that draw deeper
than someone's last breath spoken in a
parable
because nostalgia clouds his sight
of a little boy of his likeness
walking beside his mother
a reflection in the mirror to the past
when life meant video games and
sleepovers.

Tight, he embraces his mother
losing himself in an earthly warmth
a place where their souls first met.

Tears, a therapeutic cleansing
loosens and undresses
the penal years of
an abnormal cost of living
 as the child stares with wistful eyes
and a closed mouth full of:
 Are you my dad?
 When will I get tall?
 Why can't you leave with us...?

Their eyes dance in a tongue too
emotional for words.
So he hugs his son, his heir
like a wedding band holds a promise:
never to unlock his bond.

Sitting at a table
that is small as their talk
short as their minutes allowed,
an officer makes it his duty
to undermine their visit
like missing teeth ruin a smile.

With a blank finish, sadness
renders his face
and displays a growing man
who has misplaced his responsibility.

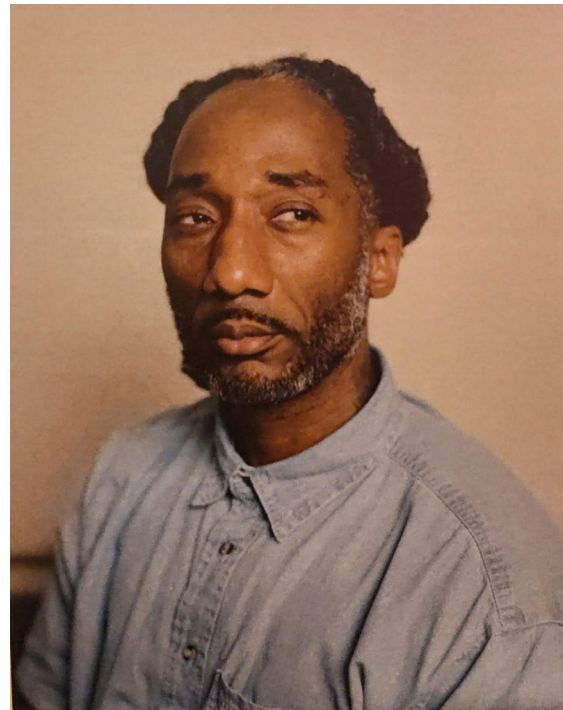
it doesn't matter!

Anthony Winn



Artist's note

Not to expose too much about the allusions and interpretations of this artwork, this piece illustrates the principle of economy, meaning it was composed with the least number of lines. I wanted to capture the fact that most of the time, my right will be wrong against oppression. Inspiration came from the artist Titus Kaphar.



14th Amendment & U\$

Tevin McGougan

Wondering about the immense violence in Chicago, from
my studies of gang organization.

Could it be the Government's objective, gentrification through assassination?

Partnered with mass incarceration & constant media desensitization?

Don't that create a plan of invasion within the confines of standard education?

Wow! Former FBI Director Hoover thought it wise for drive-by shootings on mob
guys.

They shared conflicting agendas, so it's a little more covert against you and I.

Propaganda plays a part, like the War On Drugs, chemicals they gave

Our fathers and mothers.

Mandatory minimum sentences destroy _____

Families under false moral courage.

Do you remember the 1950s' reading tests created to
force out whose vote?

It evolved into the one-sided legislation of today called the New Jim Crow.

Disenfranchisement accomplished by double-think and evasive
talk of citizenship.

Is this the same 14th Amendment that bonded us to a dictatorship?

1903's *Young v. Commonwealth* gave light to a subtle duality –

That God didn't come from Heaven and give rich _____ people sovereignty.

I recall VA's Constitution saying we are inherently equal,

where in prison in body or mind... Only you can free you.



Unworthy by Distance

Tevin McGougan

Did me breaking your heart make me unworthy of my own daughter's love?
Her granddad just died; you didn't even call back. Now, what do you think of us?
Do our mistakes as humans make us unworthy of the ones we cherish?
I talk to my daughter once a year; what will she think at ten or eleven?
She will never see the missed calls or three-ways straight to voicemail.
My daughter won't get to feel how much I yearn for her, as I'm exiled here in hell.
She's too young to remember I talked to her daily before I lived in a cell.
Mother of my child, I'd video call u at work just to see your face... a faded memory.
The most unfathomable thing in the world, now you see me as an enemy.
Unthinkable at one point in time, it's been years since you abandoned me.
Hindsight of all my mistakes would spread to the end of time.
I wanted you for my wife, but would not leave my oldest child behind.
The totality of happiness in my soul, the human form of my once innocent heart.
She has my eyes, my face, my humor, she even has my walk.
Is it easy because you don't have to face me, not picking up your phone?
Is it satisfying that I was wrong & maybe never coming home?
These questions are answered by your silence, inaction, & excuses.
Passive aggression 400 miles apart... still... it is abusive.

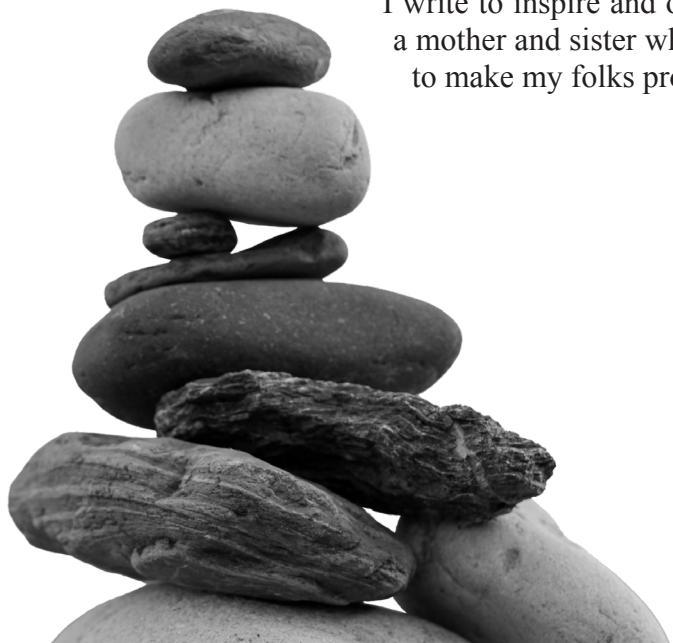
American Prophecy

Tevin McGougan

Charles Fort wrote, “I think we are property” in 1916.
Land of the free? Corporate surety runs right into slavery.
No conventional explanation for a national monetary debt
When the Treasury prints money & we can discharge credit.
Excluded from certain knowledge, like prison-censored books.
Overseers, the hundred cameras, it’s deeper than it looks.
Who are the real crooks when marketing algorithms create billions?
Do you think it incomprehensible it can be used to increase the killings?
Call of Duty mayhem, the silent loner, what’s on his mind?
A shooting spree, no accountability, playing PlayStation 5.
What about the 9,941 black men murdered in ’20?
America’s 20K-plus homicides, coincidence is blasphemy.
It’s time for a paradigm change; stop the profits in death & chains.
The compassion-less decaying brains, masses depressed & strained,
Where would we be if we thought of each other & not piles of cash?
Developments across the board for the humankind to advance.
I think we’d be chilling with aliens, plenty of time with short-lived relatives.
Free energy & counseling, healthy human beings... America, heaven-sent.
But the darkness is pervasive. Why’d Virginia end its parole?
The propagandist ideals that hide God from our souls.
How to explain sending weapons so quickly but never diplomacy?
Destroy a man after he lost himself & profit economically.
A national deceit seen through the eyes of college & prison.
Liberty for all: it’s time for America’s new vision.

Author’s note

I always want my daughters, A.T.S. and A.I.M., to know that they are my heart and motivation, and I love them. I’m fighting and striving to get back to them. I write to inspire and open minds. I am forever thankful and blessed to have a mother and sister who have stuck by me through thick and thin. I just want to make my folks proud—using this experience to make it all make sense.



Streams

Eugene Schuler

The windows to my soul
meet
The soul to my windows...

Down by the stream –
rippling imperfection...
I am the dreamer

who dreams
in streams
of perfection.

Author's note

Eugene “Gino” Schuler is “The Caged Bird,” and I write the stories for the voices that cannot be heard. Through my journey, may you find peace, love, laughter, and most importantly—self. I am a poet, artist, and entrepreneur from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, NY, (Avenue D—Stand up!), I am the author of the Sticky Notes Poetry series and creator of Stick World.



Emancipated

Darren Harris

No longer, will my eyes wet my face
with salty tears rushing down
causing waves in my cheeks
that only your hands can wipe away
if they could be reached.

No longer will the numbness of living
this life without you increase
Decreasing is the self-inflicting agony
That is receding now when you speak.

No longer, will my starvation
to be loved be exposed, and
neglected from God's earthly angels
leaving behind despicable bones
that have been disposed.

No longer will I be a slave to my
addicted ways in anguish while
in fiery flames, listening to the
whispers from a devilish liar.

No longer will I lay in a bed of nails
that I made and be chained to my past
because now six people carry me
to what twelve people gave me.

No longer, will my eyes wet a face
that was flooded in a sea of
lifeless, unimaginable darkness.
Because now, warm bronze hands are
wiping away the sadness that once lived
on a face that is now being reached.

Free Me

Darren Harris

Free me from being alienated
from my own desires and
from lying still enough to hear
worms skirmishing through the earth
eating roots and grittier-than-me dirt.
Free me!

Free me from being engulfed
in this soil of disgraced, emotional
separation
feeling mournfully alone
until after the rain stops and
the birds land down to peck away
the uncovered grass seeds. Free Me!

Free me from being hated
by my loved ones
because of being given a length of time
where my skin will renounce itself
from my bones and
my hair will blow away
with the leaves. Free me!

Free me from being anchored
by self-pity and chained
to the sinful resounding memories
that echo off the walls
and the windows rattle when I scream.
Free Me!

Free me from being a failure
at trying to live an acceptable life
instead of assassinating the life I loved
to now being surrounded
by the sounds of moans turning primal
from the excitement
of me decaying. Free me.

Author's note

I am at Lawrenceville Correctional Center (#1120930), a poet who believes in “unlocking the power of words by birthing them visually.” I believe that Mental Health is more than just a slogan, it's words to make awareness of psychological and social indifferences, as well as a pathway to treat minds.

I also would like to thank the staff of both the Coalition for Justice and Virginia Tech for providing incarcerated writers and artists with a much-needed platform that gives a voice to the voiceless, hope to the hopeless, and a physical life to a once judged, incapacitated human life.

Worthy of Recognition

Marlin Maurice Dumas

As far as I can remember, I have always been disregarded and counted as nothing from the moment of conception. Even now, in my 40s, life has come with numerous stigmas, many distorted concepts, and flawed conclusions.

Being the product of a child molester is the nightmare that I believe all my psychological bulls*** stems from (but who cares). No excuses, though. It's just another story with its own sting: but shame on him who took my mother's innocence and it's shame on her too for thinking it was cool laying down, having bastard children, chasing drugs and men while abandoning her children, forcing us to be raised by an alcoholic grandmother who thought she'd inherited a few runaway slaves as grandchildren. Her beatings were unmerciful and she was forever telling me, "Boy, you'll never amount to nothing but another no good ass ni**a who's bound to wind up dead or in prison." Now you couldn't tell me my grandmother wasn't a psychic because I became just as she predicted: just another "no good ass ni**a."

Twenty-six years ago today, in my immaturity, I made a decision that changed the course of my life forever when I let peer pressure place me in circumstances. I'm still struggling, straining, and striving to attain clarity as to why. Why was I dealt this hand? Why was I unfortunately the one who was always overlooked, always the one ridiculed and abandoned by everyone who was supposed to care for my well-being?

As I sit in the mountains of Southwest Virginia, gazing at life from a prison cell, all I can do is continue to hope to experience something I never knew was so precious: freedom, liberty, the ability to pursue whatever your mind can conceive without restraint. For years, the longing to achieve, accomplish, to taste freedom has become my drive, my thirst, Worthy of Recognition.

See, I believe those who sit around and pass judgment without restraint or compassion fail to understand I was just a child yesterday, but I am a man today – a man who's sacrificing everything within myself to be the best version of transformation, even if nobody is willing to acknowledge or count my efforts worthy of recognition.

I strive every day to be someone worthy of recognition among my peers and staff members who think my life's existence is nothing. I strive every day to be someone my lovely wife Haamedia Hali, who's clearly in this struggle also, can be proud of despite these chains, despite the negative narrative that I bring to the table. I make no excuses. Neither do I strive to minimize the poor choices I made as an immature adolescent. So, please hear me. I don't see anyone's sympathy.

I desire an opportunity to show that I am not a menace or future danger to society, an opportunity to live as a productive citizen beyond these gates, just one opportunity to be a man for once, instead of #1137348. I just want an opportunity to be who the consensus and statistics from day one said I could never be: someone worthy of recognition.

All My Life, I've Had 2 Fight

Marlin Maurice Dumas

When I think about my upbringing and my life overall thus far, all I can say is that it's been a fight. My circumstances have been catastrophic, but please don't misconstrue this expression, for I do not blame anyone for where I came from or who I am today.

My intentions are solely to make it very clear that my existence on this earth for the past forty-three years has been a constant fight that seems like it has no ending, beloved. I came into a world ridden with so much hate, bias, and negative opinions about my fate.

My conception was a crime in the first place. My mother didn't ask the fifty-five-year-old abuser to impregnate her at fourteen, only for her to drop the baby off on her bitter mother, who was abusive.

Every day, I am left wondering, "why?". Why did I have to be the kid who had to fight for everything – to be loved, accepted, and respected by the very ones who were supposed to care for my well-being? Why couldn't I be the kid who came from a loving home? Instead, I got to be the child who was the product of a child molester, and where verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse were the ingredients of my life's course.

All my life, I've had 2 fight.

Even when I decided to run away from that abusive situation, I only found myself entering another one. All my life I've had 2 fight ... In my opinion, the abuse wasn't deliberate, though. My grandmother was very strict and stern because she thought she was really protecting me from the Big Bad Wolf (the world and the dangers I'd face while entwined therein). But those beatings were unmerciful, and the isolation was damaging to my perception. But in the midst of it all, I could still sense her love for me.

So I understand me: my life has been nothing I would ever glorify. All my life I've had 2 fight. But through it all, I've learned to appreciate the journey of life's struggles and strife and everything that comes my way.

All my life, I've had 2 fight from all sides of the coin. It has never been easy living my narrative. All my life I've had 2 fight. Twenty-seven years trapped in a system, just praying for one opportunity to prove to myself that I am not a failure. Living my narrative is a fight I wasn't prepared for, but was created to face off with. Here I am, a sixteen-year-old child, entering a cold and callous environment (prison) with no clue on how to survive. Fighting, fighting is the mindset I had to take on in order to stay relevant. It's just so defeating at times, but I continue to fight. I continue to persevere through all those trials and tribulations. I continue to excel at being the man anyone would be proud of. Most importantly, I continue to excel at being the man I'M proud of.

Author's note

Hello everyone! My name is Marlin Dumas, better known as Mazi, the Minister. I want to extend my love to everyone, and for those who are fighting for a second chance, continue to fight! This, 2, shall pass. Thirty years of this world (prison), and I am still finding inspiration to strive to be a better human being.

The (Lil') Butterfly Effect

Raheem Langhorne

Aimlessly inching along without rhyme or metre
seeking shelter with no one to take you in
a heart alone in a world of dangers.

Prey for the predators swooping down
pray for the sun beaming down
trying to prevent from being consumed.

Wounds self-inflicted, burning your skin,
scars tearing your heart, you tearing mine –
so small, yet so impactful.

To the world, you're just inching along aimlessly,
prey for the predators swooping down
misunderstood, alone as you, Miss Eunice.

Silent tears no one sees or wants to hear
not understanding your beauty, beautifully you
hide from their cruelty, reality, and judgment.

Surrounded by silence, questions, sadness,
rejected, in a cocoon of spirits and smoke
not the silky haven of arms and love you deserve.

You need a change from this old skin –
loneliness killing you. I almost lose you –
the world not appreciating your worth.

I've looked for you for decades, never finding
the light to defeat the darkness
they buried me in deep, silencing my screams.

When will I find you, beauty?
Reveal yourself to me. I need you.

I pray for the sun to beam down on me.

Wounds caress my body outside, my spirit within
scars tear my heart, broken, shattered
tears unquenchable are the only kisses I feel.

Pain envelops me as if my skin
wanting to hide while already invisible to all
alone among masses, inching along aimlessly.



Lost and Found

Raheem Langhorne

Lost
in a world not knowing where I'm going,
trapped, enveloped in darkness, loneliness
grafted where my skin should be
though I am not.

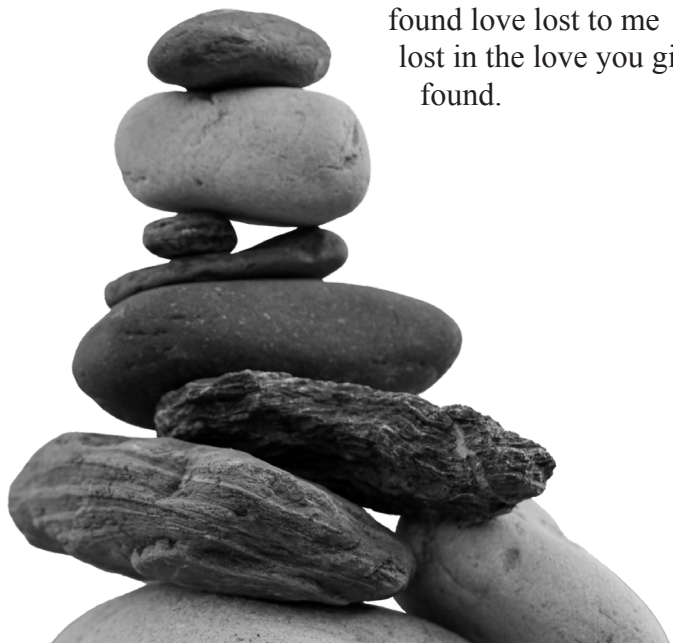
Found out how special you truly are
gentle, beautiful, a treasure lost
buried by those who did not treasure
you are one in nine billion.

Lost wealth unrecognized by an untrained...
I love that you are priceless –
an empress to my empire,
a star to my solar system. Light my way,
lest I fall from this trip to heaven.

Found my creative juices again
imagining you in my arms, imagining you
touching me, caressing you
found what I've been searching for
found a completed version of me.

Lost in my thoughts of you –
losing my sanity without you by my side
losing the fight of love again to pain
losing my nerve you gave, ashamed.

Found by you when I was lost
lost in pain when I found you
found love lost to me
lost in the love you give forever
found.



83 Days

Raheem Langhorne

A voice sweet and soft
yet powerful enough to awaken a sleeping giant
A giant hole
filled with words and actions of love
Love – young and inexperienced –
a love never felt before
Before I knew you, I loved you.
I loved you genuinely
with no thought of regret
Regret the neglect you feel
in my absence, not being there
There to kiss, to touch you,
look you in your beautiful eyes, as I hold you.
I hold you deep in my heart.
My heart waiting, waning
as it lies broken, crying
Crying silent tears
inside and out

Out of options,
tears, time
Time is up

Author's note

Words cannot be heard without ears to catch the vibrations that emit from them, eyes to see how they are arranged, or a mind to perceive the message meant to be felt with the senses. My life has been one large voice that began with tears and a curse. I have never been anyone, anything, anywhere, or lived. I am a Libra scale that has never been balanced. With fear instilled by others dictating my every decision, I have always been voiceless and powerless, so I let other poets tell my story:

“... they say my life ain't worth living, and time is slowly ticking away; don't think that I'm going crazy, 'cause thoughts be running through my head. I know I gotta be strong, gotta hold on. Sometimes, I'd rather give up instead, seems like I'm better off dead.”

Blackberry Molasses – Mista

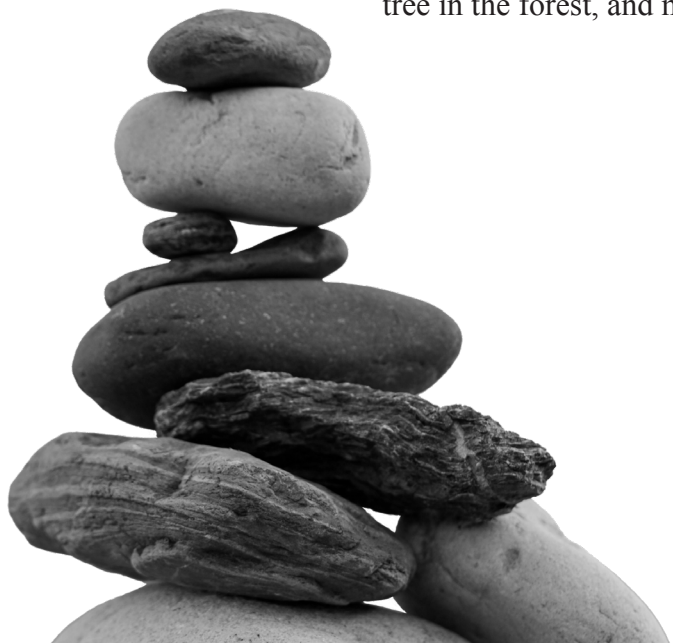
“... I don't want to live in chaos; it's like a ride that I want to get off; It's hard to hold onto who I am when I'm stumbling in the dark for a hand. I'm so tired of battling with myself with no chance to win ... I swear to God, I am such a mess – the harder that I try, I regress. I'm my own worst enemy right now. I truly hate being me. Every day feels like the road I'm on might just open up and swallow me whole; How do I feel so mighty small when I'm struggling to feel at all?”

Hold On – Adele

“I carry a smile when I'm broken in two ... how blue can I get? You could ask my heart, but like a jigsaw puzzle, it's been torn all apart, a million words couldn't say just how I feel ... and nobody knows it but me”

Nobody Knows – The Tony Rich Project

What is life void of freedom and love? What is love without reciprocity and action?
Does a man exist if he is invisible? I am that invisible man. I am that proverbial tree in the forest, and maybe I tell someone else's story.



Appendix

Interview transcripts



Appendix: Interview Transcripts

[Listen to the interview here](#)

Taj Mahon-Haft

We are here today, honored to be here, with Anthony Maurice Jordan, a really close friend of mine, and one of the truly moral, ethical, and intelligent people I've come to know in prison. He's going to recite "Reflections," his piece. And so, I'll just turn this over to you, Maurice. Introduce it the way you would like, and please go ahead.

Anthony Maurice Jordan

Well, thank you for having me. It's truly an honor. In prison, you know, [*Inaudible*], our voice isn't heard very much. So, to have this opportunity, you know, it's truly an honor. So, this piece, you know, I call "Reflections," and it starts off like this:

As I sit in my cell and replay events of my past, from childhood to the present, I can say unequivocally that out of all of my hardships, pitfalls, ups and downs, I am blessed.

I was born in Welch, West Virginia, on July the 5th, 1969, to James and Hester Mae Jordan, their first child. Strange thing, though, I can tell you who my parents are, but I can't tell you anything much more than that. My memories of them are hazy and spotty, and no matter how hard I try, there is one memory that I seem to have a problem in conjuring up: I can't ever recall a moment of seeing them together.

Many child psychologists say that children will suppress traumatic experiences to the point that when they reach adulthood, they can't even recall the event. Sometimes, I wonder if this is what is happening to me. I'm constantly searching my mind for tidbits of information, which, for me is like watching a flickering 1920s silent movie. What I do remember is moving back and forth across state lines to stay with either my father in West Virginia or my mother in Virginia.

I do remember, while in West Virginia, spending very little time with my father and more time with people I assumed to be family. To this day, I'm not sure. While in Virginia, I have very little memories of staying with my mother because most of my memories are of group and foster homes. Now that I think about it, I'm amazed at how, with such an unstable childhood that I have no history of juvenile delinquency, and how I was able to graduate high school. Man, I loved high school.

It was during my first year of high school that the Junior R.O.T.C. program was instituted, and because my father was in the Army Reserves, I thought this would be the opportunity for me to make him proud. When I told him about me signing up for the class, I distinctly remember a blank, expressionless face saying, "Oh, yea!" The only fond memory that I have of me and my father is of us together and him teaching me how to maintain my uniform, how to shine my shoes, how to polish my brass. In those sparse moments, my mind was like a sponge soaking in everything that came from his mouth. It didn't take long for those moments to dissipate.

After graduation, I felt that I was an adult, and that no one could tell me what to do or how to live my life. So I headed out on my own. I left West Virginia headed for Newport News with about \$800 in my pocket—money that I had saved by working as a bagboy throughout high school. Although legally I was an adult, I was ill-equipped to take on the role of being a man.

Manhood is one of those concepts that many young males think they understand, but in reality, have no understanding of. Because they never had any examples of it in their lives. I was one of those young males.

Prison has a unique way of distorting reality, and when an undeveloped mind enters its domain, that distortion is shaped into the wiles of desire. It takes a focused and committed mind to not succumb to the distortion. Unfortunately, many do.

In prison, I reconnected with my love for reading, a love I had developed at an early age.

Through books, I learned so many things about myself and the world around me.

Through books, I was able to incorporate character traits that I never had or knew about.

Through books, I mentally sat in classrooms of professors and historians. Through books, I sat in the labs of scientists, and through books, I was able to sit at the feet of sages and wise men and women. Through books, I was able to learn what my role is in relation to other human beings—a servant—a role that I now gladly embrace.

The end.

Mahon-Haft

Man, thank you for sharing that, Maurice. I know you fairly well, and I knew some pieces of that, but I had never heard that. And I think, especially knowing you, first of all, you do act as servant. And secondly, it helps me understand a lot, and I appreciate you sharing that. For readers, listeners, what would you say the process of being able to write—and you mentioned this before you recited it, it's nice to be heard, writing it, expressing it, being heard. What does that do for you as a person inside with so much to offer the world and confined from the chance to do so?

Jordan

Well, you know, there are many aspects, you know, of my life that I have never told anyone, you know. Even in, you know, writing this piece, “Reflections,” there's a lot of information about me that I left out, you know, very painful information. What I did reveal—a lot of this, I had never told to anyone, so to be able to release that, you know. And in prison, you know, prison creates this cocoon, you know, everybody—or the majority of people in prison—they put themselves in a shell, and to express yourself in the way that I just did, it's kind of like a taboo. You know, you don't do that.

So, I held a lot of this—I hold a lot of this stuff in. And my mind, my heart, and my soul is screaming to let this stuff out, you know. So, again, like I said, to have this opportunity to release some of this. It's a stress relief, you know, to be able to get some of this out—yeah, so.

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Mahon-Haft

So what reflections, memories—these are powerful things in everybody’s life. But I think they hold a special power and weight when we’re away for long stretches, when we’ve got long bids to do. How would you say—what do memories and reflections like this, or, like, of any sort, mean to you in the context of your perseverance and your existence inside?

Jordan

Well, you know, for a long time, I held, you know, a little animosity against my parents, you know, because I was like, “Man, how could they have done me this way?” you know. Books really, you know, saved me in so many ways, and they put a lot of things in perspective for me. I don’t hate my parents. I don’t, you know, have any animosity toward them. In actuality, I actually have more love for them today, and both of them are deceased. I have more love for them today than I ever had because I now understand the hardship and struggles that they went through.

You know, I grew up poor. Both of my parents were poor. Both of my parents, you know, they worked all their lives. So, I understand how hard it is. Growing up in West Virginia, one of the, you know, poorest states in the union, you know, growing up in the coal mines of West Virginia, you know, seeing a lot of—at the time, I really didn’t pay attention to it, but now here, looking at hindsight, seeing the poverty, you know, and understanding that, I now have more love for my parents, you know. People respond to life differently, you know? Unfortunately, my parents responded to it in the way that they did. But again. I look at myself now and I can say I’m blessed, you know.

Mahon-Haft

I am certainly blessed to have gotten to become your friend over these years, man. And you alluded to the power of books in that piece and in driving your transformation to this role of servant. For the sake of everybody out there, what would you say some of the most important books—what books would you tell anybody that they absolutely got to read?

Jordan

Oh! Definitely, you have to read *Until We Reckon* by Danielle Sered. A very powerful book. I would recommend *7 Habits* by Stephen Covey. I would recommend *Man’s Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. Those three books have really gave me a foundation that I am truly grateful to have.

Mahon-Haft

I can’t even tell you how happy I am that those are some of your answers. Those are some of my favorite books, too. Made me feel like I did a good job reading. So, yeah, no, those are all, *Man’s Search for Meaning* was a profound, it is a profound book, I think for everybody who ever kept—really opens their mind to it, especially. All of them, and I agree that Sered’s book for reconstructing our justice system is fundamentally important too, completely. But those, what is it, 150-something pages that are tiny half pages of *Man’s Search for Meaning* has all

that weight to it. It's incredible.

Jordan

Yeah.

Mahon-Haft

So, in being a servant, one last question here. In being a servant, what do you feel like some of the things that you do that are most impactful as a servant in the community where you live now, you are part of a community. So, what are you most proud of as a servant?

Jordan

Helping others. I mean, you know, service is about, you know, not thinking of yourself less but more so thinking less of yourself—or should I say vice versa. In prison, in this environment, you know, I see it all the time. There's a lot of self-centeredness, a lot of egoism, you know, a lot of focus on oneself and not focused on, you know, things outside of self. Again, I've learned from many people, learned from many places.

You know, I remember the comedian, Steve Harvey. You know, the concept—one concept of service that I learned from him was that, look, no matter what you do in life, no matter where you go in life, everything that you get, you get by way of another human being. So, depending on your attitude, depending on your character, will determine how successful you are in life. You know, Viktor Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* says, "Hey look, don't chase success." He says, "Because if you do, you'll never get it." He says, "Success is a byproduct of service." He says, "When you commit yourself to something greater than yourself, then you are successful." And that concept I hold near and dear to my heart.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, you do. It's something that really resonated with me in that, too. And I think that you getting through all this time you got, just like I didn't even have, you know—I served what felt like a really long time, but nothing compared to what you've had to endure.

It got me through. I think that that service, that higher purpose is also the key to perseverance and resiliency in that setting. So, that's my follow-up thought. I'll let you add on whatever you want there. Then just say goodbye in however you would like. What are your final thoughts?

Jordan

You know, again, I can't stress enough that I do see myself as being blessed. You know, when I think about, you know, my travels in life, you know, from my earliest memories all the way up to this point, I have met some amazing people. I have met people who have helped me grow and develop and mature. You know, and—

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You have one minute remaining.

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Jordan

—I'm truly thankful, you know, and I look forward to the opportunity, you know, to expand my service.

Mahon-Haft

Well, thank you very much, Maurice. We appreciate you.

Jordan

Thank you.



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[Listen to the interview here](#)

Taj Mahon-Haft

I'm here today with a good friend and really incredible writer and thinker, Kermit Williams. Kermit, will you do me a favor and introduce your piece, "What Could Be the Price of a Soul," yourself and let us hear it in your voice?

Kermit Williams

Yes, thank you, [*Inaudible*], I can. My piece is called, "What Can Be the Price of a Soul":

Why do we hate each other to the point that we are willing to kill one another? What is it about anything we could possibly say that could be so egregious that surrendering the right to live is the only recourse to rectify Our grievances? The impulse in us to Kill Us has become so habitual that the expression "black on black crime" is as much the fabric of Our existence as the air we've taken into Our lungs.

I've always said it's not what you say, but are you saying the right things? The harsh reality is that black society has experienced an epidemic of incessant violence towards ourselves for so long that We haven't even recognized our contribution to the reinstatement of slavery through mass killing and incarceration, and the perpetuance We lend to it.

How can we say We are not afraid to die when we've never experienced death? Consider the residual effects. A mother loses her child, a child loses its father, a family loses generations, a community loses their neighbor. Words can hurt, but they don't have to be life-ending. Our appetite for self-destruction must be extinguished by our responsibility to cultivate young minds into grasping the value of life's purpose and acknowledging not only the right to exist, but to exist and thrive.

Thank you.

Mahon-Haft

Wow. Yeah, thank you. That was—

Williams

I stumbled little bit, but I kept going.

Mahon-Haft

No, it's okay. It was really powerful. I think when we're performing something we care about, it makes us nervous. And, so I did, I heard feeling and I heard caring, and you talked about life's purpose and you're writing this. How does this piece relate to what you see as your life's purpose?

Williams

I'll be honest with you, [*Inaudible*]. I have always concentrated on, you know, or contemplated over my life. I've always sat down in the bed and thinking about what I could have done different. But more importantly, what can I do going forward? I believe that I've taken so much that giving back is the only thing that I can do. I look at the news and I see tragedy after tragedy after tragedy.

And, granted, there are organizations out there that are trying to help our young people. But I feel like that I'm primed and prepped to be a cog in the wheel, so that—given the chance, given the opportunity to get back out in society—I can be able to change the lives of kids, of young people, give them a reason to live beyond their teenage years, and beyond their early twenties. My purpose is just simply to save lives, and God willing, you know, I'll be given an opportunity to do that.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, I think that your words, they don't, maybe not have the direct, you know, like, lifesaving effect of CPR, for instance. But to the point you were making, change the minds, teach people the difference between just surviving and thriving. I think that's really important, and I think that's one of the things you can really do from inside. How does this play out for you inside in terms of mentoring the younger people in there, you know, within your realm right now?

Williams

One of the favorite things I like to quote to these young people is that you have to view it from a position of strength. Control those things that you can control and those that you can't control, that don't belong to you, you can't inherit. What you have to do is focus on you. What do you want for your life?

They have to understand that the pattern that they continue to repeat gives them nothing but the same results. So, for me, I try just to instill accountability, because they can't move forward until they've accepted accountability for what they've done. And then from there, you can seek out programs, resources that they have here, that may be tailored to exactly what you're in here for. If you're out here for substance abuse, then let's cure that. Because a lot of our young people, they are trying to intoxicate their pain away, their time away. You can't solve it like that. So I stand in here, and I try and be, you know, an example. I try to walk in an example so they can see that I've been where they've been and change is possible. So, I just continue to help those who I can help.

And, you know, for the most part, a lot of them are listening.

Automated Phone Message

You have one minute remaining.

Williams

The ones that aren't, I just continue to try and help them. I don't turn my back on them. That's

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the one thing we can't do to our young people. We can't turn our backs on them. They're never a lost cause. Everybody has a point where there's one word that you can say that may change their lives. And this is what I continue to do from inside.

Mahon-Haft

That's the hardest part is to remain consistent even in the face of setbacks. Thank you, Kermit. Thank you for sharing your voice. Thank you for sharing your piece.

Williams

You're welcome. I appreciate it, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to have my voice heard. I just hope that people will be able to listen to what I say and understand that there are people like me who really want an opportunity to be a part of changing the lives of our young people. Thank you.



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[Listen to the interview here](#)

Taj Mahon-Haft

So, I'm here today, really honored to be speaking with Siraj, also known as Tommy Helms, who is going to present for us and then talk a little bit about his incredible piece, "I'm Institutionalized." Siraj, really honored to have you. Do you want to go ahead and introduce your piece and jump into it, please?

Tommy "Siraj" Helms

Absolutely. Good morning, good afternoon, good evening. Okay, the name of this piece is, as it was just mentioned, "I'm Institutionalized":

I'm institutionalized...

Peering eyes can very easily see my mental scars the moment that we part our lips to exchange our greeting 'hellos'. For I walk life as a shell of a person of some sort that's been stripped of one's natural ability to function with a flowing ease as I now live with this crippling disconnect.

The very visibility of my mental scars has most aggressively cloaked me from my lengthy stay and cold experiences that I've underwent from being housed on the inside, where razor wire draped ever so meticulously on top of restrictive fences binds me to the harshness of my present reality. Life doesn't advance beyond the daily routine of having to accept that I no longer have a say over things independently, and self-respect is something that my circumstances will allow me to cling to. Because at any moment, on command, I must be fully willing to undress before staffers for security reasons, as if I was a horse of some sort being examined and searched for unauthorized contraband.

And solely as a matter of defense purposes, of not wanting to meet the anger or annoyance of those who've been authorized dominion over me, I've learned that it's best not to hold long stares and to hang my head low, because in here, people who are licensed to issue out punishments, wrath can be so unkind ... Even with the freedoms that's often taken for granted, like having the option to eat when you so desire.

I, on the other hand, can only meet such satisfactions if it's permitted or allowed, directly or indirectly, by those whose say far supersedes my own. And though I've intentionally made positive strides towards change in my insatiable thirst for growth and maturity, taking the needed steps to correct a shameful thinking that was far from ever being perfect, I can't deny or escape the staggering reality that the present living conditions is all I know. For I've been housed on the inside for so long that I don't even know who I am anymore, beyond the confined scope of how I've been programmed to function Institutionally. For my days and nights are ushered in with the rhythmic blows of a D.O.C-issued dog whistle that's took use of to summon my obedient attention, as I most heedfully await for the proceeding instruction that's sure to follow...

The very thought of freedom to me seems so unreal; sort of like a children's story of some

sort that's being told and delivered to an adult. For there's an old saying that, 'When one door shuts another one opens,' which couldn't possibly be more hands-on accurate in illustrating my current fenced-in living conditions. Because although I immensely grew beyond the shackled limits of my faulty thinking and actions, the very day that the door was shut on my backside as I was escorted through it. The proceeding door that awaited me stripped me of one of the most essential things which makes us all human,

Which is my very sense of identity as I now stand here utterly institutionalized, hoping to be restored with that which was taken away from me nearly thirty years ago;

Which was my old sense of normalcy (freedom).

Mahon-Haft

Wow. It's really, really intense, what you're describing. I will be honest, I received a little bit of goosebumps, aka trauma response, when you described some of those moments of institutionalization, and I think you captured a lot about what that term feels like, not just what it means. I'm curious, for listeners, for readers, why, for somebody who's clearly so intelligent and so aware of such things, why was this the thing that you felt you wanted to express in this piece?

Helms

Well, I put a lot of thought into this, and more so I was very reflective of who I am and conditions that I dealt with, but this piece was immensely personal and introspective and inspired from selected, you know, experiences amongst [*Inaudible*] that I chose to pull from to highlight a validity that's often overlooked, which there is always a potential duality, a downside to the things that we think of [*Inaudible*] good. Example being my present set of circumstances. For being that we tend to get so utterly immersed in how we perceive the thing that we still perceive the very reality of the additional side that often gets ignored. Again, I chose to share some personal accounts from my present life story.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, well, I'm thankful—excuse me, thankful that you did. I think that a lot of people hear the term “institutionalized” and think they know what it means, but they don't understand, again, what it feels like, and I think you did a really good job capturing that. A couple of things stood out. The dog whistles, as actual things that not only program us to respond, but are also still, like, the metaphorical dog whistles actually being used, is something that was really resonating with me and also the having to be prepared to be strip searched because somebody's decided they don't like the way you were moving, thinking, looking, speaking about whatever. Are those experiences that you have, that you feel are particularly poignant for you personally through these years of being in there?

Helms

You said is there other experiences?

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Mahon-Haft

No, are those, like, did you pick those two aspects because those are ones that stand out to you? Is a better way to put it.

Helms

Yeah, absolutely. Even at this present moment in part, I still feel the weight of situations that I've endured from being incarcerated. And I have to do a self check and reminder to snap back and be like, this is not right. I remember vividly at a time, in retrospect, that I was in a visitor room, and my family came to see me, and there was a lot of people there. And you know, it was so crowded and my mom, you know, being my mom, she's like, I'm going to go get you something. All right, great. I thought about it, and the moment that she left, I had to deal with the weight of feeling alone, the pressure of feeling abnormal and strange and I pulled her back. I was like ten or eight. I was like, hold on, but didn't share it to the effect of me feeling uncomfortable in the midst of being around a lot of people and noise. But things like that that a lot of people maybe dealt with, you know, as I am or what not—that we deal with of being incarcerated, the weight of the experiences of losing your normal.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, your identity. You said you lose something that is essential, and that is the identity. So, do you feel like there are things that you have been able to do that anybody could do that can lessen this or is this simply inevitable upon the amount of time that one may have to spend in there?

Helms

The only thing that you can do, the best you possibly can, it's important, is try to stay connected. But being incarcerated, your experience is molded in part, you're shaped by being able to maneuver to be able to get by. You know, without it, you can't function and it's hard to know the ins and out. So, partially under these set of circumstances, you kind of feel the weight of when it's time to eat or to be mindful of certain situations in part. But the only thing that I feel that could possibly circumvent the degree or the severity of certain situations is trying to remember and having as much, or being afforded contact with family members or just outlets and being able to talk. You know, realistically in here, you're not really afforded a lot of that from institutional situations. It's through the blessings and the aid of having a strong family source, or just being encouraged personally of having a shoulder in here or being able to remind—but, you know, in here, it can lessen the situation in a greater situation.

Mahon-Haft

You know, I can't agree with you more. In my own experience, the thing that helped buffer me from being more institutionalized than I became—although, I think to your point, I think that everybody gets it to a certain degree. It happens no matter what to a certain degree, but I think the buffer was definitely regular ongoing contact and good positive relationships with loved ones. I'm really—that's fantastic that you said that because that really touches me and feels exactly to be the answer. I'm glad you've experienced that. I wonder, taking this into the

creative direction, does writing about this—you said it was a very personal reflection. Was it cathartic? Did it help build awareness? What was the experience like of writing about this and reflecting on it as you actually went through the process?

Helms

Well, being honest, what you communicate, it allows you to self reflect on being able to get out exactly the weight of what it is that you’re dealing with. So it helps. It truly helps in part in being able to—I think in psychology it is called displacement of relations, dealing with traumatic situations that you let out but not in a bad situation, but being able to communicate. So it’s therapy. It’s having a voice. It’s being able to vocalize and let your mind breathe and being honest with the hurts, which is the weight of what you’re dealing with, and being able to identify or just coming into terms with and having a connection. So it’s very helpful to be able to communicate exactly how you feel or what you’re going through.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, I feel, again, couldn’t agree more. I feel that when I was—I did a lot of writing going through my own bid, and a lot of that was exactly what you described. It helped me actually understand and get through like—not just get through, but, like, get to the point of, like, actually grasping what I was experiencing and feeling about it in order to get through it, and I do think there’s a real value in that. So again, I’m really glad you contributed this piece.

So, having had this kind of cathartic writing experience on this very personal thing, what do you hope that somebody who’s out here reading this and is either the loved one of or maybe even a stranger—because this journal has started getting some, you know, started getting some traction even beyond the people that we know. What would you hope they understand about institutionalization?

Helms

That it’s serious. It’s real. That things like this are important. I get it, I definitely do, because you have people that need correction in part, but to the extent and the scope of the severity of what goes on, what happens is that a person really gets shifted. The weight of looking at somebody like I mentioned in my piece or whatever, like a shell of a person is crying out, the weight—from my experiences, I’ve seen a lot of guys just lose weight, become a product of something that used to be an [*Inaudible*].

But I would want people to know that people are being destroyed by being boxed in in part and losing contact with what’s normal, or just the function and aims of helping or correcting or giving some sort of aid. When it’s all said and done, you know, we’re people, and these experiences shape and it’s less in a situation, it’s turning people to something a little bit more diminished—a lower part, sadly.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah. It doesn’t help us, any of us, to have people become institutionalized and lose their identity. I think that’s absolutely true. I want to commend you for clearly being somebody

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who has pushed through, overcome, resisted this as much as possible, but also I want to offer my own, and I think everybody out there's just respect and appreciation for your willingness to be vulnerable and share the fact that this is real.

I know that I don't like talking about it, and I think I'll leave one last question there for you. Why do you think that with something so powerful that happens to even the most intelligent and put together of us inside, why do you think that everybody so adamantly refuses to admit that they're institutionalized when they're inside? Because I think you and I, you know, we know that everybody, "Oh, I ain't state struck. I ain't state struck," right? That's the first thing that everybody says. Why do people resist saying it, admitting it, rather than talking about it like you did?

Helms

It's because we've been conditioned to believe to be able to admit or see that you need help is like a badge of shame. Like, I'm going to be seen and judged or looked at a certain way because I need help, which [*Inaudible*], we all need help. We wouldn't be who we are or get to where we need to be or whatever in not having any help. No one intentionally just does it by themselves. But we've gotten to the point of believing if I tell people that I'm dealing with this, why am I hurt, or I'm going through a certain situation I might be seen as weak or, you know, ostracized or just ridiculed in part. You know, the weight of, like, "Man, he's weird." But it takes strength to be able to vocalize and say that you need help.

But ultimately, that's the position and where we're at in life of just saying and just holding it. And you have tons of people that are suffering, not just from an institutional point of view, but same with even the thoughts of not wanting to live. The pain of dealing with certain situations all the while people look at you and just say that you're fine when in reality, you're going through it. But the weight of the world has conditioned people to believe it's not okay to say that you need help. Or that you're having a battle. And that's the reason why, ultimately, strange—or people trying to suppress themselves from being able to say those types of things.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, it's quite a conundrum, finding ourselves conditioned to not be able to ask for help in a place where we all need to ask for help. Siraj, thank you so much. I'm going to just let you offer any closing words you want to, and then we will go ahead and end this interview because these phone calls have limits.

Helms

Again, I want to, for any person that's listening and applying their time to trying to have an understanding, it's meaningful in part, and it just shows that there's always a possibility inside of a possibility in being able to thrive and just the level that people care so, thanks for making time for the time.



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[*Listen to the interview here*](#)

Margaret Breslau

Shebri, it's so good to talk to you, and we've been writing for so long, and I just think it's wonderful that we can have this interview. Can you just start out by saying a little something about yourself that you'd want readers to know?

Shebri Dillon

Sure. Yes, I absolutely agree, and it's really nice to finally be able to speak to you freely. Yeah, any—describing myself can be a little difficult, but if I wanted anybody to really know anything about the person and the individual that I am, I'm a mom of four amazing children. I'm a woman of deep faith. I am trained as a paralegal, a peer recovery specialist, a horticulturist. I'm also an avid writer and reader. I am the very first Albert Woodfox Memorial Mini Freedom Library librarian. I advocate for people inside. And I also am currently an incarcerated person, and I'm serving thirty years for a non-violent offense as a first-time offender.

Breslau

Wow, that's a lot. I think it's amazing what you've been able to do. I've read so much of your writing, and you're such a good advocate. What—were you writing before you were incarcerated?

Dillon

I did. I actually started to write in my childhood because I was a foster child, and writing became a way for me to express myself. It was an outlet. When we're in those positions, it's much like being incarcerated, where there's not really anybody that is hearing your pain that you're able to process the deep emotions with, and the outlets are really minimized. I found that that was a good way to express myself, and I found a lot of healing in it. A lot of my writing was actually cultivated and crafted in the places of my absolute worst pain.

Then, as I became a teenager, I started to realize the power of writing, especially the written communication form and the power that it had to change a narrative. As a foster kid, people saw me, right? They see this child, they see the circumstances, they see the case file, but they never really see me. What writing did is it exposed my soul, and it exposed me in a different kind of way. It was so impactful with people because it contrasted what they thought I was, that literally my own writing rewrote the narrative of how other people define me. That leaked into incarceration as well. It didn't just stay there.

I don't think that my experience in that is unique. Because I think when people pick up their pen for the first time when they're locked behind closed doors in a cage the size of a parking space, and the only thing that you have is an ink pen and a piece of paper, I think that you have to just let the guttural words that are screaming in your soul fall out onto the piece of paper. It's a release, but it's also documenting the fact that this is happening to me. This is real life, and I'm going through this, and this is a solid document saying that this is not my

imagination, and this is what these people are doing, and this is how it's happening. So I think that it's a multifaceted thing.

Being incarcerated definitely made me cultivate that skill. When you're trapped and that is your only way to communicate, it's huge. It's also your only way to fight back. Incarceration, in theory, is designed to be able to separate us from the community, and it's supposed to create a rehabilitative setting, again in theory. But what it actually does is something entirely different because it's power that goes predominantly unchecked, and when power goes unchecked, it becomes abusive. So the writing becomes a defense mechanism, right? So you learn policy, you learn what's appropriate and what's not appropriate. And the same things that are used to draw boundaries for you can be used to draw safety lines for other people. I definitely cultivated it there, and then I started to realize the healing power for other people, not in just telling our truth and exposing what was here, letting light hit the darkest places of the prison, right, the darkest happenings. Being able to do that with the written word gave a power back to us, not necessarily to dominate, but just to be human again.

Breslau

Yeah, I think you're absolutely correct. I get so many people that write to me and say, "This is the first poem I've ever written," or "This is the first time I put my thoughts to words." In a way, a lot of people suggest and have said that it was frightening at first because it was like you're speaking it out loud. You're saying it out loud when you commit to paper, because you know that it is going to be read. For a lot of people, it was important to do it because they had to tell the truth about themselves.

Dillon

Absolutely. I think any time—you know, incarceration offers a unique perspective on that because when you're locked in a room and you've lived through the absolute worst moments of your life, you have to face your responsibility in the situation. That's definitely a thing. So you become accountable and you face your demons in the ugly places that people in the free world don't even slow down long enough to be able to face because the pace is just so quick. When you first become incarcerated, everything comes to a screeching halt.

But then there's also the other factor, because you're put in a position when you originally get locked up, you think that it's a moral thing. It's about right and wrong. That as long as you're good and you do what's asked of you and you don't break laws and you don't break rules, that you won't be bothered by things and you get hit with the whiplash of the oppressiveness, the unfairness, the inconsistency, and the flat-out abusiveness of the prison environment. The rules change depending on who's on shift, and you never know who's who until you learn who's who. I think that having to do that deep dig and then put it on paper is scary for a variety of reasons. Not only are you having to face yourself in a new kind of way, but when you expose anything at a prison, there's always the fear of retaliation. There was a time where my room got ran thirteen times because I wrote a grievance—thirteen times in a month. I didn't do anything, and they never found anything, but it was punishment. I mean, they got me early in the morning, in the middle of the night. I literally had to escalate it all the way to the assistant warden just to make it stop.

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Breslau

That's another kind of writing. That's true, though. It's true. Yeah, and words are powerful, you know, right? Especially in those situations. But I think you also mentioned Mr. Arey as a catalyst for your writing, and can you talk a little bit about how that also impacted you as a writer and a person?

Dillon

Absolutely. That is something that I don't know that I could even give enough words to describe the level of impact that Calvin has had on my life, and really countless others through the connection that I made with him. So to kind of adequately describe this, I have to go back to the beginning. I was actually in Fluvanna at the time, and I came across a *Richmond Magazine* article that featured him, and it was called "Unbroken." Calvin was a former prisoner at the Richmond Penitentiary. And in that, he and some other men that were incarcerated there were treated really poorly. They filed lawsuits, they did a lot of different things that allow us to have rights today that we didn't have before. The *Landman v. Royster* case was huge in giving us our prisoners' bill of rights amongst other things. Many of those things, when I read his story, I realized that I actually exercise a lot of the things that I do without consequence because of what those men suffered and fought for. For me, that alone was impactful.

It was impactful enough that I had to reach out, and I had to say thank you. I didn't know him, and I wasn't really sure how to go about contacting a magazine or what even the appropriate way to do that was. But I was compelled to respond. So I had my daughter look up the address because it said that he was a realtor at some point, and I just penned a thank-you letter. Well, Calvin wrote back, and when he wrote back, one of the things he asked me is if I had read a book called *Our Class* by Chris Hedges. And I had not, so he sent it to me. Now, this was during COVID. What they did, they actually had a little chuckhole at the front of the wing, and the wings in Fluvanna are set up like fishbowls. The lights never go out. They want to be able to view you all the time. It's inconvenient for most reasons. But in this case, it was actually incredibly beneficial because everybody saw me get that book because it was COVID, and it got brought right to the wing, and they wanted to know what it was. So once I read it, somebody else read it, and somebody else read it. It's incredibly powerful because it's about someone who taught in the prisons and how prisoners are not exactly what you would think they are.

From there, it became a lending thing. We ended up lending different books to different places, and the Albert Woodfox Memorial Mini Freedom Library was eventually born. It became a mutual aid thing, and it's caught on to several different prisons. But in that, I also learned a lot about what other people did in prison because those books were incredibly powerful. They showed me not only that Calvin, you know, what he did, he shows—he's proof positive that we're not the worst thing we ever did, which I think is a Bryan Stevenson quote originally, but we're so much more than that initially.

The last couple of years, a lot of those credentials that I rattled off, or at least the pieces that I had said, I found and was able to do based on what I had read in those books. So I became a lot

of other things, you know, being able to take classes as a horticulturist. I'm currently enrolled in college classes, which amplified my writing. I had a skillset, but it wasn't cultivated yet, and not being able to cultivate it was incredibly difficult. Once I cultivated it, Calvin started sharing it with people. I got feedback. I was interacting with people out there in the free world and that I probably never would have had access to. What that did is it made me a real human being. Just having that exposure and being able to change the narrative of what we are inside is also incredibly impactful.

Calvin stayed every step along the way. He's uplifted with quotes. He's done everything that he could to encourage, to stay involved, to connect me to other people. I was able to write an article for *Inquest* based on that as well. It's just an absolute—the level of impact is phenomenal. I cannot say enough good things about somebody like Calvin. People like him just normally don't exist. He's pretty confident, too, of the power of proximity. So when you get close to a problem, and you can see where the need is, and by watching how he's done these things, I've learned myself. I've also seen what happens with prisoners because, you know, we're so quick to use the word "prisoner." In reality, prisoners are the people you see on TV, and it's the people that the prosecutors talk about. It's the boogeyman that they use for political agendas. Prisoners don't exist; incarcerated people exist. We are people, just like everybody else, with emotions, and a lot of us have just made one bad decision that, you know, turned the rest of our life, but we're still people that can be cultivated and that are capable of change. Calvin lives that. He lives that truth in such a way that a lot of us emulate it. We're honored that he reaches back in to even do anything at all for us. That alone has such just a meaningful presence to it.

Breslau

Yeah, Mr. Arey is a really amazing person. But I think you're right about narratives, especially about women. One thing that people probably don't realize, but most women in prison are mothers. I think that writing is also a way to connect with—to stay connected with their loved ones and their kids. But it also is, like, a different kind of expression. It's not a phone conversation, right? You're telling different kinds of truths with your writing. How do you write to your kids?

Dillon

Oh, in many ways, I both pen them and email to them. And, you know, you raise kids in twenty-minute intervals on the phone from prison. And it is the absolute worst part of incarceration, more than the abuse, more than the time, more than wanting the things that you want. Being separated from those that you love is a punishment of your soul. It's not just because you want to be around them, it's because they suffer too. And so when you write them and you pick up that pen, you have to be able to bridge that gap. And to be able to—you know, a lot of us, we don't get to see our kids on a regular basis because there's distance or there's financial burden that make the visits far and few between. I'm grateful because I can get them sometimes, but there's a lot of people who don't get them at all. So the only way that they will ever hug their children is with their words. The only way that they can ever convey that they're proud of them is with their words. And it's important to do. I love that you mentioned the phone call versus the writing because that's so pivotal, because writing is something tangible. I can tell

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you something, and you hear it, and you may forget or whatever the case may be, but writing is a record. It is a formalized documentation, and it is something that is binding. My children can go back and read them. They tell me that they keep all of the letters that I send them. One of my sons has even made a little binder that he keeps every single thing that I have ever sent him down to the envelope. For him, it's a reminder. And it's not just a reminder, "Oh, hey, my mom's in prison," but "Hey, my mom loves me. Hey, I'm valued. Hey, she cares," because our family holds the time with us.

Even more so, being inside it keeps us grounded in a different kind of way, because we still have a responsibility. Just because we're incarcerated doesn't mean that somebody else can just step in and take our place, we are still needed in our family's lives. And that not only gives us a sense of community that's so pivotally important to our personhood, but it also helps them out as well because we've got to heal and bridge that gap. They didn't do anything, but they're pulling this time with us. And it's absolutely important for our communities, for the way that our children are being raised, for the people that are taking care of them, that we're able to be able to give them those things in writing.

Especially being in prison. Like, if you're listening to this phone call, a lot of times I'm tripping up on my words because people are walking behind me and incessantly screaming. The echo is insane. The amount of noise, and I don't know how it's coming across at the phone, but it's often so loud, even on this phone call right behind me, that my thoughts get jumbled, and I can't get my words all the way out. And in that, you know, your phone calls to your kids are affected the same way. People don't have the respect for those pieces because everybody's trapped in this tiny little spot, you know, and everybody's trying to get their words out. It's really, really, really difficult to be able to have that intimate moment where I can stitch and start putting Band-Aids and applying balm on the wounds of my children. Also, I would say, there are days where I can't call because there's a lockdown. There are times where I can't get to them because there's a phone line—because there's way less phones than there are inmates. The ratio—

Automated Phone Message

You have one minute remaining.

Dillon

—is absolutely painful.

Breslau

We got that one-minute reminder just to remind. Well, listen, Shebri, I think it's wonderful this conversation we're having, and we'll be in touch soon, okay? I really appreciate it.

Dillon

Absolutely. Thank you so much.

Shebri Dillon

Breslau

Thank you. Take care.

Dillon

Okay.

Breslau

Bye-bye.



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[*Listen to the interview here*](#)

Taj Mahon-Haft

Alright, I am here—honored to be here—with my good friend, Alfonso “Ghaza” Skyles, one of the most talented writers I have met inside, one of the best thinkers, and just one of the best guys. Ghaza, will you go ahead and introduce this piece that resonates with me so much?

Alfonso “Ghaza” Skyles

Yes, the title is “Giovanni Was Her Name.”

Mahon-Haft

Alright.

Skyles

This is a tribute to Nikki Giovanni.

Mahon-Haft

So then, whenever you are ready, go ahead.

Skyles

Okay. Thank you.

How do we measure the contributions of our mountains;
authors and activists who has made Joy those reasons to celebrate?
Time found in ways to line and margin
the stanzas to impact the World...
a Princess of Poetic expression; a loss.
for the whole of Humanity,
as we remember and remind.

Products of wisdom left in the minds of those
who were fortunate enough to know;
to forever live on in the minds
of those who will learn and appreciate...
life lived, to never be forgotten,
and her Name was Nikki.

Mahon-Haft

I still get chills. And I love that you wrote this piece. You and I have spoken about Nikki when we were friends inside, and since, and this is a journal being put out by the Center for Humanities at Tech, where she had most of her career. What possessed you to take this important moment, this important person, and really hold them up in this way? Give us for

readers, why did she resonate with you? Why did this piece come out of you when she passed?

Skyles

Well, you know, at a time where, you know, we have a number of issues pertaining to humanity at large, the population of the academics and creative writers and creative expression. So, for her to be an activist, wasn't popular for women to identify themselves specifically with their preferences. She resonated with me as being a mountain of a person, of an individual, within the bound circumstances or the box that people chose to define or describe her to be in. So, she took her life and she lived it how she chose.

Mahon-Haft

She really, truly did. I think that that's a really—you used the term mountain, a really apt descriptor in this moment, and especially to the point you're making. She was there, and everybody else had to accept the fact that she was Nikki, and she was there, and she, just like a mountain, she was going to be part of the landscape, and as she was.

And that it was that that really resonated with you, I find beautiful because I think, having been honored to have been a student and even friend of hers, she always struck me. That was what she taught me was you could be yourself and say anything if it was true and own it and be proud of it and live in the joy that you were describing in the poem—somebody who lives this joy. So just, I am so grateful that you mentioned her, that you wrote about her, that she resonated with you. It's interesting, and I'd be curious what your thoughts are. Do you feel like she has a particular resonance for guys inside beyond just you and I—or women inside?

Skyles

Yes, I do. I think a lot of great literary authors, poets, and creative writers can actually resonate with the men and women inside, you know, because of their plight, you know. She spoke towards a lot of the good, and a lot of those goods that she saw were visions of dreams that may not be current, but for things that we could actually work towards. And, you know, as an activist and as an advocate, you know, we are always striving for the better. So I think every man and woman can actually benefit from seeking authors and activists such as herself.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, I noticed in every library I was in in DOC, hers were the most common poetry books. And so it always struck me as interesting because she's not the most famous poet—

Skyles

Right

Mahon-Haft

—but she's most widely read in DOC. And so I think that there's something to what you're saying. I will also, for readers, say that I happen to know for a fact that Nikki thinks our

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current justice system is a sham and really stupid and that we need to treat people better. I've heard her say that many times, so maybe that's part of it. So she's with us even when she's not, brother.

Skyles

Yes.

Mahon-Haft

To the bigger question of writers that inspire us, because you're such a good writer and your work has appropriately been featured numerous times in multiple places, what do you feel like is important about finding other writers who inspire us?

Skyles

For me, I think to highlight a person's individual story. You know, I was told by an elder author, Victor [*Inaudible*], that, you know, never define or feel as if you have to define your poetry to anyone. We leave that perspective to the listener. And what I found is so many people need a voice, need an outlet. For me, writing has actually done that. And there are so many individuals, so many outstanding and wonderful young writers and elder writers who, you know, may stand on that line of a little tentativeness about reading their material. But they put so much of themselves in there so until we can actually highlight that and express to people the benefit of writing, just put something down. It doesn't have to necessarily be the punctuation—but get it out, and it's very therapeutic and beneficial. And you would be surprised how many people's lives will actually be impacted by it.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, the power of self-expression is great. And I think it brings people to better understandings of themselves, which is actually something I appreciated about this other—this essay that you've wrote, that's written, that's also going to be in here, "Lift Every Voice to Sing a Solo." Frickin' incredible title, man, by the way. So, you're getting at a lot of things in here about the intersection of individuality and a communal well-being and where we, you know, how we focus ourselves and on what. I can't do it justice. Everybody needs to read it, but I would love to get—what is it that you want any reader to take from this essay? Because it's so beautiful and it's thought provoking, and I think intentionally a little bit unspecific. But what is it about—that you experienced and you're expressing that you feel like, really, you want everybody to just take away from this?

Skyles

Well, thank you, by the way, for the compliment. It definitely means a lot coming from you. For me, when I wrote it, I left it vague on purpose. Because to make something pertaining to community, you know, very specific is, you know, is that something that can actually happen? We are all individuals within ourselves, and that's what makes us so beautifully unique. But also, it's because we are individuals in that kind of, you know, beautifully unique circumstance that we add something to a fabric that allows us to grow and progress because

of that very uniqueness.

So, I could be as much the individual, not a castaway, but very much an individual that may be one of one. But as that one of one, I add to the very benefit of our communal growth, of our collective growth. You know, so it’s like each and every person has that same quality, and until we can actually get off of our high horse—that’s me speaking about myself because, you know, this is my opinion of course—until we can get off of our high horse and start looking at how race affects other people, circumstances affect other people and have a bit of compassion. You know, then maybe, just maybe, we can come together and start having discussions that will actually allow us to all go in the separate direction that’s very specific and detailed to a difficult place.

You know, we don’t know what the future may hold. However, we don’t have to agree on every single thing. But if we can focus on the things that we can agree on and work and add towards that, then it will benefit all of us. You know, so that’s what I was getting at, while at the same time highlighting the fact that, as an individual, don’t feel like you have to dwarf yourself in the community, you know. You are as much a benefit—

Automated Phone Message

You have one minute remaining.

Skyles

You are as much a benefit as a solo person to add to that song that everyone will sing.

Mahon-Haft

Oh, what a beautiful way to wrap that up. It’s like you’ve been trained on one-minute warnings, sir.

Thank you so much, Ghaza. Thank you for your writing. Thank you for your compassion and your creativity and for sharing it with the world and with me here today and sharing some of your thoughts, brother.

Skyles

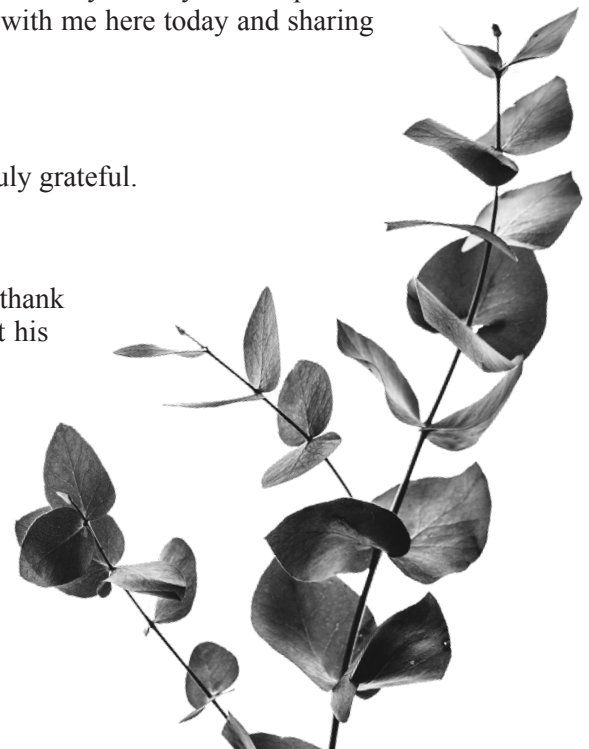
Thank you for having me. I really do appreciate it. I’m truly grateful.

Mahon-Haft

Awesome. Well, then we will end this recording and say, thank you very much, and everybody make sure you check out his other work wherever you can.

Skyles

Alright, thank you.



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[*Listen to the interview here*](#)

Taj Mahon-Haft

We are here with Canaan Swift, one of our incredible leaders inside, and a wonderful writer in mind and person. And he's going to be performing his poem "Exclusively In and Out" for us. Canaan, will you introduce it, please?

Canaan Swift

Hey, how you doing? My name is Canaan Swift, and this is the poem I wrote called "Exclusively In and Out":

A botched relationship sabotaged.
Why we sacrificed our friendship, from pure to corrupt.
Now we no longer know each other.
I feel nothing, the slightest chance of surviving being paralyzed.
You forgot what I look like,
and I forgot the sound of your voice.
I once told you I loved you.
But you cut your tongue out;
Immediately, everything changed.
No pain, no gain. What did you expect?
A mess, blood splattered everywhere.
I'll never know how you feel.
Your actions said so much more.
Feeling regretful, I hated what I expressed.
Remaining quiet, vulnerable emotions fell to deaf ears.
What I predicted, definitely was not this.
In opposition to what I expected, you'll never know.
Surprise me not.
Being involved comes with a cost.
So quick to walk away.
Life can be so unnecessary, difficult at its worse.
Batteries never last, eventually, death would come.
Don't let the sun fool you; the storm is coming.
Pressure bust pipes while the truth tell lies.
Music to my ears, tell me what I want to hear.
Complications come and go.
Life can be so dilated, push,
I can see it coming.
And I can see it going.
For what reason, I can't explain.
The rhythm, the tone, the melody —
Too low to be so upbeat.
It is what it is.

As I close my eyes, I remember I'm not blind.
Dirt under a rug washes away.
But I know the dust will always come back.
Stiff pain aroused, it's only right I shake my head.
When the smoke clears, the tears dry.
Don't laugh; I'm serious.

I no longer care anymore.

Mahon-Haft

Wow. That was quite the emotional ... I don't want to say ride because it wasn't a roller coaster, but thank you for sharing something so personal with us all, Canaan. What would you want readers, listeners to take away as—what is the understanding that you're really trying to express here?

Swift

Well, in this poem I wrote, it was a little bit more emotional, and I tried to open up and be a little bit more vulnerable. So basically, like, even though we're still incarcerated, we still have loved ones, friends, families, girlfriends, wives, etc., usually for just about everybody. When relationships, like, go down south and then things usually end, it's like sometimes the last thing you would expect, whether it's from a family member or from a friend. And when they're unexpected, you never know how they're going to end. And you usually hope for the best because while you're down, you always want that one person or the few people that you can just lean on and express yourself to or just even have in your corner just to talk to.

So, when things, like ... I guess when that bridge burns, that's what you least expected. Then, like, all you know is just to act out, you know, and usually—or you'll say something. Usually, for the most part, it's something you would regret. But when it's like, the cat is out the bag, it's like, there's nothing else you can do. It gets to the point where you're so emotional, and then eventually you just say, you know what? I don't even care anymore. Then, like, you try to go through like the—you try to rectify and you just move on. But then sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes you actually have to just go through it, but in the back of your head, you want to move on, so you have to, like, eventually just plant it in your head, plant that seed that you really just don't care anymore. That's usually, like, the one thing to moving on and getting that closure.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah. It's really a challenge to manage relationships and the emotional response to anything tumultuous in a relationship when you're inside. My own experience definitely confirms that, and you do, you get to that point. Like, it's just hurt. I'm stuck here. I don't know what's going on, and it just hurts so much that all I can do is say, "I don't care," or something like that. But yeah, once, like you said, the cat is then out of the bag, and it's hard to keep a relationship together.

You also, in explaining that, you've touched on something, though. The importance of, like,

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all you really want to do is just, is make sure things are okay. For you, being inside, having strong relationships, what do you think is the most important reason that we continue to invest in them, even when we sometimes get to this point of overwhelmed by emotions? Why is it so important to keep those relationships going? Why do they become so big to us?

Swift

I think it's a mental thing. I think it's that shoulder everyone wants to be able to lean on while being incarcerated. I know it's—you can relate because I know your situation as well. It's to have that one person to just be able to express yourself to or just to know you can confide in versus in here, you might have a friend or a homeboy or somebody that you know who you might be able to talk to, but there's just certain things you know you never want to express to them. You know, just having that mentality like, I'm not really opening up to a stranger, and it can be even someone that you've been down with, like, doing time with for years.

But when it comes to, like, somebody you know personally from the street that knows you before you were incarcerated and knows your real character and, like, how you really are, I think those are the relationships and rapports that you just never want to, like, give up on. So, even if something was to go down south, say for example, say your girl might break up with you and then, like, you're still going to have emotions for her. And then years might go down the line and she might reach out and then you might even forget about it. So, like, you'll keep putting yourself in that situation and she could leave every time, and you're still going to be so emotional to the point where it's like, man, I forgive her because I'm still in here. You know what I'm saying? So, firstly, if you were on the street, you might be able to actually get closure and move on and find somebody else. But in here, you always want that one person you can just lean on.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah—yeah. It's a maintaining of reality beyond prison, of connection and hope beyond prison, I think. And I think you just touched on something. I'd never really thought about that. But the ghosts of a past relationship or even a past hurt with an ongoing relationship, they linger with you when you're in there. It's really hard to get away from them. I think that's something to that.

So, what advice would you have for anybody out there who is a loved one? Because a lot of times that's who's going to be reading this kind of thing. This is somebody who has loved ones inside. What would you encourage them to understand about communicating with and caring about somebody that you're in any sort of relationship—you know, friendship, parent, sister, partner, whatever—while that person is inside? What would you want them to know?

Swift

The main advice I would want, like, anyone to know is communication. And outside of communication, just know, like, we need you more than you need us, you know. And the main thing is to really never burn a bridge with an individual because that's, like, the worst thing you can do, especially in here. You never know who you're going to need. So, I would

say communication and just to know, like, while we're in here, we understand life is going on a hundred miles per hour outside. So, when that phone doesn't answer or when that message doesn't get responded to or when there might be a few weeks to a couple of days to a few months or even a year and we don't hear from each other, we also—like, the person on the outside, you know, basically—like, can understand because life doesn't stop because we're in here.

So we are grateful and appreciative and patient to know, like, there's other stuff going on, like, and the world really never revolves around us in here. So, just the communication so people know we're grateful and we appreciate the loved one, the spouse, the family member, the girlfriend, the wife, or whomever, you see what I'm saying? So, like, we just know that bridge we probably would never want to burn because we just want to know, like, you're more needed than we're needed.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah. That's a very honest thing to say. I felt that a lot myself, and I think it makes relationships challenging to be in that kind of unequal power dynamic: I clearly need you more than you need me and I know it. It makes things even more challenging, I think, but I think it's really important for people to understand on the other side of that, that that is the case, and thank you for sharing that.

What are some of the things, because I think a lot of people have negative assumptions about what somebody—because, you know, clearly, this was about a breakup or a romantic interaction. There's a lot of stereotypes and assumptions about what that would mean for somebody, and some of that even comes from quote, unquote reality shows like *Love After Lockup*, etc., and garbage like that. What would you want people to understand? Like, dispel a myth for us about the types of romantic relationships that happen with somebody inside.

Swift

Usually, it is a woman. That's usually, like, nine times out of ten it would be a woman. But like, the way I write, it's not just for a specific person. It's more indirect for like a general sense, so, like, I can relate this poem to an ex I used to deal with, but I also could relate it to my father. And like, not to really indulge in too much of that topic, but like, you never know, like, how—that's why I think family relationships as well, you never know how things can deteriorate for the better or for the worse. So, it's usually a woman. That's usually what it is.

You know, the relationships, the women you talk to, or even just a friend you're going to be talking to. Things usually are up, and then sometimes they'll fluctuate and go down, and then sometimes they'll just completely just vanish. But this poem right here was, like I said, it wasn't just for a woman, it wasn't for my father specifically, you know, so. And sometimes certain relationships, family wise, they'll just vanish.

Mahon-Haft

Wow, yeah. That is—the truest feelings really apply to everybody, so you really captured

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something there, man. Thank you for sharing it with us. Thank you for opening up about it. I think it's hard to be vulnerable inside, and you're really—it's also very valuable when you can, but it is hard. It never stops being hard, so thank you. Is there anything else you want to add before we end the interview? Anything else you want to say to anybody who's listening here?

Swift

I just want to thank you and everybody working with the organization for actually allowing me to speak my piece and express my words to whomever this will see, and listen to, or read. I appreciate you. I thank you. And, most importantly, I hope you enjoy my works. Thank you.



Appendix: Interview Transcripts

[Listen to the interview here](#)

Taj Mahon-Haft

Unlocked: Art and Experiences Inside Virginia's Prisons, volume 5, poem “* P.O.W. *”
written and recited by Joshua Jonathan Hairston, the Humanization Project’s advocate inside.

Joshua Hairston

“* P.O.W. *”:

In the early days, a year or two before
it was declared a major war,
I remember...
At times, I am visited
Fragmented memories of families happily coexisting,
My neighbors were friendly,
the neighborhood was a village.
The future was the brightest
back when parents breathed
in the promise of children

That was before I became a Prisoner of War: The War on Drugs.

Reagan’s Administration
a warlike regime,
invested billions in his war machine,

Overnight, from precinct to fort.
A show of arms
A force of Arms Deployed,
Underprivileged,
Over patrolled.
We Were Unprepared For A War.

An All Out Attack...
dispatched on my kinship,
extracting us children,
attaching AT-RISK,
categorized delinquent, created status offense:

Our Initiation, into The System...
Crack babies, super predators,
we were earmarked for prisons.

I Am A Prisoner Of War: The War On Drugs.

The New Democrat,

a warlike regime,
supercharged its war machine
Mandatory minimum sentences:
Irrational deduction,
state corruption,

Coerced Cooperation
Nefarious Operations

Crimes of war,
in times of war,
no concern for the charm of Geneva

I know a woman,
when she was younger,
suspected of concealing her partner's evils,

sequestered at some point,
questioned at gunpoint,
practices,
generally
regarded illegal.

Save Her The Blame...

I Won't Say Her Name.

Unwillingly,
she took part in an agreement,
quelled her grievances,
expecting lenience.
Relief sought,
Peace Talks commenced with the cease of threats...
physically and emotionally distressed
unable to bear the thought of them taking her son,
she gave an account...
a made-up one

23 years later,
signed an affidavit.
She retracted her statement.

A Prisoner Of War: The War On Drugs

Reagan's Administration
a warlike regime,
invested billions in his war machine,

Affordable housing portrayed as Drug Zones.

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Tactical Teams frequently raided our homes,
invaded our home, openly harassed.
What could I have done to hold them back?
Did not stop

Kristallnacht... Night Of Broken Glass

until they found
what resembled powdered soap in bags.
Evidence, along with a fold of cash
Confiscated. My guess is Uncle owed them that.

Cracked my family to pieces,
drove us homeless, displaced our belongings,
our sense of belonging.
Left my childhood soaked in gas
then stood over my adolescence, with a glowing match.

The New Democrat,
a warlike regime,
supercharged its war machine –

An inner city cleanse, an inner city kid.
I witnessed my neighborhood spin itself undid.
Geographical Disaster.
Half my life, I spent eluding capture, the other half in shackles –
An African American boy, harboring anti-American sentiments...
nothing can be more natural.

I Am A Prisoner Of War: The War On Drugs

His sister, she appeared to be the only one on his side,
the only one caring if he survives.
Thousand-yard stare in his eyes.
In prison, I was told, is where he lost his mind.
His spirit forever will be institutionalized.
My uncle spent 23 years behind enemy lines.

A Prisoner Of War: The War On Drugs

“Crack” kept her for weeks,
guarded her from sleep
Insomnia brought her some ease,
offered her reprieve,
too hard for her to sleep,
scarred by what she’s seen –

the sound of her baby's scream...
She hears in every baby scream.

Light jumping off his badge,
the scent of cigarette smoke
glimmer of gold,
hints of shaving cream
not the same feelings of hope,
are inspired by the sight of police,
bloodied hands wring her clean,
spring her to a crease,
a wrinkle in time,
her nightmare relived,
her night terrors released
P.T.S.D...

The Disorder Haunting The Original Traumatization
Assault rifles pointed in all of our faces.
taken hostage, the unconscious replaying – stasis;
My mother was a woman with co-occurring disorders...
An indomitable combination.

A Prisoner Of War: The War On Drugs.

I swear by The Partnership for a Drug-Free America,
Drug Policies... Politics,
Cocaine Capitalist... Profiteers
exploited our weakened immunity,
destroyed our grieving communities.

The most vulnerable demographic –
Neighbors turned combatants
adjacent city blocks into factions...

A Rebel Force
Readied For Tour
A Warmonger, the NRA
celebrates the prospect of war.

Every side, intertwined, finds its support.
fratricide, enemies of each other,
brotherly no more

The War...

I remember.

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At times, I am visited –
memories of families happily coexisting.
My neighborhood was a village.
Parents cultivated the promise of children.
We were encouraged to be friendly.
The future was brilliant
just a year or two before
we were made prisoners of war.

Mahon-Haft

Every time I hear that, Joshua, I am floored by what an incredible story you have told. The emotions that it conjures up, the imagery. Thank you for sharing it.

Hairston

Thank you.

Mahon-Haft

Thank you for putting your heart out there. And I think as we do this interview, following up, I think myself and anybody who's listening, one of the first things we would want to know is, is this a story that you're telling from the first person?

Hairston

Absolutely. How else would I be able to tell a story like that? Absolutely.

Mahon-Haft

So you felt the pressures of this growing up in your community—this war, this sense of being targeted, being, you know, earmarked for the system. You felt this growing up?

Hairston

Absolutely. I felt it, and I knew about it. What I didn't know is that it was an organized, government-funded attack. I didn't know that. I've seen that, but I didn't know that, you know, our leaders got in rooms or had conferences on how to attack our communities. They literally said that it was a war on drugs, but the human impact of war, which we often ignore with so many wars, or our [*Inaudible*] existence on this planet. It's real. I mean, there are real casualties to this war on drugs. Why not fight for sobriety? Why not a community collaboration for healthier communities? Why a war on drugs? Why that terminology? Why that idea? Why that spirit?

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, yeah. Why would we wage war in our own communities? There is this one line that I just really want to—there's many, but there is one that just really was quite evocative for me, "left my childhood soaked in gas then stood over my adolescence holding a glowing match."

It feels like you're reflecting on a path that finds you here writing this incredible work from this perspective of being a P.O.W. It also then, the other piece of this that I find is particularly thought-provoking and emotionally, like, evocative also, is the notion of retracting one's statement. Will you elaborate a little bit on what that involved? Because I think it reflects, at least to me, the idea that our perceptions of this have changed, yet we can't do anything about it. But what were you getting at with that experience?

Hairston

Well, if you look a stanza down when I say retracted that statement, "23 years later ... retracted that statement". Another stanza down, perhaps two stanzas down. I also say "My uncle spent 23 years behind enemy lines." And so, the connection is that a mother and a sister were selling drugs in the community to provide for themselves. Now, we're talking about impoverished people. We're not talking about wealthy people bringing truckloads of drugs in and rolling in the dough in mansions. We're talking about really, really poor people who are scrambling to make ends meet while suffering from addiction themselves, right? So, the threat "sequestered at some point, questioned at gunpoint." Okay, we're talking about an interrogation, right, that is not ethical that produces a statement, right, that is false, and the threat of her children being taken, and so she acquiesced, right, she makes a statement, a false one. That gets her brother, this man, incarcerated for twenty-three years, right?

While supporting him throughout that incarceration, she, his sister, she appears to be the only one on his side, right? She's the only one on his side because of the guilt. Not only the guilt, I mean, of course, the sibling nature between them, but the guilt of having placed him behind enemy lines and then retracting her statement trying to get him out once her children, once she believes that her children are safe, even though her children end up system-impacted.

And not to, you know, I guess, draw this out too much, but, "my childhood soaked in gas, I stood over my adolescence with a glowing match." I was going in the court, and we talk about dual system. I was going in the court before I was five or six years old. I had already been in court. I had already become familiar with the cadence or the order of operations when it comes to going into a courtroom, right? I was accustomed to that as a child. And so, all of these adverse childhood experiences, right, that I was going through, prepared me in my adolescence. There was already a documentation of my at-risk youth or problematic childhood, right, that delivered me into the courts. Not saying I didn't play a part, right, but to say that there was not a systematic attack and approach that allowed my delivery, I guess, to be streamlined.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah—yeah.

Hairston

It's being simple, it's just to ignore obvious reality.

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Mahon-Haft

Thank you for sharing that, and I'm so sorry, just to experience that. And then it's also so inspiring to have you, your mind and your perspective, be in a place where you've connected all of this with accountability, but also with recognition, and I admire that. While we still have a few minutes, I want to bring it back to kind of the artistic side of this. So, you find yourself a P.O.W., and you write this beautiful, and recite this beautiful, piece with all this heart that's going to teach so many people and also reach so many people's hearts. What is, for you, the reason that you write when you are in this position? How does the writing ... what does it do for you?

Hairston

Well, I had this concept that I had come up with—probably nearly half a decade now, or closer to a decade—called therapytry, right? And it really comprises this idea of therapy and poetry, but creative writing being therapeutic elements of, you know, creative writing. To pour my life experiences, right, in a connected format, to replay those instances and process the pain in them, it's not only revelational, but it's healing, right? It allows me a new opportunity to grow and evolve from a place of vulnerability, from a place of, I guess, shame into my own humanness, my own expression of, hey, I'm a human being, yeah. Yeah, I made some mistakes, but, you know, hey, we all did. How do we regroup? How do we respond? How do we pool our resources and make this world a better place? How do we, I guess—

Automated Phone Message

You have one minute remaining.

Hairston

—collaborate, you know, to get this done? So, that's what it does for me. It's therapeutic.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, it really can be. I had a similar experience. Well, thank you, Joshua. We appreciate your time and so much your voice and your sharing of that voice with us.

Hairston

Yes, sir. Thank you for the opportunity.



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[*Listen to the interview here*](#)

Taj Mahon-Haft

I'm here with Anthony Winn about to share with us his poem, "A Weekend of Displacement." Anthony, will you go ahead and introduce your poem and perform it for us, please?

Anthony Winn

Okay. So, this is one of my favorite poems. I would like to share with you. It is called "A Weekend of Displacement." I hope people enjoy this:

The lady walks across the room.
with dignity boasting on her shoulders
like a crown of locs
fashioned by the nurturing hands
of a thousand mothers
ancestral roots of royal eloquence
that extend longer than immemorial skies.
She floats in between prodigal sons
eclipsed from the urban wild
growing, uprooted men
as maternal instincts gravitate
her towards her own
son tries to sit motionless
but emotions flame
unfamiliar syllables in his body language.
Curiosity forms long creases
on his forehead that draw deeper
than someone's last breath spoken in a parable
because nostalgia clouds his sight
of a little boy of his likeness
walking beside his mother
a reflection in the mirror to the past
when life meant video games and sleepovers.
Tight, he embraces his mother
losing himself in an earthly warmth
a place where their souls first met.
Tears, a therapeutic cleansing
loosens and undresses
the penal years of
an abnormal cost of living
as the child stares with wistful eyes.
and a closed mouth full of:
Are you my dad?
When will I get tall?

Why can't you be with us...?
Their eyes dance in a tongue too emotional for words.
So he hugs his son, his heir
like a wedding band holds a promise:
never to unlock his bond.
Sitting at a table

that is small as their talk
short as their minutes allowed,
an officer makes it his duty
to undermine their visit
like missing teeth ruin a smile.
With a blank finish, sadness
renders his face
and displays a growing man.
who has misplaced his responsibility.

Thank you.

Mahon-Haft

Man, thank you. I actually got shivers with that, hearing you recite this poem—I've read it—there's so much more in your voice, even, and it's an incredible poem. I told you before we started, it's intense. As a father who spent some time behind bars, that was the toughest thing of the whole thing, was being a parent behind bars.

Winn

Right.

Mahon-Haft

This really resonates with me, man. I don't want to put my meaning on it, so I guess I'm going to ask, will you kind of let readers, listeners—because it's got so much beautiful imagery in here. And I think the story tells itself, but I think people would like to understand where you came from, what you were coming from when you wrote this.

Winn

Yeah, because, you know, you have to think, like, when I got incarcerated, my son was like, one-and-a-half years old. So, when I came in here, it's like I was disconnected from him, as well. It's like, I didn't get to see him for, I'm going to say, fifteen years later. Physically, I didn't get to see him until fifteen years later. That event happened in the visiting room, you know. My mother, she was able to bring him in, you know, that's the three people that's involved that's in this poem that I wrote, you know, because by me seeing him for the first time as a teenager, you know, it became surreal.

It's like, the meaning of life just changed for me, you know. And it was, like, a lot of regrets,

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a lot of missed out time, a lot of first this, a lot of first that, you know. But yet, at the same time, he was able to come into the visitor's room, it was like seeing myself. You know what I'm saying? It was like I was just trying to put those emotions in words, right? And that's why I was using that rhythm, you know, to try to put it in an artistic way to really capture a person—to draw him in. But that's mainly the story behind that.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, it obviously made an impression on you. You just said it changed your life, and this is something that this was some years ago now, and you're still writing this beautiful, very evocative, but very, like, these are specific moments that seem to have resonated and stayed with you. You're right, you did put it in a very poetic way. "Unfamiliar syllables in his body language" is a line that I just—stands with me just powerfully. "A child stares with wistful eyes and a closed mouth full of," and then a series of questions, like, it haunts me. And so how do you pick the language? I mean, who knows, right? But explain to everybody your writing process, I guess, to find such beautiful language for such an intense feeling that you've captured.

Winn

Alright, well, you know, I'm a creative person, right, and I say this to individuals a lot, but I don't think they really understand when I tell them this, is that, you know, I'm going on thirty years in prison, but I have yet to be bored, right? Because my imagination won't allow me to be bored, and my creativity will not allow me to be bored. So, if I know how to say something one particular way, I try to figure out at least three or four ways of saying the same thing, right, in a creative way, you know. I think that played a part in me expressing myself, you know, in an effective manner.

Like also, you were just talking about, you know, "the child stares with wistful eyes and closed mouth." Those questions he asked me, so you kinda, you know, it's like, it hit me, you know, because like, all of them, it just hit me. I wasn't prepared for that, you know? I really wasn't prepared for that. So, you know, just thinking back on that was like, okay, I'm going to really make this poem, you know. I'm going to put a lot into this poem because it meant a lot to me, and I'm searching for these feelings and these emotions and I'm trying to put them in words, alright? And hopefully, I did a good job at it. It can last for, you know—it can be a classic. People can read it for years down the road, or even when I'm gone, they can be able to relate to it, seeing your child for the first time in this type of setting.

Mahon-Haft

As somebody who went through a lot of these feelings, I think you wrote the best poem I've ever read to capture them, so I think you did a good job.

Winn

Appreciate that.

Mahon-Haft

I think the natural follow-up, you said it changed your life. Where has this taken you?

Winn

Okay. First, it had taken me to mature, to actually look at the big picture of life, what it is to be a father, right? What it is to be a man, you know, what is your priorities? You know, how do you want your legacy to stand the test of time? So, by me asking those questions, it forced me to be more serious in my decision-making, right, because either you can grow in here, excel, or you can wither away and rot, you know?

So, I told you—I told you, you know, I wanted to grow and I wanted to be a better person. I created fatherhood programs, you know, I've been a mentor, so it touched me in a way—you know what I'm saying—that it was very transformative. And like I said, you know, that was my experience and that was my truth. Like I said, it's resonating to this day from the decisions that I made in the past.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah. Fatherhood and the tangibility of fatherhood can be a real motivating factor.

Winn

Right.

Mahon-Haft

I can relate.

Winn

Right.

Mahon-Haft

And so, what else—to follow up, you talked about the fatherhood program as one of the things that this has inspired in you. Where has—what is a lesson that you would offer to other parents behind bars or to an understanding to the world about this from that perspective?

Winn

So, I would say, never stop trying to reach out, alright? I mean, you know, what people don't know is communication, social distancing is real in prison, but there is more than one way in order to get your communication out, alright? If it's writing a letter, if it's making a phone call, establishing contacts and building meaningful relationships so that way you can stay in contact with your kids, right. You know, that's one thing that hurt me because, you know, when you're young, when I came in as a teenager, I didn't think about parenthood, I was immature, you know. But as you're growing up through that and maturing, you start to

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realize you got to do better, I got to do better. So, you know, my point is always stay reaching out and speaking and all of it. And I think mainly, this poem is to be, like, my letter to him to let him know that he was always on my mind when I was doing this thirty-six years. I think that's pretty much it.

Mahon-Haft

It's a letter to him. Yeah, that's beautiful, man.

Winn

Yeah, right.

Mahon-Haft

That's beautiful. Hopefully, he'll get to hear this, as well as read it. So, any last thoughts before we—for readers or, you know, about the poem, about your art in general, about anything before we say goodbye?

Winn

I just want to say, I appreciate the Humanization Project. I want to appreciate you. I want to appreciate Virginia Tech for offering, you know, this medium for us to grow. And I hope other writers will be willing to participate and share their work because there's a lot of talent in here, a lot. I'm telling you, like, the artwork, you know, the crochet work, and the stuff in here, man, that society don't—they can't even imagine what guys are doing creatively in here. You know what I'm saying? So, hopefully, you know, we can expand to something else where people can actually see a little bit more of what we got going on in here. Thank you, everybody. Thank you for your time, too.

Mahon-Haft

Yeah, no, it's my pleasure. Actually, got to make sure we add in, thank you for recognizing us. I'm just a small part of this particular thing. Virginia Tech and actually our efforts on it are all shout-out to Coalition for Justice and Margaret, who made this, created this whole thing in the first place also. So, I'm gonna—I don't want to misplace that at all, but I do appreciate you and you sharing your voice. Thank you, Anthony. You have a good one, man.

Mahon-Haft

Alright. You too, man.





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