



VERSE AMONG US

A National Poetry Writing Month Zine

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INTRODUCTION

Jess Abolafia, Mentorship Coordinator

Poetry, with its ability to distill complex emotions and experiences into evocative language, serves as an impactful medium for both personal expression and community engagement. For some, poetry provides a method of exploring and articulating innermost thoughts and feelings; for others, it allows them to connect to people despite physical boundaries of separation. **Lars Gunther Parker**, who first turned to writing while in a Maximum-Security isolation cell with no human contact following the death of his parents, considers how writing enabled him to confront his deep pain in a healthy manner: “While in isolation, I had to learn how to cope with my emotions in a constructive way rather than through hurting the world around me.” Regarding his personal experiences with writing, **JA Davis** explains, “For me, poetry is neither compensation nor revenge. It is a chance to participate in what feels like the truth. To deliberate (while de-liberated) on the essential confrontations of man is to rally against indistinction and blurring. It is a rare, instructive relief.” On his own relationship to his craft, **Jason Centrone** notes, “As writing continues to grow personally in its roles as expression, as discipline, a learning tool—how I figure pieces of myself out—abiding ones, emerging ones, but too, old hurtful, selfish quirks—ones I have to nearly drag onto the page, I feel increasingly closer to the craft, more respectful toward it even.” For **Ken Meyers**, poetry also provides momentary solace during his incarceration. He writes:

I’ve always thought of poetry as a compact and portable art form suitable for confined spaces, and now it has become a metaphoric echo of my former life as a wanderer. Poetry is my bivouac, the shelter I erect against the prison elements and storms that batter me. It is my backpack holding what I need to survive, a welcome burden, sometimes chafing and always needing readjustment. It is the road I once wandered that allows me a few moments unconstrained by the wire.

As these writers suggest, poetry can cultivate spaces of healing, creativity, and meaningful change. The National Poetry Writing Month (NaPoWriMo) project gives writers the opportunity to do just that.

In 2003, inspired by the National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) challenge of writing 50,000 words of a novel throughout November, poet Maureen Thorson began crafting one poem a day during the month of April: National Poetry Writing Month. Thorson shared her writing on her online blog, and soon connected with other writers who also took part in this initiative. The NaPoWriMo project has since brought thousands of aspiring and professional writers together to complete the challenge of writing 30 poems in 30 days.

Each year, the Prison and Justice Writing Program contributes to this project, inviting incarcerated individuals from across the country to join the challenge. We send initial prompts through postal mail, and check-in throughout the month with additional materials, including craft talks and essays from various writers. The goal is not to craft perfect poems, but rather, to foster a healthy, daily writing practice and routine.

Completing this challenge looks different for each person, and reasons for participating varies. When describing the importance of this project for incarcerated writers specifically, Centrone writes:

A strange truth concerning facility-life is that there is no expectation for us to do anything here, or be anyone. If someone struggles with motivation, they're able to pick up a "Duster" job on the unit and settle into the TV 18 hours a day. Having an "assignment" like NaPoWriMo can add a little pressure to get focused—to crack the binding on a composition book.

Meyers approached NaPoWriMo as the "assignment" Centrone mentions, remaining steadfast in his writing practice daily:

I dedicated a notebook to the project and first thing every morning (some days when my cellie left for work at 4:30 AM, others after 6:15 AM count), I sat down and tried to answer the day's prompt. Some of the prompts spoke to me immediately, like the Day 1 prompt about lunch in a cafeteria, inspiring "Mainline," a reflection on the days when we used to go to the dining hall, a process that ended with COVID and never resumed. At the opposite extreme, the poem, "NaPoWriMo," has nothing to do with any of the prompts, but as soon as I saw the acronym, I also saw the chemical

symbols and thought there must be a poem there. It took a while to work out what it would be, and I ended with the question I started with: “but what the hell is ‘ri?’”

Parker engaged in the challenge as a way to document his experiences, both mundane and uncommon, while incarcerated. He specifically discusses the inspiration for one of his poems—witnessing a total lunar eclipse from prison:

Even though I am incarcerated, I still wanted to witness this historic event like many others throughout the United States. But, I could not because I was ordered to lock down, due to the prison administration’s “fear” of inmates looking up into the sky and burning out their retinas. I remember feeling amazed when I saw all the staff pass out solar eclipse glasses to one another so they could go outside of the guilds and have a watch party. My peers and I had to remain locked down and watch the Eclipse pass over on our TV screens—that is, if we had one in our cell of course, which not everyone did. We couldn’t exactly see out of our windows due to them being glazed over from the outside with paint in order to obstruct our vision. When the total eclipse finally passed overhead, I could see the shadows in my cell grow heavy and feel the temperature drop. Later that night, when things went back to “normal” within the prison, I went to church. When I got back, instead of remaining in the guild, I went to my cell to be alone. It was during this moment that I wrote the poem, “Indoor Weather.”

Perhaps the most meaningful component of NaPoWriMo is the community that grows from it. Even though the majority of participants are unable to see or communicate with the other writers, each person knows that they are not alone, that there is a whole group of people, on both sides of the prison walls, responding to the same prompts and writing alongside them.

This zine itself is a communal space, where writers—separated from each other by state lines, and from society by fences and razor wire—share their poems, and in turn, contribute to a cohesive project. The writers within this zine have various creative backgrounds, from seasoned authors to aspiring poets who had the courage to pick up the

pen and try the challenge for the first time. They crafted poems of many different subjects and themes: nostalgia, longing, loss, love, dreams, survival. Even the cover art, created by incarcerated artist **Jeff Elmore**, reads as a poem, its metapoetic words against a backdrop of intricate visuals.

NaPoWriMo is much more than a 30-day poetry challenge. By engaging writers creating from carceral facilities—spaces that are immensely isolating, oppressive, and demoralizing—our hope is that NaPoWriMo enables them to experience a sense of connectedness, solidarity, and perhaps even beauty. Let the poems in this zine be a testament to the resilience, creativity, and radical transformation that occurs in spite of prison walls, and an illustration of the community strung together by the verses among us.

PEN AMERICA'S PRISON AND JUSTICE WRITING PROGRAM

Since the mid-1970s, PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing Program (PJW) has supported and amplified the work of thousands of writers who are creating while incarcerated in the United States. By providing writing resources, namely, *The Sentences that Create Us*, mentorship, and audiences for their work, PJW strives to bridge access to the broader literary community. Recognizing that the freedom to write in U.S. prisons is a critical free expression issue of our time, PJW leverages the transformative possibilities of writing to raise public consciousness about incarceration and supports the development of justice-involved literary talent.

The PEN Prison Writing Awards was initiated in response to the 1971 Attica Prison Riots as PJW's founding program. Each year, hundreds of writers submit unpublished work in the categories of Poetry, Fiction, Essay, Memoir, and Drama. Winners are published in an annual anthology, are invited to work with a designated mentor, and are awarded cash prizes of \$300, \$200, \$150, and \$75 for First Place, Second Place, Third Place, and Honorable Mention, respectively. Some winners are also featured in Break Out, an annual public celebration of the winners, staged by well-regarded authors, actors, and activists in the New York City community. The submission period is August 1 - December 31. Entries are accepted from anyone incarcerated in a federal or state prison, county jail, or other detention facility.

The PEN Prison Writing Mentorship Program has been a pillar of PJW for nearly 50 years. Separated from the outside world, incarcerated people face unique challenges to their emergence and careers as writers, journalists, and artists with valuable contributions. The Mentorship Program aims to fill this gap by pairing incarcerated writers with mentors—working writers or MFA students—and facilitating their one-on-one mail correspondence. The majority of mentees join the program through the annual PEN Prison Writing Awards, either as winners or by recommendation of the judging committee.

Through these pairings, writers receive constructive feedback on new or existing work, support with crafting a writing practice and process, and, most importantly, a tether to literary communities outside prison walls. These exchanges are designed to be connective experiences, where reciprocal learning occurs between both sides of the writing partnership. In this respect, the PEN Prison Writing Mentorship Program aims for all participants to celebrate different perspectives, develop a writing practice, strengthen literary craft, explore new methods of storytelling, and foster connections within the literary landscape.

The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison, edited by Caitis Meissner, is a dynamic handbook including guidance, resources, and advice on the art of writing fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and screenplays. Drawing from over fifty contributors, most themselves justice-involved, this manual is both a directive to sharpen your writing practice and a source of inspiration about what it means to be a writer in community with other writers. Free copies are available for individuals and groups in carceral facilities. To request one, send us a note indicating your interest. Someone may also request the book for you by filling out this form online: <https://tinyurl.com/yjxc28s2>. Please note that *The Sentences that Create Us* is currently banned in Florida state prisons, and we regrettably can't send copies there at the moment.

To learn more about the Prison and Justice Program, visit our website (<https://pen.org/prison-and-justice-writing/>), subscribe to *Works of Justice*, email us (prisonwriting@pen.org), or send a letter through postal mail (PEN America, 120 Broadway, 26th Floor North, New York, NY 10271).

CELL CYCLONE

Leo Cardez

*A metaphor for the chaos lived inside a 6x9 concrete tomb,
inside a cell with bars of firing neurons.*



VISTA CARCERAL

Ken Meyers

My view's frame, 11" wide, deepset
another 3 and glass another half
sandwiched between steel bars, rectangular,
the first hollow but the second?—
how could I know, it a world beyond my reach—
granular, rusticated, cinder block windowsill
grey fading to white
home to patches of moss
anchored to aggregate, these my tiniest gardens,
hummocks of green and black and bronze
protected on their precipice,
I tend them with careful well-wishes and longing.

Below: a strip of soggy grass
now aburst with flashes of yellow
dandelions who like us have learned
to keep their heads down
trying to go unnoticed
trying to live another day—
but dandelions can never fall back
their joy punished to prevent its spread.

Then, beside and beyond, more
cellblocks more cinder blocks
row after row after row of chain link and concertina
whose razors are allowed their joy, their carnassial joy,
blades that catch light,
scatter its contraband smears of sunset pastels,
blades that wait patiently unaging
for any who'd transgress.

SUNSET OVER I-BLOCK

Ken Meyers

If I mount the desk,
if I contort my body,
if I crane my arthritic neck
just so,
there, to my left, beyond the next block over
hugging its industrial roof, there they are:
trees, and my strip of sky, a flash of sunset
pastels sliced by concertina wire
until they
: kept at bay
: fade
: wane
: die

Later, Mars will rise, his ruddy prick of light
more powerful than The Gods of DOC

MAINLINE

Ken Meyers

The chaos, the queue
COs barking orders—“stay in line,” “time’s up,” “take it back”
hold shoulder to wall and shuffle forward
until steam table fare glimpsed through
greasy cracked glass—
thick, soundproof, shatter-proof safety glass—
what force, what anger, what weapon
could have injured is so?
and yet it holds, firm in its frame
hardened, secured, impenetrable
as we all are no matter
how damaged,
cons and COs both
Locked in our roles.
A knock on that glass to the line worker—
friend? (there are no friends here—
only coinciding interests and motives)
associate? debtor?—
whatever—
favor extended or debt paid,
the extra gristleburger hidden under
fried potatoes or mac salad—
keep the count, your place in line, don’t lose it now
ID scanned tray retrieved keep count don’t miss your come-up
shuffle to table to welded seat
never breaking line order
never sharing beyond the three men at your table
hoping for a meal with no pepper spray,
this their favorite condiment
15 minutes then up,
shuffle to tray window
cup & plastic fork spoon knife—take 3, return 3—
slide tray, leave,
brace for pat down
hoping the extra patty
safe in its old ramen wrapper
safe in your shorts
will be missed and missed again
the process repeated at block door
and then to your cell to lock in
where for later your defiance will await your hunger

NAPOWRIMO

Ken Meyers

Sodium I get—it's in everything,
not just chips, pretzels, tuna
but in peanut butter and tears,
in the sweat we drip endless track laps walked
or trying to walk away from a shank

But polonium?
Sure it's toxic like our lives,
like our air and interactions,
but how else can I feel connected, relevant?
Perhaps through Marie and Pierre, poisoned
by their own ambition, by their own curiosity?
No. They were heroes. Such thought an obscenity.

Tungsten—so hard, so essential.
So different from me.
But memory: once
subjected to the flow, the pressure of electrons
resistance, conflict burning white hot
illuminating;
now we are both obsolete,
shelved and forgotten

Molybdenum,
this I could use, something
hard, toughening, corrosion-resistant
mellifluous
where memory is corrosive
melodious
where weakness is fatal
dulcet
defense against acrimony

But what the hell is “ri”?

FENCEROW

Ken Meyers

The carcass lay where it must have lain for half a century,
bullet-riddled, its wounds dressed with graffiti
a sapling grown through a rusted fender.

Someone once polished this beast newly bought,
newly brought home,
loved as people love the material.

And after that? Passed down? A teenager's first car?
What dreams, what secrets
might rusted springs of a naked backseat tell?

And then, eventually—farm car, put out to pasture
hauling tools and supplies and midday meals across fields
until it could haul no more,

abandoned here, stripped of whatever worth
it had left and then left
to slump back to the earth whence its hulk once came.

UNSEEN
Larry Stromberg

Days fly by with lightning speed
Nights vanish into darkness
The world spins into another tomorrow
I stand in the middle of nowhere

People come and go with a heartless "Hello"
Alone in my make believe wonderland
Invisible to the naked eye
To be honest, I like it that way

Unseen

Dark before dawn
Angels fall to my side
Let the creativity flow
Use my blood to do so

Praying on my knees makes me feel free
I'm tired at looking at all these medicated zombies
Ghosts from my past haunt me relentlessly
Maybe, I'm really insane

I'm acquainted with all suffering
My melodramatic theory
No awaking serendipity sightseeing
Silhouette in the fire

Let me be finally seen in the flames

IMPRISONED LOVE

Angel Ayala

After work I had the whole prison yard to myself.

I sat there alone for a few
In the twilight,
Ignoring the snarling barbed wire fangs
And the stalking gunner in the tower,

Gazing at the sky and waking stars,
Imagining I could float up into them
Like a lost dream,
Being remembered by Existence.

And you awoke as I fell asleep.
To dream.

Of you.

HERE, I AM ALONE

Michael J. Richardson

The air is thick
And heavy the burden
I chew and swallow
But sorrow is gristle
And despair is drink
From a chalice of chalk

Here
They're in love with themselves
Hating one another and
Lacking compassion they
Endeavor to be alone

Here
Light years separate mind from heart
A billion beacons glitter aloft
Teasing the homesick gazer
Whose compass spins and cries
Directionless and void

Here
Home is an illusion
Like a dream made of sugar
That dissolves in the rain
Of a dreamer's fancy

LIFE PLUS INTEREST

Michael J. Richardson

Ravaged by malignant remorse
Consumed by vicious memory,
Your prisoner recalls the course
That led to penitentiary.
Regrets compound intensively
As tears of anguish are let loose,
And sorrow flows until empty
When still becomes the saving noose.

STORM-CHASING HOPE

Michael J. Richardson

She is born on the eastern horizon
I exhale and chase her west
Should I be deemed as worthy
She'll warm my flesh with a kiss
Consumed by the promise of comfort
Oblivious to peace in the shadows

Deep sable and cold is the night
She's gone again
Only to be reborn in the east
For Hope is Tomorrow's to give.

A WEEK OUT OF SEGREGATION

Bryn Montello

Entering the space where eight years ago
I carved your face from my own flesh
on a Tuesday late April

But Wednesday I walked in the fresh air, I am no longer in, but
nowhere

Thursday I found my groove, a space in a room not far removed,
body whirling, limbs loose!

Friday I found a fingerling of a pencil and paper, then reached across
fibers to find favor with some few

Saturday lo! my own flesh and hers clasped
little one, darling, mama won't cry when you go

Sunday I found my center raised in powerful song!
I can feel right when the days are still long!

And then in first passed moons day I found in my center,
I'll find solace, a place in each day
enough love and strength to carry through coming winter

[UNTITLED]

T.J. Green

Blue like the frosty grass under prison
Lights and half-moon darkness.

Where
Have my days gone? and what have I
By them become?

Through this
Dirt-crustd rusty metal
Screen and past
These bars meant to keep me
In, and beyond
The fences topped with razor wire,
The light pollution and guard towers,
The stars are
Burning with a glory I could never show, haunting me
With memories of a home I'll never know
Again: Like sneaking out
My basement bedroom window and running
Barefoot through soggy fields full
Of thistles and burr bushes to get no where
But heaving
And sighing
And howling at the moon.

I grate my fingernails
On the screen as a breeze breaks in
With the heart-raking scent of a bonfire that drags me
Back to my summer at Uncle Joe's: S'mores and backyard camping
And getting married to Stacy Chapman in the swimming pool
at seven years old.

Where
Did those days go? and why can't I know
That simple joy again?
Behind me the chuckhole slides open with a [KILINK!], 'Breakfast
In the cell
Again,' I think.

A train in the distance whistles me to tracks
That pass the house I failed
To grow up in; tracks on which I used

To set change
To squish, and once a toad
(But I changed my mind and let him go),
And throw rocks at freight trains, laughing when I heard
The glass of new cars shatter.

All
My dreams are shattered now; all
My days are faded.

My ball cap, faded
Frayed and blue and hanging
On the hook beside me starts dancing
In the late Autumn Wind. Icy drops prickle
My skin and I'm fourteen, dancing
In the downpour, not caring even for the cigarettes getting soggy
In the pocket of my
Faded blue jeans.

SHIPWRECKED

T.J. Green

A flagging sun

Listing atop a sea

Of clouds on fire,

A scene

I'm seeing through

Chainlink and razor wire.

Someone sailing

By on Route 34

Blasts their horn...

Is it jibe or a cry of encouragement they sound for

Us?

Running the grounds

Shipwrecked souls try

To make the most of our tiding time outside:

Yard shoes scuttling

Concrete gall quickly and heavy

Weights are lifted in spite...

A sparrow sings her siren taking

Flight.

The flagging sun

Sinks

Into a silhouette of seaweed and silver fences...

Into an eventless horizon and is

Lost.

A SERIES OF HAIKUS

T.J. Green

Dawning light; pale, gray
Treasures spark'ling in the sand
The tide comes and goes.

Darkened clouds gather
Shadows eclipse the landscape
The critters scatter.

Thunder growling
Lightning rips across the sky
Letting loose the rain.

Water over earth
Sand, grass, rocks, trees, mountain peaks
You cannot stop me.

FOUR NIGHTS AND THREE DAYS

T.J. Green

Four goddamn nights and three days this toilet's been stuck
flushing, and it's Friday.

Four goddamn nights and three days.
I've told every officer who's worked the wing and they all wrote
work orders and two of them even called.

To hush the howling growl I laid a pair of pants over the bowl but
they got saturated by the upward spray and started to sink
and I got worried they might get sucked in while I was sleeping and
then I'd really be in trouble,
and the sake of my sanity would not suffice for a valid defense.

Four goddamn nights and three days,
and maintenance won't be back till Monday.

Two more nights and three days.
By then I might be so used to the noise that its absence
makes me crazy and then
I'll really be in trouble.
What if I go completely insane and spend all day flushing the toilet
for comfort?

Four goddamn nights and three days.
I wonder how many gallons of water that is because in school
one time they told us to put a couple bricks in the toilet tank
at home to help save the planet.

If I did tell my mom I don't remember what she said but
I know we didn't do it,
maybe we didn't have any spare bricks.

Tell you what I do know:
IDOC doesn't give a damn about the planet or my sanity,
but they've got plenty of bricks.

RESPONSIBILITY

Lars Gunther Parker

Knowledge in the classroom,
food for thought, not bought.

College inside of the prison classrooms,
indentured servitude on time given by the court, not bought.

Learning welding in the morning until count time,
when we return to our cells, filled to the brim, on a cellular level.
Then, welding again in the afternoon,
only to be followed by college thereafter.

Eating my dinner in the college classroom,
then shifting into the prison chapel
to devour a church lecture by Tony Evens on T.V.
before I eat my second dinner back in the unit.

I am bound by my responsibility to eat what's given,
my plate being filled with nourishment to provide me a new life
beyond the Great Divide

that is a concrete barrier separating "me" from "them"

as we all eat and learn together
with our mutual love of knowledge.

INDOOR WEATHER

Lars Gunther Parker

An Eclipse in a Prison
where all people wearing blue are in dark cells.

We watch the world from a T.V. and see a screen
between “you” and “me”

Does it rain indoors?

When the fire suppression system is disabled,
even “saints” burn in the chapel during prison revivals.
Maybe they weren’t as godly as we thought.

Being a prisoner means not having the freedom to look up
into the Eclipsed sky and burn our retinas out.

Do you smell it?

The tension between a flood of misinformation and the great
Reformation of religious freedom inside this concrete field
of dreams, once alive but now dead.

I need to think about things as I wait on the Eclipse to end
then “we” in blue can come out of the cell again.

WHAT'S LEFT

Robert Hitt

When the gulfs
between you
and everything else
become absolute
and the terrors
of the inconsequential
are unsheathed,
silly little things.
here is how it should be.
how it once was.
perhaps
how it could be,
could have been.
When it ends
will it be enough to have
known
what was possible?
It will have to be
It will have to be.
silly little
things

ROOMMATE JUXTAPOSITION

Elizabeth Hawes

She returned to prison because she was drinking again. She drank after discovering her daughter was molested while she was in prison the first time.

She was a rail-thin tattooed biker with few teeth and dreams of becoming a cosmetologist. Her favorite movie was *Beauty and the Beast*.

She crocheted and was learning Ojibwe. She was learning how to be a poet and wrote about her grandmothers.

She was large & schizophrenic. laughed or scowled. Frequently conversed with the mirror above our sink. She tried to choke out all her previous roommates.

She was loud because she was very hard of hearing. She spilt coffee on the floor everyday and was releasing to a trailer park in Wyoming.

She was in anger management class. Her dad was a cop, and her sister was a prison warden in another state.

She was a very small grandmother who was dating a trucker and owned cockatiels.

She was a forty-ish Republican with serious health problems. She had a heart attack soon after she first arrived and often went on weird all-protein diets: in prison this meant powdered eggs and summer sausage.

She was in the Sunshine Service Dog Program--loved dogs--and wanted to be a mom more than anything.

She used Tarot cards and wanted to be a dominatrix. She was raised by a mother who was fearful of leaving the house.

She was large. at least six feet. 300 pounds. able to grow a full beard unless she took medication to prevent her facial hair from growing. She was engaged to a man 40 years her senior.

She asked me to read a letter she had written to her girlfriend to see if it sounded okay. It began, "Dear Fucking Bitch."

She was from a family of ten kids. Over the two years she was here, three of her siblings died. Two overdosed. One was murdered.

RUNDOWN OF LAST WEEK, MARCH 17-23

Elizabeth Hawes

Last Sunday—St. Patty’s Day—when I wore nothing
green, at a table behind me, a woman sang
Crybaby ass, bitch, bitch, over & over

Monday—before ten, my neighbor left
prison with a smile & her belongings
in a card

bored Tuesday, I made my husband
look up names of Ethiopian foods
and spell them out over
the phone for my next story I was

writing Wednesday, the notary notarized
legal forms & I sent them
to my attorney

Thursday, light flakes were flying
like pixie dust past my window as I printed
my one-act about lichens in the computer lab

Friday, a concert hall near Moscow
was attacked by ISIS-K as I watched
a PBS film about Marin Alsop called *The Conductor*

On Saturday, I bemoaned
no soccer on TV and listened
to Stevie Wonder as princess
Kate announces she has cancer

APRIL
Elizabeth Hawes

sixteen years ago, when Soren turned
five, we sent a large yellow painted card
board box to North Carolina full
of fifty things yellow

Play Doh-dump truck-crayon-highlighter-a can
of corn-comb-rubber duckie-Trusty pencils-school
bus-star-tee shirt-marigold seeds-Twinkies-
tennis balls-shovel & pail-anything
we could find in the right
shade of sun

Soren's favorite: big yellow box

every April we create a card for the son
of my husband's best friend, now
21. still living in his world of LEGOS &
Spiderman costumes. still picking dandelions
fifty things yellow

**CENTO: AGAINST FORGETTING,
EDITED BY CAROLYE FROCHÉ**
Elizabeth Hawes

Don't be afraid. I must tell you
what I saw

One day somebody in the
crowd identified me

I won't mention names

A woman in a yellow jacket, she goes in

In the meantime, people were killed

No foreign sky protected me

Write it. write. In ordinary ink

my head shaved bare

it is hard
to make a poem in prison

and when you marvel at how;
fall on knees to pray

Land breaks yellow south below,
pale squares

We still have verse among us

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MAMA JAN
Zilla (Shalayah Jacox)

LeeLee, sing to me! Do you remember you'd always come to my house and say, "teach me how to sing, Mama Jan, please!" I remember dressing you up in all those pretty frilly dresses and stockings for church every Sunday just for you to take them off and hide under the big dining room table by the piano, while I'd be dressing your big sister, Fussy. With all the assorted flowers and heavy maroon tablecloth on it, I wouldn't be able to see you under there. I'd have to bend down and peek under and you'd be napping in those nude stockings and those cute 1 inch heeled church shoes that clasped on the side and your bloomers. That's where you'd always hide. I'd think to myself, *By now you'd think she'd find somewhere else to hide*, but nope. I'd have to grab your foot and pull you out cause standing at 6' even at my age, it wasn't easy to bend that low. I'd redress you in your all white dress and put pretty white ribbons around your thick curly pinktails. All that pretty jet black hair on yo' head and you'd holla anytime anybody tried to put a comb through it while you was still awake. I dressed you in all white, and Fussy, your sister, in all pink. Identical dresses, different colors. My beautiful little granddaughters. We did this dance every Sunday and every Sunday you'd sleep the whole service long and after the service you'd wake up on my shoulder every time we'd pass that candy store next to Footlocker in downtown Minneapolis. And every time I'd take y'all inside you'd want a big bag of caramel and cheddar cheese popcorn and a lollipop of assorted color bigger than yo' head. We'd get back on the bus and you'd eat until you fell back asleep in my arms and I'd haul you and your sister off the bus and into the house. You loved to sleep all Sunday long. Now you're all grown up!

I reply "and now your gone"

SNOOZE
Sean J. White

startling alarm
throwing cold water
& raising the curtain
to queue the actor
to the stage rudderless
& ruining a dream
worth remembering
(though forgotten)
fingers drift
hoping to shore
the morning switch
reverie becomes reveille

[UNTITLED]

Sean J. White

daffodils sighing
in a vase by the window
an empty garden

ALL NIGHT CAFETERIA—REHAB

Jason Centrone

The old fluorescents
burn, I mean they're raining
radioactivity, flooding the shallows
where a first wave of lesser organs
has begun to palpitate. An end,
if this feeling wins,
is a few left turns
from what will be a surprise
of my pajama'd self on little seafoam
bathroom tiles.

All of my life, these maps lie
flat on their backs—oblivious to the scatter
of cutesy crosses—each, the possible plus
sign where my soon-to-be neighbors
and I, in artless rows and six full feet
of shade, will finally even out—I think of our quilted
boxes—the occult pouch
of desiccant tossed in—like with pull-ons—Skechers,
Uggs, or the sleek espadrilles
I never owned.

It's fine, it's fine,
only these would be fresh off the shelf—the overture
to their opening act still sounding all Marriage
of Figaro-jaunty while the last chord
to the last crook of my labyrinthine march
hovers—a dissipating glow, now.
Like the streetlamp by intake, now,
in the face of its crowning sun,
Ponderous, Ancient of Days—your contribution,
my sweet, spent creation,
has been noted.
And the coffee's just as weak.

MEDITATION FOR BEGINNERS

Jason Centrone

Fold
(yourself). First,
in easy angles—take it to the floor mat.

You can (by hand) then
pump the brakes—here is intimacy. Here.
The grit-small stones consisting
in dim compartments—third,

why not,
from the inner alleys, whisk
an entire legacy of shards? Empty every sac,
wring (at length) the spring roll viscus
of its bilious themes—bitter jams & jellies. Hum
the bad air yon and after (meaning fourth),

just have a listen. What's this rhyming
with your buzz-lips? Whiskers!
Up from the knolls & dingles—you've complained.
Now collecting currents—great whorls
of untapped amity. Optimize
reception. If you're a slouch (an addled bear), then fifth,

sit in a way that compliments
gravity (but doesn't fawn). Sit plumb
in the jaws of your hesitation—(that is) be the ball-gag
to its distributive property (sealing in
the better airs). Here is now and now is currency—
unlatch the purse to that inhering

sixth, your Haiku sense, and (subliminally) waft.
Infuse what you can of the vapory brew—tea
from the taproot—Spirit is the building steam.
Mind—the ice floe dwindling, and across this vast, this
scabland you've exposed, make it an even seventh—

your supplemental eye
scuddling spirals (divining)
the Mullein's floss—a comforter drawn
back for you in the high berth of the soul. Climb,
at last, climb in. You've never belonged
more.

HOME SO BADLY, I CAN TASTE IT

Jason Centrone

Imagine you are
from another planet, stuck...
—XXI century prompt—fragment

And what if we are
from another planet? Plane, rather.
Stuck—already the kinks
from looking up—wistful,
sweeping night skies with a borrowed
telescope—are setting in. Beds between stars
so empty. Unmade. We're up longing
in long miles. Parsecs—I'm just now,
with the windows blotted—the dark turned up
like no one's business,
zoning out by layers.
Concentricities, but getting not so far.

Scripture—sutra, annotated manuscript,
the limited edition
cracked leather codex—there's gossip here
of Higher Worlds. It's been suggested,
if we drain our last half gallon
of citrus soft drink-like-antifreeze
over the last jumbo frank—all the fixings—in situ,
right here in mini-mart parking,
we'll have a chance, a shot
of wriggling in
to a sort of phase with these high-vibe domains.

The missing link, at this stage—effective ads.
It's late-night pizza commercials
setting the bar. Hot gold in slo
seething HD molten cheese mo—the mendicants
can hardly compete. When interplanetary
cruises do slip in
to the main stream—Krsna-loka:
Wish You Were Here, or Zen and the Art
of Total Integration—for me to don the burlap—
to cinch a matching rope-belt on—the ads—
they'll need that Elysian sizzle.

THE BROOK
Paris Atréju Chantelle

There roves the girl a-skipping again,
All 'round the sweet apple tree,
Then not over the brook, but through the brook
Splishing and splashing skips she;

Comes next the boy, a pirate again
Sailing the green grassy lea,
And not over the brook, but through the brook
Splishing and splashing wends he;

Sister and brother hopping again
Chasing the bunny midday;
But not over the brook, no, through the brook
Splishing and splashing hop they;

Came then the night whence praying again,
Knelt by their soft feathered nook,
Thanking the Lord for such a fine day,
“but most for our dear splashy brook.”

THROUGH MY WINDOW

Paris Atréju Chantelle

Years of smears and dusty rain
Prevent the stars from entering,
Through plexi-plastic, warped and stained,
Through prison lights and dusty rain.

There dwelled that time—how long ago?
Myself I built a telescope;
I breathed night air, inhaled the sky
And watched the stars sail sweetly by.

My children viewed the Little Bear
Who danced within a nighttime fair;
They wandered through great Ursa's den
Where found they rings of Saturn in.

But years of smears and dusty rain
Now dam my stars from entering,
Through bars and plexi-plastic stains,
Through prison lights and dusty rain.

Of Draco did my children see
That serpent coiled in mystery;
They watched him wind through starry seas
And bare his fangs at Hercules.

And now without my stars in sight,
My children gone and prison lights,
No star may pass into my eyes
No longer may I see the skies.

Years of smears and dusty rain
Prevent the stars from entering,
Through plexi-plastic warped and stained,
Through prison lights and dusty rain.

Yet of those stars my heart doth yearn
To close my eyes and there sojourn,
Amongst God's silv'ry heaven's keep,
Beyond my window e'er to sleep.

I WONDER WHEN THE FISH MIGHT BITE?

Paris Atréju Chantelle

I wonder when the fish might bite
Beneath this frozen lake of ice.

My tackle box with hook and bait
Fell in that hole I careful made.

As you might guess, my pole went too
My big red sled and then one shoe

Then I fell through...

It's snowing now, I'm stuck real tight
Beneath this frozen lake of ice.

The sun went down, it's dark as night
I wonder when the fish might bite.

MEADOW SONGS

Tracy Leigh

There are several various worlds undetected by human eyes too busy to witness the insurmountable beauty of it all. Wildflowers stretch the sun breath in hopes of being lifted from among the weeds.

Flutterbys frolic in the meadows sheaves, twirled and dipped by Spring's gentle breezes, boldly basting the panting fox sprawled in the grasses as he fights a sleep squint.

The nearby trickling brook entices all of nature with a lullaby familiar to generations passing by whether it be the meadow's occupants or weary travelers. So many secrets dwell deep in the fields' waist high grasses, the frogs and crickets gossip back and forth incognito within their surroundings. Contentment resides here even amid torrential rains and thunderstorms deemed naturally soothing.

A generous 'splay if birds whistle their latest tunes until a raven calls out a predator's arrival. They work together, keep life simple, and enjoy the little moments of their quaint lifestyles. No envy felt over plights, the meadow's songs coexist without missing a beat, content to be undetected or appreciated.

SLUMBER TUMULT

Tracy Leigh

Special Weather Alert

A tornado has been spotted in my bedroom.
I cherish observing funnel clouds formations,
however, their muscular roar is not...
NOT allowed in my bedroom!

Your words fuel the beast by day,
my soul repulsed by careless venom.
Then P.T.S.D. triggers ignite the
turbulent weather affliction by night.
My twister nightmare = a fight for flight.

Deep asleep in my bed wrestling myself,
I swat at the Tasmanian Devil in my head.
Aiming directly at me, the cyclone is
faster, wiser, foresees and manipulates my path.
Screams muffled, I struggle to pillow shelter.

Exhaustion spars with adrenaline as
I run this way, then that way,
careening haphazardly to avoid crossing
tornadic aim. Those attempting to wake
me, become a brawl component.

My subconscious state knows I
must wake to escape the affray,
be safe, be free, still I scream.
Assaulted by tangled sheets askew—
The Battle of the Violent Rotation.

Morning uneasy, my heart races, I feel
suffocated, head pounding, I catch my breath.
Disheveled recollection of my reality and
a wide-eyed roomie frantically proclaims,
“Where were you? I was unsure what to do!”

THE GOLDEN YEARS

JA Davis

The sun rises like it did
in my childhood. The earth
is the same. Hawthorn, acaçia—
only we have changed.

Our shadows hunch like
two upright croissants. Your eyes
don't linger on my face like they used to.
The brittle skin, silvered hair—

I've watched your mouth crinkle
Happy Birthday as the years passed
like ticker-tape. Now you're mouth-breathing
on the bunk beneath me. Exhaustion
without pleasure.

All this time reliving the same
nightmare of being abused
and growing up to hurt your family.

Because I hurt mine too, I know what it means
to live clinging to the bottom of your guilt
like a tequila worm. But I don't
sense in you the hunger or thirst
that makes a man unreachable.

I hear you sigh and sputter useless prayer.
Here again is the moment I could
become a better version of myself
when I slide down the ladder
and fumble toward you, your body
indistinct from the blankets
lavished atop you.

I gather the corners
and retuck them like wisps of hair.
I pull you close because you
have been hated, because I have,
and your heart is wider
than the bed I lie in.

I cradle you—
or maybe myself? Like entering
the myth of altruism, loving
in order to be loved the way I wish to be?

How we test our faith like this, sleeping
the sleep of the unjust, waiting to be pulled
out of the nightmares we wove by each other.
To be held and not let go of.

Prison ages you, yes, but does nothing
to diminish dread, or lack of composure;
avidity, or need to touch the warm, beloved body
still reached for in the dark.

Time is slipping between our fingers.
Regret is fading behind your snores.

O deviated septum!
little train tracks shifted left,
you can breathe easy now, I'm here!

You've got three senses left and I want you
to feel me when I wipe the corners
of your mouth. I want you to know
that I know the body is full of redundancy:
eyes, kidneys, lungs—but one heart,
and you gave me yours.

WITNESSING A SUICIDE

JA Davis

SIDE A

The unit is so still so silent
taking in the scene... Lord I fear it
endangers everything we've built
through each unbearable night!
The bridges carefully constructed
over the chasm of grief
have fallen away as though
by weakness or design.

One look is enough to doubt
the certainty of our homecoming.

And we. Can ever really know
how much of him was already gone
before his shoulder blades pushed out
like knives through brown silk,
and wings burst, and he soared home?

SIDE B

Lord, there I go again:
writing what I want to be true.
But wasn't everything so loud?

Now that I think about it,
didn't some asshole yell *where the foood at*
not two minutes after they came and took the body?

Wasn't he sentenced to life? So at that point
one could ask, what else was there to resist except the body?
Didn't he disentangle his soul?
Wasn't it marred by self-pity?
Didn't he scatter himself like pollen
across the grooves of the metal floors and ceiling?

Didn't they rule it an accident? *He was extremely
obese. His heart gave out.* Didn't it boil first
inside the bowl of his chest, then wasn't it just meat?

Didn't he die before he remembered to ask
his child for forgiveness? And weren't we unmoved?

Wasn't it a projection of our own insensitivity that
we turned to you, not for consolation, but to say

why am I still nothing?

why am I at your mercy?

BEFORE INDO-EUROPEAN

JA Davis

There are poems I carry around inside me like a spider brooding on her eggs, hoping they'll hatch and be more than a dossier of my failures. When they turn I split them open. Pour out the syllables and coax them to life. The stillborn that calcify to stone are like secrets yet to be unearthed, sunken like a mastodon in ice or scrawled on hidden glyphs inside terracotta jars. And before that, the unwritten ones, that for thousands of years caught inside the throats of men who died at sea or on funerary pyres, becoming mist then swollen clouds that still hang over us today. When they shift to rain and fall, they wash away the heat and detritus of our language to reveal us as we were when touch, taste, sight, smell was all there was. Back then, everything was unsayable. A cry for mercy was as it was from the beginning: a chest heaving sob. A primal scream of loss and our own recognition of it. Wordlessly we knelt against the earth, our hands lifted upward in capitulation to time and ceaseless pain. Our hearts were feral. Unlearned, yet fully articulated. When you saw my hands you knew my heart at once. When you heard my intense cries you were certain I did not take your own deep wounds for granted, and you left knowing closure or returned improbably bearing witness to love. Then the apple tree withered and we saw that we were naked. We spun words as new raiments of self, writing in cursive what God had already carved into the earth. And the distance between those things was what language was, and closing it, what poetry sought to do. It was a gift. After all, wasn't the heart rescued by Mother Tongue? Didn't those nights of screaming end and wasn't our pride spared because now no one had to see how we felt about all we'd done? Though I can't help but think: how quiet the guilty have become, and how inadequate the pen.

BEAUTIFUL BLACKOUT

Greg “Relevant” Willis

Now the Sun was hip-hop chillin’
just doing what it does,
when the Moon slid by to spend some time,
and show its friend some love.

It crept up from the bottom,
diagonal—its direction,
with each step it moved more left,
‘til they made an intersection.

The gifts God made the fourth day
showed up—since they had clearance;
the Sun and Moon took center stage,
and planets made an appearance.

A full eclipse was happenin’,
8 April 24;
the day turned to night and back,
and left us wanting more.

The atmosphere changed weirdly,
blue shimmering and unearthly;
the winds picked up and temps went down,
and all the birds stopped chirping.

The glasses that seemed useless,
worked better than expected;
for doubting science geeks and nerds,
we humbly stand corrected.

The eclipse lined up exactly,
too blissful to explain it;
that feeling that transforms your life,
God helped us all attain it.

Our comments tried explaining,
this marvel at our gazing;
for once in life, it was finally right,
saying “Awesome” and “Amazing.”

We all turned into children,
awestruck and full of wonder;

as brilliant beads and diamond rings,
fell low—for all to plunder.

Some traveled umpteen miles,
and spent untold resources;
but those whose trip got them a glimpse,
returned back home remorseless.

Plus couples joined in marriage,
a plan at first through drastic;
but afterwards, though not absurd,
‘cause this day was fantastic.

If polling those who saw it,
our answers would be ranging;
but have no doubt that each account,
would say, “It was life changing!”

*Reflections by the poet, Relevant, who witnessed the eclipse
from inside Grafton Correctional Institution.*

INMATE IN THE CAFETERIA

Terry Little

Support is just a fraction.
Resulting in overwhelming inaction,
Redacted to accepting what should not be,
But hopeful of all possibilities.

There's a face to relate to,
Not uncommon for such a place,
Like the smell of eight shoes,
Or sprayed with mustard mace.

The grimace is exceptional,
Substitutions impossible,
But you do what you gotta do,
To get past the inedible.

A GHOST LETTER'S RESPONSE

Terry Little

I would like to get to know you,
As a person. Who are you?
What were your favorite foods?
Do songs change your mood?

Do you like to read?
I love to read, so much so.
Good books make me sneeze,
Especially the drama in exciting scenes.

Do you like to write?
Such a silly question, right?
This may seem strange,
Please don't be afraid.

When I write I'm overcome,
This is hard to tell someone,
But a spirit inspires me,
Taking over my body in its entirety.

MY DAY OF INFAMY

Luzalbert Hernandez

It is my view that a man must suffer so that he can conquer suffering

It is my view that a man should not seek out suffering but nor should he retreat from it

It is my view that a man who flees from suffering because he has not the fortitude to endure it and overcome it is no man at all

It is my view that a man transcends only when he has conquered suffering

It is my view that life is juxtaposed, the utmost of joys and the utmost of agony

Oh the agony...

I remember that spring day handcuffs clamped on my wrist
wrists covered in the long sleeves of my buttoned shirt,
dressed for my doomsday

"25" years
the judge's words echoed throughout my 22-year old mind
my jury trial over but my true trial by fire just begun

I stood on the concrete steps behind the fenced antique courthouse
and smelled spring

A smell I remember as a child at baseball practice, the pollen high
A smell I remember when my mother took us children to the track
with her, how my lungs burned and thighs quivered
the scent of freshly cut grass and precipitation came through gasps

I stood still for a moment gazed out at my homeland from behind the
eyes of a man exiled

it was one of those deep spring evenings, long and drawn out
the smell of flowers in bloom

The officer escorting me panicked, his weathered hand dropped
to the pistol on his thick belt

Escape, freedom, and captivity filled my thoughts

Should I run and die here, I thought
let the officer's bullets rip through my tattooed flesh
and pardon me from my sentence

25 years for a fight, a fight called aggravated

the insidious suicidal thoughts began to torment and mock me
defeat, failure, loss all overtook me
my spirit battered like a war-torn banner

On that April 26th, my day of infamy,
the skies of my life darkened,
and for eight years I've roamed in this carceral wilderness

With only Faith and Love to sustain me
my eyes tired but still set on that land of freedom, the land
from which I was banished

It is my view that once a man transcends he will no longer
just survive but thrive, no longer fight but conquer
Then he understands the land he tills with his hands
will bear harvest

Let April 26th, my day of infamy,
mark the beginning of a new epoch
when unconstitutional convictions will be overturned, relief
will be found and the scales of justice will tip in our favor

An epoch in which that day will come
when my bare feet rest once again kiss the the earth,
the dirt of my homeland.

MY ITHACA
Luzalbert Hernandez

Victoria The Beautiful, Victoria The Magnificent

At your pinnacle, the dull blue of your evening sky stretched
tight over you

across the heavens, a paragon to all creation
Your soft dark soil meshed between my adolescent toes
as my bare feet trekked across your earthen face
stratified in layers divine: dirt, grass, man, and sky

I yearn for her warm embrace in the spring
her hot love in the summer
her declining kiss in autumn
and even her cold shoulder she turns to me every winter

Because I know that when her flowers again blossom
and her leaves bloom
she will once again turn her face upon mine
so close I inhale her aroma of thick humidity
witness her extended days, the sun in her eyes refusing to surrender
that stage of the sky to the oncoming brief of night

I hear her siren song of crickets, birds, and car horns
Taste her when she opens wide her mouth and pours down her rains
on my eager outstretched tongue
Feel as her as I walk atop her streets with names like: Sam Houston
and Hackberry attached to them

Like Odysseus I am only a man in a far off land
on the shores of the penitentiary I stand,
I gaze out everyday across the ocean of grass and rolling hills
that float beneath the barbed wire
and I yearn

I yearn for My Ithaca, My Hellas, My hometown: Victoria, Texas.

FREEDOM
Luzalbert Hernandez

My soul burns for freedom
My body weary from incarceration
I cannot eat; the worms of injustice malnourish me
Barbed wire, jail bars, and chains pick at my flesh like vultures

Is there any reprieve for a man like me?

My emotions frail, my essence gone
In this desolation enervation rules
I cannot see beyond this valley of bondage

But my spirit wills me on toward a promised land
A land of freedom, of liberty
My vision stares a second chance in the eye

*Continue walk on, there is no rest for you, oh, cursed soul, there is no rest
but in the grave and it is not your time*

I'm agonized crissed crossed and crucified
My soul is afire and only freedom can quench that flame
Freedom that word like the sky encompasses my consciousness
It beckons to me to take up my cross and walk on

I follow the mirage in this wilderness

I run, run, run until I fly, fly, fly

Jeff Elmore
Leo Cardez
Ken Meyers
Larry Stromberg
Angel Ayala
Michael J. Richardson
Bryn Montello
T. J. Green
Lars Gunther Parker
Robert Hitt
Elizabeth Hawes
Zilla (Shalayah Jacox)
Sean J. White
Jason Centrone
Paris Atréju Chantelle
Tracy Leigh
JA Davis
Greg “Relevant” Willis
Terry Little
Luzalbert Hernandez