



Bona

BOND

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Donate or submit to Lucky Jefferson at: luckyjefferson.com.

Juan Hernandez, a currently incarcerated artist, collaborated with us for this project. We are also grateful for the Chicago chapter of **The Awesome Foundation** for funding this work and making the exploration of the complex and often overlooked relationships formed in and beyond prison possible.

We received numerous submissions from currently and formerly incarcerated individuals across correctional facilities located in New York City, North Carolina, and South Carolina; across state and country lines including Canada and Indonesia; and across organizations that support this work including Just Arts 4 All, PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing Program, and Look 2 Justice.

Thank you for your vulnerability and support!

Foreword

From: Juan Hernandez
Date Received: 02/12/2025 01:15 PM CST
Subject: Bond

From the age of 16, all my relationships have been long-distance.

Romantic relationships, friendships, associates, and even family ties have all been curated from afar due to my incarceration. I have no choice in this matter, but many people do. They face this situation whether they like it or not, making the best of it to keep what they hold dear. It's hard work too. I, for instance, developed a permanent callus and indent on the side of my middle finger writing hand from countless hours of snail mail throughout the years. I've put in work, as have countless others in this unique situation.

Long-distance relationships, although hard to maintain, are sometimes essential for people like me. Some years ago, I received a letter from a stranger asking me for a commissioned portrait of an adopted cat for their roommate. This stranger developed into a pen pal and then became my most trusting friend who opened the world to me in ways I would have never expected. Without them, I doubt I'd ever become a published author or have my artwork exhibited in galleries throughout the country. We both learned and experienced a great deal from this long relationship, like how to speak in code while on the phone in case officers were listening in.

When dealing with long-distance relationships, each one has its own story to tell. Maybe you have a prison pen pal you've never met but feel closer to them than most friends you see daily. Perhaps your loved one is a soldier who was deployed, and due to the sensitivity of the mission, they can't even inform you where they are.

How do these situations change you? Do they make your relationship stronger, more meaningful? What tools do you use to keep in touch? What gravitates you to another from such a long distance?

Bond tells of the experiences, advice, strife, strength, and determination of many who work to sustain relationships, where distance is an obstacle to overcome.

From: Demetrius Buckley
Date Received: July 17, 2025
Subject: Posture

I saw you earlier this month.
I waved. I sent memory
beyond indentation.
Patches of skin, scratching
at it. It's a fever, a sleep sleep
rock-a-bye-baby scratching at it. No more
noise, no more outside,
inside, phone receiver,
fingers clacking keyboard,
pressing black buttons to a boiler
releasing the boiling brown water.

No more water. No more water.
Goodbye to that guy and
the other guy—they're catching
that members-only boat ride. Floating
on a river full of aching souls.

At Dwayne Water's prison/hospice institution
I went outside and saw a field of flat 6-inch
width sticks, 6 feet apart,
numbers written on them like some
abandoned construction site.

Yellow tape meant that a family wanted
the body in a week or two.

Red tape, there are the remains to be donated:
Heart, kidney, brain.

But that sea of blue, the light brown boxes un-
claimed,
camping boats overturned on shoreline,
freeway trash
collected.

Whale carcasses
tossed out on the ocean's bank.
The forsaking, the garden
of endings.

From: Lanae Tipton
Date Received: July 2, 2025
Subject: Struggles, Structure and Sanity

Anytime I feel overwhelmed and need to refocus, I call my dad. While this may seem like a totally normal thing to do, for me and my father it's not. Our relationship has had its fair share of gaps, bumps, and hurdles throughout the years. And if I'm being honest, given our history and different life experiences, he's the last person I expected to find solace with, but his stories have become my closest comfort and each conversation we share has given me a push to get through another day.

I'm currently incarcerated at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Being confined in an environment festering with violence and a daily air of depression that automatically rubs off on everyone, takes its toll. My father, meanwhile, is a retired 2-time war veteran of Desert Storm and the Iraq War, with 24 years of service under his belt. He's never been in a situation similar to mine, yet we have found an unthinkable connection. His tough love and advice combined with a dose of humor has helped me navigate through my own current war: prison.

On one occasion I called my dad to express the alienation I often feel from my family since it's so difficult to express the oppression of prison. Unexpectedly, my father related. "Being placed in a foreign environment, away from family and always on alert is much like being incarcerated," he told me. Having been deployed countless times while he was in the army, far away from the comforts of his home and family, he understood the weight of my circumstances perfectly, giving me a place to vent so that I didn't feel alone, but rather connected.

My father wasn't always around in my younger days, but now that I'm older and we're separated by the impenetrable walls of TDCJ, miles apart but a call away, he always picks up. As our bond grows through our phone calls, he continues to find the correlation between war and prison, which has been a huge revelation for me as I self-motivate by chanting silently, "If my father made it home from real wars, then this should be a cake walk, right?"

However, some days are harder than others. When I update my family about my life inside prison, some updates are filled with progress and hope-filled conversations, but others can involve drastic shifts in my mood and environment. Being incarcerated comes with its fair share of obstacles, frustrations, and setbacks. When I'm venting my dad is the only one who really understands how quickly things can go wrong in an instant, and also how altercations are always a blink away in the type of environment I'm in.

During one of our daily half-hour phone calls, I told my dad, "Most times fights aren't even given a second glance and can feel so unexpected in here. It is unsurprising to see at least 2-3 physical altercations daily and seemingly, this is normal."

Having seen more than I could imagine in the deployments my father endured. He wasn't quite fazed by my admission about the violent environment I'm in. "Some fights are inevitable because of our location," he told me. "It's the tone of war."

Because my father was patrolling "enemy" territory, requiring him to be on guard 24/7, I realized how much I was living in the same kind of conditions. In prison, strangers place targets on each other's backs for small offenses or power plays, which can result in some brutal battles. There are a lot of fights over respect and even claimed territory as well, like certain day room tables or TV times. In addition, TDCJ staff incessantly enforce their authority by patrolling dorms, but unlike my father who patrolled to uncover enemies or aggressive threats, the officers here, who are itching for some action are usually the ones to provoke violence.

“There are bad soldiers in the military too, baby,” my dad told me once. “It’s not promoted and it is punishable, but they are there.” He told me this after I revealed to him that oftentimes the cruelest corrections officers have military backgrounds. But to my dad, he finds the officers in TDCJ to be a joke, believing that they easily take advantage of the authority that allows them to openly mistreat incarcerated people. The structure of TDCJ is also very inconsistent and from my dad’s military perspective, that is unacceptable. For example, every officer enforces policies differently or not at all. Sometimes new rules pop up unexpectedly that aren’t even in the officer’s handbook, or the rule is enforced by one CO and not another. This creates a lack of structure and can be a headache for those of us who are incarcerated. To my father, all crooked officers lack both honor and integrity and when hearing of the foul tactics that staff get away with it leaves my father in disbelief.

During the summer, one recurring topic of conversation between me and my dad is how to survive in the scorching heat without relief. Being that a majority of TDCJ’s prisons are without air-conditioning, I openly complain about the discomfort of the terrorizing Texas heat.

“You think that’s hard?” he asked me, chuckling before he shared his own experience with sweltering heat:

“I was out there in Iraq, in full battle gear, wearing a thick uniform, heavy armor and a helmet in 106-degree weather. You’ll be ‘ight.” Playfully dismissing me with a little humor and some good nature, he advised me to wet a towel and lay it around the back of my neck to help me cool down.

My dad and I often find ourselves laughing together easily as we commiserate over these similar tortures and relatable stories, but there are times when I can hear the pain and hurt in the words that remain unspoken: That he struggles with the knowledge that his baby girl is having to fight for her own freedom, similar to how he painfully had to fight for our country’s freedom, the thought of which breaks his heart.

My father has significantly opened up about the tragedies and losses he has seen in war and the toll it has taken on himself and many he knew. This I can sadly relate to. I've witnessed my fair share of the loss of lives by suicide, minds being broken from solitary confinement and spirits shattered by longterm incarceration. There are many days where I've been on the brink of giving up and feeling utterly discouraged, but my father's strength gives me courage.

My father ends many of our phone calls saying, "Keep yo' head up, baby girl" in his serious tone of voice. And I oftentimes respond with a somber, "I will, daddy." But, since we try to never let our calls get too dark, he'll add some good cheer to our conversation by singing the chorus to "O-o-h Child' by the Five Stairsteps: "(Keep yo' head up.) Ooh child, things are gonna be easier/Ooh child, things'll get brighter."

Believing that the soldier in my dad runs in my blood, too, I hold my head high as I fight my way home, much like my father did.

From: Corey Devon Arthur
Date Received: June 30, 2025
Subject: When I Came on the Mountain

I am a boy gone bad from Brooklyn that became a better man because I broke a mountain's back. In December of 2021, I was transferred to Otisville Correctional Facility, a medium security prison. After a quarter century of surviving like a savage in cells, this mountain covered in snow was the prettiest prison I ever saw.

I was cruelly created and crafted in the cages and corridors of the New York carceral state. My trek from Rikers Island to the dungeons of Attica didn't condition me for hikes in nature. Just traversing the 40 acres of a 45-degree pitched mountain on a daily basis physically put pain on my body. I would have never suspected that four years later a season of spring and summer would set upon us both, and something special would happen.

I'm no stranger to taking on tough mountain terrains. Back in 1996 when I was 18 years old and free, an older woman taught me how to physically navigate a double black diamond snow mountain on skis, during a weekend getaway of sex and drugs.

Things were different for me since then. In the summer of 1997, I was 19 years old when I buried myself under a mountain of shame and pain in the prison system overgrown with betrayal, blood and murder. I killed my ninth grade English teacher. I'm ashamed and sincerely sorry for what I did and the hurt I caused. From that fatal day forward, making an apology and redemption was an uphill battle. I've never been one to duck any kind of smoke. I swore to myself that somehow, I would walk every step of it.

It wasn't just the walking. Everything seemed harder and higher in Otisville. My self-esteem didn't allow me to take any more shortcuts. I had acquired a taste for punching up and above my weight class. By this time I had shook with the New York prison system to change their strip frisk and phone policies. I slumped them both times thereby ensuring that, for me, there would be no easy way out.

The parole board kept me boxed in by backdooring me three times since I've been here. Psychologically, this put me in a position to plant my flag on this mountain. Thereby ensuring for me there would be no easy way out. The Parole Board kept me boxed in by backdooring me three times since I've been here. Psychologically this put me in a position to plant my flag in this mountain. Then suddenly, the wind wept stopped.

In February of 2025 the entire New York prison system went on pause. Prison guards went on an illegal wildcat strike. For the second time in my life I would step up and serve my community. The first time was in February of 2020. I put the entire Fishkill prison on my back and carried it through the covid-19 pandemic as their Inmate Liaison Chairman. This time I would bumrush the mountain and break its back to beautify my community and role model positive behavior.

In May of 2025, the smoke cleared from the strike. Otisville was severely understaffed and demoralized. The entire scene was ugly, especially the overgrown green grass on the mountain.

One rainy day soon thereafter Officer Hoffman, who patrolled the north mountain, caught me off guard and asked. "Hey Arthur, the big bosses got you pegged for bad ass. You wanna work for me. You think you tough enough to take care of this mountain?" I looked him directly in his reflective shades and saw, one wild thing facing another. The mountain and I. Neither one of us was willing to budge.

"I'm all in." I replied and walked away.

The next day I grinned, grabbed my mower and weed whacker and went to work. I delved deeply into the guts of the mountain, I weed whacked every weed and tall grass in sight, even the slim slimy blades of grass that tend to get wrapped around the tree. From time to time I had to sling my machine aside and take vines out with my fingertips. This part of the grass was always wet when I touch it. It smelled perfumed from being pumped. I tasted bits of it on the tip of my tongue. It was chewy and sweet. Both the tree and I liked it.

After six weeks of brutally blazing through the thickest of the mountain bush, she bucked me back. She didn't break me. At night I shook because I was sore, blistered and sported a bloody lip. The mountain humbled me. Afterward I called her Humility.

While I never been broken by this mountain, I have been broken while on it. I cried on the shoulders of this mountain. We regenerated each other and grew together. I made her beautiful. In exchange I was gifted pride in my work. I looked at her, exposed and evenly trimmed. I immediately orgasmed. So consumed I was by her vastness. The vision was vocal. We both screamed into the shifting wind. Then came quiet. They were watching.

They were the big bosses who ran the joint. They saw the product of my passion as I aggressively cut the grass. Yet within this force there was finesse. The arch of my right to left one armed swing with the weed whacker is something certain staff came outside in the burning sun just to see. I sever the grass from its roots with style.



S. Tillet

Franklin McPherson

July 23, 2025

Lucy Jefferson

To whom this may concern,

My name is Franklin McPherson, and I am 38 years old. I have been incarcerated since the age of 20, I'm currently serving a sentence of 25 years to life in the State of New York.

Please find enclosed 3 submissions from me, one is a story called 'Liberty or Death', the second one is an article called 'Economic Equality' and the third one is a poem that I wrote for my daughter called 'These Cuffs'.

Please feel free to reach out to me if you would like something written on/about a particular topic. You can reach me at the above address or download the securus app and reach me directly to expedite the materials to you. Thank you for your time in this matter, I hope this could be the beginning of a communication.

Thank you,
F. McP

These Cuffs

By: Franklin McPherson 38 years old

Not a day goes by without a cloud or two,

Thankfully, my motivation is you.

From the moment I had you I knew you were mine

Don't worry princess Daddy is fine

Free Mel is what they say

Hearing your voice makes my day.

These scars and cuffs yes, they're real

Words can't describe how you make me feel.

One day we'll be together at last

being inside you've grown so fast.

Trust me when I say good times are to come

And being away is the hardest thing I've done.

Remember not all skies are blue

But baby Daddy will always love you.

From: Elizabeth Hawes
Date Received: June 30, 2025
Subject: The Assessment

While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:

Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt? No or Yes

I work as a clerk in the prison's Transition center. It's a room of resources for incarcerated people. On Thursday afternoons, the new arrivals (called R&Os, an abbreviation for people in Recovery & Orientation), come in and listen to the head of discipline talk about bad behavior, fighting, and segregation. Then my bosses (there are two) talk about all things Transitions. After that amazing presentation, my bosses pull up the R&Os driving records and see if they have any outstanding moving violation tickets or if their driving privileges are revoked. Then they talk one-on-one with the R&Os about the status of their driver licenses. The goal is to make sure that everyone leaves prison with two forms of ID: some kind of state ID/license, and a social.

Did an adult or person at least five years older than you ever touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? No or Yes

The new people also take an assessment on one of our five computers. This data is said to be shared with their case managers. The idea is this assessment will help with their future programming.

Some of the questions are asking for simple facts, some are highly personal; uncomfortable things.

I always ask anyone with a foreign accent if English is their second language and if they want me to read them the questions.

I just met these people. I don't want to hear their answers to highly sensitive questions.

Today I read the questions to a woman of Somali descent.

Did an adult or person at least five years older than you ever attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you? No or Yes

Transitions works with people who have an array of concerts. Before the R&O's came in, I spoke with a woman who told me she, "had cancer head to toe." I don't know if this meant bone or blood or lupus. I don't know. She didn't offer. I didn't ask. I only said I was sorry.

This woman wasn't freaking out about her cancer, she was terrified for daughter, a 26-year-old with a rare heart condition who needed surgery ASAP. Her daughter wanted to postpone surgery until her mom came home. But her mom wouldn't be home for another three months. The mother told me she was trying to convince her daughter to have surgery as soon as she could.

Was your mother or stepmother sometimes, often or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? No or Yes

There are dozens of questions where you have to choose from these responses:

Definitely false, mostly false, somewhat false, slightly false, slightly true, somewhat true, mostly true, or definitely true

What is the difference between slightly false and slightly true?

There are dozens more questions to be answered with:

Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree

After the R&Os left, I sat down with a mentally-challenged woman who was leaving in 94 days. She had a traumatic brain injury (TBI) a decade earlier. She struggles with addiction and has been homeless off and on for more than a dozen years before coming to prison.

We talked for quite a while. I told her I would make her a resume. She had never had a job or volunteered anywhere. She did not have a GED. We agreed that Goodwill Easter Seals might be a good place for her to apply for employment, they had branches all over the state.

She appeared physically able to work. As long as she wasn't in a fast-paced or overly-stressful environment and the task was not complex, she could do the job.

Did you often or very often feel that no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? No or Yes

Over the weekend, I see the woman with the cancer. She works in the kitchen and was dumping left-over food off of people's meal trays. As I handed her my tray, her face lit up.

Everything went without a hitch!

Her daughter had her surgery. I instinctively put up my hand to give her a high five.

Which I regretted almost immediately because

- a) She was wearing plastic gloves, &
- b) Dumping the remains of people's lunches into a garbage can.

God only knows what I had just smashed into my hand.

Sometimes I celebrate with too much enthusiasm.

Did you often, or very often feel that you didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? No or Yes

Many incarcerated women have employment histories in the fields of nursing or PCA work. Many now want to be peer recovery specialists, or give back to their communities by volunteering at shelters.

When creating resumes, you can tell when someone's life started to spiral. Their early positions had trajectories of increased responsibilities. They would start as an administrative support professional, but their last job was

working at a gas station.

Not that there is anything wrong with working at a gas station. But their employment gaps and short work stints become glaring.

I am a good person: never, almost never, sometimes, almost always, always

In Transitions we have a resume packet for people to fill out. We then take this filled out packet and type up the resumes in a way that highlights their best selves. Some people fill out these packets with incredible detail. Some people barely write in anything. This is often not about laziness. Some can't remember basic information-names of employers, the dates they worked at the business, or how to describe what they actually did.

All in all, I feel like I am a failure: never, almost never, sometimes, almost always, always.

There are three Transitions clerks. My coworker Golden and I have worked together for the last two years. We make resumes on the daily. Sometimes we play a game with the resumes with little given information that is reminiscent of that old game show, Name That Tune.

I can make that resume in nine words.

I can make it in seven.

Six.

Make that resume.

The third clerk, Post-it, became a clerk this spring. She is an artist and is an excellent office person-which is critical as I haven't done a mail merge in forever and Golden will be leaving this summer. Someone has to merge those memos

Did you often or very often feel your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to a doctor if you needed it.

Golden and I are both activists, but operate in different capacities. Golden just earned her paralegal certificate and will be working at the Attorney General's office later this summer. She intends to go to law school. She is all about helping her community and interested in working with other people in either civil or family law. I am a writer whose mission is to document and inform people about the current carceral conditions and problems in order to promote change. I gather and tell stories of incarcerated people to help non-incarcerated people understand that trauma is the foundation of criminal behavior and make suggestions on how to rebuild systems that could be more helpful in the future.

Golden wants to help people individually. I want to abolish the current system. We both want to improve people's lives.

Most of my friends have committed crime: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree

I think this is a trick question. So, we either have no friends in prison, or most of our friends are criminals?

What data hole is this info going into?

The year prior to your incarceration, where did you live for most of that year?

- *On my own in a home that I owned or a place that I rented*
- *With my spouse or partner*
- *With a family member (not including spouse or partner)*
- *A shelter or transitional housing program*
- *Outside, in a car or vacant building or some other place not intended for housing.*
- *Don't know or unsure.*

Today I helped the women with the TBI fill out an application for the Goodwill Easter Seal Program. She is experiencing extreme anxiety about releasing as homeless. She is excited to sign up for a program that will help her find a job. I am told she is unable to acquire an apartment until after she leaves prison.



CHARLES L. WYNN SR.

October 1st, 2025

Lucky Jefferson

Peace Lucky:

Pleasant greetings and monumental blessings to you, and Juan Hernandez. I'm very proud of you both for the publication of your magazine "BOND". I simply wrote out a few pages on "AN UNCONVENTIONAL MARRIAGE." Hopefully it can become a contributing writer to your new magazine. Just feed me a topic----

I'm from Brooklyn, New York. I'm 59 years young, with four precious grandchildren. Stay strong and safe my brother---

In Solidarity: Charles L.

"An Unconventional Marriage"

by: CHARLES L. WYNN SR.

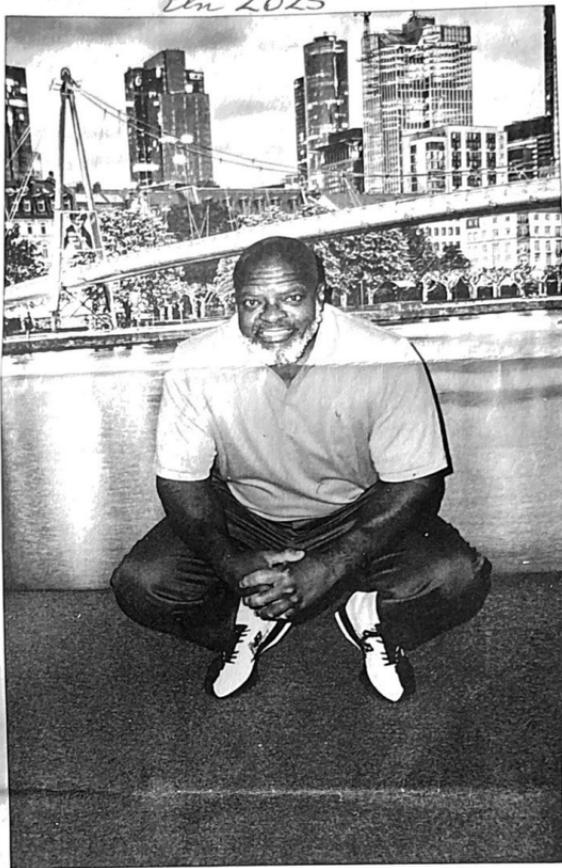
Unfortunately for the past twenty-two plus years I've been here in captivity dealing with the obvious. Prison is a very dark place, filled with negativity, pessimism, and heartache. However, we allow our sun to shine brightly through positive energy, pleasant thoughts, writing, cooking, singing, laughing, and communicating with someone from the outside world that we were taken from.

During this long and painful journey I've been married several times. Each time the marriage ended was because of my location of confinement. It's natural for any wife to want her husband at home with her every night, and to be able to hug him when she wakes up, as well as before she goes to sleep at night. This is a normal process.

However, when a man & a woman share a marriage when the husband is in prison that normal process doesn't exist. So one must constantly utilize unconventional methods to suffice, but no matter how much you (AS A husband) call on the phone, or write letters, send e-mails, or get visits from your wife, that void is still there. A wife needs time with her husband.

Some women are stronger than others, and are in it for the long haul, and some are not. It doesn't make any woman lesser of a woman because she may become overwhelmed at the absence of her husband's physical presence at home. The entire process is meant to destroy the marriage. So each and every married couple in the aforementioned situation must be very creative in doing unconventional things to keep that fire burning. I embraced it all, from calling as often as possible, writing letters and poems, sending cards, flowers, other gifts, sending photos, and even serenading her with music over the phone.

" Cln 2025 "



Peace,
and
Blessings
my
Brother:

Cln
just
another
innocent
Black man
that was
railroaded
for a crime
that Cln

absolutely did not commit. The struggle
continues for those of us in the fight.

Unapologetically Innocent,
Charles Sr.

Cln know that systemic racism is there in Illinois,
just as it is in New York, and all over this country---

From: Sara Shea
Date Received: June 13, 2025
Subject: Mailing Crossword Puzzles
to a Friend in Federal Prison
February, 2014

- 1) Weapon hidden inside of 'argument' (3 letters.)
- 2) Legal label that follows you like a shadow (5. Ends with N.)
- 3) Person defined by their worst mistake (7. Starts with C.)
- 4) Synthetic killer, measured in micrograms. (8. Starts with F.)
- 5) White powder with a black market. (7. Starts with C, ends with E.)
- 6) Courtroom process where justice is weighed. (5. Ends with L.)
- 7) Small cage for big regrets. (4. Starts with J.)
- 8) A spec, rearranged, means fleeing captivity (6.)
- 9) "I used it" scrambled leads to a tragic act (7. starts with S.)
- 10) Cry me, twisted into compassion. (5.)

From: Kashawn Taylor
Date Received: April 1, 2025
Subject: Violent Offender, "Chapter 10"

A queer, a jock, and a crackhead are placed into a dorm. They become friends, and, apparently, that's the joke.

Making friends used to be easy for me. In high school, I was a bit of a social butterfly, hanging out with all crowds when life demanded it of me. Friends flocked to me like I was honey and they were flies with a mean sweet tooth. As I grew older making friends became harder, but also less important. By the time I came to prison I had three - sometimes four - friends, and I had no plans to make more during my bid. Being the social creature that I am, that, obviously didn't happen as I planned.

When, in early December 2022, Orlando moved into my dorm, we bonded instantly. Though we had nothing in common outwardly - he was a tall jock who played sports and I was just... not that - we soon realized we had the same sick sense of humor. We also had the same charges, though he was only serving an eighteen-month sentence, instead of three years. At twenty-two, he was the youngest person in the dorm.

To pass the time, he wrote a short story in which he and all his friends die gruesome, improbable deaths. He asked me writing questions like, "Is writing 'She was spoiled like sour cum' too much?" I asked him life questions like, "What's a first down?" It was a mutually beneficial friendship, and it all started by inviting him to Alejo's Saturday night trivia.

Lucien joined our group soon after I asked him if he needed coffee. He'd come to the dorm the day after my birthday, and after his first morning meeting retreated to his bunk in cube six. I sat at a dayroom table to write, and soon he came out of his cube holding his coffee cup, looking like a starving puppy with a long face begging for scraps. Happily, he took two scoops of my freeze-dried Colombian java, and we became besties. Or, whatever you'd consider the prison equivalent.

Since I have crippling attachment issues and no resolve in most social situations, I clung immediately to them.. like they were honey, and I was a fly with a mean sweet tooth. We were all close in age and first-timers.

It was near the Christmas holiday. As much as I refused to admit it aloud, I was lonely; my friends barely answered the phone. I knew Orlando and Lucien felt the same way, because they said it. In a dorm where people came and went quickly, it felt nice to have friends. We became inseparable.

You know when you make a new friend and you want to talk or hang out all the time? It was like that, but on steroids, because we were in prison and had all the time in the world to shoot the shit. From the morning meeting at eight-thirty in the morning until the nighttime count at ten o'clock, we sat at a table bullshitting, trading pre-incarceration stories, and playing Monopoly Millionaire. Orlando had a wealth of wild college stories, while Lucien was dealing with a pregnancy scare at home. More accurately, his friend-girlfriend-in-between was definitely pregnant; he was just unsure if the baby belonged to him.

Christmas came, and to spread some holiday cheer I wasn't feeling, I colored old Halloween pictures from a children's coloring book. Coloring was huge around here, like something in prison brought out the child in men. I didn't color, but in October I snatched a few photocopies of cute animals near pumpkins in case the urge struck me like the sudden urge to piss. I gave them to my new friends.

"Thanks man," Orlando said in his long surfer-dude drawl. Though he'd never been to California, he'd affected that accent as a joke, and, unable to stop, it became part of his personality.

"This really made my night," said Lucien. We fist bumped and he launched into an ADHD-driven tangent about the Christmas he spent at a crack house.

The makeshift cards weren't much, and I decided on them last minute, but people say it's the thought that counts. Truthfully, not much thought went into the cards either, but it was a nice gesture. And acts of kindness in prison help me hate myself less.

It wasn't long before the rumors started. For some reason, they shocked me, but they shouldn't have. Rumors, much like our recycled air, had circulated the dorm before.

About a month after I came to the CHANGE Unit people started asking questions about one of the two people I spoke with most. Ironically, my peers asked about the heterosexual man. They'd pull me aside and whisper in conspiratorial tone: "So... you and Alejo... are you guys... you know?" or "Alejo's a little -" they'd make the limp wrist motion "- right?"

No and no. Just no. The only reason those questions came up was because of his association with me. Like a coward, I never told him of the rumblings to save myself the embarrassment. But I did make a mental note, and created some distance. Like me, Alejo was long-term, and I'd rather sequester myself than have a straight man cut me off because everyone thought he was gay.

Three months later, the gossip train roared to life again. This time, however, instead of a choo-choo train, it was a bullet train headed for a brick wall.

As Orlando, Lucien, and I sat at our usual table, a peer mentor named Cornelius hobbled up, and sat in the empty seat.

"Lemme talk to y'all fellas for a min," he said, making himself comfortable.

Here we fucking go, I thought. Cornelius had a habit of preaching the same long-winded sermon about his former life of crime and how, this time, he'd really changed. For real. He meant well, he really did. But after hearing the same thing a million and one times... please, someone shoot me.

He leaned in real close; we copied him. What was so important he needed to interrupt our very serious and highly competitive Scrabble game which included such scholarly words as dick, tits, and nuts?

"There's... uh... some... well." He folded his hands in front of him on the steel table. The suspense was murderous. "Some people in the dorm are talking 'bout you three. Making them uncomfortable."

He pointed at us, and we looked back and forth among ourselves.

"You know, too touchy-feeling with each other.

We looked at each other again, then burst out laughing. Cornelius did not laugh.

"I ain't jokin' fellas."

"There's nothing like that going on," I said, suddenly serious.

"Okay, all right," he said. "Just thought I'd let y'all know. Watch what y'all do, who y'all talk to. Have a nice day." Cornelius got up and limped away.

Orlando and Lucien said stuff. I'm not sure what because my soul had been punched from my body. Of all the things he could have said, I'd, foolishly, expected that the least. In fact, I expected him to say that people were murmuring that we were talking shit. Because we were.

"Chow!" shouted the officer from the bubble.

Everyone else scattered to throw on their ugly tan uniforms, shirts and pants slightly different shades of beige. It made me want to puke - that, and what Cornelius had told us. I could feel a bout of disordered eating - an abnormal coping mechanism I'd developed at UCONN in response to stress - coming on. For the most part, I'd kept it under control in prison.

Lucien and Orlando noticed I had remained seated, and stopped at the table before heading to the chow hall.

"Yo, you're not coming to chow?" asked Orlando.

I stared past them, through them. With a soft, detached voice I said, "I'm not hungry." I stood up and walked circles around the dayroom alone for the next two hours, listening to music.

It felt like I was in shock. First, I was embarrassed for my straight friends, that they'd been dragged into an uncomfortable situation. Second, I was worried they'd distance themselves from me, like I'd been diagnosed with the plague, or MRSA, or worse - COVID.



That did not happen, and I am still grateful. After Alejo informed me later that day that people were going to his cubie, another peer mentor named Banks, with the same rumors, I let my boys know.

“They want the mentors to go to staff,” I explained.

Orlando laughed a nervous chuckle. “This is wild.”

“Go to staff with what?” said Lucien, banging his fists on the table. “Nothing’s fucking happening, no touching, no nothing. What the fuck.”

I looked around the dayroom for prying eyes, and said, “The peer mentors know that, so they aren’t going to staff. Banks said if they’re so worried, they can take it to staff themselves.”

“Word.” Orlando nodded his agreement.

Lucien turned to me and studied my face for several moments.

Suddenly, he smiled big and said, “Yo, don’t let this shit bug you. I was bothered at first, but I’m over it. Most of these men could be our fathers, and they’re so miserable they need to bring others down with them. They see us laughing, having a great time, making the best of this shitty place, and get jealous. We know the truth. Fuck them.”

For a former crack addict with severe ADHD and an uncanny ability to somehow relate everything to sex, Lucien’s take was profound, and probably correct. I found that, and the way he switched effortlessly from soft and serious to obnoxious and silly, truly endearing.

“Yeah, Kashawn,” added Orlando, “fuck them!”

“Fuck them!” I smiled my gap-toothed smile, and we all fist bumped.

I didn’t eat for three days. When I said “Fuck them!” I meant it, but the situation still irked me. Banks made a general announcement about rumors in the dorm needing to stop at the next day’s morning meeting. I looked around at our

therapeutic community for telltale signs of unease. Banks wouldn't tell us who complained, but I was determined to find out. I was shocked to discover my facial reading skills were not nearly astute as I'd imagined.

Our unit manager, Counselor Supervisor Gaudet, had come to the meeting for the first time in weeks. For a little person - she clocked in at just over five feet - she made big promises, like a seventy-inch day room TV. I couldn't quite place her accent. Was it Boston or Jersey or New York? All three? Sometimes, I wondered if it was fake, like that accent affluent white people in movies from the 40s and 50s affected.

Her bubbly, positive, what-can-I-do-for-you attitude may have been an act. It was too over-the-top. She would go from showering praise to threatening to ship people to general population for what I considered minor infractions, like hanging your towel to dry on your bunk ladder. In fact, she made good on a great many of those threats. Still, my own interactions with her had been positive, encouraging even. She seemed to like me, so I thought it prudent to inform her of the rumors. Better to kill this now.

Her mood that morning appeared, at the very least, to be You are worthy of a little time, today. I hopped in line behind a group of new guys eager to start DUI class and leave on home confinement.

"Taylor!" she said when it was my turn. She smiled with both her mouth and bright ocean eyes. "How've you been? How can I help you?"

Gaudet stared people in the eyes when she spoke, and she was staring at me. This was a tactic people in power - managers, salesmen, men, psychopaths - used not only to convey investment, but to intimidate and assert dominance. I used it daily as a manager at a car rental company to let customers know I wore the fucking pants. She wasn't going to shake me, though, and I explained the situation and my concerns.

"Those rumors haven't even crossed my desk." After Banks's speech, she had made her own, echoing his words, even of course threatening to kick people out of the dorm. I was starting to think she enjoyed screwing with inmates. "So, what do you want to do?"

“It was addressed today, but if the rumors persist, I can get back to you, and move from there.” I stared back into her eyes.

“Sounds good! Great talking to you, kiddo.” Gaudet patted me on the arm and moved on to the next person. “How can I help you today?” she said to the man behind me as I walked away.

With that taken care of, I thought I’d feel at ease, but I didn’t. I wasn’t sure why. Perhaps it was because she called me kiddo. She called everyone kiddo in that high, condescending tone. Even the alcoholics with burst nose capillaries leaking into their face like poison, old enough to be her grandfather. Especially those men.

Because of my unease, I tried in a subtle way to distance myself from my friends. But it was so difficult. I didn’t want Orlando and Lucien to think I hated them, so I still sat with them in the dorm, walked with them to chow, and exercised with them. Basically, nothing changed, except now we joked about the ridiculous situation.

We’d walk down the hall and one of us would say, “Oh shit, you’re too close! People are gonna think we’re faggots!” Then I’d say something like, “GAYYYY!” in a demon-voice and we’d roar with laughter. “Yo,” the other would interject, suddenly stern with a steel face, “stop laughing. That’s gay as fuck.” And we’d all go silent with dumb smirks plastered on our faces.

About a week and a half later, on Friday, January 6, 2023, my desire to eat had returned, my friends and I were unbothered, things were all right.Until right after lunch. The officer shoutedour bunk numbers, and the dorm broke out in an accusatory chorus of “oooooohh!” like we were children about to be scolded for stealing candy from the shop. The short trip from our table felt like a walk of shame, eyes openly tracking our steps.

“Counselor Supervisor Gaudet will meet you outside.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. Lucien whispered, “Rumor has it..you’re the one who shit on the floor.”

For a fleeting instant, I genuinely thought she might be calling us for that reason. Someone had shit on the floor right next to one of the toilets, and peer mentors denounced the action at the morning meeting. When I came back from work - I had been hired as the unit clerk the day before, some three months after applying - someone had done it again, in the same stall. If someone expected one of us as the serial shitter, I wouldn't have been at all surprised.

Gaudet popped up in the hall, and in that aggressively kind voice said, "Come on, gentleman!" and waved us on.

Any thought that her summons might be about doodoo in the dorm flushed down the drain. Later, Orlando would tell us he seriously thought she was calling us to tell us how great we were, shining, exemplary members of the CHANGE Unit.

"We're going to your office?" I asked, my voice shaky.

"Well, I'm not going to chat with you guys in the hall." We followed her into library where her office was secreted. She sounded maliciously jovial. She unlocked the door, ushered us in, turned to me, and with a chuckle said, "This place is becoming like a home away from home for you." She grinned in the dark library like the goddamn Chesire cat.

Gaudet instructed us to take seats, but kept the lights off.

The only illumination came from the two large windows near the rear of the library through which a glum courtyard with wilted and dead plants was visible. Okay, I thought, she's keeping the lights off. What's that mean?

"Gentlemen," she said, seated across from us with her arms folded, "the giddiness, the flirting, the inappropriate touching, and other behavior needs to stop. Staff has come to me now and this... needs to end." Her face had become stolid.

"Especially the giggling and playing around near the showers.

"If hear any more of it, I will be checking the cameras, and I will separate you into three different dorms."

My jaw dropped. I assumed Orlando and Lucien looked equally flabbergasted. I opened my mouth to speak, to defend myself and my friends but she cut me off swiftly in that dark library.

"I can't listen to you. I just can't. When staff comes to me with these things, I just can't listen to you; I must address it. Perception is everything around here." Without skipping a beat, her tone brightened from virulence to sardonic pleasance. "That's all, gentlemen."

As she escorted us out of the library and school area, she repeated, "Remember, perception is everything."

What Lucien, Orlando, and I heard amounted to: "Fucking faggots! You and your faggotry will not be tolerated. Neither will your gay shower orgies. Knock it the fuck off, and enjoy your weekend."

I couldn't believe she had the temerity to throw around casual jokes to line us up, then murder us with the skill of a Russian assassin. Three targets, one bullet, a triple one-shot kill. What's worse, I'd spent two hours in the library that morning at her request, making invites to two hundred inmates, hence the asinine home away from home quip.

My friends were good men, and saw the situation immediately for what it was: an attack on me.

Between gay shower orgy - "gorgy" - jokes and equally vile remarks about Gaudet, Orlando said, "If you were any other person, this wouldn't be happening. No question, bro."

"Fuck!" said Lucien. "I have so many good comebacks now."

"This is discrimination," I said. My eyes started building with a familiar salty pressure. "Guys, I am so sorry this is happening. I'm sorry you have to deal with this because of me. Thanks for being my friends, and I'm sososo sorry."

I couldn't be sorrier.

Choking back tears, I went to the bubble and asked the officer to call Gaudet. She'd told me she was putting in four hours

of overtime that Friday. "If she doesn't speak with me before she leaves, I'm going straight to her boss."
He dialed, spoke quietly, hung up. "She said she's in a meeting. You'll have to wait."

"Fine."

Bullshit.

An officer over the PA system announced recall in preparation for the two o'clock count, which meant we had to retreat to our bunks for an hour and a half. Regularly scheduled nap time. I stormed to my cube, climbed to my bunk, and sat Indian-style, staring at the door.

Shaking with frustration, I imagined terrible things happening to that woman. I willed with every fiber of my giddy being extreme and hostile annoyances upon her. Things like tiny horses accosting her feet at all times, tripping her up every few steps; for a colony of endangered animals or insects to appear suddenly in her home, and eat everything she cooked before she could serve it; for her to develop severe tinnitus that only flared up in important meetings or when she tried to sleep.

Then she poked in, looked directly at me. The sun from the unfrosted window behind me lit her up like a celestial spotlight. I perked up; she grabbed a cart of paint by the door, and left. I willed that she'd always have a vague sensation of soggy socks.

Eventually, she came back and called me over. We stood by the door in the dayroom.

"What is it, Taylor?" She was cold, distant like a robot dressed in a human suit.

"Can we talk somewhere private?"

"No."

"But -"

"You're not getting special treatment."

That stare. That lack of compassion. That bitch.

She wanted to humiliate me. She often confused humility with humiliation. Other inmates stood around, waiting to speak with her, listening. My dignity was of no concern to her. I tried to appeal to her LMSW side, hoping the cop-bitch side hadn't completely overridden her humanity. I made sure to use "I statements." Those people love that shit.

"I haven't done anything different from any of the other inmates here. I sit at the table with my friends and laugh, just like everyone else. This wouldn't be happening if this wasn't involving me."

"It's staff reporting it, Taylor. An officer went to the captain, and the captain came to me. Told me it's my unit, said to handle it."

"But nothing's happening! Check the cameras. You won't find anything."

"What about the bathroom? There aren't cameras in the bathroom, are there?" She knew there were not cameras in the fucking bathroom.

I scoffed. I had forgotten about the gorgies.

"Perception is everything," she reminded. "Do you remember any times you have been... uh... excited? Maybe touched a shoulder or something?"

My words began to falter. I was flustered, but still incensed and determined. "You have a master's degree in social work.

You should know that perceptions are tainted by prejudices and biases."

"Exactly. Distorted perceptions. Which is why you need to be cognizant of what you do." Why couldn't she see that we - I - didn't do anything? Why was she pressuring me, forcing me to be always on edge? Why did I have to act differently from everyone else because weird men were uncomfortable with my existence?

"Can't you see that I'm the victim of bigotry and

discrimination?" I was pleading - begging, actually - and I hated hearing that desperation in my voice.

"Maybe you feel that way because, in the past, you have been a victim. Isn't that an easy stance for you to take?"

"What kind of LMSW are you? How about the fact that half the dorm knew I was being touched inappropriately? The things you accused me of doing have happened to me, and you didn't know. I handled it myself, so as not to be seen as a 'victim.'"

Her weight shifted back and forth, from one leg to the other. She was ready to pawn me off to the captain. "How about I see if he's willing to speak with you? I know he's here."

"I'm not going down there to be attacked."

"Well, that's what's going to happen. He will challenge everything you say."

I rolled my eyes.

"Where are your friends? Why are you the advocate?"

My eyes locked with hers, and I said, "This isn't about them, not at all. It's all about me."

Something in her eyes changed. It was like something clicked, and gears which previously refused to run screeched to life. Rusty, but still in working condition. She leaned in close and whispered, "Do you feel like any of the officers treat you differently?"

A crowd had gathered and overheard most of the conversation. The effort for a modicum of privacy was too little too late.

"Not differently, I guess, but they do stare a lot. The new ones since the post changed."

"So, like eyeing you, trying to catch something?"

I nodded.

She said she'd speak with the captain and return with a response. "We'll find a resolution to this." When she returned a half hour later, she shook her head and said, "He said you'll need to write a grievance. Start by writing me a request, I'll respond, and you send it along with the grievance. Hang in there, kiddo."

And she left for the weekend.

I ate only once through Saturday and Sunday. Both nights I woke up and crept into the bathroom, and made myself throw up while everyone slept. Later, Orlando would tell me my technique of upchuck and flush wasn't as flawless and inconspicuous as I'd thought, and that he had heard me puking out my brains.

I wrote Gaudet a five-page missive explaining how I went out of my way to avoid drawing attention to my otherness. How I showered in the last stall, so no one could say I was sneaking peeks. How I made sure I was extra polite, even when uncomfortable, so as not to be seen as the stereotypical sassy gay. How, in her unit, one of her peer mentors had said that, if given the chance, he'd round up all the faggots in the world and kill them.

To me, it appeared that the only acceptable resolution for the administration was that I had no friends. How dare I even try. If I isolated myself, a situation like this couldn't happen again. And it was bound to happen again and again until my release. God forbid I try to make friends in prison. Mental health, come get this homo.

Tuesday afternoon.

Gaudet sat me down in her office. Counselor Altieri sat in the office with us.

"I wanted to give this back you," she said, and handed me the request/letter. "There's a lot of emotion in this, and I feel terrible you're going through this."

I'd written I didn't feel comfortable speaking with the captain, since pervasive cultures of ignorance and intolerance usually started at the top. She explained she gave the letter

to Deputy Warden Mu'min, who said to write her directly if I felt the need to speak.

Gaudet put her hand over her heart and said, "It's my job as administration to ensure your safety."

"Sure." I nodded curtly.

"Good. I need you to write a statement saying you feel comfortable in the unit, in the facility, and continuing as our clerk."

Ah, Altieri was there as a witness. I wrote the statement.

"Great," said Gaudet. "Send my response to your letter with your grievance."

The response: "Mr. Taylor, it is disheartening that this has been your experience, and I am so sorry you are having to go through this."

The Gaudacity of this woman.

"Don't worry," I told her, "I will."

That night I sat with Lucien and Orlando at our usual dayroom table. Inmates around us cooked gumbos, wraps, and played cards. The air was thick with oniony must and sodium. I explained to them what happened, and as I did, Lucien's foot accidentally brushed mine under the table.

I shuddered theatrically. In a deep, guttural voice I said: "GAYYY!"

We cracked up, slapping the table like a newborn's bottom in our fits of laughter.

"I love when you use your man-voice," said Lucien. "It's like seeing a dog walk on its hind legs."

Nothing came out of my grievance. First, the deputy warden denied it for being too long. After resubmitting it and cutting out significant details, I opted for a meeting with the deputy warden. What she told me amounted to: don't do things to bring attention to yourself. She used the fact that she was a woman in a male-dominated workplace as justification for her advice.

“So, what do you want me to do?” she asked. “What are you asking for?”

Since there was no official paperwork filed by any staff member, just a haranguing, there was not much that could happen.

There was nothing to officially grieve. I left her office feeling defeated and humiliated for even trying.

Lucien, Orlando, and I remained close friends throughout our time incarcerated together. In fact, we added a fourth member to our clique, James, and continued to try to make the best of our time in prison. Rumors swirled around us like a swarm of those nasty drain gnats that infected the bathrooms. That, however, didn't deter us from making the best of a shitty situation and developing meaningful bonds with each other.

Though they all went home before I did, we either remained in touch through the phone or Securus messaging, or reconnected after my release. James remembered a book I needed to complete a series and sent it to me without my asking. Lucien and I talked daily on the phone. Orlando couldn't sign up for messaging, but we connected on social media almost a year after he went home.

In August 2025, Lucien passed from a drug overdose and I had to bear the onus of telling James and Orlando. His passing surprised us and occurred before we could get together for a reunion, but nothing - not even death - can erase the memories we made in prison.

There's no bond greater than the one created by being accused of gay shower orgies in prison.



From: Tess Ezzy
Date Received: June 16, 2025
Subject: for J, who once taught me silence

we were not in love,
but we borrowed each other
like library books—
creased at the corners,
underlined in pencil.

your hoodie smelled of eucalyptus
and afterparties.
you always rolled your sleeves up
like trouble was a craft project
and you knew how to fix it.

we shared more cigarettes
than secrets.
you spoke in chords,
and I learned to listen
to what wasn't said.

then came the static.
a rumour. a name in a mouth
that didn't belong to either of us.
I didn't write.
didn't know if I had the right.

but I remember:
you believed in third chances,
in stealing flowers from roundabouts,
in the sacredness
of found things.

if this poem reaches you—
if it folds itself into your day
like a letter pressed into a lunch tray—
know this:
you are not forgotten.

the bond remains.
not iron or barbed wire,
but eucalyptus
and afterparties.
and the quiet between songs.

BOND

Lucky Jefferson

Dear BOND,

I received your contact info and call for submissions from _____ of Just Arts in Tulsa, OK. _____ has quite a bit of my art on display at Just Arts.

As I understand it, you are seeking submissions on how incarceration affects human relationships, bonds formed within the system and the eternal need for human connection.

I have been incarcerated since 1991. My own story reflects the loss and estrangement which prison causes as I have attended the funerals of my mother, two brothers, and one sister; witnessed the loss of an uncle, three aunts, a nephew, and a niece - all of whose burials I was not allowed to attend.

At my trial I had over 200 character

witnesses who wished to attest to my character and community involvement. The first Christmas saw me mail out over 200 holiday cards. Thirty-four years later, in 2024 that number was down to just 14.

Over the years, as one is "out of sight and out of mind," contact becomes less and less as life on the outside continues - without you, and your importance in the daily lives of all you once touched finally ceases altogether.

People who I once swore would never leave my side have long ago moved on. Some of the best friends I have ever known are those I formed "behind the wire." Why? Simply put, to have endured this crucible makes a person share a bond with you that none who haven't can ever hope to understand. A bond is established - A link built in the ashes of many destroyed lives in unbreakable.

It still amazes me that those friends made in prison who have been released have unfailingly remained steadfast in writing, accepting my calls, sent care packages, books, even visits. Several attend my parole hearings, provide a home and job

plan, and form the vital support network that will make transition to society a success.

It is rare that a person can go through incarceration and not emerge traumatized - in your very soul and very being, on a cellular level.

Prison seeks to dehumanize and make the loss of individuality the norm, imposing toxic shame to replace self-esteem. Incarceration is a snowglobe of violence, anger, and intolerance. It makes people accustomed to abnormal living conditions through conformity and brutality. People lose their identity and sense of autonomy as human emotions, touch, love, and compassion for others is "against policy" often driving the imprisoned into isolation. It creates a culture that responds to oppression as a reflex, removing the human component vital and necessary for reentry.

Losing contact with old friends, watching family die off each year, tends to leave one forlorn, feeling forgotten.

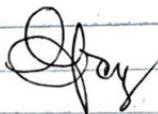
I have enclosed excerpts from my play in poetry, *Song of the Prison Gate*.

4

Should you be interested, I can send you the entire script.

Thank you for allowing me to submit my work for your consideration. I hope to hear from you soon.

In Unity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. J. J.' or similar, written in a cursive style.

Song of the Prison Gate
Voices in Poetry and Prose

By

Gary K. Farlow

A Play in Monologue

Scene: The Stage is framed by black curtains in front of which sit chairs in a semi-circle. Each chair is occupied with a mixture of Caucasian, African-American, Latino, Native-American, and Asian men in various styles of prison inmate uniforms.

First Inmate

(stands and reads from his script)

Song of the Prison Gate

The faces I have seen

Passing through this portal,

A descent into the maelstrom,

Anger, fear, calculation,

As they shuffle by,

Becoming human compost

In this poisoned garden.

Oh, the stories I could tell

Of the many who pass by me

Only to sink into the quicksand

And mire, halcyon days gone

As they sit idle now.

Years and talents wasted.

Their pleas for mercy

And songs of innocence

To a blindfolded statute

Who turns a deaf ear

As no one makes eye contact.
Peanut butter and crackers for breakfast,
Ten minutes to eat...nothing to drink
We move out.
Each bus holds sixty-five,
Packed like sardines
In an oil of anxiety,
The cuffs clinched tight.
This is called *diesel therapy*.
Our bus pulls out onto the highway
As morning commuters pass us.
Wonder what *they* had for breakfast?
Do they know how precious their freedom is?
Secure in their Mazda's, Chevy's, Toyota's.
Will that ever be *me*?
(Third inmate sits down.)

Fourth Inmate

(Stands and reads from his script)

My first Christmas in prison was a reality check. How do you break your own heart? You go to prison and call home on Christmas Eve to hear in the background the shouted "hello's" and "Merry Christmas" and it suddenly dawns on you that life has moved on – without you.

I stood, biting my lip until I could taste the metallic flavor of blood so I wouldn't cry on the phone. You can't cry in prison. Can't show any sign of weakness as the predators, like sharks scenting fresh blood will swarm.

"Is ever'body there?" I ask my Mom.

"Yeah, honey, we're all here."

"No Mom, not everyone." I struggle to reply.

"Well, no, but honey..."

"What Mom?"

(Stands and reads from his script)

"Thank you for using Global Tel Link."

*"Hello?" I stand at the wall of phones in the cellblock, watching in confused amazement as the inmate carefully slips a sock over the phone next to me as if it were a cotton condom. He then put it to his ear. My first thought was he was simply being hygienic, using protection as if he were preparing for phone sex with his "baby's mama." But, then, I become aware that I was the *only* one *not* talking into the heel of their gym socks. I've observed these same germaphobes use a napkin to lift the salt shaker in the chow hall so as to not touch it, yet they will then use that very same napkin to wipe their mouths! Prison is truly a land of contradictions and inanity. Since I didn't plan on licking the phone, and know that germs, like white men, can't jump, not to mention that all my gym socks have holes in them, I place my call. I like to live dangerously.*

(Sixth inmate sits down.)

Seventh Inmate

(Stands and reads from his script.)

Step into my body

Take a trip with me

Take a look at my world

See the things I see

Slip inside my heart

Feel what I feel

The anger, pain, a loneliness,

A sadness so very real.

Walk these corridors of hopelessness

That fill these walls

Hear the woeful muffled cries

That I know so well

Now return to your world

Away from this nightmare of hell

And me the same person you were

Tell me if you dare

My first hour in prison, it was like I was outside myself, watching me in a movie. I was in a bubble, fragile. I had a Hollywood image of prison: smoke-filled dormitories inhabited by tattooed body-builders out of a biker's rally carrying hate and homemade weapons. I wore my fear and trepidation like an aura as I, a pale 129 pound weakling, stepped into my worst nightmare. It was like that old television commercial for E.F. Hutton. All conversation and card games came to an abrupt halt when I walked into the dorm. Every head swiveled in my direction to size me up. My first thought was *I'm going to die tonight.*

Growing up, Mama told me that I'd end up in trouble if I didn't listen. Well, I didn't listen. Now here I was, like a piece of driftwood, the flotsam of society, washed up on these shores of the land of the brutal. A life in suspension.

Mama used to love Johnny Cash. He sang once that he turned 21 in prison doing life without parole. I turn 15 next week, doing life without parole. Maybe I should've died that first night. But you never know how precious life is til you try to take your own.

(Ninth inmate sits down.)

Tenth Inmate

(Stands and reads from his script.)

House of Time

Winter is the slayer of living things.

A refrigerator of memories.

January in solitary confinement.

A bleak time of year anyway,

But I'd hardly seen anyone for days.

Just a tray of food three times a day,

Shoved under my door with no words.

In this place a conspiracy of silence.

We seek to heal our fractured hearts,

One beat at a time.

As the arc of sunlight makes its way

Across the 5 x 9 cell.

For an environment cannot

Determine your attitude,

My eyes open.
Perhaps there is hope afterall.
(First inmate sits down.)

Second Inmate

(Stands up again and reads)

Orange

Who am I?

*Orange is the sun at dawn or dusk.
Orange is the pumpkin my Pops used*

To carve on Halloween.

Orange is the Dreamcicle the ice cream

Truck sold on a hot July day.

Orange is a big inflated ball

Dribbled and swished in a gym.

Orange is the tabby cat, Garfield,

Morris, and my own Tiger.

Orange is a bar of Dial soap,
The kind Grandma always bought.

Orange is the pies she made for

Thanksgiving.

Orange is the shade of the trees

In our backyard every October.

Orange is the color of my prison jumpsuit.

I hate orange.

(Second inmate sits down.)

Third Inmate

(Stands up again and reads)

(Stands up again and reads.)

What's In A Name?

Paris, who had never been to France.

Bone Crusher, who never hit another human being.

Crowbar, who used one to steal twelve cars.

Professor, who never graduated high school.

Z, who dreamed of owning a Datsun Z 28.

Strawberry, who despised his given name of Walter.

Big Mo, who looked like a love child of Mr. T and Goofy.

Chante, who wanted to be America's "Next Top Model."

September, who loved the Autumn.

Big E, who had a heart of gold.

Dove, so named by his 1960's "love child" parents.

Rabbit, who was scared of his shadow.

Cat Man, an inmate "crazy old cat lady."

Capone, who fancied himself a Mafia kingpin.

Chemo, who wanted to be a scientist.

Tiny, who at over 300 pounds was anything but.

Disco, who once loved to strut his stuff.

Prophet, who swore he was an agent of Karma.

Poppa Smurf, who had held the title of the oldest living inmate, until...

Goat, who made love to one.

Eddie Munster, who made love in a funeral home with...well, you know.

And to all the countless "Jersey's," "Philly's," "Cali's," "New York's,"

"Preachers," "Cowboys," and "D.C.'s..."

What's in a name?

In prison, you just never can tell.

The rec yard is closed...
Commissary computer is down...
Words begin to flow.
Curses and muttering.
One bumps into another.
A guard yells "LOCKDOWN!"
One shove, then another.
A punch is thrown.
A melee ensues.
Whistles are blown.
Alarms blare.
Chaos and devastation.
Reign from cellblock to cellblock.
Homemade knives are brandished.
Blood is spilt.
Innocents are not spared.
Elderly are trampled.
Old grudges settled.
Pain and death.
This is the possibility
That inmates face daily.
Always on alert.
Prepared for battle.
Scared but unable to show it.
When will it come?
This is life in prison in America.
(Sixth inmate sits down.)

Seventh Inmate

Almost leading me to yonder heights.

Beckoning me to beyond life's span.

Almost becoming a better man.

Almost, almost, it just can't be.

A life in prison, this is me...

(Seventh inmate sits down.)

Eighth Inmate

(Stands up and reads again.)

Freedom and Pain

I stand in the vastness

The sea in front, sand behind,

A seagull soars and a crab tries to hide.

I feel small surrounded by such grandeur.

My spirit flies with the birds,

And knows freedom with no limit.

My heart hides with the crab

As it creeps to the edge and can go no further.

It disappears in the small, cramped space for one.

Just as I can go no further than a wire fence.

And retreat into my own shell, a cell.

When darkness surrounds, fear paralyzes

And pain reigns.

(Eighth inmate sits down.)

Ninth Inmate

(Stands up to read again.)

Carpe Diem

Tenth Inmate

(Stands up and reads again.)

Visitation

I was up even before sunrise. Got my shower, took my time shaving. Excitement bubbled in me like a kettle about to boil over! Teeth brushed, aftershave applied – the non-alcohol kind, and I dressed in my “visitation clothes.” A freshly pressed shirt and pants, the crease so sharp that a Marine Corps drill sergeant would be impressed! Shoes shined til I could see myself in them. I sit down to wait. Visitation starts at 1:00pm. I watch as the clock slowly ticks by: 12:45, 1:00, 1:15. Okay...she’s a bit late. It’s all good. Probably traffic. Yeah that’s it, traffic. 2:00pm now. Damn, I hope she didn’t have car trouble! I won’t even *think* about an accident. Could Mama be sick? No. *Somebody would’ve called.* 2:15, 3:00pm. Sweat breaks out. I feel it running down my back, my shirt sticking to me now. *Guys in the cellblock avoid glancing over at me. Their sympathy, empathy, understanding what I’m going through. Every inmate has at one time or another endure what I am today.* 3:15, 3:30, 4:00pm. That’s it. Visitation is over. I slowly trudge back to my cell, quietly closing my door. And I lay in the stillness of my darkened cell. The tears that had been threatening now given freedom to drop onto my pillow.

(Tenth inmate sits down.)

First Inmate

(Stands up again to read.)

Chow Hall

Scurry, scurry

The roaches hurry,

To get into position.

It’s chow time again!

What’s this we see?

Diced carrots with peas!

We skitter across the floor,

Seeking such delicacies and more!

Doing the backstroke in gravy.

Hey look guys! I’m a sailor in the roach navy!

Scooped up in a ladle

And sorrow-filled nights.
In prison you hide teardrops
But sometimes they still fall.
You're all alone, lost in the past,
Living behind the wall.
Many lose their family,
Most lose their friends,
Every day brings heartbreak
That no amount of time can mend.

Letters go unanswered,
Few will accept a call.
This the cost when all is lost
Living behind the wall.
The past forever hidden
The future far away,
Our life story unwritten
With nothing good to say.
No one will stand by us,
Or catch us when we fall,
Our debt to society never paid
Living behind the wall.
(Second inmate sits down.)

Third Inmate

(Stands up to read again.)

Only A Dream

Up in the air and over the wire
My feet touch the frosted grass
Or it is summer and the dew is sweet

We found Doc's shark easily enough and I counted out the money. Doc excitedly reached for his watch just as two new C.O.'s rounded the corner and confiscated the money, the watch, and put cuffs on all three of us. No use denying. We was all cold busted!

Now, a seasoned C.O. would've warned us, let it go, and that would've been the end of it. But these two boys were real asswipes of the first degree. You know the kind. They was bullied in school or by other kids in the neighborhood and this was their turn for some get-back. Didn't matter that it weren't us who bullied 'em growing up. We jus' represented all them years of being called a "geek," a "spaz" or some other name and having their lunch money taken.

They took us before the shift commander who acts kinda like a magistrate. We all could see him roll his eyes. Few want to do the paper work required in a situation like ours. I mean, nobody was bleeding. Nobody was hurt. A debt was paid. Everybody won. No dice. The Lieutenant could do nothing as the two "arresting officers" stood with arms crossed and shit-eating grins plastered on their pimple-marked faces, while we three were sent to the hole. Three days later we were all released back into general population, but my money, Doc's watch, and his girl were all gone. It just don't pay to gamble – and lose – in prison!

(Fourth inmate sits down.)

Fifth Inmate

(Stands and reads again.)

The Poetry of Punishment

Why do people have to die before their greatness is recognized? Who will have anything to say about me? Who will write my epitaph?

As I sit, alone in my cell on the medical ward, waiting for God, I tip my hat to my 20's when anything was still possible. My requiem is of a poor, bantam cock of a man, no longer a rooster filled with piss and vinegar. I've spent decades behind these walls. These hands have folded in prayer, held the hand of another dying of AIDs in prison and crying out for his mama. These hands, age-spotted now, have held a brush to create beauty on canvas. No longer youthful, no longer supple, these hands once held protest signs against the war in Vietnam, for racial equality, applauded at concerts and plays, held a pen to write poetry, casted a vote.

Perhaps I will leave footprints in the sands of time, a legacy to say that I existed. That I was more than my crime (said loudly). But like the artist and poet, some are never appreciated. With our hands we reach for things we shouldn't have, grasp for what isn't ours. With our fingers, we touch the filth that surrounds us.

Perhaps my words will kindle the musings of some aspiring writer, encourage another to breathe life on paper. This shall be my epitaph.

(Fifth inmate sits down.)

Of stifled dreams

Blue is the color of acceptance

A coming to terms with what is

And what will never be

Greens is the color of rebirth

The yearning to emerge, free

From this cathedral of pain

Rising from the altar of hate

Yellow is the color of hope

A belief in tomorrow

To once more walk in the light

Orange merges hope with frustration

As days slide into years

The rainbow bleeding into one

The indomitable human spirit

To lift from the depths of despair

Unfettered, free

To simply (pause) be...

(Seventh inmate sits down.)

Eighth Inmate

(Stands to read again.)

Butterfly

In the beginning (said solemnly)

It was all darkness and fear

I could see no way out

No end to the anguish

Here, in a place that conveys death

Yet, can offer life?

Inmate 10: This new Jim Crow cannot be.

Inmates 1 – 9: (Loudly!) When are we gonna see justice?

Inmate 10: Is this what our forefathers wanted to see?

Inmates 1 – 9: (Loudly!) When are we gonna see justice?

Inmate 10: Make way for a wave of resistance.

Inmates 1 – 9: (Loudly!) When are we gonna see justice?

Inmate 10: Let's unite in our insistence.

Inmates 1 – 9: (Loudly!) When are we gonna see justice?

Inmate 10: Our quest for reform is far from done.

Inmates 1 – 9: (Quietly) When are we gonna see justice?

Inmate 10: We won't stop til prison reform is won.

ALL: (Loudly!) We won't quit until we get justice!

(All inmates sit down except Inmate 10.)

Inmate Ten

(Reads solemnly)

Dear America

Why do you keep silent America?

Why do you keep your counsel

As millions of your countrymen languish?

In a nation comprising just 4%

Of the world's population,

But 25% of the world's incarcerated,

Why are you content to spend

Your taxes to subsidize a failed system

Called prison?

Why, America, do you turn a blind eye,

A deaf ear, to the cries for mercy,

The plight of so many?



Marc Rosemond

September 18, 2025

Lucky Jefferson

Sir:

Thank you for the opportunity to show my work through your magazine. No need to return the originals.

Respect
Marc Rosemond

Victor Chunga

Lucky Jefferson

07/17/25

I saw your information on the Black&Pink Newsletter requesting artwork concerning relationships. I would like to submit two of my works for your consideration.

The story is titled "In My Time". Originally, it won an Honorable Mention in the 2017 PEN America Writing Contest for memoir. It was the very first story I ever wrote, and I used actual excerpts from my diary to write it. The story is 100% nonfiction, though the version I'm submitting is a slightly updated version.

I titled the cartoon "Adopt-A-Prisoner.com" and I drew it during the recent CO strike when the National Guard had to fill in (I also drew a cartoon of a CO as a shepherd herding us to chow and laughing about his job being so easy; that cartoon will soon be published by PJP). It's a commentary on how some (a lot) of women troll prison pen pal sites looking for a man to "adopt", so each inmate represents a type of dog since dogs and inmates are actually considered "property" in the eyes of the law. There are a lot of animal lovers who believe dogs/pets are more than property and should be treated as such; well if dogs aren't property then HUMANS should definitely not be considered state property either, no matter what mistake got them in prison.

I know "In My Time" is kind of long, but I thought maybe you could use excerpts of the diary entries. Every time I read the story I still can't believe that was my life... to find love, TRUE love and then lose it so violently. It's a gift though. I can honestly say I KNOW true love, I KNOW what it is to be loved so much by someone that he would sacrifice himself. You know how in relationships people are always saying things like, "I would die for you," or "I'd kill anyone for you." Well, I can honestly say I KNOW what it is to be loved that way. That's a gift, though one that came with a very high price.

I hope you enjoy the artwork. Please let me know if you would like to see some of my other works; writing about relationships is sort of my bread and butter. In 2021 I published a zombie fiction book titled "The Ones Who Survive" under the pen-name Victor Manuel (it's my middle name). The first print ran its course, but the eBook may still be available on Amazon or Barnes & Noble. I'm always looking for opportunities to showcase my work and reach people--specially college students interested in working with the prison population. I have an AA in Psychology, and I'm almost through a BA in Sociology. Next will be my Masters, the end goal being a PhD.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Have a wonderful day.

Sincerely,



The TIJUANA hairless is VERY SOCIAL AND GREAT WITH KIDS.

The FRANCHIE is really in RIGHT NOW. He's OBEEDIENT AND EAGER TO LEARN NEW TRICKS.

AND The BULLY, AN AMERICAN CLASSIC. HIS TEMPERAMENT AND TOUGH EXTERIOR CAN OFTEN GET HIM INTO TROUBLE, BUT IT'S NOTHING SOME TLC AND A LOVING FAMILY CAN'T FIX. THEY HAVE ALL THEIR SHOTS AND COME WITH CERTIFICATION



From: Vincent Chunga
Date Received: July 17, 2025
Subject: Excerpt from "In My Time"

5/9/16 ("IN 3 WORDS I CAN SUM UP EVERYTHING I'VE LEARNED ABOUT LIFE: IT GOES ON"

- Robert Frost)

If I asked a bank for a loan, it would want to see my assets. And I guess there wouldn't be much to show, so does that mean I've lived a wasted life? No, my assets are my experiences, my emotions, and my hard-earned jewels of wisdom. I know true love, the type of love you'll sacrifice yourself for another. In the bank of life, that's better than gold. As long as Ron's out there, I'll always know there is more to this place than concrete and bars.

I haven't heard from Ron since March, I'm not worried though. There's not much I can do to help him right now, not until I see him face to face. For now I'll be the voice in his heart. I know he still remembers the love we shared, and where there's love, there's hope. But this story isn't about Ron, it's about me. It has always been about me.

My search for love has inadvertently led me to a search of my own soul—what it means to me to be human. I don't believe people change, not really, they just get better at hiding who they are. Yes, actions, beliefs, values, loves, etc. changes and evolves, but who that person is at their core remains. A fighter may stop fighting due to age or a change of values, but that fire will always be inside. At my core I know I'm a good person, maybe not a "nice" person but definitely a caring person who wants the best for everyone, yet I still allowed heroin to override my basic humanity and cause tidal waves of pain. It's difficult to consolidate these two conflicting sides, so I've escaped my reality by getting lost in the men I've loved—seeing myself the way they see me. Confronting my crime and that darkness is like attempting to study a black hole from up close: It devours EVERYTHING that comes near it, leaving only frozen in time like an event horizon the image of the people I hurt to take their heroin. The pain I caused them haunts me, so I turn away from it, but like gravity—it pulls me towards it. Everyone has a black hole in their timeline; just as is at the center of a galaxy, a timeline couldn't exist without a black hole. There can't be life without it. It's time I become the person I'm meant to be by crossing the event horizon and

face my black hole.

I'm still not completely convinced I'm not in some type of hell loop, but I'm only stuck if I stop fighting for love. It's only failing if I give up. No amount of loss or pain can erase the beautiful memories I've made with those I've loved most. That's worth something, maybe it's worth everything. In the end all we have is our memories, and it's the good ones that stick. When I think of Ron, I don't think of the fights, the fear of getting caught, or the pain of losing him. I remember the way the morning sun would hit his face in such a way that it looked as if he wore a halo; I'll remember all the venison tacos and egg sandwiches that I still don't know where he got, or all the times I rushed to the court to pick the strawberries before the woodchuck got to them because Ron likes fresh strawberries in his cereal. That's the truth I choose to take with me.

-----[I got older]-----

From: Teresa Poquette
Date Received: June 15, 2025
Subject: To My Son

A Mother's Love is forever,
from the day you were born
and beyond.
It won't die-never,
even after I'm gone and you mourn.

I raised you the best I could;
proud of all you did.
If I could get you out, I would.
You're no more a kid.

You're a grown man behind bars
that circle you all around.
Wire fence greets me as I get out of the car.
Metal upon metal I hear the sound.
I eagerly wait to see your smiling face.
I pray you'll be alright
and hope you get out of that place.
I love you with all my might.

As I leave, I wonder when I'll see you next.
I must go. Your hug felt the best.

As I walk away, tears fall down my face.
You can't see them now,
I go a slow pace;
my head bowed.

Our love is strong.
We've survived this long.
We can hang in there, together.
Our bond, something no one can sever.

I couldn't have asked for a better son
than you.
Without you, I'd be blue.
I love you with all my heart;
never to part.

From: Fendy S. Tulodo
Date Received: July 25, 2025
Subject: Forgive in Mono

The old speaker coughed again.

A quiet buzzing started inside the walls. Static crackled like someone clearing their throat. Three flashes came from the red light. Then it stayed on. He stared at it. Still holding his screwdriver, he tilted the small amp box on the table and twisted the wire tighter, slow like counting pulse. No one else in this place believed the speaker could sing anymore. But it did. Barely.

This used to be a radio shack for guards... now it was where he built his beats. And fixed broken pieces. Not just tech. Sometimes, his chest.

Outside, someone threw a mop against the floor. Steel and echo. Afternoon duties. The hallway smelled like soap and warm metal. But in here, the air was always dust and silence... except when his music started looping.

It wasn't much. A cheap microphone taped to a paper cup. A pair of cracked headphones found behind the old food cart. A small busted keyboard someone left behind after transfer. That's all it took.

And pain, of course.

He didn't know why he kept making music here. The first time, it was just to drown the memory of his father yelling through a cracked wall. Same pitch, same crackle. The old man was already buried now.

Almost two years. No last call. No letter. Just cold dirt and a text from a cousin: "he's gone."

Gone... and he still left that broken shout inside his head like a stuck hi-hat.

But beats... helped. Like they answered back, told him something was still here. Like the signal from the speaker... it still reached someone. Even if it coughed.

Last week, he layered a low synth under a vocal take he recorded while hiding under the bunk during inspection. It was one line. "I forgive you for not knowing what to do."

He whispered it again into the cup mic. This time slower. The sample warped, cracked like dry skin, but something in it made his hands stop shaking. He didn't cry. Not really. But the pressure inside loosened like bad plumbing. That night, sleep never came. He remained seated, eyelids heavy, while the recording repeated until dawn.

In his head, he imagined it drifting through the walls. Someone might hear it. Maybe the guard with the limp. Maybe the boy across the hall who tapped beats on his knees every morning. Maybe... someone outside.

Once, someone told him forgiveness is soft work. Quiet work. But inside here, nothing was quiet unless it was broken.

His music wasn't soft. It scratched. It popped. It stumbled. But it told the truth. And somehow, in that noise, he started fixing something... in him-

self. Every mix, every take, every failed bounce... it made things clearer.

Back then, at home, before the arrest, before the concrete, he used to record in the bathroom. Sound bounced off the tile. His kid slept in the next room. He always thought his beats would save them. It didn't. But maybe... it could now.

The place he stayed in now had one barred window. You could see part of a rusted water tower from there. That's where he placed the signal receiver. Just a small DIY antenna. It blinked green when it caught something. Most days, it blinked yellow. But today... it was green.

His fingers twitched.

He turned up the gain. Static. Then... a sample played back.

His own beat. But different.

Someone had flipped it.

The synth he made was there, but chopped like shattered glass. Over it, someone had looped their own voice... muffled, heavy, breathy... saying something in Javanese. He didn't know the full meaning. But the tone said enough. It was a reply.

He stood there, not breathing. Eyes on the blinking light.

It was real.

He wasn't alone.

The following days, he kept sending. More tracks.

Short. Raw. Personal. Each beat was a page. He sent one with the vocal clip of him muttering: "he never told me how to be a man, but I still hear his footsteps every time I stand alone."

That was the one that got a response with a gamelan loop underneath... soft bells and clashing rhythms. The file was called "InsideStillBeats.mp3."

No name. No note.

Didn't need one.

Every song now became a letter. Not to his dad. Not anymore. That part had changed. Now it was bigger. Each bass kick was for someone who waited too long to speak. Each snare hit said "I'm still here." Each vocal layer was a quiet scream into the cement. He crafted his tracks with care now, keeping each mistake like a scar you stop hiding.

Some days the antenna glowed green for hours. Some days, it didn't. Either way, he kept building.

One afternoon, something strange happened.

The old speaker... dead since last week... crackled on by itself. The red light blinked twice. Then a song played.

It was one of his. But layered over it was the sound of the sea. Real sea. Not a loop. And birds. Distant. Messy. Alive.

He dropped the mic.

No one could get that kind of field recording from here.

It had to be from outside.

Someone out there had sent him this.

The cold floor supported his weight as he rested against the wall, sitting motionless. Letting the sounds wrap around him. The sea. The birds. His own beat under it all.

He smiled.

The burning in his chest persisted, yet pain stayed distant. Mostly.

For the first time, he felt it. Not guilt. Not anger.

Peace.

The next morning, everything changed.

He came back from work duty and found his gear gone. Speaker. Antenna. Mic. Even the keyboard.

All gone.

Only a small note left behind. One sentence.

“The beat made it out. Let it go.”

At first, he panicked. Hands shaking. He checked every corner, every wire, every plug. Nothing. Emptiness rang louder than sirens.

But then... he sat.

Breathed.

He pressed his fingers to the floor. Tapped once.

Twice.

He still remembered the rhythm.

He didn't cry. Didn't scream.

The bench was pulled to the corner by him.
After sitting, a napkin's back became his writing surface. Chord progressions. Drum patterns.

New titles.

The beat was still here.

Even without the tech.

Even without the tools.

Even without the walls.

It took weeks before anything else happened.

Then one morning, a guard walked by and dropped a small envelope by his feet. No eye contact.

No words. Walked away.

Inside was a CD. No label. No tracklist. Just one thing written on it in marker:

"Keep building."

He didn't have a player for it. Not yet.

But he didn't need to.

He already knew.

Somewhere, someone had heard him.

And they were still listening.

END

From: Stephen Chalker
Date Received: August 18, 2025
Subject: Iron

I am attempting to iron out wrinkles,
Creases,
Haphazard ridges tracing a chaotic
Topography
Across a dozen white table cloths.

They are to adorn the dining tables
At my youngest daughter's Bat Mitzvah.

Her older brother and sister did not have
Me in attendance at their celebrations.
I was "away"

The last time I did this much ironing
Was in preparation for "viso"-
A magical day when loved ones come to visit and
Spend time with their incarcerated family and
Friends.

I saw my youngest, now 13, exactly 6 times over 42 months.

Every weekend, I would dutifully iron institutional green
Pants and shirts
To a paramilitary crispness and angular
Desperation
But a visit from her, or anyone else, rarely
arrived

Now I glide an iron
(Spitting and spewing swirling steam)
Over the peaks and valleys of
Crumpled and neglected fabric
Faded coffee stains
Somehow this seems
Insufficient

My eyes are glossy
Not from super-heated water vapor, but
Because my efforts
At pressing these rags
Into something resembling
Their original form and color
Are frantic
And frankly
Futile

From: Brianna Yancey
Date Received: August 17, 2025
Subject: Tessering- The 29th Try

I re-introduced myself to myself, this time - Camille Dungy

I am the daughter of a black man that exists
in the world. That's important for me to say
to myself after 27 years of not believing he existed
or not feeling that I exist because of his absence.
There is something that translates broken
to a little brown girl wanting to hear what whole
love feels like and she cannot touch it.
My mother says: 'You were made from stardust and second chances'.
The knowledge of this light could not touch me
until I was a woman.

I met him after he was released from the cell and
into a world that was built around snuffing him out.
When I saw him the little girl,
with sweating ponytails full of plastic pastel bows,
stood up inside of me
and took a breath after years of holding on to it.

We were next to each other in a dark restaurant,
my nervousness hid by the shadow of neglect.
The time standing too still to touch itself.
His white collared shirt too big and full of loss
against my red faded hoodie swollen with want;
neither of us saying that in the dark it hurt
to be whole.

From: Tony Vick
Date Received: September 18, 2025
Subject: Hands

I am thinking about the next words to pen while writing a letter. I catch a glimpse of my hand. I have not noticed it in who knows when.

It's old, wrinkled, spotted, hairy.

It's my father's hand.

My dad was a hard worker, laboring over a small farm with plows and axes. Deep calluses formed on his hands, like a new mountain forming out of rugged ground. He would occasionally take his pocket knife, the one his dad gave to him when he was twelve, and slice off the outer portion of the hard skin. It made me cringe each time. It was surgery without anesthesia.

My hands are not hard and crusty. Almost three decades in prison has kept me in jobs that demanded my brain power, not man power. So, my palms are just soft and pudgy and full of lines that tell a story full of tragedies and unexpected turns. The tops of my hands are indeed my dad's, age spots and all, but the palms tell a different story.

When I was around four or five, my dad grabbed me one day when I darted out from the church doors running to the car. I was always looking at the ground trying to find treasures like a worm or granddaddy long legged spider. Just as his strong, rough hands, snatched my arm, I looked up to see the bumper of old man Bishop's black Chevy Sedan within inches of

my head. It scared me when he grabbed me, but it made me feel safe. Dad's hands were steady, and when I encountered them, I always felt protected and sometimes corrected.

My hands were blood red the first time I was cuffed up and riding a chain bus to prison. The iron was pushed so deep into my wrist that the veins in my hand were poked out and my fingers numb and aching with trapped up blood. My hands, paws in a bear trap, would never be free again.

My dear mother had delicate hands, long fingers that could stretch and play a full octave on the piano. They were smooth and white. When her fingers struck the ivory keys, you could barely tell one from the other. She sighed when her hands kneaded dough, expertly rolling and folding the flour and buttermilk into a rectangle to cut out biscuits. She would touch the dough as her mother had taught her, with her trained fingertips and gauge if it had enough spring to be ready for baking. When her hands touched me, love penetrated my soul, and I felt fully embraced and adored.

David's hands shake. He's just in his forties, incarcerated about twenty years, but watching him eat is like observing a toddler using a spoon for the first time. He normally sits alone while eating as others are uncomfortable watching miss-mouth pieces roll across the table. His fingers are small and rigid, and they tightly clasp the "spork." His firm grip looks like a blacksmith holding a hammer pounding out a horseshoe. He draws his mouth closer to the bite, but still loses half the soup before it hits his lips. His hands are determined and resilient. Even with their disability, his hands find ways to maneuver and function.

My Uncle Doug lost part of his right arm in the war. I fondly call him Uncle Hook, since he had a prosthetic attached to his elbow with a hook on the end instead of a hand. He said he could still feel his hand and fingers and sometimes they would cramp. He called it "phantom pains." His left hand would help to navigate where he wanted the hook to be when he was working on his car engine. The hook may be holding a tool, or a light, while his left hand worked its magic. His hand and fingers, even though they were no longer there, were present. A permanent relationship.

I had been taking Old Man Roberts some food each night to his cell. He didn't have the strength to walk down to the prison chow hall anymore, but didn't want to complain. If he did, they'd take him to the cold and isolating infirmary to stay. As he ate, I would read some newspaper articles to him, and he would occasionally grunt with, "Them damn liberals gonna send us all to hell." We would look at the age spots on his hands and try to determine what animal or bird they looked like. As his body weakened, he talked less and stared at the television with his baby blue eyes. I was sitting with him one night when he grabbed my hand, a desperate plea coming from a dying man. His grip slowly faded and fell limp. I felt the life drain from Old Man Robert's hands.

My grandmother, Mama George, had the most interesting hands I had ever seen. She was born in the late 1890s into a family of sharecroppers in Kentucky. I would sit by her rocking chair holding yarn while she rolled it into a ball. I asked her why some of her fingers were crooked. She told me that you could tell a lot about a person by looking at their hands.

“These old hands of mine have helped bring life into the world and helped escort it back out at the end. They have been broken, bruised, and burnt, through hard work and labor and by bosses that wanted to make a point,” she told me.

Mama George had big hands for a lady, with lots of extra skin like an old basset hound, and her pointing fingers were crooked. She'd use one hand to unclench the other. A little help with her free hand. They always looked like they were ready to fight.

I've lived an extraordinary life. My hands have caused great devastation and they have created beauty. They've built community. One doesn't diminish the other, but each is part of my story. My hands have touched life and death. And now as I look at my old hands I wonder what is left for them to do or to feel or to write. How I long for those hands that have brought me such comfort and safety, to once again touch me, hold me, love me.

I take my right hand and place it on top of my left.

There it is, my dad touching me. I can see it. I can feel it.

Meet The Contributors

- p. 11 Demetrius Buckley's work has appeared in Rattle, where he was a finalist for the 2024 Rattle Poetry Prize, Michigan Quarterly Review, where he won the 2020 Page Davidson Clayton Prize for Emerging Poets, Apogee, PEN America, and RHINO. He is the winner of the 2021 Toi Derricotte & Cornelius Eady Chapbook Prize.
- p. 12-15 Lanae Tipton is a proud mother of one and aspiring author. Tipton is currently incarcerated in Texas and has been since she was 18 years old. Her writing focuses on using her personal testimony and current environment to shed light on the mistreatment and injustice behind bars. Through her writing she strives to voice struggles and barriers incarcerated people are faced with and to provide readers with an inside look.
- p. 16-18 Corey Devon Arthur, an incarcerated writer and artist who is part of the Empowerment Avenue Collective, with his work published in venues including the Study and Struggle, Spectre Journal, the Drift, and Writing Class Radio. He exhibited his art at two galleries in Brooklyn, New York, in 2023.
- p. 19 Selvyn Tillet discovered art by watching painters and caricature artists for hours, a fascination that followed him into incarceration. Inspired by Bob Ross, he began painting landscapes that echo his Caribbean roots and longing for freedom. His first exhibition affirmed his growth, and he continues expanding his practice with steady encouragement.
- p. 20-21 Franklin McPherson is 38 years old and has been incarcerated since the age of 20. He serves a sentence of 25 years to life in the State of New York.

- p. 22-26 Elizabeth Hawes is a poet, playwright, and essayist from Minneapolis. Recipient of the Keeley Schenwar Memorial Essay Prize, she has contributed to multiple pedagogical journals and books. Her quotes have been projected onto the Rockefeller Center during PEN America's Centennial Art Installation Celebration: Speech Itself.
- p. 28-31 Charles L. Wynn Sr. is a currently incarcerated writer.
- p. 32 Sara Shea received her BA from Kenyon College, where she served as Student Associate Editor for The Kenyon Review. Shea pursued graduate classes through the Great Smokies Writing Program, UNC Asheville, and Western Carolina University, where she studied under Ron Rash.
- p. 33-48 Kashawn Taylor is a Black, queer, formerly incarcerated writer from Connecticut.
- p. 50-51 Tess Ezzy (she/her) is a poet and fibre artist living between Sydney and Kastellorizo. Her work explores memory, matrescence, myth, and the mess of being alive. She runs The Moody Project, blending poetry with felted storytelling for neurodivergent souls.
- @themoodyproject_
- p. 52-69 Gary Farlow is a currently incarcerated writer and aspiring playwright.
- p. 70-71 Marc Rosemond is a currently incarcerated artist and father.
- p. 72-75 Vincent Chunga is a currently incarcerated artist and writer.

- p. 76-77 Teresa Poquette is a native Vermonter. Poquette's Poems was published in 2019. It included poems by her Mother, Amelia. Teresa most recently wrote "Reunion". This poem was printed in the Colchester Sun newspaper & on the Colchester School District/ Colchester High School Alumni website. Please see: <https://sites.google.com/view/teresa-poquette>
- p. 78-83 Nep Kid is the music-making name of Fendy, a storyteller and home producer based in Malang, Indonesia. His work explores memory, grief, and creative survival, drawing from daily life and overlooked pain to craft quiet, emotional narratives that hum like low beats under concrete.
- p. 84-85 Stephen Chalker (he/him). He was formerly in federal incarceration but since he has been released, he has dedicated his life to education. He is a teacher, a tutor, and occasionally, a writer. He lives in South Florida where he does his best to help those who need.
- p. 87 Brianna Yancey is a resident of Greensboro, NC. She currently teaches at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University.
- p. 88-91 Tony has served almost three decades of a life sentence in Tennessee. He is the author of two books, *Secrets From a Prison Cell* (Cascade Books, 2018) and *Locked In and Locked Out* (Resource Publications, 2023). His writing has also been published at *Solitary Watch*, the *Progressive*, *Truthout*, *Shado* and in multiple books and anthologies, the most recent of which is *Storms of the Inland Sea* (Shanti Arts, 2022). His Filter story about CoreCivic medical care won "Best News" at the 2025 Stillwater Prison Journalism Awards.

ABOUT LUCKY JEFFERSON

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