

## JumpStart -Exploring and Encouraging Creative Writing

Dear PE Members, I hope you enjoy and benefit from the creative writing project created by Greg. Greg heard about Prisoner Express and contacted me. When he heard about our programs, he offered to create this creative writing packet. It clearly was a labor of love for him. Greg has included an address so you can write to him directly with your submissions. **He will also contact those of you who have access to JPAY.** His address is listed in the packet. Write him and let him know if he can contact you through JPAY and you can send your writing to him that way. We have been tossing around many ideas of how we might publish some of the writing you submit for this project. I would love to hear your feedback on this project. Your words have power and I am thankful for Greg for his encouragement to you all to EXPRESS YOURSELF! Best wishes, Gary

Welcome to JumpStart!, a creative writing program designed by three kind-hearted and way cool, and sometimes modest, dudes: Michael, Taj, and Greg. We are way stoked to be here, guys! —What an awesome opportunity for the three of us. —By the way, my name is Greg and I am the leader of JumpStart! That's just a nominal title, really, given that I help put things together and make some crucial decisions when needed; all for the sake of structure and order.

Actually, in reality, my buddies Taj and Michael do their best to keep *me* in order! That is the truth. It's also true that we hold *each other* accountable. Mutual accountability is our way of making sure this program is as meaningful and thoughtful and as organized as possible—for You. Michael and I are a team for You in every sense of the phrase. We live and breathe and even sleep in dreams of increased collaboration, creativity, and clarity; all in the service of meeting your possible wants and needs as writers and participants. — We hope that we are able to provide you with good and thoughtful support.

Michael and Taj and I are also close friends, looking forward to making you part of our friendship circle and creative community. There are many days when we inspire each other. —What a joy to have imaginative friends. Creative collaboration enlivens. It enriches. It grounds us in the life-breath of both relationship and relationships. That's precisely why we really look forward to *including* you in our creative endeavors, making you a part of our creative community as well.

So. How do we begin with this bold endeavor, to connect creatively? Well, as you might imagine, my friends have a love for jumping into words, as if they were the beginning of something magical. Like an amazing relationship with

readers; or even a special kinship with words themselves. We hope our program will spark a writing flame in you. Inspire you *to share, to explore, to go wherever your mind may take you*—into worlds of insight, discovery, deep connection, into fun, laughter, and hurt. Into places where all people go when they are in authentic relationship with themselves and with others— when they are part of a community.

Michael and Taj and I, as a team, are intent on establishing a creative environment that is easy-breezy and relaxed. Our exercises and prompts are designed to stimulate and expand the imagination, even inspire deep thought; all within a collaborative setting that feels *real* and honors each person as a creative, intelligent, and mature learner. We want all of our participants to have the sense that they are teaching us every bit as much as we are teaching them.

In fact, we see ourselves not so much as teachers but rather as facilitators. We are here to empower everyone. Insomuch as some or many of the exercises and prompts in this packet cast light and clarity on the creative writing process, expand the imagination and leave our students refreshed; creating vistas of glimmering knowledge and new understanding; insomuch as it accomplishes all these things, we have done our job!

We would like you to use the workshopping exchanges (by way of JPAY, for those who have access to it) as opportunities to ask for clarification, but also to take risks. Big risks. Knowing that we promise to provide a safety net, one where you will feel comfortable to fail, knowing you can pick yourself right back up. Yes, we will be with you all the way!

*You'll notice that the packet itself invites you creatively into more than twenty prompts!! Of course, you're not expected to write a piece for each prompt. That would take enormous energy and time. That would also lead you in too many directions at once. What we recommend is this: go through the packet a couple of times, sort through all of the choices in your mind, and then ultimately choose three or four prompts; or as many as five; that really inspire you to write. Perhaps it would be a good idea to choose at least one prompt from each section of the packet. There are three sections. By choosing to engage in each of the three sections, you will not only stretch yourself as a writer, but also be afforded more opportunities to have your writing published. We will be creating collections of writing based*

on theme and topic. Some pieces will be selected for the Prisoner Express Publication, which will be sent to all participants once published. Other pieces may be chosen for online publication or other opportunities as well. So potential publication is something to consider. However, in the end, you get to choose what you want to write. Please keep in mind that we will be accepting written pieces by way of JPAY, for those of you who have access to it. For this reason, along with challenges of time constraints on our end, we request that your writing pieces be **brief**. We welcome short and extended poems; descriptive pieces; and short stories. Whatever genre you choose, please limit the length to **two pages**. This will challenge you to be succinct. To make every word count. To think big picture. To be organized. In short, the requirement of brevity will certainly strengthen your abilities as a writer!!

For those of you who do not have access to JPAY, here is our address:

**Jump Start!**

**P.o. Box 59771**

**Homewood, Alabama 35259**

## **Section I.**

This packet begins inside the world of memories. It invites you to take a fun-filled trip into the joyful moments of your past; just for a while; or even for longer spell if you like. For Whatever time frame you Choose. Just long enough for you to feel freed from the physical environment that encases you.

Yes, encases.

Do you sometimes feel like a bug that has been placed in a closed container?

Who could possibly argue that prison life is liberating? By its very nature, Institutionalization forces *limits*. It *confines*. It even *suffocates* an individual. Sometimes. At the very least, it leaves an individual feeling emotionally and spiritually crippled. Especially on difficult difficult days.

Institutionalization wields its power by way of steel bars creating a kind of numbing grey that seeps into the mind and body, hushing the very soul of a person. This can happen. It happens all of the time.

Yet, for this very reason, we wanted to begin this packet in the realm of the infinite.—That is precisely where the past is, yes? In the realm of the infinite?

Or, more broadly, when viewed through the lens of a grateful mind, the past may also be viewed as an infinite space of the spirit. It can carry us anywhere. It can take us way, way above the rooftops of our minds to the tallest parts of our imaginations, where the skylight of our thoughts and feelings shimmer and shine.

You can allow yourself to go there right now, to that glimmering space in your mind. Drift at this moment into a warm, light-hearted, happy, sensory-filled place; one filled with whimsical, windy memories; spectacular thoughts that fill your mind with magical poems; taking you to ease and comfort; to the excitement of a sudden space-chase. where words on the run. from the beat of a glaring sun. of a Furious Poem. Yikes! —Let's get out of here!

—Ah, Never mind, then. Everything's cool. False alarm.—

Yes, words can take us places. We can wield them how we like, shaping our memories to suit what we want. For ourselves. For our readers.

For the moment, let's imagine poems as memories filled us with sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Sensation gives us Life. It awakens our minds and bodies. It gives us the energy simply to be. To breathe in the realm of the infinite...as if it were Ours....and in fact...*It Is*.

No one can ever take from you your power of memory, or the imagination, which makes every memory breathe with the magic of language. No one can take that away from you. What is more, the interaction between memory and the imagination is a living breathing thing in and of itself. It can and will grow over time—if you give it the time and the space and the attention it needs to thrive. The world of the mind is truly an infinite space. So is the realm of words. The more you spend time with those realms, the more you'll discover how those spaces can widen together, like a sky-dance; deepening, moving forward, backward, rising and falling; all in the instant of a breath.

The realm of poetry and creative writing can provide a beautiful space for you; one that can liberate you from the walls, from the steel bars that would seem to be your living space. —What if, after all, the space in which you live, as it turns out, is One that you Create?! What if.....

We invite you to begin this creative writing journey by looking back at the smallest chunks of your life, the tiniest fun-packed moments of your life, that were filled with experiences *in and of* sensation. Take for example, your memories of eating something delicious from a summer grill.

Let's get straight to the taste of it. Let's imagine a sizzling hamburger that is swept into the doorway of your mouth all at once, pressing up against the arched roof of it. The satisfying tingle of the burger, the sizzle of it, and the heat of it, all ride along the arch; even the the slippery yum of the

juices run down your tongue. —That is the stuff of poetry....yes!

That is poetry without rhyme, by the way. Many modern poems do not rhyme. But they often do focus the lens of the image in order to portray complex sensory based experiences filled with sight, taste, smell, and touch. Words or phrases will be repeated, for musical effect. Or rhythms of phrases will be repeated. —But there is also the focus.

By “focus the lens”, I mean that the image is just a moment in time, lasting something less than sixty seconds. Writing this way, within a frame of time that is compacted, oftentimes assists with the magic of a description, particularly if it is sensory based and telling a story.— The writer is challenged to stretch out time, to make it seem as though the experience is long-lasting though in reality the experience itself is ephemeral.

In the previous example, I did not focus on sound so much, although the Reader can imagine what the sound of the experience might be like.

Why not allow the reader to participate in the poetry? Won't he feel more engaged if he has the opportunity to fill in some of the blanks? It's more than fine to allow the reader to make inferences, to imagine as well. That's much of the craft of writing!

Going back to the burger: you'll notice that the description of it was colored with the literary tool of **Metaphor**. Which is to say, the dining experience did not begin and end with “the mouth” but rather with the “the **doorway** of the mouth”. The literary tool of metaphor asks the writer to think of the objects that are part of physical reality in terms something **other** than what they appear to be. The mouth is thought of as a doorway here. How else might you as a writer think of the mouth, if you were to write your own description of a culinary experience? We invite you to make a list. As you make an effort to expand your list, you might think about the properties of the mouth. For example the tongue is flat and soft. The roof of the mouth is arched. Also, you can think about what happens in the mouth. Well, it's a place of travel for food, yes? —What kind of traveling place might the mouth and tongue be, then?

Now, moving forward to our first set of prompts. We have chosen to break down possible prompts by **Seasons**, since thinking of memories that way naturally brings in sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. After all, how can you possibly send your mind and memory to a baseball park without being stirred by all the senses? They are there right before you. Interacting with you as much as you are engaged with them.

Here is a wonderful summer snippet from our friend, Taj; who loves the outdoors and the world of ballparks.

*The grass was almost neon green, it had been watered so deeply and constantly, reflecting the Florida sun and citrus in the air.*

A marvelous use of parallel images that bring in several sensations, all in the stroke of a few phrases. Notice that Taj did not employ metaphor here, because it wasn't necessary. The description is nonetheless really sophisticated because the reader gets to imagine the florescent colors of citrus and how they match the bright hues of the grass. So. Descriptions can be molded and welded in many ways.

Here is another wonderful summer image from our friend, Taj. This one is more developed. It's always best to write what floats freely in your mind. If the image you picture requires just a couple of phrases, that's perfect. Or if what's required is a more complex set of phrases, or sentences, like this one, that's perfect too.

*A blackbird darted from a tree to a telephone wire behind his head. His eyes trembled slightly. A single drip of sweat condensed in that little divot above his lip but below his nose. He smelled slightly tangy on the hot, muggy breeze.*

Notice how Taj begins with a broad description, and then he focuses the lens, so to speak, to create a clear crisp image. That is ideal! Also notice that Taj writes with lots of elaboration, but again does not need to rely on metaphor here. This is the joy of writing. You can choose to bring in figurative language when thoughts inspire you that way, or you can allow images to stand on their own.

Here are some prompts that may jar some images in your mind; bringing the eye of your imagination into striking focus; into experiences rich with detail and resonance. We suggest that you choose several or many of these prompts. For each prompt, you're invited to write a three to five line poem. If you feel inspired to write a poem with several stanzas for one or more of these prompts, by all means go for it.

Summer Memories  
in a ballpark  
on a playground  
in an amusement park  
of swimming in an outdoor pool

of swimming in a river  
of summer sprinklers  
of building sandcastles on the beach  
of digging for worms  
of playing with pets in the yard  
of Kool Ade and Popsicles  
of walking on asphalt  
of melting tar  
of grilling hotdogs and hamburgers  
of listening to outdoor jazz  
of listening to bluegrass music  
of dancing under a summer tent  
in a favorite restaurant or fast food place  
at the dinner table with fresh vegetables or summer fruits  
in the outdoors observing, experiencing, or interacting with  
the animals

It's certainly possible to create a *collection* of three to five line poems all celebrating the season of summer. You could think of each three to five line poem as a sparkling pebble in a larger collection of wonderful glimmering poems.—By the time you have written seven or eight brief poems, you have a shining display of marvelous pieces for everyone to enjoy. Each poem gleaming in its own remarkable way. Each one reflecting just a glimpse into some aspect of summer.—If that is your passion, to have a collection of tiny sensory-filled poems that reflect memories of Summer; or even more than one season; then we say, go for it!

Such a collection would be marvelously useful not only for our creative writing community; but also for the public at large; to see that individuals behind bars are beautiful people; that they, like all human beings, deserve dignity and respect; and love. As for publishing opportunities, yes, you will be afforded several ways to get your writing in print! Of course, there will be a selection process to determine which writings are most suitable for publication. However, if you are committed to making the necessary edits and revisions; to do the necessary work to create a quality poem or descriptive piece; we will find a way to get your writing published in some way, shape, or form. (Some writings will be part of a larger collection. Others may be published as stand alones.)

As you edit and revise yourself, please keep in mind that these sensory-filled poems will each have its own flavor, its own feel. If you feel inspired to write a poem that makes use of metaphor, then terrific! If not, simply writing a detailed description is equally wonderful.

Once you have had your fun and fill with creating short poems, you can try shifting purposefully into more figurative and imaginative descriptions. Take, for example, this haiku poem written by our friend, Michael. Haiku poems are very structured but do not rhyme, and they are three lines in length.

“Summer Sandwich”

*Big Red Basket heats  
up in rays of Purple Love  
while the Onion waits.*

Michael imagined the red basket as something **other** than what it is. He actually imagined it as an oven. Or, rather, a *love oven*, so to speak.—Now that is a stretch! Oftentimes the most creative poems do indeed require that kind of mind-bending to make the poem's words supple enough to be imbued with real imagination.

Speaking of mind stretches, here are some words related to summer fun, that be used in multiple contexts, in many many ways: Sizzle, Bake, Brown, Crackle, Splash, Spin, Ripple, Shout, Scream, Whistle

Let's just look at the word, “Sizzle”. There was the hamburger example we looked at earlier. A fun descriptive poem. However, there are other ways to use this word that are more unusual. For example, the sizzle in the voice of a red-hot rockstar. Or the sizzle of a saxophone. Or hey, how about this: the sizzle of the stars. Or here you go: the sizzle in the eyes of a summer lover.

Now you may be asking: but how do you take such a fun-filled list and turn it into a poem? Well, there are a number of ways to play with lists. Here is what I did with my list: I took *two* of the images from the list, “star” and “summer romance”, and imaginatively *paired them; that is, I looked to see what these two apparently different things, a star and a summer romance, actually may have had **in** common, even though they appear to be quite different— even though they are indeed quite different at the surface level.* Well, of course, we know that stars and summer romance both “sizzle”, in a sense. In addition to that, I observed that they are both wondrous in their own way, mysterious in their own way, and even infinite in their own way. I took all of those commonalities and let them bake in my mind. Here is what came out:

Summer romance  
sizzling  
under the stars  
popping and spinning

into All  
things hot hot hot and  
blazing

of bundling up indoors  
of bringing out the blankets  
of watching the cold smoke of your breath drift away

until softening into a kiss  
rocking toward the moon  
drifting towards All things  
wondrous  
infinite  
mysterious.

Just as before, after you have your “sparkling pebble collection” of small poems about winter, please do share them with us by way of JPAY! We will be in contact with you. =)

There you have it. A poem that evolved from a basic comparison. The list of the comparisons might be viewed as the bare bones of the poem. The outline, in a sense. Then I allowed my mind to spin the tissue, the flesh of the poem, by way of the subconscious. The final touch, of course, involved spacing. I played with the spacing of the first stanza to give it some jazz, then allowed the second stanza spacing to smooth out, mirroring the description of the words. Of course, it's not necessary to get that fancy with spacing. I simply like to do this because one of my favorite poets, Nikki Giovanni likes to play with spacing in the same way. If you're interested in knowing more, we can chat by way of JPAY.

**Prompt** Now get more creative with the season of winter. Here are some words associated with Winter. “blanket, blizzard, howl, freeze, darken”. Of course, you can expand that list tenfold! As before, see how far you can stretch the use of these words. Allow the stretching to Become the bones for the poem itself. The outline. Then allow your mind to spin the tissue, the flesh. —Only this time we have one extra challenge! —See what words you can find that cross over, that convene two seasons at once. For example, the word sizzle can certainly be used for both seasons. How awesome that would be, to start a poem in one season, and then end in the opposite; all by way of the bridge...of....a....word! I'm not going to provide an example here, but I'll bet some or many of you can spin a poem on your own with the power of your minds!

**Prompt:** Take the other words mentioned above and make a creative list for each one of them. See just how far you can stretch the use of each of those words. The more that you're able to stretch the words, the greater your ability to launch into poetry! Sometimes this requires the time and energy to make a long long list for each word. Give yourself the time and the patience. You'll find that the lists will grow more interesting and original as they grow longer. The lists themselves, along with creative spacing of the lists, can evolve into poems in and of themselves, as shown above!  
=)

**Section II .**

O.k. guys. We have had fun traveling into the realm of memory. Now it's time to turn to the present. The world of life behind bars. But make no mistake of it. We still want to begin this adventure into the present, at least begin our journey with some humor. Granted, of the dark variety.

Prison Food

No one living behind bars would say that they're satisfied or even remotely pleased with the slop that is slapped on plates day after day, week after week; in prisons all over the globe.

Here is an extended set of Haiku poems on prison food written by our writer friend, Taj. Some or many of you may know that a Haiku poem is three lines long. It generally does not rhyme. The first and third lines are five syllables long. The middle line is seven syllables long, thus allowing for an ebb and flow, or a rise and fall in the tide of the lines.

POEM-- Ode to "Meat Rock",  
a haiku in 9 parts

"the rock," thrice weekly  
meat, by any other name

Now shifting to memories from the opposite season, winter. Again, you can write a collection of brief poems, that capture an array of senses. The joy of the winter season.

Winter Memories  
of catching snowflakes  
of building snowmen  
of melting icy windows and windshields  
of etching your name in a foggy window with your fingers  
of trudging through drifts of snow  
of sliding on icy walks  
of drinking hot chocolate  
of warming by the fire  
of nighttime candles

does it taste as sweet?

shapeless protein mass  
grey outside, pinkish middle  
summer roadkill style

"meat rock" or "meat rot?"  
rock-- my tooth, bone shard shattered  
rot-- smell, sight, stomach

raw form squeeze tube gel  
package: institute only  
not for human guts

beaks, feathers, buttholes  
hot dogs of the turkey farm  
stray mutt turns up nose

globbed gristle grease trap  
one farm's trash my treasure slop  
did I find an eye?

shapeless mound of "hmmm..."  
unseasoned swamp rat loinchops  
cancer petri dish

still, best chow we get  
salt, hot sauces hunger pains make  
imaginary steak

you gonna chew that rock?  
byproduct bon appetit  
four star jail cuisine

Fantastic writing by Taj, don't you think?! And so poignant. Notice how each stanza provides a new perspective into the meat entree. It celebrates the *otherness of language*, a topic we discussed earlier. How writers shift into **figurative writing** by looking at object, like a piece of meat, in terms of what is *not obviously there*. Here, in this poem, we have the meat perceived as: rock, as rot, as a mound, as a grease trap, as swamp matter, and so on! This is the magic of poetry taking hold in each stanza. —What would be another way that you might describe the meat entrees on your weekly plates? What labels would you assign? How would you elaborate on those labels? —Or more practically put, how would you add your own stanza or set of stanzas to this poem if it could be expanded?

**Prompt:** Write your own collection of three line poems. They don't have to be Haiku! You can play around with spacing. If you need five lines per stanza, sure, why

not. Feel free to write about any entree on your plate. If you choose the mystery meat, you may want to think of it, as Taj did, in terms of rock. Or more particularly, sedimentary rock. You could describe the entree layer by layer, with each of the layers having a different set of flavors and textures. Or you could look at it from multiple angles, as Taj did. You could even look at the grub from the perspective of an ant in the food and what he experiences. Feel free to dream away! This is Your writing.

Here is another poem by Taj. Wonderful piece in which he draws parallels, shifting from the rotten spoiled meat, to the sad conditions of the individual partaking in the food. Beautifully done. (Perhaps you have your own poem in you?)

POEM-- mushy grub

every meal  
can be gulped without chewing  
conditioning us  
to lives without a bite...  
all my wisdom, all my teeth  
yanked out for just one minute cavity easily mended  
elsewhere  
here the impetus  
for unnumbed extraction  
via rusty pliers

they seek to make us all  
mushy, greasy, nameless amalgamations of  
unseasoned starch and  
protein substitute meal  
able to be gummed  
by old and infirm alike  
or anyone who chooses do  
overcooked to enable us  
to be ground up  
without resistance  
swallowed down  
no nutrients absorbed  
shit out  
partially digested  
to be served again

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Now we will shift from looking at the "what" of prison food, to the "how" of it. Just how did the food end up like this. Who or what is responsible. Or is anyone responsible??

Prison Food Recipes

Gentlemen, the world itself is a vast kitchen, stocked with all the most savory of ingredients! With its vast array of of textures, colors, and flavors, the opportunities are endless. For everyone. Most particularly for our world traveler on the scene, the royal rat. Our rat as chef knows how to collect just the right combinations of ingredients, to satisfy the most expansive and diversified of palates. For the diner wanting to partake in the latest of cutting edge cuisine, ah, yes, the world itself might necessarily be viewed as a vast kitchen!

**Prompt:** Make your own list of things a rat may gather while on his travels through city, farm, and wilderness; sewer, pipe, and dumpster. Write a descriptive piece that has a *broad* time-line. Chronicling all of the wondrous places the rat has been to gather just the right mix of deliciously rotten, sour, sweet, and creamy-slimy-dreamy ingredients for the most and expansive and diversified of palates. This is the only way to be more conversant with others on the cutting edge of new innovations in post-modern industrial cuisine, yes?

You may want to break down the rats travels into section and category. For example, bits and pieces of things gathered along an urban block might represent a stanza on ingredients for street potato soup. Then another stanza might be stuff gathered from an eatery bathroom, just the right marinade for a juicy steak. This is just one way to structure it. Feel free to be as creative as you like! Imagination is the name of the game. If you keep it focused, break things down into chunks, like food, the writing will feel manageable.

**Prompt:** Consider the Kitchen Cauldron as a One Stop Shop for the the Royal Rat. He's going in for the dive. Write a piece about the dining and regurgitation experiences; also cauldron as virtual spa, the cleansing and exfoliation processes. Dream away! It's your poem.

Of course, you can make up your own prompts regarding a prison recipe book. For example, what about this one: "From Shovel to Cauldron". We'll be happy to get a wide array of perspectives and responses in order to make an actual recipe book, in part, we imagine, from the perspective of the world as a vast kitchen!

**Take for example**, the farm, the place where food begins. It would be interesting to have a descriptive piece portraying an animal, whether a chicken or pig or goat, as a *virtual processing food plant*. Of course, we know all prison food is manufactured and processed. What if the very first processing plant, though, is in the mouths, the throats, the intestinal tracts of the animals? That could be an interesting piece. It would also be an opportunity for you to go to the library and do some research on anatomy. How all of the various digestive tracts work. This would make your piece even more descriptive, and would lend itself to a more detailed and imaginative piece. [Gary's note-The PE nutrition packet will cover this subject, and will be mailed out in a few weeks]

**There are also** the Chronicles of the kitchen Finger, with Special Attention and time given to the distinguished travels of the Index (in some Windex at the moment?) Over the course of the day what does it pick at, pick up, pick through, before being swallowed by the soup of .....the cauldron....

Whose fingers, dear reader, would we be referring to? Well, there are the fingers of the farm hand, the factory worker at the processing plant, the truck driver carrying the processed meats and vegetables.....(where there is a rip in the plastic or paper and a hand that digs...).....The mysterious fingers the person responsible for dumping all the meats and vegetables into the famous the infamous....prison kitchen cauldron.

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...

### **Prompt**

Let's play a game of Kitchen Hide and Seek! When little attention is given to the order and structure of a kitchen, well, let there be no mistake, the ingredients will find their own places to go. Write a piece about Kitchen Hide and Seek. Where are those Mushy Corn Kernels Hiding, Now that the Can Has been Opened. Who brought them there? What about the Mystery Meat? Left Unattended, never got placed in the fridge. Where Has it gone, where is it hiding? Whoop, I thought I found it. Has it managed to slip away again?.....You can write this as a poem, or perhaps as a descriptive piece; one in which you explain how certain food items were in mislabeled cans that got placed in the most inopportune of areas; where they

became contaminated or “spiced” with all kinds of extra “ingredients”.

### **Imaginary Food Prompt**

Legend has it that there is a person behind bars who sneaks in the middle of the night to the kitchen (exactly how he is able to get a way with this, no one knows. Some claim that he makes himself invisible—quite easy for him to do since he has been treated as if he were invisible for so long). In any event, the midnight chef has a way of grabbing all of the largest bowls he can find, the bigger the better so that he can release all of his worries and frustrations and anger into those bowls, like a kind of stirring and stirring of emotion. Here is the question, though: what does all that stirring create? Some sort of invisible thing-a-maswappers? Where do they go? What do they do? Whom do they affect? What else has been created from all of that stirring?

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Now shifting to a more sober tone, regarding life behind bars.

### **Poems from the Prison Walls**

Countless untold unshared worries and fears, invisible to the ears of the outside world—often invisible to anyone and everyone other than the worrier himself—countless untold unshared worries have scurried and hurried up nearly every prison wall around the world. Way up into the corners, way up through the cracks and crevices, where they have been stored—for centuries. Yet these walls are not just made of words, they also embody the people who are part of those stories. Eyes that have seen the most wretched of things. Feet that have scurried away from the most unspeakable of occurrences; that continue to wander toward unknowable places. Write an extended poem about these walls. What do you see in them as you approach?

Where have they been, how are they shifting and changing day by day, what will become of them in the distant future?

### **The Greys**

Sometimes you may find yourself walking among the greys of prison life; the walls, the steel bars, the floors; all shades of grey varying slightly; sometimes you may find yourself walking among so many shades of grey on grey on grey on grey; they no longer seem varied but rather

monotonous; you may find yourself sinking, farther and farther, deeper and deeper, into the monotony of it all.

**Prompt** Write a poem on the monotony of prison life. The repetitions. The routines. The grey walls. The repeated lacking of things. What exactly is lacking? Where do all of these repetitions take you emotionally? How would you describe those emotions in terms of imagery? What does monotony look like, sound like, taste like? What it would feel like if you could touch it?

Similarly, you can write a storyline around the dulling of the senses. If the dulling is a gradual process, write about the critical shift where dulling becomes a kind of deadening. What do you do, what do others do, emotionally and spiritually and intellectually to resist the psychological death march? What of the individuals who do not resist?

Poem Sample:

“Sonnet” by e.e. cummings

*No sunset, but a grey, great, struggling sky  
Full of strong silence.*

Poem by Taj

*The steel rung against its steel partner all through the night,  
little exclamations of cold, uncushioned living.*

**Prompt** Write a poem or descriptive piece about the Eraser Arms of Prison Life. How does one end up completely invisible over time? Does it take several weeks? A year? What seems to be the mysterious maybe magical but not so wondrous moment of complete disappearance? How do you know? How do others know? Once you’ve decided that you’re invisible, what do you do? How does life change?

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**Prompt**

Just to lighten the air a bit, what if you were to imagine the greys of prison not as grey at all but as a magical shade of silver. (Langston Hughes writes about silver). Where would the silver transport you? What or who would be the cause of this psychological shift from grey to silvers? Perhaps a friend or loved one? What is it about their presence in your mind, that allows the landscape of grey to be transformed into silver? Describe this silvery place in terms of sight, sound, touch, taste, smell. It could very well be that there are a number of silvery places that you travel through in your mind. Describe the sensations of the journey.

**Prompt**

Sometimes we seek escape from the painful realities of life in ways that are destructive. We turn to addiction. Write a **brief** descriptive piece in which you give a portrait of yourself during a period of time in your life. What were the realities that you were escaping? Verbal abuse from others? Household memories filled with drama? Describe a particular moment in time, including the place and others who were there; describe the moment at which you first chose to explore an unhealthy escape route from your pain. What was the escape route? Drugs? Sex? A combination of both? Imagine the drugs or sex as a vehicle that is taking you to some fantastic and fantastical place. What is the vehicle? Where is it taking you? *Zoom in the lens* on a particular scene, at a particular time, to allow the writing piece to have Focus. Once you have provided a narrow focus, then you can end the piece by looking at larger patterns, the larger landscape of your addiction. —But make the bulk of your writing, the body of it, focused on just one scene. That way you can cover all of your bases within the two page limit.

**Section 3.****Light Wind and Water**

Oftentimes, the cool waters of compassion and empathy, when combined with the light of affirmation, can heal an individual in magical ways. Here is your chance to get a close-up view of of empathy and affirmation; ways in which they might be described in terms of metaphor; questions that can assist you in developing those metaphors so that they flow and allow you to relate your own story in a way that is authentic, meaningful to you. There is a lot of imagery in these descriptions. Imagery that describes interactions in relationships, and also state of mind. This is the wonder and joy of language, of metaphor. It tends to be fluid, flexible. You can wield it, like your own imagination, in countless ways. The sky is the limit.

**The Cool waters of Compassion and Empathy**

Empathy is the vehicle by which one reaches another human being at a deep level by way of thoughtful listening. A sincere listener will reach into the recesses of his imagination in order to find ways to relate with the person who is sharing, who is giving them a piece of their heart, all with the hope of healing. I'm sure all of you can think of situations in which you listened to a friend compassionately for thirty minutes, a full

hour, or even much longer. In some situations, you may have felt the task at hand pushed your limits and abilities. Listening fully was a challenge. Perhaps you were having a difficult time understanding the perspective of your friend, where he or she was coming from. Yet you had to do your very best to stretch your mind, to put yourself in your friend's shoes. You had to use your imagination. That is what empathy is all about.

**Prompt:** Think of a person, perhaps a really close personal friend, or a loved one who, demonstrated very real empathy toward you, at a particular moment in time, during a particular conversation. This friend demonstrated an empathy so pure it was as if your tears were like grey rain pouring into her/him as well. The two of you were like water on water. The kind of integrated rain that could only create a vast silver sheet. As if you were mirroring each other. But where did this mirror in the conversation take you? Perhaps it was the kind of reflecting mirror that zipped the two of you into a place of light. Where you could share freely, but in a fun space. Or maybe the mirror was more like a doorway, made like a sheath of sorts, like silver skin, that drew you into a fleshier place, or all the way into the bone. Maybe the conversation continued to deepen. Write a poem or descriptive piece that begins this way, and then it tells the story about where that mirror took you. Keep the description within a narrow time frame. Fifteen to thirty minutes. This will allow you to focus on the most crucial and transformative parts of the conversation and the relationship—and the shift in You.

**Prompt:** Or, from a slightly different angle, maybe the empathy of your friend was again, like water on water, but not in the form of rain; instead it was as if you were two lakes becoming one; there was a deepening effect. One that created a kind of flood. But it was the most joyful of floods. Imagine the sounds, the feeling of being immersed in that flood. All of the sensations. What was it like? Describe it as a joyful moment in time.

**Prompt:** Write a poem in which you describe what you Want and Need in the way of empathy. Maybe you have so much to share that you want ten close friends. Or an entire nation of people to share with! Or maybe you want empathy and care from a higher power, mixed in with the friendships. Simply write from the heart, repeating "I Want...or I Need" again and again to make your poem stick together.

**the light of affirmation.** Affirmation is the vehicle by which we make positive General Statements about other human beings. For example, “You are a kind and loving person”. That’s an affirmation that most anyone would be happy to receive. I’m sure you have been given affirmations from loved ones or friends. When they are *authentic*, when the person is particularly sincere in their observations, making it clear that they have seen with their own eyes, heard with their own ears, the kindness and generosity in you; when they do this, then can and most often do have a significant impact on a person’s state of mind and well-being.

**Prompt:** Think of a friend or family member who provided you affirmation in a way that was incredibly powerful. Think back to the specific time and specific situation in which a certain conversation occurred. What was said at the time that made you feel authentically affirmed? What was the context? Perhaps it was a situation in which you were struggling in some way, almost as if you were floating in dark water, or struggling to swim; without a clear sense of who you were or what your mission or purpose was. Then you had this conversation that you are describing and it was like light on water. You were able to see again. That is, see *yourself*. Somehow you knew that the water was taking you somewhere. Where did that conversation take you? Perhaps to land? How did you get grounded and rooted? Were you something like a tree? Or your mind was several trees all at once getting grounded? Or maybe you were something more like a bird. What was the voice like, the one whispering in your head? How did the story evolve?

**Prompt:** Here is a variation on theme. Perhaps your friend’s affirmation was helpful or transformative in a different way. Maybe you when you had your conversation with him/her you were in an o.k. place. You had some sense of who you were and your purpose, mission in life. However, that light of purpose and self-worth was a little dim. Perhaps because too many loved ones or friends had not been seeing you as you were. They were either not attentive or perceptive to your individuality, to your uniqueness. However, someone changed all of that. You had a conversation with someone and during that conversation with this special person, the light in you began to brighten. This person truly saw you as you are and that was an amazing moment. Describe what was said. Describe how you felt. You might imagine the experience as light shining on light, the lights together expanding and brightening the light of self within you. How did you feel? Taller? Stronger?

Where did you begin putting all of this brand new sense of power as you ended the conversation? How did this empowerment translate in the very moment, internally but also externally. What did you do? Describe what happened over the course of the coming weeks and months. Ever so briefly, just to convey a shift in pattern.

**Prompt:** Again, write a heartfelt piece describing what it is that you want, an “I Want” poem, as it relates to affirmation. Maybe there are parts of yourself that you want to strengthen. Making certain strengths grow even stronger. —I have written a poem about wanting to become a picture of kindness. What is a value or a strength that you want to grow? Or, perhaps what you really want is more encouragement and affirmation from others. I once had a friend who told me, “Greg, I love the way you affirm and encourage me every week; but I want you to double the amount. Two scoops of chocolate ice cream per week, not just one”. What would you ask of your closest friends and family, if you could request of them anything; in terms of encouragement and affirmation? How would you describe these wants in terms of imagery, that is, a picture in your mind that clearly portrays what you want?

What about:

**the lights possibility.** Having a sense of possibility, that there are many options one has for one’s future, is crucial to one’s wellness.

**Prompt:** Think of a friend or family member who guided you toward a sense of possibility, at a particular point in time, during a specific conversation. Maybe you were having a sense of only limited possibility at the time. It was as if you were looking up at the midnight sky, and there were only a few stars in the sky. Just a shy glimmer of hope here and there.—But then you had a conversation with a particular person. He/she said something, or a number of things that opened up your world to new ideas, new thoughts, new possibilities. Suddenly the light in your mind began to expand shining a thousand stars in the skylight of your imagination all at once. What was said in that conversation? What happened as the two of you, figuratively as you continued to explore? Maybe you began pulling down some of those stars from the skylight and putting them up a little closer to the forefront of your mind. Right there in the front yard, where you could dance with them. How do you see them now? Perhaps something bright and silver, or something golden. Perhaps something spinning in a certain direction. How would you develop the imagery here? And your own personal narrative as the conversation ended. Did your life open up into a dance for

a period of time? To a sense of play and/or ease? What happened?

### ***the wind power of goals***

With whom did you share a powerful short term goal? How did the wind of his motivating words add to your own windpower, to generate an amazing race to the finish line?

### **the blanketing light of a vision.**

Oftentimes when we have a sense of possibility, along with a current of confidence and self-efficacy, we begin to dream and to dream big.

Think back to a friend or family member with whom you shared a dream. You shared it in full during a conversation that you had. Look back to that specific conversation, along with the place and time. Perhaps you were feeling as though there was only a little wind under this dream. It needed more energy, but also more detail. As you were talking with your close friend, they were to add just the right kind of detail, in a way that reflected their sincere interest in what you were envisioning. Their words were providing a wind beneath you. They were giving your dream the kind of energy and enthusiasm it needed to grow. —As if there were a wind both above and below you! A channel. — The conversation itself was like an amazing wind funnel taking you to a brand new place in your mind. The tallest of places, like a skyscraper! You were ready to board the elevator of your highest self, to move toward your greatest potential.

**Prompt:** Imagine you are in this skyscraper of your mind. You are growing taller and taller in the light of your own vision, your dreams, for a better, brighter, fuller future. Imagine you are on the elevator and there are a number of things that fuel its ascent. Empathy. Affirmation. A Sense of Possibility. Goals. The Fuels of Light, Wind, and

Water. Which of these elements do you need the most as you are riding your way up, way beyond the heights of your own imagined potential. As you gather the fuel you need, you can stop and get off the elevator as you like. To visit and meet with certain friends. Some who you know. Some who you create. Your own imaginary support system. Along with a higher power. Perhaps you even stop on a certain floor to meet with none other than...yourself. All these folks are basically the agents of achieving your potential, they provide you with the initial fuel. Then once you're back on the elevator, you find ways to take their energy and create your own...fuel. Again, what are those fuels that you most want and need. What fuels do you clearly already have that can get this elevator going for at least a few floors? Write about this, using some of the reflections from your earlier writing to build your way into the building, as it were. By all means, have fun!

We will end with an amazing poem by our friend, Michael. He has a particularly strong relationship with God. And wrote an amazing piece that brings in All of the elements.

On some sunny days, and always on Sundays, I enjoy climbing way up the rainbow speckled trees of my mind, way up to the greatest heights in my spirit, to behold the most wonderful beautiful and awesome God. He shines his Glory with such power and grace breaking all chains of darkness in my heart, reviving my love and respect for all human beings. After a visit with God, I sometimes find myself traveling canals that bring me onto pathways of deeper reflection, following what I believe to be righteous and good.

Or, I will find myself walking through a forest by a spring, drinking from it the purest energy. My heart is filled with a loving power so great, so enveloping. It shoots and spreads beautiful colors all around the planet. It is the water-crest beam of Grace and Mercy. In the here and how. In the infinite realm of what is to come.

