

# PRISONER EXPRESS



*Jason Hawkins*

**Poetry Anthology**  
**Vol. 27**

# Note to the Reader

Dear friends,

Welcome to Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology #27! I'm Elinor and I'm a freshman at Cornell. Over the past few months, I've had the pleasure of reading all of your poems and putting together this collection, which has meant so much to me. I often find myself thinking about these poems after I go home for the day. Sometimes lines will even jump out in my head while I'm sitting in class or completing homework. I am incredibly grateful to have had the chance to read all of your works.

I also want to note that we receive hundreds of poems and unfortunately we have very limited space to print them. If your submission does not appear in this anthology, please do not be discouraged. Poetry is inherently subjective and many works that aren't printed here are scanned onto our website. If you've only submitted recently, it is also possible that your poem has moved on to the reading cycle for the next anthology.

I hope you enjoy these poems as much as I do and are able to find inspiration, joy, and solace within them.

Best wishes,  
Elinor

## Themes

Hindsight (p. 3), Life in No Man's Land (p. 5), Complex Injustice (p.12), My Pain and My Worth (p. 14), Love? (p. 19), A Leap of Faith (p. 22), Alive in Nature (p. 24), Planting Seeds (p. 25), Foresight (p. 27)



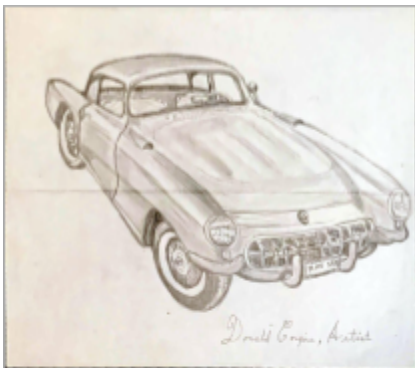
*Gary Farlow*

# Hindsight

***“To bring back the things you have lost...  
To hold someone in your arms once more”***

## **Hindsight by Mitchell Womack**

To tell him there's only  
questions at the  
bottom of the bottle, not  
answers.  
To tell him hitting the blunt will  
make  
the right thing to do more  
obscure, not clearer.  
That all those so-called  
homeboys he  
is hanging out with is what  
makes him lonely, and  
that he's gotta get out of his  
own way to find love.  
The home he's always gone  
from is  
gonna be where he wishes he  
was at one day.  
And the people he hurts the  
most is  
the people he's gonna miss the  
most.  
But he won't listen.  
He can't hear me.  
He's my past,  
Living on in my regrets.



*Donald Corpie*

## **Luminaries by David Zenquis**

There is not “meant to be,”  
We are all dreaming.  
We keep driving  
Even when our knuckles turn  
white  
And,  
Like a deer in the headlights,  
Luminaries  
Shine our despairs—  
We never wanted  
What we couldn't bring back

## **In the Labyrinth by Burl Corbett**

After wildflowering my father's  
grave  
and offering an illogical prayer  
for his agnostic soul, I shortcut  
through  
the vast, monument-free  
necropolis,  
another roadside-plucked  
bouquet in hand,  
searching for my Granny's  
hard-to-find grave.  
We Romantics loathe these dull  
graveyards  
devoid of marble angels and  
granite  
saints, from whose unfurled  
wings and upraised crosses  
one can triangulate specific  
graves.  
The towering maple that once  
shaded  
Granny's grass-shrouded,  
tarnished-brass marker

is now dead itself, its torso and  
limbs  
cremated in the caretaker's  
woodstove,  
its obituary published in  
smoke.  
I pause to get my bearings,  
realize that I'm standing on the  
grace of a former co-worker  
from my wild pipelining days.  
Richard Ponds ran a D-8 Cat  
sideboom,  
and I was his “swamper”;  
together we  
laid untold miles of natural gas  
lines,  
burying the fruits of our  
collusion  
with the bright, earth-scoured  
blade on his dozer.  
Although Dick and I weren't  
exactly “pals,”  
and never socialized off the job,  
yet I spent more time with him  
in four years  
than I spent in my entire life  
with my  
Granny, and possibly my father,  
too.  
Now, Dick lies beneath my  
discourteous  
feet, a reminder from the  
universe  
of life's fugitive transience. I  
place  
a single blossom upon his  
nameplate,  
silently curse the cruel  
Daedalus who  
designed this bland, fathomless

labyrinth  
wherein lies my Granny so still  
and cold,  
awaiting her child Theseus,  
now grown old.  
The end.

**Do It All Again by Chris Davidson**

To be able to rewind time  
would be the best power ever,  
To fix all your past mistakes  
and failures, to do it all over.  
To bring back the things you  
have lost in your past,  
To feel loved, to hold someone  
in your arms once more.  
To not watch your dreams fade  
away and crumble to dust,  
To not relive your stumbles and  
falls on an endless loop.  
To not be reminded of all the  
could haves and should haves.  
To not have to look back and  
say, "why the hell did I do that?"  
To be able to go back with all  
the knowledge you have  
obtained  
To make sure that you get  
everything right this time  
around,  
To go back and view it all from  
a different perspective.  
To be able to hit pause right  
before it all went wrong.  
To tell yourself to stop, don't do  
that at all.  
To go back and fix the things  
that shattered your world.  
To be free of all the  
self-loathing and doubts.  
To be able to see the sunrise  
from in your arms.



*Michael Thomas*

To be safe and sound, to have  
kept you beside me until the  
end.

To see that smile on your face  
and the twinkle in your eyes.  
To be able to tell all the things I  
can't anymore,  
To tell you just how very much  
you meant to me,  
To hear you say my favorite  
words "I'll always be yours,"  
To say back "Mi estes mundi"  
(you are my world).

**Just Meat by Donald Warner**

I was that man's last  
conversation  
I cannot remember his name  
Just glimpses of his face and  
body  
Memories I cannot trust  
  
My recollections are not of him  
but of me  
My surroundings, images  
meshed together  
Of then and now

The sound of

His flesh hitting the concrete  
Same as a side of beef hitting  
The slaughterhouse floor  
Trucked in from Iowa,  
Nebraska, or thereabouts

Dropped in transit  
By a temporary worker  
That did not want  
Did not ask for this

Much like the cop that cut him  
down  
No effort was made  
To honor his integrity  
Unlike the slab

That was carefully  
Hoisted and hooked  
That still had value  
I was the last conscious  
interaction

I cannot remember  
What was said  
No subject, object, verb  
None of it

What was so trite  
That occupied the time  
Interrupting what became  
inevitable  
Take me back

What did I feel  
Think of what played out  
What happened  
In that moment

# Life In No Man's Land

***"They still give me spoiled food  
Sometimes it's barbecue / Sometimes it's mildew"***

## **No Man's Land by Taj Alexander Mahon-Haft**

In the center of our tiny  
universe  
worst job in the world  
prison roundball referee  
shouted down by both sides  
threatened by fans and guards  
gotta sleep next to everyone

Around the cracked asphalt  
track we stroll  
Taj and Mikey, analyzing cloud  
forms  
that relive past and future trips  
calling each other Alex and  
Bear  
even though we know we real  
names and hopes  
in this place but not of this  
place

From the belly of a lightpole  
planted 'tween double fences  
casting midnight industrial  
shadows  
even at dawn upon everyone  
exposed is a hole worn from  
decades  
of jury-rigging and neglect

Out wafts the song of seven  
blackbirds  
a clutch larger and better fed  
behind the barbs and between  
the wires  
for even in no man's land  
the birds can land freely

Life goes on

just not as I thought  
or you planned...  
... always

## **One Leaf of Grass by Ben Wilkins**

Five is the acreage of the prison  
yard  
He surrenders to the track  
walking counterclockwise laps  
The tall grass beckons when  
wind ruffles its feathers  
Pay no mind, walk another  
reverse lap to rewind time

Infinite are the majestic  
mountains resting, peaceful  
slumber  
Redemption strangles the  
minds of imprisoned fathers  
The brisk airs contrasts the  
sun's warm glow  
One leaf whispers

I pluck a single specimen from  
the patch  
Press it between my thumbs  
and blow shrill vibrations  
The call of the wild turns  
curious heads  
One smiles recognition

Thoughts swirl like soft-serve  
ice cream  
Is life still a blessing?  
Mountains reply a firm yes  
The outdoors refresh broken  
mental spokes

I raise the leaf and sniff its



Jesse Osmun

pleasant fibers  
On impulse I munch it  
attentively  
A plain romaine salad with  
hints of earth & a note bitter  
Celery and dirt's flavor child  
born of curiosity's mirth

## **Shadow on a Window by Douglas Gordon**

Looking out the window of my  
cell  
There is nothing but whiteness  
The window is a foot wide and  
4 feet tall  
There is nothing but whiteness  
because there is a film on the  
window  
I wonder is the film to keep me  
from seeing out?  
Or to keep others from seeing  
in?  
I know it is a film because there  
is a tiny

tear at the top of the  
window  
Looking out the tear I see a  
steel mesh  
fence and razor wire  
above that  
I continue to look at the  
whiteness when  
the sun hits the window,  
now I can  
see the fence, it covers  
the window  
No, a shadow of a fence covers  
the window  
A tiny bird lands on the fence  
No, a shadow of a tiny bird  
lands on  
the shadow of the fence  
I watch the bird fly away  
I mean, the shadow of the tiny  
bird  
flies away  
Is the film on the window to  
keep me  
from looking out?  
Or to keep you from looking in?  
It doesn't matter because it is  
all just  
a shadow of freedom.

**Untitled by Colin J.**

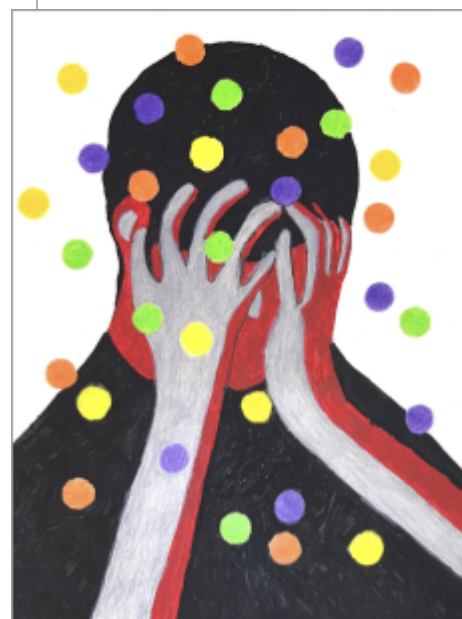
**Broughton**

Kendrick warned me...

I pulled out my best uniform,  
the brightest and sharpest  
set of oranges that tax money  
can buy  
My t-shirt is brand new,  
crispy and white like a frosted  
honeybun  
Socks and boxers come from  
the bottom

of the pile, the set I pull out  
for special occasions, a time  
like today  
Dust lingers on the black  
leather  
boots, size 15, but nobody  
really  
pay attention to my feet  
A nervous sweat bead appears  
upon  
my brow, concentrated from  
the  
aftershave of a smooth, bald  
head  
and the lines I've rehearsed a  
billion times  
I hope I don't tell the same  
stories again, but then they  
always  
save the day when an awkward  
silence becomes the elephant  
in the room  
I brush my nicotine-stained  
teeth,  
then rub cheap cocoa butter  
lotion on  
my bronze hue, praying for a  
familiar  
smell to rub off on me as we  
embrace  
I dress slowly and distract  
myself  
as each minute passes  
I hear the C.O. call a name  
that  
isn't mine  
"You have a visit!"  
Maybe I'll be next  
Then he yells for another guy  
that isn't me  
Thirty minutes pass, then an  
hour  
I go to the C.O.'s desk to make

sure he hasn't skipped me  
"Haven't had a call for you yet,"  
he says with a hint of concern  
Another hour fades away, I pray  
nothing bad has happened  
I stand by the C.O.'s desk to be  
sure I'm up next, but I wait in  
silence and rehearse my lines  
again  
More time slips away, along  
with  
the C.O.'s bologna and cheese  
sandwich  
and potato chips washed down  
with  
a diet soda  
I go to my cell and take off my  
clothes, putting everything in  
its  
proper place  
No visit for me today, so I  
zone out by placing my earbuds  
in my ears  
The irony of my let down  
blares through the speakers:  
"We say we gone visit /  
we lying bout coming!"



Paul Bero

**In Stereo by Taj Alexander Mahon-Haft**

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

**Dear Neighbor by Keith D. Pertusio**

Thank you for sharing your  
music through the vent.  
I probably wouldn't know much  
about the genre of rap  
but your thumping tutelage is  
making me tense.  
I'm grateful you're sparing me  
all the expense

of buying music I like, which  
you would call crap,  
since you blast yours next door  
without charging a cent.

Thank you for ensuring I don't  
become slothful  
by cranking the knob just as I'm  
starting my nap  
And when I feel proud of my  
mental health progress  
the incessant tones tell me that  
it can take far less  
to push me over the edge by  
making me snap  
for which your "Diamonds in  
My Ears" song is especially  
thoughtful.

Thank you for letting the  
universe revolve around you.  
It needs someone on which it  
can be set.  
If the staff truly wanted to  
prepare you for society  
They'd order you to play your  
racket more quietly  
Your volume is stressing all the  
guards and get  
they say not a word and let you  
continue

I write this to the din  
of your thumping bass  
which makes my  
cabinet hum in the  
vibration  
Earplugs now in, I  
write with my mind  
finally free  
so you turn up your  
noise without  
thinking of me.

At least I can rest in the thought  
that this nation  
will parole you years before  
they will consider my case.

**The Answers to All My Prayers by Claude Kelley Kirk**

We're sorry, all gods are busy at  
the moment.  
Please try your prayer again  
later.

Your prayer is very important  
to god.  
Please remain faithful, your  
prayer will be answered  
in the order it was received.

Your prayer is number  
27,789,647,351 in queue  
Please remain in prayer, God  
will be with you shortly.

God is experiencing unusually  
high prayer volume.  
Please leave a prayer at the  
tone, God will get back  
with you as soon as possible.

We're sorry, the prayer mailbox  
is full.  
Please try your prayer again  
later.

The god you are trying to reach  
is not taking prayers  
at this time.  
Please pray back at another  
time.

We're sorry, the prayer you've  
prayed has been discontinued.



Akeem Page-Jones

Please check your premise and try your prayer again.

### **Prison Shoes by Lance**

**Porter**

May I empty my head upon your bed

Please do not fret there's no goop or gore no juices or slime no brain nor mind of any kind

No, those things have long withered away

Some 30 years and a day I have bells, and whistles, and something with bristles I have voices, circles, curly Q's and squiggles and oh so many sorts of

crazy laughter and giggles See, no blood or liquids to sodden your sheets

What do you think, is my head quite neat?

How do I think, you ask.

Oh dear no, there's none of that,

for thinking in here has no use, frankly it tends to confuse and makes one gloomy and blue, this

is the best advice I can give to you, now that you've put on your prison shoes.

### **Letter to F. the Night of the Execution by Eric Bederson**

here i am editing my poetry, thinking poetically, lyrically, reading e. e. cummings, learning a whole new language.

all i want to do is roll up a piece of paper for you

execute a good rolling of paper.

you should see me in my cell, in my daydream looking

lost, looking like "what am I

going to do next with all

this space, this time, the

freshness, the new, the floor,

the desk, the door, the sink,

what am i going to do with

the all mine of it?"

you should see me looking lost,

looking unproductive, just

breathing, just moving through

the space, the all mine

of it i go to the window, i go to

the door more often

now to hear the hearing of the

nothing outside

within the building, to see for

seeing all of nothing

moving within the outside of my side.

the speaker plays more than i

can say, why when

one's alone the speaker plays?

to play and not to read,

why not to draw? the speaker

on to play away with no

one to listen, really listen, just

to drift to sleep.

not to interfere for who but i

not you to interfere when

i or you do hear not my noise

the speaker plays.

not my noise the speaker plays my song.

the chair is it not to drag to desk side to gently lay

legs to floor to write, not to

scrape the floor, to unwax,

to clamp down, to whack, to

startle. no chair whack

startle clamp now passed a

week. no stack to see,

no window gazing over one's

head. no toilet flush for not

my pee by me to flush

repeatedly. no sink on running

for no reason, running for why?

not me to drink having

drank already, having water

running for no reason not me.

polished sink i'm having clean

of drops of water running free.

you should see me having no

conversation. what a sight to

see. no need to agree to roll

one's eyes, to exasperate, to

think "why me," to pretend to

read to avoid so much more

than one's needs in attention,

just me to sing aloud or not,

to jump up and down or not, to

do or not, out loud or not all

day or not, to lounge a lot.

would you believe not a

breakfast tray missed? not a

meal not enjoyed at a desk with

space and time to

mess and clean or leave and

pile up, with bags of

bread on bunks and magazines

all strewn and

unfinished letters uncollected

before lights out

or now lights on, or sleep or

not, no schedule to





*Kenneth Zamarron*

keep, not missing a single breakfast tray.  
oh, if you could see me now, i occupy territory like a mouse on Christmas Eve. i tiptoe to and fro so as not to upset the delicate balance that is my peace and quiet. i can hear Mac in the wall writing at his desk the need to yell out the door (strangely) does not occur to me. i had no laundry. i have no trash.  
strangely. i thought for the briefest moment this afternoon i didn't know what to do and it scared me that i was just maybe feeling lonely until i laughed (was it out loud) and the thought went through the vent. i thought for the briefest moment that i was bored. bored with the tv, with the radio, with the reading of the Huck Finn,

with the New Yorker, and the option A, B, C, until i laughed. until i woke. it was only a dream. oh, if you could see me now, dreaming. i drift on a pillow of cloud i drift to sleep but startle awake. why does living alone make one prone to startle awake? it's just the beanhole, it's just cells unlocking or neighbors talking or c.o.'s walking and i'm just listening through my dreams. it's just the earbuds not in. it's just the not drowning out of the superfluous background noise of another day in prison. so i startle awake. funny how the habits one thinks are needs change so quickly with circumstance. adaptability i guess. compromise most likely. nonetheless, alone is my preference. certainly gives Marion a gold star in the mind. hell we're walking distance to Illonois. funny how i think now of getting robbed when before was more likely. no mistakin' my property i guess. all my responsibility, more likely.

### **Insanity by Lance Porter**

My mind is spinning  
as the confusion rebounds  
about my head  
I'm not sure whether  
down is up, and up down,

or whether inside's out, and outside in.

I have chewed my nails to jagged stumps  
stinging and bleeding oh so much,  
especially when the soap touches  
I have ringing in my ears, oh dear,  
from where?  
I see no phone, no alarm, no bells of  
any kind  
my, oh my, I must be losing my mind  
This is not good  
How long have I been in this box  
I can see no sun, no sky, no blue  
nothing to gauge what's true  
Hello, I call out loud, Hello to you  
echoes back to me  
oh dear, oh my, will someone help me  
not a singing bird or a tree  
just a box and me.

### **Goodbye Music by Jonathan C. Holeman**

I pretend that I don't care  
But soon, I won't hear music  
How do I say goodbye  
To what kept me alive  
For the last several years  
I really didn't know what  
If anything I could do  
The hearing aides buzz  
Swarm of bees in my ear  
It doesn't bother me  
That all the people's voices

Sound like Charlie Brown's  
teacher  
But without the soothing music  
What I am, what I can do  
Read the television  
Closed captions of fake news  
I'll adjust, I always do  
Like the nine quiet years  
They kept me in a dungeon  
Underneath the stairs  
There wasn't any music then  
Just me and my insect friends  
Now I sit and play guitar  
In a cell on a maximum  
Security prison yard  
Scribbling out the songs  
Written in this broken heart  
That no one will ever hear  
It makes me wonder sometimes  
If anyone ever read  
The best poem ever written  
Or the greatest novel  
The most touching screenplay  
Or were all those also written  
By someone somewhere in a  
cell  
Never to be published  
As if they were just words  
Random, haphazard on a page  
Lined paper to be thrown out  
When the prisoner dies  
For now, I play my songs  
That no one will ever hear  
Then I'll say goodbye to music  
And throw it all away  
Just like a piece of garbage  
Just like me

### **Untitled by Perry Ransom**

For over 13 years I've been  
behind this door...  
forgetting, being forgotten,  
heartbroken,

sad, angry, bleeding, crying,  
bones broken,  
jumped on, deprived,  
frustrated, hungry,  
dehydrated, afraid, worried,  
cold, sick,  
hot, ashy, writing, drawing,  
watching,  
listening, cleaning, organizing,  
analyzing,  
reflecting, remembering,  
imagining,  
meditating, sober, getting high,  
programming  
bucking, maced, restrained,  
overwhelmed,  
cut, beaten, tricked, learning,  
destroying, connecting,  
building, disconnecting,  
missing out, stuck, mad,  
growing, lying, sleep, restless,  
awaken,  
dirty, worried, cautious,  
aggressive,  
hurt, broken, bipolar,  
disappointed,  
chasing, determined,  
physically training,  
focused, fighting, eating,  
stressed,  
praying, wishing, hoping,  
losing saving,  
spending, investing, and so  
much more,  
all behind this door.  
you'll have to stay tuned to see  
what I do  
when I no longer am...

### **Count My Bones by Arnold Barnes III**

Lockdown  
Week 1, day 1

1 corn dog and a handful of  
raisins  
Damn, and we ain't been to  
store in weeks  
6 prunes and some mystery  
meat  
Least they ain't lock us down in  
the heat  
But they used to and they still  
do  
Still give me spoiled food  
Sometimes it's barbecue  
Sometimes it's mildew

Week 2, day 14  
14 days and only 5 showers  
Yet I bird bath, just without hot  
water  
Though their rules state I'm  
supposed to  
Have hot water in my cell  
And they're always talking  
about the rules  
And rarely do they follow the  
rules  
But they're always talking about  
the rules  
And I find my face turning blue  
Not cause I'm holding my  
breath  
But because I'm suffocating  
from all the B.S.  
1 egg sandwich for breakfast,  
that's it

Week 3, day 16  
Getting easier to keep the body  
clean  
Everyone marching to showers  
real slow  
Looking lean  
What's in the johnny inmate  
1 PB and J, 1 boiled egg

Oh, and a handful of frosted flakes  
15 hours later, what's in the johnny inmate  
1 hot dog, and a handful of french fries  
Eat it real slow garcon, drink 2 cups of water  
Lie down and be very, very still

Week 4, what day I don't know  
All I know is that I don't get mail no mo  
My T-Jones don't even hit me  
My bros don't even hit me  
Hell my clothes don't even fit me  
I used to weigh 185 pounds  
Now I look like a greyhound  
I look in the mirror  
And I can count all my bones  
What's in the johnny inmate  
1 PB and J and a burrito

Week something, day something  
I feel so weak  
What are these people doing to me  
An unusual form of cruelty  
Short-term memory loss, anxiety and confusion  
Personality disorder  
Schizophrenic, bipolar  
All this in a 6 by 9  
Where I feel like I'm losing my mind  
Why won't they feed me  
Not like the taxpayers' money won't cover the cost  
Least they could do is cut the cell lights off  
This sleep deprivation

And calorie restriction  
And truth be told I ain't even tripping  
Cause all this is just making me stronger  
Mentally and physically I'm stronger  
God body  
Spiritually I'm stronger  
And when lockdown was over and the doors rolled  
I emerged from the door like a light

Same light that was divided from darkness  
Physique, like a Michael Angelo chiseled from stone  
But only... cause I count my bones



David Stanton

# Complex Injustice

## *“Who should you fear?”*

### **The System by Chiquita Fizer**

The system wants to keep you locked up, not caring that it's just another set up. Another inmate locked up, another dollar, another mother left childless.

The system wants to keep you locked up not just physically but mentally, and let's not forget empty.

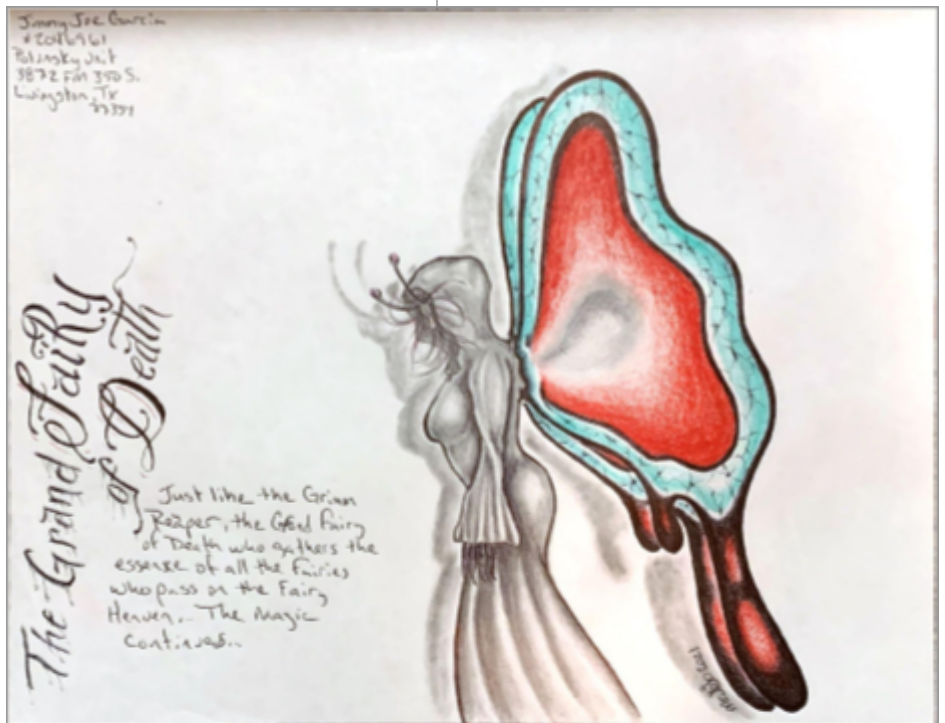
The system don't want to see you win, it's been rigged since the beginning. So when you walk out these gates don't let the system keep you as a victim. It's up to you to make the decision, not to become just another statistic.

### **Stand Up and Be A Man by Greg Fonseca**

He could not buy a beer  
Nor a pack of cigarettes  
Nor could he see the naked ladies  
Dance  
“You're too young,” they said  
“Grow up and be a man”  
At 15-years old he was given a

Life sentence by these hypocrites  
They treated him like a man before  
Court proceedings he did not even understand and they called these proceedings “fair”? And now he is a man?  
“Enlighten me,” he said, “But what is your rationale?” Your system is broken  
Through and through  
And apparently you cannot see that the ones that you hurt are you and me  
History will show how wrong you were

To take a kid and send him to a place that you yourself would loathe to be  
And when the shoe is on the other foot  
We all see what happens  
What happened to “being a man?”  
The world sees you sniveling and begging for mercy (Mercy you never showed to anyone)  
And when you are led away in handcuffs  
With tears and snot running down your face  
Remember what you told the 15-year-old kid:  
“Stand up and be a man”



Jimmy Joe Garcia

### **A Forced Journey by Robert Viveiros Jr.**

When I look in the mirror and  
see my own eyes  
I guess I should be happy I'm  
still alive  
I'm sitting here in this cell  
because the jury were blind  
covered with a face mask I  
couldn't see the obvious signs  
I was told "don't worry at the  
end you will shine"  
I felt both hopeful and hopeless  
at the same time  
I was forced to go on this  
journey too  
you have to understand what it  
is I'm going through  
lies, deceit, speculation and the  
truth was not sought

now this cell I'm sitting in is  
like dynamite in a box  
the prosecutors are celebrating  
their success  
meanwhile I struggle to fight  
under this distress  
believing in our constitution  
has made me a fool  
I thought when it comes to "we  
the people" justice for all  
means me too  
with no money for a lawyer I  
feel like I'm fighting this alone  
that's why I spent today writing  
this poem

### **Who Should You Fear? by Marlon Olivera**

Who should you fear? The man  
accused of a  
crime or the judge who gives  
him  
decades of time?  
Who should you  
fear? The man  
who walks  
around with a  
weapon just for  
protection  
or the prosecutor  
with a sharp  
tongue trying  
to get him the  
maximum  
sentence?  
Who should you  
fear? The man  
who just  
wants to be free or  
the corrupted  
system

who wants to keep him under  
lock and key?  
Who should you fear? The man  
who foolishly  
and regretfully made some  
mistakes or the  
harsh and unfair laws that say  
not to  
give him a second chance,  
instead make  
him property of the state?  
Who should you fear?

### **It Works by Arturo Vazquez**

There's hitting rock bottom  
and then there's hitting the  
bottom of a rock  
while being ground down  
buried alive under the pressure  
above you  
Layers and layers of foundation  
Built atop you as you suffocate  
All the while as you beg for  
help  
People scoff  
or better yet laugh  
while they tell you to keep your  
head up  
Buried below and forgotten to  
time  
Systems of houses and roads  
are built atop you  
and yet, even then  
The people who stomp when  
you  
Expect a miracle of your own  
making  
and when it finally happens  
and you dig your way past all  
the barriers  
Everyone rejoices  
Because their system worked



*Edward Rodriguez*

# My Pain and My Worth

***“Has my own value always been so easily judged?  
Or have I kept my true value hidden?”***

## **Addiction by Tika English**

Trial by fire  
Burning rain  
I'm flooded with pleasure  
And running from pain  
The stagnant waiting  
The endless years  
Of crying and trying  
And falling in tears  
To depths that are endless  
Far reaching and wide  
I'll never climb out  
I'm buried alive  
Sweating and kicking and  
shaking  
The fear  
Runs out of my mouth  
And screams in my ear  
That I'll always be empty  
I'll never find life  
There's fighting and searching  
and tearing  
Inside  
The comfortable lies  
That sneakily hide  
The truth to myself  
That I'm dying alive

## **Familiar Stranger by Lawrence Smith**

Familiar hands accompanied  
by a stranger's motive to hover  
like an eerie shadow of  
darkness holding my innocence  
while escorting my body to a  
cold shallow grave, dug by  
clammy deceitful hands.  
Alerted senses are like a  
vibrating spider's web.  
Unwanted tickles and lingering

pats masked in playful rubs  
while spirits of fear chills my  
bones, my flesh vanishes under  
your touch.

You took from me liberties that  
weren't yours to take. You  
boldly stole pieces of me that  
can't be replaced. Subtle  
strokes to my ego leave me  
back open to your attacks. Trust  
becomes a suspicious embrace.  
You have the audacity to say,  
“you love me” while making  
me, forcing me to hide and  
trust your lies. You destroyed  
my mind with dark thoughts  
and you smother my light while  
stealing so easily my childhood  
while injecting my life with  
promiscuity.

What you stole was precious to  
me. It meant a great deal to my  
existence, so easily you erase a  
replaceable value that once set  
me apart.

How am I supposed to hold my  
head up high with tainted  
morals? Your hands hold my  
flesh hostage as your thoughts  
rape me, feeling no need to ask  
permission. You leave no way  
of bargaining, insecurity,  
uncertainty becomes my  
secrets, whispers my prayers  
while isolation becomes my  
forever nightmare. You create a  
reality of selfishness that holds  
my soul in a barless prison and  
your touch becomes the  
sinister guard. You lessen my

soul and make my desires toxic  
all for the sake of your own  
manipulating hunger and  
seductive greed.

Your touch drains my life of its  
freedom and I am a chalk  
outline of my previous self all  
because of a familiar stranger.

## **To My Father by Ted Cole**

You remember that morning  
When you were 12 or 13?  
You know, that morning when  
you woke  
With the certain knowledge  
that  
that was the day? That it was  
time to make...  
“The decision”?

How long did you consider,  
all the many pros and cons.  
the advantage of one choice  
Versus the delight of the other?  
Did you contemplate the many  
ways  
either choice would impact  
your young and vulnerable life?

Did you consider what your  
older friends had chosen?  
Maybe you gave careful thought  
to grandpa's plans for your  
future,  
or grandma's religious  
leanings?  
Or perhaps it was the social  
consequences that most  
influenced you—  
what your peers and classmates

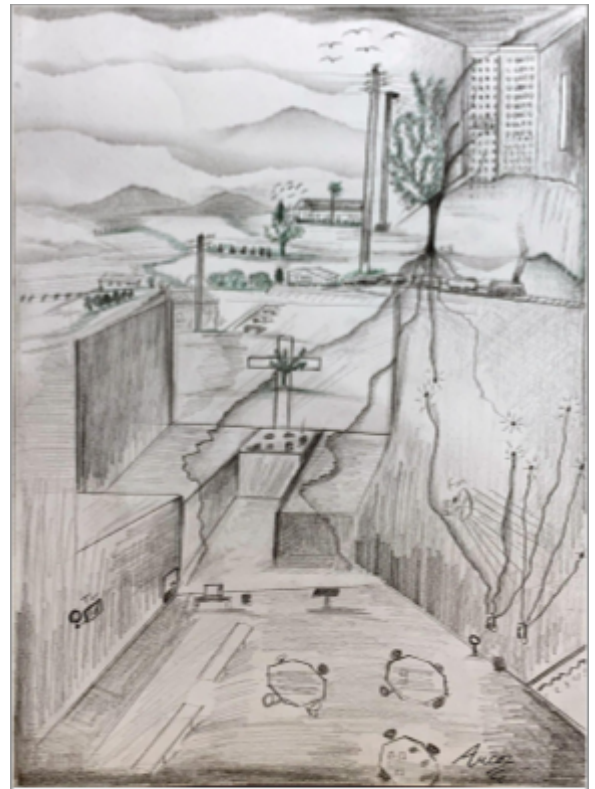
would think.  
I'm just curious, but I really  
want to know  
how you made your choice:  
boys or girls, boys or girls, boys  
or...  
and you chose to prefer girls!  
Right? You did make a  
conscious choice, didn't you?  
No? You didn't choose to be  
"straight"?!

Then what the hell makes you  
think  
that I made the choice to be a  
queer?  
How can I make you  
understand  
I simply followed my heart. Just  
like you.

### **The Train Ride by Colin J. Broughton**

All aboard! The boom of the  
conductor's voice  
sounded like raspy thunder,  
almost commanding  
me to drop my daydreams and  
move, move, move.  
Grabbing a window seat, I took  
a final glance  
at the station. I would never  
return here again,  
even though it was a nurturing  
home for nine months.  
I took in new sights and foreign  
sounds,  
smelled freshly brewed coffee  
and wondered  
what the other children would  
be like  
at my new school. I remember  
the line leader.

She smiled at me every  
time we locked eyes.  
Her baby teeth shined  
as if they knew they  
would soon be replaced.  
My teachers welcomed  
me too with warm  
smiles of their own,  
but I was still uneasy.  
The new boy:  
I was called names, I  
was stared at,  
laughed at, and even  
called stinky by one girl.  
As time passed I had a  
few fights, kissed a  
couple girls, and  
endured my fair share of  
solitude in timeout.  
Kindergarten was tough.  
Children mean. The  
train whizzed by endless  
pine trees, hills, and farmland,  
then finally stopped.  
When I got off I left a suitcase  
filled with  
Thundercats, Dr. Suess books,  
and my innocence.  
I left a bag full of shame from  
untold family  
secrets under my clean  
underwear. The new  
Luggage I took contained fear,  
uncertainty,  
puberty, and pride. It was 1997:  
I got  
stoned for the first time ever. It  
was juvenile.  
I choked. I coughed. Smoke  
rolled from  
my nostrils as I tried to look  
cool. It was  
the peak of my destruction.



*Miguel Arcos*

The portal to  
a life of crime. I smoked on  
weekends.  
I drank malt liquor with the big  
boys.  
I was introduced to B&E. My  
life moved  
with the pace of the stray  
bullets that took  
innocent lives in the city.  
Unexpected.  
Sneaky. Life changing. The  
night life had  
a cast of shady characters, and I  
was  
the breakout star. When the  
train stopped  
I left behind opportunities,  
good advice,  
sound judgment, and the real  
me,  
only to leave with confusion,

tunnel vision,  
and a drug addiction. Stepping  
on the  
platform I was told to take off  
my clothes.  
The other young black men  
stood in front of me  
naked. We squeezed pink soap  
into our hands  
and jumped in the shower, only  
to be kicked out  
in a minute or two, covered in  
residue.  
I was issued a jumpsuit that  
countless men  
had worn. I was a son. A  
brother. A nephew.  
A grandson. I turned into  
#337151. It was 2009.  
October first. The beginning of  
a new normal.

### **I'm Not Mad at God by Richard Beebe**

I am such a contradiction  
I feel informed and rational,  
I don't get angry over nothing,  
But my mother asked me,  
"Why are you so mad at God?"  
And I got mad for real-  
But mad like a broken heart.  
I could never be angry at  
The glass of a window  
Because I can see outside,  
Or for the warmth in my room,  
Anymore than I could hate  
The sun for my shadow,  
Yet how can I explain  
Hate not for the player  
But hate for the game  
To one whose integrity  
Has been stolen by the fear  
Of death and growing old?

How do I watch the mother  
Who taught me critical thought  
Call exploitation comfort  
And beloved holy names?

### **I'm a River by Claude Kelley Kirk**

V. I:  
I was born of the rain, on a  
colder autumn day  
The only son of consequence,  
and a bitter fall from grace  
I grew up like the rapids,  
runnin' wild through the hills  
And when the rue of winter  
comes, well I'll be runnin' still

Chorus:  
'cause I'm a river, without a  
riverbed  
Most times I just wander  
around, nowhere to lay my  
head  
If I only had a valley, that I  
could call my own  
But I guess these muddy waters  
must roll  
Must roll - on and on

V. II:  
One time I nearly dried up, and  
offered you my hand  
When you swam into my drift,  
wrote your name in my sand  
So unafraid to drown, you drew  
me with every breath  
You waded in my shallows, and  
fathomed every depth

V. III:  
But you knew the rains would  
come, and someday I would  
flood  
'cause the waters of this river,

run faster than our blood  
The only reason for a river, is to  
forever run  
And who am I to question what  
fate, has gone and done

### **Blue Pens and Old Trucks by Brandon Rushing**

Just a blue pen.  
Rolling ball tip, spring loaded,  
gel grip, with clip.  
A kind of bullet shaped clear  
tube  
that reveals the spring and  
cartridge inside.  
I can monitor how little ink is  
left.  
Do a little math; comparing it  
with what I've already done.  
Figure up maybe how much  
more I can do.

I set a value on it like this.  
By what the pen has to offer  
still.  
By the amount of work that  
might be accomplished  
with whatever ink remains.

This is something my  
stepfather beat into me,  
this value system.  
He would size everything up  
this way.  
His truck ticked over a hundred  
grand on the odometer.  
One day he just pulls over on  
the hot shoulder  
of Highway 190 West, and just  
sits there,  
an internal audit raging  
through his mind.  
The truck lost.



He pulled back onto the highway and turned at the first light. Not taking me to school where I belonged, but instead, to the car dealership.

He didn't haggle. He didn't prevaricate or waste time. The old truck was gone. The miles of memories of flying down red dirt roads, cruising across state to a Nationals Track meet, racing to the hospital when Chris fell through our bedroom window and had to have 172 stitches across his back. That all left with that truck.

I knew in that moment that value was important. If you had no value you were expendable; a tool to be traded in when the new was gone. It pissed me off to learn this lesson, this truth about our world. And even though I sometimes fight that truth, I rarely win. Though sometimes I do.

The blue pen runs out of ink. I knew it would. I click the button, screw apart the tube, and change out the cartridge. It takes a little work.

It consumes a little time. In the end though, the pen is just like it was before. Valuable.

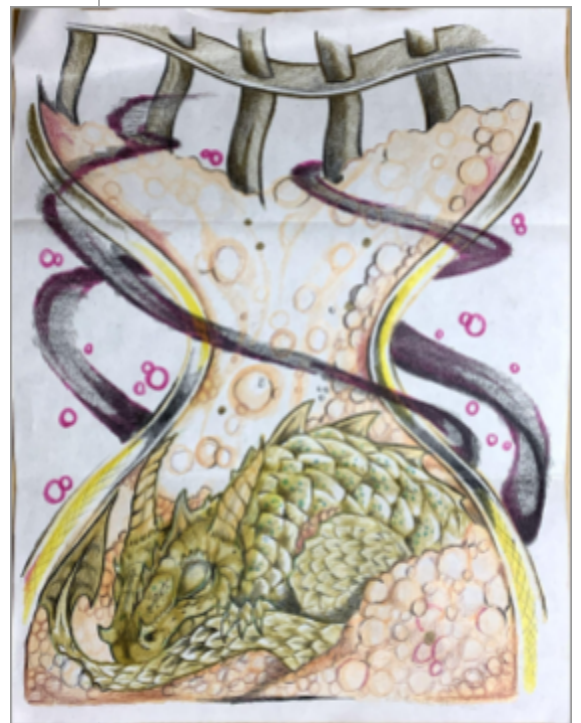
I know my stepfather could have changed the motor and transmission in that old truck. He could have put in the time and the work. And the old truck would have been like new again. I understand that. Which means that he chose to let go of that truck. The value of all those miles and memories was just too low. He'd rather let them go, let us go, than go through the effort it would take to keep us.

As I sit here, writing this with my blue pen, whilst serving a life sentence in prison, I can't help but wonder. Has my own value always been so easily judged? Or have I kept my true value hidden? Am I the blue pen - or the old truck?

### **Shook Up by Jason Powell**

My mom and Uncle Joe went to prison. My family would fight over my

little brother and sister I was almost as strong As J.P. Aunt Judy made BBQ Chicken. Jordan and I cried in the morning together. Judy left the kids with me alone by day. By hand salmon fishing the feather river. Like J.P. I kept my Promise. I found my niche. I lost my niche. I was extra Rebellious. Ma and Uncle Joe come home to show us I never forgot. You don't like me hurting inside. I hurt people. My Aunt Judy said goodbye. Through glass I watch the chaplain walk away. I cry. I hurt. I mule kick the door



*John Sigalas*

till every window  
in the jail  
shook

**Night Demons! By Rashuan Black**

When my eyes shut as I lay  
exposed.  
Assailed by virulent thoughts.  
My mind explodes!  
I scream!  
Good times fly by in the blink  
of an eye.  
I'm watching my soul.  
I'm homesick, bad dreams,  
internal conflict.  
My worst days are mixed with  
death and violence.  
Past events affect my moral  
compass.  
I dare seek peace through sleep  
and silence.

My nightmares!  
I'm lost and don't care.  
Ambiguous thoughts, my path  
is unclear.  
I look in the mirror and see  
everything I fear.  
My past, my future, my tears.  
Sleepless nights stained pillows  
and a silent cry.  
Night terrors!  
I know what pain is, mental  
anguish that seems endless.  
My eyes open, I try to focus,  
Damn I only been asleep a few  
minutes!!

**I, Destroyer by Bryan Petit**

I long to be the planet Earth  
Consistent, stable, and strong  
Instead I'm hostile, not fit for  
life  
Everything I do is wrong



*Kristopher Storey*

I am the blazing yellow  
sun  
Nurturing those under  
my glare  
Then destroying all I'm  
close to  
With harmful solar flares

I am a stalwart and  
unwavering  
Heavy atmosphere  
Protecting what I hold  
inside by scorching any  
who dare come near

I am the moon with a  
smiling face  
On one of my duplicitous  
sides

The other shrouded in mystery  
Where all of my secrets reside  
I am an interstellar asteroid  
Strange and sinister and long  
Drifting under your vigilant eye  
In a place I do not belong

I am a comet, brilliant and  
beautiful  
Cold as ice to the core  
Briefly brightening the night  
for some  
Only to disappear once more

I am a black hole, eraser of  
light  
Ominous and dark and unseen  
Distorting, devouring  
everything I love  
Until there's no one left but me

I am manning a distant station  
The lonely astronaut  
Banished to the outer reaches  
of space  
Nothing but an afterthought

I am the universe, full of  
potential  
Vast and brimming with stars  
Yet barely able to sustain life  
I'm too tumultuous, silent, and  
harsh  
But I long to be the planet,  
Earth  
So dependable, resilient, and  
tough  
Instead I'm destined to always  
fail  
I am never quite enough

# Love?

## *“My love, my first / I will never forget”*

### **At a Relic Shop by David Zenquis**

I bought an illusion of love,  
It pumps no blood,  
For it's not a beating heart,  
Just a heart-shaped apparatus  
at fault—  
A makebelieve  
Makeshift chemistry  
Equipment, emitting  
pretentious bliss

### **Secretly by Shanon Williams**

I keep my head held low as I  
walk on by  
I don't try to say hello. I don't  
look her in the eye  
I won't even slow down, I just  
keep on going  
So she can pretend like she  
don't know me  
Because when she's with her  
friends she don't want them to  
see  
That she's been hanging around  
with somebody like me  
She's got a look to keep and I  
don't fit that mold  
My image contrary to the one  
that she upholds  
I don't rock the latest fashions  
or talk the coolest lingo  
The only things we have in  
common are things only we  
know

And no one else can know it, I  
have to play it right  
If I ever want to see her we can  
never come to light

So secretly is how we always  
meet  
I would love her openly but she  
wants to be discreet  
The skeleton in her closet  
always at her beck and call  
I take a little of her, it beats  
nothing at all

It doesn't matter if I need her if  
she's not by herself  
Convenience only matters my  
love sits on a shelf  
Until the day is over and she's  
all alone  
We meet up after hours for a  
walk in the park  
The stars twinkle in our eyes  
making sparks in the dark  
And she might love me too with  
a funny way of showing  
Then the birds start  
chirping, the sun is on  
the rise  
We see each other clear,  
she looks me deep into  
my eyes  
And says, “if you want to  
keep me you have to let  
me go  
So, if you see me in the  
daytime...” I already  
know  
I'll keep my head held  
low as I walk on by  
I won't try to say hello, I  
won't look you in the eye  
I won't even slow down,  
I'll just keep on going  
So you can pretend like  
you don't know me

So secretly is how we always  
meet  
I would love her openly but she  
wants to be discreet  
I'm the skeleton in her closet  
always at her beck and call  
I take a little of her instead of  
nothing at all

### **Lack by Carnell Wingield Jr**

Everything I lack makes me  
appreciate what I have.  
I would love you down,  
you would drown between the  
sheets,  
make eye contact but cannot  
speak,  
I would make it hard to speak  
to me.  
You will blush when I smile,



Wade Garrett

you will emulate my style,  
we will reflect each other,  
I will drive you wild.  
You will be my sweet tea in the  
summer,  
Hot tea in the winter,  
Just don't spill the tea, while  
you are my dinner.  
Love over love when I am your  
lover,  
Never an ending,  
Only a turning over.  
All in all, top to bottom, over  
and over,  
Always, forever, never a part  
time lover.

**Poetry for Hot Dogs by  
James W. B. Jackson**

I used to lie about the quality  
Relationships I had  
My favorite lie is about a  
ladyfriend and I camping out  
Writing poetry from the  
entryway of separate tents  
Sharing them, and then  
chucking them into the fire  
To fuel heat for the hot dogs  
It's a Don Henley thing, "When  
we're hungry,  
Love will keep us alive"  
But in this hollow reality it was  
a lie  
Grievous in my now need for  
that brand of Love  
I stopped telling that lie long  
ago  
As it revealed a desperation far  
deeper than what  
Fulfilled desire could fill  
Emptiness like a chasm  
If there's a why question  
somewhere

Then it remains  
unanswered, and  
whatever deep  
Seated issues unresolved.  
So now I just fall in Love  
with anything. Names,  
Faces, ideas (usually my  
own), dreams (almost  
always  
My own),  
By the time something  
real comes along I'm  
gonna  
Be spent.  
Ha, ha, haaa....  
Something real... Shit!....  
What's that?

I block off desire now  
with my ire in the  
Fight for freedom.  
Now I need something to eat,  
paper to write on, and  
Stamps and envelopes to mail  
real shit to reality  
From the address of a  
nightmare more than I need  
Phone kisses, partially nude  
pictures, or I Love You  
On pages best used to chuck in  
to roast  
Hot dogs in the campfire  
between our tents

**Claressa by Kareem Carter**

Ask how I'm doing,  
And I'll lie.  
Ain't no sunshine,  
I'm not fine.  
They stomped my heart,  
To make wine.  
How do you cope,  
When you realize,  
You've lost the love of a



Jonathan Holeman

lifetime?  
Should you stay here,  
Or should you just die?  
Every day I awake,  
To a torturous death.  
I have no air,  
So I pant for breath.  
Just look in my eyes,  
You'll see a million tears.  
I've lost Claressa,  
That was my only fear.  
The only one in this world,  
Who really cared.  
She was my titan, my  
tranquility,  
Now I'm really scared.  
In a world of forgiveness,  
Some forgiven twice,  
How could one  
misunderstanding,  
Cost me my life?  
You're the dream that never  
dies,  
The reason I survive,

The raven in my eyes,  
The sun that brightened my  
sky.  
Ress, you are my everything,  
Unequivocally, you are the best.  
I've swallowed the pill of losing  
you,  
But I will never allow it to  
digest.

### **First Love by Al Newberry**

My love,  
My first,  
I could never forget.

Your lovely body,  
Your lovely face.  
The soft caress,  
The tender embrace.

Both of us  
Too young,  
Too naive  
To know the import.  
Your smooth, fair skin,  
Your deep blue eyes,  
Your lips on mine  
To mesmerize.

So many years have passed,  
Still you I think of.  
Wherever you are,  
I wish you love.

My love, my first,  
I will never forget.

### **Sweet Love by Mandilo**

#### **Ruffin**

I'd rather love you  
Than hurt you  
Because loving you is what I'd  
rather do

So no, I'm not going to with you  
  
I know you've been hurt  
But that was him and not me  
And I see you for the beauty  
you are  
What he was way to blind to see

I know you want to be loved,  
Appreciated, and adored  
And all that he could not give  
you  
I will give you that, plus much  
more

So please, I beg you  
To give us a chance to be  
That song of Sweet Love  
That is meant to be sung for  
both you and me

### **Two Tears by Richard Smith**

It happened on a starry night  
The moon was new or out of  
sight  
I looked and listened all around  
And all was silent, not a sound  
A smell of Jasmine on the wind  
I grab the hand of my girlfriend  
I kiss her lips and bend a knee  
To ask her, "will you marry  
me?"  
Her smile is glowing with her  
eyes  
And very quickly, "Yes," she  
cries  
A tear cascades down her cheek  
I try to stand my knees gone  
weak  
This is the best I've ever been  
Her love is what I yearned to  
win  
Because we ought to celebrate

I run to the store, she says she'll  
wait  
Some sparkling cider and the  
ice  
Along with fruit, that should be  
nice  
I'll tell you where this tale is  
set:  
The public garden where we  
met  
I hurry back, the party's on  
The fountain stands alone, she's  
gone  
I worry she has fled, she's not,  
She moved atop a grassy plot  
My lover's body's on the ground  
Two bullet holes that I have  
found  
One in the head and one below  
The gorgeous eyes have lost  
their glow  
Her pretty lips no longer smile  
Her fragrance lingers for a  
while  
And all her hair is tossed and  
wild  
Her belly swollen with my child  
The second shot has killed my  
son  
I'm broken, demon spawn have  
won  
I'm sorry Jasmine, sorry kid  
For what evil humans do and  
did  
A tear collected in my eye  
And that is all, that's how I cry  
I hate to hate, but I'm irate  
What is a life for? Is this fate?  
And should I run, or kill, or  
yell,  
Or end my life, escape this hell?

# A Leap of Faith

*"If I could, I surely would / put the world on my back"*

## Leap of Faith by Lance

### Porter

I took her hand  
and there we stood  
upon the ledge  
She asked if I was  
ready.  
I told her I was afraid  
Her reply was "it's okay  
to be afraid, it only means  
there is uncertainty before you"  
"This is where true faith is  
born."  
I took a moment to steady  
my nerves. I looked at  
her and said, "I was ready."  
We leapt together. She  
disappeared and I crashed  
upon the rocks and debris  
broken bones and a bloody  
me washed gradually out  
to sea.

## The Volunteer by Bradley Martin

The call comes in the middle of  
the night  
Via a radio signal faster than  
the speed of light  
To the little black box posted  
like a sentry at my bedside  
Monitor III it's labeled in white  
And it orders me to charge like  
a medieval knight  
The tones go off screaming in  
my ear  
As I awake wide eyed and alert  
with fear  
Adrenaline instantly begins to  
course through my veins

My feet hit the floor as I  
frantically get dressed  
What is it this time?  
A smoky fire or a mangled and  
twisted car wreck  
An elderly man with a heart  
attack or best case scenario  
simply a case of acid reflex  
I glance at the clock its quarter  
till four  
As I find that ever elusive sock  
in the bottom of my dresser  
drawer  
I whisper three little words in  
my wife and child's ear  
The three little words that we  
all hold so dear  
It is not clear if these words  
might be my last  
If they are, may they forever  
hold fast.  
I grab my keys and head for the  
door  
My truck starts with a mighty  
roar  
Frost covered glass  
Makes it impossible to drive  
real fast  
I reach the station  
Proud to serve my nation  
I'm the first to arrive  
So I turn on the lights and open  
the doors  
The smell of diesel drifts  
through the air as I start the  
engine  
I love the smell of diesel in the  
morning  
It sends my cold body a  
warning  
The chief arrives next

Followed by a few others  
Scrambling to put on all their  
heavy gear  
We all pile in the truck as I opt  
for the rear  
The final moment arrives  
where the big red truck is put  
into drive  
The blue and red lights come  
on as we pull across the pad  
The siren screams as we go  
careening into the night  
Our emergency lights  
Reflecting off the neighboring  
sights.  
We arrive at the scene  
The chaos ensues  
And adrenaline goes into  
overdrive  
Risking our lives pushing our  
deepest worries and fears aside  
As we battle the odds  
Sometimes it's the heat and the  
smoke  
Blacker than coal and so thick it  
chokes  
Not to mention the heat from  
the searing flame  
Sometimes we wrestle against  
mangled steel  
Remnants of a car mangled like  
a crushed can of coke  
Occupants trapped, barely alive  
Floorboards puddled deep with  
crimson ooze  
O, God I hope they survive  
We call for the jaws and pry off  
the door  
Like the incredible hulk  
As we wrestle the victim out of  
the mangled bulk

We load them onto the  
stretcher  
Just as the wrecker pulls onto  
the scene  
Safely in the back of the  
ambulance our patient now  
resides  
As it instantly takes off with a  
screech of the si-reen

**My First Poem by Bernardo Rodriguez**

Has a butterfly landed on your  
hand,  
I've never written a poem  
before,  
So what's the word for first  
time?  
Have I just un-virginized myself  
by poem  
It can't be plural, poems, it's  
one.  
This poem as a butterfly, fly,  
fly.

**Brave! By Kareem Carter**

The windchill factor  
When it's twenty below  
The shivering cold,  
The arctic snow.  
Withstanding those conditions,  
No house, no cave.  
To some, that may serve  
As the definition of brave.  
To be hurt, I mean pierced  
To the core of your soul.  
To feel a crease in your chest  
As if your heart unfolds  
To then stand before others,  
And let that story be told  
With the intentions of saving  
many,

That's the definition of bold!  
You share your story,  
And I'll share mine.  
And in succession with  
humankind  
The world will align.  
Despite our many differences,  
We all feel pain  
And, in those moments of  
despair,  
We're all one and the same.  
We deal with hurt differently,  
But that's the beauty of life.  
Individuality, free-will,  
free-choice, free-voice  
Strength is measured  
By our will to survive  
The measures we take  
En route to stay alive.  
A hero is a woman,  
Who's been through it all  
And uses her darkest moments  
To cushion one's fall.  
I understand your situation,  
I feel your pain.

I empathize, I sympathize,  
I'll umbrella your rain.  
I will see you through,  
Navigate exponential terrain.  
I will ease your load,  
Alleviate the masses of strain.  
If I could, I surely would,  
Put the world on my back.  
And I'd carry you to the top,  
And we'd never look back.  
Since I can't, I'll lift your spirits,  
With nouns and verbs.  
Motivate and empower you,  
With pounds of words.  
I'll stand up for certain things,  
And for those things I'll die.  
And, before I explode again,  
I'll break down and cry.  
Please understand what I'm  
about to say:  
Those enslaved were the  
ultimate definition of  
Brave!



Ariel Martinez

# Alive in Nature

*“Remember in spring, the ice always cracks”*

## **Rochester Dreams by Glenn Thomas**

Oh how I remember, the way it  
once used to be  
Those carefree days of youth, I  
still vividly see.  
Along the flowery banks of the  
Genesee.  
I would sit, I would walk,  
sometimes I'd even run,  
But mostly I'd just bask in the  
warmth of the sun.  
In youth, my salad days had  
scarcely begun.

With the long snowy winters  
now over and done,  
I frolicked and played, how I  
had so much fun,  
Often with friends, sometimes  
just an audience of one.  
Among the colorful blossoms,  
the sun always beams,  
Its golden rays shine on forever,  
or so it seems,  
When I lay me down to sleep,  
in my Rochester dreams.

Yes, I fondly recall all the  
sights, all the sounds,  
When I explored that far  
northern town in great leaps  
and bounds,  
From its bustling core to its  
quiet burbs, I sauntered all  
'rounds,  
From a busy downtown, where  
the church bells tunc,  
To Cranberry Pond, where the  
birds all foraged and sung,  
I climbed oaks and maples,

whereupon thick limbs I hung.

On the waves I would surf, the  
blissful heights I could reach,  
But alas it turned cold on the  
shores of Ontario Beach.  
Sadly, winter was nigh—  
“Summer, please stay,” I'd  
beseech,  
But no one can alter the  
seasons God deems,  
Remember in spring, the ice  
always cracks at its seams,  
And summer lives on forever,  
in my Rochester dreams.

## **Haiku by Arabella Fairchild**

White moon shines brightly  
behind ominous black clouds  
picture perfect night

White blossoms on trees  
signal the coming of spring  
love waits in shadows

Raindrops beating time  
music of a thunderstorm  
pools of water dance

## **I Am Alive by Gary Farlow**

I Am  
evening shadows on the grass  
dew on a morning glory  
crust on a snowfall  
the red sun of a harvest dusk  
rustle of Autumn leaves  
crunch of a first frost  
glow of a full moon on a lake  
hazy heat of a Carolina August  
wind preceding a gentle rain  
fog on a late summer morning

I Am  
Alive.

## **Untitled by AD8824<sup>1</sup>**

I watch the clouds with  
envy of their peace,  
how sweet the travel of  
skies –

So gracefully they move  
with the wind,  
as if submitting their  
will and I wonder,

if I too inside this cage  
can give in to the ways of  
nature,

Conscious of obstructions I  
face both in and out,  
and so it seems nature  
works against me,  
But a folly to believe for  
the wise one knows,  
Nothing is ever as it  
seems...



Miguel Arcos

<sup>1</sup> This author prefers to use their  
prisoner ID for publications



# Planting Seeds

***“We are seeds hidden in darkness***

***We are surrounded by richness / potential”***

## **Reaping by Lawrence Smith**

Lying on a prison bed,  
Fateful vision fills my head:  
Man knelt down  
On fallow ground  
Tiny seeds in hand.

Solemnly he plants the earth,  
Prays to God with all he’s worth  
Sows for years  
Waters with tears  
Humble garden sprouts.

Smile dares show upon his  
face,  
At new life in this small space.  
Upon the blooms  
Great shadow looms  
Blotting out all light.

Tree colossus! Blackened  
Tower!  
Grown of past sings that he  
gave power.  
Fills the skies  
His garden dies  
Broken man in dust.

Scene fades away, and I return  
To this cold cell my choices  
earned  
Claw and scrape  
Still no escape  
What you sow you reap.

## **Going Home by Bob H. Cook**

With winter slowly fading from  
the mountains of my  
childhood,  
The river’s calling to me and

the fish are going wild.  
The fields of lespedeza wave to  
me from the meadow  
And welcome home forever its  
lost and wandering child.  
Oh Lord, it feels like heaven as  
my memories awaken  
I toss aside my sorrow and the  
years I spent alone.  
We have no way of knowing  
How the seeds we plant are  
growing,  
But a home-bound whistle’s  
blowing,  
And I’m glad I’m going home.

So long now, I’ve imagined the  
family round the table,  
That non-essential chatter my  
heart so longs to hear.  
The laughter of the children,  
the tender hugs and kisses,  
To know the joy of finding what  
I’ve searched for all these years.  
Some things live on forever like  
Mama’s biscuits,  
Though hands and feet grow  
feeble and strength is all but  
gone.  
Life’s river keeps on flowing,  
And the hands of time are  
showing,

But I feel a south wind blowing,  
And I’m glad I’m going home.

## **Buried Words by Devante Thomas**

It was just a matter of time  
Being born from dirt

Living through filth and grime  
Causing my bloodline to hurt  
Flushed away into oblivion  
“never given time to grow”  
To exist, to manifest  
Just a wasted young seed, not  
planted with the rest  
Lost among disease and  
sickness  
Pills and bed rest, suffering  
through weakness  
Now we pray to someone or  
Jesus  
God, Allah, Muhammad, which  
prophet?  
What profit do I get from  
selling my soul?  
No loyalty or love stuffed into  
the empty hole  
Of my heart, what heart do I  
got?  
One that’s dark and ready to  
consume  
Anybody that’s ready for  
perpetual doom  
That’s too easy, too grisly, too  
evil  
Got to dig my way out of this  
devil  
Corpse; six feet by six feet, six  
weeks  
To eat me, rats and maggots  
Take those loafers off and  
reveal my feet  
Cufflink prints put on by those  
dragnets  
Imagine it, to die with no  
purpose  
Like a baby born with no  
heartbeat

“But remember you said you  
were sorry?”  
Yes, probably, but during this  
life there’s no mercy  
I’m cursed, see! Chained  
forever  
Even before birth - can’t wait to  
sever  
That rot from my mind  
Because only hate is what got  
me in a mental bind

**Bioluminescence by Randy  
Carter**

we the wretched receive  
no respite  
we resolve living forever  
in revolt some revolution yet  
we wither daily and b  
y generations rather than  
bloom a new creation  
folded in frustration  
hard  
cold  
  
i’m studying mechanics so i can  
know how things work so i can  
build something  
and destroy something  
i’m studying explosives and  
foundations and structures i’m  
studying engineering so i can  
know how things stand  
so i can bring them down  
so i can make them fall  
so i’m studying  
demolition and making  
plans  
i’m studying plants and how  
they begin in darkness unseen  
and some are known to burst  
through cement but really  
they just found a way through

the abstraction in the concrete  
the substance used to  
lay foundations  
hard  
cold  
but not impenetrable b  
y beauty formerly concealed in  
dirt which some call soil  
rich  
dark and filled with nutrients  
mainly those needed for plant  
life  
(without which we’d all die)  
nitrogen potassium  
phosphorus (NPK) ingredients  
(listed on the labels of  
fertilizers) used to bake bombs  
which break foundations &  
bring down structures  
(we’re all made of the same  
stuff)  
i’m studying seeds  
and soil  
and fertilizer  
and mechanics  
and engineering  
  
because we the wretched  
remain  
concealed until  
we realize we’re rich and  
dark  
surrounded by everything we  
need  
to break through foundations  
to BOOM  
so i’m studying horticulture  
and photosynthesis because we  
don’t need to receive  
anything we don’t need a  
respite yes we have been  
surrounded by death which  
precedes

decomposition which deposits  
what life is composed of  
(we’re all made of the same  
stuff!)  
back into the soil which makes  
it rich in nutrients  
we are seeds hidden in  
darkness  
we are surrounded by richness  
potential  
concealed beneath foundations  
which are  
hard  
cold  
so i’m also studying warmth  
which is found in we  
in closeness  
  
(some organisms that grow in  
darkness make their own light  
which is called  
bioluminescence  
recently scientists  
have discovered this  
phenomenon in humans)  
  
i’m studying we the wretched in  
closeness in darkness  
surrounded by death how we  
are rich and how we make our  
light and how we will break  
through foundations and  
destroy structures  
by becoming gardens wild and  
untended  
blossoms and trees  
tangled together  
vines and weeds  
rooted in richness  
from death making  
life  
light  
BOOM

# Foresight

***"I'll get my chance / and when I do!***

***I refuse to do what's been - and being - done to me"***

## **Ahead to the End by Melissa Germain-Lark**

Looking ahead at a daunting scene  
While coping with captivity.  
Trying to envision my American dream  
While surrounded by depravity.  
Hoursdaysweeksmontsweeksd  
ayshours  
The years endured without punctuation.  
Despair and its stalking companion depression  
Are taking a toll, killing my soul.  
The loneliness only another reason  
To just let go of this endless season.  
Wanting relief, a reprieve from this pain  
I can't handle much more  
I'm Going Insane!

## **Will There Be Anything Left by Robert Thompson**

They say the waiting is the hardest part,  
Not knowing for how long or where I'll be.  
I feel like each day takes another piece of my heart.  
Being stuck behind a locked door without a key.  
Will there be anything left?  
  
Will I ever see my dog,  
grandparents, mom, or dad?  
What will be left in the town I

know?  
Knowing that I will never have anything that I had.  
I wish I had a crystal ball to give me a clue.  
Will there be anything left?  
  
Will it be five, ten, fifteen, or more?  
Each day I lose a part of my soul.  
Opening an internal wound that stays sore.  
All the fallen tears could fill a bowl.  
Will there be anything left?  
  
I think about the day when I get to walk free.  
I can go anywhere and do what I want to do.  
Will there be any family or friends, or will it just be me?  
If I pick up the phone to make a call, who will it go to?  
Will there be anything left?

## **She's Dying, and It's Killing Me by Alan Piwowar**

I want to scream out, but they'll Come  
My twin sister is dying  
I wish she was lying  
I am a perfect match  
"For what?" you ask  
  
"Stop crying," she tells me over the phone,  
laying in a hospital bed now for eight months

without a place to call home  
  
Covid did it! That dirty prick!  
Added to her diabetes and CHF,  
it all equals death  
I used to beg her, plead with her,  
Don't you see you can fix this?  
Lose weight, eat better, feel great...

I was talking to a wall  
A big brick wall  
Cinderblock  
Hollow on the inside  
like these ones I'm trapped behind  
Where I'm dying - just to give her a kidney; left or right?  
Either side!  
  
Pray they say -  
let go and let God.  
Let him do what?  
He's not Santa!  
Take my kidney to save her life!

Oh, I can't?  
Because I'm in here?  
Cause I'm a pozzed up queer?  
Would it show I'm too human?  
I just want to  
Scream!

But all I can do is dream -  
  
Of the day I will wake up,  
take a different path,  
avoid the drugs,  
finish class, do the math,

save a life – hers?  
Maybe mine, too.

### **Self Care by Rolf Rathmann**

At peace am I  
amongst destruction  
not with; in spite  
of my soul; not dead  
merely stilled, determined  
to breathe  
for yet another flight  
frightening  
quivering  
confused  
in my plight  
of unknowing  
wherein lies joyfulness  
an end has yet to be  
scribed  
through choices alone I  
make  
though oft yearned  
and aided by foolishness  
my closing act  
holds promise  
solitary  
singularly present  
a drop in a moment  
answers will be revealed,  
A purposeful,  
Beautiful,  
Life.

### **My Chance Will Come by**

**Reginald J.**

### **Holland-Houston III**

When you hate yourself,  
How can you love someone  
else?  
Is it even possible to care for  
someone  
When you constantly salsa with

death?  
When you look in the mirror,  
you see failur e  
How can you motivate someone  
When you're not motivated  
yourself?  
Is life even worth living  
anymore?  
Fuck up, after fuck up, after  
fuck up.  
Right when you think you're on  
the right path,  
Doing the right thing,  
You eventually find out - you  
weren't.  
Everything you did was for  
naught.  
Growing up never knew deep  
inside  
You could succeed.  
Constantly told you'll be  
nothing but a  
Dead beat.  
Always told you'll  
never amount to  
anything.  
At a young age had to  
get up, go out, and  
FIGHT!  
Knocked out, dropped,  
stomped.  
Dopefeened, cut,  
jumped.  
Gutter Guy dreaming  
of being a Benz Baby.  
Frugal Fellow  
anticipating being a  
Billionaire Baller.  
Soon enough I'll get  
my chance  
And when I do!  
I refuse to do what's  
been - and being -

Done to me.  
I refuse to ride onto a high  
horse  
And talk down to - or about -  
someone.  
Give me a chance, all I need is a  
chance  
And I can guarantee I won't  
fumble.  
I refuse to become this low in  
life again.  
Just give me a chance,  
I promise you won't regret it.  
My time will come, my chance  
is nearing,  
Humble I am now, and humble  
when I'm winning.  
A cry for help,  
Is so humiliating,  
But my chance will come...  
I can feel it ☒



Jeremy Brown