

Prisoner Express

Poetry Anthology Volume 33



Dear Readers,

Welcome! My name is Pranavi, and I'm the editor for the 33rd Poetry Anthology. This is my second time putting together a publication for the Prisoner Express program, and I am so grateful to have been able to contribute to such a meaningful project. It was incredibly rewarding to read so many poignant poems; as such, it was very challenging to choose from so many pieces. Thank you for sharing your words. Thank you for these stories. Even if it wasn't possible to publish every submission, it means a lot that you chose to entrust me with your words. Your voice is a powerful tool, and I hope you choose to continue speaking your truth. Please continue sharing your work—the world is starving for poetry.

Volume 33 includes an electric variety of pieces, encompassing a wide selection of topics. From religious discoveries to family tributes to lamentations on love to treatises on social justice, every poem was a window into a life. I began thinking about how all of us lead vastly different lives but share certain commonalities: heartbreak, addiction, isolation, and bursts of pure, unadulterated joy. There's something about outsourcing these heavy, complicated feelings to paper and pen. Writing is catharsis, but more than that, it is liberation. It allows us to name the unnamed. It allows us to shed light on uncomfortable subjects. It allows us to not only educate but to uplift. Amid war, political upheaval, and divisiveness, poetry is a unifying force. It has the power to bring people together.

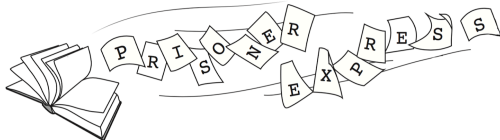
Artistic expression has never been more important.

The 33rd Poetry Anthology features more than sixty original poems alongside original artworks from both old and new PE contributors. We are so thankful to everybody who submitted. Special thanks to Gary and Jen for all of their hard work in keeping the library up and running. Warmest congratulations to all those selected to be a part of this body of work. It's truly been an honor.

Sincerely,

Pranavi

Durland Alternatives Library
The Home of Prisoner Express
130 Anabel Taylor Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853
(607) 255-6486
<https://alternativeslibrary.org>



CORRECTION: The poem "So Far from the Sun" in Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 32 was written by **T. N. Brown**, not Tom. The Prisoner Express Editorial Team sincerely apologizes for this error.

Seasons Change

by Lance Ellis Porter

From the roadside,
the early morning sun
sets the foliage afire
in a chaos of colors.

Tolling in the distance,
the service bell rings.
Sunday morning
prayers are set to
begin.

In the fields,
the golden brown
grass dances in the
wind.

As the mallard ducks
quack with delight
during their late
autumn swim.

Way up high in the oaks
the squirrels jump
as they gather nuts
limb to limb.

Soon it will be winter—
the cold season begins.

My Tree

by James Prichard

You are my favorite tree,
Halfway up the hill, just past the stream.
Protecting
Those smaller trees you tower over.
We have been in each other's
Lives for many seasons.
We have watched each other grow.
We share in each other's
Pains.
I see your scars,
The lightning strike that hit you.
A century before I was born.
It gives me hope for my
Healing.
From my own lightning strikes.
I look at you with
Envy.
All the lives you have seen,
The Natives that used to rule the land.
Wagon trains heading to California
Hoping
To strike it rich.
Bullets from the North and South
Passing by.

How many others from where
I stand have made you their
Favorite tree?
The stories you could tell
From your Earthy breath.
You are a haven, confidant,
And focal point for my
Soul.
I come to you in
Loss
Uncertainty, joy, and confusion.
Looking at you through teary eyes,
To embrace your strong silent
Comfort.
You are my
Solace.
The truth is, I may as well be
Blind,
And not see you at all.
The eternal razor wire
Keeps us a million miles apart.
What I fear the most, see you or not,
Is that we may never be on the same
Side.

Headspace

by Lance Ellis Porter

Following thoughts through
the rivers of my mind
as the astral planes come aglow
in their dazzling diamond light
and the moon beams full in its
burnt orange radiance.
The grasses whisper upon the
winds and the trees sway
in the silent melody.
My heart beats and breathes
conflict through my peace
and security, combined to exist.
For these be the moments to
cherish such living expression
as this.

The Gift of Sleep

by Daniel M. Warby

As the Sun goes down
And the Moon comes out to play
Stars greet the night sky.

The cool breeze air does blow
Through the sweet-scented pine trees—
A relaxing night.

I lay down to sleep
And I thank my God above
For this gift to me.

Untitled

by Lance Ellis Porter

Under the canopy,
my eye
traces the branches,
fingers reaching
up and towards
the blues.
The dappling rays of
sunshine twinkle
like diamonds
as they filter through
the riot of fall colored leaves.
As I lie stretched
upon the earth,
my contentment
occasionally drawn
away by the sight
of a butterfly
fluttering to and fro,
the warmth of the late
autumn sun reminds
me of how it felt inside
when my mother would
run her fingers through
my hair as a kid.
Those moment of
intimacy, where I
could feel the bond
between us,
no more than
with this thought.

Strange Vegetation

(Beyond the Journey's End)

by Andrew White

Inspired by Albert Camus' book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Strange vegetation—
Mysterious fruit grows from floating bushes.
How did I reach this alien demesne? When
the journey reaches beyond its end, a
foreign habitat will ascend.
Old rules will no longer apply.
And logic will become a lie.
What is left but to observe?
Mindfully survey the landscape
for signs of a new protocol,
and accept what life has become.

Virginia is for Lovers

by David McQuaid

The lily of the valley is growing with poison ivy;
streaming magenta darkness, dripping
down the vine;
my little Apple of Sodom, how does your garden
grow?

Faith, my friend, is believing without seeing;
the ghosts on the stereo, with haunting
amber sound;
my little Apple of Sodom, how does your garden
grow?

Are there flowers in your attic, sobbing sorrow
tears;
skeletons in the closet, stricken with gray
scale fear;
my little Apple of Sodom, how does your garden
grow?

If I am the Gardener and you are my Flower;
flowing magenta darkness;
then She was never the lily of the valley.

The lily of the valley is growing with poison
sumac;
bleeding magenta darkness, falling down
the vine;

my little Apple of Sodom, how did our garden reach the Shore?

Hope, my friend, is one letter away from cope;
devouring the freshest fruit, with the sweetest lies.
my little Apple of Sodom, how did our garden reach the Shore?

A Death's-head hawk moth is fluttering in my light;
dancing December colors, with May desire and delight;
my little Apple of Sodom, how did our garden reach the Shore?

If I am the Gardener, and you are my Flower;
flowing magenta darkness;
then She was never the lily of the valley.

Mutual Restitution

by Shaun Blake

We wait alone, unseen, unwanted, unfelt.
Impatient, we bide within a stifling snare.
And you, who watches us fall without a care,
thought you had played no part in what was dealt.
So you turned your back and through the crowd,
you melt.
Because your life seems full and never bare.
When the call to serve was sent, you didn't dare.
You had no thought that there all day we dwelt,
hoping the one would come that could be true.
Out of the vast cruel world to help us through.
The brooding shade of shame into the light
of patience, forgiveness, and righteousness.
Ready to sparkle new without duress—
step forth, take one's hand, lead us through to light.

The Way We Praise God

by Margaret Barker

We yell and clap when we listen to rap but
sit
on our hands when we pray.

Some people need to get out of that
groove. That's
not what the Bible tells us to do or say.

It says to "make a joyful noise and raise
our
hands up to Heaven." That will light our souls on
fire with the Holy Ghost!

Not staring at the floor, then saying
"Amen." It will get
you no closer to God, Our Maker, if you just pray
at the most.

You hear that? It's the angels singing and
waiting for
you to respond with a song of your own.

Dance, sing, and shout to the Lord—you
will not feel alone.

You will be amazed at how many will join
in.

Don't be quiet. We are all full of sin.
Get moving, warm those hands, feet, and
mouth.

Then, get your groove up and shout.
So cover yourself with the blood of the
savior
and move to the beat of the Lord with our heart
and soul.

Pray with warmth, not silence and
coldness.

That's the way the Bible tells us to praise
God.

Don't stand in the corner and hide.
Be the loudest so God can hear.
Thank the Lord and receive it with good
cheer.

The Key

by Rev. Mitchell Shaffer

One day I walked along a stream—or was it night and just another dream?

I really didn't know for sure but as I looked around, I saw that I was walking on clouds. My feet? They weren't on the ground.

I guess you can imagine that this gave me quite a scare?

Being by myself alone and walking in mid-air.
Oh no, I cried. What's happening to me? I'm not sure, am I going crazy?

Then, all of a sudden, an overwhelming presence of Love came over me, and I knew I wasn't alone anymore. And from out of the blue, a voice said,
Hey you, step in, and please close the door.

The voice I heard came out of a great white light out of which flew a beautiful bird. The bird I identified was a lovely white dove and what made him different from most doves and so unique, is that the voice I was hearing came out of his beak.

The words that he spoke were engraved in my head. Believe me or not, friends, here's what he said:

I am the Lord, God!
The God of Abraham
The God of Isaac
and the God of Jacob
I am the Light and the Life
I am the Resurrection
I am Love.

And when I knew that he was through, I asked: *Lord, could it really be true? Am I here and speaking with you?*
This time, a voice came from further above and was filled with compassion and unconditional Love.
The words God spoke I say unto thee as he spoke through the beak of the dove.
Yes, my son, you've found the key, and the key has always been Love.

Alone

by Shawn Morris

Alone:

A place that seems safest as ugly truths unfold

A place to hold my hurt and anger, locked away, untold

A place I seem to be headed when all is said and done

A place where there will be no help or comfort from anyone

A place that pulls at me as my heart weeps

A place that seems to call for me eternally.

Alone:

The place where I know I need to be

The place where I know no lies will be told to me

The place where my heart is free from pain

The place where my emotions are not played with like it's a game.

Alone:

The word that describes where you are without friends.

The word that describes how my days will end.

Alone:

The life I must live to keep what's left of my broken heart safe.

Alone.

Promise Not to Cry

by Jeremy Mount

Let's talk about a love story, but you must
promise not to cry.
Because we both know love is a crazy thing,
Like that perfect wine you work so hard to find,
Or that favorite movie with a happily-ever-after
ending.

For him, love took a back seat to never
being sure.

She always knew, so she waited for him to
fall in love
with her.

They joked together about future plans.
Visited crazy places like the Leaning Tower of Pisa
and the Badlands.
She got him backstage passes to all his favorite
bands.
He took her to all the very best Manhattan hot
dog stands.

But love, you know, is never what it seems.
And she always felt like things were fraying at the
seams.
The heart is not a trivial thing; it should never be
abused.
So one day, when she learned that she was sick,
and she gave him the news,
He stood the test of love and what he would
make of it.
And she was depending on him to not just walk
away and quit.

You could say he got scared or consternated—he
didn't understand.
Truth is, at love's hardest, he just couldn't be a
man.
This woman that loved him so, she passed away
alone.
A picture of him was placed on her coffin lid.
And you can cry if you want to...

Because I did.

Where?

by Dustin Miller

Where do demons go to weep,
and who allows their ilk to hide
within the constellations where
stars, once bright, have gone to die?

And who apportions mercy there
to all the burning hearts that swell
beyond the reach of kindness,
bound behind the gates of Hell?

And where does such a monster go
to pay remorse and to amend
the suffering their actions sow?

...asking for a friend.

Beyond the Wire

by Gary Farlow

I can plant kisses upon your face,
my whispers of love in the wind.
It lets me travel to any place,
if only I imagine or pretend.

As I begin to concentrate,
I set my spirit free.
Within loving meditation,
you and I can simply be.

As I stand lost in your arms,
I find some needed peace.
Feeling love in your smile,
all my fears cease.

Beyond the wire can take me
to any place I please.
As I just close my eyes,
think of you . . . and just leave.

Three Stops in Life

by Sensei Pitt

First Stop:

Runaway from a group home.
Castaway, into this house I'm thrown.
Left the little I owned behind,
Even a few folks who were kind.
Went off the rails, stole a car, got sent to jail.
Left behind my girl,
just to enter hell in this world.

Second Stop:

After 4 ½ years locked up,
Providence gave me a chance.
Split second decision.
Changed my life's course.
Commutation of sentence,
Governor's blessing, instant release.
Left behind all my fellow delinquents.
Released at 18 with a criminal record.
Socially retarded, unprepared for freedom.

Third Stop:

Geographical cure never works.
That's been my curse.
Tried Alaska, cold turkey.
Caught a new case.
Traded out my turn keys,
because someone saw my face.
Left a good woman
and my favorite dog.
Caught a life sentence.
My mind in a fog,
Free rent, food, and clothes.
Buddhist prisoners I call my bros.
One life traded for another,
someone's father, uncle, or brother.
A bar fight and a drunken rage
ends with life, locked in a cage.

Disappointment, I

by Terry Olney

I am disappointed with my stupidity.
You would think that age would have cured it.

When I was young, I wanted to be older.
To be independent and in control.
Yet in all these years, I've gone nowhere.
Nowhere from my regulated youth.

How many years since that child dreamed
Of the greatest things he would find
At the tops of the mountains he would climb.

Never thinking, never imagining
The disappointments, the nightmares
Waiting for him on the other side.

Old age has gotten me nowhere.
Nowhere but in trouble.
And closer to death.
Still trying to find myself.
Finding myself, thinking about "it."

And I think that "it"— Death—
Will probably be a disappointment to the old man.
Just as being a grown up
Turned out to be to the boy.

Addiction

by Larry W. LaFleur

The bottle sings to me.
The line calls my name:
 we can make it better;
 we can ease your pain;
 we can quiet the voices;
 with us, life is guaranteed to never be the
same.
They are liars.
They only kill and maim.
They only bring guilt and shame.
I know better...
and still they call my name.

“Time”

by Zachary J. Brubaker

No matter what it takes,
I’m determined to do better.
I may bend but I won’t break.
Going to get my life together.

It is definitely long overdue.
It’s time for me to change my ways.
Time to face the truth.
No more excuses to be made.

Been full of guilt and lots of shame.
I get down and depressed,
But I have no one else to blame.
For my life being such a mess.

I know there are brighter days,
If I change my way of thinking,
Get out of this haze,
Quit using drugs and drinking.

It’s time for me to change.
I can no longer stay the same.

Origami

by Darren Butler

I keep waiting for the pain to get better.
When my paper heart leaves the shredder.
The ribbons of myself all but killing me.

I keep hoping I’ll be allowed to fly.
When I’m folded into airplanes,
Only to be thrown into the rain.
Knowing I’ll never reach the sky.

I keep falling for the rope.
When it’s the only way to cope.
Even though it could never set me free.

I keep staring at the creases.
When I’m left out of the dance.
Now I’m praying for a chance.
To see where this leads.

When the Ether Grows

by Dustin Miller

- I. Thank you
for the weather and the wine,
and for each storied season,
fallen fallow
to mark our irrevocable traverse.
- II. Take what nourishment you can
from what passes between us,
lest mystery intervene,
leaving you confounded.
- III. I will eat from the crown
of your gentle brow,
every kind thought passing
upward between your starry eyes.
- IV. And when the ether grows
fine enough that I can take you in,
we will dance beneath death’s eaves,
impervious to the pull of its silent tide.

The Year of One More

by Michael Bush

It is the year of one more.
Not the last, the one before.
One more Christmas.
One more New Year.
One more birthday, once it arrives.
One more winter.
One more spring.
One more orbit to survive.
One more.
Just one more.

Then comes the year of the last.
Not yet the end, but coming fast.
The last Christmas.
The last New Year.
The last birthday, once it arrives.
The last winter.
The last spring.
The last orbit to survive.
The last
at last.

Go home.

Cigarette Window

by Zachary Hayden

Late night fog and rain on
the other side of a cigarette
window, barred like
everything else here.

The double fence hazy, like the
edge of the world seen
from our ship sailing
through broken shoals of
time.

A crew captive, mutinous,
driven mad from finding
no enemy but ourselves,
nothing to fight, save the
unrelenting insanity of the
years stretched before us in
their cruel snarling ranks.

Looking out my cigarette
window glass at the fog
and rain...curious, searching
the boundary for a
promised land beyond my
sense.

A world fading fast from
us to memory as a fallen
leaf bleached by the sun
drifting, yet never to catch
upon a tangible shove.

We are a Dutchman flying,
frozen, nowhere, fast.

Slump

by Louis "Paleface" Christopher Gray

I sink low into my depression like bucket seats
in an old Chevy truck, which makes sense in a
sense.

Because I've got a truck load of problems
from a drug addiction to a prison sentence.
Couple daughters that I'm missing and I'll be
missing them
kids til they're a couple of grown women.
Even savages get sad when their back's against a
mat.

And I ain't hear their kids' voices in eight years.
I'd be happy to hear them say, "I'm mad at my
daddy."

I'd get it. And try to fix it cause I'm mad at my
own mommy
for thinking our past is good when it's not.
Like it's all water under a bridge that don't exist.
Upshot Creek and I paddle farther.
At least my father's getting it right.
Lead by example—I oughta watch him
instead of sniffing a 16th every two hours. Like,
what's the problem?

I thought my life had just gotten foggy,
but it was Suboxone that had me nodding.
I sink low into another slump, like good
drink in an old cup, when I'm stumbling drunk,
thinking maybe I should've unloaded the gun
when I put it on them at the gas pump,
instead of a correctional facility in Westville,
Indiana with the thugs.
I'd know I wasn't going home instead of country
down,
a day which may never come.

I made it out of another slump—a little flustered,
but fuck it.

I wonder all the time how other people trust
the promises that have been broken too much
to even dub it rubble.

My sneakers stay tied tight to the concrete,
which takes away my troubles.

You can only say, "I'm sorry baby. You
know how much I love you." so many times
before the only reply you hear is, "FUCK YOU."
To which you'll say, "I'd love to," hoping that she'll
forgive you,
tell you she truly loves love,
instead of things she thinks you should do.
Try not to think of what is next.
Not the should've-could've-would've-would-dos
if she turns around and refuses
to forgive you when she leaves too,
in her own little depressing slump,
like bucket seats in a Chevy truck.

Prison Mail Lady

by Lorenzo Vittorioso

Listen, my friends, as I spin the tall tale
Of the mythical hag who handles our mail.
She goes by 'Gertrude' or 'Maude,' hell maybe it's
'Madge':
Methusaleh's wife with a correctional badge.

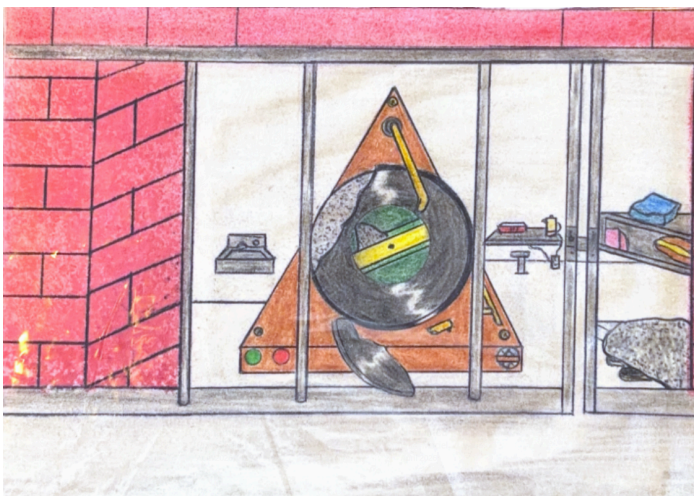
Her shift starts at 7, but it's quarter 'til eight,
As a ramshackle truck creaks onto the lot (just
fashionably late).
From a smoke-filled cabin, the crone wearily
emerges.
Her mournful scowl reminiscent of funeral dirges.
She plops down in the mail-room, this wrinkled
old hag.
Reluctantly plucking one letter from a dozen mail
bags.

"Well, that's enough for right now!" she drones out
with a wheeze.

"Time for my four-hour break as the Union
decrees."

Later on in the day, it is more of the same:
This creature moving so slowly, she gives sloths a
good name.

Just who is this biddy? We may never know.
But it surely explains, in part, why prison mail is
so slow.



Art by Clifton Jackson

This Lined Blank Page

by Daniel M. Warby

Right now, I'm sitting in segregation.
Thinking about what to write.
Weighing thoughts like an investigation.
Did I even use that right?

Should I write about seasons?
Or some beautiful place?
Should I write about the reasons
I've been sent to prison in three states?

No matter what I think,
And no matter what I say,
Words are hard to put in ink
Upon this blank lined page.

Behold My Soul

by Gary Farlow

Handcuffed behind my back,
strip searched before strangers.
Bare feet on sticky concrete.
Locked in a cell alone,
under harsh fluorescent light.
Nothing but me and my imagination.
Little to do but eat and sleep.
The choice to be a victim
of my own past or
a warrior in the making.
Everything taken
but my attitude.
Hatred and violence are never the answer.
They may cage my body,
do with it as they wish,
but my mind and soul remain my own.
Chaos swirls, tensions rise.
It brews around me
like a miasma of turmoil.
I let my response
live in my art, writing, and poetry.
My fellow warriors:
Monet, Wilde, and Frost.
I release the pain that dwells within
onto pristine paper beneath my pen.

I Will Never Be One of Them (An Outsider's Anthem)

by Andrew White

They dwell in daylight, but I walk at night.
And I cannot grasp their ways -
I will never be one of them.

Don't call me a brother, for I am the other,
A stranger in this place -
I will never be one of them.

Just wraiths in a dreamscape, without a sure
shape.
My eyes gaze far beyond -
I will never be one of them.

One foot on the ground, but never Earth bound.
Their world to me is a spectral swamp - I will
never be one of them.

The Origin of the Black Rose

by: Trevor Eli Ringgold

Imagine a handful of soil
scraped out of the cracks in the streets.
Imagine that a crackhead Father spit a seed,
watered with the blood of an alcoholic Mother,
fermented by the hateful sun,
which trains its rays like guns
to shoot heat so hot
that you're unable to breathe.
And out from that handful of soil comes a root,
much too stout to be a tree,
much too black to be clean
while much too black to be free.
Whose stem was twisted and bent,
its leaves withered and rent
from genes sinister-lent.

The product of systemic racism and oppression
To not raise it is best.
For it is the Frankenstein of growth.
And some creations bring death in their wake.
The type of death that you face
and see it in its face:
that it is content with its face.
Now know that this handful of soil
that was scraped out of the cracks in the streets,
whose crackhead Father produced the seed
which was watered with the blood of an alcoholic
Mother.
The one that was fermented by the hateful sun
that trained its rays like guns,
shooting a heat so hot
that you're unable to breathe.
Where out from that handful of soil sprouted a
root,
much too small to be seen
and way too black to be clean
while way too black to be freed.
That had a stem which was twisted and rent,
of whose leaves were withered and bent,
which had genes spliced and sinister-lent.
A product of systemic oppression and racism,
created to bring death in its wake.
The type of death that awakes and finds its
content when it takes
it is the Frankenstein of roses,
the one that to erase it is what's best.
That handful of soil grew me,
the black rose.

Here to Stay

by Shaun Blake

Prisoners here to stay,
the cells all shut and skilled,
condemned for life at bay.

In concrete walls of gray,
small breath-of-life be stilled,
we are all here to stay.

No warm light of sun's rays
upon our face gets spilled.
We are all here to stay.

No concerned friend to say:
"With you, my heart is filled."
We are all here to stay.

Nothing except decay.
Our spirits have been killed.
We are all here to stay.

So then it is we pray.
Forgiveness for us willed.
We are all here to stay.
There's nothing more to say!

HAIKU #001

by Johnny Vang

Crinkled old pages
live longer when stripped bare from trees
destined to perish

RIP Baby Casper

by Kathia Coreas Lopez

Baby boy, I just found out
somebody took your life out.
I'm crying out your name.
Why for me you couldn't wait?

I wonder who did it
so I can slap him and beat it.
You told them maybe I was the one.
Real love between us is what it was.

January 28th was the day of the crime.
I wonder where God was at the time.
You're leaving behind a baby boy.
Donde sea que vayas, yo voy.

I know you are going to look out for me,
hoping you were here with me.
I wonder how our babies would have looked.
I write their names on my love book.

You had a beautiful laugh. I still can hear it.
No other man can fit your position in my heart.
I made a big promise to myself.
Do good, get out, and do well.

December 7th, I did meet you.
I wish I was there to protect you.
I hope you really rest in peace.
Of your love, you gave me just a tease.

A Woman's Worth

by Joseph Bigelow

Everyone needs a special woman in their life.
Could be a friend, family member, lover, or wife.

Dear woman, your affection can nourish a man's
soul and be so motivating when you glow.

Electrical vibrations. Powerful communication
communicated through our eyes.

Dazzling with your design, unique with your
feelings, intriguing with your mind.

I gotta let you know that I appreciate and cherish
the light you bring to the world. Without you I
wouldn't survive.

Irresistible like a goddess, elusive like a butterfly.

Inexplicable, there's no amount of worth for what
you provide.

With an open mind for me in which to confide,
you alleviate my pain through your grace...soul
ties.

Found me in a dark place and left my soul
purified.

Encourage me through my struggles, gave me
strength when I'm weak.

You even make me a better man the times that
you're feeling weak.

Compelling me to put in the effort so I can be
your Hercules.

I enjoy our stimulating conversations, even when
we disagree. Who's really right? Sometimes you,
sometimes me.

But no matter the case, we help each other grow.
Together, we hold the master key. Together, we're
the greatest team.

You're the paint to my canvas, the spice to my
recipe.

Your love brings me to ecstasy. Your compassion
is my serenity.

I'd just like to thank you for helping me feel free.
I hope I can give you the world for everything you
mean to me.

Poseidon, Hades and Zeus

by Danielle Woolley

Poseidon, Hades, and Zeus
Gave us all a boost.
Hecate, Hera, and Aphrodite
Oh the love of the mighty.

Odin, Thor, and Loki
Why can't we see?
Freyja, Nerthus and the Norns
Take the darkness by the horns!

Jupiter, Mars, and Neptune
The time is coming soon.
Venus, Diana, and Juno
Only some of us know.

Dagoda, Belenus, and Dylan
Rise up if you can.
Cerridwen, Brigid, and Danu
Begin your life anew.

Anubis, Osiris, and Horus
Put up a fuss!
Isis, Ma'at and Bastet
Life is the true test!

Mother's Love

by Jason Keiser

A mother's relationship
starts before we know.
That's why she's one of a kind.
She's a strong, beautiful woman.
Loving, caring, tender, affectionate, and mean.
That's what makes her special.
Arms always open
to welcome you,
always there to pick you up
when you fall.
Open ear,
to listen.
A mouth,
to open when
you need to learn.
A heart,
full of love
that only she can give.
Always there to comfort you,
knowing she did her best.
That's why I'm proud
to call her...
my mother.

Letter to Momma

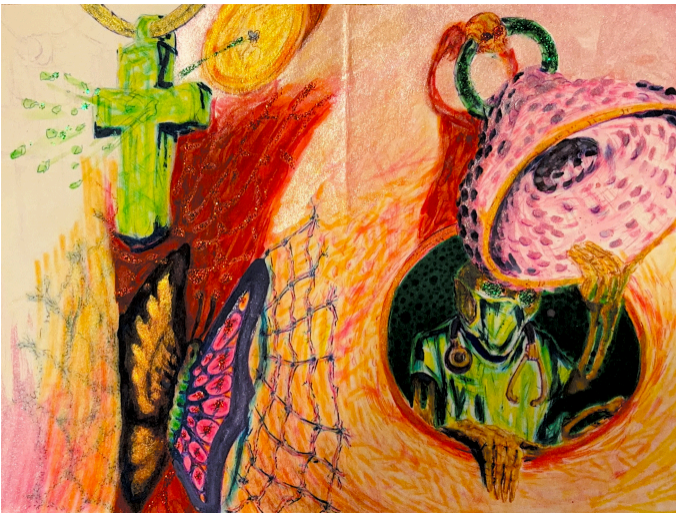
by Keith Sims

Momma, I know you told me to write you a song,
but writing you a song is kind of hard for me now.
And the reason it's hard for me now
is because your fourth-born is currently stuck in
the now / at this present time,
knowing that the box they confined me in will
never block my shine.
My future is bright and under the right light, you
could actually read my mind.
I swear I hate it here.
But who could I blame when I'm the one one
flamed,
when I'm the one who provided the keys,
assisting the gang?
And that assistance I provided is the reason I'm
caged,
clueless as fuck searching for an opening to this
white man's maze.
I promise you, Ma, it's hard to remain
positive when the negative is the only way the
sane could remain sane.
But I'm strong enough to succeed,
though my seeds probably believe I left them
purposely to flourish on their own.
But who could say that they're wrong?
I know I can't because I have had golden
opportunities to leave this street shit behind me.
But the moment someone violates,
I want to violate them just to show the street it's
still inside me.
But one day, I'm going to make you proud.
I just hope that day doesn't be the day that I'm
staring up at the clouds,
and you're proudly looking down,
with tears of joys in your eyes,
and plastered across your face is a smile,
because your problem child has fondly found a
way out of the lost and found.
Momma, I prayed for help.
And I'll be lying if I said God granted everything I
asked.
But truth of the matter is,
He was there for me every time I lacked.

i's (Eyes) of Fire

by Daniel Gest

We change
people.
We just don't know
stories shared
on the fly
of a dangerous stroll.
Clay in, clay out.
Hung upon a
world that
has no go!
There's a science
in giving that
gives back
in forgiveness,
things we've done unto others,
their misgivings.
There's no
wonder to its beginnings.
To the Earth, we show a sense
of kindness when it's in our favor.
Not to blind us to a stranger,
the hand points to
a judge, lost to become
what is one
is where you'll find us.
It's never our turn to pretend.
You shouldn't mind thus,
for a place is never needed
and we're the one to
remind us.



Art by Daniel Gest

The Finale

by Austin Kelley

My body is exhausted. I haven't slept for days.
Too busy wrestling my restless mind that can't
decide
whether I should call your phone—would that be
okay?
Maybe your voice can help me dream, escape
reality.
Because I've never been proficient at making it
alone.
Tried about a hundred times before, what's one
more
added to the list of my attempts to let you go?
And I'm trying to give you up, but I'm not strong
enough...

The stars up in the sky, I wish upon them all.
Convinced by the notion that they'll bring you
back.
And the months have turned to years, God I
haven't seen
the features of your lovely face that I once
embraced.
'Cause somehow I lost sight of what matters
most.
Deep down, I can't fight the truth—I know it's
you.
And even though you're gone, I'm still living with
your ghost.
It's obvious this drinking isn't enough to forget
your touch.

And tonight might be the day that I get the nerve
and toss these memories out to the curb.
'Cause all they do is bring on a reign of hurt.
Nightmares to remind me how we didn't work.
And my friends say it's for the best,
but before I make that choice...

Could you give me just a little bit more,
to get me through the night?
And when morning comes around,
you can move on with your life.
I swear this will be the last time
I'll ever ask you for anything.

Ashes

by Austin Kelley

Just rest your eyes and listen close.
I'll recite all you need to know,
and nothing more, nothing more.
And I bought this rose for our grave,
to mask the scent of death we made.
It's over now for sure, for sure.
So put down the pen 'cause this is the end.
And you can't erase what's been written.
Swimming in the ink, never once did you think
the hourglass would run out of hope...

I heard you torched all my stuff.
The plans about a future us,
have burned away, burned away.
And the songs I penned for you and I
have morphed into a wretched lullaby
that's on replay, on replay.
So I'll put down the pen 'cause this is the end.
And I can't erase what's been written.
Swimming in the ink, never once did I think
the wildfire would run out of smoke.

There's a light in your eye
that's been dim for so long,
as we bid our goodbyes,
'cause we can't right the wrongs.
Yeah, the fire that we had
has finally fizzled out.
And we can't get it back.
So let the ashes rain down.
Let the ashes rain down tonight.

(When My Son Was Just Eight Years Old)

by Ron Moser

When my son was just eight years old, we sat and
watched the
Super Bowl. Then, I carried him off to bed.
As I bent down to kiss him on his head, his eyes
sprung open.
This is what he said: "Dad, I sure would like to be a
pro. Do you
think tomorrow you could teach me how to throw?"
I said, "I don't know. Because you see, son, I have
these two tickets
to go see the Chicago Bears that I sure would like to
share."
As his eyes began to glow, I said I sure would love it if
you would
go. As I stepped back to turn out the light, the last
thing I heard
was, "I love you Daddy and good night!"

My son was so excited, with those two tickets in his
little hands.
He just couldn't wait to find our seats up in the stands.
As he
sat down with a huge smile, he looked around. He
noticed all the
players, big and small. My son, he knows them all! And
by name,
not just by number. I myself wouldn't be able to
remember; I don't
know how he got so smart. "Ok Dad, the game's about
to start! The
Bears are playing the Lions." Now every time I think of
my son,
I start crying. Remembering those years, I really pour
on the tears.
Because my son is no longer eight. One thing I do
know:
my son will always be great!

I did some really bad things that tore us apart.
Although I don't see my son, he will always be in my
heart.
I will never forget that Super Bowl of 2010. That's when
my life
really began. To this day, eleven years later, every time
I think of
that glow in his eyes, all I can do is break down and
cry.
Although we've been through a lot, I have a love for my
son
that will never stop.

Love you Jacob,
Daddy

True Story

by Toshiba Daniels

Concrete jungle
no trees, only gates.
Chow is served,
feeling empty but just ate.

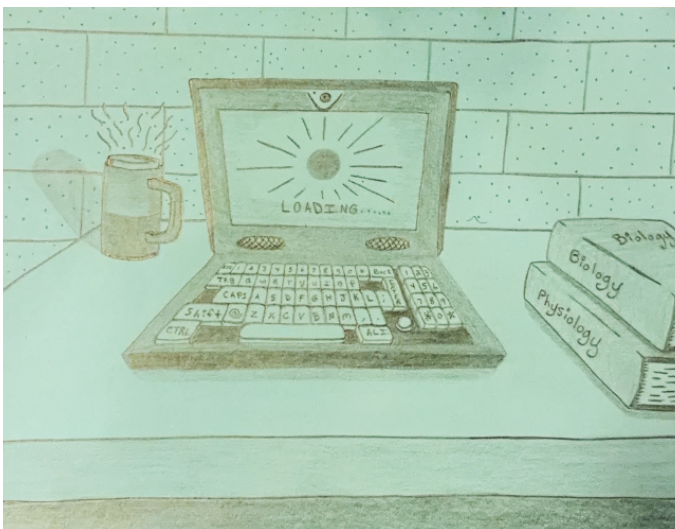
Phones attached to a wall,
separated families.
All communication comes to a stall, yet you
still reach out in addition, constantly
having your dignity snatched.
You hold onto the memories attached.

Your mind must be as strong as the coldest heart
Or your mental health might decline.
Like the woman residing in the bunk next to
you who has a recent diagnosis of
breast cancer—stage two.

Showing penance is disregarded.
Count time.
Sit up and face forward.
Never lose yourself in the penitentiary.
It is an institution not rehabilitation
or recovery.

Just as the sun rises and the moon
lights the night, I will embrace
the liberty to speak and my passion
to write.

True story.



Art by D'Andre Morris

Time

by Reynald Carey

The time seems to blend together,
making days feel like years.
It's crazy how time flies by.
Nothing can stop its ever-shifting gears.

The moments missed are unimaginable.
Minutes and seconds left unattended,
never to be gotten back.

They are in the "nether," forever suspended...

All I can do is cruise here on pause
while life flows into a foreign future.
Maybe I will get some reprieve
stitched with a snapshot's suture.

Until I return back into the world beyond,
I'll try my best to remain semi-sane.
However, actions from all the others
may soon well be to blame...

Crystal Ball

by Kris Gardner

As I relive memories of days gone by,
sometimes at night, I want to cry.
Locked away from all I hold dear,
it seems I've been gone a thousand years.
Uncertainty plagues my thoughts of the future.
Will my life end here, or will I go further?
How many waste away here as I do?
Or just give up, lay down, and die?
When it will end, nobody knows.
But one day for each of us, the cold wind will
blow.
So, tell me—tell me, crystal ball:
how long until I take my final fall?

Scrabble

by Max Reynard

Q for 10 points.

Q for the words I can't play.
Q for the conversations I can't have.
the jokes I don't want to hear,
questioning the stories I don't tell.

Q for the partner I talk to
on the phone and say it's my mom,
who I write letters to and say it's my friend,
whose quilted picture I keep behind the calendar.

I always draw those letters,
U, two E's, and an R;
but I'll find QUA or QUID or QUIT
for lower points and fewer queries.

Q for the silence,
for the gaps,
for the dark nocturne,
quiet nightly in my soul.

I keep some books,
you know those books,
turned backwards on the shelf,
careful from whom I quote.

Q for the fucking calamities we create.
cute koans to save us embarking on catastrophe,
if we spell these cries with a Q.

Q for 10 points.



"The Dance" by Len Whitman

Rise in Darkness

by Colossal

Walking through the streets.
Legs and feet
have steps that constantly keep.
Rest is a treat.
Destination is an accomplished greet.
A great friend is hard to find.
But, when one comes,
they can be easily spotted,
even by the blind,
if in light or darkness,
intent shines. Which is ultimately fine.
Emotional damage,
from the thought of being not average.
Uncontrolled and rapid.
Until logic is found.
And my voice forms sound.
And height finds ground.
Without harm or criticism.
Maybe numerous ridicule.
Rejected from what's possible.
Hurt when the logical
Subject is reachable,
without obstacle.
And the power decision remains, "No."
And yet I sustain go.
No matter what, I aim so.
A rough road I travel.
Smarter than gravel.
A life yet remains.
With much to gain.
Joy outlasts temporary pain.
When times change, in its same,
I remain my name.

-Colossal-

Sticks and Stones

by Gary Farlow

Fag, faggot, queer.

Sticks and stones
may break my bones
but names...
oh yes, they do hurt me.

Pansy, fairie, "Nancy-boy."

Do you even see me?
See how your bullets
of words
pierce my very soul?

Sissy, "abomination," freak.

"He'll grow out of it."

"It's just a phase."

"Big boys don't cry!"

"Grow up and be a man!"

Punk, homo, sinner.

But...so was Alexander the Great,

Aristotle, Socrates, Plato,

Liberace, Elton John,

Oscar Wilde, Gertrude Stein.

"Light-in-the-loafers," weirdo, fruit.

We led armies.

Founded universities.

Composed symphonies.

Wrote classical literary works.

"Three-dollar bill," unspeakable, accursed.

Yes, sticks and stones

break my bones,

but your names?

My Pride and Heritage won't let you hurt me.

Unexpected Hope

by Cornelius Cork Crawford

As I sit in the dark, cold cell, lonely tears
dropping from my chin,
realizing my ceiling is falling and my walls are
caving in,
the C.O passes by as he normally would.
Unexpected at my cell door, there he stood.

As our eyes met, he held up mail. He said,
"This is yours."
Confused just a little, I ask, "Who are you looking
for?"

As I read my name, I realize God saved
my day.
For a little hope is what I ask for every
time I pray.

As I read about the program, they ask for
a poem.
As my words hit this page, I know I'm never going
home.
This is my truth. I hope you can see.
To you, this is a poem. But these words are
actually me.

Country of Cages

by David West

1.
Country of Cages:
It happened in stages,
Like it or not.
Like frogs in a pot.
2.
No more restraints
in spite of complaints.
Congressional submission
ensures acquisition
3.
Of power unchecked
and social neglect.
Land of the freed,

now conquered by greed.

4.
Of Russian oligarchs
we now complain.
How ours are different,
we can't explain.
5.
They both have lobbies
in halls of power.
And all their hobbies
require the shower
6.
Of dark contributions
Destroy institutions
Meant to protect us
While they infect us.
7.
With cynical lies
of the Rigging.
No longer disguised
now that he's King.
8.
It's OK,
now he's selected
his votes are good
others rejected.
9.
Opponents whine 'bout race and sex
but they won't stoop to help the workers.
So while their duty they neglect,
Their place is taken by the lurkers.
10.
So now the greedy have their way.
Bow before the airhead King!
Can't afford a place to stay?
A Cage for you is just the thing!

Living with Death

by Sensei Pitt

The furnace of heat,
rising up my neck,
and over my head.
Flashbacks to days of the dead,
sheeple wandering amongst the wolves.
Thoughtless, clueless, protected species.
Death awaits around every corner,
blessings unbidden, graced, and hidden.
Mobile carrion, disrespected killers virulent.
Precarious existence, living on murderers' row.
Awaiting death and the final blow.
Flash of knife and lock,
bars of soap inside a sock.
Awaiting a beating, black and blue,
praying to a God to save you.
Scarlett splattered walls,
evidence of resolutions that fall,
by the wayside as if pre-ordained.
Like blood splattered walls that remain stained,
the de-evolution of common sense
isn't simply happenstance.
It's the erosion of awareness of death,
mortality walking amongst us all,
awaiting death's dropped call.



“Piss on Liberty” by Aaron Obeginski

Empires

by David West

1. The rise of ancient Babylon,
Achieved by neighbors preyed upon.
Hammurabi forged his code
Across the land, his army strode.
2. The Pharaoh's tombs that Egypt built
with slavish toil and squandered gilt.
Ensuring immortality
required the slave's fatality.
3. The Persians lost at Marathon.
Athen's rise was thus begun.
Their hegemony was refused
by Spartan might at Syracuse.
4. Marching bold triumphal legions
Conquering barbaric regions.
Weapons sharp and shining bright,
Always ready for a fight.
5. The Caliphates had saracens
Manning all their garrisons.
Guarding looted books and slaves,
Fanatics marching to their graves.
6. The Ottomans had Janissaries
Looting all the monasteries
Of the fallen Byzantines
And their empire Levantine.
7. For Queen and country, Khyber rifles,
Crimson coats, and gaudy trifles,
Marching through the deadly pass,
Confident their rule will last.
8. Flights of lethal olive choppers
Descend upon the poor rice croppers
Accused of being Viet Cong,
Commit a self-fulfilling wrong.
9. Comrades in their armored tanks
Lined up in their serried ranks
Under heel their boots are grinding,
Proletarians now finding -
10. That demagogues and profiteers
Prospering throughout the years
Off the blood of the unsung
from the lamp post should be hung.

To Vladimir

by Gary Farlow

I've a tip for you, Vlad,
and this is no joke,
You've bitten off more than you can chew,
Ukraine will make you choke.
Your armies are strong,
full of North Koreans, tanks, planes,
the wicked little drones
falling on Kyiv like rain.
But you're more like a toddler,
a spoiled little brat.
The Ukrainians are indomitable—
you can bet your ruble on that!
Standing on the border,
gazing across the channel,
sputtering your lies
in speeches so banal.
So beware, Mr. Putin,
these words are true.
"V" is for victory,
and it will be Ukraine's over you!

I Am Not the Enemy

by Jim Gooding

We both looked weary from the battle.
And we said: *I don't want to fight.*
If the truth was told,
I didn't want to yesterday, and I don't tonight.

I could see some things behind his eyes.
In the stillness of the quiet,
he gazed at me with a furrowed brow,
portraying anger...but I didn't buy it.

He used to hate me
as much as I hated him.
And to rub dirt in the wound,
we had the same name—Jim.

For years, he had power over me,
knowing I wouldn't look back.
Shooting his guns and throwing the bombs.
Every day, attack after attack.

My life before the battle was vibrant and thriving.
It was peaceful...a 'city on a hill.'
But he turned it to rubble,

and the smells of a landfill.

Here's the thing—I can rebuild the city.
Make it amazing once again.
There ARE battles I'll have to fight.
Trusting God, leaving the wars to him.

The Bible says, 'A brother is born for adversity.'
And 'a friend loveth at all times.'
I sure am glad that Jesus
is a very best friend of mine.

So—this mortal enemy of my life?
The one that came to steal, kill, and destroy?
The one who had beat me down in defeat?
Jesus says THAT Jim is a frightened little boy.

When I became a man,
I put away childish things.
Now, I have Jesus' stamp of approval.
He gave me a new life. A ring.

Satan still tries to trick me,
reminding me of my past.
But Jesus lets me fight right back
and hit the devil in the face with a bare-knuckled
blast.

So, now when I see Jim's face?
I don't see my enemy in the mirror.
I see a man redeemed and cleansed.
No longer living defeated and inferior.

Does that mean I'm cleaned up and perfect?
No, but it DOES mean this:
Christ has lifted a once-defeated Christian.
And the smile on my face is his.

You might be wondering this question:
'How do I get in the Lord's army? It seems
pretty cool.'

Maybe you can start in the mirror,
and remind yourself, 'Mama didn't raise no
fool.'

God will show you what your brave looks like.
Might even make you bold.
And give you helpful words to write.
It can happen. You're never too old.

Lose My Way

by Bruce Enos

How did I lose my way in this world?
Neglect and abuse is what I endured.
Insults with punishments my parents hurled.
Disobedience to authority is what occurred.
Bullied, picked on, and name called at school.
Tried to fit in, but I wasn't cool.
Low self-esteem and lacking coping skills, tools.
Hanging with the wrong crowd which made me a fool.
Turning to crime as an easy way to survive
Stealing and lying was a fleeting way to contrive.
Alienation from family is all it provided.
Convictions led to prison and my rights, nullified,
Hope you ask, as I am surrounded by darkness.
Feelings of despair, sorrow, and emptiness.
I shake this nightmare and discover nonetheless
the pain, torment, and trauma. Oh what a mess.
Power to change has been inside me, waiting to
be shared.
As reality hits me, life is not always fair.
Shed my victimhood and allow the world to bear.
To see my worth, value, and transformation is
something rare.
Hope is a gift in this desolate place.
The time I have will not be a waste.
Redemption and forgiveness, I yearn with haste.
A long road I am on, to right my wrongs and all
my mistakes.



Art by Sean Flatt

Broken Boys

by James Prichard

On the inside of the inhuman cage,
With many others, full of hurt, pain, and rage
Pushing their chest out, stiff upper lip, putting up
the front, not caring what others think
Covering their dents, bruises, and scars with ink.
A reused canvas, vibrant colors; symbols, with
meanings of a vast array.
Building a wall, moat, and warning signs to keep
others away.
With a single word or off glance, ready to prove
their manhood with a fist in a cinch.
The moment passes and it is back to thoughts of
dominoes, the ball game, and how much they bench.
Many not wanting to face why they didn't go from
boy to man.
Not having the tools, avenues, or help to truly
understand.
Though different on the outside—Brown, Black,
White, and Red—
We all have unhealed trauma that is our common
thread.
This wasn't where we wanted to go, or who we
wanted to be.
Hard not to when social services, flashing lights, and
violence was all we did see.
We search others to see signs, cracks, soft spots,
and what rang that traumatic bell.
Were they too not told "I love you" by a father figure
til it was too late and they were already in a cell?
What was it for them? What piece was broken?
What do they miss?
What didn't cause but helped lead us to this?
What made you take the other fork in the road, to
be so bold?
What is your story that is yet to be told?
Who knocked that young cowboy off his horse?
Or was it something much, much worse?
Was finding your own identity such a feat?
Or someone else's ways, faith and preferences in
you did they beat?
Were you told that you were trash, stupid, and
would never amount to anything?
Did you take that to heart because it was a
message that a loved one did bring?
Did you feel lost and unwanted, with no place?
Did you too never see your father's face?
Who was it that once again took your toys?
This all and more we ponder, surrounded by Broken
Boys.

The One

by Jessica Styles

Moving within
our minds and
through hearts
on fire for love.
The ultimate truth
of the Lord shines
brightly in my eyes.
The reflection reveals
what I have witnessed,
God. All around me.
All through me & you.
His love carries in life.
The realization beyond
what I can see and
feel is the knowing
of a Higher Power
walking with me.
Leading my life
to where love
exists inside
our world.
Earth!
Peace
with
Him.



Art by Jason Hale

The Miracle of God

by Levi Jabari Gardner (L.J.G.J)

If a miracle of God were to spare me: why?
After decisions I've made, choices even I've despised.
To think my mistakes and God's grace can coincide—
to give me another chance, to finally be alive.

The miracle of God, His amazing grace
covered in family prayers, the ones the Devil can't
erase.
I want to live the will of God, yet temptation invades
the space.
Still God's eye is on the sparrow; still nothing can take
my place.

The miracle of God I feel selfish to receive,
knowing His love for me. Yet it's still hard to believe,
after all the wrong I've done, that God still finds favor
in me.
Give me strength to fight what tempts, the sin I want
to conceive.

If a miracle of God were to spare me: why?
No answer until the day I die,
wiping the tears and illusions from my eyes.
Lord I need you to lead me. I'm blind.

I Refuse

by Richard Mainprize

I refuse to be defined by my past.
I was a worthless, wretched mess,
with a black soul,
filled with the reds of anger and rage.
The orange and yellow of frustration
and pain
burning inside.

Outside, I looked normal.
I must have
Because no one noticed the smoking morass
that was my soul,
the burning, smoldering landfill
beneath my skin
that was defining me.

Even I ignored it.
Then my world came crashing down.
I fell into a hole I could not see.
The demons spilled out.
And one who was innocent lost her life.
I survived, but I was broke.
I looked for a way out.
Darkness was all around.

6:00 pm

by Lorenzo Vittorioso

I sit in the cell with my feet up on my bunk,
reluctantly pulling my computer tablet from its
jean-pocket, makeshift storage spot that hangs
on the cell wall: it's time for my daily
disappointment.

I punch in the multiple ID numbers, and once
again, input my identity as seven digits, the
'name' the State owns me by. I agree to the
ridiculous terms of use for the
umpteenth-thousandth time, finally navigating to
the messaging application, where a few
remaining people in my life sometimes
condescend to type a note.

There's my brother, who is dutiful and clinical in
his attention to me. There's an ex-prisoner who
was a decent friend to me in here, but who has
since gone home, and now he struggles to adjust.
Third is an old counselor who is kind enough to
check in on me from time to time: he writes the
longest notes. The last is a once-close friend who

knew me for decades, yet rarely deigns to write
anymore.

As the tablet searches briefly for new messages, I
hold my breath in spite of myself—hoping, even
longing, for a dot to appear next to any name,
indicating a new communication.

No dots materialize though, as usual. I casually
glance at the last time I received a text from any
of the four, and the time ranges anywhere from
two weeks to three months. I go through this
fruitless ritual every day. I am not sure of what I
am hoping to see (to feel?).

Connection?

Love?

Oh please! Don't make me laugh...yet the longing
persists. I still look. Every day.

I glance down at one last name that I failed to
mention earlier on the list. It is my Dad, dead
now two years. He sent only a text or two before
he became too sick to even remember how to log
on. Most of the saved texts in this string are from
me to him—messages he never read, including
my goodbye to him on the day he passed away. A
farewell he could never know. His text to me is
simple:

Hello son. I love you.

"I miss you Dad. I love you too." I say to the
ether. "Perhaps I will see you soon."

A sarcastic grin creeps across my face as I think
it more likely to see a dot appear next to my
father's name before I see one appear by any of
the others.

I turn off the tablet.

Until 6:00 pm tomorrow.

Maybe tomorrow.

Untitled

by Victor Frieson

Life on the edge
standing on the ledge.
Stuck in my head.
Bad thoughts are fed.
Always taking time to have an open mind.
Humans are destructive; it comes from our
design.
Realizing all these things, this life isn't what it
seems.
Only thing I do believe is my thoughts from when
I dream.
It seems too complicated when my ego has me
jaded.
To get love from everyone around you is way too
overrated.
I wanna be alone and do it for my own,
proving to myself in life that I'm finally grown.
Grown enough for change, to merge into my lane.
The only thing that I'll regret is if I stay the same.
Let them think what they think and watch their
minds shrink.
They will say they're on your side, then switch up
in a blink.
Where's the empathy they speak of? It's nowhere
in their hearts.
To turn into what all I see will curse me from the
start.
Hate sharpens like a dart, and the love remains
dull.
Love is empty from most hearts, but the hate
remains full.
My parents aren't even nice; why did I get this
curse?

I guess I'll get the answer when I finally leave
this Earth.

I'm not perfect, but I'm worth it, and only I can
see that.

The more I live this life, the more I strongly do
believe that

all saints have a past and all sinners have a
future.

Beat the Odds

by Toshiba Daniels

The system thrives—so can I.

Country at war and fighting—why would I?

Politicians are running to win—so am I.

Our youth is learning—why wouldn't I?

The disabled have ability—so do I.

When the odds seem to be stacked against you,
never live just to die.



"Stand Tall" by Joshua Wells

The Best Gift Ever

by Terance DeJuan Wilson

Speaking to Eternity: 'O' sweet spirit without blemish, from your mouth to the heart of man—thou fated image through the chisel of adversity: loneliness, temptation, rejection, criticisms born to die. In the search for identity, I've often questioned, *Lord, why?* Being forgiven before living—the word walked the Earth in your image. Invisible things, spirit given, the gift that keeps on giving, descendant of a king. Stripped to the barest essence of humanity, with neither beauty, nor power, brought the prestige of divine knowledge, the commission of salvation. The world tried to define you. When I was lost, you came to the cross to rescue me from a world confused. You gave me confidence. In exchange for sin, you gave me grace. In homage, you sacrificed your life to redeem the flawed life that I would live. Salvation, suddenly on the horizon. A beautiful flower, an exquisite branch. From the beginning, you predicted your final hour. The best gift ever is the life that I get to live with Christ. He died so that I might be protected by the stars and stripes. The blood of the king, son of God, united in thought and purpose like Queen Hadassah, the flower of the king Ahasuerus' eye. I often questioned, *Lord, why?* Who am I that you might mind me? The wise men presented him with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Hailed from Nazareth—a place where it was unthinkable a miracle might occur. Father, grant the serenity and wisdom to perceive what I've been given.

Don't Ever Change You

by Rev. Jamie L. Smith

Don't ever change you so the wrong people will accept you. Be your wonderful self so the right people will embrace you.

Don't let hate eradicate your spiritual joy. Look in the mirror and love what you see.

Remember, it's God who created thee. That makes you special—not the excuse, but the exception.

Don't ever change you because society says your lifestyle

is wrong or in your body, you don't belong.

Respond by being confident, courageous, and strong.

Don't ever change you, for no two stars are the same.

So love your identity and your name, whatever it may be.

Don't ever change you, even when the skies are gray. Keep

your head up. Keep living. The sun will shine another day.

Don't ever change you for you, because you are a star. Don't

be afraid to shine no matter where you are.

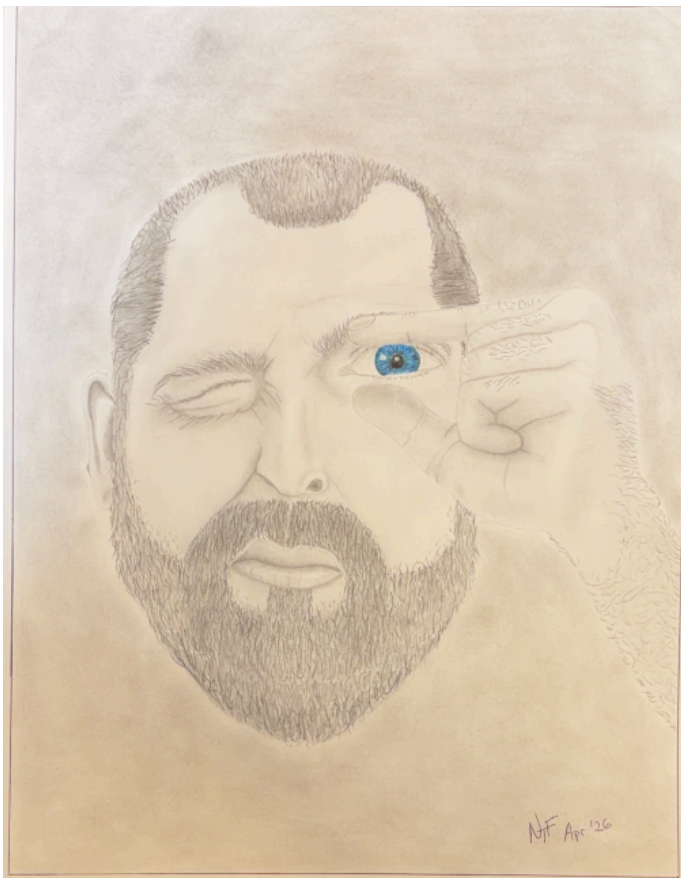
Inside Me

by Shaun Blake

I looked in the mirror today, seeing
what was inside.
An intermix of my parents' features looked
back at me with hints of ancestry.

Looking closer, deeper, I see
a little evil peeking out with
a little good pushing forward.
A little sadness, loneliness, regret.
A little happiness, desirability, contentment...
A collage of my life experiences of
relationships that have molded me.

Looking deeper still:
who to my surprise do I see!
A deeply ingrained part of my core:
my Heavenly Father at the foundation
of me—now I see that He's always
a part of me.



Art by Nicholas Fugate

Moon Pies

by Curtis Dillard

From the slice of the moon, out comes the lesser light.
Spilling
over galaxies in outer space, the milky way with a pack
of Oreos,
double-stuffed. With a cup of hot coffee, poured over
the stars, good
to the last drop, on the way to Mars. Pluto, the planet
of Doritos
and Fritos, with every kind of chip, satisfying to the
soul. Venus, your
fire, your desire, she's out of this world, hot as a deep
fryer. Planet Earth
since birth, when Adam and Eve committed the first
sin—we've been cursed.

Blue Spell

by Abdul S. Kareem

What's to be said of a heart that finds
hibernation opposite the bear?
Under the blue spell,
the cloud and cool foretells more than Autumn.
When folly is brought inside,
when selves are pulled in close,
my heart awakens to find its reflection.
Amid the fallen leaves, fallen daylight, two things
come to mind.
One, a kind of condensed, sweetened nostalgia.
The summer, dang, where did it all go?
The other, nearly bringing me to tears.
Another year alone, another year deserved,
another year foraging the discards...
slow down, breathe, count your blessings...yeah.
It is beautiful, the gray.
The way it carries a billion stories, up and over,
making foolish our borders.
Some small win to one, everything to another.
Some love, some ritual, some waste, evaporated,
recycled.
And when it rains...*Allah, see me in it.*
Because aside from a prayer, like water over deserts,
the precipitation is the only unregulated contact I
have with the outside world.
So...if caught in its isolated shower,
I won't reach for drier land
but find certain its mercy.
Treat its soak and wetness as part of the
enchantment,
reducing the distance between me and everything
else,
especially the one of most import...you.

Tears of Freedom

by *Canaan Swift*

For the ones who will never see the other side.
The light of day, the eyes will never meet.
All you can do is remember.
The perfect day—first day out.
It's only right, home sweet home.
Walking out the gate proud, head high, life.
What a time it is to be.
The fences that will never confine me, again.
And again, I cry.
Day to day routines, cursed memories.
Tears that became the worst nightmare.
Too scared to sleep and too afraid to let it go.
Looking back was usually a waste of time/
The only reason for reminiscing,
contemplating on the lesson learned.
It's never too early to live and love life.
Uncontrollable emotions—why these tears just
won't stop.
It's unbelievably believable,
freedom to be, freedom at last.
Better late than never.
Some of the best news I received all day.
Woke up blessed, glad I woke up.
The sun's reflection from off my skin.
The diamond in a rough, shining.
Pause on the joy, now let's enjoy the moment.
That chance that finally came.
My outlook on life, revised and upgraded.
Same story, new chapters, revealed and
unwritten.
Feelings which are so foreign.
The time we spend to get used to
The victory lap, the welcome home chant.
Raided and rallied by bridges I'll never burn, day
ones.
The circle of love, accompanied by some of the
best company.
Back to these tears,
each one falls to the ground, rattling.
Emotional exposure, I find myself more vulnerable
than ever.
The sleeve we all notice, the open book that's
easily read.
I want it to be known,

why I put these feelings out, express myself.
These tears speak for themselves
in the moments of silence.
Paving the road one step at a time.
Recognizing my redemption and my rebirth.
Freedom was my salvation.
And these tears set me free.



Art by Chris Calix

A Starry Night's Wonder

by *Kris Gardner*

The billion stars I see at night
are such a breathtaking and beautiful sight.
How many, I wonder, gaze back at me
with wonder and dreams of things to be.
As different as night is from the day,
the creatures that God made so far away.
Perhaps one day, we will converse
across the vastness of the universe.

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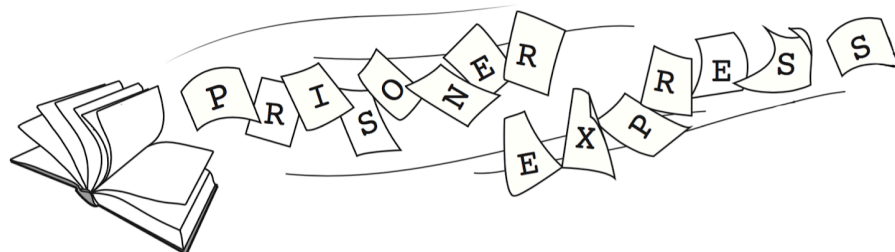
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Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 33

Spring 2026

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