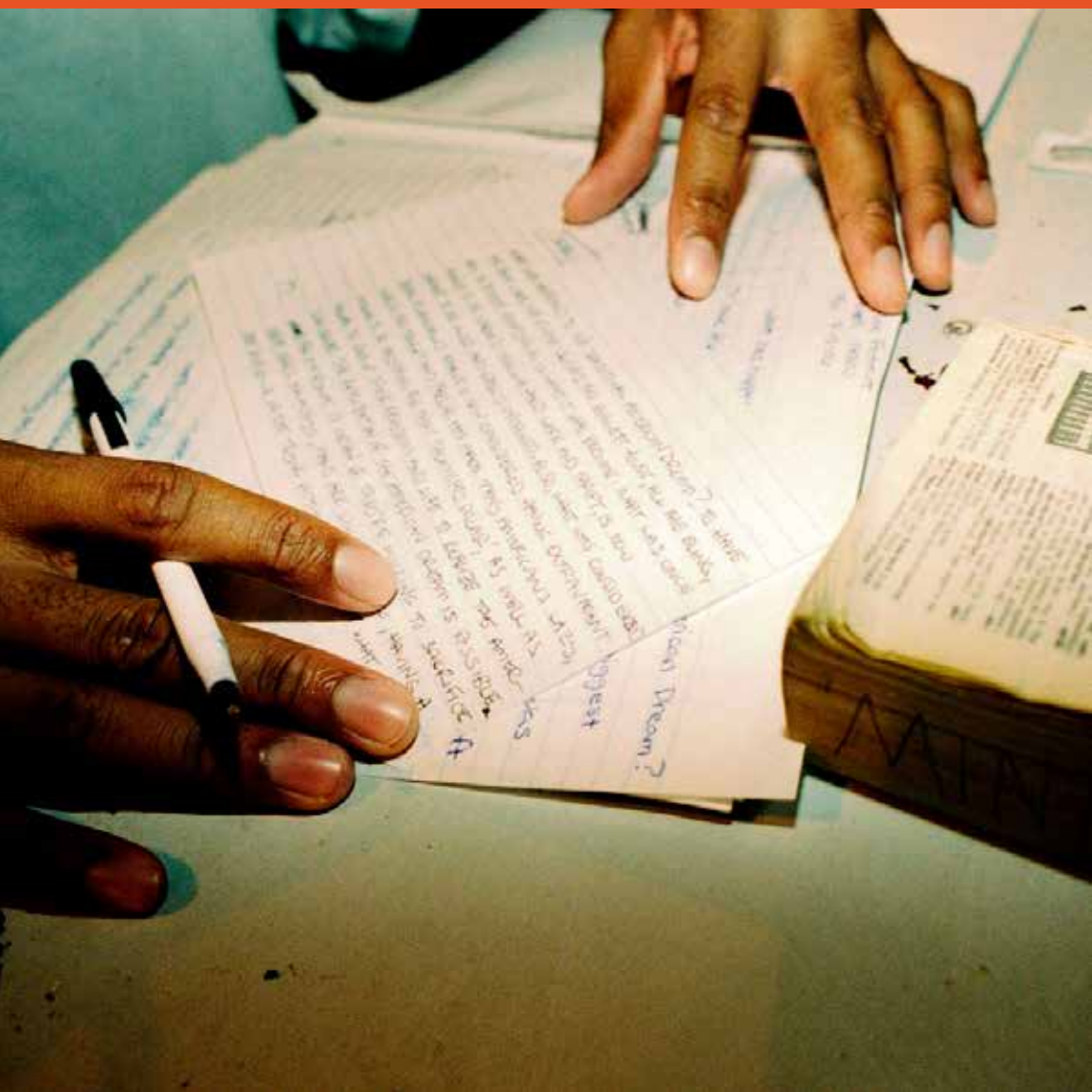


OPEN LINE:

LIVE

PERFORMANCES IN PRINT

OPEN MIC 2016 / SAN QUENTIN STATE PRISON

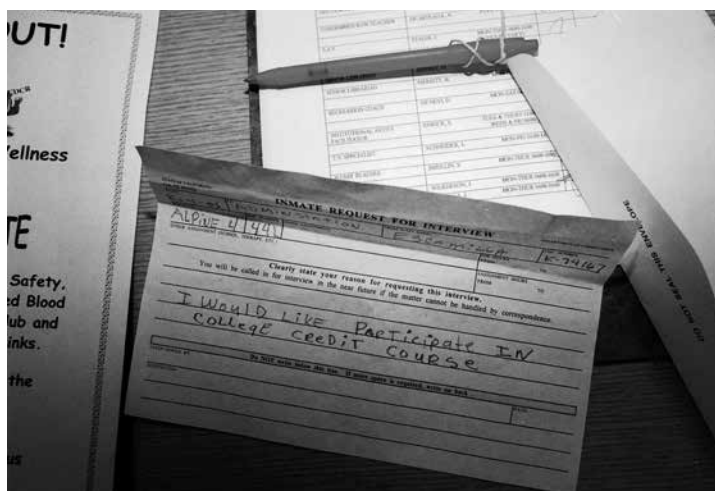




Artwork by J.S. Long



A Prison University Project Publication



The Prison University Project (PUP) is a nonprofit organization that runs a College Preparatory Program and an Associate of Arts Degree Program at San Quentin. The mission of the Prison University Project is to provide excellent higher education programs to people incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison; to create a replicable model for such programs; and to stimulate public awareness and meaningful dialogue about higher education and criminal justice in California. PUP is also engaged in an array of artistic and cultural projects that document the intellectual and creative work of students, facilitate their civic engagement in the public sphere, and humanize the image of incarcerated people generally in the public imagination. The following is a literary journal of the students' writing and performances captured at PUP's annual Open Mic Night on December 26th, 2014 in the chapel at San Quentin State Prison in San Quentin, CA.

INTRODUCTION

In a place where the passage of time is frequently associated with sentencing, parole hearings, time served, and other metrics of incarceration, the arrival of a new year is complicated. For most Americans, the end-of-year holidays represent freedom to travel, to celebrate, and to gather with family and loved ones. In prison, holidays are not necessarily a cause for celebration. For many, holidays magnify the distance from everything and everyone outside the walls.

Every winter, as the new year approaches, the Prison University Project holds an Open Mic event in the Catholic chapel at San Quentin State Prison. To those unfamiliar with San Quentin, a chapel may seem an incongruous venue for a secular collision of such diverse performances, which in any given year might include a haka dance, a metered ballad, or an ode to a charismatic goose. To those familiar with San Quentin, the Catholic chapel is both a place of worship and one of San Quentin's primary event venues. Anyone walking through the prison's courtyard on a wind-bitten evening, as I have done hundreds of times,

will be accustomed to the warm light often emanating from the building, and the strains of some performance filling the surrounding space. Juxtaposed with the surrounding structures—most prominently the euphemistically-named Adjustment Center—the chapel area often feels as close to a sanctuary as one could hope to encounter in a prison.

The annual open mic begins with an announcement. Invitations with tear-off RSVP slips are sent to all college program students, delivered cell-to-cell throughout the housing units. Email invitations go out to volunteers and other friends of the program. Bids to perform roll in, RSVPs stack up in the college program office, and an emcee is appointed from the student body. The chapel space is reserved with the assistance of San Quentin administration. A request is submitted for refreshments from the food services wing of the dining hall. A list of attendees is submitted to the institution. All the paperwork is finally in order. What began years ago as a spontaneous gathering on the prison yard is now an annual tradition.

The Open Mic event is a celebration of the currency of learning: the spoken and written word. At the end of a long semester, the event gives students a chance to spend that currency out of the classroom, with their peers, in a collective space ungoverned by the rules and conventions of academic expression. The event is also a celebration of the rich eclecticism and mutual support that strengthens the vibrant learning community at San Quentin. Celebration is not a rule—there are no rules, except respect for the audience and the space—but celebration emerges often. As the reader will discover in these pages, one contributor celebrates his journey to literacy, another celebrates the fauna of the prison yard; there are celebrations of human rights, family, life itself. Others mourn, laugh, wonder, honor, memorialize, and explore.

On the evening of December 26th, 2014, nearly three hundred students, volunteers, and friends of the college program gathered in the Catholic chapel once again, as they do each year, to enjoy the evening's performances. Decorations adorned the seating area, hot beverages were tapped

into Dixie cups from state-issued cambros, and performers took to the pulpit-become-stage to share poetry, essays, hip hop, instrumentals, dance, song, and other less classifiable pieces in front of a live audience. Contained in these pages are the pieces that were offered that evening.

SIMON WOODARD

*On-Site Program Coordinator
Prison University Project*

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This book is typeset in Museo and Museo Sans

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01

OVERCOMING

JAMES EARL VICK

*Is
prison*

a dead-end

or

*a new
beginning?*



I spent the first four decades of my life trying to hide the fact that I was illiterate. As a result of my not being able to read or write at age forty-two, I felt humiliation daily. Although this daily humiliation was horrible, its devastation turned out to be an inspirational challenge. It motivated me. I made a promise: I promised that if I were given the opportunity to become educated, I would take full advantage of it – and by keeping that promise, a new world has been offered for my exploration.

My full name is James Earl Vick, and I was born in 1953 in the state of Mississippi--the poverty-stricken delta area. I was the youngest of eight; I had five brothers and two sisters. Most people considered Mississippi the poorest state in the country and I grew convinced that my family was the poorest in the state. Survival was a continuous struggle. There were only a few times when I did not go to bed hungry or wake up hungry.

Growing up, I wasn't given the opportunity to attend school. One of my childhood memories is standing on the back porch of a shack that we called home, waiting to go to work while the rest of the children in the neighborhood went to school. I worked at whatever I could,

from picking cotton to work in warehouses to work in outhouses. As a kid, I noticed how some people loved their child as a prize possession, but for me childhood was a curse.

There was no glorification in being the only child who could not read or write. Too many nights I cried myself to sleep while wondering why my parents were always too tired to take me places or do fun things with me. As a child, I found nothing loveable about parents who could not read or write. Trying to understand and solve problems at age 10 that my adult parents could not solve kept me depressed.

So naturally, thirty-two years later, while working at St. Vincent de Paul in San Mateo, CA, my heart was filled with a great deal of joy the evening I first admitted to another person I could not read or write. This event occurred in May 1992, in the storage room located across from Chaplain Paul's office where I had been loading coloring books to be delivered to the Recreation Center day care for young children. Flipping through those beautiful coloring books is what inspired me to want to know the words surrounding the pictures. As I began to shed tears uncontrollably, I realized my life was going to change dramatically. My entire life I lived with and tried

I was motivated to write and share “Overcoming” after learning that there are hundreds of men in prison who cannot read or write. Hopefully this will encourage them to ask for help now, and not wait as long as I did.

to hide this painful and shameful fact that I was illiterate.

So at age 42, I decided to confess to my friend and mentor, Chaplain Paul Moriarity, that I could not read and write. Little did I know that I was only confirming what he had known for years. Now I know why he just shook his head and smiled, as I did likewise. At that moment, my breakthrough was finalized. The shameful stigma of being illiterate was no longer a factor. Immediately Chaplain Paul began to lay the foundation. This was in September of 1995 in San Mateo County jail. We established a time, a place and a promise: this is where my introduction to education started.

My first lesson began with elementary reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling and coloring books. We met once a month for the next 15 months. During that time I was also introduced to the Bible with unexplainable, but most welcome, compassion.

Regrettably, before anything major could be harvested from the many hours spent together, I was transferred to San Quentin State Prison in 1996. Without being fully conscious of what I was doing, I continued to practice the study habits Chaplain Paul taught me, even though he was no longer near me. I got into a G.E.D. class

at San Quentin and did my best at all times. I was doing so well that the summer of 1997, I wrote Paul my first letter. There is nothing in life that could make me feel so grateful and fulfilled as learning how to read and write.

My next letter was written on June 2, 1997. The first letter to my daughter, along with a birthday present, being that she was born on June 2, 1976. I made her so proud of her dad that she framed the letter. Often, I've asked myself, "Is prison a dead-end or a new beginning?"

One afternoon in 1998, I was stretched out on my San Quentin bunk allowing my mind to drift wherever it wished because I had no idea how to untangle the web that held me captive. All of a sudden there was a knock at my cell door. My quick response to the interruption resulted in being pleasantly surprised. It was Chaplain Paul. His visit was so welcome. After the brief hugs we began to pick up where we left off as if I were not in prison.

Before I learned of the death of my friend Chaplain Paul, I was able to give him a copy of my G.E.D. certificate and in return he left me with three pieces of wisdom that are a part of my everyday life: "James, keep God first in your life, never give up, and never stop reading."

I know I was blessed to have had him in my life and I hope you have been blessed in sharing my story of overcoming my illiteracy and my shame.

02

SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

MESRO COLES-EL

come from oak tree skyscrapers
In flower beds of newspapers
Detailing the nation-makers'
Complex capers.
I plug the mic to the speaker to
Cover the globe with pronouncements
Of speeches for our approbation
And public service announcements.
Each and every day
I use mic cords to build words
For every single home
From projects to suburbs.

And in my sleepless nights,
I reach this mic to breathe this light
And receive insight.
When I'm seen in flight,
I'm seen free despite...

Shackling gripes and confining steel pipes.
My life's rife with lyricism, individualism,
Isolation through Islamism and
Self-pugilism.
My rap style's ghetto and shameless
Famous for translation
To Braille and Sign Language
My rhymes are both wretched and selfless
And we go together like Jif and Welch's.
So I bring it to your chest with magniloquence
When I represent
To make my countenance
Magnificent.

And in my sleepless nights,
I reach this mic to breathe this light
And receive insight.
When I'm seen in flight,
I'm seen free despite...

Fake heights...that take life.
My whole life is spent doing battle.
What gives?
I had to do battle before I knew what it is.
I never received thoughtless presents or gifts
So I give gifts through the mic
And sign cards with my lips...

03

LIGHTS, ACTION

EMILE DEWEAVER

*People in
hell*

don't want ice

and clean water

they want

wings.

Naomi Shihab Nye: A boy told me if he roller skated fast enough his loneliness couldn't catch up to him.

Emile DeWeaver: People in hell don't want ice and clean water. They want wings.

Rorschach: (angry, intense voice): **The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown.**

Pablo Picasso: ART IS NOT MADE TO DECORATE ROOMS. IT IS AN OFFENSIVE WEAPON IN THE DEFENSE AGAINST THE ENEMY.

Ford Madox Ford: This is the saddest story I have ever heard.

Jorge Luis Borges: My story is about two men.

James Baldwin: While the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard.

Rorschach: **Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this.**

Picasso: EVEN IN A PRISON, I WOULD BE ALMIGHTY IN MY OWN WORLD OF ART, EVEN IF I HAD TO PAINT MY PICTURES WITH MY WET TONGUE ON THE DUSTY FLOOR OF MY CELL.

John Berryman: We must travel in the direction of our fear.

Rorschach: No compromise!

Emile DeWeaver: District Attorney Jeff Rosen doesn't believe in throwing lives away. His job is not personal, not mean. He respects even defendants in his pursuit of justice.

Samuel Beckett: The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.

Louise Erdrich: Life will break you. Nobody can protect you from that, and living alone won't either, for solitude will also break you with its yearning.

Girl: Dad, I'm hungry.

Everybody: (silence)

Rorschach: **Nobody knows who I am.**

Enid Bagnold: Who wants to become a writer? And why? Because it's the answer to everything.

Mary Oliver: You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Borges: Having reached a hundred, the individual no longer stands in need of love or friendship.

Quevedo: He called it Utopia, a Greek word meaning there is no such place.

Rorschach: **Nothing is hopeless. Not while there's life.**

Google Search: How Can Organisms Live Without Sunlight?

Isaac Asimov: In life, unlike chess, the game continues after checkmate.

Pablo Picasso: WHEN I WAS A CHILD MY MOTHER SAID TO ME, "IF YOU BECOME A SOLDIER, YOU'LL BE A GENERAL. IF YOU BECOME A MONK, YOU'LL END UP AS THE POPE." INSTEAD, I BECAME A PAINTER AND WOUND UP AS PICASSO.

Emile DeWeaver: There were two Emiles during these months: Emile the rationale master, who knew his future, and Emile the human animal, the survivor who had been clawing for space to breath since father burned books, since expression filled the sky above the Youth Authority with thunder.

Rorschach: Heard a joke once: Man goes to doctor. Says he's depressed. Says life seems harsh and cruel. Says he feels all alone in a threatening world. Doctor says, "Treatment is simple. Great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go see him. That should pick you up."
Man bursts into tears. Says, "But doctor...I am Pagliacci."

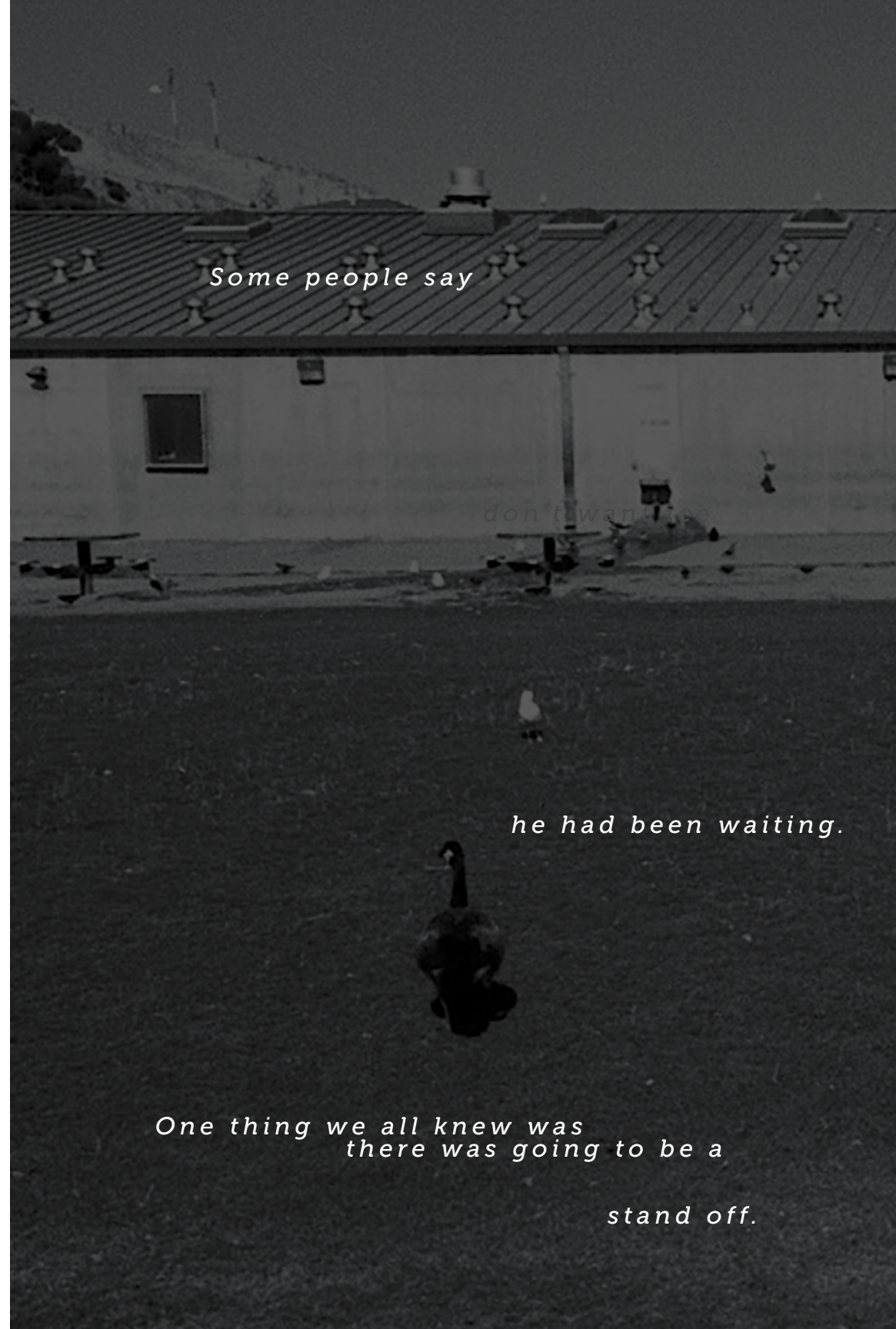
Everybody Else: (laughter)

"Lights, Action" is a poem written in the form of a screenplay. I composed it from quotes from my work and quotes from literary personalities. I'm a hoarder; I had gathered the quotes on odd scraps of paper over decades. I was interested in what my collection had to say about what I valued. When I performed "Lights, Action," I announced the name of each speaker in my own voice, but I read the quotes in different voices at varying speeds. I didn't want just to read a poem; I wanted to feel like I had performed memorable art.

04

MAX

LIONEL SCOTT



Some people say

don't want to

he had been waiting.

*One thing we all knew was
there was going to be a*

stand off.

They acted as if this Max was some type of superhero or the toughest prisoner to see. As for me, I began to get myself ready. I wasn't going to show any fear and I would stand my ground. I had heard from Butch and J Dove that this Max would put down a demonstration whenever it was needed. Lee and Crunch walked with me across the yard headed towards the back end of the prison. Lee stood 6'3" and Crunch, 6'5", and they looked as if they had been working out all their lives. As they walked across the yard with me, being only 5'10", I felt comfortable in the middle of my partners.

The yard was quiet and we could feel the sun shining on our faces and a warm breeze blowing through our t-shirts. The prison walls surrounded us and the guards in the towers on the wall did their usual duties. We headed for the back wall and walked across the baseball field. We noticed the inmates to our left at the education department looking at the way we walked in stride. They could tell something was up. Some knew we were going to check out Max and some waited with anticipation to see what would happen. One thing they all knew was that there was going to be a show.

Max saw us coming. Some people say he had been waiting, others say it was just the way he looked. One thing we all knew was that there was going to be a stand off. There was no way Max was going to have the yard and get all the attention. It just wasn't going to happen. Lee and Crunch stopped and I took two extra steps so Max would know who he was dealing with. J Dove and Butch waited just in case things didn't go the way we planned. You could see the bag sticking out of J Dove's jacket and Butch, as usual, just looked on with that attitude of whatever.

Max and the rest of his crew walked towards us without a sign of fear. We did notice the way he got respect from the rest of his peers and how they followed his lead. I took another few steps forward and extended my hand, as if he would reach with his wing to shake. Instead Max just made a honking noise, and then I knew what he was all about. He was no more than the rest of us. Max was a hustler trying to look out for his family and keep the other geese at bay. Once we established that, I did like the rest of the cons: I fell in place and watched Max walk boldly up to me and take the bread out of my hand while I listened to the other cons say, "I

told you he was cool." In my mind, I knew that although Max looked different, he was still a living being that we should always love and respect as we would have others do to us.

05

SELECTED POEMS

DEREK MALIK LARAMORE, SR.

ARRESTED

Through all the drab and dreary contrast that
exists OFF in my confines, I find myself not
going out of my mind, but there has to be a way from your way;
because your way is so far away.
There is no other way than to put you away.

REALITY

Spinning around endlessly going through motions
of insanity
Looking about hopefully for the real
reality, reality is beautiful it is exceptional.

CREATE

Create a thing of beauty for all the world
to see, just like your father and mother
before you masters you were born to be.

HEALING

God is love, Love is willing; Love is not
killing; Love is living; Love is Forgiving.
Love is together and God is forever.

My writings are my life and

DIVING BOARD

My diving board was never slavery.
Slavery was my first time being kidnapped
and sold as if I were nothing more than
the flesh of an animal. All human existence
stopped that very day. I can smell the
blood, sweat and tears of my ancestors.
You tell me I am free because slavery
has been abolished now. No one was persecuted for the crime
that held
me in bondage for 400 years. My history
does not start in America. My
history started in the motherland Egypt
she was my wife and now you say I am free
I was never properly
Divorced.

the way I see the world.

06

IDENTITY

FATEEN JACKSON

A consciousness, gradually awakened, perceives its existence only through its environment, not fully aware of its asking: "What am I? Who am I? And, who are you?" Those hazy and vague questions get no real consideration, let alone sincere recognition, for a true identity.

Yet, others are naturally chosen to create and dictate one's identity without permission. Because impressionable minds are designed to heed those who came before them, thus, experience is collected through instruction, direction, correction, and action.

Then one's own curiosities, ponderings, and counselings are normally tested through trial and error, and, more trial and error, until, one's own idiosyncrasies are developed through development. However, still harboring some insecurities, usually, one's idea of oneself is an accumulation and imitation of synthetic versions of characteristics and, personalities from those who influenced them the most, some subtle, some not so. And much of who we are is in periodic flux, settling from time to time as this or maybe even that individual.

Ultimately, one's morals, values, and principles, which are all learned, governs identity and help shape one's character. But, even those are subject to be amended through further growth, understanding and unfolding.

Therefore I ask: "What is one's true identity?" I mean their untainted authentic selves, who is that? So, I question myself. Am I just an absolute fixed character with the need for adjustment? Better yet, am I who "you" say I am? If so, why should "I" be? Who will benefit the most, you or me? Well I say my true identity dictates that: "I AM what I AM; I AM who I AM; and I AM that I AM," without illusion or confusion, now...who are you?

I discovered spoken word poetry two years ago while I was housed in solitary confinement (The Hole) for my past gang affiliation. That unfortunate experience compelled me to pen this piece. This poem describes how a character is built from birth, and the realization that I'm ultimately the architect of my identity. I don't have to be locked inside someone else's perceptive box. Transformation and redemption are always possible.

SELECTED POEMS

RAHSAAN THOMAS

MY CONTRADICTIONS

Everybody helps me but nobody bothers
 I'm a man with a son, but I ain't a father
 I'm a son with no dad, a traveler with no bag
 I'm like water with no minerals,
 a soldier with no generals
 A general with no army,
 my own airstrike tried to bomb me!
 I'm a husband without a wife,
 a lover without the love of his life,

I have feelings, but I don't care, I'm broke but I still share, I'm
 loved without affection, I love without affection, I used to love
 without protection.

I'm black but my skin is light,
 I do wrong to achieve right
 I hate violence, but I always fight
 I have a rich brother who is jealous
 of a broke me, a mother I don't see
 Place to be, I can't be

I send birthday cards,
 but never get one on mines,
 I'm remembered but left behind.
 I hate Black Rob, but I like Whoa,
 I'm somebody with no say so
 It's not my fault, but it always costs me,
 I'm innocent, but the system lost me.
 I have a soul mate, that won't come see me,
 little cousins who don't know why they don't
 want to be me.

I have a million dollar ideas with no cash, I'm a baller with no

stash. I'm a martyr who's still living,
a Yogi, a Muslim, and a Christian.
I'm a materialistic revolutionary pushing
peace and love, who believes you need guns
to protect the doves. I did it, but I'm still not guilty, my
conscious is clean but my cell is filthy

I'm a man of God, but I live in hell,
I'm doing bad but feeling well.
I complain but I don't vote,
I swim but I don't float,
My life is crowded, but my heart is remote,
I gag but I don't choke,
I do what you won't. I haven't won,
but I will because I'm persistent,
I'm a living contradiction,
but at least I'm consistent.

INSTITUTIONAL: ONE BAD APPLE

All men are created equal, that's true indeed
But the constitution still isn't up to speed
3/5 of a man, they used to enslave us
2015, 1/3 they mass incarcerated us
Why do they hate us?

N.H.I.
Poverty and skin color why?
They let us die
No Humans Involved
The case may never get solved
Revolvers, revolvers
And now one is pointed at me
Police ain't never where they are supposed to be
While they do donuts for lunch
One Bad Apple spoils a whole bunch.

Shots go off, my little brother goes down
He looks human to me as his blood
spatters the ground
We got good grades in school
We never carried no tools
But when you're young and Black
That's that—all the police think they need to know
Jaded to how the streets go
They let the heats blow

And now I'm infected
Because my hood ain't protected.

Loop holes held open by the NRA
Make it easy to get guns to me
Armed and ready it won't happen again
Not to none of my next of kin
But sure enough two try
And sure enough one dies
By the gun in my hand
And my determination to take a stand
But am I standing in the wrong place?
Racing in the wrong race?

Surviving gangbanging caught with
the gat in the palm of my hand
They let him go like he part of the plan
Part of the clan
And life they one if given a sequel
Is sincere enough to uplift his people
Even though they found both their guns
In Iraq they found none

This ain't no riddle,
They weren't armed with skittles
I'm so sorry I killed that man, that's square biz
But if it wasn't self-defense, what the hell is.

George Zimmerman...Really?

I write to make meaning

from the ashes of life imprisonment.

08

I NEVER KNEW

ANTHONY "HABIB" WATKINS

This journey took

*me to a place far,
but yet so near*

a place

where knowledge

is king

and love is so sincere.

I never knew hate until I went through much pain,
and I never knew love until I understood love's aim.
I never knew anger until I put trust in men,
and I never knew joy until I found peace within.
I never knew sadness until I met a lonely man,
and I never knew happiness until he became my friend.
I never knew lies until they taught me about me,
and I never knew truth until I set myself free.
I never knew ignorance until I went to their schools,
and I never knew knowledge until I stopped being their fool.
I never knew peace until I had to go to war,
and I never knew life until I understood what war is for.
I never knew freedom until I went to the Pen,
and I never knew freedom until I found freedom within.
I never knew myself until I began to see, that I
would never know myself until I found Allah inside me.

When I learned that Allah blew His Spirit into the Soul of
Man, I went on a journey to try and understand.

I journeyed on this road with a conscience and open mind,
searching for the wisdom to make sense of these troubled
times.

This journey took me to a place far, but yet so near, a place
where knowledge is king, and love is so sincere.

**The message is twofold:
internal and external. The first
being double consciousness
in asserting oneself into a
western hegemonic patriarchal
system that has yet to totally
include African Americans; the
second being the war I have
participated in on the streets
in “our country ‘tis of thee,
great land of liberty” where the
African American is 54% of the
Prison Complex today.**

09

PAIN

JASON JONES AKA ALIAS

Pain is just weakness leaving the body
At least that's what the streets taught me
And look what it got me
Labeled a number with a release date that will make even Stevie
Wonder
I stumbled thru life
Decision made with bad precision
Thinking I knew it all
But the truth y'all
The pain I caused
Came from the pride I took in my flaws
So who's to blame
Me or my pain
I try to picture change
But my mind couldn't step outside of its frame
So I muted my pain
And succumb to my environment
Became a product cause,
that's how you survive in it

Fueled by mistrust and anger
I looked in the mirror and became a stranger
Now tell me, what's stranger than
A child growing up storing hate within
My hate within caused me to cause pain to men
Women, children, family and everyone around me
Ya, it had my vision cloudy
Even on a sunny day, when the skies was clear
I still couldn't see past that man in the mirror
But things change, and vision became vivid
The life I was living was way too explicit
No more games, no gimmicks
Learned if I invest in the future,
I can't pay the past a visit
See: I was given the wrong dictionary
Now I define pain the same way my victim felt it.
See, I was given the wrong dictionary
Now I define pain the same way my victim felt it.

When you allow yourself to feel,

you feel a lot more human.

10

GOD'S LOVE

PERFORMED BY DANNY HO
WITH DARRYL FARRIS, ALAN BROWN,
DWIGHT KRIZMA & ROBERT TYLER

It is not

*by chance
that the vast*

skies

and earth

are given to us



Chorus: The love of God is like the moon and stars. It lifts me high, there is nothing for me to repay. He leads me through the dark night so that I praise His love that is as big as the ocean. His love shines everywhere, washes away all sins. His love is great. I determine to offer my life to proclaim His love to the entire world.

God loved me from the beginning when the world had not yet come into existence. Who knows from where I came into the world. He did love me so I must sing songs to praise Him.

It is not by chance that the vast skies and the earth are given to us. It is His love. He created rivers and mountains. The wind blows, the rains drop, they resemble His words echoing inside each of us.

Today and tomorrow, He knows every single day. I entrust my life to our merciful God. Whether it is raining or shining, I always sing songs to praise Him and feel at peace.

Look up to the sky, at the moon and countless twinkling stars. Who dares to ask, from the lower earth to the higher sky, where God is? God is beside me, He follows me everywhere like a body and its shadow.

Many things about tomorrow
I don't seem to understand
'Cause I know who holds tomorrow
And I know who holds my hands
Because He took my sin away
Dark night has turned to day
Who dares to say?
How God's love is shown today
You look into the sky see the light see the light
Knowing that you're loved in His sight in His sight
He put the moon and stars high above high above
Shining in the night to show His love to show His love

Chorus: The love of God is like the moon and stars. It lifts me high, there is nothing for me to repay. He leads me through the dark night so that I praise His love that is as big as the ocean. His love shines everywhere, washes away all sins. His love is great. I determine to offer my life to proclaim His love to the entire world.

11

ROSES

ANTONIO GENOVESE

Red roses were her favorite, her name was also Rose,
and every year her husband sent them, tied with pretty bows.
The year he died, the roses were delivered by her door,
the card said, "Be my valentine," like all the years before.
Each year he sent her roses, and the note would always say,
"I love you even more this year, than last year or this day.
My love for you will always grow, with every passing year,"
she knew this was the last time that the roses would appear.
She thought he ordered roses in advance before this day,
her loving husband did not know that he would pass away.
He always liked to do things early, way before the time,
then, if he got too busy, everything would work out fine.
She trimmed the stems and placed them in a very special vase, then,
sat the base beside the portrait of his smiling face.
She would sit for hours in her husband's favorite chair,
while staring at his picture and the roses sitting there.
A year went by and it was hard to live without her mate,
with loneliness and solitude that had become her fate.
Then, the very hour, as on Valentines before,
the doorbell rang, and there were roses sitting by her door.
She brought the roses in and then just looked at them in shock,
then went to get the telephone to call the florist shop.
The owner answered, and she asked him if he would explain,
why would someone do this to her, causing her such pain.
"I know your husband passed away more than a year ago,"
the owner said, "I knew you'd call and you would want to know.
The flowers you received today were paid for in advance,
your husband always planned ahead, he left nothing to chance.
There is a standing order that I have on file down here,
and he has paid well in advance, you'll get them every year.
There is also another thing I think that you should know,
he wrote a special little card, he did this years ago.
Then should ever I should find out that he's no longer here,
that's the card that should be sent to you the following year."
She thanked him and hung up the phone, her tears now flowing hard,

her fingers shaking as she slowly reached to get the card.
Inside the card, she saw that he had written her a note,
then, as she stared in total silence, this is what he wrote.
"Hello, my love, I know it's been a year since I've been gone,
I hope it hasn't been too hard for you to overcome,
I know it must be lonely and the pain is very real,
for if it was the other way, I know how I would feel.
The love we shared made everything so beautiful in life,
I loved you more than words can say, you were the perfect wife.
You were my friend and lover, you fulfilled my every need,
I know it's only been a year, but please try not to grieve.
I want you to be happy even when you shed your tears,
that is why the roses will be sent to you for years.
When you get these roses, think of all the happiness
that we had together, and how both of us were blessed.
I have always loved you, and I know I always will,
but, my love, you must go on, you have some living still.
Please...try to find happiness while living out your days,
I know it is not easy, but I hope you find some ways.
The roses will come every year and they will only stop,
when your door's not answered, when the florist stops to knock.
He will come five times that day, in case you have gone out,
but after his last visit, he will know without a doubt
to take the roses to the place where I've instructed him,
and place the roses where we are together once again.

James Ferioli
Jeff Maria
Antonio Genovese
Folsom Prison 1988

MY MOTHER, THE GODESS

TIMBUKTU

She is born and raised in an upper class home with parents and siblings down in the Crescent City of New Orleans, Louisiana a well-known area Ponchartrain Park with expensive homes, cars, private golf clubs and families with money.

My Mother the Goddess

She becomes a lead singer for an all male band at age fifteen among males who should had played that big brother or father figure to her instead one of them a sexual predator get her pregnant.

My Mother the Goddess

Parents kicked her out of their home to maintain that upper class image.

My Mother the Goddess

She went and lived with an aunt who resided in a big white house with a big black piano inside a living room. An aunt whose husband once played music with well known musicians from the 30s and 40s and 50s down in New Orleans.

My Mother the Goddess

A few years later she met and married the man who many years later becomes

known as a dad and father figure to me.

My Mother the Goddess

That same marriage she gave birth
to a total of twelve children, four
girls and eight boys

My Mother the Goddess

She has been blessed to witness
each one of her children grow
into adulthood before moving out of her house.

My Mother the Goddess

The first time as a young adult
I am blessed to hear her sing during
a Sunday service inside my grandfather's
church. Wow! The gates of heaven
open and angels are dancing.

My Mother the Goddess

I am having dinner with my parents.
Dad brags about out living my mother.

My Mother the Goddess

That was funny and unbelievable
because he smoked cigarettes marijuana
and drank alcohol where mother does
none.

My Mother the Goddess

At sixty years of age my dad and
father died from lung cancer as a
result of smoking cigarettes and marijuana.
My Mother the Goddess

Life goes on for mother as a widow.
Through hard work she managed to build a much better life for herself
that had always been a dream to my deceased father. A life shared
with her lovely grandchildren.

My Mother the Goddess

December 26. The exact date she
is approaching eighty-five years
of age. I'm told she moves
about as if she's thirty-something.

My Mother the Goddess

She has always been a conscientious
human being, female, woman, mother
and queen of all the necessities that
constitute her as a goddess

My Mother the Goddess

Although three thousand miles
separate us plus the walls of
incarceration mother is so proud
of the man I have finally grown
into.

My Mother the Goddess!

**This piece was done in tribute
to and in honor of my mother
because the date of the event
was her birthday.**

13

ASCENDING TO HEAVEN

RICHARD D. LATHAN

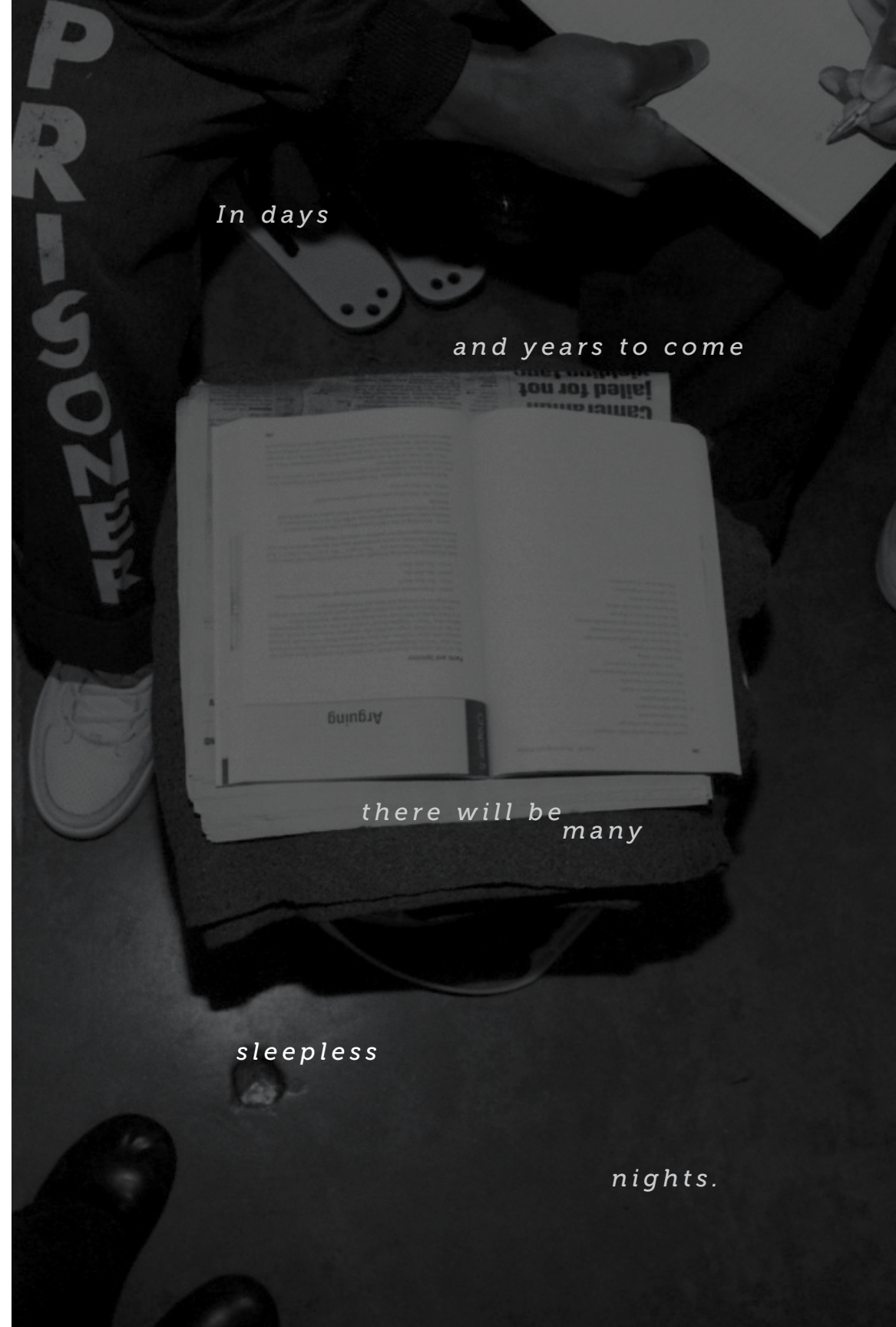
In days

and years to come

*there will be
many*

sleepless

nights.



They're ascending now
the sons and daughters you
always knew. When you gave
birth to them, you watched
them grow, you gave them all
unconditional love with true
ambitions that all of them
would become strong young men
and women.

They're ascending now to heaven,
their strength, memory and spirit
will forever live in you, console
you and humble you to the core.

In days and years to come there
will be many sleepless nights, your
hearts and souls will ache remembering
your children's love.

They're ascending now
they have been called home
to the house of the Lord to
get their wings. So all of them
can become the angels they always
have been to watch over you
and family.

**I chose to perform
this at open mic
night because I
can feel the pain of
losing someone that
I love so dearly. I
wanted the parents
of the children
of Sandy Hook
Elementary to know
that this my way of
giving them a big,
big hug.**

FOWL GAME

EDDIE "EDITO" DEWEAVER

It was the 'Day of Peace' at San Quentin and I observed the different activities on the yard. Some people were at tables making signs, some were walking, some were talking, while others were playing basketball, horseshoes, cards, or dominoes. However, I noticed some people were participating in illegal activity which brought them joy. No, I am not speaking about drugs or alcohol use, rather I am focused on a seemingly charitable event, which for reasons unbeknownst to me, has been criminalized. I must first confess that I too have participated in this activity. It is feeding the birds.

I can remember, when I was young, how my father took the family to the Oakland Zoo or Lake Merritt where the animals would eat right out of your hand. I did not notice it then, but now I see a lot of birds in competition for the crumbs. The sparrows get bullied by the pigeons, the pigeons by the Canadian Geese, the geese by the sea gulls, and somewhere in this hierarchy the ducks and crows come and go as they may.

On the yard, some people reserve their breadcrumbs for the birds that they have developed empathy for; while it

**I have stage fright,
but I know I am
amongst family,
both incarcerated
and free. I am on
alternate time, if
there is time. With
anxiety building
my name is called.
I dig into my piece
without looking up
at the audience.
Nobody has any
idea what this
piece is about,
so the element of
surprise is on my
side.**

is not natural that the small or handicapped birds can thrive, those less capable souls still need food to survive (maybe there is a young unhatched or hatched nestling in need of warmth and food). Deuteronomy 22:6-7 administers a blessing that one may prolong their days by taking care of young birds in a nest. While compassion is good for the heart, this is not the conclusion drawn on this day of peace.

On this day, I discovered extra bread being thrown away. When I gathered it all together, I had amassed an apple box full of bread. I decided to break the law as my empathy for the birds took over. I then threw bread on the baseball field and quickly dumped the whole 2x2x3 foot box of bread in the grass, quickly retreating to the track to watch. What I observed was altogether different than what was expected; I witnessed fowls of different feathers eating together. So satiated they were that they peacefully sat in the sun. Another seagull soared in from a distance and, spotting the mountain of bread, swooped down, frantically swallowing as much bread as he could. As the bread lump slowly descended his esophagus, this

seagull did not know what to make of the scene: a mountain of food around, with pigeons, ducks, seagulls and geese just relaxing in the grass together in peace. As this perplexed seagull took back to the sky in disbelief, I pondered what I had just witnessed.

There are fights that can occur in the pecking order for lack of crumbs, but with an abundance of food, all can enjoy peace, which may appear to newcomers as abnormal. This was the lesson that I learned on the day of peace. What a fowl game!?! I now have a new understanding of what it means to behave like an animal, and it is, ironically, a higher standard.

**The warmth of light laughter
from my brothers and sisters
welcomed me to look up,
but I only stole a quick
glance... I reflected about the
uniqueness of San Quentin,
how we are all blessed to
be here. At the conclusion, I
received a roar of applause as
people shot to their feet.**

SELECTED POEMS

A. KEVIN VALVARDI

CONTRASTS

Walking in circles,
 I look around and see,
 Against the backdrop
 Of a clear blue sky,
 A brand-new hospital building
 Next to an old dining hall roof;
 A modern jet airplane crossing
 The face of an ancient moon;
 A small prehistoric hillside lined
 With large contemporary homes;
 Contradictions of young and old
 All constantly surround me,
 Like the many men who walk
 Steadily by me each day—
 The worn out souls I see
 And pass along my way—
 Searching, seeking something,
 From an abundant nothing.
 Home, such a distant memory,
 Somewhere right outside these walls.
 I cannot take to the skies
 At the end of the day
 Like the ostentatious fat geese
 That walk about the grounds,
 Eating up the green grass
 Of the field of broken dreams,
 From sun-up 'til sun-down.
 Yet, I try not to lament
 My time as it slowly passes,
 And force myself to smile
 As I make my way forward—
 Just one more moment...
 One more precious day.
 I awake and breathe again,
 But what about tomorrow?
 I'm not lamenting;
 I'm just existing.
 How 'bout you?

MALALA

Small, yet so strong,
And so bold and bright,
Fighting for justice
And other girls' rights.

A voice of salvation
In the voice of a girl,
Speaking out for a nation;
Speaking out to the world.

Not to be silenced
Despite threats and attempts,
Now her voice is much louder
Than she ever dreamt.

Everyone's taken notice
Of her courage despite
The obstacles she's faced—
Her words are her might.

"I am Malala!"
people now say with pride,
as they hold up a hand
against those rights denied.

Her detractors can't win
In the end, 'gainst such might,
If all those who agree
Would stand up and fight.

Not with bullets or swords,
But with words and deeds,
So her message will have
meaning,
And all women will be freed.

I AM MALALA!

**This poem
is dedicated
to the young
Pakistani
girl, Malala
Yousafzai,
who survived
a gunshot to
the head for
speaking out
against the
Taliban and
other who
do not want
to allow girls
or women to
receive an
education. She
is a true hero.
I AM and FOR
MALALA!**

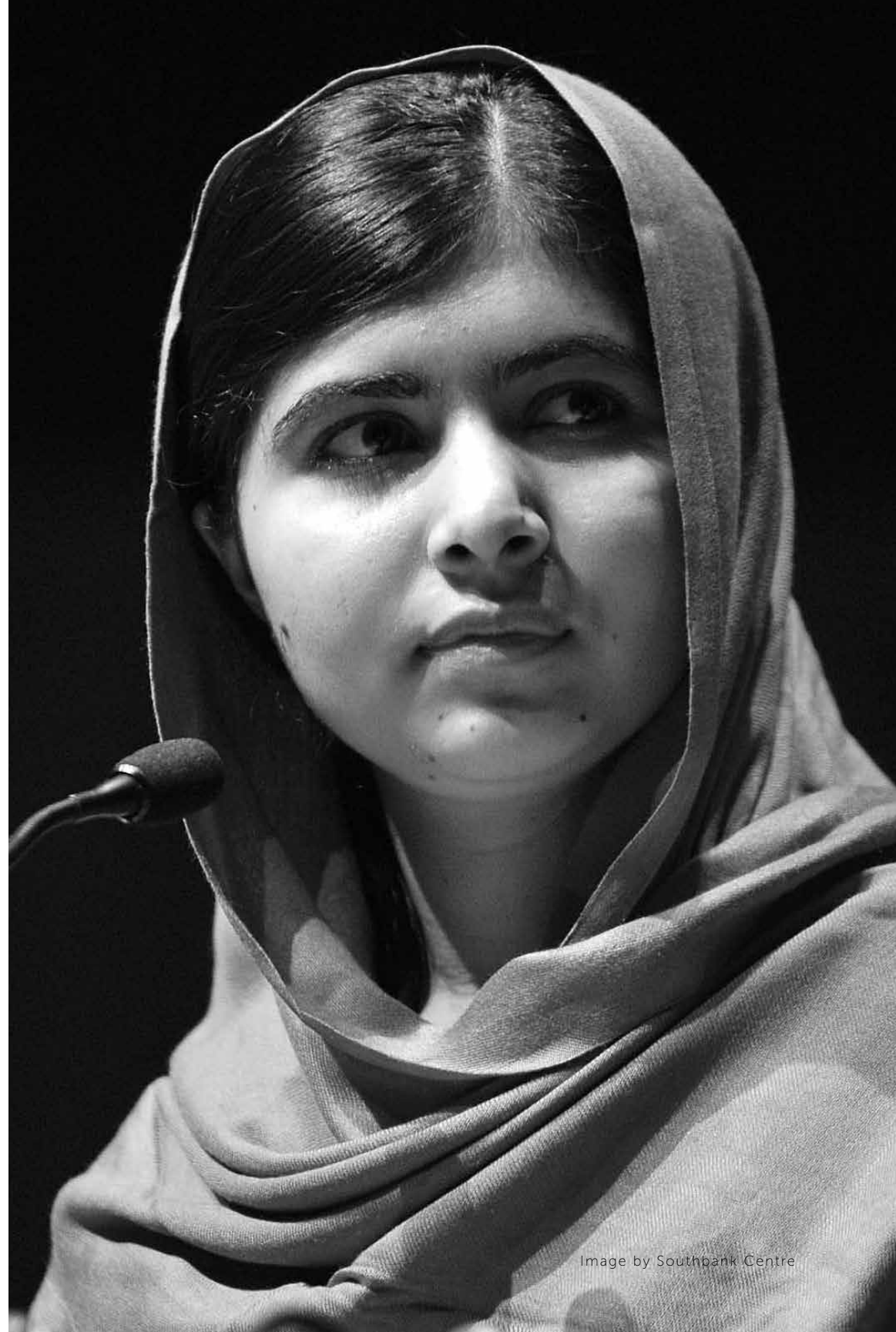
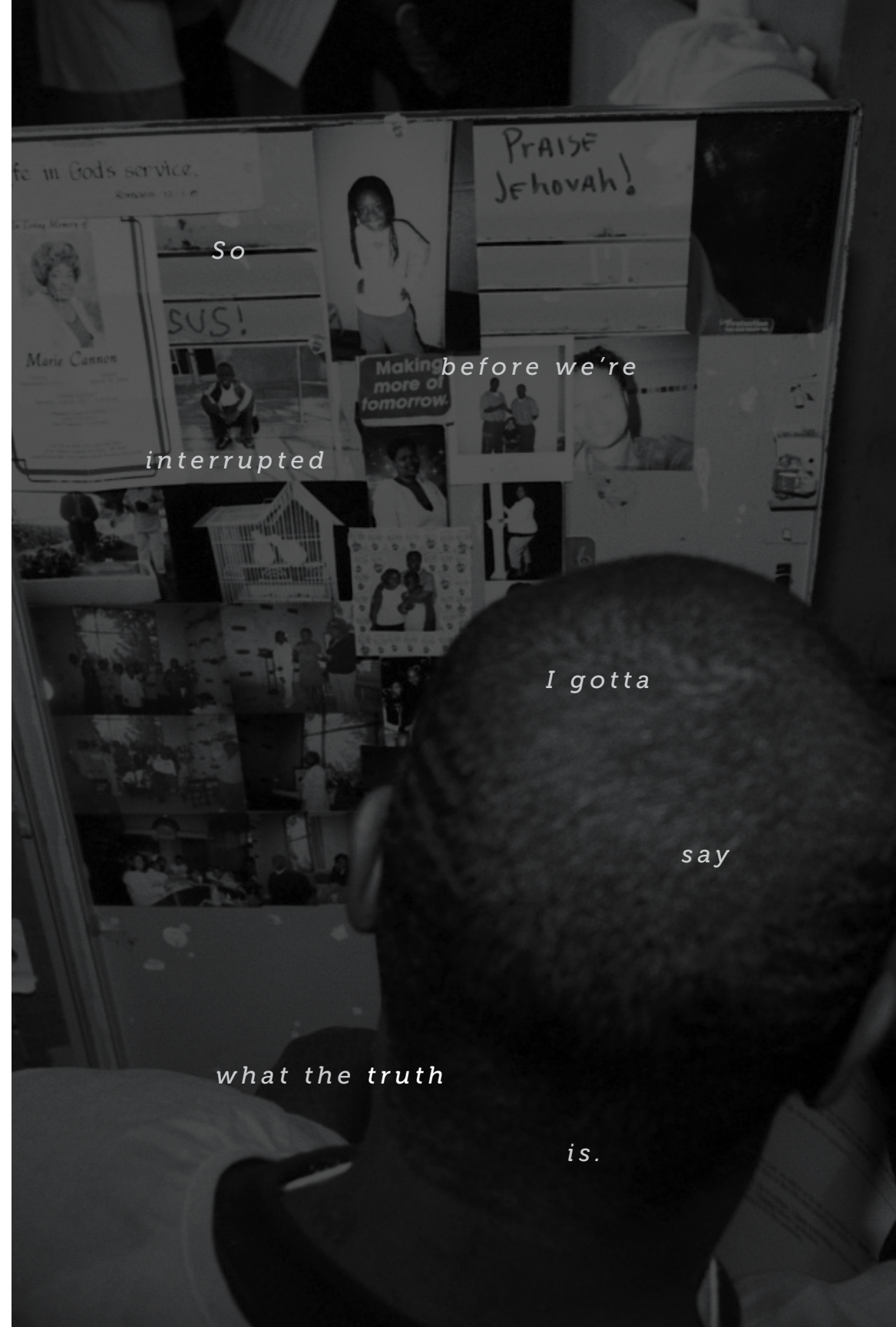


Image by Southbank Centre

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MORE THAN

LE'MAR "MAVERICK" HARRISON



So

before we're

interrupted

I gotta

say

what the truth

is.

Are dreams the lives we want, but are unable to live?
Why is it when we want what we can't have sometimes considered a sin?
Within this thought I'm tossin and turnin, tryna leave reality.
But my mind steady movin, can't seem to get you outta me.
How do we convey true feelings and speak of the unspoken
When the heart is beatin', afraid to be broken?
I'm open to what coulda been, but happy for what is.
You're my guilty pleasure but innocent, no judgment.
On both ends, I know that we are just friends, yet in
the love that has been started, I can't tell you where the lust ends.
Do my eyes tell you I want you, while tryna hide my desires?
If I did what I want to it might set our soul on fire.
So before we're interrupted, I gotta say what the truth is.
Every train of thought I have, when you pop up, I lose it.
Is the past just a story we tend to tell ourselves sometimes?
Or a place we put regrets for things not said and left behind.
In my eyes, what we are has no definition.
But I know that it is pure and born from only good intentions.
Every time that you would listen to my troubles and my woes,
a new place for only you inside my heart and mind would grow.
Truth be told, I wanted to listen,
Now can you tell me what your heart say?
All the lessons that you've learned,
Did you learn 'em all the hard way?
My heart aches...exposed, as our times come to an end.
Til we meet again,
I'll always consider you more than...

This piece was written to help me express all the feelings social confines and personal insecurities wouldn't allow me to say; a sort of “declaration of thanks” (if you will) to a very special someone who showed me that the measure of true friendship isn't about how you feel about someone else, it's about how they make you feel about yourself.

LETTER ON FORGIVENESS

FRANKIE SMITH

Dear Zachary & Amy Marie:

This is a letter addressed to both of you describing how I have changed and who I have become while incarcerated. But, before I dive into my own personal growth, I would like to tell you both how sorry I am for leaving you without a father. I do realize how much pain I have caused and how angry you both must be. Unfortunately, I cannot change what has happened in the past, I can only learn from my bad decisions. I will not ask for your forgiveness; instead I will hope that through time and my efforts to make amends, you both will find in your heart a way to forgive me.

I am in no way expecting an instant relationship with either one of you. I know the years have taken you both into adulthood and you are no longer the teenagers I left behind. So, with that thought embedded in my mind I hope in time we can become a family. I am proud that despite my absence you have become caring and loving people. For that I feel truly blessed. You both know that prison is a place where darkness, despair and sadness seem to be normal way of life for most. But, because of my belief in God and my refusal to accept these negative emotions as my own, and, of course, my love for you both, I have used this time in prison not to cry the blues or feel sorry for myself. Instead I have used this time to grow in my understanding of who I really am and where I went wrong.

Through this process I have come to realize that I am worthy of a second chance and I pray that you both will feel the same way. My accomplishments while in prison have allowed my self-confidence to grow. The self-confidence that I possessed on the streets, but lost because of my alcoholic behavior is back stronger than ever.

What I want you both to know is that I am sober in my mind and body. And I am willing to prove myself to you both by my actions not merely through my words. Also, through my self-examination I have found that my moral core and values have not changed. I am the child God created and I have found my way to my true self. My journey has not been an easy one, nor did I expect it to be. I have dealt with the physical and mental

stress of cancer. The uncertainties of life, or should I say the thought of death. I have missed moments like your high school graduation, your birthdays, the holidays. I have missed your smiles, your laughter. I haven't been there to dry your tears. But, I have always been there in spirit and not a day goes by that I don't think of how much I love you both and how blessed I am to be your father.

With these claims of who I am now compared to who I was I hope we can have a relationship based on trust and love. I am willing to share any of my experiences in prison with you both. I know I am not the only one who has changed and I would like to take the time to get to know you both. I promise that nothing will take me away from you until my time on earth is over. I truly believe that I can make a positive difference in your life.

I know they say you cannot make up for lost time, but what we can do is make our time together special. I need your help and support in dealing with the new world. I also need time to myself, as you can only imagine prison is a zoo of madness with no privacy whatsoever. I need your trust, your guidance, and most importantly, your patience. I know it is never too late to be the father I have longed to be. I ask you both from the bottom of my heart to please give me the opportunity. God willing the day will come when we will be together; until then, remember I love and miss you both very much, and that prayers are with you always.

Stay healthy and safe and always follow your dreams.
God Bless you always.

Love,
Dad

**I wrote this piece to
apologize to my children
and to assure them of the
changes I've made as a man
and a father.**

BIOGRAPHIES

A. Kevin Valvardi is an inmate artist and poet serving a life sentence in California. He has been writing poetry since the age of nine and began teaching himself to draw while in prison. As part of San Quentin's Journalism Guild, he has written a number of articles for the San Quentin News. He has also written several children's stories and began learning to write short fiction and nonfiction stories in 2012. Kevin hopes to write a story about life prior to his crimes and incarceration and to have his poetry and stories published one day.

Anthony Watkins is humbled to be part of Patten University Project at San Quentin. He is working toward confidence and deserting the cockiness he exhibited in the past.

Antonio Genovese is a student in the Prison University Project's College Program.

Danny Ho is a student in the Prison University Project's College Program.

Derek "Malik" Laramore Sr. is a poet, published journalist, writer of urban books and a student with the Prison University Project.

Eddie "Edito" Deweaver submitted a poem as his bio: Born in the nineteen-seventies/Childhood trauma, first memories. Extreme mathematical skills/And a hurt literary will. Now just perceiving for myself/Prison universities are full of wealth. Self-esteem not a distant dream/Education now proving me. Happy to be alive today/Striving to make a better way.

Emile Deweaver is a 2015 Pushcart nominee with creative work in a dozen publications, including The Lascaux Review, Frigg, Punchnel's, and The Rumpus. You can find his work on his website and by visiting his monthly column "Good Behavior" at Easy Street. He is a co-founder of Prison Renaissance, an organization that uses art and community to create a culture of transformation to end cycles of incarceration.

Fateen Jackson Sr. is 40 years young and has been incarcerated for 18 years. To view more of his spoken word poetry, search for Fateen Jackson on youtube.com.

Frankie Smith was born in Sacramento, California on January 12th, 1956 and is the oldest of six children. He grew up playing baseball and is now the head inmate coach of the San Quentin Giants. He is a two time cancer survivor and a proud father of two adult children, Zachary Lee, 29, and Amy Marie, 27.

James Vick, the youngest of six children, was born April 6, 1953, and grew up in the poverty-stricken Greenville, Mississippi Delta area. Survival and illiteracy were excruciating and continuously humiliating struggles. He performed "Overcoming" with the hopes of encouraging as well as inspiring those being held captive in the web of illiteracy to ask for help today and not wait as long as he did.

Jason Jones aka Alias is a student in the Prison University Project's College Program.

Lionel Scott thinks it is very important to always know the whole story in any and all situations. This is one of the things he has learned from the PUP program.

Le'Mar "Maverick" Harrison is a dreamer by heart and a performer by nature whose goal in life is to spread love and joy to anyone who crosses his path.

Mesro Coles-El is a student in the Prison University Project's College Program.

Rahsaan Thomas' spoken word pieces are inspired by his life. He co-founded prisonrenaissance.org, writes for San Quentin News, and has been featured on CNN's United Shades of America with Kamau Bell and on NBC Bay Area.

Richard Lathan was born and raised in the city of Los Angeles. He doesn't know where he got his poetic writing from, but he likes to write what naturally comes to him with real meaning and love.

Timbuktu is a student in the Prison University Project's College Program.



Artwork by J.S. Long

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