Your teachers
Are all around you.
All that you perceive,
All that you experience,
All that is given to you
or taken from you,

All that you love or hate,
need or fear
Will teach you—
If you will learn.

Your teachers
Are all around you.
All that you perceive,
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All that you love or hate,
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-Lauren Olamina / Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*
About the Women of Wisdom (WoW)

The Women of Wisdom Book Club meets every other week, year-round, inside the Secure Female Facility at Hazelton Correctional Center, a federal prison in Bruceton Mills, West Virginia. For over three years, incarcerated women and a few volunteers from the English Department at West Virginia University have been gathering in a circle to discuss books and work on writing projects. In a wonderful and chaotic brainstorming process that culminates in a vote, we decide what books to read. Our first selection in October 2014 was Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred*. It remains a touchstone for our conversations. This is WoW’s first collection of writing. We are delighted to include the work by current book club members as well as former members who are now released. We are grateful to the Women of West Virginia University Enrichment Fund for supporting this collection and to the Appalachian Prison Book Project for mobilizing this dynamic learning community.

Katie Vogelpohl, Beth Staley, Katy Ryan

WoW BOOK CLUB

Words come together to form the pages of this book.

One, two, three, I think I’m getting hooked.

With my book light in hand, I’m hiding in the nook.

Began, just a little leery of this group that’s set apart.

Open hearts & open minds received me from the start.

Ostrich-like behavior accepted for the faint of heart.

Kindling the inner gifts that make us so smart.

Conversing on what we read or what we thought.

Listening and learning…skills that can’t be bought.

Understanding ourselves deeper…lessons that can’t be taught.

Believing in oneself… I hope that’s the lesson caught.

Tanisha
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The Clouds
by Carletta

you ever look into the sky,
as you stare in the clouds they
reach deep into your mind

you stare at them until you
are removed from the world,
your body begins to rest on
each fluff

you relax as you feel the comfort
under your body,
your body moves back and forth
as if you are resting on a wave

you compare the feeling to
the day you became saved,
your body filled with the love
of our father

you knew without a doubt you
were safe,
while on that cloud you knew
for a fact you in his place

on this mountain the clouds take
you away,
into a place where you aren’t
treated as a stray

into a place of purity and
peace,
all the pain and suffering at
once deceased

at least for as long as you
reside on that cloud,
you can live on it until reality
hits again loud

until life shakes back into a place,
and prison begins to peek around
the corner picking up the pace
again

you run back to the clouds,
running to escape the prison
sounds
**Slavery**
by Carletta

I think of slavery being more than a black Annie,
I think of slavery being more than vermin wounds

I think of slavery as being more than a prostitute making a dollar,
I think of slavery being like a lost child in a dungeon, or a little boy with a chest box with no toys

It’s not just about color because now all races make a slavery noise
In prison, we slave for 10 cents an hour

No matter the color, we all use the same shower,
No matter the race, we all have the same power

Powerless like a bike tilting on a rock,
Or a woman walking in the rain with heels but no socks

Yes, our African Americans suffered for years,
Still decades later the suffering is still near

Instead of African Americans, it’s all,
Whites, Mexicans, Latinos, Blacks in the prison
System WE All fall

Fall powerless and why,
Cause unlike the “slaves” they stood by
Stood with pride, even when they were surrounded by weapons

Some say they should have stood up, but I give them my blessings

In the end, Justice was served like that bike that didn’t fall over,
Or that chest that didn’t hold a toy

Even though it looked like death was at the door,
A way out screamed before they hit the Floor

There is always a way of escape and nothing ever looks as it is,
When you see me, know that I am deeper than I appear

When you open the box, know it’s full,
And that child you see will see the light soon.
**Pain**  
by Carletta

Pain can kill you or build you,  
Pain can tear you apart or put you together

Pain can make you round  
Pain can slim you down

Pain can take a turn for good,  
it even can make you more understood

Your pain can heal her pain,  
Her pain can change his name

His pain can open her eyes,  
Her eyes can read his cries

Her pain can turn into shame,  
Her shame can cause his pain

His pain can turn into his Glory,  
Her pain can tell a painful story

While his pain is heard by many,  
Her pain is read by plenty

God is in the midst of their pain,  
Using it to heal many people in Shame

Building him and her up by their story,  
Now her pain and his pain Is called Glory

Her pain built her up,  
His pain put him on top

God’s goal was to make their pain stop,  
Make their pain a living crop

It bloomed into something special,  
Now look at them you can tell  
They’re both God’s vessel
Disappearing of the Sun
by Carletta

Sometimes we have to hit rock bottom to rise,
Sometimes we have to suffer to win the prize

Sometimes we walk in our faith blind,
We look straight because we know God’s behind.

Even though at one point we were bold,
We screamed we will sin ’til we old

Stealing, Robbing, fighting, fornicating, and much more,
We did it boldly ’til that day God come knocking on our filthy door.

Took a prison bid for most of us to see,
Can you say loudly that God helped you and me?

Helped change attitudes
Turned you into purity again and turned
You from always being nude

Made you never wanna commit a crime,
I think we can say thanks God for sitting me on my behind

Thanks for the threshold
My old life has been sold

My new life has begun,
Now I don’t have to hide out until the disappearing of the sun.
Choices
by Carletta

Can you look through the tears of a man,
can you see what lies behind the tears of a woman

Rape, hurt, death, marriage,
or he just tired of being a street savage

The fast life only lasts for a short time,
It’s only fun when you young committing crimes

Once you old and you look back,
you wasted so many years taking people’s stacks

Started off as a child taking lunch snacks,
Then as a teenager robbing the dope packs

Now you see how you wasted time,
Wasted time committing dumb crimes

Sitting in prison wondering why,
thinking in spurts that you’d rather die

Shedding tears that fall from your eyes,
losing loved ones while being the wall without saying goodbye

If it’s one thing you can say,
It would be put God first and leave the crimes to the sinners

become a winner and reach for the stars,
If you don’t you may get too far too far onto the wrong path,
Then it’ll be too late as you feel
God’s wrath

Stuck between a cell and tears,
facing your biggest fears

Will you see life again or die
in Jail,
Will you make it to heaven or
go straight to hell
Chapter 1: “Follow the drip”

My shoulders tensed up every time I felt the heat against my neck. I hated getting my hair straightened. The hot comb did wonders to my nappy roots, but the heat burned as if I had jumped in a grill of hot coals head first. “Ahhh,” I screamed as the hot comb touched the tip of my ear.

“Girl, come sit down now and shut up,” mom yelled as she stood with the hot comb in one hand and the other hand on her hip. I didn’t even realize that I had jumped up out of the chair until she yelled at me. “Run,” was the only thing that I could hear running through my mind. I took off through the house and clean out the front door. I had enough of that comb and my scalp did too. “Get back here, Nute. I’m going to whoop your ass!” I could hear her yelling from a distance. My friend’s (Mills) house was five minutes down the road walking, but since I was running, it took me no more than two minutes to reach her house. Mills lived with her G’ma, sister, and her cousin (Ray) at the end of E. Lane St. I lived at the top of E. Lane St. It was the first place we moved to when we left Wake Forest less than a year ago. Even though we were in the flat-out ghetto, I was happy to be outta the house we lived in on N. Taylor St. in Wake Forest.

It was haunted and I believed that with all my heart. I’d seen Freddy Krueger, clowns, and even gold statues at that house. Now, twenty minutes away my only fear was this damn hot comb that I felt every week. “Girl, what’s wrong with you?” Mills said as I flew into her yard. I was out of breath like I had just ran a marathon. It felt like I did too, because I could barely respond to Mills’ question. My chest moved rapidly up and down, and all I could do was lean over and place my hands on my knees until I caught my breath. “I left, Mills. I had to go,” I replied in a rasp. “You left where?” she responded confusedly. We were only six years old. Mills was a week younger than I, but when our parents wasn’t around we thought we were eighteen. “That comb, Mills. I can’t take it. I wanna…”

Before I could get the word out, my mom appeared in Mills’ yard.” “Let’s go. Now. And I mean Now!” she said in a stern voice. The way she sounded, I knew she was mad, but she held it in until we began to walk back home. “So you tryna run away now over a damn comb?” she asked. “Momma, it hurt. Please give me a Foe; I don’t want to get hot combed again please,” I cried, not only because I was serious, but I felt my butt stinging already from the whooping I was about to get. I became confused when she busted out laughing. I looked up at her with my head titled, waiting for her to explain why she was laughing at me. And I was serious; I no longer wanted to see a hot comb another day of my life. “It’s just for me, Nute, and I’ll think about it, but, in the meantime, if you ever pull some shit like that again, I’m going to tear your ass up so good you gone wish you never had a ass,” she said staring me dead in my eyes as we walked to our house.

The next day was the happiest day ever for me. My brothers and I woke up to sausage, eggs, pancakes, and grits. My brothers were eleven and three and for the most part, we got along fine. Well at least when mom was around we did anyway. My mom had a total of six kids. The two oldest had died. One from SIDS, and the other from pneumonia. My brother (Kenneth) that died from SIDS died before I was born and (Rico) died at nine when I was a baby. (Jeremy) was five, and he remembered Rico really well. My mom said at Rico’s funeral something changed in Jeremy’s eyes as she knew Rico’s death had a major impact on him, which explained why he was so protective of my little brother and I. My brother (Rabbit) who was right under Jeremy, lived with his dad in Riley Hill,
NC. Riley Hill was about thirty minutes from us. His dad was very wealthy and could take care of him better, mom would tell us when we asked about our brother. His dad drove long distance trucks around various states. He was definitely more stable than my mother was. “Jeremy, you gotta watch your brother while I take Nute to get a perm. The cab will be here in a minute. Nute, hurry up and eat so we can go,” mom stated as we sat at the table eating. “Okay” Jeremy replied in a huff. He was upset that mom was making him watch (Shorty). He had plans on seeing his girlfriend, Isha. Mom was with Shorty’s dad, but he worked for waste industries, so he was always at work during the day. They had a rocky relationship, but the love they had for each other keep them together. “Isha, you know I want you so bad…” I sang as I ran out the kitchen picking at my brother. He tried to grab me as I ran out the kitchen, but I ran in laughter behind my mom. I was so happy to get a perm. Or so I thought until the hair dresser put the cream crack to my scalp and my head exploded in pain. “It burns, Ma. It burns,” I cried. “Yea, now you wish you had that hot comb, don’t you?” She giggled. “No ma’am. Just cut it off. I wanna be bald.” I didn’t know that within the next two weeks I would be a few inches from really being bald. The hair dresser didn’t wash all the perm out when she did it, and when my mom washed my hair two weeks later, hair fell into the sink in clumps. Getting a perm was the worst decision ever made. Two weeks of glamour now felt like a lifetime of pain. Mom tried fixing it by putting liquid activator in my hair, but at school the next day, I would learn that that was a bad idea as well.

I got up for school the next morning. As I rose up from the bed, I noticed my neck and pillow was wet. The activator had dripped throughout the night. I tried patting it dry so that it wouldn’t drip at school. When I arrived to the bus stop, everybody stared at me, saying nothing. Mills didn’t even say nothing; she just stared. “What dang?” I asked, rolling my eyes in frustration. Jerry curls was in style at the time, so I didn’t understand what was the looks for. As I looked around, all the other girls had pony tails with bows or beads, but no Jerry curls. “Ok, maybe it’s only in style for grownups,” I thought to myself. I noticed that once the bus came, everyone waited for me to walk first. I took a step on the bus, and I could hear one of the kids saying, “Follow the drip. Follow the drip.” I stopped and looked back, but it only made things worse. They all started laughing. I then noticed why once I felt cold liquid hit my neck repeatedly. I sat down at the first seat, crossed my arms, and looked out the window. I was pissed. I couldn’t stop the activator from dripping, and all my peers thought it was funny. I wanted to jump off the bus and run home, grab my Chuckee doll, and hide in my closet. Once we arrived at school, I ran off the bus into the building to breakfast. (Danus) a boy that rode my bus came up to me and touched my shoulder. “What?” I said, snatching away. “Dang, I just wanted you to know that you left some of your juice on the bus,” he busted out laughing, as he high-fived his friend (Keith).

I stood there on the verge of tears. I just wanted to go home. I hated being in school, and at this time, I hated life. I couldn’t wait to get home to mom. No more activator. She would wash it out and let me wear a frow until my hair grew back, especially once she realized that I was being picked on. If I told Jeremy, he would go to the school and beat up all the kids over me. If mom didn’t wash out the activator, that would leave me to tell Jeremy. I couldn’t wait to get home to my mom. School couldn’t be over fast enough.

“Ma, they picking on me. Please wash this juice stuff out,” I said as I ran through the door. “What are they saying, Nute?” “They said follow the drip, you left something, put a match to that and you gone explode. Ma, please wash it out,” I cried. “Come on girl,” she said, shaking her head. “I should go to that school, but Imma wash it out and you can just wear a frow until it grows back,” she explained, getting the shampoo products together. I laid back on the counter as she washed my hair.
The next day, the kids wasn’t as mean, but actually nicer. Mills even talked to me, and she acted as if yesterday never happened, and so did I. When I got to class, (Theo) and (Tyrone) was there waiting for Mills and I. They were twin brothers, and they was Mills and I boyfriends. Theo and Tyrone looked exactly alike, and sometimes it was hard to tell them apart, especially when their mom dressed them alike. Today was one of them days that their mom dressed them alike. I went up to who I thought was my boyfriend and kissed him on the forehead and hugged him then pecked him on the lips. His eyes grew big, and I realized I had kissed Mills’ boyfriend. I felt a gush of wind coming, but by the time I looked to see what it was, Mills’ hand went against my face and she pushed me so hard I fell into the blinds and the blinds fell on my head. We began fighting. As I swung at Mills, she pulled at my frow and swung at me. I wished I had activator in my hair; maybe her hands wouldn’t have had such a tight grip. The teacher grabbed us, breaking up the fight. She escorted us to the principal’s office where our parents had to pick us up. We were suspended for three days, and I knew mom was going to be mad, but when she came she wasn’t mad. She figured I got fighting because of the kids picking, and there was no way I was gone tell the truth about what really happened. The next three days was going to be relaxing with mom and my little brother.

I didn’t know those was just thoughts and God had something in store for us the next afternoon. Something that would change our family completely for the rest of our life.

Chapter 2: “The Fire”

“Hey, I need you to bring me some Kerosene as soon as you can. I’ve run my bath water, so hurry before it gets cold,” I heard my mom say as she walked out of the bedroom into the living room where my brother and I was sitting watching t.v. I knew that she was talking to the cab driver. He was our “special” cab driver, which meant he was assigned to us. He took us anywhere we needed to go and brought us whatever we needed for a small fee.

Within ten minutes, I heard a horn outside the house. “Nute, go get the kerosene from (Mr. Wilkerson),” she yelled from what sounded like the kitchen. I got up and went to the door where Mr. Wilkerson met me with a red jug full of yellowish-brown liquid. I took the jug in both hands and took it into the living room, leaving Mr. Wilkerson at the door. “Thank You!” I screamed as I stumbled away. I placed the jug beside the heater, and returned back to the couch beside my brother. “Thank you, Nute,” Mom said, grabbing the jug from the floor. I was so into the television, I didn’t even pay attention to her putting the kerosene in as I normally did.

Woosh! When I looked up, I saw flames begin to take over the chair and the bar that sat behind the heater. Mom grabbed the chair and began swinging it in the air as though she was playing a game of baseball with no baseball, but only the bat.
When I Found Out
Jessica

“That’s why your mother gave you up for adoption because you’re ugly,” my playmate and enemy, Dominique, a 10-year-old boy screamed at me.

We were stopped on our bikes at the top of the hill to the street I lived on. I froze and felt both fear and confusion rush through my veins.

“No I’m not! What are you talking about?” I countered, though deep inside I knew in my bones it was true.

Everything in that moment came together, made sense. The whole 8 years I had been on planet Earth I had felt deep within me that something was off, a bit askew. I knew then why I felt like an alien in my house. Why I looked so different. Why I never exactly fit in with my family. That was the exact moment I felt my fragile identity fragment. What meager, confused sense of self I somehow managed to construct was fractured immediately. I laid on the pavement, shattered beneath the spokes of my bicycle wheels. I choked back tears. I had never experienced this level of mortification before.

“Yes, you are! You’re adopted! That’s why your mom got rid of you! Your mom and dad told mine,” he taunted me, laughing with a spiteful grin.

“You’re a liar, Dominique,” I screamed in protest and sped off on my bike, desperate to get away from him, from the situation, and from the unknowable truth that was suffocating me from the inside out.

I pedaled hard and fast, not knowing where I was going. Just knowing I needed to escape.
How I Breathe
by Celeste

Every once in a while
my breath is shallow,
my heart is heavy
my eyes are wet.
I’m aware of what brings this on
but there’s no way
I would avoid these tears
they come with each
heartfelt letter
to my mother & my dear bother
So I breathe
through the emotions
I breathe through;
my mind wondering why it was meant
for me to be away
for so very long
For as long as I can remember
I’ve been taught to breathe
THROUGH THE PAIN
I’ve been unstoppable; fearless
I’ve always known
I could do anything
breathing my way THROUGH
In gymnastics, ballet
crossfit, underwater diving
making my way back up to the surface
diving off a cliff
even in sex
but this, this 30-year sentence
can I simply breathe my way
through this?

Here is how I breathe each day;
counting my blessings
focusing on those blessings
and all
the abundant possibilities
that each day brings
When I look around me
instead of focusing on
who I don’t see
my precious family
I see all of these women
who are part of the same
big world
as me.
I open up my heart to them
Sometimes I help them breathe.
“Life shrinks or expands with our courage” – Anais Nin
by Celeste Mónet Blair

On a beautiful sunny day—okay in Texas, this means your sundress sticks to you and the leather seat of your car can be wet—nonetheless, the sun was shining, and there was a sense of serenity in the air. I walked up to the opening at the Quick Sack and noticed a stranger standing by a motorcycle who seemed so familiar.

“Nice day for a ride,” I said.

“I’d sure take you,” he replied.

“Not today, but thanks.”

All day, the brief conversation stayed with me.

Our bodies are electric. We are energy, and the connections of our lives are as long as art.

I once gave a talk and wrote words about the day my daddy died. I remember describing the way I felt, as if I’d been connected to an umbilical cord that reached to him, and that through this cord I drew my strength, my grand sense of who I am.

And now, as I’ve recently been connected with my son, that cord lives on and flows in a fresh direction.

Six days ago, when I first received the email telling me that the child I surrendered 30 years ago (into the arms of another woman) had found my parents, an entire new range of emotions surfaced.

So many things ran through my head. Nick. His name is Nick. I couldn’t sleep that night. There were too many questions. In the night, I became obsessed with his height. The next day, okay—he’s 6’3”. Great, beautiful. Then came the letter. I sat down and told him what was on my heart.

The moment in history I most wanted to share was the time I last held him in the hospital. I can’t remember ever in my life trying so hard to memorize something. As I held him, I tried to breathe him in. For so long, I studied the lines and curves and feel of him. And then he was gone. Since that day, I’ve been HYPERAWARE of the vast hole that was left in my soul.

Last week, in an instant, it was filled, and it’s as if we were never apart.

And now that we’ve compared notes, I know, it was him at the store on that beautiful sunny Texas day.
Rain
by Celeste

It was raining the day I buried my Daddy.
Mud sloshed all around
My black patent shoes were splattered
and somewhere, at the bottom,
of the hole, worms were making
ready to facilitate his large wooden
casket.
I was washed out.
I drown myself in booze and
drugs and men.
Now the rain refreshes me.
**Fire Burns**
by Celeste

When I was young
my mother only, gently
told me not to touch the fire
my father always encouraged me
**TO EMBRACE THE BLUE FLAMES**
of life.
Now that I’m older
Embellished in the scars
I’m reminded that life is meant
to be a balancing act.
I’ve literally burned my house down
so many times.
What mattered most was my garden
Out back
bringing to this world the opposite of fire.
The compost pile slowly decays
**microorganisms busy yet relaxed.**
Everything I’d ever had
or have ever worked for
is gone
**UP IN SMOKE.**
I mastered the art of mind travel while lying on the hot pavement in Central Texas in the middle of summer, a hostage of the state. I was grounded from the beach grounded from the country club pool grounded from cool cocktails and sexy bikinis grounded from all things that made Texas summers tolerable. For me, the summers of my life had been more than tolerable, they’d been fantastic. I drew upon my vast reservoir of those great memories as I lay in my white cotton, convict-made shorts & top bearing an orange tag that labelled me by name and offender number. I closed my eyes and transcended into the cool water. I was no longer in prison. I realized that day that captivity was a state of mind.

\[ \text{A MAN OF GENIUS MAKES NO MISTAKES} \]
\[ \text{HIS ERRORS ARE VOLITIONAL} \]
\[ \text{AND ARE THE PORTAL OF DISCOVERY} \]
James Joyce 1922

I noticed the beads of sweat dropping, one by one, to form a quick pool on the asphalt beneath me. I saw myself turn entirely to LIQUID. I became one with the deepest oceans — miles from any significant body of water.

My Search for Soul Satisfaction

There is a scripture in the Bible, Exodus 21:5&6 pertaining to the law of the slave guaranteed freedom after a period of 6 years. His master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the doorpost and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever. Sometime around 1800 BC, this was written. Nearly 4000 years later, my life was forever changed by these words.

In 2013, when my husband Samuel suggested that I participate in a ceremony encompassing this ancient ritual; I had been sober for many years. I mentally prepared myself for so many various relapse triggers. I was completely blindsided by this catastrophe. My refusal to participate in this crazy activity created a ripple effect.

A ripple that led me here, writing sketches of my story from Federal Prison.
My days spent as a Deaconess at the House of Yahweh were the most peaceful days I can remember in all my life. It's hard to write about and as I think back to those first months; no one, family or friends, understood what I’d found there. Pastor Hawkins always said that when you come to hate the world, you’d come to love the House of Yahweh. I was sold. The world had let me down.

My blessing has always been my curse. As a small child, I had visions, visions like those described in Revelations. When people lied to me, I’d hear the truth. As I grew older, I would sometimes freak people out knowing what was going to happen before it happened.

The messages from Pastor seemed in line with my earliest visions — visions of a world corrupted and defiled, filled with hatred and unkindness.

When I entered the House of Yahweh, I’d come to distrust everything. I was freaked out by stories of our food, appalled by the treatment of humans and animals. I was disgusted by all the scientific debauchery disturbing our once harmonious planet.

Christianity had let me down.

Everything had turned to plastic.

I couldn’t breathe.

In the HOY, the women gave me the space to breathe. They spoke in hushed tones…they found joy in the simplest things. They helped me find a depth within myself.

I remember reading somewhere that the healthiest women, those who lived the longest on this planet, were those who ate from a garden and had a sense of purpose. I sensed this among the women of the HOY, but I’d yet to discover precisely what that purpose was.

I am haunted by the idea that this break in human civilization caused by the discovery of the scientific method, may be irreparable. Though I love science, I have the feeling that it is so much against history and tradition that it cannot be absorbed by our civilization.

MAX BORN 1965

Samuel was kind and smart. He was thoughtful and slow to respond. He invited me to the House of Yahweh for one of the Great Feasts. I fell in love. The people of the House of Yahweh follow the 613 laws of the Old Testament, which means they celebrate the Feasts of the Old Testament, and whereas all of the members aren’t always present each Sabbath, they do flock to the middle of nowhere in Texas four times a year. One of my favorite duties was picking up women at the airport from all over the world who had come to celebrate.

The HOY is, at its core, 40 acres. As I drove near, I noticed, on the surrounding vast acres of land, a few very large houses with strange platforms built up, like watchtowers. I later found out that these were used to watch the cycle of the moon, to spot the new moon. According to Scripture, this is how you are to set the dates of the feasts.
I suppose what you must know is that I had been living in this hypocritical, temporary world among people best described as surface dwellers. The people of the House of Yahweh were so rich with nothing but their values and traditions.

Edmond Vance Cooke wrote a poem, HOW DID YOU DIE, he said “did you tackle that trouble that came your way with a resolute heart and cheerful, or hide your face from the light of day with a craven soul…fearful?” This has been my creed.

In 1997, at 27 years old, I emerged from 6 years of incarceration BROKEN. I had held my head high, done my time with a smile. I earned a college degree. I hadn’t told my friends. I was fit as a fiddle. I had an awesome husband who adored me. I was leaving prison with every material advantage. How could it be that I wasn’t OK? How was I so lost?

Six years before, my life had been a never-ending party. I was the center of that never-ending party, and this was proven in the fact that everyone I knew had gone on to excel in their profession or have children. The party was over. Lee picked me up on a cold February morning in my brand new Volkswagen Jetta. I set out on a twelve-hour drive to Nashville with a total stranger. He had once been my best friend. I knew him from visits, sure, but they were totally face value. I never told him the tragic realities of my life in a Texas prison (pre PREA) and he rarely boasted of his many successes. PTSD was the elephant in the car that was demanding we pull over for a drink.

I hardly remember arriving at the house he had bought for me. It was filled with all of my belongings. My great grandmother’s dining room table, dressers from my childhood, paintings on the walls that I painted in the party season. I was a stranger in a strange land. I didn’t feel as if I fit in there.

One day, we were coming in from the fields. Our squad was made up of 100 of the rowdiest, most mentally unstable, angry women, institutionally known as CLOSE CUSTODY. The worst of the worst. I earned my membership with a word processor. I wrote up every injustice and made no less than 50 copies of each grievance. This pissed off the administration to no end. So there I was, a vegetarian coming from the fields after a long morning in the HOT Central Texas sun. The majority of my peers LOVED PORKCHOPS. On this particular September day, there were Pork Chops on the menu, but the chow hall had run out. As the Ladies approached the serving line and found only green bologna, they became HOSTILE. A riot ensued and by the end of the day, I was locked in my cell, all of my property was removed save for my soap, toothbrush, and comb.

I was kept in that cell for one calendar year. Every meal, breakfast, lunch and dinner was a sack of peanut butter sandwiches and wet raisins for breakfast, bologna for lunch and dinner. For Thanksgiving and Christmas, they dropped a sack of dry turkey sandwiches through the hole.

I patiently watched as the seasons changed outside my window. On every 4th day, the guard would come with mail and shackles. She would escort us to the shower, and in shackles, we would be allowed a 5-minute shower. I missed the fields, where I worked all day in the Texas sun. I longed to trade my solitude for HARD LABOR.

Sometimes the hole within us is so gigantic, it seems to contain us. All of life is an equation: An attempt to find a formula that fits or to find a way to fit into the formula.
More than once, this world has become too cruel to bear.

When a young bright girl can be placed in prison for 6 years for having had a CONVERSATION with an undercover police officer, when the CORE OF IT WAS THAT SHE WAS IN NEED OF HELP. I was a drug addict, a threat to myself — this world is too cruel.

Pastor’s words seem to ring true, “THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE HAVE GROWN COLD.”

I think what I’ve come to realize now is that Pastor understood the equation and used it to his advantage.

I left prison completely lacking the ability to love. Oppression has that effect on you as you have to love yourself in order to love anyone else.

I met Joe 6 months after I was released from The Texas Department of Criminal Justice. I’m almost certain I warned him of my inability to love—that all men count with me, but none too much. I wasn’t good at mushy stuff; I didn’t like to linger in bed after sex. I refused to put my phone on vibrate. I was a girl making up time. What I was good at, I told him, was building disco sand castles, hosting great parties, creating cheap illusions. I sold him on the American Dream… I was on parole forever—so when he became possessive and abusive, he had that leverage over me. He was gorgeous and dangerous and obsessed with me. I met him first in my favorite place, UNDERWATER, diving down after the same lobster. We had strong common denominators; we both grew up in a civil war.

Mine was the American War on Drugs, which seemed to have begun in my childhood living room; his was in Khartoum SUDAN.

We were like Fire and Ice.

Everything we touched turned to gold. Unfortunately, it was 1998; 9-11 was just around the corner, so it would all be short lived. Fire and water and electricity and sex and passion and drugs were all fun….Until they weren’t. Until they BURNT my skin and eventually my soul was scorched forever.

My father was a least a level 7 or 8 NARCISSIST. Since he died, other narcissists have rotated effortlessly into my force field; Joe was certainly one of them.

Pastor Hawkins would later be no exception. As it was with Joe, it was with Pastor. A man never tells you on the first date how he will isolate you, tear you down, cause you to doubt who you are. Never on a first date does he hit you, kick you, or duct tape you for interrogation.

Cults work in a similar way; they ease up on you. In the end, the result is the same. GREAT DESTRUCTION FOLLOWS UNFOUNDED FEAR. – Ursula K. LeGuin

You lose your identity, your creative verve. Your ability to think clear original beautiful thoughts. After it’s over, after the storm rolls through, after you’ve spend days simply trying to find your shoes, there is this period of time much like mourning. A time when you feel spent and empty, having USED all of your energy JUST TO WALK AWAY.

But you have work to do—at this part of the equation, you build a wall.
My wall makes China look like child’s play.

I’m working a deal with Trump to leverage for my freedom.

The House of Yahweh is beautiful in an organic, back-to-basics way. The food is clean, the people are polite, and all the members have a plan. They’re prepared for the worst. No one judges you on your past and for me this means so much. As I mentioned before, I had become very afraid of the food in our world. The HOY addressed this issue in a perfect grass-fed, grass-roots sort of way. Driving up the winding road, I would see herds of sheep, buffalo, elk, cows, and goats…all looking BIBLICAL and healthy. They produced goat’s milk, organic cow’s milk, churned butter and made cheese.

The front gate is guarded, but not like a prison or a fortress, in more of a protecting OLD WORLD way. The guards there are known as SHAMARINE, a Hebrew translation of “those who guard the House of Yahweh.” When you drive into the compound, it looks as if a series of storms have rolled through and left the place tattered. Pretty flowers grow around beat-up trailers, cars with 10 inches of West Texas Dust are parked here and there. If you look a little deeper, you see meek, modest, productive ladies with well-behaved children. The sounds are sweeter too; there is no gossip or rudeness, certainly no television.

It’s simple to find your way. The men are separated from the women, and lest there be any confusion, women’s buildings are painted soft pink. The women have dominion over the little store, the cafeteria, and the school for girls.

I think one of the sweetest scenes I’ve ever encountered was when once I walked into the Ladies cafeteria early one morning and a dozen young ladies were singing joyfully and making Honey Butter Balls. How can you not fall in love with a place that requires you to eat honey and butter, rolled into a ball and dropped into dark chocolate each day!?

Those same little girls have never been outside the gate. One day when they are in their early teens, they will marry, likely a man much older. Their marriage will be arranged for them, and their husband will have other wives. And these are the things they don’t tell you at first.

I was Samuel’s only wife. Whenever I excelled there, in charitable ways, when I was made Deaconess, he beamed with pride and I longed to please him. It seemed simple and right.

If you google the House of Yahweh, you’ll read that it’s a sex cult. In the three years I was a member there, I never discovered why.

As the years went by, my list of concerns grew. Yet so did my love for my husband. We weren’t always at the HOY. It could have been that for the first time in my life, I was afraid of something. I was comfortable with Samuel. I felt secure.

Just when my soul seemed satisfied, these little static waves would come rifting between what my eyes saw and what my heart felt.

I just couldn’t fully commit to the ideas of Pastor, and this created a rift between me and my husband. Two hours away in Ft. Worth, Samuel and I had a pleasant and productive life. Sunday through Friday we lived this great rendition of life on Earth. He had a successful business, and I was
very helpful, as an artist and a designer, very much part of why it was successful. I had an amazing
garden filled with a bounty of heirloom herbs and veggies. I grew giant zinnias and whimsical
cosmos and delivered bouquets to all my neighbors. We took long walks together; and to our
neighbors and clients, we appeared normal, and for so long, we were the perfect spin on normal.

I was sure that for the first time in my life, I was safe, loved, and had a permanent home. That was
it. There lies the key to it all. A sense of permanence.

The ache for home lives in all of us,
the safe place where we can go as we are and NOT be questioned.

— Maya Angelou, 1986

One of my sharpest memories of my past was that of a sun-shiny day. I remember driving down I-
30 into Fort Worth from Grand Prairie, in my perfect vintage butter cream 500 series Mercedes with
walnut interior; the sunroof was open and the sun beamed down on my shallow-tanned face. My
house was perfectly decorated; I was impeccably dressed. My trunk was full of the best meth in
America, my purse full of cash. I had 27 various admirers and no particular place to be. I was the
narcissist of my own life

I thought I was on top of the world, as I drove down the freeway looking in the rearview mirror.

The bible describes Vanity as the futile attempt to be satisfied apart from God. It goes on to say that
all earthly goals and ambitions, as pursued to ends in themselves, produce only emptiness.

What I lacked that day was soul satisfaction. In the process of simply surviving, in the process
of building all of those great big walls, I’d overlooked the core rebuilding of ME.

Sitting here now, telling this story, perhaps you can see how it all happened. How when on the great
Feast Day when I was called to participate in the ear awling ceremony, I could not. But most of all,
understand, that when I refused and Samuel divorced me, it crushed me.

There weren’t enough drugs or cocktails or men or shoes to satisfy the hole that was now the space
inside me. The world I stepped into was night-to-day from the one I’d left. I had too much pain, too
much time, and too much money. That’s a seriously dangerous combination. I fell into a river of
GHB, meth, and whisky. Some days, I woke up literally thinking that someone had flipped the
room, like everything seemed to be arranged in an opposite way. There were times I am sure I
should have died.

Yet here I am.

Within 2 years, I was in Federal custody for 30 years.

As I stand here today, stripped of my possessions, wearing a poly-blend beige monkey suit and a
number.

I somehow feel satisfied.
I think it was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who said something like this: “If we could see the intimate details of our enemies’ entire past, if we could feel the heartaches they had known…there would be enough sorrow to diffuse all hostility.”

This is just one of the reasons that women should find their voice and speak their truths. The best reason I know is due to the fact that there is healing in that space. There is power in finding the places in which you were broken and holding them up to the light. There is transformation in taking the raw bitter truth of what you’ve learned, (making it malleable) shaping it into a work of art whether it be a song, a poem, or a written work or painting, even a dance.

The audience whose eyes and ears and hearts receive them share your burdens but ultimately celebrate your process and your success. If they’re keen and the weave is fabricated, the world will be stronger, the community richer.

Prisons will close

and children

will grow up with their MOTHERS.
The Consumer
by Celeste

OK Edward Bernays, you had
me pegged from jump
I was never a citizen
that was before my lifetime . . .
I'm a consumer and
You weren't mad when
I drove a 7 series BMW
Paid a high interest and always
had the latest SUV
And all the shoes
with matching bags
from the magazines
I saw you cringe when
I planted heirloom seeds
in my garden and tried
to get green
But I never dreamed you'd take it
So hard
When my husband divorced me
And I let it consume me
And my friends came by
and they got high too, with me
And now it's like I'm not
even a citizen
But I guess I never was.
Lost Soul
by Celeste Mónet Blair

There was nothing
    NOT BEAUTIFUL about her
She was sharp and sweet
    and moved like fluid
    like the fluid she used
    to numb her pain
She moved slowly in and out of storms
She jumped head first
    into the RIVER OF FORGIVENESS
where all was forgotten
    HER PAIN HER SORROW
    HERSELF
in and out of Storms and more men
    than she could recall by name
Storm after storm
    she ran naked through the rain
until she slipped one day and drowned
    IN A RIVER OF SADNESS
and there was
Nothing more beautiful about her
Dear Grandmother
by Rosalind

You have been there since my birth
You took care of me
Loved me as one of your own
You never treated me differently

In my times of trouble
You protected me from harm
Through my abandonment
You embraced me
Through hurt and neglect
You took care of the pain

Now that you need the help
That you have always given
I can’t give it back
Not at this time
Because I’m so far away

You long to hold me in your arms
But I’m so far away
I long to have your arms around me
To feel, the warmth of your love

You have always
Taken care of others
Now, you need someone
To take care of you
But the others aren’t there
And I’m still not there
Because I’m still so far away

I look forward to the day
When I’m no longer far away
Because, there is so much
That I, still have to share

So, can I share this
With you today
Though I’m still far away
For some other day
May be too late
Who Am I
by Rosalind Bowman

I have been said to be a bad person
I have been judged by my peers
I have been sentenced without you really knowing why
You have been given bits and pieces of my story
“Who Am I”

I have been placed in a place with others
I have been forced to deal with all of the hate
all of the ridicule
all of the disrespect
all of the vulgarity
“Who Am I”

I have been treated as though I’m no longer human
I have been forced to deal with my surroundings
I have been relied on to appease others
I have been laughed at
I have been used by others for their own gain
“Who Am I”

I have often thought there is no other way out
I have often thought of ending all of this
I have often looked to others for help
I have come to the realization that there is no way out
But then, I think again
“Who Am I”

I am not a bad person
but misjudged
I am not a person
that should
be treated with disrespect
or even ridiculed
“Who Am I”

I am a person
that should be treated with substance
not laughed at
or used by others for gain
“Who Am I”

I am a person
Who will seek to find
another way out
Who will continue
to look to others, for help
Who will know, that there is, a way out
“Who Am I”

I am now, a woman who laughs
I am now, a woman who is loved
I am now, a woman who is beautiful inside and out
I am now, a woman who no longer feels trapped
I am now, a woman who is Free
Free to love
Free to Live
Free to be in spite of what others say
“Who Am I”

“I Am You”
The Mirror to My World
by Rosalind

I know that it has been a long time since we last saw one another. I thought that I might have forgotten how you look, or the way you feel upon our embrace.
For you are the mirror to my world.
When I first laid my eyes on you, you were like the mirror to my world. You hadn’t changed, but only matured.
You ran into my arms and forgot about everything and everyone else. It was as if there were only you and I.
For you are the mirror to my world.
Yes, it has been a long time since we last saw one another, but we won’t make it our last.
For you are the mirror to my world.
I look forward to the next time, when I can look at you and feel your embrace.
For when I see you, I see me.
When I embrace you, I embrace the mirror to my world.
What Helps You Breathe
by Rosalind

What helps me to breathe, is knowing that it is always free.
What helps me to breathe, is to know that there is life after this.
What helps me to breathe, is knowing that there is support like no other.
What helps me to breathe, is knowing when I think or feel that I’m alone, I’m not.
What helps me to breathe, is knowing that in spite of it, I’m loved.
What helps me to breathe, is just knowing.
If I
by Rosalind

If I could express myself to you
I could tell you how I really feel

If I could express in words, I’d
Tell you every beautiful word

If I could express in one word or
If I had just one word, it would be
Difficult. For there are not enough words
To express how I feel.
An Empty Room
by Rosalind

I walked into a room
Where I was to meet others
No one was there
I felt alone
Wondered why I was there
I thought the others would come
But no one else came
I tried to find someone else to help me
Find out why, I was here
And still
There was no one else but me
So, I waited and waited
And still, no one came.
Why I Write
by Rosalind

I write because it makes me feel free to say whatever is on my mind. I control the words that are put on the pages. I write because it helps me to feel and let out all of the emotions that are locked down within me.

I write because of the joy I feel knowing that my words have helped someone or touched someone in a positive way.

I write because of the release of all the pain inside of me.

I write because without writing, no one will ever know any of my lost words that can brighten up a gloomy day.

I write because it lets me be me.
A Flicker of Light
by Leslie

It was unbearably cold the day we sat huddled around the table in the bagel shop just a few blocks away from the federal courthouse in Greensboro, NC. I made small talk among the group of us, in a futile attempt at hiding my nervousness. I wanted to run, but that would mean running from my family, my elderly mom, my home, and my never-ending hope of one day having a “normal life.” On my way out of the restaurant, I stopped at a blackboard with the heading, “Things to do before I die.” I picked up the chalk and wrote, “To come home to my family.” Then I drove the few blocks to the courthouse and surrendered myself to the US Marshall to begin serving my 52-month sentence.

Three years have passed since that fateful day, and I finally am beginning to see a flicker of light in what has otherwise been a very dark place. Anxiety has begun to set in, and my mind is consumed with so many questions. Questions like who will employ me, how will I pay my living expenses, let alone my restitution, and of course, the most important question of all, “what have I learned?”

Before coming to prison, I went online to research what programs were available in the Bureau of Prisons. There was a wide range of programs available online, but when I actually reached the prison, I was so disillusioned. For a number of reasons, the majority of those programs were no longer available. There were some classes, GED and the like, but not much to offer for those inmates with a post-graduate education.

I applied for a library privilege, and I began to read. I read a lot of legal fiction, some true crime, a ton of novels, but the reading left a lot to be desired. I wanted to learn more about people like myself, who wound up in situations such as the one I’m currently in, and what I could do to never wind up in this position ever again.

I borrowed a book from one of the ladies in my unit and she invited me to join the book club. She said it was a small group led by West Virginia University professors, but that she would recommend me as a participant since one of the members was going home. I was so happy for this opportunity because idleness had led me to believe that I was in some type of vegetative state from which I was in dire need of a reprieve.

The book club was held in the visiting area, an area that was well-lit, airy, and set apart from the noisy common areas of the prison. It was a quiet and serene atmosphere that on most days was conducive to learning.

I initially came for the books, then for the peace, and the company of outsiders. At times, I even questioned the subject matter of the books. Too much oppression, racism, poverty, sexism, genocide, death penalty, mass incarceration, etc. Too many social problems. I kept an open mind, however, and I kept coming. Even when I became overwhelmed with emotion about some of the things I read, my peers, the facilitators, the visitors, and at times even some of the correctional staff would avail themselves to me and help me to gain a more positive perspective and to get through those times.
As I continued to show up, in time it was no longer about books, or programs, or peace. I began to realize that it was about me, and millions of others like me, who never quite understood how they embarked on a course of destruction and were just as clueless as to why they were unable to change.

So again, the question, “what have I learned?” I’ve learned that the tentacles of poverty are strong and extend much further than many care to admit. However, no amount of whining or bemoaning a historically biased and corrupt system will bring about any positive change. I've learned that we often view the world through the hand we're dealt, that never ever winning can lead to self-loathing, and that all too often, we become our worst oppressors. Many of us end up in prisons, mental institutions, or as drug addicts—or in cemeteries. And many just give up.

Today, however, there will be no giving up. I think back to Bryan Stevenson in *Just Mercy*. Broken. Crying into the night and wanting to give up, but continuing to forge ahead, to help one more incarcerated individual. No, I cannot give up. I can accept personal responsibility and not allow outside voices to become inside voices. Besides, my own conviction is much greater than my felony conviction, and in the words of the great Assata Shakur,

*If I know anything at all
It's that a wall is just a wall
And nothing more at all
It can be broken down*
Transition
by Leslie

Perspective is everything. For me, it was always the hard way. By trial and error, or by hook or crook. I visualized my transition from my old perspective. All I could imagine was doors repeatedly slamming in my face as I tried to explain away my background, my conviction, or in legalese, my instant offense.

My 22-year-old son met me at the Greyhound bus in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He had become a man in the four years that I was gone, and beside him was his pregnant fiancé. I had spent the whole ride from West Virginia wondering what I would do once I got home. But the pained look in my son’s eyes settled it for me. I had to make it this time. I could not ever leave my sons again. This time, I had to make it.

I reported to the halfway house and for the most part, it was a very warm and supportive atmosphere. There were on-site case managers, social workers, and employment specialist who were really helpful in meeting my every need. Once I completed my agenda and submitted it to the staff on duty for approval, I was able to go out into the community on my own to seek employment or address other transitional needs. After 4 weeks, I was approved to go home on supervised release. I still had to submit a weekly agenda, but I did not have to be home before 9:00 PM.

In 6 weeks, I landed a job as a Psychosocial Rehabilitation Facilitator for a community-based mental health agency. I went back to the halfway house with my offer letter to report that I had found employment, but what I encountered was a very somber atmosphere. They were very supportive to all the residents, so I found it a little strange that no one paid much attention to my announcement. I later learned from one of the residents that evening that the BOP had terminated their contract with the halfway house, and the residents that were still under supervision would be transferred to another halfway house in another city that was one hour away.

Initially, I was not worried, because I was no longer in the halfway house physically; I was in community custody therefore having very limited contact with the halfway house. I only had to turn in my weekly agenda, and be in before my 9:00 curfew. I also had to answer 2 phone calls during the evening but never after 12:00 AM. But things were not quite the same at the next halfway house.

This halfway house called you all day and all night. If for any reason you were unavailable to pick up the phone, you would be written up and possibly sent back to prison. An app was placed on my phone that would sound a loud piercing beep at least eight times daily. When the beep sounded, you had one minute to open the app and look into the camera inside and recite the five numbers that were on the screen. Oftentimes, the app would not accept the check-in due to glitches in the system, but you had to repeatedly keep doing it until it was successfully submitted, or you would be written up and placed back in the custody of the halfway house, or worse sent back to prison.

One day a week, I had to report to the facility to submit a random urinalysis. I had no driver’s license at the time, and the halfway house was inaccessible by bus. Each week, I had to find a ride there within a few hours after being notified to report. If I could not find a ride there, I was ordered to report back to the halfway house for violating the conditions of my community release. I rode with anybody I could find because I was so desperate. One day, I rode there with a friend of a friend who worked in that same city. I had to catch an UBER back for $65.
This halfway house offered no support, just punishment. My anxiety was through the roof, and I was constantly being threatened and provoked. I was placed back in custody once for missing a phone call at 2:35 AM. I complained to the BOP, and they allowed me return home so that I would not lose my job. A week later, my driver got lost on the return trip home from the urinalysis, and I wound up arriving home 20 minutes later than the time they had allotted for the trip. I called them while on the road and informed them I was lost. It did not stop them from placing me back in the halfway house the next day and holding me in their custody until my supervised community release was over 15 days later.

I did not know what to do at that point, but I knew that I would lose my job if I stayed out of work for two weeks. I was earning decent money by then, because I had completed my Peer Support Specialist training, and I had several clients that I could service after my regular 9-5 job. I could not lose my job. I had resumed responsibility of my home again, and I had $1800.00 per month in bills that I needed to pay each month.

So, for two weeks, I borrowed a car from a friend, and drove, unlicensed, for two weeks back and forth to work. I knew, if caught, I would lose everything I had worked for. But then again, that was the plan, just not my plan.

I hated that I had allowed the forces of evil to cause me to commit a crime, but I just could not lose again. That halfway house was worse than prison itself. They never even inquired what I would do upon my release. I woke up and signed my release papers and left without even a goodbye. The people in that awful place really tried so hard to defeat me. They helped me though. They helped me to empathize with the freed slaves who were freed only to be subjected to the Jim Crow laws, or the ones down in Texas who were enslaved an additional two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. They helped to reinforce my commitment to stay focused and not allow myself to be locked up again.

I have been home six months. My life is really coming together. I did not have a hard time finding work. My work is fulfilling, and I earn decent money. My grandchild was born last week, and I was able to show up. As I get better, my son gets better. Our home is coming together. Everyone is working. We are growing separately, and as a family. My job is great. I am working on some really great projects, and I am honored to be a trusted employee. I can’t appropriately express how wonderful I feel each time I punch the time clock, and I’m reminded that today I count somewhere. I am not only working to improve my own life, I am also improving lives in my community. Today I stand for something much greater than the institutional census. And yes, I now have my North Carolina driver license.
Something to Think
About by J.

Intro:
Life is hell for a young black male/ Live and worry where struggle is mostly mandatory/
prejudice to the fact that them days is over/ When in fact when they see black you’re attacked like a
cobra/ With vicious looks, vicious crooks/ at times life’s repeatin’ itself from them old history
books

Life for an African American has and will always be a struggle. No need to sugar coat it. It will
always be a race war, life will always be a tussle.

The only difference now, our ancestor fought to remove that muzzle.

I believe in the principles that my ancestors died for. One of those being freedom of speech, while
the others they cried for.

We can hide our feelings but some of us have never been scared to speak. Don’t judge us by the
outside, what may appear weak.

Judge us by the content of our character and not by the color of our skin. Don’t judge us like a
murder scene because even then things aren’t always what they seem.

Intelligent, Intellectual, Ingenious of sort. My knowledge ain’t never been short.

United we stand: Divided we fall.

Get off your knees. “F” crawlin’ it’s time to walk.

Incarceration does not have to be a waste of time.

Educate your minds. My people, my sisters. Get off your behinds.

What it was is not what it has to stay. They’ll try to remove you but we can never be replaced. Stand
tall. I love my face.

Read something other than Hood Books; it might give you the answers to your prayers like an
Amazing Grace.

Life is like court and I’m laying down my case. I’m unarmed. No more pistols on my waist.

Of course, they don’t know what it’s like having a black face.

But it’s a new season, and I’m racing, spraying venom like mace.

I challenge you to get your GED. I challenge you to take that new class and learn something new.
Elevate and be free.
Prove what they said to not be right. Take something home to your kids other than the wisdom of how to fight, and what looks hot with them crisp white Nikes.

I refuse to be caught in their definition of black. Why do you think the law was what it was about crack?

I’m on another level!

Elevate your minds/ I’m on my Grind/ Legit Hustla’.

Learning how to stack my loot and invest it.

Drug money is dead money. I’m tired of blood money.

Stimulated Capitalist/ Achieve the vision and capture this.

Assess my assets/ I will forever be Black. Black is reborn.

Hip-Hop is a way of life. This is my exclusive, no more excuses. How can this be so real and you exclude this.

This is just something to think about.
From the Inside
by J.

Introduction:

As a society, as a whole, instead of being so judgmental, we should collectively figure out how to end the culture of street crime. Instead of adding to the fire, maybe if we did more to help the struggle by providing multidirectional strategies to end the exponential growth of prison populations, we could help end mass incarceration. Mankind should stop being so quick to write incarcerated individuals off as a lost cause, and instead educate them and help them become civically engaged. We should be more willing to help America as a unit, instead of tearing America down.

America is the richest, strongest, freest country on Earth, yet it has the most people incarcerated, in both relative and absolute terms. The overuse of incarceration, and the judgements within are results of the many systems of injustices and intersecting discriminations. Mass incarceration has to stop, but to assist this process, the voices of the people who have had experiences with the criminal justice system and have reflected deeply on these issues must be heard.

Analysis and Integration:

Ending the culture of street crime begins with an agreement that crime is indeed a social issue, and once that agreement is made, we can then suppose the need for social solutions. We have witnessed first-hand what the results of current methods have brought. Americans have learned to believe that incarceration is the answer, but it bypasses the people as opposed to empowering them for change.

Society spends so much time downgrading and out-casting the ones committing the crimes, instead of attempting to humanize them, embrace them, and include them. It stands to reason that those who are underprivileged, politically disenfranchised, and historically oppressed will more than likely show more bitterness and impartiality to the norms of those who prohibit them because they are the most divested from them socially. (“For this reason, it is unrealistic to think that any serious efforts to address the problems of drug addiction could be successful while simultaneously excluding drug users, who consume illegal substances, and drug dealers, who market them, from such efforts.” Lifers Article). It is completely rationally inconsistent to expect a decrease in the crime rate plainly by galvanizing law enforcement, legislators, and a few select community groups, while prohibiting those considered to be criminal elements in the process.

A multidirectional strategy was implemented called LIFERS, INC. (Long Incarcerated Fraternity Engaging Release Studies). Their mission is to end what Americans have identified as the culture of street crime by starting with their selves within the institution and expanding out into the community. They began an analysis of the crime problem from the viewpoint of the perpetrators, men serving life terms at a maximum security prison in Pennsylvania. These men from their unique positions offered the leadership necessary to begin to prevent street crime and violence. These men felt compelled to start looking at their own problems from different perspectives. These perspectives focused on their prior behaviors and prior thinking patterns. They began to understand and witness that overcoming the challenges of crime involves altering the way a person thinks. Therefore, there has to be an example or pattern that the whole society observes wherein everyone is banded together for the single purpose of altering the values that make up the culture of crime.

Another strategy implemented was a course called: “The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program: Exploring Issues of Crime and Justice Behind the Walls.” Fifteen college students and fifteen incarcerated individuals come together each week to read, write, study, and talk about crime,
justice, and related issues. A community-based learning opportunity where the titles are left at the
door and everyone is seen as having something important to offer in the learning process. By the
end of the class, both inside and outside students develop a desire to make a change in the world.
For the incarcerated student who comes into the circle feeling like they are seen as the problem, they
leave at the end seeing themselves as a part of the solution to the problem.

Education and opportunities give the incarcerated individuals a new sense of identity and
purpose. Empowerment to take on challenges, and to pursue and achieve goals they never imagined
possible. Paul Perry, a lifer who killed a rival gang member, changed his life in prison, and now is
motivated to do whatever he can to help facilitate the transformation of fellow prisoners by the
liberating power of education. Education, a voice, an opportunity, and civic engagement are huge
pieces of the puzzle to end the culture of street crime, but the nation as a whole has to get on the
same page.

Personal Reaction:

Can we change the “Culture of Street Crime” using those within the culture? My answer is:
absolutely. Those within the culture can use their own personal experiences to help someone else to
not make the same mistake they did. They can learn from their own personal transformation inside
the walls and begin to understand the devastation that crime and violence wreaks on individuals and
families. They can turn around what was once a negative energy, and use it as ammo to begin to
achieve what many see as an impossible task, ending the street crime culture. They have the
understanding, experience, and credibility to begin a powerful movement. Yes, we within these walls
can definitely contribute to changing the culture of street crime. But we have to act, not just talk
about it.

In 1982, when grants and financial aid were still available to people in prison, Paul Perry, the
aforementioned Lifer, earned his education. But today, 2017, grants and financial aid are no longer
available to someone in prison, so without the financial means, you cannot gain a higher education.
We need more opportunities, such as the “Inside-Out Program”, and Life Inc. Alternative that
create learning experiences and civic engagement. If it’s been proven that education and
opportunities give the inmate a new sense of identity and purpose, more of these things could help
end the culture of street crime.

Conclusively, we all agree that the “perpetrators” would help the problem, but we have to
acknowledge and accept the responsibilities they played in the destruction of their own communities
first before any changes could be made. I believe this is a key factor that has to be acknowledged,
and only then could the practical solutions be best realized beyond conventional thinking. Then can
those most acquainted with the street crime culture and who have gone through the
transformational process be empowered to use their experience and street knowledge to end it.
Ending the street crime culture is not an impossible task, but is has to be done collectively as a
nation from the Inside and Outside.
False Assumptions
by J.

I walk in the store with a pocket full of Nickels
Hearing whistles
Brushing up against dead people visioning candle vigils
Eyes on me like blood stains
Assuming by my clothes my thoughts scream ashamed
Envious looks
False stories, False hooks
Like being told only half the story like our school history books
Beggin’ to arrest me
Mentally duress me
Infamy
Look in my Eyes can you use the infancy
Pack my madness in baskets
Plastic bag it
Anger coming Rapid
Like UPS get packages
Savages
Prejudiced behavior is contagious
So long from here to Asia
STOP IT
There’s no profit
I don’t see you you’re so microscopic
Assume that I’m this when I’m really that
Y’all think we don’t know/ But the cat’s been out the hat
Illegitimate leaders
Packed heaters in two seaters
Born and raised in the wilderness
Fearless
Equivocal politicals
Unbelieved Reasons
The world’s falling off like the after summer season
They want us in poverty probably
Runnin’ from the government
Devil Sent
Its evident
Book and arrest us for cooking and stretching it
Wonder why we talk with guns
Keeping our lungs from strainin’ screaming our way out the slums
Far from dumb
Epic creations
Pregnating words – a knowledge birth
Like x-rays you see through
An expert’s worth
Searching to rip the horns from the devil
Aspirations of a rebel
Contaminated bricks
Undeveloped like a fetus
Open your eyes and see this
You’re the precise reason I’m cold like ice
Picking you out my brain like lice
Even when I’m called a maggot I’m still fly
Assume what you want because until I die I will never be
mentally extorted
Just abort it
Swallowing you whole
With no type of remorsin’
Chewing you up like an entrée but I’m the main course
Judge to be judged
No hurt feelings, no grudge
False Assumptions
Running in the Rain
by J.

Can you hear the darkness? No one around me but me. Locked doors. Defenseless from the ones holding the key. Fast paced sprinting, I feel the blind racism by any means. I’m still free, sheltering myself from rain drops of gossip. Running from false judgements and assumptions. Propaganda. Untrue agendas. Becoming one with the rain. Melting into the Earth. Search for Truth. Craving loud deafening sounds of Thunder. Blocking out pain. Blocking out injustice. Prejudice corruption. Stab wounds from Haters. Immortally trained not to die. Obstacles are just that. Corruption of obstruction. James Bond. I maneuver through mazes. My mind is cageless. While they continue to chatter, I shelter myself. Umbrella of strength. The greatest revenge is success. Not running from, but running to. I root for myself. Fatigued of trying to convince you. If the authorities think you’re different or don’t understand you, YOU’RE DONE! But how is this not unfairness at its best. My mind runs but my body sees it as a test. Gaining experience from every stride. God knows how authorities lie. The rain cleanses my soul. Washes out the vindictiveness. I feel you all pulling at my limbs, but I’m resilient. Running until my lungs burn. Soaking in wisdom until my brain hurts. Running to, not running from. A difference. Minus the two equaling a positive number. No need to ask you to comprehend what’s already comprehensible. The powers that BE are always justified by solemn untruths. Running in the rain to a place that is different. Inequalities seldom seen. Black, Brown, and White are only colors. A person’s sex or preference is never seen. Running in the rain to a place where the minds matter more than anything. A place where it’s not black lives matter, but only your mind matters. The rain washes it all away. Running in the rain.
What Helps You Breathe?

My Sense of Success
Chained by my fear of failure I breathe through
The obstacles of injustices feed my spirit to succeed which means I breathe through.

Looking into my grandchildren's innocent eyes... Hearing the magical sound of their laughter... The look on their face when they've learned something new... The way they love me unconditionally... When they hug me so tight and won't let me go...
Family—because I love them more than life itself

My Children and Grandchildren

Voices of my children
Memory of my mother
Daughter of my Father
The smell of Fresh baked bread
The sour taste of a lemon
The bitterness of Black coffee
The Pain of A headache
These things help me know I am alive.
...Two being alive, means I'm breathing...

Love
Unconditional, Undeclared
Agape Love, & never
Faith In my Darkest
Hope: Love helps me BREATHE

Being Satisfied
With a piece of mind
And not worldly things.

God helps me breathe
like I...
Family...
I love you...
Air...

Just knowing I have all I need
helps me breath.
Knowing I'm Planting positive seeds
helps me breathe.

Flowers and the memory
of the smells of my garden.
Thyme, Lavender, Mint, Lilac,
and the Earth.
All help me breathe.

Aiyah, Aubron, Ariana, Emory
Love, Family, GOD, me

A^3 + E = my heart
my breath
Woman
by Melissa Hicks

Beautiful, Strong, Fierce, Gentle, Uniquely defined,
Courageous, Perfect, Graceful, Exceptional, Divine….
Colorful, Brilliant, Passionate, Precious and Oh so dear,
Stunning, Incredible, Patient, Fascinating, Exquisite, Delicate,
Chosen to be the vessel for mankind to bare…

WOMAN

Women are awesome, whether they’re single, coupled or separated,
Her young are her riches, she’s their armor, defense, protection, guard, to them she’s dedicated…

WOMAN

THE EXCEPTIONAL WOMAN

She’s a prize possession, a rare gem,
A ruby, Pearl, Emerald, Jade, Sapphire, opal, Onyx, Topaz, diamond in the rough
Her worth is priceless, no matter her color, shape or size,
She’s often misunderstood and needs an escape, a break, refuge, praised, applauded,
Loved or recognized…

WOMAN

THE EXCEPTIONAL WOMAN

There are many titles that only “SHE” can hold,
Lady, Dime piece, Stud, Female, Matron, Well-bred, cultured, high-born, noble, broad,
Chick, babe, boo, maternal, Godmom, Grandma, Nana, Mammy, mom, mommy, Ma, the Matriarch,
Princess, and finally, the one who wears the crown, “QUEEN”
She reigns on her throne of courage…
Her inheritance are her eyes, which are the windows to her soul,
Her lips bare secrets, never to be told…
Her hips sway to a rhythm that only she can hear,
and her offspring as the exact replica of herself as she looks in the mirror,
Her significant other often sees her as,
Stubborn, bullheaded, willful, stern, head-strong and frisky…
But she interprets that as her being a sharp, acute, keen, intense, adorable,
Structure, which makes them complete…

WOMAN

THE EXCEPTIONAL WOMAN

Ladies and Gentleman

Give due credit to,
Pay Homage to,

HONOR,
COMMEND,
EXALT,
CELEBRATE,
ADORE,
HONOR,
RESPECT,
GLORIFY,
The Unique, Prosperous, Courageous, Victorious, Glorious, Female Species…
THE EXTRAORDINARY EXCEPTIONAL WOMAN
Survivor
by Melissa Hicks

Born in the ghetto a minority,
Subjected to discrimination and poverty…
    Discriminated, rejected, yet accepted,
Looked down upon, misunderstood, but respected…
    Beat down, abandoned, exhausted,
You think that you can walk two steps in my shoes? I doubt it…
    Abused, mistreated and STILL a survivor,
For every goal that I achieve, there’s one higher…
    My ugliness reflects my true beauty,
Scarf on my head, wiping my apron making it dirty…
    Flat stomach, now huge, decorated with stretch marks,
Each morning I awake, I praise God that I made it thus far…
    Stomach protruding, feet two times their normal size,
A big unknown tissue which used to be called a nose sits between my eyes…
    Sweat on my forehead, slippers on my feet,
So worried about tomorrow that I can’t even sleep…
    Carrying his child couldn’t protect me from his reign of terror,
Looking into her beautiful eyes, made my focus clearer…
    The musical sound of her cry enlightened me,
Thinking about who her father was frightened me…
    A second of peace excites me…
My will to survive ignites me…

Is that enough yet? Has the earth even begun to crack? I guess not, there’s so much more, hold up,
    let’s rewind back…

    Sunglasses on my face, meant to keep you from gazing into my soul,
Knowing that if you look into my eyes, the hurt would be exposed…
    I cover up, wear a mask, concealing who I truly am,
I’m afraid if I be “me” I’ll be beat by my man…
    He loves me, he hates me, from the world he decapitates me,
If there’s a God, where is he? Does he love me? Will he save me?…
    Afraid to walk the streets, terrified of the very ones that we’re supposed to trust,
Raise a child in this cruel world, is it a blessing or is it a curse?…
    Raise him up, teach him the right way to go,
just for him to see the police beat down and kill one of his own…
    Prisons overpopulated, politicians break laws like me,
Judge sentences us to life, yet set his own colleagues free…
    This epidemic of injustice sickens me,
What happened? What went wrong in the land of the free?…
    My soul aches for the children that will have to carry the torch long after me,
I pray that they reach for the stars and always follow their dreams…
    Some hurdles are hard to get over when you’re trying to win the race,
But remember slow motion is better than no motion, it’s not about the pace…
Don’t ever forget your journey, the hurdles you’ve gotten over prepared the mold for who you are, remember those same obstacles are what motivated you to raise the bar, I believe in my heart that our struggles are not in vain, A wise man once said, “No pain, no gain…”
**Name Calling**
by Trilla Holley

I’ve been called a lot of things in my day
Here are a few I wish I’d heard just the same

She’s a perfect wife, a mother, and a child of God…
She’s a go-getter, She’s very good at heart!!!
I’ve been called a lot of things in my day.
Here are a few I wish I could change…

She’s a hustler, a criminal doing a rack of time
She’s sick, an addict with nothing on her mind…

Even though I’m serving time for a crime that
Wasn’t on my mind, it wasn’t time wasted…

It was one day they called my full name that I
Stood without shame amongst a crowd, tall & proud
I stood with a smile for the accomplishment that
I made my

(GED)
Why Do We Care
by Crystal Huggins

Why do we care
About what others say,
And what others hear?
Why do we care?
Is it fair, that in
Your hour of despair,
No one is ever there?

So, why do we care?
Life isn’t fair, when
We tend to care, the
Outcome my dear, you
Must and will certainly
Fear.

So, why do I care,
Because I’m here and
Not there, fair or
Unfair, I’m determined,
I will care.

P – please
R – return
I – into
S – society
O – our
N – nurturers
**4 Panes**

by Crystal Huggins

It was once told to me that life can be seen in 4 Panes, not physical pain, window panes.

| Pane 1. I see and no one else does, although I wish everyone could see, who I am, see how I feel, see what I think, see what I can. There’s more to me than these khakis. |
| Pane 2. You see and I wish I did, maybe then I’d be able to understand why you treat me this way, with such disrespect, downright disdain. Don’t you care if I hurt, if I cry? I wanna see what exactly you see in and about me. |
| Pane 3. I guess everyone sees, whether we agree or disagree, or disguises how we feel, about what we really see. Window pane 3, Yup, that’s me. |
| Pane 4. The one that means more than any of the four. God, who knitted me together in my mother’s womb. He ordained each day of my life before I was born. If I can just glimpse what he sees when he sees me, then window panes 1, 2, or 3, would no longer matter to me. |
The Truth Is
by Jaye

“What would happen if one woman told ‘THE TRUTH’ about her life? The world would split open!” —Kathë Kollwitz

THE TRUTH is … my world split open when my mother’s womb split open, March 4th … 1982.
THE TRUTH is … I was a good baby, curious, ambitious, compassionate, and sensitive too.
THE TRUTH is … I felt like an only child, my siblings and I were all 10 years apart, the 3 of us are so different, I am the youngest so for me it was hard.
THE TRUTH is … I didn’t get to meet Barbara, My Grandmother, but I carry her name. When she passed away, my mother went insane.
THE TRUTH is … my life was scattered. I stayed with my Aunt for a while. She was like my mom, and I was like her child.
THE TRUTH is … my mom became well so back to the projects I went. I wasn’t mad at all, although the house that I inhabited was never a home.
THE TRUTH is … there were 9 of us in that little ol’ space, but the adults couldn’t see the sly look on his face.
THE TRUTH is … I loved my grandfather, but I couldn’t remember all those times that he loved me in the months of September, October, November, December … I just can’t remember.
THE TRUTH is … they knew all along so why would I say anything. I thought nothing was wrong.
THE TRUTH is … my aunt kept me in church. I had a father who I couldn’t see, He loved me, unconditionally, I just had to believe.
THE TRUTH is … I went to Emmanuel Baptist all by myself, I was a big girl then …12 to be exact, that was a safe place to be, a shelter from trouble, a peace haven, a step towards heaven a place where love, wasn’t misunderstood, a place where everyone was supposed to be good.
THE TRUTH is … I found love again right under the staircase, where one of the “brothers” put his love in my face. “I’m getting you ready to be a woman Jaye … don’t you want your boyfriend to love you?” he said kissing my neck. “My grandfather loves me. I already know how.” I replied showing him how I know.
THE TRUTH is … one day when that same “brother” continued to give me unwanted lessons, I received a blessing, an angel, his sister, caught him during his session … I simply walked away, thinking that things were OK, knowing in my heart that Love, Love, Love, was really pain.
THE TRUTH is … I’m an adult now ruined, confused, hungry, needy, damaged, saved, conflicted by Love.
THE TRUTH is … my womb split open on March 3, 1999. My heart burst at the sight of my daughter for the first time.
THE TRUTH is … that was a Love that I’ve never experienced, all at once, in a second. Time stopped, this time I knew what Love was not!
THE TRUTH is … I found a mixture of Love, along with other things from her father, I was only 16, 17, 18, I was tired of this life, and I thought… why bother?
THE TRUTH is … he came in on time, the barrel was in place, the metal tasted smooth, cold, much like the tears that streamed down my face, eyes closed, finger on the trigger.
THE TRUTH is … the blow to my head caught me off guard, my hand free of the gun, my mind spun blinking back the sadness and rage in his eyes, it was replaced with the hatred, a brand new disguise. I hadn’t met my demise.
THE TRUTH is … nothing worked … pills, razors, self-destruction, in the midst of jobs, school, honor roll, promotions, a beautiful intelligent little girl, my life was masked with such a pitiful world.
THE TRUTH is … I had a male friend years later who helped me in my homelessness. I also turned to women. I liked them, loved them, preferred them over my new friend, who helped me find shelter. He wanted me to repay him. He said he was better.
THE TRUTH is … he was really upset, there I lay on a couch, in the middle of his crack-head mom’s living room, while my daughter lay peacefully asleep on a futon oblivious, without a clue… I struggled, I fought, but I didn’t make a sound, as his hands choked me out, with his pants on the ground “that’s right, keep your mouth shut, you don’t want her to wake up do you?” he whispered to me… Then came the rip of my cheap white panties.
THE TRUTH is … it was over soon… I showered, cried, cut, scrubbed, but it wouldn’t change what was now inside.
THE TRUTH is … my womb split open for the second time.
THE TRUTH is … there goes that feeling again… somewhere inside, its familiar but so many other emotions attempt to override. This time it’s different. My little boy was only 4 lbs as opposed to his sisters 8… He was a fighter, a tiny little fighter. He inspired me. He conquered his task of gaining 2 lbs before 3 days. He changed my life, in so many ways.
THE TRUTH is … I’m a go getter, I’m ambitious, I’m resilient, I’m a survivor, I’m a drug addict, I’m a mother, I’m a liar.
THE TRUTH is … Ecstasy, Weed, Absolut, Razors, Sex, etc took me down further.
THE TRUTH is … I managed, did good, for a short while raised my kids, in spite of my fast life, drug life, sex life, wild life. They are amazing those two, to be able to conquer all the shit I put in them through.
THE TRUTH is … one night they went away on the weekend, I needed a break, I lost my job that week so I decided to celebrate… yeah that’s right, celebrate the last day of my free life, how ironic huh.
THE TRUTH is … I didn’t follow my gut, “I don’t want to go to the club tonight. Lets just stay in,” I said, “I got the truck, we got some pills, I got a pound, let’s go uptown” my sis told me.
THE TRUTH is … we went to the club, my sister could rap, so she entered the battle, she won all the money, but the guys wanted their share back.
THE TRUTH is … everybody was high, everything was moving so fast, the punch is what caught my eye.
THE TRUTH is … I wasn’t myself, it wasn’t me. I saw the fight between David and me, that girl was crazy, he beat her up, they were rolling on the ground, but then she got up, she fled the scene and got in the truck. “What happened?” her sister said… “Let’s go home, and Roll up.” That was
my reply. They were driving away, quiet into the night. And then there was noise, with blue and red lights.
THE TRUTH is … a mom’s world was split open, in half, shattered, broken, it was no longer one. When she received the news about her son.
THE TRUTH is … my world split open when I realized what went wrong. I hated myself, I wished it was me, I cried for his kid, I cried for his mom, I cried for my children, I cried for the whole world, both sides were split in two… how do I put it back together… is it split open forever?
THE TRUTH is … I’m a mother, I was a murderer, I was a monster, I am a conqueror, I am a survivor, I am a child of God, I am forgiven, I am me, I forgive myself, I will put my world back together, I am doing it now in these 20 years, I am better, I am sorry, I am a new person, I am Jaye.
My Soulmate
by Jaye

When the love of my soul never ceases
To Amaze me, and the feelings that we
Share never grow old.
When the sacred bond between two,
Each with their senses,
Can read each other’s minds, a love so rare
It begins with me, and ends with you.
When you can look into love’s eyes,
And hear what they say
With no words to be spoken, the
Strength of their being, just takes you
Away.
When love happens to be distant
And sometimes has gone by…
One thought of love’s smile
Puts you on a natural high.
When the first kiss is electric yet
Pleasantly placed, it makes energy envious
Through the connection phase
Souls that are intertwined as one
Bearing the spiritual connections that
God gave his son. A Love that none
Can interrupt. Satan himself can’t corrupt
Because of Fate…The one inseparable Love
Of my life…My soulmate
I Cry…
by Jaye

I cry when I feel like I’m outta control
When the world is against me for reasons untold.
I cry when my heart is drowning in pain, when I
Look for who’s at fault, it’s always me who gets the blame.
I cry when my mind is confused. After friends turn
Their back on me and I realize I’ve been used.
I cry when I keep my word, and in return
I’m betrayed and burned.
I cry sometimes and I don’t know why, just
Feel like cleansing my soul through my eyes.
I cry because love’s never fair, when I love
So hard, but your love doesn’t care.
I cry when I’m extremely angry,
I can’t do what I want to release my fury.
I cry when I pray to my Father, he understands
Me when no one else will bother.
I cry because he’s so good to me. When I am
At rock bottom, He doesn’t hesitate to rescue me.
I cry because of fear of losing my mother. I
Only have one, and there will never be another.
I cry when I struggle with my mind’s own war,
So many injuries and casualties leave my thoughts
Beat up and sore. I don’t wanna cry no more…
I can’t help but to cry because I miss my kids.
I cry all the time because I can’t believe
What I did.
I cry because I can’t rewind the time
And take back the night of my crime.
I cry, and cry, and cry so much, and
I never will figure out why.
So I’ll just continue to cry.
My Voice
by Tanisha

When I speak, who is listening?
When I speak, who is witnessing?
People Pass Me By EVERY day, no words Exchanged
Never thinking twice if that’s a loss or something gained

My voice Has Been muted, muted by me, By choice.
Muted Because I choose to be silent and not use my voice
You may say that’s Selfish and that’s fine with me.
Because the truth is, I might Have the words that can help set you free.

My voice could touch your Heart.
But that’s only if I choose to not keep myself apart.
**Mean Mug**
by Tanisha

You say the mug on my face looks mean.
You say I look mad at the world.
Tell me is that all you see when you look at me

    Does the mug on my face scare you away?
Does it make you second-guess your approach?
Do you suddenly forget what you want to say?

    If only you didn’t judge the mug by its designs.
If only you took the time to read between the lines.
This mean mug keeps out a Bunch of crap and holds in the things most dear.
This mug is not for the faint of heart, it keeps away those gripped by fear.

    Those who dare drink of this Hot drink will enjoy the sweet goodness inside
Everyone Else… who Gives a Damn? They’re not worthy.
So…will you look past the mean mug, or –
Run away and Hide?
Breathe
by Tanisha

How do I Breathe? What does it Really mean…
to Breathe? It’s defined to inhale and Exhale, to
pause as to Rest: to live; Exist.

Recently I discovered life wasn’t what I thought
it to be. I thought I was living, but Realized
I was Barely existing. I thought I was Breathing
only to discover I was on life support and
the Machine was Breathing for me.

I Had a Heart Attack and it temporarily
Stopped – NO BREATH!
Now my eyes are open. My heart is pumping,
Scarred, But it’s working at least. The
tubes Removed. I’m Breathing – on my own –
Slowly – a little painfully, But I’m doing it.

I Have a second chance. A chance to love.
A Chance to face my fears. A chance to live.
You Only Live This Life Once They Say…

So Just Breathe
Lock Down
by Tanisha

Lock Down! Go to your cell.
Tell me is it like this in every jail?
Lock Down!...Because two people wanted to fight
I wonder will I be locked down for the rest of the night

Locked down, caged in like an animal.
They're lucky I don't turn into a cannibal.
Locked down before giving me my meal.
And they wonder why I'm eyeing what food I can steal.

Lock Down! Go to your cell.
I swear this place feels like Hell.
Locked down for something that had nothing to do with me.
God, I can't wait for the day I am free.

LOCK DOWN!
I Need a Drink
by Tanisha

My body’s on fire, in need of this ice-cold drink.
The chill of the ice shocking my soul.
I expected a chill…but not too feel it in my bones.
I need the chill to cool off the rage.
But this day’s old ice just put me in a cage.

My body is frozen, in need of this steamy hot drink.
The heat from the steam warming my soul.
The inner warm that makes everything better.
I crave the drink that burns like the sun and
Melts away my cares.
But this scorching hot drink just burned up
What I hold dear.

My body is neutral, not in need of a drink.
Yet a drink sits before me, neither hot nor cold
I tried to swallow this drink, it did nothing for me
I regurgitated from its putrid taste.
Lukewarm drinks are such a waste.

My body is thirty, in need of a nice big drink.
Dehydration sets in, feeling parched from a cup
That’s bone dry
Hoping this cup of love will fulfill my greatest need.
Give me a drink of your love, hot or cold,
I'll happily drink it up…you’ll see
But a drink of your love — ROOM TEMP
Is just not for me.
What Helps Me Breathe
by Shay

The feeling of being alive
The smell of outdoor air
The way the sun sets
The love I receive from home
The warm sun kissing my cheeks
The feel of a fresh shower
The aroma of the peeling of a fresh orange
The way God empowers my soul
The beautiful melody from a harp
The stampede of marching soldiers
The very essence of life…
Why
by Shay

I really don’t know, but I guess
I could lie, say I had to
But no, that’s not it, I could blame
My peers, but ha, I’m a leader, never
A follower, maybe I needed the money
Yeah, that’s what my mind said, but that’s
A lie too, maybe I can blame my mom
And dad, no my grandma, I got it, my brothers,
I did it, just cause I’m a girl, why can’t I?
The Truth is what you asked for,
Tskkk, I guess if I’m honest
I’d say I’m Greedy, I idolize money,
The very essence of it, the smell, the color,
The thought of holding it makes me ecstatic,
The thought of having more brings me joy,
The smell of it makes my mouth water, I wasn’t
Neglected, I never went hungry, my parents didn’t
Beat me, I didn’t grow up in the ghetto, in fact
Believe it or not I have a college degree, I took
Cabs to school everyday because I didn’t feel like
Walking and the school was only about 10 blocks
Away, so you ask why I love it so much, Power,
All I ever wanted was Power, the feeling of
Being in charge, the praise, the boasting, all of it
Is why, so now you see, that’s why I will
Not lie.
Poem for My Daddy
by Shay

No matter how long it takes for me to get home, I know you will always be there when I need you, never have you turned your back on me, never will I turn my back on my father that I’m conceived of…

I dream of holding you close again, one day very soon…Can’t wait for the day when you give me away, when I finally choose a groom

You can count on me, I’ll be there to the end, not only are you my father, but you’re also my first love best friend, the one man who has always loved me unconditionally

Flaws and all

Whatever it takes, I want our loving relationship back, Daddy. You made me strong, you instilled strength in me, because of you, I am strong, I will never break.

I love you, always.
Gone But I’m Here
by Shay

No matter how long it takes for you to get home and really realize that I’m gone, know that I will always be there when you need me. My spirit is what guides you; never has God turned his back on me. Never will I turn my back on a child that is my legacy. When God made me a mother, it was a job that I was honored to take on. And even though I know that your heart is heavy, your thoughts are scattered, times seem hard, remember the love we shared is all that matters. When God whispered into my ears and told me that it was time to go home, your face was my last thought. I smiled, I didn’t question then, for I knew that I could be right by your side. As an angel, your angel, I could soothe your tears, and whisper to you in your dreams, covenant you with all my love. When you feel that warm brush of wind kiss your cheek, the calm sensation you feel when you’re overwhelmed, that’s me. I’ll always be your mother, whether I’m here or in heaven for God chose me as your special angel, the greatest job ever…
Excerpt from Untitled Novel
by Shay

Pulling up in front of Red’s house, London and Chelle were in awe. They could not believe that it was his place. He lived in a gated community with security and the whole nine yards. The mansion was by no means a simple house. It was gorgeous. The lawn and outside decorations looked expensive. The girls felt like they were at the home of a movie star. They were merely hood rich, nothing compared to this. They were speechless. London was the first to speak.

“You sure you got the address right?”

Chelle checked her phone and replied, “Ya, damn this nigga got paper.” She looked around the yard.

“Why don’t you call and make sure?” London stated, never taking her eyes off the mansion. Chelle dialed Red’s number. He picked up on the second ring.

“What’s up, Ma? Where you at?”

“I think I’m outside. What’s your address again?” As she was asking, he appeared in the doorway of the mansion. He walked down the stairs, hanging up the phone.

“I guess this is the right house.” Chelle hung up and got out of the car. Red walked up to her, giving her a hug.

“Damn, Ma, you look good as hell and you smell good.” He licked his lips and looked at her seductively. London got out of the car and walked around. Red couldn’t believe how gorgeous she was. “Damn, she fine. I should’ve chose her,” he thought to himself. He quickly averted his attention back to Chelle before she noticed the lust in his eyes. He spoke up asking, “So this yo lil Beamer huh?” looking at London and escorting them into his house.

“Ya, it was a birthday gift from my mom,” London said. As they walked in, the girls were even more mesmerized by the inside of the mansion. They were awe-struck. The foyer had gold trimmings and a huge fish tank with little sharks and eels and various other creatures. It went all the way up to the second floor. The staircase was grand and wrapped around on both sides. The living room was snow white with different color throw pillows on the sectional. A 70” flat screen was mounted to the wall. The girls had never seen such opulence.

“Right this way, ladies,” Red directed them further into the back of the house where they came to a movie theatre with a bar and dance floor. There were maybe twenty other people there, mostly guys and about eight girls, including London and Chelle. Red took them to the bar. “What would you ladies like?” he asked.

Chelle said, “I’ll take a Cosmo.”

London replied, “I’ll take a water.”

“She doesn’t really drink,” Chelle explained to Red, “But that means more for me and you.” She gave Red a seductive look as the bartender gave her the drink. She sipped it while London picked up
the bottled water the bartender placed in front of her. They turned around and looked at the other people there. “So, who are most of these people, your friends?” Chelle asked Red.

“You can say that. They work for me and my cousin,” he replied.

“What do you and your cousin do, if you don’t mind me asking?” asked Chelle.

“Let’s just say we’re cleaners, we have a cleaning business. Let me show you the rest of the house,” Red said, changing the subject, grabbing Chelle’s hand.

Chelle turned to London, “You gonna be cool?” Chelle asked with a please can I go look.

“Ya go head. I’m gonna sit here and listen to the music,” London replied before taking a swig of her water. She looked around and everyone was mingling. The dance floor was empty. She decided she wanted to dance. She went to the DJ booth and asked him to play something that she could groove to. He obliged and put on some trey songz, Neyo, Plies, Pretty Ricky, etc.

London loved to dance. When she danced, she be in her own world. She was so into the music that she didn’t notice when Uno walked in and went to the bar. He got a double shot of Henny and turned to watch London on the dance floor. He was drawn to her sex appeal. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. One of his workers named Sly came up to him.

“What’s good, Bleed?” Sly said, giving him dap.

“I can’t call it. Who’s Shorty on the dance floor?”

Sly looked over at London, “I don’t know but she is right. She been in her own world all night. She came in here with her friend and Red.”

Uno took a good look as London was dancing with her eyes closed. He remembered her face from the mall. “I can’t believe this dude invited them back to the house. He don’t even know these broads,” Uno said getting up from the bar.

Sly looked at Uno, “Ya seen Shorty before?”

“Yeah. At the mall earlier when we were tracking a mark. Red was her friend though. Imma have to talk to him about this shit. This house is off limits to outsiders. He know the rules. That’s why we have our own condos,” Uno said angrily.

Sly looked at London again and said, “I don’t know, Bleed. I would’ve broke the rules for her too. She look like she one of a kind.”

Drinking his beer, Uno just stared at London. He couldn’t help but want to know her. She was like an Angel in his demonic world. She didn’t belong.
Every Friday, my mother and I would go to 125th Street, Harlem, NY to meet my dad at the Baby Grand, a bar. We would walk straight to the back, where it was dark and secluded. My father sat there with numerous women around him as he counted money. My mother would give him a look, and he would dismiss the women. Then, we would all leave to go home like a happy family. The next day, my mom would go through my father’s clothing to take them to the cleaners, and she would find handkerchiefs with lipstick, phone numbers, and earrings. She would cry and say, “I’m gonna leave him soon, but the money is just too good.”
Just Breathe
by Ausia

All my life, I been holding
my breath
Missing breakfast, lunch and dinner
just to stay skinny
Suckin’ in my stomach to be
Model thin
Cutting my hair off to be
Halle Berry pretty
Just to put weave in to
be Beyoncé beautiful
Never telling anyone exactly
how I feel
Aloner and scared because
everyone always says I’m
weird
Holding in my breath afraid
to be the real me because
I have to be perfect I have
to be the person all these people
want to see
Holding my breath waiting to be
set free
Waiting to experience the love that
burns inside of me.
Waiting to be the real me
I have to step out on faith
exhale and set myself free
mentally, emotionally
all this hurt and pain that’s
buried down inside of me
I have to physically release this
baggage that’s within me

So no longer will I hold my
breath to be the person I
wanted to be
Today I will let my breath
go and take the first step
towards being the real me
Today, I breathe.
A Letter to My Mother
by Ausia

Dear Momma

A black sheep, an outlaw, rule breaker
Risk taker
I know you’re let down by me
A Drug dealer, a people pleaser
I know you’re unhappy with me
a promiscuous girl, a stripper, an
escort
Ashamed of me as you should be
A convict, a criminal, a gangster a
hoodlum
Dissatisfied with me and I
completely understand
a sinner, a wrongdoer, transgressor
evildoer
Mom, you’re frustrated with me
Please listen, let me explain
I never meant to disappoint
you.
I was so addicted to the
hustle the money the trips
and all the material shit
that I didn’t for one
second stop to think about all
the people who love, depend, and
need me. All the people
my incarceration would affect
How it strained your marriage
your career and your health
Mom, there’s no one to blame
for my decision and actions
but me.
I know I was raised better
and my heart knows I mean well
I apologize to you mom, dad, my
sisters and my kids for having
to live through these consequences
with me for such selfish
life choices I made.
My Truth
by Ausia

Monique was a young girl,  
She had no parents,  
Harvey was running the streets,  
Bettie Boo was away doing 15 years in prison,  
Left with Grandma Hattie, she had  
No guidance, discipline, or stability,  
She started running the streets,  
Searching for this feeling,  
A feeling that got her nothing but left  
Her with a baby at 15,  
January 30, 1989, I would be  
Born to a mother so young she  
Didn’t how to break the  
Generational curse,  
Scared and alone with no  
Mother of her own,  
She dropped out of school  
Got stressed and left,  
And there I was, left with  
Grandma Hattie too,  
My cousin Museco died  
My Grandma Hattie died  
My mother moved away  
Left with family, I came to find  
Out soon enough that abuse was  
Real, and love was not,  
Everyone who was supposed to love  
Me just kept leaving me,  
I never knew my father,  
I first met him when I was 15,  
By then I had already been with  
My share of men looking for love  
To fill a void in my heart, plus  
Daddy was a junkie from the  
Start, nursing several bad habits,  
He had no time to step up and play his part,  
At 17, I got pregnant,  
I got an abortion,
I wanted to die,
I tried to kill myself,
I missed 42 days of school
Sulking in my depression,
But I got myself together in 2007,
I broke the first generation curse,
I graduated high school,
I got my diploma, but it was
Such a requirement that it was never
A celebration, it just went unnoticed,
I moved out on my own,
I thought I was grown,
I got pregnant again, and went back home,
I moved back out into my own place,
And I had my princess,
October 25, 2008, we were doing
Great, then I got with this older
Guy who would get me in order,
Who would set me straight,
He had two girlfriends, we were
Both pregnant, and we thought it was okay,
But 8 months pregnant, I was fed up,
And I walked away stressed,
Had my baby 4 weeks early,
But she was strong and she lived,
Born November 20th, 2009, she was
Her father’s first girl and a
Second of mine, at 21, I
Had enough, a full-time college student,
And a single mom working 3 jobs,
I was almost back in a good place
Then the day care called and
Said, “Your baby is not okay
She’s got a really high fever,”
I didn’t leave work, and 5 hours
Later, she called back and said
She’s not breathing, 911 is on the
Way, I left my job without a
Word, speeding, she was life-flighted
To Rainbows, but she was alive, she was
Breathing, she was there a few days,
I left her to go to class, then
Go to work because I still had
My oldest one to support and rent to pay,
CPS came the next day, said if I
Didn’t stay, they’d take my child
For neglect, they said, Aubrey stayed
In the hospital for 3 months, and I came to
Find out she had kidney reflux,
I lost my house and all my
children’s stuff, except for what
We had at the hospital, which wasn’t much,
I was doing everything alone, I
Was so stressed and depressed, I
Started drinking, taking x-pills, and
Snorting coke, I started working at
A strip club, I said, just to get
Back on my feet, just to get some
Quick money or a baller who’d take
Care of me, that was exactly what
I got, a baller to feed by x-pill
Habit, I was strung out, living out
Of my car, finally, my kids’ God
Parents told me to get myself together
And off the drugs, or they’d take
The girls from me, I said take them,
I’ll see you in 3 days, I have
To fight these demons in peace,
I locked myself in my room,
I didn’t leave or sleep,
I pooped and threw up constantly,
Cleansing my system to get back clean,
Monday, I came out the old me,
No more x-pills, and I didn’t even
Go back to the strip club scene,
My first boyfriend came home
From doing 5 years,
We re-kindled our love,
And he put me through hell,
He sold drugs so he wouldn’t let me
Have a job,
He abused me, neglected me, and
Cheated on me, he drove me crazy to Therapy, then to the 5th floor,
All the while I was questioning What was wrong with me,
Why didn’t he just love me,
I was never strong enough to leave
Because I had nowhere to go, plus
Why leave when he took care of those kids and me,
He caught a case, went back to jail,
I never felt so safe, I got my STNA, got a job, got a place
Like before, I was almost back
In a good place…
Then Aunt Sissy called and said
My sister was dead, she was in a Car accident, I got in my own Car and drove fast nowhere in
The rain, I sang and I cried, I talked to God, and I asked him why,
I got back, stressed out,
I was sad, alone, and depressed,
I spanked Aubrey, but I didn’t think it was abuse, well it left
A pink line, length and width,
A bruise, and CPS said differently,
They picked my kids up from day care, the next day I was at family court,
The next day I was at my sister’s Funeral, I felt like my whole life had fallen apart, they said take Parenting, take anger management,
And when we go back to court, we’ll give them back to you,
2 weeks shy of finishing my classes,
A guy I was dating hit me up
The next day I paid a visit to the Hospital because something just wasn’t Right, my chest was tight, they told Me my lungs collapsed at 0%,
They rushed me to OR stat,
They cut my side, broke two ribs,
And put a tube in me, I lay in the
Hospital in recovery for 3 weeks,
I didn’t make it to court, they
Gave custody of my kids to my
Parents because they said I came
Up too short,
I was devastated that I was being
Penalized for something I had no
Control over, I felt like the system
Played me, I moved away,
Became a drunk, got pregnant again,
With twins, I didn’t know
By whom, but both guys I was
Sleeping with were headed back to
Prison, and there I was again
Stuck in a difficult position,
One day I went to the doctors,
And the twins had no heartbeat,
As bad as I didn’t want them,
I didn’t want them to die,
They sent me upstairs,
Put me to sleep, I woke up,
The nurse said sorry, not one
Baby survived,
I went home, I was depressed,
I lost my job,
I went to jail,
Came home, went back to the
Strip club, went back to the drugs,
I met a pimp, and I let
Him game me, but he liked me a
Little too much for himself to make me
Work, so I didn’t, and I stayed on
His arm,
September, October, November
Came, I didn’t get a blood stain,
I was pregnant,
I was glad, I was happy,
I was nervous, I wasn’t ready,
And neither was he,
I miscarried on Christmas Day,
And that was the end of him and me,
On the same day, my mother had a minor stroke,
And a few months later, I made
Up my mind, I would be an escort
Because I really liked money, I was
Alone, it was just me, no man, no kids,
Why not, I started taking calls and
Going on dates, the money started rolling
In, one day, a customer told me
I should move to DMV, I’d make
More money, so I packed my bags,
And caught a flight, I didn’t tell
Anyone, I just up and left in the
Middle of the night,
I set up shop, I was doing real good,
About to move permanently to D.C.,
But then I went on a call and
A John held me hostage for 7
Hours at knife point, he
Stripped me naked, tied me up, then
He degraded, raped, and mutilated me,
He left me in the tub, locked in
The dark, finally 4 hours later, he
Let me get dressed, dropped me
Off back at my hotel,
The next day, I caught a flight
Back home, where, at that
Moment, I’d planned to stay,
But I missed the money and
My johns missed me,
I met a really nice guy, and I
Lied about my life, he lied about his too,
I found out I was pregnant, and I
Changed my phone number, and I
Stayed, I got in school, I got my
Oldest two daughters back,
And I managed to make the
President’s List, we lived alone, it was
Just us 3, I had my last baby girl,
April 5th, 2015, it was me and just
Them 3, finally things were
Looking up, 3 months from graduating,
I met Jay, and I thought, yes,
Finally someone who really loved
Me, I dropped out of school, so I
Could run him around to his licks,
And soon enough, he was in jail, and
There I was once again pregnant,
And alone, he told me just
Sell the dope for him while he was
Gone, I'd be okay,
I thought he loved me,
So I did as he said,
The whole time he was just
Setting the way,
He came home December 26th,
March 17th, I had our only son,
March 21st, I was informed I'd
Be getting indicted, I got ready
For court,
I was charged with conspiracy to possess
And distribute heroin,
I fought the case for 9 months,
I self-surrendered on January 4th,
To start bidding,
I am 5 months to the door
Of freedom again, and I'm just
Excited and anxious for my
New life with my children to begin.
This Time
by Kirsten

This time it is going to be different!! This time I am not going to do what I did. This time I am going to be a different and better person. This time I am going to take advantage of my freedom like I had in the past. This time I’m going to stop saying this time; it’s going to be different.

For the past 2 ½ years incarcerated at a Federal Prison, I sat and contemplated how this time was going to be different. How I was going to be better!! How I was going to go home and be a mother to my child, a daughter to my parents, and a sister to my siblings. I sat for 2 ½ years, planning out how things were going to be different. As my release date approached, the more I reminded myself that this time was going to be different, I continued to convince myself that this time was going to be different. I continued to say I cannot do this again. But was it truly going to be different this time?

On January 6, 2017, I was released from Federal Custody, and I continued to tell myself this time was going to be different. And it is. This time is different because I am not the same 29-year-old who would lie, steal, and cheat from those around me. This time is different because I learned to appreciate my freedom. This time is different because I spent 2 ½ years being a specter in my own life. This time is different because I am more than a weekly phone call to my son. This time is different because it is exhausting living someone else’s life. This time is different because I’m 31 years old, and this is my last chance to change. This time is different because I am more than a number and a last name. This time it is different because it has to be different.

Being incarcerated, all inmates have these optimistic dreams of making sure that this time is going to be different. We sit in our cells and determine how we are going to change, how we are going to reenter society, and how we are not returning to prison. How we want to be different and be more than what we are. We sit for a sentence imposed by the justice system to determine how to make sure that this time is truly going to be different. The million-dollar question is how do we ensure that this time really will be different? How do we ensure that we won’t be returning back into the system? There is no real answer to this question, and there is no road map. You can’t eHow or Google how to make this time different. All you can do is try to do better.

When job interviews get frustrating because you can’t pass the background check, when you’re not up to the expectations of your family members, and you feel that you are a failure, just TRY TO BE BETTER!!

Try to remember that this time is going to be different because you have a chance. This time will be different because you have been broken, and anything broken can be repaired. This time will be different because you can’t go back. This time will be different because you have been stripped of your freedom, and that has been given back—which doesn’t happen to all.
My advice to you and to myself to make this time different is JUST TRY TO DO BETTER!!! Don’t set the bar too high until you get your head above water. Don’t allow the stigma of being a convicted felon determine who you are, what you deserve, and how this time isn’t different. Don’t let disappointment allow you to fall back. Remember that everyone has a past, but we also have a present and a future. All we can ask of ourselves is to TRY TO DO BETTER!!!!
Contributor Biographies

**Carletta** was born in Wake Forest, NC but raised in Raleigh, NC. She graduated from William G. Enloe High School in Raleigh, NC and later graduated from Earle C. Clements Job Corps in Morganfield, KY, where she earned her CNA license. She worked in nursing for 5 years, taking care of mentally disabled patients and the elderly. She has published two poetry books and is now working on a few novels. Carletta plans to continue her writing career and start her own “Banging for Jesus” organization in the near future. In the meantime, she plans to continue attending classes at her local community college to study criminal justice upon her release.

On October 9th, 1990, **Jessica** was born to a young mother in Florida and given up for adoption to a family from New York. She then embarked on a dysfunctional ride of a childhood and adolescence, enduring a number of traumatic experiences, ultimately resulting in her incarceration, a prison sentence of 71 months. She chose to use this time to grow and evolve into a better and stronger person, seeing her punishment instead as an opportunity for growth. Despite moments of indescribable challenge, she remains grateful for this experience.

**Celeste**: I’ve been an artist my entire life. At a very young age, I began using creativity to cope with the trauma of my surroundings. I come from a large family of artists and musicians. I’ve never considered writing to be one of my best mediums, but I’ve always know I’d have an important story to tell. I’ve always loved poetry, and there are three poems I’ve always cleaved to: “How Did You Die,” “If”, and “Still I Rise.” When the judge sentenced me to 30 years with little regard as to how I came to stand before him, a part of a drug conspiracy, I wanted so much to recite for him, “Still I Rise.” So here I am, in the pages of this collection, trying to piece it all together.

I, **Rosalind**, became inspired to write while I was incarcerated at the SFF Hazelton before the Book Club started. I found that through my writing, I can be me and free to be me. I love showing my innermost thoughts and feelings. I just wish that my grandmother would have still been here to hear all of my thoughts and feelings. I dedicate this to Vilma Prather, my grandmother through whom all of this came to be.

“**Mjazz**” aka **Melissa**, a native of Pittsburgh, PA, discovered her talent of writing while serving a 10.5-year sentence in federal prison. Her passion for writing has pushed her through many obstacles which have materialized into her writing four novels. She has used her prison experience to ignite her will to survive by conquering the negative aspects in her life to make positive changes. When she’s released from prison, she plans to continue writing and dedicating her efforts to helping children follow their dreams.

My name is **Gertrilla** I’m from Washington D.C. with 3 children and 6 grandchildren. I’m a 49-year old female. In my attempt to try to allow people to get an
understanding about me and what I’ve gone through all my life, I came up with the poem, “Name Calling.” I’m not a writer or poet but found it rather easy when it came to talking about my realities.

**Johnisha “Jaye”** began to recognize her love for writing at the age of 16, in her 11th grade Honors English Class at Eastern Sr. High School in Washington D.C. She loved Shakespeare, favoring stories like *MacBeth, Hamlet,* and *Romeo and Juliet.* Poetry became her favorite genre of creative writing. She also enjoys playwriting and screenwriting. She has modernized several Bible stories, adding her own personal flair of humor while capturing the essence of each story’s purpose. In the beginning of her sentence at FCI Danbury, Johnisha found herself relieving stressful and confusing situations through her gift of writing. While at SFF Hazelton, she taught several creative writing classes at Re-Entry Resource Center for 2 years. Two of her most recent pieces, “The Truth Is,” and “I Cry,” were recited and performed at the well-known restaurant and poetry gallery, Bus Boys, in Washington D.C. Johnisha continues to write poetry and plays when the opportunity arises and her soul motivates her to do so.

**J.** has been incarcerated since 2005 for 2nd degree murder while armed. She accepts her incarceration as a disguised “blesson.” A lesson concealed as a true blessing from her Higher Power. She has taken multiple classes through Ohio University’s incarceration program, and has a life goal of earning her PhD in Behavioral Sciences. She spends most of her time watching sports, writing, and reading. When she is not consumed by one of those activities, she is religiously exercising. She will be released from prison between June 2020 and June 2021, and plans on building up the community that she helped destroy though her own personal experiences. She wants to specifically work with troubled teens and young adults who are headed down the same avenue she once was on.

**Tanisha,** also known as “T,” asked ten people, “What do you see when you think of me? Describe me in one or two words.” Responses included, “Beautiful, spicy, loving, funny, sassy, sarcastic, realistic, bold, brass, intelligent, interesting, fierce, caring, loyal, weird, friend.” Who am I? What’s my life’s score? I am all that they say and a little bit more. I am UNFINISHED. My life story has only just begun. My heart once was too guarded, the fear inside had won. But now I’m fighting and one day in the future you will see the complete, fully-lived life, version of me.

**Shatima “Shay”** was born in Murfreesboro, TN. She started writing short stories at the age of 7. She loves to read and is currently the author of 3 urban books waiting to be published upon her release in December 2017.

**Daphne,** a woman, a mother of seven, a grandmother of ten. I completed basic training in the US Air Force, traveled and lived all over the world, primarily growing up in New York. When I was young, I said, “When I grow up, I will have stability in my life.” Guess my goal was accomplished. I’m presently serving a 10-year sentence in a federal prison. I graduated from Ashbrook High School. I got A’s in social work, I’m nine credits shy of a BA in Business. I also worked as a
housekeeping supervisor for 3.5 years before my arrest. My hobbies include reading, entertaining company, and playing bingo.

Updates From WoW Book Club Alumni

Leslie: I had the opportunity at Hazelton to read books provided by APBP. I would like to offer my thanks to those people who provided the books and those who braved the weather just so I could become more enlightened. I want to learn what I can do from my city to keep the books coming into the prisons. God Bless you and All you do.

Jeannie: I am doing very well! I just bought a small condo in Santa Barbara, CA. I am the Congregational Care Coordinator for my church and an active volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. I still work as a paralegal and am keeping purposefully involved in my community. Being a participant in the book club was especially meaningful to me. I thank you!! I am eager to assist you and the Appalachian Prison Book Project in any way allowable. Please keep me updated and informed. Heartfelt thanks and deep gratitude, Jeannie.

Kirsten: I am doing well and that is great!!!! I am doing very well and have been adjusting to freedom without any hiccups!! I miss the group too!!! I actually finished up reading the last book by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. We read her book about a year ago. I really think a great book for the group would be *We should all be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It’s an amazing and quick read. I have been writing. When I finish, I’ll send it to you. I have an amazing job actually working for an attorney in D.C. that is really big into reform. I am blessed to say that I am one of the few lucky ones who landed on their feet. “I want movement, not a calm course of existence. I want excitement and danger and the chance to sacrifice myself for my love. I feel in myself a superabundance of energy which finds no outlet in our quiet life.” –Leo Tolstoy
**Wow Reading List, 2014 - Present**

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*

Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*

Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*

Julia Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*

Alex Kotlowicz, *There Are No Children Here*

Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*

James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”

Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize Speech

Mark Brazaitis, *An American Affair; Julia & Rodrigo; Steal My Heart*

Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*

Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*

Fred Chappelle, *I Am One of You Forever*

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*

Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*

Geraldine Brooks, *Year of Wonders*

Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth*

Lorraine Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun*

August Wilson, *Two Trains Running*

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*

John Joseph Adams, ed., *Brave New Worlds*

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

David Oshinsky, “Worse than Slavery”: *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*

Kathleen Grissom, *Kitchenhouse*

Jeannette Walls, *The Glass Castle*