

Bridges

Issue No. 9—**Letters From Home**

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**Justice
Initiatives**

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

A typical issue of *Bridges* features writing and artwork by our incarcerated neighbors and is distributed to the New York City jails and state prisons we serve, but for this issue we present work by community members on the outside who have been directly affected by the carceral system. This will also be the first *Bridges* made available in print to the general public as well as to our incarcerated readers. We're calling the issue Letters from Home.

The pieces in this issue mostly came out of a six-week writing workshop with facilitators and participants who are formerly incarcerated or otherwise impacted. Our friends from Re/Creation, Khadira Sunni Savage and John Proctor, facilitated the workshops, with assistance from Justice Initiatives' Isabella Vieira. You can read Khadira and John's reflections on the process before you dive into the writing and artwork that came out of the series. You will also notice real letters from home throughout the issue. These were gathered in a callout to friends and family of both Justice Initiatives and Re/Creation.

We hope that our incarcerated readers will enjoy the issue and appreciate the spirit of solidarity and support in which it was created. For our readers in the community, we hope that you will also enjoy these pieces and that they will give you a better sense of the impact of the carceral system on the lives of all who are impacted by it.

In solidarity,

Justice Initiatives at Brooklyn Public Library

If this issue has moved you in some way, if you find areas for feedback, or would like to share another thought, we'd love to hear from you.

Write to us anytime at:

Justice Initiatives

Brooklyn Public Library, Outreach Services

10 Grand Army Plaza

Brooklyn, NY 11238



Letters From Home Cohort

Letters from the Facilitators

Even before Re/Creation's inception, our organization's fortunes have been shaped and informed by the Brooklyn Public Library. When I was first building writing workshops at Rikers Island in 2017, the first other facilitators I met there were BPL librarians and staff running the book cart, and they always welcomed working together. When Re/Creation became an organization in 2020, BPL colleagues recommended that we apply for their incubator grant, which they awarded us the next year. That grant funded our movement into publishing the work of our workshop participants and paying them for their work. One of our first public group readings was in front of BPL's main branch.

It is in the spirit of this continuing collaboration that Re/Creation held a 6-week workshop this summer for writers returning from incarceration that has resulted in the zine you hold in your hands. These writers, mostly new to me, lent their determined, generous spirit and talents to both the workshop and the work, and many of them are now part of our Re/Creation writers' collective.

I frequently say that writers' and artists' visions work best in conversation, and I think this is especially true here. Fiction and creative nonfiction share space with stunning visual art, with first-person letters from home to our people still on the inside pulling them together and reminding us of how deeply personal this work is to us. I'm honored to have had a part in bringing it about.

—John Proctor

Letters From Home is more than just a writing workshop series. Every person who sat at that table at Bedford Library shared a common pain: prison. My father's double life sentence was a dark cloud over me most of my life. Through the art of writing I learned to express and transmute what I felt into words. While at the table we learned how the simple act of writing or saying it out loud gifted us solutions. Each piece was curated from a space of holding value to our lessons learned and having conversations with ourselves that are sometimes hard to hear.

As I co-facilitated these workshops I understood that I would be entering this space a year and a half after losing my oldest brother to cancer while in DOC custody. It was grief that allowed me the space to write; it has been my form of alchemy and has taught me how powerful it is to create while in this energy.

My brother's death taught me how important it is to get a Letter From Home and how writing can put so much into perspective when it doesn't really make sense. If there is an opportunity to keep communication open with your family, do it, and if you have a loved one incarcerated, send them a line or two and let them know that someone is thinking about them.

I hope you enjoy what we created for you and that it connects you to the power of writing as a tool for healing.

—Khadira Sunni Savage

Far Away but Close to Our Hearts

by Roberto Cepeda

Here's something I need to tell all those incarcerated in the city jails, state and federal prisons. In New York City, other states and even abroad. You are all missed. It doesn't matter if you get one letter a week or make one phone call a month or get one visit a year. You are missed.

I spent time in Auburn, Elmira and Clinton correctional prisons in New York state. I rarely got mail or spoke to a loved one on the phone but what I do know is that throughout the prison industrial complex occasionally church organizations and advocacy groups would visit the jails, provide greeting cards and small gifts of socks and snacks during the holidays and pen pals to those in need.

When I came home I attended several churches in Brooklyn and Manhattan and I found that many have prison ministries that routinely pray for those incarcerated. Things aren't easy for many families today. Some are struggling financially to make ends meet. But prayer, empathy and genuine heartfelt concern that many feel for the men and women incarcerated doesn't cost a dime.

Without you knowing it, there are those that nonetheless pray for you. Ask the God of their understanding to keep you and your loved ones safe. To grant you peace and serenity and bring many of you home safe and sound.

So even if you don't get a letter every week. You are missed. You are loved and thought of. Someone cares about you and wishes for your well being. For me, that was the inspiration that got me through another day. I hope it does the same for you.

This is Dedicated to My Father-in-Law... Who is Currently Serving Life in Prison

by Nichole Denise Chan

Head high, sunshine, let's look up to the sky.
Its brightness don't die; let's push to stay alive.
This is a letter from home.
Written in stone.
Remember your strength, hold on to your faith,
That good things come to those who wait.
And that everything is... gonna be ok.
Just never give up, stay true to yourself,
And remember that health is wealth.
Remember to smile, remember to sing,
Remember to breathe, and set your mind free.
You can be anywhere when you close your eyes
And let your mind roam...
This is just a reminder —
A letter from home.

My Contemplations

by Henry Robinson

While I'm upstate, I'm up late/ trying to contemplate, who was
real who was fake/ the people I love the people I hate/ and how I
made a BIG mistake./ I'm good now, but will I be at a later date?/
because it's beef that I create whenever I make the GROUND
shake?! whenever I am going against the opposing/ and I don't
have anyone else to throw the extra "blows" in?/ so now I'm like
water in the freezer... I'm frozen?!/ I'm in the box writing words
that rhyme,/ discovering what bugs can fly jump and climb,/ while
receiving letters from the loved ones of mines/ That's just a couple
of ways I do my time,/ or sometimes I'm up late singing old or new
songs/ or on my knees, praying to God, while reading "Psalms."/

So, now I contemplate on how I mistook things?./ and being that I
mistook things?, does that mean I mis-take?/ I think I made a BIG
"mistake",/ but now it's too late/ cause I've learned my fate./ So now
I contemplate/ what's real, what's fake/, what's love, what's hate/,
so that I could come home on my "conditional" RELEASE date!!

Scattered Thoughts on a Walk

by David Ralik Hopper

Granting freedom to my tired toes
Socks removed,
Heel, toes groove
Into green blades of grass,
Beneath tickles my barefoot

Foot connected to calf,
Calf to thigh,
Butterflies burst out of cocoons
Land upon my face as a smile

Between these walls,
My thoughts take flight

The ball of hydrogen and helium
Tumbles over my face
Scorching my eyes.....

It reminds me that I'm still alive.

On a bending knee,
One hand glides over the
Silky tulip, the tulip
That grows behind these walls.

Behind these walls,
Death, sickness, pain, rage
and time
And more time and more time
But behind these walls such beauty grows.

It is morning,
Dew sets,
Feeding the humming bees
I take a breath....

Give my eyes rest,
the darkness I vision
is comforting.

Knowing within minutes
The bell will ring
My hour of keep lock
Rec is over....

and it's back
to the belly of the beast.

That memory
Stays with me
and reminds me
There's life outside of these walls.



Healing by David Ralik Hopper



Untitled by A. Battle

Letter From Home

by Khadira Sunni Savage

Adu,

Had it not been for your absence, I'm not sure my relationship with God would be as strong as it is today. I spent a lot of time being mad about us being separated, feeling rejected by your lack of involvement in my life because I understood that you being locked up didn't mean we couldn't have a relationship. I feel like you choose to separate yourself even though I made it very clear that I wanted and needed you to care about me the way I cared about you.

Nothing anyone ever said about you made me hate you or feel like I did not need you in my life. You choose to disconnect, removing everyone from your visitation list was the last straw for me. I learned about rejection from you, my father. The day that I came to visit you and discovered that you had removed everyone off the list. I was in crisis. The delusion of the character I had created in my head told me to go see you because you would know what to say to me. I told myself that my mental health condition might have been something you experienced and maybe you could tell me how to make it stop.

My entire childhood Umi told me that I would be a Monster just like you so I thought you would be my cure. The Sergeant went to the back to speak with you when she saw my reaction to being moved off the list, she saw me break. She told me that she let you know that it was me trying to visit you, "Tell him it's Khadira." I was sure that if you knew it was me, you would accept the visit and speak with

me. I was 33 years old and I could count how many times I've seen your face. I don't even know what your voice sounds like.

Tears on the ground as I cried walking through the flowered walkway at East Jersey State Prison. Then the strangest thing happened, it started pouring rain out of nowhere! It was like God was crying with me as I cut ties with you.

That day I found my real father, God.

Thank you for breaking my heart so big that it cracked me open spiritually. It took me years to consider if it was possible that you rejected me with that intention. That you wanted me to release you and that you knew the only way for me to let go of you was to break my heart, it worked.

I no longer desired to know you and changed my focus towards raising my own family. I poured into them and developed a love for my kids that could never make them feel rejected. Was that your intention Abu?

When Bear died I thought you would have reached out and want to know how he died. He died in DOC custody serving time for a crime identical to yours, he had cancer in his bladder. I never got to tell you how we reconnected, I found him on MySpace and we really tried to have a good relationship before he got locked up. I got to visit him a couple times while he was hospitalized in Troy NY and again the night before he died at Bellevue Hospital. I got the chance to feed him and joke with him that day, he couldn't really talk but

Bear always spoke with his face; we have that in common.

After he died his family on his moms side ghosted me when it was time to pay for his cremation so he's with me now. The youngest of your 15 children I always wanted to find my siblings and I'm grateful that me and Bear was able to spend time together. When we contacted New Jersey State Prison to notify you of his death they told us that you refused to attend his service. No need to worry, Bear never had a service. When I got his ashes back from Owens Funeral Home, I walked with him through Harlem. One last walk through the hood, he loved Harlem just as much as me, did you know that?

Now I'm alone again. John is awaiting trial now. I don't want to speak on his charges because I'm praying for his release; he has 6 kids. I'm faithful that God is finding a way for this all to make sense, even after all of this I am optimistic.

I'm not mad at you anymore, I think I'm navigating acceptance of your absence by looking at how I alchemized it. I see how beautiful my children are and I'm getting closer to Umi everyday. She told me that you liked to play chess too and how you also loved music the same way I do. We speak your name through a different tone now. Perhaps you saved me, that's what I tell myself now; I changed the narrative.

I love you forever,
Khadira

Take Care of Your Mom

by Sylvester Lawrence Jackson II

Those were the last words my father ever said to me before he passed away. I promised him I would. I went home everyday after work so that I could cook dinner for my mom and me. I'd stop and get ice cream for dessert. After dessert we'd watch her favorite TV shows and she'd go to bed. Most nights I'd stay home, but sometimes I'd go out for a little while to hang out with my friends. Looking back I wished I hadn't. I started doing bad stuff, drinking and partying, and it kept getting worse, so bad in fact I ended up getting in trouble and going to prison. Prison sucked but I knew I'd be home one day. I'd call my mom once a week just to see how she was doing. Just hearing her voice made me feel better. I always worried about her. My mom's been sick since I was a little kid. We had to give her insulin shots everyday. My father taught me how to do it. My mom also suffered from epileptic seizures. My father taught me how to deal with that as well. My dad was a medical technician in the military and he knew how to do all that stuff, he taught me a lot. Things and lessons learned that I still use today.

I was coming up near the end of my sentence upstate. I think I only had maybe one or two years left to do. I was excited because I'd be able to go home and take care of my mom like my dad wanted me to. So I made my usual weekly call and one of my four nieces answered the phone. It was weird because she lived down south and I wondered why she was in New York and at my mom's house. The facility where I was had an old Superman phone booth where you stand inside and close the door. When I asked my niece why was she home I could picture in my mind her holding the phone away from her mouth. She said to my family, "Oh he doesn't know yet."

My niece got back on the phone and said Grandma is gone. She had a brain aneurysm. I can't tell you exactly what happened next. Everything just went black. I know I was crying. I think I screamed and I know the COs came rushing over, I told them my mom died, and that's all I can remember saying. The next day a priest came to see me and I don't remember the conversation but he got in touch with my family and made plans for me to go to my mom's wake. It was weird, it seemed like everyone in my housing unit knew and was sad for me. I was told I couldn't go to the wake and the funeral because my nephew Artie was upstate too, so I had to choose the wake or the funeral. I decided to go to the wake. He went to the funeral.

I remember when a day came for me to go see my mom. They gave me a pair of brown pants, a white shirt and white sneakers to wear to the wake. It was a long drive. There were three of us, two COs and me in the back seat. There wasn't much conversation. I mean after all what were you going to talk about, the weather? The wake was in Hempstead, New York. It's a town in Nassau county. The funeral parlor was the same one we had used to lay out my father. When we walked in there was no one there. The officers had removed the handcuffs and chains around my waist in the parking lot. They left the ones on my legs so I couldn't run. Running was the last thing on my mind.

My mother was lying in a coffin. I don't remember how long I was standing at the coffin, until someone touched me on the shoulder. It was my sister Diane. She'd done a great job taking care of my mom. My mom had on this beautiful white dress and she looked like she was just sleeping, I sat right in front of her casket, I never got up to hug anyone. I was ashamed. Looking back I think everyone knew I'd come from an upstate prison, but no one said a thing. I kept my legs under the bench so no one could see the chains. I knew my mom missed her husband, my dad, and now they were back together again. I was happy and sad at the same time. It was 2 years

to the day that my father had passed away. My mom was at peace, no more pain, no more doctors, no more shots. I don't remember saying anything to anyone, I just sat there and let my sister take care of everything. There were a lot of hugs and crying. The COs let me stay for hours. I wanted to see my best friend Steve before I left to go back upstate. He didn't get there on time. The COs walked me out to the car and while they were cuffing me in the parking lot, my grandnieces and grandnephews ran out to say goodbye. That's when the crying started, my heart sank. I got into the backseat of the car and we drove away. They asked me if I wanted Burger King. I hadn't had it in about seven years. I said yes, then I gave them directions to the parkway. I needed to get away, quick. The longer I stayed the more my heart hurt.

We had a long journey back upstate and the COs said we'd have to do an overnight at none other than Sing Sing, because my facility was too far away. When we got there the only cell and bed available was on death row. How's that for irony, coming from a wake and having to sleep on death row. I had the strangest experience there. It felt like my mom was trying to take my soul. I really had to fight to stay here. Anyway I woke up the next morning and we started a long trip back. When I got back to the facility all the other guys there kind of befriended me for going through what I just went through. One of the first things somebody asked me was, "Hey you just got back, you want to smoke a joint?" I said no.

I was there for another month or so and they told me to pack up, I was going to a new facility. Which was weird because I had just been at this facility not too long. Anyway they sent me down to a facility called Hudson.

When the bus pulled in a CO came on the bus I was ready for him to read us the riot act like they do at every facility, yelling and screaming and trying to be tough. But this CO was a little happy chubby guy and he said, "Welcome to happy Hudson!" My thoughts

were, “We’re still in prison, what’s happy about that?” But this was a work facility and we got to work outside of the facility. I ended up working at the police academy where we prepared meals for COs and other people. One of my first jobs there was learning how to peel grapes. Weird, right? What you do is you take the top of the grape, you cut an x, and you just peel it away, and it makes some kind of salad or something. I don’t even remember but they said if I ever decide to get a job in a fancy restaurant that was one of the things I’d have to learn how to do. We had the morning shift 5:00 a.m. to 12:00 in the afternoon and it was pretty cool, it was good job. The CO that drove us every morning was ex-military just like me. We got along fine. I wasn’t even at this facility for 6 months and they told me to pack up again, I was going to work release.

The first thought that came into my mind was that if my mother could have hung on a little longer I would have made it home to her and been able to do what my father wanted: Take care of your mom.

I Know Not Why the Caged Bird Sings

by Velma Freeman AKA Lady Vee

Tell me why Oh Lord did you close the doors
For me to be locked up in vain
I Pray and Pray for unlocked doors
To help me relieve some of this pain
Here I sit like a bird with no wings wishing that I could Fly
And all the world could see I was Free as I flapped my wings in the sky
With a pen in my hand and things on my mind
And the tears flowing like there was no end...Wondering why I am
still here
I just can't understand if this is your plan but I'm continually praying
for it to end
Unlike the bird I have no wings just waiting as the time goes by...
Wondering what these years will bring without my wings;
What song will I continue to sing!?

I know not why the caged bird sings. I'm just like a slave crying out in
vain.
Wondering will I ever be set free again. What are you saying?
You were never free!?

Oh Yes I was Just my imagination and me.

As I sit here and think I could take myself many places wherever I
want to go. I could go home and reminisce of All the good times I
had or I could get caught up in All I've lost... wishing that day had
never came when they shackled me up in those chains ☹️!

I now know why the caged bird sings... because he wants to fly but
just sits and flaps but still continues to have no wings.

After sharing my poem to a few listeners in a writing group I attended at the Bedford Library located at 496 Franklin Avenue in Brooklyn, New York, one of the facilitators with Justice Initiatives and Re-Creation asked me what I would say to myself now that I am out, or those who are still in who have also walked in my shoes. Also what words of encouragement I could share with them to encourage and let them know there is always a light at the end of the tunnel.

I am gonna sit and stop and make it brief... I know it may seem hard to get any sort of relief from the time you spent behind bars and may have even gained a couple of scars but as you've also heard, time heals all wounds... so this is not a time to sit in gloom. Start thinking of what you want to do and make yourself a plan... Stop thinking of your past mistakes and try to understand.

Keep the faith, brothers and sisters, and let it carry you through...
Be Strong and continue on and you too will make it through! 😊

Cover yourself with the
Armor of God
Ephesians 6:13-18

Leave Behind

Regrets, suicide, sadness, negativity, stink'n
think'n, violence, giving up, etc.

Remember — you are what you eat
and what you think.

Make your own list of what you don't need and pray for
the Higher Power to take it away.
God Bless.



A Magical Bird by Je'Jae Cleopatra Daniels

Bars Couldn't Hold Me

by Kaeshalee Vega

The walls tried to swallow my name, cold steel biting at my skin,
time dripping slow like broken clocks, but my spirit refused to cage in.
They counted my days in shackles,
I counted my days in prayers,
they saw me as a number,
I saw myself as the storm they feared. Concrete whispered silence at
night, yet my soul sang louder than chains,
I carved my freedom in the dark,
where light still pulsed through my veins. Yes, they took my body-
but they could not own my fire.
I walked out sharper than glass,
a phoenix born of barbed wire.
Now I stand—
not broken, but risen,
not prisoner, but proof.
Every lock only taught me the code to my own truth.

Rikers

Dedicated to Sammy W. and the Family

by Sylvester Lawrence Jackson II

We the people do hereby proclaim that upon entering the facility known as Rikers Island the phrase “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” no longer applies to any citizen within these United States of America. It is self-evident that not all men or women are created equal nor do they have inalienable rights such as our right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

It would seem that in our country we’ve built statues and memorials commemorating equal rights, freedom, and justice for all. When in fact souls have been lost on the Island of Death. Men and women are being held behind bars for months and sometimes years before going to trial.

Aren’t those the same reasons that the founding fathers seceded from England? What happened to a speedy trial by an impartial jury? Or are we to assume that the Bill of Rights ceases to exist upon entering Rikers Island?

On November 18, 2023, I attended a memorial service for the souls lost to Rikers. As I stood listening to the names being read, it reminded me of the names being read during the 9/11 memorial service. Standing underneath the Washington Square archway, I happened to look up. There glistening in the sun was the Freedom Tower and I suddenly realized that the men’s and women’s names I was listening to would never know what freedom was because not only had Rikers taken their freedom, Rikers had taken their lives.

If we look at our history as a country, America has always taken freedom from others. I've got a constant reminder within my own family's history, being a direct descendant of Native American Indians who were forced to live on reservations and African-Americans who were torn from their native homes and forced into slavery.

My family suffered at the hands of white Americans, but we were strong and resilient enough and fought through the horrors and evil atrocities inflicted upon us.

At 63 years old, I'll be the first to tell you of my love for my country. My father and I both served in America's military. Every member of our family is a proud American. Still, as Americans, we are aware of our rights, such as our right to free speech and free assembly and our inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness.

Honestly, how many Americans are truly happy with all the wars and protests, the killings of our citizens, and the deaths of children on a daily basis?

Capital punishment, solitary confinement, and lethal injections are part of the norm in today's American society. Our country proudly displays a statue of Justice which has a blindfold over her eyes. Its simple meaning is that Justice is blind. Are we so blinded to the fact that ignorance, prejudice, and hatred are crimes against humanity? Then how should humanity be judged? Humanity towards others after all is the key to life. How will history judge America?

PRISON BLUES



Prison Blues I by Roberto Cepeda

PRISON BLUES



Prison Blues II by Roberto Cepeda

Tears You Can't Hold

This poem is dedicated to my Father

by Courtayne JB Charley

Buckets become filled
Often words do not heal.
Because my life is on the line
Praying for my father's return in time.
I lost and I lost questions turned tides

More than anything I want my father home constantly's on my
mind. May this letter from home, find you in good shape and on
grind. I wanna thank you for being strong in this race a long time.
1 smile from father just makes it all fine. So when this arrives, I can
see that smile. You are my father and I am your child.

Mass Incarceration

by Kim Seabrook

Mass incarceration, lack of education, false information with
no valid explanation

This is our generation we have to show some elevation
so they can get what they deserve by a little motivation

What if we were taught self love and meditation

To help channel and alleviate all the frustration

Of our everyday struggles and our living situations

Dont tell me that this is a figment of my imagination

Youre telling me our men cant have a decent place to sleep

A profitable income so he doesnt have to beg to eat

A valuable life that doesnt include lack of quality

Where he can provide for his family not illegitimate but honestly

We want our young kings to walk proudly w/o any confrontation

Where they can wake up and walk through life with some from
of appreciation

We can teach morals, respect and how not to neglect

How to level up and protect, how to manifest and connect

Instead they are getting locked up for some minor violations

Stuck inside cages because they cant afford the proper representation

But this what we supposed to put our hands to our hearts ..for this
one nation

They say its under God, indivisible and justice for all... I have a
different observation

I see massive incarceration, lack of education,
false information with no valid explanation

So to our sons that are learning to find their destination

We send you love and light to make it through any situation

In life you have choices there is a way to get out

Live for yourself, not in fear, not in doubt

To our brothers who were recently released after serving some time
Then to be set free because you didnt commit the crime
That has to hit harder than if you were actually guilty
Come home, stay focused and plant that root for your tree
To our fathers who were unable to provide stability
Because you were never guided on your true capabilities
You were taught how to face your reality and run away from
your dreams
Sit back and evaluate on what that really means
Mass incarceration, lack of education,
false information with no valid explanation
How can we teach them the many levels to success
with the many souls of the obsessed and and the minds of the oppressed
How can we teach them love w/o fear of thinking what should be
an abnormality
Thoughts of getting lost to the system or facing some type of inhumane
brutality
We were taught to mistreat one another forget unification
What happened to the elders being role models for the younger
generation
They said you're not doing well if you're not affiliated with some big
corporation
they said that you have to submit to the system be down with
the organization
How can we show love, how can we teach and reach out to our
communities
How can we erase their minds from distrust and provide them
with opportunities
Lets decrease incarceration, provide the proper education,
Stop hiding the information! I hope that I made it clear with
my explanation

Letter From Home

by Victoria Savage

Dear Yuhanna,

I miss you so much,. I miss our conversations about God, and about life. I gotta be honest It just saddens me for different reasons to have to write you like this. Nevertheless, I love you always and will love you and I'm praying that God will show up and show out for you. I pray even in this you'll know that you're not forgotten and that you're not alone. You are and always will be my brother and my friend.

Please don't let this time be in vain. Please fight through it, please forgive yourself. God has already forgiven you. Please make sure that you have on the mind of Christ so you could hear what God truly wants for your life. I pray that your identity will no longer be shaped by your trauma instead your identity will be shaped in Christ Jesus.

May God bless you and keep you always. Know that it is greater later just keep your head up and allow God to transform you. May God get the glory out of your life.

Love always,
Victoria Savage

To THE Love I Lost

by Henry Robinson

I hope you don't find this poem innane, / but so much has been
racking through my brain / because these feelings inside I can no
longer sustain. / I was out there REALLY treating you like YOU
wasn't my main?! / when in fact, I really visualized us walking
down that lane. / I know you don't believe it, / but I really mean
it / and when we "used" to look into one another's eyes? ... didn't
you see it? / that light at the end of the tunnel,? / it could only
MEAN life or death for "anyone" who comes through, / but not for
me and you?! / not for light and "his" black angel / ... for US??
it means hope, and hope you cannot funnel. / So we hope for a
brighter day / while using laughter to wash the tears and pain
away / because there's nothing that we can gain / from "feelings"
of remorse or "tear"stains, / so we get ourselves "together" for our
family, "amongst" other things? / And realize that some "things" you
cannot change? / And in some situations?, you just cannot explain?!
/ I guess that's why they say, everything happens for a reason? =/
I guess that's why I'm behind "bars" still breathing? / and I get
out 0-14 "winter" season?? / , but while I'm doing these years?! /
while I'm up here?! / I AM THINKING about how I'm gonna treat
YOU once I get back out "there"?! / Hug YOU, but only "two
times" twice as before / And LOVE you like your "last" love, but only
MORE / ... YOUR "knight" in BLUE "armor"??! / Believes, if YOU
DO "bad"? you GET "bad"? "but" that's ONLY Karma / LITE, gonna
do you "RIGHT" ... I will "never" HARM YA, because that's NOT a
part of MY "persona" / because I believe in "LOYALTY" ... AND I'm
a MAN OF HONOR / ... No matter YOUR honor? / I WILL STILL
"honor" your HONOR.

Letter From Home

by Khadira Sunni Savage

Dear John,

It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to say to you so let me start by saying I miss you and I pray everyday for your safety and wellbeing while you are away. Part of me not knowing what to say has a lot to do with me not understanding how things unfolded this way.

I rack my brain trying to remember our last conversations before all of this happened and I draw a blank. We used to talk for hours and hours and somehow it all faded. It feels like my mind deleted everything just to tolerate the idea of you not being here. This is a different level of grief, different from Abu and different from Bear; this hurts worst.

This is not how things are supposed to be, I wish you would have talked to me and told me what was going on with you sooner. I pray that you are able to heal from this experience and that somehow this brings you closer to God.

I love you forever,
Khadira

Hello, Are You There?

by Nichole Denise Chan

Hello, are you there?

Sometimes you act like you don't even care.

I poured my heart out to you, but you can't even hear.

You just continue to look at me with this hurtful stare.

Hello, are you there?

The connection we had was so rare...

And to lose it one day was my only fear.

I tried, over and over again, to keep you near,

And hold you close to my heart, so very dear.

Hello, are you there?

I promise that if you lend me an ear,

I will give you this love that no one will ever compare,

And show you that I will always be there.

Hello, are you there?

I think we lost the connection—

That made me shed a tear.

But if you lend me another ear,

I can tell you where to find me, my dear.

You have a collect call from my heart.

They Say

by *Smooove Babii*

They say we're teaching our young black boys, not to cry, suck it up, the introduction to pride, and then that young black boy grows up to take a life type of event to shake his pride is all in his eyes but it's glorified. The last thing he saw in that chair was a southern fry his mamma crying trying to figure out what more she could have done to keep her baby alive. See I was born by the crack valves where we lay a smack down we packaged the raw up, they called it the dog pound. See your pound ain't the same as my pound my pound out weights your pound this pound knocks weights off, you could be a star in front of this whole crowd, you know funeral style where the preachers preach the church saying conceal smudged from the Mac your grandmam weep, your cousin lean, your brother and sister didn't know you was a demon on these streets just for you to reach six feet under your sneaks... all because we told that young black boy not to cry. To hold his pain and frustration mounted inside. His mamma is a fiend, his daddy not alive. He was flag slinging, twisting up fingers we called it sign language, always being talked to in my cadence. It's a difference when I say we came from high maintenance, my arm shaking, first time holding the grip, my eyes baited, turned away pulled the trigger they shape shifted!

All because we teach our young black boys, not to cry, suck it up, the introduction to pride. Then, that young black boy grows up, and he doesn't see any future inside.

He ain't scared to die. He wants those tear drops, but it ain't for the clear eyes, see his mob ties, he'll do anything to stay high because it numbs the pain inside his older cousin got him outside for those hand-me-downs to stay fly in all seasons he doesn't have a safe space

commit treason. He doesn't even know what to believe in. He's just another victim of genocide. They just labeled it as black on black crime, but how can he stay alive? When it's pole switching, drug dealing, got him stuck on the 30...

We are all Christians! We are all sinning but who listens to the youth until they go missing or concrete giving depleting the value of our business. Then they try to move in and push us out like we're autistic cause we're all trippin...

All because we teach our young black boys, not to cry, suck it up, the introduction of pride, and then that young black boy grows up, you can see the excitement in his eyes, despite him contemplating suicide. He's down with them drill vibes, militant time. He says he'd like to be in and out of the system, it kills time. Since he was nine when he held that nine with two hands. They gave him anywhere between nine and forty-five. That's some real time, but I wish we could pause time to acknowledge how we steal time from still time but time doesn't stand still. It just tik tok in our mind then you get a split-second memory like... I forgot I was on the adopted side which makes me angry inside like Mama Payne, when her bird died. I was taught to keep six brothers that sky drive or hold me high...

But imagine if you are being taught, not to be vulnerable or emotional and then the world expects you to grow up and be lovable. You don't see the trauma that we're passing down to our youth, because we're teaching our young black boys, not to cry, suck it up, the introduction to pride? Naw... I'mma tell my sons that it's okay to cry and let daddy dry your eyes!

Letter From Home

by Kaeshalee Vega

Dear Oliver,

I hope when this kite reaches you, you feel seen, loved & appreciated. I'm so sorry that I fall out of contact so often, you know the world out here is so fast paced. I miss you, I love you so much and I think about you often. I still have the letters you wrote me when we were younger, I read them when ever my crown is tilted and some how I could hear your younger voice in my head as I read them & instantly feel better. As a Woman I have so much respect for you, despite your incarceration you have always been there for me in moments where I needed you. You're really one of One and happy to have met you and had the opportunity to experience your love. Although the system has you physically always remember your strength is in your Knowledge, your patience, your ability to display humility. Know that you are a King with unwavering integrity. I know you will do amazing things when your freedom is restored and I pray the universe aligns us again even if its just as friends. Nevertheless I love you as much as I did when we were teenagers, if not more. Writing this letter feels nostalgic. It brings my mind to a time where my spirit knew safety and found comfort in your words, support and guidance. I remember the wave of separation anxiety I felt when the system had us apart. Nothing is coincidental, us meeting as kids was Divine timing. I feel like the universe knew we needed each other in those moments and I am so grateful for the energy we

exchanged, the cycles we broke together and how we unpacked our trauma and nurtured each other's spirits through our storms. You are such an amazing person. The system may think other wise but Ive always seen the King in you. A love like ours is only seen in movies or books, I love how through our letters we controlled our own narratives. I miss you so much. Its really bitter sweet because I know where your at & I want to see you soo bad but im navigating the world out here and just haven't had the time.

How selfish of me right? I hope you understand, that as soon as I can I will. You deserve the unconditional love that you give. You move with honor and have the ability to decipher what energy should and shouldn't be in your life. I hope that when this kite gets to you, it affirms the God in you. I hope when you read this you feel spiritual protected by our love and connection and remember the power you have in your blood and soul as the Black King you are. Remember in a system that seldom operates morally that you are worthy of respect and honor. Please know that our ancestors continue to protect and guide you along this journey ASE! Nourish your mind and your spirit because as long as you maintain your hunger for knowledge, you are FREE! The world needs you out here.

Love you always,
Kaeshalee

Women's Identity

by Kim Seabrook

Sometimes it's hard for a woman to know her identity
Society makes it easy to become your own worst enemy
Feeling misguided and mislead about your true destiny
Following the crowd instead of doing things differently
They expect us to be reckless and unprofessionally
They want us to be mad and filled with jealousy
Acting devilishly, desperately, and unethically
To make it in the world you must be a celebrity
With a size 2 waist living excessively and expensively
Not to accept yourself the way you're built genetically
How dare you walk with your head high respectfully?
You're not supposed to know what it is to have integrity
They want you to be selfish instead of building collectively
Sometimes it's hard for a woman to know her identity
The power of a woman needs to be used effectively
Knowing your inner beauty and self-worth is a necessity
I know the peer pressure can sometimes weigh heavily
Banned from being who you are you must change cosmetically
As if only physically means more than acting intelligently
Not knowing the true you, who you are authentically
Instead you act more pathetically, offensively with obscenity.
I am not pointing a finger so let me say this apologetically
What if we use our beauty to change the world?

Just speaking hypothetically

We are Queens, let your crown shine, present yourself elegantly
We are women, we create life, use that power with intensity
Walk with grace, speak poetically and attract others mentally
There is nothing prettier than woman who can speak intellectually
Woman stand your position in life cause it changes unexpectedly
The world is yours, stay strong and claim your residency
Because sometimes it's hard for a woman to know her identity.

Letter From Home

by Hunter

Dear Uncle,

I hope when you get this letter you're in good spirits and healthy. As for me I'm doing pretty good, preparing for graduation and prom. I hope by the time graduation and Prom come around you will be out. I wanted to write you because it's been heavy on my heart something you said when you first got locked up. You said "if I would have asked you to go play ball, or to just hang out together that would have prevented you from getting locked up," and when I first heard that I was hurt. After a few months of thinking about it, I'm no longer hurt I'm angry the fact that you blamed me for your mistake you made as a grown man is crazy. All my life you been in and out of jail. I don't remember ever playing basketball with you so at 16 that's not on my mind, because that's never been our relationship. That's the relationship I had with your brother. The Uncle that actually taught, me something, the Uncle that didn't wait for me to ask him to play Basketball, he came and got me and took me to play basketball. You both have been in and out of jail for as long as I can remember but he made the effort to have a relationship with me. I shouldn't have been your clutch, me not hanging out with you shouldn't have made you rob that store, being a good uncle a role model is what should have kept you out of jail. Let's keep it real you were trying to impress a woman that could care less about you. In no way am I trying to make you feel worse than what you feel, but I want you to be accountable for your own actions and not blame a kid for your actions. I'm angry now but I hope by the time you come home we can sit down and talk about this and we can find ourselves in a better place.

Peace Uncle

I was Born into a World, Criminalized

Logging in my thoughts at 5:23 am, after nights of restlessness of feeling incarcerated in my mind, due to state punishment. Letters from emptiness...

by Je'Jae Cleopatra Daniels

I wouldn't call myself a criminal, because a baby can't ever be at fault for another adult's malicious labels. But you can say that I was born as a criminal baby. My crime? For simply existing, and having a natural tendency to defy the choking laws, societal norms, and life expectations in a heteronormative, patriarchal, Abrahamic fascist society. No one can tell at birth that I was different; the doctors never said to my parents that I had any birth deficiencies, nor can a Rabbi or a shaman predict the trajectory of my off-the-map life. I wake up many days pondering if I should veer my course and conform to societal expectations. Or suffer standing on my own feet, by going to the beat of my own drum.

I was expected to stay in the same gender I was assigned at birth, wear masculine clothing, impregnate a woman, settle with her, raise kids, and be a hard-working breadwinner. It feels in 2025 that even in Western society, deviating from that enforced male role is the only option of honor. Even a powerful man, like Senator Cory Booker, was suspiciously labelled "gay" because he wasn't married, without kids, and defied others' expectations of his manhood.

I remember a time, as a kid, so innocent, wanting to be carefree, and express my inner femme energy like my dear mother, who was so colorful, unapologetic, and walked the urban jungle of NYC with great pride of her Temani ancestry and her flair for defining her own fashion. I believed my gender expression for a moment was pure, and at times, she even allowed me to be free. From wearing overgrown t-shirts as

night dresses, to painting my toenails without my orthodox Jewish school knowing, to sending me to synagogue in snazzy colorful outfits, while my peers wore black & white suits like a cult of penguins. The joy I had of being myself was only pounced on by my Jewish-Ashkenazi neighbors. These neighbors reminded me of my poverty, cultural differences, and not fitting in their conservative clubs. My mother and I were rebels, charismatic, authentic, and pure artists.

I would always tell my supporters, I was labelled negatively before I was able to define myself as a child. The normalized gossiping in the shtiebel that I was gay, years before a child can even have a developed sexuality. I had a crisis of demonization in my head of OCD, fearing images of hell, because I was dehumanized as less than for being viewed, and eventually believed to have an orientation that sets me apart from other heterosexuals. The fault was mine for simply being born, a heathen to them. But for me, I felt I was stuck in a chamber of tentacles that I couldn't get out of my body, not to feel the stigmatic shame of being depraved in any form of kedusha. Only in my 20s, as an openly queer young adult, involved in progressive activism, was I made aware of the world we live in—full of queerphobic laws. With 64 countries and counting around the globe, criminalizing homosexuality / transexuals, and 12+ having a death penalty for consensual intimacy. In what sane world should one's natural desires, love, and relationships be criminalized? In a current heteronormative society, where we are forced from birth to remain in our gender assigned categories to uplift abusive male roles, downplay women into caretakers and baby machines, and all life is meant to keep producing generations of robotic humans who are here for one thing, to follow order, we are told that is natural law.

I have internalized for years, knowing I was never going to fit the ideal role of a father, and feeling more motherly, to now having a radically genderful take on parenting of shared responsibility, that if I can't fulfill the breadwinners duties, I am to be disposed not only from so many

circles, but even the faith, the people, and mentors I had in Judaism. No one taught me what my life can be, as a queer person. I had to find that on my own, with queer/trans elders leading me along the way, more loving as my chosen brethren than my own abusive blood.

There might not be a Sanhendrin ruling over every step in the diaspora, outside of a few defunct and malicious rabbinical courts. But, the admittance to fully entry into frumkeit, was obvious culturally to every Jew, if you slip up on any Mitzvah, if you commit too many Aveirot of any taboo pleasure, and if you explore any path, outside of what you are assigned, you are not only banished from our Kehilla, but from entry to the gates of heaven, and forever from god's love. Eve, having a natural inclination to eat and being curious of new food specimens, biblical followers and theists today, forgetting of their own bodily functioning, blame the 1st woman for eating an apple. Imagine, Eve, like any starving person, would have to question with great pressure and shame, do I eat to satiate my lingering hunger, or do I become a criminal in the eyes of others, and suffer a burden of not nourishing myself? The Torah and its supporters might claim, one can break any halacha in order to save a life, but always finding a loophole to blame you for testing the 7 deadly sins. Luckily, Jews are experts in fear mongering, and they have created 613 ways to fail at being Jewish.

On a side note, I always felt as an artist, spiritual being, and a lover of diversity, that my political consciousness leaned left towards inclusion. Being the minority staunch liberal at my family's shabbat tables, and being publicly shamed to remove myself from our table setting, as a middle schooler, for talking back to ignorant guests spewing racist, homophobic, transphobic, and other hurtful conspiracies freely, because they believed they were in a safe haven of Republicans. My parents, although divorced since I was a toddler, believed the Republican Party was in line with their religious orthodoxy, and the definition of real American Patriotism, as a means of truly assimilating as 1st generation Americans. Knowing at a young age, this imperialist

nation, wasn't my original home, didn't give my soul and body comfort to truly anchor itself at rest. I questioned why our coffee-tanned bodies had to come here, before knowing of the persecution my ancestors faced due to antisemitism. In a land that was led by white christians, who never considered us as equals. Still today in my 30s, I am perceived by many Americans outside of liberal bubbles as unamerican, my criticism of the status quo, my brown hide, and queering expression, and being a religious minority, all marked me as not fully one of us. They have the record to prove it, as my rights as an average citizen are not the same as those in power. Being born into a lower class system, and still on the welfare system 30+ years later, because the glass ceilings of the American caste system won't permit my body, despite my degrees, work experience, intelligence, and passion to achieve greater heights as a potential business owner, is denied entry, as if there's a hidden dark website, giving employers, government officials, and those in power, the ability to deny entry to black and brown bodies to have social mobility. Oh wait, I forgot, it's called the American corporations, and their inherent racist H.R. policies, that screens us not as potential employees, but as threats to their system of whiteness.

In Trump's era, 2025, I have been told for nearly a decade, by both "allies" and related employers, producers, and colleagues, that my visibility, presentation, and identity was a liability. The ingrained blame, I felt triggered again, searing molten lava in my veins for my whole body to burn, but not explode, of being casually reminded, you can't belong as you. You must either change, keep your head low, and never speak up about what's wrong in America, to get ahead. How can anyone with a conscience, be able to bury themselves into a closet of lies, and trauma, to make a few dollars, for a society that won't treasure their personhood nor wellbeing?

Nearly everyday, I break down in New York City, the monster of ultra-capitalism, made to feel my worth is nothing, because I am poor in my pocket, despite being rich in my heart. The other night, as I was

trying to decompress before I had to break my back at a summer school gig that made me miserable, working with privileged white kids that I had to grow up with, about the reality of having negative 1000s of dollars in my bank account. The fear of being so close in proximity to homelessness and bankruptcy, and the defamed reputation of poverty. We are all one paycheck away from being in destitution, and how I feel guilty, for every homeless and disheveled person I see on the streets with various addictions and obstacles to maintain a good social standing aches my bleeding liberal heart, or that of a former yeshiva kid. Yet, I often view these housing insecure folks, and feel terrified that I will easily fall in a greedy society that sucks my resources, that I will succumb to being on the floor, begging, and countless of people will walk over my body, like I don't exist, awaiting for me to rot and die. America enables people with more class power, deem themselves more humane than those in a futile state. Our society enables us to blame those who have obstacles of acquiring any coin towards sustainability, by taxiing them further, while the greedy rich class continues to be glamorized for not only making it, but toppling others' needs. There's more cultural taboo on taxing the rich than the expending the labor of the 99 percent. Everything around us is valued and reduced to what we wear, how much we can purchase and access luxury goods, while devaluing our humanity to seeing others as equals, and discarding their personhood based on what they can afford. Let's not even go into the racism, classism, and sexism among ableism that prevents billions systematically to be denied nice things in life, and continue to place it in the hands of the wealthy. If I would even consider to steal from a department store a luxury good item to feel class, or desperately take a milk carton to feed myself, to even hopping the turnstile to save on a buck, I risk endangering myself towards criminalization. I remember being a teenager, going through an emergency exit at a train stop in Chelsea, and although many bodies went through, I was stopped and ticketed \$150 by two cops, for a \$2.25 fare I couldn't afford, that's not even 10 times the amount for one single ride at the time, but an atrocious debt to the police state, as they continue to raise the prices of

transportation. While I argued, why wouldn't they stop the other white women who were jumping the turnstiles in front of our eyes? The MTA / NYPD have been sleeping with each other for decades, and their transit court has no legitimate appeals process, that avoiding any fine from public transit will lead cops a warrant for your arrest and building a case against, me and the poor to being jailed. One would think, after a city-wide protest and campaign against the racial profiling of people of color by cops through Stop and Frisk, that all the left leaning activists would speak up against transit police and its courts jailing low income New Yorkers for being unable to have a recovery plan out of further debt. Why should the NYPD receive 29 million a day to brutalize, surveillance, and overly police marginalized New Yorkers? To the point that their ever increasing city agency budget of 6 billion dollars, has no real plan to "protect and serve" as their slogan claims. Many times I have had to walk into local precincts, whether I am expecting some small piece of justice against an assailant, or inquire of their policing in my district, for the average cop being dumbfounded, ill informed, and equipped with no community resources for say victims of domestic violence. To me, the majority of them, are men with further power, with weapons, and a supremacy complex believing they are above the law, and mandated to control and abuse others based on their twisted version of the law.

One day, As I felt desperate, afraid, and embarrassed to ask for help openly, I needed to invest in my life, and put my business efforts aside, and create a gofund me for the bare minimum it costs to survive in the big apple. I internalized that my blood doesn't care about me, as the majority of my family didn't put coins into my fundraiser, except my parents eventually. Before the donors started chipping in, from close friends, I experienced jealousy, shame, being viewed as privileged, and having too much to ask for favors. I requested less than 3,500 dollars, which isn't enough for one month's rent and other household costs in my neighborhood. Yet, whenever a marginalized person is publicly requesting for aid, whether Palestinian, queer, bipoc, etc, are haters

troll our fundraisers and make reports of false accusations, as I recently woke up to an email, claiming my fundraiser was deactivated being I am assumed to be illicitly selling drugs, where there was no mention of even medication I needed to cover, and I never had a drug charge against me. For a troll, to go so far to block my attempt to receive vital savings, is atrocious. The autocratic republic of Amerikkka feels it's constantly trying to silence, disable and even kill me from having my pursuit of happiness. The level of paranoia and mental destruction I face to believing your environment is out to erase your basic stability is horrifically cruel

Who decided to price everything around us, from having a home, to drinking water, and even receiving care? I am constantly denied life saving medical care, because my insurance is on a medicaid plan. In a growing number of states in America, I am criminalized for taking hormone replacement therapy, to alleviate my chronic dysphoria, where transphobes are demonizing me for wanting to be my assigned gender, rather than their repressive versions of myself. If I feel desperate to steal food in a local grocery, to feed myself, I am sent to jail or charged a mega fine for begging for my basic needs of survival. But, our society has normalized, seeing daily 100000s of visible and hidden homeless, poverty stricken and food insecure humans, who are starving and suffering, because access to nutritious let alone healthy foods to fill our stomachs, and secure our health is overpriced. The stigma I've faced for being a welfare baby, carrying a EBT card at a local supermarket chain, where once arguing with my lawyer on the phone for being denied benefits, as the government continues to cut me off when I am poor, but the moment I make one dollar to my name, I am considered too rich. On a Staten Island ferry to Manhattan, a ferryman overheard my conversation with my lawyer, and shouted at me, "you are stealing from our government" for needing welfare benefits to survive. I told him to mind his own business, but despite his efforts to try to instill classism, "go get yourself a real job" working hard never gave me the sustainability to me or my family to get out of below the

federal poverty line, and I still haven't seen a job that pays well, despite applying to 1000s of opportunities annually, and being rejected and denied the American dream. I've internalized for too long that my gender identity, orientation, political views, and limited abilities are the problem for not being hired. I am told by American corporations, I am never enough! I don't fit the industry, and that I need to be typecasted into a suppressed blue collar role to be a hard worker, without complaints, while the rich rulers live in ease, and the working class continues to suffer for the comfort and joys of others. I know I am a hard working person, who always finds ways to be productive on a typical day, and has acquired many awards, fellowships, internships, work experience, and higher educational accolades despite all the micro / macro-aggression bullshit I face in the American capitalist workforce. Whenever I have to file a workers' complaint of discrimination, against my employer, I am often met by an exaggerated villainous depiction of my character as a reason for letting go of me in their defense rather than ever receiving justice for the constant abuses I've faced. One employer once claimed that I was violent, mentally disturbed, and stealing from other racial minorities, all for coming forward of being sexually harassed, and scolding me for taking breaks and requesting disability accommodations that are my legal rights. Stigmatization of any kind, is a highway of being falsely criminalized in our given cisociety.

For the past decade, I wake up every day in Trump's America, which touts christian hegemony, and predatory cishet men, who are crushing our supposed democracy. The news of authoritarianism continues to trigger my mental sanity, as if republicans want to continue to instill fear mongering, hysteria, and disable opponents from fighting for an equitable America that uplifts all, not just the powerful. I am living in a mix of a dystopian and hopeful reality. I might be safe, authentic, and grow a bit in my life, career, and relationships, but I am also being reminded how much oversight our government leaders have over my personal freedoms. From being able to access social security, to basic

healthcare, the 99% is being expected to break their backs further, until we are dead, for a nation that doesn't invest back in our wellbeing. Why does America demand a constant higher cost of living, if it can't ever improve our quality of life? Nothing about this American "democratic" system is just, politicians are being bought on the daily by both major parties, super pacs and lobbyists are influencing the political sphere with their agendas, while numbing the public and those affected by draconian measures to remain dumb, naive, and not mobilized for an equitable future. President Trump is allowed freely to persecute, deport, and prevent liberties to millions of Americans and immigrants, but it's considered illegal in red states to defy the status quo. In many town halls across America, protestors using their rights as citizens to speak up on injustices, are being detained, jailed, censored, and silenced into submission for speaking out against authoritarian rule. We have entrusted political figures who are meant to advocate for the underdog, not strip the voiceless of any further rights.

Although marijuana and some recreational drugs are legal in certain settings, I feel forced to self medicate, in order to alleviate my chronic pain. The fear of being criminally charged for safeguarding my health, goes back to the painful position, Eve was placed in. Do I defy the law for my internal peace, or do I please others, for environmental peace? I wrestle with this question on a daily basis. Do I choose to do what makes me happy, only to suffer the ignorance of others? Or do I please those who never had my best interests, only for me to suffer in the closet? I choose to affirm myself, even when my mind is made to believe my opposers, as I rather feel understood on my own, by a few good kindred spirits, than feel isolated, misunderstood, and not supported by those who will never truly heal my wounds, pain, and fears from within my closet.

Why the fuck, am I jailed for fighting against injustice, and evil mongers in our political and economic leadership? We are jailed for bankruptcy, wanting to take our own lives, needing an abortion, requesting inclusive

educational materials in classrooms and libraries, the list goes on. A black trans leader, once told me, laws historic or current don't define morality, and justice isn't measured by the actions of men.

#LiberationNow



I Can't Breathe by Roberto Cepeda

Iron Doesn't Break Our Nature

by Kaeshalee Vega

Iron doesn't break our nature

Um...

They came for our soft edges,

tried to snip our voices,

tried to clip the wings of our maternal souls, to take the mother
from the woman.

They lined us up,

counted us like numbers,

told us our instincts were weakness,

our love... disposable.

Um...

But in these cells, we remember.

In the clanging silence of the night,

we gather-quiet, fierce, alive

building villages out of whispers,

holding each other like lifelines,

because nurturing...

is stitched into our bones,

even behind steel and concrete.

Um...

They hit us mentally

planting doubt,

poisoning self-worth,

making us question if we are even human.

They hit us spiritually

forcing obedience,

erasing ceremony,

making the sacred mundane.

They hit us emotionally

isolating us from our own hearts,

while the walls echo with stories of survival. Um...
Healing is not a day.
Healing is years, decades,
learning to stitch your soul back
after the system tore it open.
And while we heal,
the vibration of our being is low,
because too many women have forgotten the universe pulses
through them,
the divinity that cannot be caged.
Um...
But still...
behind these walls, we rise.
We build community from shared pain,
we cradle each other's fears,
we teach each other to breathe
through the chains and the cold steel. Because the maternal,
the nurturing,
the unbreakable truth of womanhood
cannot be stripped by uniforms or locks.
We are galaxies in the shape of flesh,
even when the system says we are nothing.
Um...
So remember, sisters...
even behind bars,
even under the weight of cages,
even in the shadow of a system designed to break us...
our power hums.
Our love organizes.
Our maternal fire
cannot be taken.
Um...
We are alive,
we are women,
we are unstoppable.

The Colors in the Fall

by Paul Rivera

Behind bars I looked at the heavens, searching.
To understand the relationship between,
Man and tree-emotions and leaves.
Remain the same while accepting a coming change.
Cotton to stone-Cloth to iron-Freedom to cage.
This Fall season opened portals to acceptance.
Of a life without the spring-without the summer.
Only fall giving direction to growth.
Only winters... stripping every leaf-every emotion.
Only the tree... pruned by policies and procedures.

I Looked through memories which may not be mine. I found crushed brown leaves, like the graffiti of laws jurisprudentially spray-painted on my life's background. These still could not distort my innocence or describe how a fallen branch defines the tree. Have they forgotten the multiplicity of colors expressed in my fall. The reds, the oranges, the yellows, the browns, and the golds. Oh, how the court's ventriloquist answered in my name. Blasphemies in my name to the People of the State of New York.

So many emotions flared in me
So many emotions flared at trial
So many emotions flared in solitary confinement
So many emotions flared at the board
So many emotions flared in the fall

A solitary tree reflects colors happening at the fall
A season changes and emotions flare and rise phenologically
Challenging-confronting-contumacious to the system containing me
Trying to contain me, even shifting containments to disorient me
They could not contain my dreams, promises made, or pinky swears

Fulfillment of the promises being contained in me, drives the brown leaves' life fall, while green maturity grows. To be awakened by a yellow leaf touching my forehead, whispering; Awaken sleeping one, while all the other leaves seek entropy. You are still dressed in leaf green, caterpillar green, evergreen. It is the acceptance of space, not the acceptance of condition, that breathes fresh air into the space of I. Refreshing truths emerge the alchemizing of my surrounding. This prisonized condition cannot withstand the changing of space in me that shelters my spirit. Squeaks of a cage awakened in me as the door swung open.

Dreams becoming reality.

Reality becoming opportunity.

Opportunity becoming responsibility.

Responsibility becoming obligations.

Obligations becoming relationship.

Relationship becoming connection.

Connection becoming Socialization.

Socialization became Freedom.

Freedom to be me.

2 Coffees

by Khadira Sunni Savage

I'll take 2 coffees one for you and one for me
That used to be our thing and every time I take a sip it's your face I'll see
My big brother my hero, we were supposed to break the curse
Somehow we are here now, and I'm in my feelings but saying that might
just make it worse

Just tryna wrap my head around why you would do anything that could
possibly take you away
I'm looking at your kids as they process your absence, it was them that
needed you to stay
We already know what it's like to long for our daddy
Even saying that word has me in tears, cause I barely known that man
since my momma had me

I'm tryna understand what changed that would make you lose it
Cause the decisions you made wasn't forced, you had to choose it
Did you think about what life would be like for your babies if you ever
left them?
Did you think about everything your sisters endured with no father to
help them?

I feel betrayed like I didn't even know you
But when we talk I hold back, it's probably not the best time to show you
How I feel...
But what does it even matter now? What's done is done
And if you didn't break the curse you now leave that burden to your son

For now I'll take 2 coffees one for me and one for you
I'll live my life and celebrate my freedom and do the things we both love
to do



2 Coffees by Khadira Sunni Savage

In Memoriam: A. Battle

by John Proctor

Many modern journalists and legal scholars have noted that, absent a functional mental health care system, our jails and prisons have taken on the added role of in-patient mental health facilities for our most vulnerable populations. In this sense, Antonio Battle was an ad hoc and involuntary ward of the state of New York, deemed unable to care for himself because he couldn't hold down housing and employment, which he of course couldn't obtain because they were denied to him because of his record or he'd never been taught the basic life skills to find them.

But more than that, Antonio was a supremely talented artist and thinker. When Re/Creation Founding Facilitator John Proctor walked to his first workshop at Rikers Island, his co escort was describing some of the guys he'd be working with. "This one, Antonio, can straight up rap with the best of 'em. What you call that, 'spoken word'?" He was right: Antonio Battle could straight up rap, whether that's in the hip-hop sense or just in talking your ear off. One of the first things we ask our workshop members to do is to answer the question, What is your story? Antonio was first to answer, with what felt like a well-honed spoken-word piece. The voice he used was both vulnerable and combative, hitting the accents extra hard. After he finished John asked him if he'd worked on that before then. "I been workin' on it my whole life," he said, leaning back in the pew of the chapel where they held that first workshop.

Antonio was 54 years old when we met him. Knowing him for the rest of his life, we saw him go through the latest variation on a well-worn cycle, but we also witnessed and nurtured a higher calling for him: writing words and creating art. He sent us his work from

upstate, from shelters on his release, and even handed it off to us when he was homeless. He seemed to know his time was limited, and producing his work became his primary purpose.

In 2021, Antonio Battle died in a temporary housing facility in Hell's Kitchen. We had no family to contact, so we handled his burial as best we could. He is now buried on Hart Island, among undoubtedly many artists and poets who died homeless. His voice, in his art and his life, was music. After his death, our workshop gathered in his memory, and determined together to keep his words and work alive. His only legacy is his work, some of which we're glad to share in these pages.

Themeless Crossword

Kate Chin Park

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ACROSS

- 1 Kitchen garment that's also an NBA salary cap term
- 6 Get ready
- 10 "You're about to give me bad news, I can tell"
- 14 "We're here, we might as well!"
- 16 Songwriter Simon or McCartney
- 17 End of an emphatic dismissal
- 18 Rating for racy or violent shows
- 19 Bungle
- 20 Cover up, as laughter
- 21 Basic top
- 22 Contacted on Insta, e.g.
- 24 Sega Genesis competitor
- 25 Word before games or shorts
- 27 Feel rotten
- 29 Complaint
- 31 Slime or sludge
- 32 "Four Weddings and a Funeral" star MacDowell
- 34 Takes care of
- 36 Cheese that tastes similar to parmesan
- 38 Brand of anti-virus software
- 39 Formal addresses
- 41 "Lincoln in the ____" (novel by George Saunders)
- 42 "____ appetit!"
- 43 What many recovery programs have twelve of
- 45 "For sure"

- 46 Like a small, non-corporate-backed band or movie
- 48 Dos multiplied by tres
- 50 Minigolf action
- 53 Term for a male pal
- 54 Cooked over high heat
- 56 Nowhere to be found, briefly
- 57 Spades or diamonds
- 58 Star of "Nope" and "One of Them Days"
- 60 Whale that vaguely looks like a panda
- 61 Skeptical response to the 60-Across clue, maybe
- 62 Leadership title, for short
- 63 IDs with two hyphens
- 64 Features of rams and rhinos

DOWN

- 1 "Best Picture" or "Best Dressed," for example
- 2 ____ Penh (capital of Cambodia)
- 3 New Orleans dish traditionally prepared on Mondays
- 4 Turn-____ (attractive features)
- 5 Preoccupations for picky people
- 6 Snoopy?
- 7 Top-level workers?
- 8 Mixture such as a mayonnaise or salad dressing
- 9 "Oh, for ____'s sake!"
- 10 Decide one will

- 11 Classic yearbook comment
- 12 First and foremost, in Spanish
- 13 Greeting in Porto or Sao Paulo
- 15 DC baseball squad
- 23 Was the culprit
- 25 Turn over to the enemy
- 26 One of three in an ellipsis
- 28 Be a go-between (with)
- 30 "No ____!" ("Happy to!")
- 32 Vice president who killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel
- 33 The four major entertainment industry awards, for short
- 35 Throat bug
- 37 Top tournament selections
- 39 "Help me, ____-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope"
- 40 Give a lecture about
- 44 Sounds from fire engines
- 47 Tiny amounts
- 49 Labor Day mo.
- 51 Type of promotional product
- 52 Baked pastries that often have fruit and custard
- 54 Equipment for the slopes
- 55 Line in Morse code
- 57 ____ up (what bread can do with sauce)
- 59 Star sign before Virgo

Writing Prompts

by Re/Creation

Sometimes the hardest part is knowing where to begin. When we hold writing workshops, we set aside 15-20 minutes for silent writing where participants can write about whatever they choose. To support the process, we offer questions or prompts to sit with. These prompts often emerge from our opening discussions or reflect on what is unfolding in the world around us. Below are three prompts we hope will support your own writing journey and help you begin when you're not sure where to start.

1. What's your story?

This is usually the first question we use to begin a new workshop with inexperienced participants. It's deceptively simple: Choose what you think are the most important elements of your story to tell someone who is just meeting you.

As with most prompts, it's good to set a time limit for the first freewrite—either a half hour or an hour is plenty. In answering the question, you might simply write in a stream-of-consciousness flow. But you might also make a list of the people, events, and ideas that shaped who you are today. Don't try to get it perfect—no first draft is perfect. Just get it down.

2. Defining hope

At a recent workshop, we figured out from check-in's that everyone was feeling at least some level of disharmony in our lives. Wanting to channel our discussion into written work, we decided to ask together the questions, "What is hope?" and "Who is our family?" and even "What is a family?" Eventually we discussed the experience of personal and family trauma within the confines of a legal system that has always been built on fear and disruption of our personal lives.

The conversation that night was intense and personal, but once we went into our writing time at the end, it produced work that gave some written form to these hopes and fears that can cripple us when they remain formless and abstract.

If you're reading this and would like to try it as well, ask yourself any of the questions above, and ask people you know these questions. Then, in your own writing space, answer any or all of them.

3. "I Told a Lie"

The impetus for this prompt came from our regular workshop member Sonny Jackson, who was workshoping a piece he called "I broke the rules." One part of the piece is about perhaps the most common form of rule-breaking: "Is telling a little white lie accepted as breaking the rules? I've told lies before, and they weren't little, but they were to get me outta trouble. I once told a judge when I was trying to get my benefits that I worked off the books and that I'd been in jail or prison. It seems that all she heard was I worked off the books. I was denied my benefits. When I told this story at a meeting people said I should have lied."

This sparked so much in all of us. We talked about how so many of our institutions demand or subtly imply that we lie in order to get the things we need, especially if we have the mark of a criminal record. But talking about institutions led us inevitably back to our core institution, family. Is this where we learn the art of lying? Is it ok, even a net positive, to lie in certain circumstances?

This prompt is another deceptively simple one: Start with the sentence, "I told a lie." Pick one lie you've told and write about it. Explore how this lie impacted your life and the world around you, if it was worth it. Go deep in why you told this lie, and maybe even whether you would do it again.

Welcome Home

Reentry support through the library

Welcome Home is a Justice Initiatives program here to provide you with comprehensive support as you navigate reentry. At the heart of Welcome Home are our Reentry Navigators, Paul Rivera and Donald Washington. Having both been through the system themselves, they know how overwhelming it can be to come home and use their own experiences and perspectives to help guide you through your own reentry journey. They'd love to connect with you ahead of your release and invite you to get in touch using the number or address on the next page.

When asked to describe the program, Paul shares that for formerly incarcerated New Yorkers, Welcome Home is not only “a main support program but a way to restore their humanity and bring them back into society. It helps by making individuals understand that they are not alone in the process and to give them a one-on-one personal approach to help navigate the system that has separated them for so long.”

“We help individuals navigate the systems and the bureaucracies they will face, moving forward,” Paul explains:

“We teach participants how to make meetings, we attend meetings with them to show that they have a support system. This is what the Welcome Home program is about. What they learn from us are things that will continue to guide them and keep them on the path they seek for themselves. It is not something we do that is one and done, we make sure it is something that is continuous throughout.”

“What makes Welcome Home special,” Donald adds, “is our focus on supporting patrons to achieve their goals. This is our primary focus. Our hope is that patrons walk away feeling empowered and capable.”

“We are all committed to the work that we do,” says Paul:

“in our culture, in our policies and procedures. It’s about giving community to one another, helping people join together in unity, I think there is strength in the way we work with each other within our team. We work with a sense of camaraderie, friendship and a common understanding that we are committed to the same cause, knowing that we are all working as one mind and one body as we help individuals not only restore their body but their minds upon returning to society. We hope to continue to expand the community one individual at a time.”

Who is Welcome Home for?

The program is available to anyone directly impacted by the criminal legal system, from those arrested without charge to those who have been incarcerated for many years. People of all backgrounds, ages, abilities, and genders are invited to participate.

What services does Welcome Home provide?

- ▶ One-on-one appointments with Reentry Navigators to help you identify your needs and goals and map out your reentry journey
- ▶ Guidance on housing, health, reconnecting with loved ones and more
- ▶ Monthly dinners where you can join a supportive community of peers and share resources
- ▶ Connections to free library services, local groups and the compassionate, dignified help you deserve

Call 929.561.9789 for more information about Welcome Home or write to us at:

Justice Initiatives–Welcome Home
Brooklyn Public Library, Outreach Services
10 Grand Army Plaza
Brooklyn, NY 11238

TeleStory

Video calls through the library

If you are in one of the following facilities and you have family in New York City, you may be eligible to join Brooklyn Public Library's TeleStory program:

- ▶ Altona
- ▶ Cayuga
- ▶ Elmira
- ▶ Fishkill
- ▶ Franklin
- ▶ Mid-State
- ▶ Riverview
- ▶ Ulster
- ▶ Washington
- ▶ Wende

TeleStory allows families to make FREE video calls to incarcerated loved ones from the comfort and convenience of a Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) branch. The program is made available as a supplement to in-person visits.

Please note:

- ▶ Video calls are for 60 minutes
- ▶ Family members must be approved by DOCCS
- ▶ Video calls are by appointment only
- ▶ Family members must show identification
- ▶ Video calls are a supplement to—not a replacement for—in-person visits.

Please contact your Offender Rehabilitation Coordinator (ORC) for more information. To apply, request an application from your ORC or call BPL at 718.916.9408.

More resources

Re/Creation

Re/Creation is a non-profit community of writers and artists with a shared vision for co-creating a world free of oppression. Members and contributors are people who have been directly impacted by the criminal legal system and their allies. We support each other's critical, creative, and artistic works, championing talented storytellers to build confidence and community. We work toward these goals through workshops in jails and prisons as well as for people returning from incarceration, an online publishing platform, speaking engagements, and connecting directly impacted thinkers and creators to relevant campaigns. If you are currently or formerly incarcerated and would like to reach out to Re/Creation about your work, you can do so at:

Re/Creation c/o John Proctor
2900 Purchase St
Purchase, NY 10577

Osborne | Loved Ones Link

Incarceration is costly for families in countless ways, including the ongoing expense of traveling to and from often faraway correctional facilities.

Osborne's Loved Ones Link transportation program removes financial barriers by providing free bus service from New York City, Albany, Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse to over a dozen state prisons.

For more information, email **LovedOnesLink@osborneny.org** or call (833) 437-3368.

QUILTS (formerly Black & Pink)

QUILTS (Queers United in Liberation Tristate, formerly known as Black and Pink NYC) works toward prison abolition and supports LGBTQIA2S+ people and people living with HIV/AIDS who are impacted by incarceration. We do this through pen pal matching, mail correspondence and visitation, community reentry support, sending solidarity packages and commissary to inside members, and organizing with community partners in advocacy campaigns. We support and correspond with people incarcerated in state prisons, federal prisons, city/county jails, and other institutions of confinement (such as state psychiatric centers) in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. If you are interested in getting in touch to either receive their newsletter, or to be matched with a Pen Pal, please write a letter to:

QUILTS

P.O. Box 1741

New York, NY 10013

Or if you would like to get involved from outside, QUILTS gathers twice a month in person and online to answer mail from inside members.

1st Sunday of each month | 4-7 pm ET

Parole Preparation Project

135 W 20th St Suite 302

New York, NY 10011

Zoom registration: **bit.ly/bpnycsundayL4L**

3rd Thursday of each month | 5:30-8 pm ET

Brooklyn Community Pride Center–Crown Heights

1561 Bedford Ave Suite Ground A

Brooklyn, NY 11225

Zoom registration: **bit.ly/bpnycThursdayL4L**

To learn more about becoming a pen pal and sign up, visit **bit.ly/bpnycpenpalguide**

Alliance of Families for Justice

The mission of the Alliance of Families for Justice is to support, empower and mobilize families and individuals impacted by the criminal justice system so they can marshal their collective power to create a just world.

Re-Entry Support Services: AFJ provides group and individual counseling for family members and formerly incarcerated individuals, and makes referrals to other support services as needed.

Legal Support: The criminal justice system has a long record of human rights abuses. In addition to a newly-launched in-house Legal Support Unit, AFJ refers to a pool of pro bono attorneys to provide legal support for individuals and family members whose human rights have been violated during their incarceration in prisons and local jails.

Advocacy and Communication Skills Training: AFJ trains a select cohort of family members and formerly incarcerated individuals in advocacy and communications skills that empowers them and amplifies their voices

Voting Rights: AFJ seeks to restore full citizenship rights, including voting, to all people, regardless of their criminal history or incarceration status. We also seek to empower those who currently have the right to vote to exercise that right.

Get in touch:

Alliance of Families for Justice
8 W. 126th Street, 3rd floor
New York, NY 10027
P: 347-973-058

How to Submit Writing & Art

- ▶ You may submit up to six poems, up to two essays or stories, or up to four pieces of visual art.
- ▶ Submissions can be typed or handwritten. Please keep a copy of your work and provide an address where we can reach you, including your legal name, ID number, and your pen name, if you want to use one.
- ▶ Please specify if you would like your submission to be returned. If so, we will make every effort to either return your work to you or to an outside contact whose address must be provided. If you do not want your work to be returned or do not specify otherwise, we will archive your work at the library.
- ▶ Submission deadlines are rolling—you may submit your work at any time to be considered for future zine issues.
- ▶ If selected, we will write to you within 4–6 months of submission to confirm acceptance and set up payment. We offer a \$100 honorarium for each published artwork, poem, or work of fiction and nonfiction. Thank you so much in advance; we can't wait to see your entries.

Send submissions to:

Justice Initiatives—Bridges Zine
Brooklyn Public Library, Outreach Services
10 Grand Army Plaza
Brooklyn, NY 11238

Contact Us

As library workers, we believe that access to information is your right! Have questions about something? It can be about almost anything: recipes, sports, history, nature—whatever comes to mind. Send us a letter and we'll find the answer.*

Write to us at:

Justice Initiatives
Brooklyn Public Library, Outreach Services
10 Grand Army Plaza
Brooklyn, NY 11238

***NOTE:** At this time, we can only answer letters and questions from individuals in New York State. We cannot answer questions about someone's personal address or information.

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