

WORDS OF FIRE XI



**Writing and Art by
Imprisoned Artists**

Issue XI
Fall 2022

Edited by
Prison Books Collective

Words of Fire is a collection of writing and artwork by people in prison or on parole at time of editing. It is published by Prison Books Collective Publishing and Distribution.

We welcome submissions at any time of short essays, short stories, poetry (all text pieces under 500 words), and art from people in prisons and jails. We may edit submissions for clarity, length, and comprehension. We will not publish works that are racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise persecute specific groups of people, and discourage promoting violence. We rarely publish more than two pieces by one artist. Please title your pieces if possible.

Include your name and location on all submissions, preferably each page. This issue prints full name and town for distribution within prisons, whereas the online version uses initials only. **But beginning in Issue 12 of Words of Fire**, we will default to sharing your full name and town in print and online.

Tell us if you have other preferences.

Mail submissions to:

**Words of Fire
Prison Books Collective
PO Box 625
Carrboro, NC 27510**



Words of Fire only exists with your support! We'd like to thank everyone who submitted work for this issue.

Prison Books Collective is a group based in Carrboro and Durham, NC, that sends books to people in N.C. and A.L. prisons (just write to the address above!). We also send zines (noncommercial booklets about various topics, like this one) nationwide. See more at www.PrisonBooks.info.

INTRODUCTION

Hello friends and comrades,

This is the eleventh issue of Words of Fire, our semi-regular zine of prisoners' writing, drawing, and news. We thank both our applicants for their patience during an arduous three years.

Since the last Words of Fire, the condition of imprisoned people in America has worsened. COVID-19 has killed and harmed, and the isolation and danger of the prison-industrial complex has increased terribly. Closed libraries; book bans by prisons and jails; scanning and shredding inmates' letters using private companies (as began in NC in 2021); and more.

Across the nation, groups who send books to incarcerated people struggle to preserve the right to read. Meanwhile, activists and organizations struggle against police violence, for-profit prisons, the racist and classist justice system, solitary confinement, mistreatment of vulnerable inmates (e.g., our transgender siblings), and inhumane detention of undocumented immigrants. We encourage our readers to engage with these issues, and to keep in mind how they are connected.

We send books to aid self-improvement, imagination, curiosity, empathy, and all the other countless values of literature. Every week we send out dictionaries, thrillers, political books, and more to readers behind bars. We thank our volunteers for keeping up the work that began in 2006, even through a pandemic. We are also grateful to donors, whether they are a library, bookstore, school, club, or a concerned human being.

Finally, **thank you** to those who submitted their work. We honor your choice to share your hearts with us and the world.

In solidarity,
Prison Books Collective
Fall 2022

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Our Value

By Shaka N'Zinga/Arthur Wiggins
Jessup, MD

What is the value of Black life?

About \$20

During slavery, a Black male was valued

At about \$100

In the criminal justice system

A Black male is worth

\$40,000 a year

While free, in society, his value

Is but \$20

Just ask George Floyd

A Letter to the World

By S.S.
Laurinburg, NC

Dear World

I pray with my heart on my sleeve and my dreams dedicated to you that these words will stand out just as gracefully as your compassion do and the essence in your teaching of life lesson has taught us to go through.

Let us confess together that beauty in life struggle, that can find grace, that can help wash away the pain, that we will sometime face.

Reflection is the business of man, a sense of his state in his first duty, but who remembers the elements of his past, and the hard part and partial of his journey, where he never expected to hold the great mirror of truth, up before the world to see.

So let this day be the reason, allow these words to preach to you, the bigger picture.

Let the gospel of a true tale of compassion, inspire you just as much as it has inspired me.

And let me tell you a story about a good Samaritan whose works of kindness and patience has touched me and help me to embrace my faith.

Once upon a time and once you overstand this message, you will come to grasp the hidden blessing in life's lesson.

There's a lil blue bird that lives in a cage, that lives in an environment he knows nothing about.

A jail bird you may say? Well that's what we will call him.

Because his life is no different than mine's today.

A lonely bird in a dark place, in a dark moment of his life, where a genuinely unexpected destiny has occurred.

This bird that is not recognized by others dwells in a place, in this world, where the reality of hate can be a known factor of life.

Tears within sorrows, losing hope in today and tomorrow, trying to suck it up with courage. Believing in yourself is an ambition that's not worth it.

Where this reality makes your dreams, not worth dreaming, your hopes, not worth hoping, and your prayers, just a waste of time.

But until this good Samaritan had appeared, who has brought the divine beauty of life harmony back into this lil jail bird life.

Now this lil jail bird's tweet, has become more than just a tweet.

The melody of his heart has ignited within him a new love song, that has flowed through like fire, breathing life and passion back into his soul.

But now his soul has been rescued from this torture, and his broken heart has been fixed.

Because he find his strength in this good Samaritan, the one who cleans his cage and feeds him.

A person with the compassion to treat him with kindness and respect.

A miracle worker with grace.

Can you see them?

That good Samaritan.

The one with the beautiful smile, the one with the essence of love that stands out brighter than the sun.

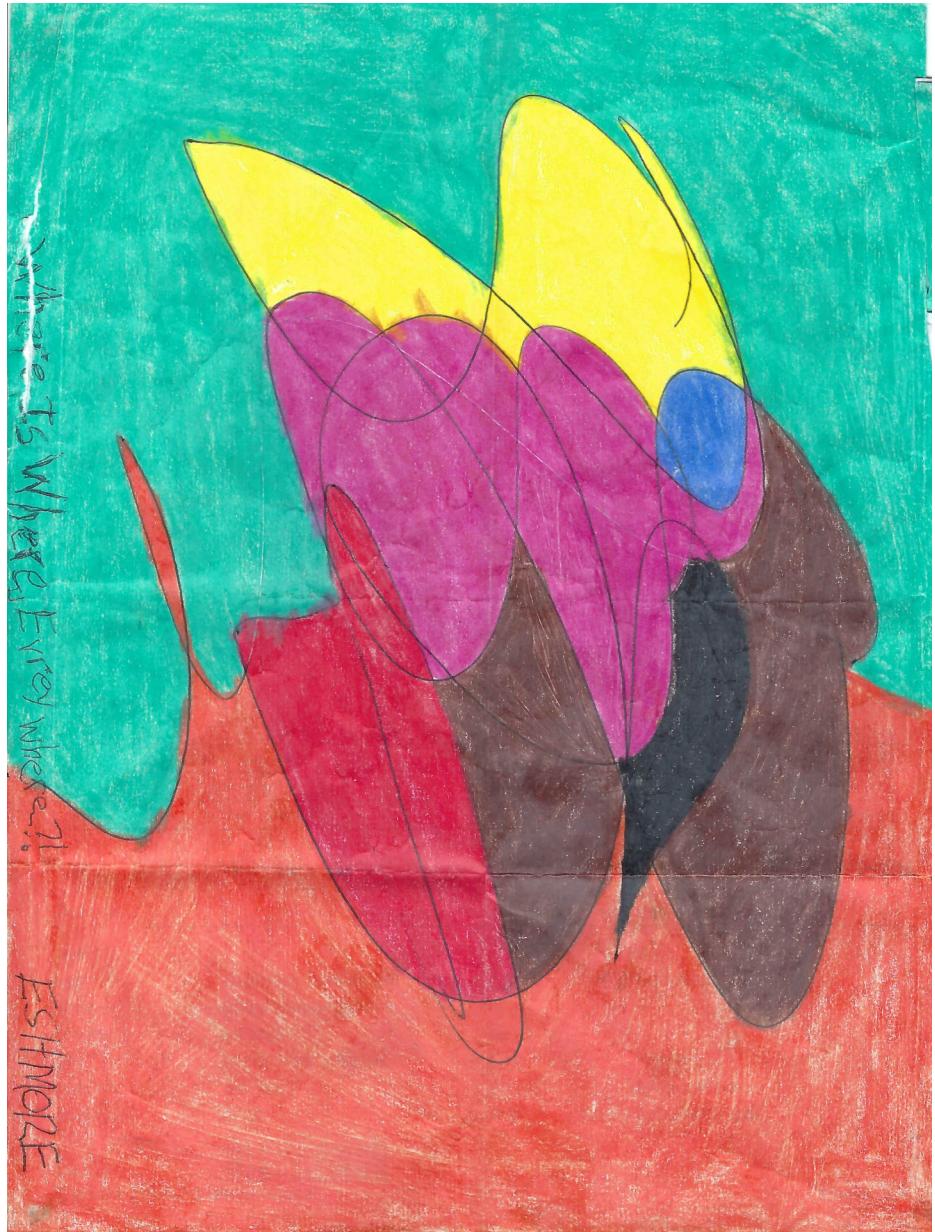
The one whose empathy grows throughout this lil jail bird's life. Shining like a star of wisdom.

Don't lose sight of them, and how fortunate this moment can be.

Because now the world has been replaced, and now become that good Samaritan to me.

A lil jail bird.

Dedicated to P.B.C. Staff.



Where Is Where, Everywhere?!

By K.G.
Meridian, MS



Where It Is, Is Where It Comes From

By K.G.
Meridian, MS

Wave after Wave

January 7th, 2021

By K.W.

Thomson, IL

I am drowning.
 Come to find out,
 It's impossible swimming through,
 Madness.
 Wave after wave.
 Caught up in the current.
 Events unfold,
 Will we burn the Hill?
 The workshop of our Democracy?
 Are we that easy?
 To be led blindly?
 With,
 No,
 Proof?
 Madness.
 What is yet to come?
 Independence undependable?
 The trust is dying
 I TOLD YOU!
 We are dying from
 This... This... This...
 Madness.
 I am drowning.

Blue surf is waxing–
 loudly it whispers
 over sands coming.

Two lovers alone
 on the moon-lit strand;
 their need not postponed.

Blue surf is ebbing–
 passion's height reached;
 as one, hearts beating.

Two lovers obtained
 a moment's oneness:
 in release, love reigns.

Blue surf has now waned;
 their moment departs–
 in sadness they kissed.

They turned so to leave;
 separate, alone–
 Blue surf: let it be.

Blue Surf

Anonymous

NC

Treatment v. Punishment

By Shaka N'zinga/Arthur Wiggins
Jessup, MD

...We must all be aware that penal institutions reflect the society at large and prisons are in trouble because the society is in trouble.

A knowledgeable man once said, "To punish a man, you must injure him... To help a man, you must improve him... You do not improve a man with injuries." With such words I would like to induce the reader to consider for a moment the very notion of crime and punishment. And while y'all do this, I shall proceed with telling you all something you don't know.

There was once a child who prayed that the court that sat in judgement of him, set to punish him, would address the issue of treatment as opposed to simply continuing the tired old process (a broken process) that began for him on February 7th, 1989. As a sixteen-year-old child, 30 years ago, none of the neuroscientific factors or psychosocial features of brain development of a child was as advanced as it is today. Today the Supreme Court recognizes that juvenile offenders are constitutionally different from adults based on three significant gaps between juveniles and adults:

1. Children have a "lack of maturity and under-developed sense of responsibility," leading to recklessness, impulsivity, and heedless risk taking.
2. Children are more vulnerable to "negative influences and outside pressures," including from their family and peers.
3. A minor's character is not as "well-formed" as an adult's; his traits are "less-fixed" and his actions are less likely to be evidence of irretrievable depravity.

At no time had he been considered the victim of a broken system that had placed a child in the custody of an adult prison to grow from boy to man, never having addressed the childhood sexual and physical traumas he suffered and endured before being shoved into prison. While in the adult prison, on top of all of

the unaddressed sexual abuse, the sexual abuse continued. That is, until he became a product of that savage environment.

At the age of 15, crimes were committed and he was but a pawn in a game he knew not. As a Black man-child, he was poor, Black, and in real trouble. Guided by the influence of a man of 21 and white, he fell into a very vicious and racist trap. Lives were lost—white life. In 1988 it was very clear that Black Lives didn't matter. The child, because of his dark skin, was made to appear as the leader of a drug crazed crime spree.

After suffering being raped, in this new prison environment, he was compelled for the sake of survival to adapt, cope, and become creative in a destructive manner. Turning to and getting deeper into the prison drug culture as a means to deal with the psychological and emotional trauma. Jail-made wine and whatever drug he had was a daily routine that kept him functional.

Self-medicated, having to grow up in this abnormal circumstance while suffering from mental disorders unaddressed, the daily traumas invoked by living in a cage required him to strive daily to develop his humanity, in spite of the inhumanity of life's experience—his existence. To become more fully human was his deepest desire, his dominant drive alongside his drive to be free. A paradox developed. A method to his madness was required.

Crime and punishment legislation, the War on Crime, and the poor are one-in-the same and have produced prisons built to dehumanize and castrate. The mentally ill are the makeup of the 21st century prison system. Our protagonist should know, for he is one. Treatment, care, community orientation doesn't exist.

Treatment for him came in the form of writing. It was necessary for him to create a fantasy world to address his confused and traumatic sexual experiences—the shame, fear, and anger. He was compelled to become the very things he vowed to never become. In his fantasy world, via his writing, is where he was able

cn'td

to address the sexual abuse that began for him at the age of three. At the hands of his stepfather, the issue of his gender and his sexual inclinations began.

In his fantasy world he became the stepfather and all the other men in his life that used him like a girl. In his fantasy world he became the master and sadist.

He ascended to the top of the food chain in this penal system built on dollars and no sense. He found himself in one of the most infamous prisons in the United States of America: the Maryland House of Correction (The Cut). Having a very political mentality, he found himself the head of the Writer's Club. In this position, he was able to have various women enter the prison Tuesdays and Thursdays weekly. This lasted until the prison was raided in February 1999 and placed on lockdown. The State Police lead the raid. It was like being locked up all over again. No sex, no drugs, no cellphones.

They came, they saw, they conquered. Repression breeds resistance and breaks minds. No treatment was brought in to help heal users, addicts, and mentally traumatized souls. The cycle continued.

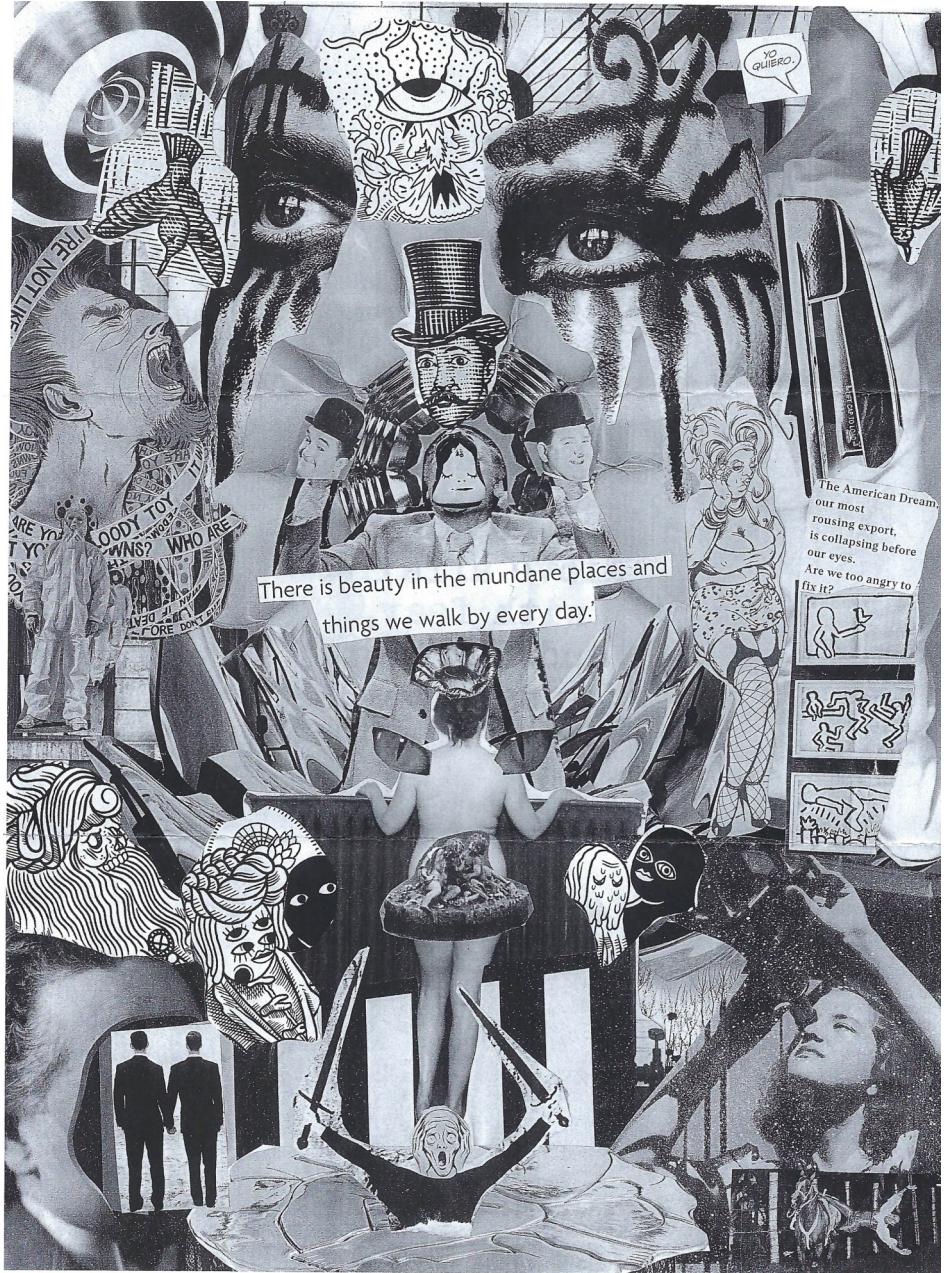
Once again, the child finds himself in the court of law being judged. Now the child lives in the body of a man, broken a thousand times. Now that they have killed the boy, they seek to destroy the man.

Think About IT!

By John Ballard

Bayboro, NC

- How far can kindness travel?
- Do you think skin color to love really matters?
- What is the cost to really be free?
- Is it blindness if you choose not to see?
- Does hate grow up from birth?
- Wasn't love walking first on this earth?
- What would it take to give?
- Why do opinions tweet how one should live?
- Can there ever be peace?
- Is there protection when in comes the police?
- Would there have been change without a pandemic?
- Is there leadership without a leader being in it?
- Does racism come in just one color?
- Could someone be pulled up without the hand of another?
- Do tears fall the same from every eye?
- Isn't pain the same no matter what color cry?
- What if character was an act to be judged?
- Why not change then to seek how things was?
- Must respect come with a higher price?
- Is there anything more valuable than a human life?
- Can there really be Love without Hate?
- Is there hope without having faith?
- Can you have TRUTH within lies?
- How can we come together if we divide?



Zine excerpts

by Kit Brixton/Kristopher Storey
Lexington, KY



Die Now in the Shade

By i-10<3u²

Maury, NC

I know water by thirst.
I know fire by shadow.

The leaves let the sun-light dapple their dead,
drying, decaying, and dissolving
 Into the depths
 Of the earth. Relatively.
You can always go deeper.
Curious it could happen here.
A wonder it would happen now.

I've lost love in prison
and found prison in love.
I've known more nights than not
 never needing the sun
 praying anything over
the same day should come,
 so I know you, Death,
 and you need not knock,
your footsteps give you away.
Won't you please come in?
 Is that any way to greet
 an old friend?
 Is that how you greet
 an old flame?

Remember when you taught me
 what's in a name
 as you weaved the free
 flowing fragments of fate
 with a star and a cross
 knowing north means not
 Up? Up
 means out
 and out's in the south,
 and though I try hard
 I can't figure out.
 But I've digressed far
enough and we both know I
have a date with down.
 And there is no late
 for there is no wait
when we realize down
 means inside.

And so I am.
 And so am I
going out or going
 in? Does
one end or one
begin? Don't
tell me now,
 I'd take it
 as a slight
on your word.
I'll know soon enough.
 You are upon me.
 Yes, I know,
you are upon me.

I've known water.
I've known fire.
And now, at last,
 How can I
say I've known
Death, when
only now I know
 Life by Life's
last breath?

Hunting, Still, O God

By D.T.

Bunn, NC

I look for miracles
beneath the violet gladiolas
blossoming in my face,
their lavender scents
aroused by a spring breeze,
No miracles there,
I swat away the hum hum hum
hummingbird
buzzing through my hair,
No miracle there,
A flock of sparrows
choreographs a ballet
across a dark blue sky
to music I can't hear,
No miracle there, either,
Still, I look.
Where have all the miracles gone?
I'll sit quietly in the Mimosa's shade
Until you show me
Where you hid them.

PRISON: A Womb or My Tomb?

By J.W.

Lumberton, NC

Dwelling within the exiles of steel and concrete,
Physically bound and mentally struggling with such defeat
Many of us so young, life seemingly over too soon,
Prison: will it become my womb or tomb?

Loved ones fervently stand by our side,
They too, intertwined with the struggles of doing time
Especially the 3 million kids, the silent victims, that go to bed at night,
Who have a mother or father in prison unable to hold them tight.

Dwelling within the exiles of steel and concrete,
Physically bound, spiritually within we all must retreat,
Asking for forgiveness, forgiveness of self, a heart renewed,
Prison: will it become my womb or tomb?

How do we become so powerless over our chosen addition,
Squandering away life's blessings turned into a state of chaotic perdition?
I must rise up to accept responsibility for my ineptness as a man,
How is it my son unconditionally loves and forgives me, I do not understand

Dwelling within the exiles of steel and concrete
Physically bound, emotionally there are many truths I must meet
"Who Am I" along this journey with due diligence I will exhume
Prison: will it become my womb or tomb?

I am still a son, husband and father,
Daily I must strive to educate and rehabilitate self to go farther,
From entering prison an illiterate to now pursuing college degrees
Reducing recidivism, paying it forward, with integrity and honest means

Prison: for many has become a tomb;
For me it has become a womb.

Note: Statistics "say" that 6 out of 9 minority boys who have a father in prison will likely end up in the system. My son this senior year was straight A's, shined on his football team, striker on soccer team and just accepted to attend Clemson and USC to study criminal justice. He is breaking the cycle!

It's a Lifestyle: Ode to PTSD

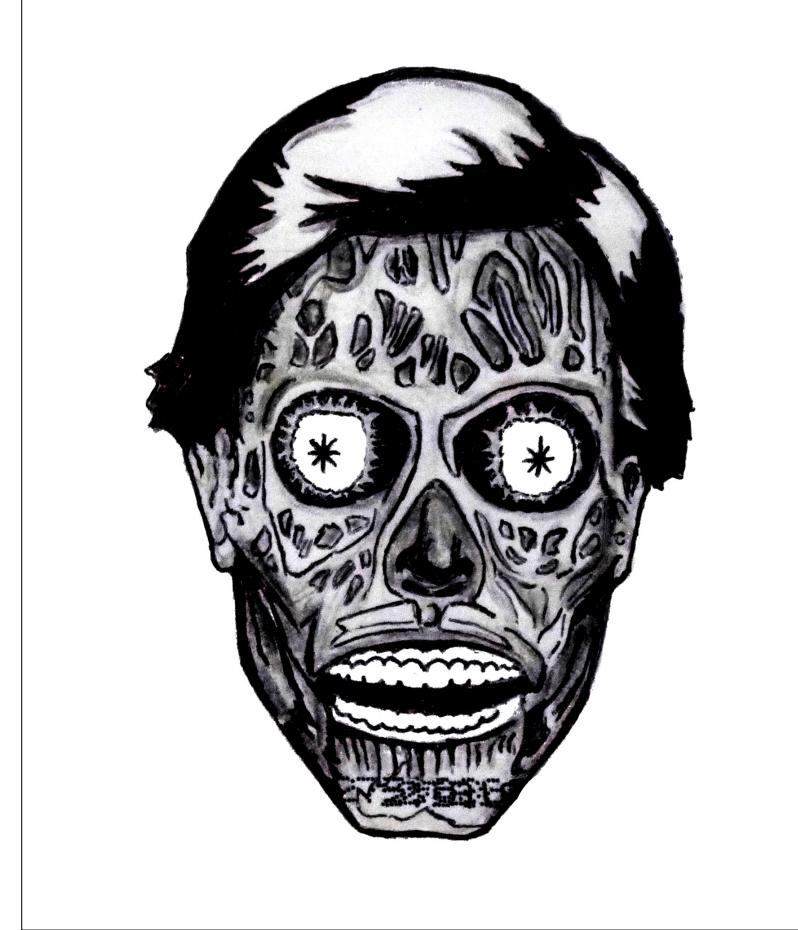
By C.T.

San Quentin, CA

Taps knocks buzz-whirs,
 Traps locks cuss-words
 Curse my reaction!
 Regain neuro traction
 Control breathing and placate seething
 In through the nose out through the mouth—
 that's for the birds; send it south
 Step away count to 10, then back to 1
 Oh it's a lifestyle, my friend; you're never done
 Merely existing yet hoping to live, and to beg that we forgive
 Or, at least, beg your pardon as I sow my garden
 Meanwhile, weedin' and weedin', cultivating
 my added vision of Eden

Alas, forever tortured by but a pindrop
 A quick start, a sudden stop
 While you simply thwart pain by knowing
 reds on yellas kills fellas
 I limply shun the sidewalks in the rain,
 terrified by umbrellas
 Ration and reason are so last season
 The new black is passion and mental treason
 Ripe to scratch out my eyes from phantom sorrow,
 But I recall I just used them today, and I'll likely
 need them again tomorrow
 So, you think you can tell heaven from hell?
 Blue skies from rain?
 Can you tell a green field from a barren plain?
 Do you think you can tell?
 Taps from knocks, buzzes from whirs;
 Traps from locks, cusses from words
 I can't... and I can

Note: Spoken word poetry inspired by incessant, relentless PTSD triggers in prison, eliciting knee-jerk mental and physical, and all too often vocal reactions.



Envelope drawing

by Daniel Ventre
 New York, NY

Untitled

By L.K.
Raleigh, NC

"You spilled your milk you filthy brat!"
 Daddy's slap was not a pat
 The angry words that spewed from his lips
 Hurt far worse than his hands and fists
 My tender butt all black and blue
 Had been beaten by daddy's shoe
 With my head hung low trying to disguise
 Tears that flowed from blackened eyes
 "You'll regret the day that you were born!"
 Daddy's voice yelled with haste and scorn.
 "Now get out of here and don't you return!
 Or I'll use my fists and then you'll learn!"

So with a bag of clothes and nothing more,
 This child walked out the front hall door
 Wounded and so scared he hit the road
 A pitiful bag, such a heavy load.
 Just 6 years old, such a fragile age,
 Yet just another chapter, another page
 From a life racked with pain and woe
 As far back as my thoughts could go
 I saw love as just another word
 It's demonstration had never occurred
 As thoughts drift through those fragile years
 The boy kneels by his bunk in tears.

"Forgive me lord for this rage inside
 It feels better to expel it before I die.
 How can I love when I've suffered so much hate
 And is eternal hell my only fate?"
 This leaves us all lord so confused.
 When we grow up so badly abused.
 "Lord, had I known, had I kept you in my life.
 I would have conquered all my strife.
 Please lord, If you hear a child cry into the
 Woeful cries of pain or scared cries of fright
 Please, please dear lord go to its aid.
 For its sins I've known, endured and paid.
 Because in you, there's a true father's love.
 That embraces me with tender arms from above."

When It Hurts inside of Your Soul: COVID-19 inside Prison

By Bobby Bostic, author
Jefferson City, MO

The pain inside your body is not the worst pain, nothing is more painful than soul pain. It lingers on. It stays inside of you like COVID-19. I am one of millions of prisoners across the world that caught COVID-19. There is no way around it in an overcrowded prison environment. Already trapped inside of a prison cell, COVID-19 traps you inside of your body. When it is hard to breathe who can you call out to? You labor for breath all the while sweating buckets. Your body hurts with every breath. Inside of a cell you suffer alone, nobody feels your pain. Most of us prisoners don't know when, from who, or how we contracted COVID-19. Nevertheless once the COVID-19 hits you it takes over your world, COVID-19 imprisons you. A cell without bars, it locks your body down. It attacks your cells and organs.

The first sign that I had COVID-19 was when I caught the chills. The same night I started sweating profusely. The next morning I awoke to a high fever. This was the worst. My entire body ached. Medicine did not help nor relieve my pain. The only temporary relief was sleep. Sleep doesn't come easy in prison though. There are 5 custody counts that you must stand up for. Noise is everywhere. Movement is constant. Violence is ever present and always near. This isn't the place to try and sleep your pain away.

Medical staff are indifferent to the serious medical needs of prisoners. Dozens of prisoners around me with clear mild or even severe symptoms of COVID-19 do not report their symptoms to prison medical staff. The majority of us just ride it out in our cells. Each of these prisoners show all of the symptoms of COVID-19. In the first few days I lost my smell. Then I lost my taste buds. I did not eat for days. I could not smell anything for more than a week. Fellow prisoners couldn't breathe.

Some sought medical assistance only to be taken to solitary confinement to be put on quarantine. As confirmed cases begin to rise at the prison entire housing units were put on complete lockdown for two weeks. Ironically no sooner than they were released from quarantine, many other prisoners in the same housing unit contracted the virus.

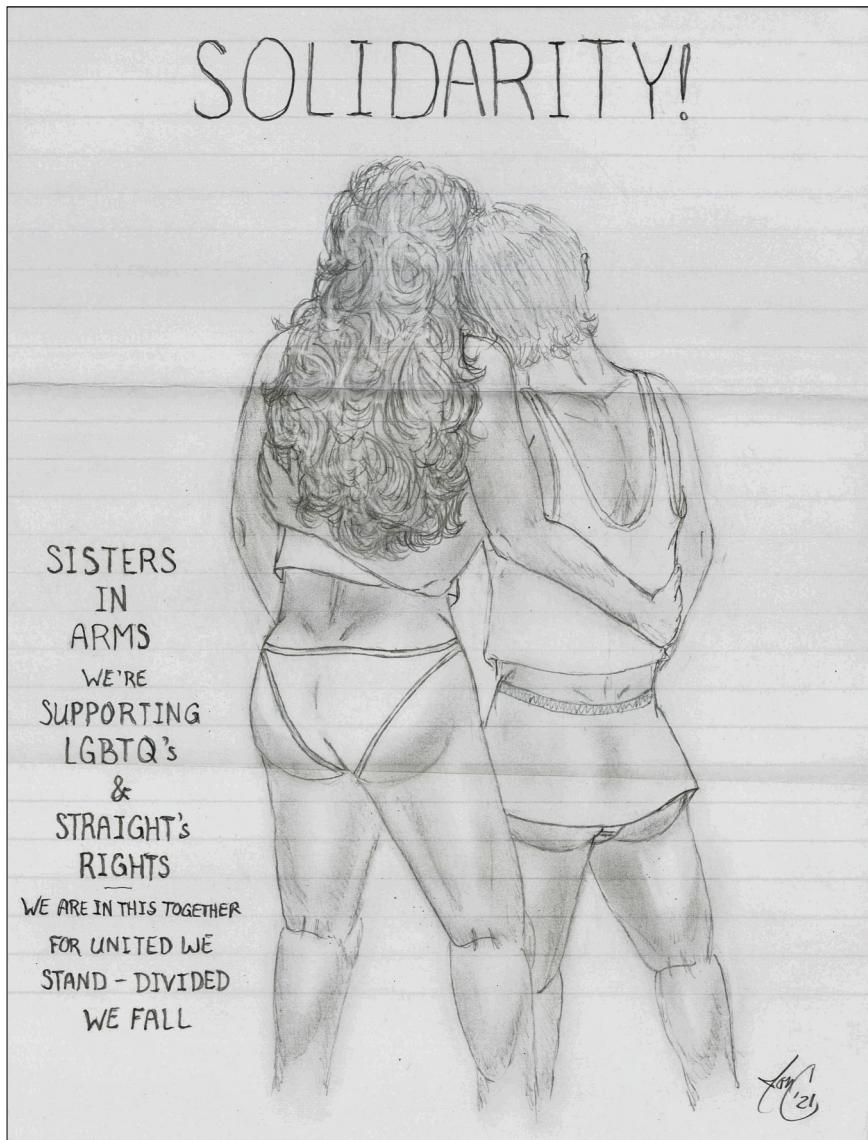
Again these same housing units went into complete lockdown quarantine. Then a guard or nurse would bring the virus in again and back on quarantine the inmates go.

Hence as I write this the entire housing unit that I am in is on a two week quarantine lockdown. We only leave our cells for showers a few at a time. They haven't tested everybody. Medical staff does random tests here and there. If those inmates happen to test positive, then our lockdown will continue for two weeks and on and on it goes. This is clearly not solving the problem nor stopping the spread at this prison.

COVID-19 is a curse. It is a curse that haunts us inside of these prisons. NO matter how we or the state tries, there is no real way to social distance inside the confines of jails, prisons and detention centers. The very design and structure of these facilities are built for close contact. Places of confinement are meant to house as many bodies as possible in the smallest amount of space as possible. How can you practice social distance when every half of a foot from you is another body? We stand in line for breakfast, lunch, and dinner with another person standing in front and back of us less than a foot apart. It is the same way when we sit at the small tables to eat our meals.

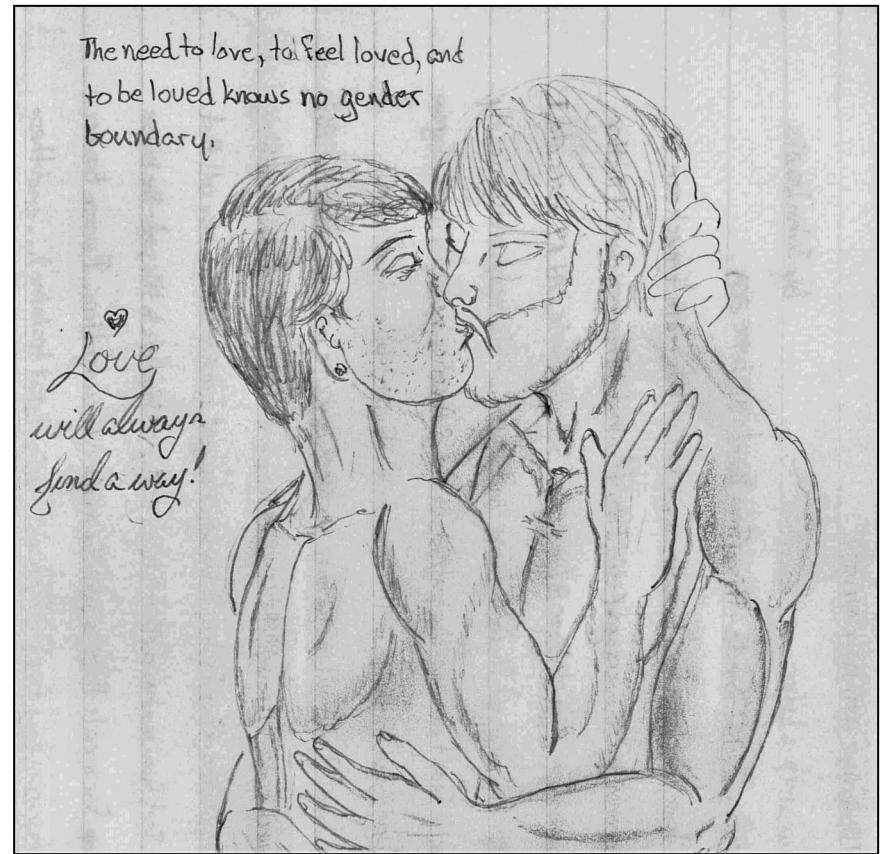
In all honesty there is no 6 feet apart social distancing in these prisons. COVID-19 hit us and hit us hard. Along with the elders in the free world we are among the most vulnerable population. Medical care in the Department of Corrections is not known to be the best. In prison the worse tend to get even worse. So in here the curse (COVID-19) just spreads just like the misery that tends to blanket the air. Besides a vaccine we need another cure. We need a cure from mass incarceration. It is mass incarceration that contributes to COVID-19 spreading so rapidly in prisons, jails, and detention centers.

More than just your body; COVID-19 inside prison hurts your soul. I know. Stuck in a hard steel bunk with nowhere to go. I dream of freedom, but with a 241 year sentence, that seems so far away. Even still, today I feel happy because I got my sense of smell and taste back. It is the small things that count. Your sense of smell and taste is part of your humanity and COVID-19 can strip you of that. COVID-19 overwhelms your body and it feels like you are drowning inside of yourself and the pain you cannot get out of your body. You go inside of your soul and it hurts there too. This is what it is like.



Solidarity!
by Anonymous
NC

The need to love, to feel loved, and to be loved knows no gender boundary.



Love will always find a way!

Love Will Always Find a Way!
by Anonymous
NC

Passover in Block G26

By D.T.

Bunn, NC

Someone's always singing,
 Someone's always prayin',
 Someone's always screamin'
 To take the pain away
 Water falls in empty shower stalls,
 Flip-flops splash a wet tattoo,
 TV local "news alerts"
 Disturb the morning peace
 Stacks of shrouded, sleeping men
 Shake a shudder,
 Double-bunked,
 Rising soon from shattered dreams,
 Chatterin', whisperin' soft
 In cold sarcophagae,
 Like loaves of unleavened bread.
 Scattered sunlight hides in corners,
 Raindrops break on double windows,
 Starlings in the fenced-in courtyard
 Snatch bread from captive sparrows
 Shivering in their nests.
 Another dawn awakens another hope

Untitled

By N.W.

Troy, NC

How they struggle to maintain
 The illusion they create
 Weaving worlds held by sorrow
 Smothered by greed and hate.
 "You are nothing but a beast"
 their motto and their creed.
 For to see the truth of light inside
 is forever to be freed.
 On every level of this dream
 The rules for all to see
 The shadow can never drown the light
 The sun will rise indeed.



Untitled 2
by T.O., Salt Lake City, UT

Edit and layout by

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