

EXPOSURE

ON WRITING IN PRISON



WORLD
VOICES
FESTIVAL

The People's Forum
May 8, 2019

Welcome to Exposure: *on writing in prison*

Every year PEN America produces the World Voices Festival, a week-long celebration of literature from around the world. For over a decade, the Prison Writing Program has contributed a festival event that highlights the work of writers in our program— typically, sourced from the award-winning work in our Prison Writing Contest archives.

For their 15th anniversary celebration, the World Voices Festival has taken on the urgent theme of Open Secrets, an exploration of the dissolving boundary between the public and the private in our literature, our politics, and our daily lives. Immediately we recognized the ways in which our work is in conversation with this theme. We began to ask questions: What risks do incarcerated writers face when their words travel beyond prison walls? And how do audiences of their work read, honor, and bear witness without assuming voyeuristic or exploitative perspectives?

We decided to try a new approach: commissioning original works from some of the most active writers in our network to reflect on these and other tensions between the realm of public readership and the often hidden creative life in prison.

Our process: we sent letters to a short list of writers, with an invitation that offered a series of writing prompts.

- *Why is it important to have an audience for your work— specifically speaking to an audience inside and/or outside of prison?*
- *Why is it important to have readers or witnesses to our personal narratives?*
- *What is the line between voyeurism and witnessing?*
- *What are your fears when people from the outside read your work? Any advice on what audiences should bring to the reading? What to put aside when reading?*
- *Writing in prison can often be exposing. How do you deal with the heightened risk of writing while incarcerated?*

- *How has being incarcerated affected your writing rituals or style? Does less privacy in living space have an impact on creative expression?*
- *People often consider the Internet and social media an increasing public sphere (though one that can largely be controlled.) With access to social media, what would you/could you do that you cannot now? Critiques? Ideas we might consider in our usage?*

Lastly, we wrote, we are also open to other interpretations of this prompt, and invite creativity.

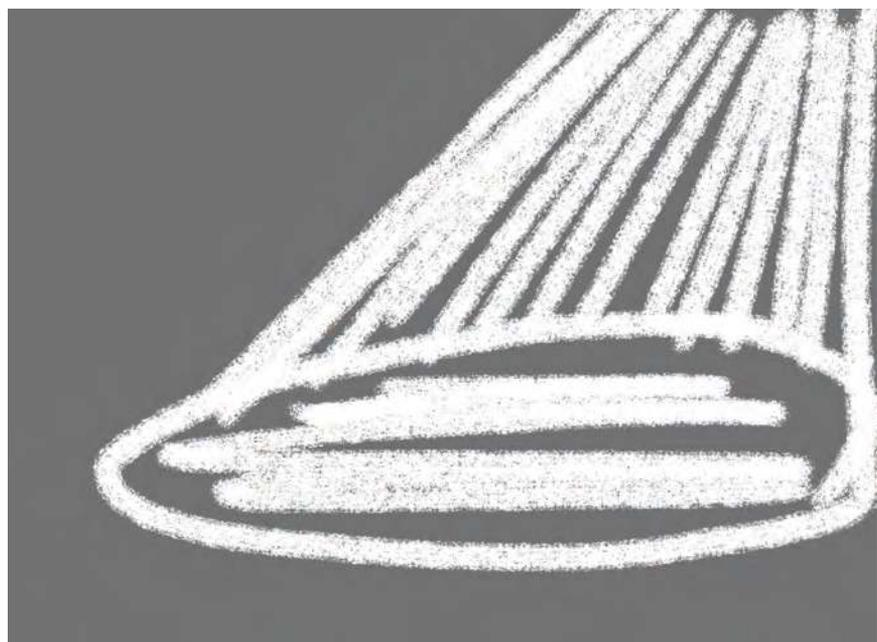
The array of writings that you'll see on stage tonight, and which are excerpted in this book, echo and affirm the shared experience of writers in prison—one of systemic barriers, censorship, and the personal risk, bravery, and relentless commitment it takes to reach a public readership. The writings also offer, of course, a wide spectrum of individual vulnerabilities, unique voice and dedication to various forms of artistry and craft.

We are grateful to showcase the work in the capable hands of our author/activist performers, and invite you to respond with thoughts, feelings and revelations that arise via the index cards on your chair. Your comments will be sent back to our writers—one of the many ways we push against the wall that separates our worlds—offering a taste of what happened in the room back to the writers who couldn't be among us tonight.

Thank you for joining us,

Caits Meissner

Prison and Justice Writing Program Director



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How to Write in Prison

Arthur Longworth

Writing in prison isn't the same as writing outside. A prisoner exists beneath an aggravated form of disenfranchisement behind these walls. It's a form of exclusion that's likely unfathomable to an unincarcerated writer.

I don't have a computer. No access to the Internet. Nor the ability to run an online search.

My ability to reach outside prison—in the minimal, monitored, and restricted ways I'm permitted—is limited by how much I have, or don't have, in my prison account. Phone calls cost me more than they cost an un-incarcerated person. And I don't have access to a phone directory.

Letters also cost me more to mail than they cost an un-incarcerated person. And the pennies I make an hour from my prison job barely keep me in soap, deodorant, and toothpaste.

I'm isolated. That is, I'm separated from society not just by the wall that encloses me within the prison, but the number of decades I've been here. Like the majority of prisoners with a long-term sentence, I was sent here when I was young. I've been in so long now that I can remember a dream I had last month better than what it was like to be outside prison. I don't have even a single unincarcerated adult memory. I know few people on the other side of that wall.

I don't have access to a historical archive. My access to public records virtually doesn't exist because I can neither request nor receive them in electronic or digital form. The cost of physical copies is beyond my ability to pay—a copy of my own prison file would run me more than a grand. And I'm prohibited from possessing records of any prison official. If I were caught with something like that, I'd be in the hole longer than if the guards were to catch me with a gun.

I don't often come across a newspaper. And never one less than a week old. Sometimes it's hard to find a dictionary with all its pages.

What I do have, when I budget my expenditures carefully, are a couple writing tablets. A handful of pencils I sharpen sparingly so I don't go through them too quickly. And two ballpoint pens: a black and a blue.

I also have the library which, in here, isn't what an unincarcerated writer would consider a library at all. That is, a single room of mostly beat-up, outdated, and moldering books.

Nevertheless, I've read nearly every book in the room. Like the majority of prisoners with a long term sentence who were sent here when they were young, I entered prison uneducated. Which means, I struggled to read at first. But I kept at it—I continued to read no matter what happened around me over the years, and no matter what happened to me. In the process, I discovered treasures. That is, works by writers who inspired and motivated me—writers through whose eyes and ideas I learned that the world, and my obligation to it, is more than I could never have imagined when I committed my crime as a young person in survival mode on the street.

I found no shortage of books about prison and incarceration in the library. Works written by academics, attorneys, historians, journalists, as well as books and articles by current and former prison officials are all crowded onto three shelves of an outsized section. And more books are squeezed onto the shelves each year. I'm not sure if the number of books related to incarceration is because the library is in a prison, or if it reflects the inordinate role prison has come to play in the world outside the wall.

Either way, I'm conscious that there are no books about prison on the shelves written by any modern-day incarcerated writer. I know it's not the librarian's fault. She makes no secret that she disapproves. Her boss, too. I suppose, because librarians know that barring the works of incarcerated writers from the shelves lessens the legitimacy and voice of works that are afforded the privilege of space on a shelf. Unfortunately, librarians aren't the ones who decide which books are allowed, and which aren't, in this library.

When I first felt the impulse to write, I was dissuaded by my lack of formal education and any model or standard of an incarcerated writer to shape my writing after. So I suppressed the urge. That is, I pushed it back down where it came from, which is that place inside me where I keep everything I've seen and experienced inside these walls.

When the compulsion to write rose into an irrepressible tide and poured over the wall of my resistance, words began to spill out onto paper of their own accord. I couldn't have stopped them if I tried. When I saw my experience, and the experience of those around me, woven into the fabric of words, I quit worrying that I'm not supposed to know how to write. I went with it.

Comparing the words I write with the words of the writers on the shelves, I discovered my edge. An incarcerated writer who writes at any length about

the institution in whose belly he exists channels an experience distinct from an unincarcerated writer. That is, I have the ability to articulate not just what prison looks like, but how it feels. Even when an unincarcerated writer is granted access to enter prison, it isn't the same because his exposure is mitigated and not without respite. He isn't subjugated by the institution in the same way I am.

I know the milieu better than anyone. I know the regimen, chaos, attrition, and every other force the institution exerts on me and those around me. I know how to navigate the underground networks of the prison, as well as the economy. I've developed strategies and relationships that enable me to move between the contentious lines of division into which people separate themselves inside the walls. That is, into the categories of race, gang, politics, religion, nationality, and crime—which are really just the same ways that people divide themselves outside.

Most prisoners trust me. I know that every group in the prison coheres around a culture of oral history preserved and carried forward by the elder respected members of the group. I've earned trust by listening to their stories. And because they know that my circumstance has never been any less miserable than theirs.

I take notes in a coded shorthand that only I can read. And I smuggle the notes like contraband—because that's what they are. If I'm caught with them, guards will take me to the hole and I'll be “validated” as a gang member in a file I'm neither allowed to see nor dispute. At some point, I might get out of the hole. But I'll never get out of that file.

I discovered years ago that I'm not free to write what I want about prison. Not as long as I'm in one.



Arthur Longworth



“I am a forty-five-year-old state-raised prisoner. And, I will not be silent. Most of the time I have spent at the state penitentiary has been in Walla Walla, WA which is the subject of some of my essays. Entering the prison with only a 7th-grade education, I taught myself to write by reading books from the prison library. I also work as a Spanish language translator.”

Arthur Longworth’s essays have been published by *The Marshall Project*, *VICE News*, and *YES! Magazine*. He is a multi-award winner of the PEN Prison Writing Contest. He is also the author of *Zek: An American Prisoner Story* (Gabalfa Press, 2016), a work of creative nonfiction that lays bare the experience of mass incarceration from the inside. For more info go to arthurlongworth.com.

EXCERPT

To Be Heard

Benjamin Frandsen

My thoughts remain in the stars—no voice
I remain behind bars for a choice
to abandon myself to the wild
defiled

Now branded
like the X
on my file

I am an ex-offender
shipped fourth-class male
from the Public Defender

I am an ex-citizen
recidivism cautionary tale
ex-con expected to fail

But I fly in the face of expectations
embrace the odds
against me
the harder I'm pressed
the sweeter the victory

I now understand
that the greatest need in humanity
is simply to be heard

The need of the child
is to be heard

The need of the victim
is to be heard

The need of the poet
is to be heard

Why does the caged bird sing?
to be heard

I will be heard

Performed by Jecoina Vinson



Benjamin Frandsen



Benjamin's parents raised him to believe in the primal power of words, those magical keys that unlock the beauty of life and pain and love. He's written over 50 poems, 15 songs, 4 screenplays (one a work-for-hire), and is midway through completing his first novel. He first learned of PEN when his mother won the 2005 Emerging Voices Fellowship for her narrative nonfiction partial manuscript *Some Mother's Darling*. Before

she succumbed to cancer in 2013, she made him vow to finish her book, a promise he recently fulfilled. Being chosen for an Honorable Mention in the 2018 Prison Writing Contest was a double privilege because he joined his beloved mother in the ranks of scribes who have been honored by PEN.

Anatomy of a 6'x9' Cell

Brian Batchelor

1. BARS

My good friend noosed himself rigid around his bars. 15 on the day a jury of his peers damned his pubescent black body to petrify 100+ years. How he must have pined for lost time lonely in his cell, his whole skin a scowl until the bars spelled a ritual for release.

*

How many times have I slammed these iron bars shut locking myself in? How many clenched hands have repeated the same clutch-slide-lock? Did the metal maker mold this kennel door knowing, for the occupant, it would be a daily DIY caging? When I reach through the bars and bring nothing back, am I wrong to reach again and again?

Bars = What keeps me from—

3. TOILET

No toilet seats or lids. There's a metal push-button in lieu of a flush handle jutting from the wall 2" above the toilet. The toilet is 2' from where my head lies on a plastic-wrapped pillow every night, 8" from the side of the desk so my lanky frame must sit sideways over the bowl, maneuver my hips just so to the left, lean forward slightly and hike my knees up until tippy-toed, shins smashed against the desks edge. Wiping requires its own awkward negotiations.

5. DESK

I have books. Books stacked horizontal to bookend the books rowed vertical, spines out so I can see the beautiful names of poets and artists and this one behemoth called A Poet's Glossary that is sort of esoteric and intimidating but goddamn if I haven't dogeared its dense pages with eager hands.

7. BED

A stiff neoprene foam mattress plastic-coated on top of a 6' long, 2 1/2' wide sheet of metal bolted to the wall. If this were my coffin, they would need to saw my feet off to make me fit.

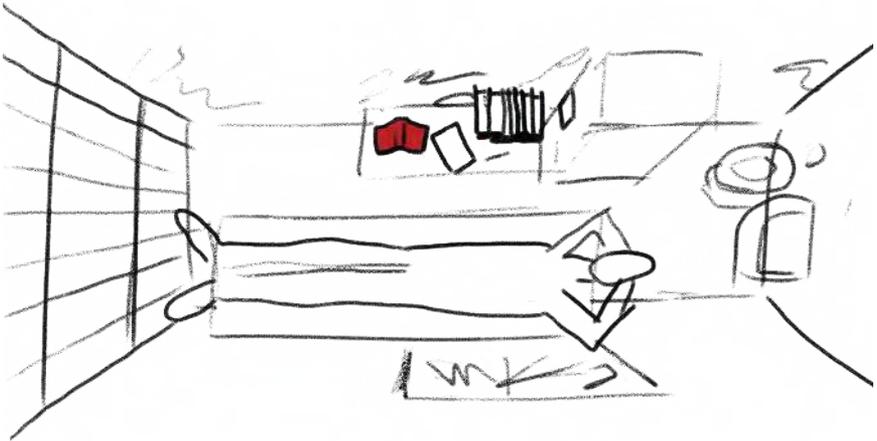
*

I have taught myself to sleep on my back.

*

I have never used the term bedroom here. I have not relaxed my hardened body into peaceful slumber here. I have not stretched myself into a satisfied waking here. I have not slept next to the love of my life or made love here. I have not folded my limbs into a question mark at the bed's edge and prayed for forgiveness here.

Performed by Christopher Soto



Brian Batchelor



Brian Batchelor is a poet and artist currently working on a chapbook of illuminated poems. He is a member of the Stillwater Writer's Collective and has been an avid participant in workshops taught by writers from the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop.

He was born in 1983 in the tiny town of Washington, D.C. When he doesn't have a paintbrush in hand, a nice cheap Bic pen takes its place. Albert Camus said it best: "A man's life is nothing but an extended trek though the detours of art to recapture those one or two moments when his heart first opened."

Edify

Elizabeth Hawes

I try to learn something new every day.

- * Irish soda bread = 1lb. of flour, 1t of baking soda, 1t of salt, 3/4 C of buttermilk
- * A photon means a “packet” of radiation
- * The western part of Lake Huron is polluted with algae.
- * Susurrus means “a whispering or rustling sound.”

Yesterday, I spoke to Stephanie, who lives a few doors down the hall. I learned that her mother:

was in a wheelchair because she had a bad hip and fibromyalgia.

was watching not only Stephanie’s ten year old son, but also his three cousins, all under the age of four, because their mother is in treatment.

Stephanie is planning on going back to Texas once she is out of prison, and that’s in December. I don’t know why she’s here.

I don’t share much of my life with others. But then, my husband is not in prison and has no tattoos, and we don’t have children—just two half-Siamese cats that are siblings and poor mousers.

My home life lacks drama.

- * In Ojibwe, the word for old woman means one that holds things together.
- * It is a myth that MSG, a flavor enhancer, is bad for your health.
- * The endangered pangolin is only found in Africa and Asia, and looks like a walking pinecone.
- * Millie Benson was the ghost writer for Caroline Keene, and wrote most of the Nancy Drew series.



One weekend, while walking in line on my way to the dining room, a very loose term for “chow hall,” or what I refer to as “The Hit and Miss” because the food is inconsistently prepared, I follow a friend again, loosely defined, she was in my playwriting class—who has a red swastika that shows its top half just above the back of her t-shirt neckline.

What in the world would possess someone-anyone-to permanently mark themselves with a prominent sign of universal hate?

She didn’t appear to be a racist. Or anti-Semitic. Or mean-spirited. Actually, she smiled a lot. She was kind.

I asked her about her tattoo. She said, “I was different then. I’ve changed.”

I don’t know what I learned from that conversation, but I thought about it all afternoon.

Once a white-supremacist, always a white supremacist? Was she a fascist? Is she a fascist? Was she a Nazi? Is she a Nazi? Do I give Nazis more respect if I capitalize the word nazi?

The woman with the red swastika went to boot camp, and now is gone. I guess I’ll never really know. I do know she likes to draw goddesses and moons. I let go of my judgment.

That is my lesson.

I am surrounded by bad choices. Bad-situations. Addiction.

I try to figure out what I’m supposed to be learning within this college of disaster. I document what I see because I don’t know what else to do with all that surrounds me.

Performed by Kirya Traber

Elizabeth Hawes



Elizabeth Hawes is an actor, gardener, playwright, poet, and prisoner in Minnesota. She has received three national Prison Writing Awards, and one Fielding A. Dawson Award, from PEN America. Recently, Elizabeth worked on a series of vignettes about women in prison called, *My Life is a Vegetable*. She enjoys taking college classes and watching other people cook.

The Railroad

Arthur Longworth

I can't tell you what the Railroad is. But I can tell you why it exists.

I used to send my writing out masked as correspondence. Articles, essays, and manuscripts that I broke down into letter-sized installments and mailed. I received confiscation notices that read, "Trying to make profit from writing," and "3^d-party communication." Whatever that's supposed to mean. But not all the writing was confiscated and I numbered the missives so when one or more turned up missing, I could reproduce them.

I dropped an envelope through the slot atop the steel box bolted into the concrete floor at the cellhouse entrance two days ago. The box looks like what I imagine a mailbox in the free world might look like. But it isn't a freeworld mailbox. This morning, a guard brought a notice to my cell that the prison confiscated the envelope. The notice reads, "Writing an article with no approval from [the] superintendent. " But there is no policy or process for prisoners to ask the superintendent whether or not they can write.

Understanding why the Railroad exists is to know that the strategy of denying people the right to define their context or narrate their experience within an institution has a history in this country that predates incarceration. "Railroad" isn't a happenstance term. Like the covert railway along which slaves and their narratives passed into the free world before us, laying a network of rails that lead out from behind the walls that enclose mass incarceration violates what the State delineates as the law.

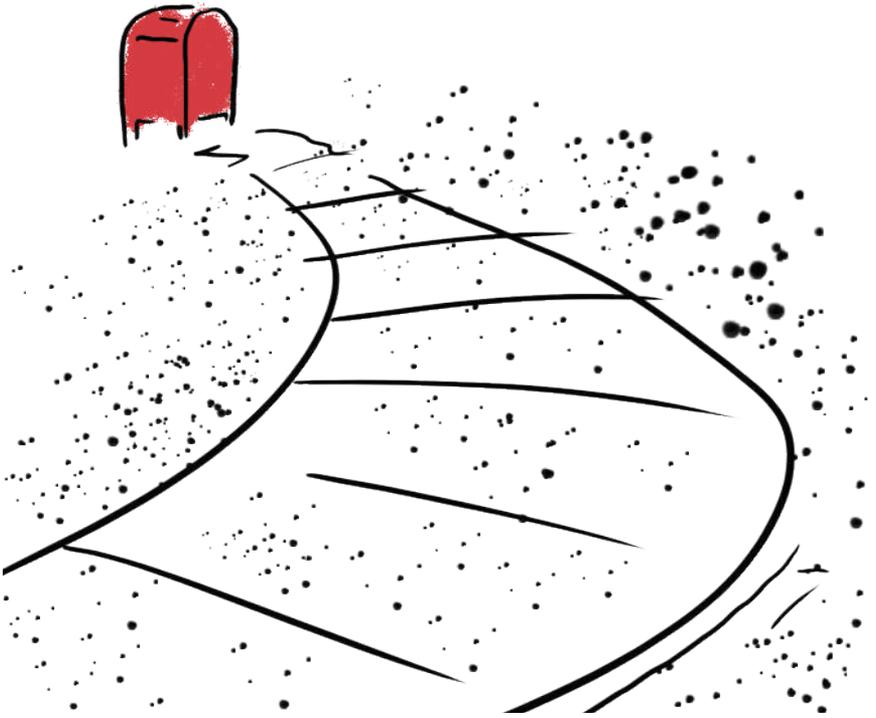
Consequently, participation in the Railroad is fraught with danger and makes your existence in prison more harried and precarious than if you were a gang leader, drug dealer, or high-level escape risk. The institution considers you a greater threat. Yet, criminal intent plays no role. The Railroad is merely visceral rejection of the idea that there are no stories behind these walls other than the one narrated by the State.

No, I can't tell you what the Railroad is, how its rails are laid, who's involved, or how it works. It may be the only thing about prison I can't—won't—write about. Because writing about it would compromise its existence. And, without it, I

wouldn't be able to write.

Just know that these words aren't an exception—they didn't enjoy the luxury, privilege, or security of a mailbox in the free world. Prison hasn't yet surrendered. If not for the rails, you wouldn't be reading this.

Performed by Jon Sands



CENSORSHIP

Matthew Feeney

Censorship didn't exist in my world
until I came to prison.

"They" control who we call
Who writes to us
Who we visit with
Even who we associate with.

What we read
What we see
What we draw
Especially what we write.

An incarcerated writer trying to correspond with my writing mentor,
I have to work with our prison's ***** department.

And when ***** refuses to forward my poem to my mentor because it contained
the term "*****_*****," my mentor never receives it.

No discussion, appeal or due process
***** has done this to 3 different works of mine (so far)

Just writing this poem could get me in trouble

Even though I won't use the word ***** or write about *****_***** or use my thesaurus to express my written joy in continuing to work with my mentor.

I'll self-censor

Edit my words

Redact revolutionary and overly-creative ideas

Sanitize and clean it up

hoping it makes it past the word police guarding my words from the outside world

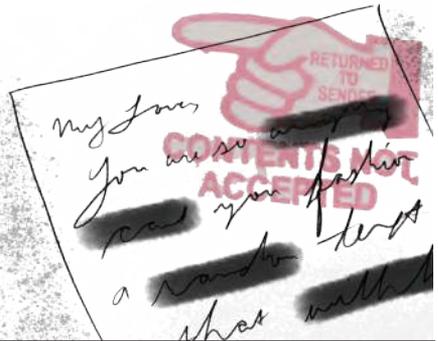
Because if I can't somehow get this by, through or around *****

it'll be nothing more than handwritten scribbles

stuck behind bars

in my writer's notebook.

Performed by Jecoina Vinson



Matthew Feeney



Matthew Feeney is a former actor currently incarcerated in Minnesota. Matthew received 2nd place in the 2017 PEN America's Prison Writing Contest for Fiction and more recently won 1st place in the Grandview Award for the 2018 League of Minnesota Poets 34th annual poetry contest. His work has appeared in *The Analog Sea Review*, *Spotlight Review*, *The Pinyon Review*, *Bear Creek Haiku*, *the Blue Collar Review*, *The Beat Within*, *ArtLiJo* and the *Hawai'i Review*. Matthew is a member of his prison's Restorative Justice Council and a trained Conflict Resolution Mentor.

Exposure

Elizabeth Hawes

Every time a prisoner submits their writing into the public sphere they are subjecting themselves to an audience who can easily look them up and be told a prosecutor's version of a story (true or untrue) about their conviction. This is in juxtaposition to all a prisoner desires:

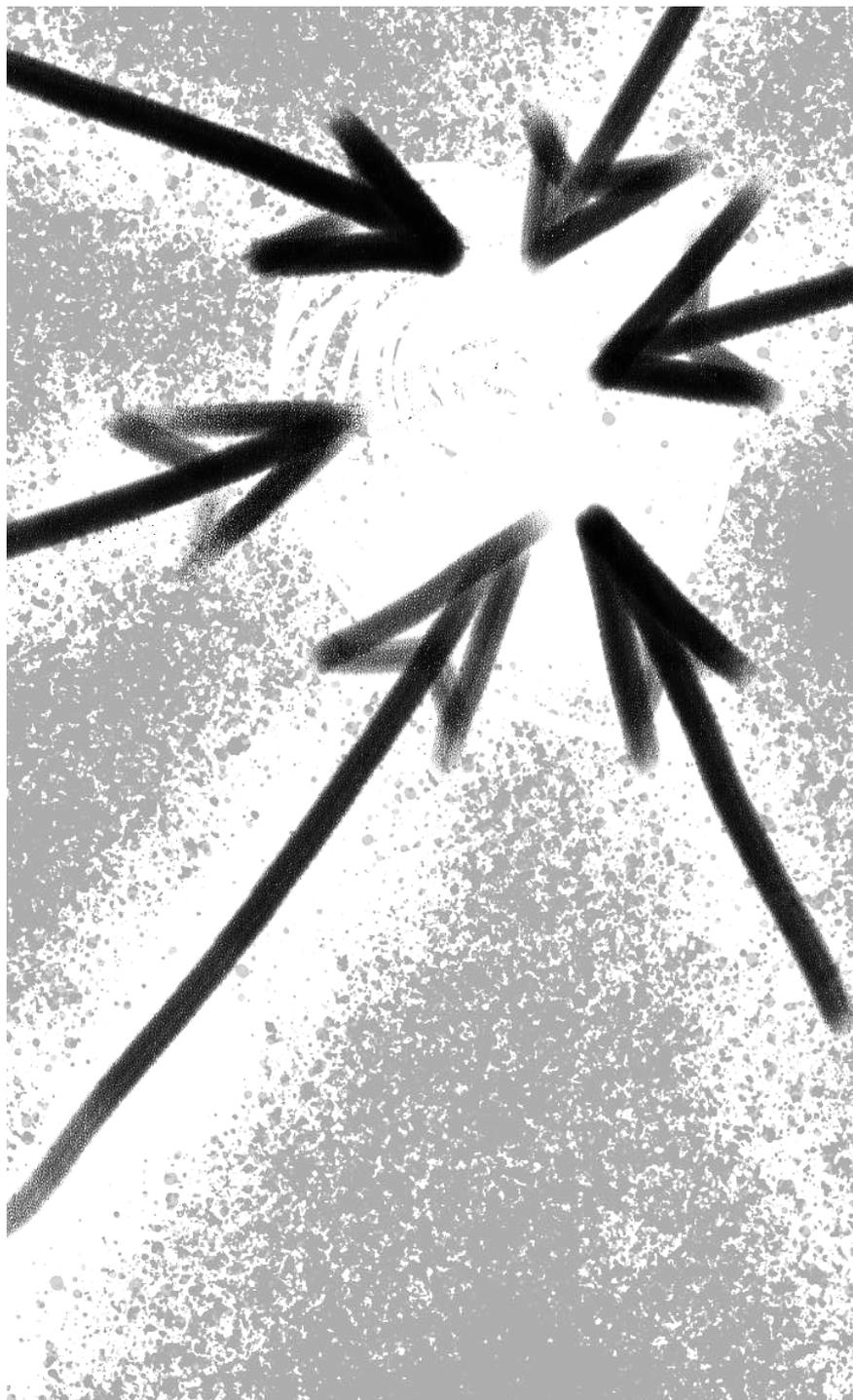
- To put the past behind them
- To lay low and quietly merge back into society
- To reconnect with those they love in fresh circumstances

Writing as a prisoner ties their name to the label of felon. A prisoner must ask themselves, am I willing to put myself out there? To possibly be talked about (again)? To be judged (again)? And, more importantly, is this story/play/poem/idea worth my vulnerability? Will people listen or judge? While all artists/writers question the value of their work and wonder who is viewing it and how it is being perceived, a prisoner who is an artist or who writes always carries the added burden of having to apologize for their past. Or for a piece of their past, or for one afternoon of their past or for one minute of their past.

Mass incarceration is war and I'm a reporter on the front line. I don't want to be here but I am here surrounded by struggle, vulnerability, anger, grief and confusion. I listen and ask questions that sometimes I wish I hadn't because often the story behind the time is long, sad, and painful. I keep asking because every person is important and deserves to tell their story. It empowers people to be heard.

And that is why it is worth the risk for me to elbow my way into the written conversation of the world beyond the wall.

Performed by Mahogany L. Browne



Reforming Ourselves, In Obscurity

Greg Goodman

I watched from society's farthest margins, violations against your rights to privacy, and your perfunctory outrage, that within days will subside until the next violation.

I watched this envious of your access to these resources and experiences, but also for want of similar exposure of my own personal data. My interests, rehabilitative successes and re-entry goals that comprise my activities in prison. Data that would expose who I am, compared to who I was—what I've done to change and what I'm continuing to do.

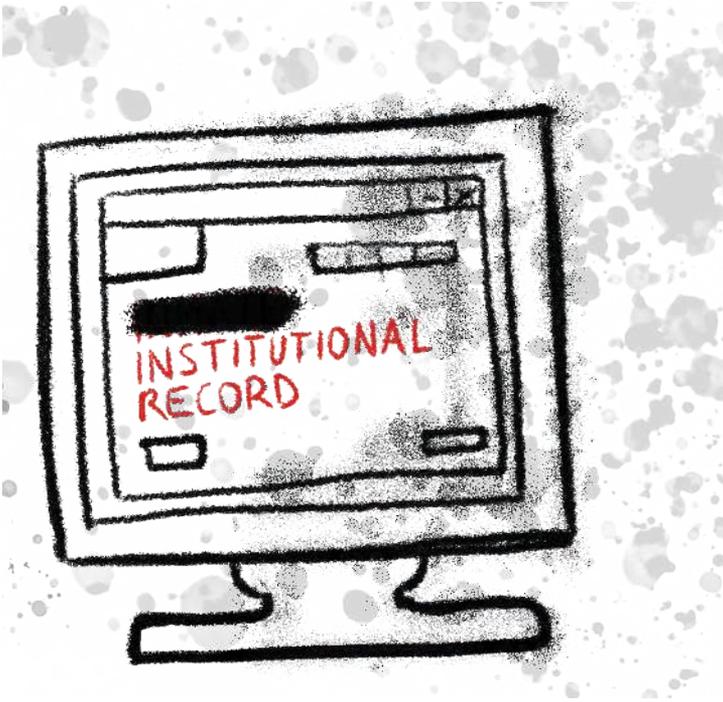
For the imprisoned, your violations of privacy and data breaches are an attractive alternative and analogous of transparency. The potential gains from such exposures far outweigh the risks of renewed public scorn. We want our personal data released into the public sphere. In many ways it already is. Much about us is public information. Starting with our arrest and the blurb of history that usually follows. But once transferred to prison, our narratives lapse into a shroud of privacy.

Despite the systemic suppression of our voices, we fill in the lapses where we can. Many of which lie within our prison records. In Virginia they lie within CORIS, the Correctional Information System. An extensive database that includes our institutional adjustment, disciplinary infractions, vocational training and other developmental activities... Public access to the cache of data in CORIS would fundamentally change the public perception of prisoners.

Public access to CORIS would further substantiate Evidence Based Practices and prison reforms. It would affirm our personal endeavors towards reformation, and either refute or corroborate everything we've been writing in our letters, and telling our families over the phone. It would bolster your trust in us and validate the sacrifices of our loved ones. And that their hopes in us are not misplaced.

When used together, [these files] contextualize our footprints—the imprints made years ago, as well as the impressions we’re making today. Our paths contain endeavors and digital footprints we want you to track, so that hopefully, one day you’ll be encouraged by what you see, and can say, “I see where he’s going.”

Performed by Aja Monet



Greg Goodman



Greg Goodman loves words and weaving them into a poem or story. An obscure or interesting word is often all it takes for him to construct a small mat or larger tapestry. His poem, a 2017 Prison Writing Contest winner, “*Glimpse*,” was inspired by a glance in the mirror and the word “tonsure,” as well as how much he’s aged and grown in prison. The metaphorical “trigger” he writes of is his tongue—at once quick, sharp, and mean, turned slow, dull, and more thoughtful now by comparison and maturity.

Shit

Matthew Feeney

Prison's supposed to be a time and place to get your shit together.
But thieves try to take your shit
Bullies give ya shit
Mouth off to the wrong guy and you're in deep shit
You can't take a shit in private
All our personal shit has to fit in 2 bins
Most inmates don't give a shit 'bout nuthin' 'cept themselves
Easy to forget little shit like signing in
Everyone knows each other's shit
Shitty mattresses make it hard to sleep worth a shit
If you don't fight you're a chicken shit
They feed us shit
It's difficult to get shit done
OGs walking around like they're King Shit
Most days we feel like shit
Some days we look like shit.
The system treats us like shit
Then excretes us out the door
Expecting us to
Clean up our act
And live like a normal human being.

That's bullshit.

Performed by Robert Pollock



Answers

Joe Vanderford

How has being incarcerated affected your writing rituals or style? Does less privacy in living space have an impact on creative expression?

Prior to coming to prison and discovering who I am, I have always been misunderstood.

I am a pre-op trans-male. It is too much to explain to every roommate. Additionally, I'd face the worries that as a male trapped in a woman's body; females think I'd ogle them. (Not every woman is a turn on).

No privacy has meant many distractions from balancing life and creative expression. It can be like trying to study at a bus station or living in a chicken coop. It's difficult to formulate a thought when your bunkie is rude and flatulent.

Writing in prison can often be exposing. How do you deal with the heightened risk of writing while incarcerated?

I have been incarcerated 32 consecutive years in three states, six prisons, and turned down by the parole board four times, on this life sentence for killing my fiancée. Writing in prison is exposing because it is a microcosm society. High profile cases are readily discussed. Your writings are easily interpreted into situations of your surroundings.

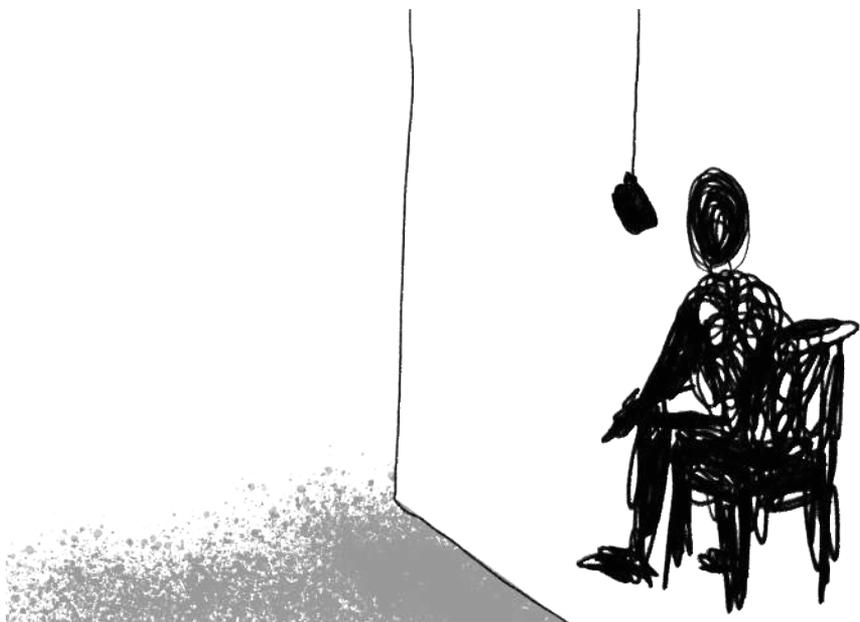
Everyone knows, without naming names, the woman that hung herself because her lover in the prison was going back to her ex. Many times I have written things barred from being sent out due to inflammatory/inciting language. Yet I haven't asked anyone to do anything. I just have informed people of situations.

Writing what I think or feel, even momentarily, has cost me parole. I have been called a whistleblower, rat and/or snitch, reporting excessive violence incidents. You literally can't afford a bad day. Administrators don't take kindly to you bashing their system, even though it is NOT a personal commentary on any particular person. Let's not forget that you are at an officer's mercy for rule violations, who may write their own rendition of events.

It's a struggle to write when you write under threat of Miranda—that everything you say can and will be held against you, even if you're not acting as a criminal but a journalist of your own life.

I've come to terms with the fact that I will not be able to write a book unless commissioned and it gets sent out chapter by chapter—sometimes page by page.

Performed by Kirya Traber



Joe Vanderford



My friends call me Joe. I just graduated from a college tech class to become more familiarized with computers. I'm a 51-year-old transgender, fighting to get my testosterone and parole. I've served 32 years in prison. When I grow up I hope to have a penis, wife, fur kids, produce plays and have a PhD. in gratitude for freedom.

The Right to Write

Matthew Feeney

I don't know how I'm going to survive.

I don't know how I'm going to make a living.

I don't know if I'll get over these hurdles.

I don't know.

So I write.

I write about the perceived injustices.

I write kites to try to make prison a better place.

I write to Senators & Popes & Commissioners & Wardens.

I write to express my fears and kindle my hopes.

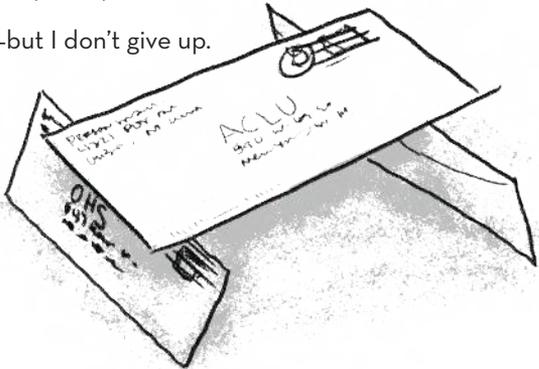
I write to all the letters in the alphabet soup:

ACLU, DOJ, LAMP, OHS, MSOP, LLSP, etc.

Most of the time I'm ignored—but I don't give up.

I write to survive.

I am a survivor.



Performed by Christopher Soto

The Why Of It All

Santonio D. Murff

My hand trembles on the tremendous responsibilities to being THAT writer, THAT voice, that must give sight to your eyes of the unseen injustices, brutalities, sicknesses, and mistakes.

*

I must reach beyond state lines, political parties, financial barriers, and fears to touch your hearts, caress them enough to activate their voices, to move you from thrill-seeking voyeurism—a private peeking at the taboo—to outraged witnesses, outspoken critics, and ultimately catalyst to change.

Catalyst to change!

I must be open and honest with you; escape my fears of criticism and condemnation to show you the dark sides of humanity. I can't cut corners. I can't sugarcoat my crimes, our crimes, if I ever wish credibility with you.

*

It is the seclusion, the roaring silence of solitude, the desolation of the darkness gives power to my pen. The weight to my words. For I have tread the pebbled, potholed road to redemption that many never will, the majority could not. I illuminate it for one and all.

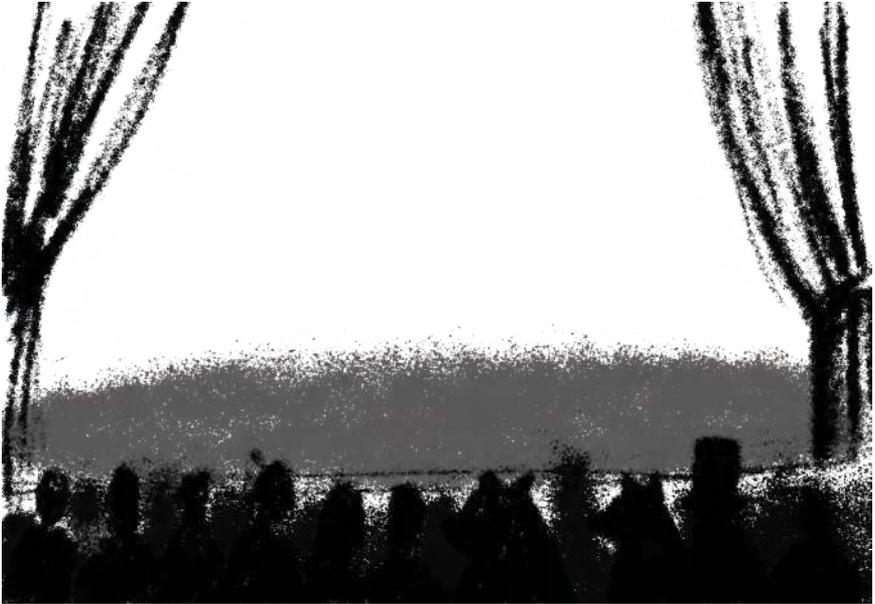
I belong to no cult of rituals. I'm no artist with style. I am victim, victor, and voice. I am water, flowing with my emotions, following the tide of my experiences. Going where destiny dictates.

The internet, social media, are my oceans—taking me, my emotions, my experiences to distant lands and foreign people. Telling my story, our story, far and wide. Spreading truth, my truth, our truth, across the globe. Asking, demanding, crying: “Who will answer the call for justice?” “Who will answer the call for justice. . . will you?”

How can you answer the call for justice? WHAT CAN YOU, PERSONALLY, DO? Where do you start? When? You start today by merely caring, and continue tomorrow by contributing in whatever capacity you are best suited.

Ask questions. Adopt a prisoner. Join an advocacy group. Support PEN, incarcerated writers, and prison reform. Vote wisely. One answer does not fit all and there are no wrong answers. To spread my truth, our truth, YES—but to get you to think, feel, and take action, any progressive action—THAT is the climatic. . . WHY OF IT ALL!

Performed by Mahogany L. Browne



Santonio D. Murff



Santonio D. Murff-Bey is a seven-time PEN awardee of Moorish-American descent, and a political prisoner/activist who has educated and elevated himself to the elite circle of literary greats. He's been recognized and won awards in nearly every genre: *Gotta Mak'em Pay* (fiction), "Mass Incarceration: The Shame of a Nation" (nonfiction), *Retired from the Game* (memoir), *The Cobra's Cross* (screenplay), *The Why of it All* (drama), "Banging for a Solution" (exposition), to name a few. He cordially invites you to check out his most recent work, *The San-Man: Love, Loyalty, & Vengeance* by T.D. Leoverture (his pseudonym). Santonio, his family, and the disadvantaged multitudes who he takes great pride and pleasure in helping, THANK YOU for your support!

Poetaster-in-Residence

P.M. Dunne

These days I write & listen more than I laze & talk. Editors treat me with respect (most of the time). I learn primarily through trial & error, by sending my work through the literary kiln, to measure its worth in the inferno of humanity's omnificence, which, I imagine, is the way wordsmiths, both past & future, have & will become masters of the language. As a citizen, you have to be brave to dream of being a writer. As a prisoner, you have to be crazy.

Though I cannot attend poetry readings or book release parties, I'm nevertheless grateful to be a part of this shared experience. I'm honored to receive encouragement from people who don't know me or owe me anything, yet, for some reason, feel the need to offer me, a 'killer,' their precious time (something I was too selfish to do prior to my incarceration). One day, perhaps soon, I'd like to do the same for others. Hopefully our paths will cross, intertwining like lightning—briefly, luminously—before heading in opposite directions with a newfound sense of purpose.

Today I offer myself to the wind, to whomever listens, hoping my story inspires others—authors of every ilk, 'incarcerated' or 'liberated'—& honors the precious life I robbed as a manchild (which has since returned to the ether) ensuring it was never in vain.

dear wind
trust me when I fall
hold me like a raindrop
in the cup of
your palm
to know once again
the warmth of a woman
the joy of seasons changing
birthdays weddings & yes
funerals

Public. Private. You. Me. What's the difference? Aren't we all the sum of our contradictions? People can pretend I'm dead, locked away in a castle—but I'm not; I'm here, breathing the same air as you. & besides air, there's nothing between us.

Performed by Jon Sands



P.M. Dunne



P.M. Dunne is a Bard Prison Initiative student majoring in literature serving an eighteen-year prison sentence for a crime he committed when he was twenty-one. He is the author of two poetry collections, *Omega Point Theory* and *Harijan*, as well as two short story collections, *A Sick Man's Dreams* and *Keep This Between Us*. His work has appeared in *The Awakenings Review*, *New Millennium Writings*, and *Voices*. His work won second place in PEN America's Prison Writing Contest in 2018, has appeared in the *The Named and the Nameless* anthology, and was read at the Brooklyn Book Festival. This summer, his work will be performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

EXCERPT

Poetics: Mid-Summer 2016 (Fragments of a Freestyle)

Justin Rovillos Monson

Troy asked me today: "So have you put any thought into what you want to do when you get out of here?"

*

I want to be
A zero
No longer

*

Here in this life
We take showers
Touch ourselves
Eat fruit
& commit to letters.
We dream of liquid swapping
We get off to echoes

*

My bones have become esoteric
Inside this royal structure
That builds pieces of our hunger
We open our mouths
Waiting for this sticky
Month to pass
We send fragments of desire
A holdover until we kiss
The pieces floating back
To our electric core

*

Wondering if we think about similar things before we go to sleep—right now in different parts of this vast country on the brink of madness.

*

When another breathes on your stomach
I am not present & I am reminded
Of my past which screams oblivion
My hands buried in pregnant thoughts of you

*

All of my poems
Have folded away
Into the swollen humidity
Of July—all clouds
Renegade verbs?
Unsung forms?
Let them sing
Let us join them

Performed by Aja Monet

Justin Rovillos Monson



Justin Rovillos Monson, a first generation Filipino-American artist, was the winner of the inaugural 2017 Kundiman/Asian American Literary Review/ Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center Mentorship in poetry. A love poet, he seeks in his writing to catalog the body incarcerated, to misbehave, and, most of all, to conjure a poetics of reaching. He was born and raised outside of Detroit, Michigan, in Oakland County, and is currently serving a sentence in the Michigan Department of Corrections, from which he hopes to be released in 2027. He is currently a 2018-2019 Writing for Justice Fellow.

About Our Performers

Mahogany L. Browne is the author of *Woke Baby* and *Black Girl Magic* (Roaring Brook/Macmillan), *Kissing Caskets* (Yes Yes Books), and *Dear Twitter* (Penmanship Books). She is the Artistic Director of Urban Word NYC and has received literary fellowships from Air Serenbe, Cave Canem, Poets House and Rauschenberg and Agnes Gund's Art For Justice Fund, through which she is writing a series of essays about the effects of mass incarceration on women and children.



Photo Credit: Curtis Bryant

Aja Monet is a Caribbean American poet, performer, and educator. Her first full collection of poetry, *My Mother Was A Freedom Fighter*, was nominated for an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work. She is co-founder of Smoke Signals Studio, a community collective dedicated to music, art, community, and cultural organizing. Inspired by poet June Jordan's revolutionary blueprint, Aja facilitates "Voices: Poetry for the People," a poetry workshop for grassroots community organizers and people imprisoned at Dade Correctional Facility in South Florida. She is currently working on a new book of poems called *Florida Water*.



Jon Sands is a winner of the 2018 National Poetry Series, selected for his second book, *It's Not Magic*, due out in October 2019 from Beacon Press. In conjunction with the Adirondack Center for Writing, he has taught workshops and performed at Federal Correctional Inst. Raybrook, and teaches creative writing for adults at Bailey House in East Harlem (an HIV/AIDS service center). He lives in Brooklyn.



Photo Credit: Jonathan Weiskopf

Christopher Soto is a poet, editor, and prison abolitionist. He has taught writing to incarcerated youth in Los Angeles, pen-paled with LGBTQ prisoners, and for the past three years has been working with a national organization that works to end the death penalty. He is currently working on his first full-length poetry collection about police violence and mass incarceration.



Kirya Traber is a playwright, actress, co-host of First Person PBS, and Community Artist in Residence with Lincoln Center Education. She is the recipient of Robert Redford's Sundance Foundation Award for Activism in the Arts, and an Astrea Foundation Award for Poetry. Kirya has continuously worked as a cultural worker in schools, community settings, and within the juvenile justice system.



Photo Credit: Kai Richards

Jecoina Vinson is the Youth Engagement Specialist and a Teaching Artist with Drama Club NYC, which provides theatre programming and positive mentorship to incarcerated and court-involved young people in New York City. Jecoina has facilitated across multiple theatrical workshops, peer groups and programs. He has been a student of theatre for over ten years and firmly believes in its power to transform, heal and empower individually and communally.



Special Thanks to...

The People's Forum, all of our writers, performers, and the many helping hands who made this event happen through planning, on site help and other contributions, including our current Spring 2019 Prison and Justice Writing Program interns who helped vision this entire event, edit the excerpts you see here, and design this program booklet: Giselle Robledo and Lisa Nishimura. Thanks to our past interns who came back to lend a helping hand—Grace Kearney, and Meher Manda, the support of the World Voices Festival team, our production manager Emily Gallagher and our many PEN America colleagues.

With gratitude,

Caits Meissner, Prison and Justice Writing Program Director
Robert Pollock, Prison Writing Program Coordinator

About the 2019 PEN America World Voices Festival



It's our 15th anniversary and we could not be more excited about the stellar line-up of writers, artists, and public figures who will be joining us, and our topical (and urgent) theme, "Open Secrets." We will explore one of today's hottest issues: the dissolving boundary between the public and the private in our literature, our politics, and our daily lives.

All of us are aware of how the genres of literary memoir and personal testimony have flourished in recent years, partly as a result of a culture more attuned than ever to share everything (online and off line), but also due to an increased willingness by writers to share, and try to make sense of, profoundly personal experiences.

We have witnessed important social change in the #MeToo movement, and disclosures of child sexual abuse within religious institutions. At the same time, we are increasingly apprehensive at how the digital revolution can be used against us, with governments and corporations harvesting our private data, foreign governments manipulating our democratic processes, and every aspect of our behavior seemingly able to be tracked and manipulated.

This year's Festival explores the profoundly complex and challenging issues involved in this dissolution of the public and the private in more than 70 events of discussion, public address, poetry, readings, performance, and testimony.

About the PEN America Prison Writing Program

The only real threat to free expression is the lack of a willingness on the part of the free thinkers to face the slings and arrows of the oppressors. Ultimately it takes the overwhelming will of a few or the combined will of many to overcome the oppression; with luck it occurs within our lifetime.

– Gordon Bowers, author of “Somewhere, Kansas”
winner of PEN America Prison Writing Awards Third Place in Drama

PEN America stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect open expression in the United States and worldwide. We champion the freedom to write, recognizing the power of the word to transform the world. Our mission is to unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible.

For more than four decades, PEN America’s Prison Writing Program has amplified the writing of thousands of imprisoned writers by providing free resources, skilled mentors, and audiences for their writing. Founded in 1971 in the wake of the Attica riots, our program advances the restorative, rehabilitative, and transformative possibilities of writing, and has offered many thousands of incarcerated writers free literary resources, skilled writing mentors, and audiences for their work. Our initiative includes a Handbook for Writers in Prison, distributed for free to thousands of incarcerated writers annually; a prison writing contest that receives approximately 2,000 submissions each year; and a mentorship program that connects writers through the walls.

In 2018, PEN America was able to deepen our commitment to confronting our era of mass incarceration with the launch of the PEN America Writing For Justice Fellowship. The Fellowship commissions writers to create written works of lasting merit that illuminate critical issues related to mass incarceration and that catalyze public debate.

We invite you to learn more about our prison and justice initiatives at pen.org/prison-writing, and to join us in this work by becoming a member of PEN America at pen.org/join.

Programming for PEN America’s Prison Writing Program is made possible in part by generous funding from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, The Edward Bunker Family and the Greenburger Center for Social & Criminal Justice.

**The 2018 Prison Writing Awards Anthology
is available now on Amazon**



This Anthology features illustrations from Yolande Brener, Max Clotfelter, Molly Crabapple, Rachel Masilamani, Caitis Meissner, and Robert Pollock

*Stay tuned for the upcoming release of the
2019 Prison Writing Awards Anthology*

Praise for *The Named and the Nameless*

“The stories told in this PEN America collection of diverse and dazzling voices reach from behind prison walls, compelling and indelible. In their plays, poems, essays, stories and memoirs these incarcerated writers share important truths and show how much talent the U.S. locks away. The men and women who write in prison depict confinement and claim freedom—theirs and ours—one word at a time.”

—PIPER KERMAN, Author of *Orange is the New Black*

“The Named and the Nameless is the finest example I’ve read in years that radical soulful writing must be done from the inside out. The pieces in this book brilliantly circle carcerality and freedom without ever being bogged down in convenient cliché or sentimentality. In the book’s beginning, I asked myself if these United States of America have the moral authority to incarcerate anyone. By book’s end, these breathtaking writers answer that question one verse, one sentence and one paragraph at a time. The beginnings of liberation look and feel like this book.”

—KIESE LAYMON, Author of *Long Division* and *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*

“In a culture of violence, where even language has been used to demean, abuse, and manipulate, this collection shows how language can be used to transform, change, and liberate, too. The writings and experiences found in this book are not merely windows into the lives of those behind bars, they are mirrors glaring back at each of us. They are invaluable in the fight to save the soul of this country. Still, their relevance can only be measured by our willingness to do something about it.”

—AJA MONET, Poet and Author of *My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter*

