

WINTER HARVEST



*Writings from the Students of the
Education Justice Project
Special Edition*

SPECIAL EDITION

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is one of only fifty.*

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*The students and instructors of the
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INTRODUCTION

The seeds of *Winter Harvest*, gathered from memory, were sown and germinated on the page through the rigorous efforts of Education Justice Project students. The Education Justice Project is a college rooted in the Danville Correctional Center. Every writer whose work is featured in this volume shares at least two experiences in common: incarceration and the desire to learn.

Beginning in the summer of 2010, a group of a dozen EJP students gathered for a reading/writing seminar: The Art and Craft of Memoir. The thematic focus for that first seminar was the personal artifact. We began with an in-depth analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's essay "Biography of a Dress," and advanced to read memoir by such authors as Maxine Hong Kingston, Michael Ondaatje, and Ernest Hemingway. Closely considering how a material object can tell a story, students drafted their own urgent, imaginative work in response.

The personal artifact workshop led to another workshop focusing on place. From there, the EJP writers worked diligently with editors Amy Sayre-Roberts and Jodee Stanley to select and refine essays for publication, for sharing—with readers like you.

In the winter of 2011, T. Ray X. McDowell composed an eloquent foreword for a public reading by his fellow Education Justice Project writers:

It might be asked, "What can grow in the winter?" In agricultural communities, grains, fruits, and other summer produce are stored and 'put away' for the harsh and needy months of winter. These kept resources are vital to the survival of the communities that depend on them. We now know what can grow in winter.

Audrey Petty
Associate Professor of English
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Second-Hand Batman

Otilio Rosas

Every afternoon, through the wonder of television, Batman and Robin calmed overactive kids for a half hour at a time. As soon as the show was over, every single one of those kids was outside with a bath towel wrapped around his neck, claiming dibs on being Batman and not Robin. Robin's role was left to the younger brothers, the youngest of friends, or in my case, the poorest portrayer of the *Dynamic Duo*.

Robbie Appleman would always come knocking five minutes after the show went off the air. "Did you see it, did you see it?" he asked me, all excited. "Let's go outside and play!" he'd tell me. "Okay," I'd say half-heartedly.

Robbie was the only kid in the neighborhood not running around with a bath towel around his neck. He actually had a shiny black cape with strings to tie a knot with. It looked sort of like a magician's cape, but the main thing was: it wasn't a towel. Needless to say, I would not be playing the role of the "Caped Crusader." I was his trusty sidekick, Robin. I played the role without much complaint because Robbie was also wearing some house slippers that looked like boots, but had the Batman logo stamped on them. My mom had taken me to South Park Mall and Duck Creek Plaza to look for those stupid Batman slippers, and all they had left was an over-abundance of Robins. I took what I could get, but I wasn't happy about it. I never wore the Robin boots outside. I considered the implications with steeled calculation (as only Batman could), and wearing them could only mean something: that I *was* Robin. No, those boots remained rooted in their true purpose of being house slippers, nothing more. As it was, playing the role of Robin meant never having any say-so in the crucial decisions being made by "the duo." If Robin suggested some alternative solution, Batman

would respond with that almost mechanical voice and say, “No, Robin, we must proceed with caution.”

Man, I couldn’t stand Robbie (I mean, Batman) when he made comments like that, so decisive and final. I hated being Robin! I was not made to be second fiddle. I was made for the spotlight. At that age, I was such a ham. Every chance I could find to emote, I took. After all, with a large family, you had to stand out to get some extra attention from mom and dad.

I cringe now, whenever we happen to watch our old home movies and I see myself as a young kid hogging the spotlight or simply filling up all the camera space. I would dance, I would sing. I would make funny goofy faces and contortions with my body. And so, being relegated to play the role of Robin was not for me. Sure, I humored Robbie and went along with him. I mean, he did have the nice shiny cape, but it was a different story once I was home.

After observing my dedication to watching *Batman*, my sister Patty sewed me a black cape and ironed a Batman decal to the back of it. It was official; it appeared that I had surpassed Robbie, since his cape was plain and decal-free. I couldn’t wait for Robbie to come over after Batman went off the air. I was sure that soon, there was going to be a new and improved Batman.

But something happened...

When I started playing the Batman role, I did it in the security of my own home. The building that I was rappelling down from was the handrail that led to the basement. My Bat rope and Bat hook were a rope belonging to my dad and a bent fork that my brother Mike had bent after telling me that he had psychic powers like Uri Geller. I would twirl the rope around my head a couple of times, toss it at the handrail (wrap it around it and hook it by hand) and begin my rappelling to the basement, where I would open laundry doors and look behind the pool table—seeking out the Joker, Penguin, and the Riddler.

I was having such a great time and using my imagination so much, I didn’t need to go outside to be Batman. In my house I could play out my ideas every single day. For his own part, Robbie had been undergoing a transformation since we’d last played together. I was right. There was going to be a new and improved Batman, only it wouldn’t be me. I don’t know what store he went to, but Robbie now had a Batman mask and a pair of gray/blue gloves, and those were items I could not compete with. I began to groom my youngest sister Ira in her role of Robin.

Empty Alarm Clock

daniel e. graves

The rule was: if we had dinner, there was no need to set up the three bowls with five spoonfuls of peanut butter and two capfuls of honey. The rule was hardly ever enforced because most nights, dinner consisted of water—nothing more. This wasn't a punishment. We simply had nothing to eat. Many nights, water was what was for dinner; breakfast almost always consisted of that government peanut butter mixed with government honey. And breakfast was sometimes served in the wee hours or whenever hunger pangs no longer allowed a peaceful rest.

Some nights, hunger pangs woke me up at 2 or 3 a.m., and I'd find one of my sisters at her place at the table, slowly savoring her bowl of peanut butter and honey. Rumor was, these government issued foods were below grade, rejects, substandard, or plainly for only welfare recipients. Most times in those a.m. hours, nothing on earth tasted better.

I remember being just tall enough—on my tiptoes—to see the insides of the bowls as my oldest sister prepared them for the morning to come. I remember wanting to be the oldest, so I could also lick the excess peanut butter from my fingers after putting the five even spoonfuls into each bowl. On the real hungry nights, the three of us would gather around with our cups of water. The two youngest watched as the older one worked. Since the oldest had the advantage of licking her fingers, she, in turn, had to do us favors. I liked my bowl to be a bit sweeter, so the capfuls of honey had to overflow just slightly, spilling over into the bowl.

A Season of Autumn

Otis Williams

At the age of eleven, my season of autumn began in verdure, in the rural town of Sledge, Mississippi, and withered in the Windy City of Chicago. Forty-five years hence, late October has come again, bringing with it my renewed memories of those long past days of seasonal transformations. Deep greens subtly change into dark purples and brilliant oranges.

Fall Comes

Our family was the last from Grandma Nellie's branch of the family tree to leave the South. In a modest caravan of two large moving trucks, a station wagon, and an old Cadillac convertible, we entered the city of Chicago at dusk. We traveled by way of Lake Shore Drive. It was late October and many families had decked out their houses and apartments with Christmas lights and ornaments that dazzled us (rube) passersby. We stared in awe at the flashing displays against the smoke-ish curtain of night. In this captivated state, we observed each unique presentation until we arrived at our destination, around thirty minutes later. We worked for several hours into the night, moving in our belongings. Finally, afterwards, we were able to settle in our new home.

1326 South Albany was the address of the quaint, little, cottage-like, two-floor Dutch-style brick building. Co-owned by Grandma Nellie and Uncle Lucius, her youngest of six, 1326 sat between two court way buildings and faced eastward onto Douglas Park. My three brothers, my sister, and my parents moved into

its ¾ livable basement. (The other quarter of that basement space was used to house the building's hot water boiler, coal furnace, and coal bin, as well as an assortment of empty and full 16-ounce Nehi and Dog 'n Suds sodas.) For the next two years, the seven of us made this our humble abode, knowing the only thing that really mattered was that Grandma Nellie now had all of her children gathered together once again.

By the time we'd arrived, Grandma Nellie was recovering from a nervous breakdown and was under strict doctor's orders not to physically overexert herself, nor be exposed to any excessive noise; sharing her home with her daughter, son-in-law, and two grandkids (as she had for some time), the doctors orders couldn't be fully met. Her five-room upstairs dwelling was overfilled and had become a constant noise box. As a result, Grandma Nellie was in and out of the hospital, until one day, many months after we'd moved in, she passed away in the care of Mount Sinai Hospital.

The day she passed was a warm day for spring. I recall racing home from school, expecting that Grandma Nellie would be released. As soon as I came close enough to see my little brother John sitting on the top of the front steps of our building with his head propped in his hands, staring vacantly out into the park, I knew that I was too late. After opening the gate, I quickly bounded up the stairs to where John sat. When I asked what was wrong, he replied in a voice I barely recognized. "I just saw Grandma. She came to tell me goodbye." Indifferent, I continued on my way to see Uncle Lucius, and oddly, as I was being let into their first floor apartment, the phone began to ring. It was the hospital. Aunt Creola cried out, "Lucius, honey. Momma has just passed away."

Uncle Lucius's usually bright eyes dimmed in the sudden quietness of the moment. The air vacuumed from the room with me in tow. As I recall, I went into the park. All I'm really sure of is that I must have walked around for hours because when I came home, it was dark and my mother was very upset. I was not moved by her emotion, for I was beyond hearing words. My mind was back Mississippi, recalling Grandma Nellie.

Grandma Nellie was my father's mother. She stood about 5'6, was chubby, light brown with lots of freckles on her face. She had the prettiest hazel eyes and a peculiar shade of reddish brown hair that she usually wore in a single long braid. She lived in Mount Bayou, Mississippi, just off the banks of the bayou with her last husband, Granddaddy Polard (the Goat Man). Their house was white, surrounded by a white-picket fence that kept out the goats and protected the huge pecan and hickory nut trees that stood in their backyard. Granddaddy

Polard loved goats, and he had every type of goat there was. Some were black and white, others were brown, white, or spotted—there were even some with large floppy ears. They all stank!

My father Buddy used to take me to see Grandma Nellie during the fall, when the pecan and hickory nuts had begun to drop from their trees, after he had taken his season's crop of corn, cotton, and soybeans to the mill and gin, depending on which crop he would be delivering. Grandma Nellie always had a big flour bag of both pecan and hickory nuts for me, knowing I couldn't decide which I loved best. Since Grandma Nellie's place was only a few moments away from the mill and gin locations, Buddy would never say no whenever I'd ask to be taken to see her. All I had to be worried about was getting to the nuts before the goats did. Goats love nuts. Every year, I would chase them out of the yard and repair the busted fence whenever they had either trampled over it or torn away some of the pickets to enter the yard. But I didn't mind. Grandma Nellie was my ideal: comforting retreat, protector, and the most adorable of all women. I would often sit at the dinner table and just peer into her eyes, amazed by their beauty. And her hair simply mystified me, with its rare shade of brown that flowed over her shoulders like water along a brook. When taken down and let loose, it also reminded me of the moss that hung from the leafless trees of the bayou.

No one could cook better than Grandma Nellie. One time she visited our house and had baked biscuits that I just couldn't get enough of. I must have wolfed down fourteen of them before my father told me, "Boy! Get your greedy butt up from this table."

Grandma Nellie responded, "Buddy! Let that baby eat. He's the only one that chases the goats out of the yard and fixes Grandma's fence after they've tramped all over it. Go ahead and finish eating, baby."

"Mama," said my father, "ask this boy how many biscuits he's already eaten."

I blurted out, "Fourteen!" and Grandma Nellie smiled and chuckled, then made a slight gesture with a wave of her hand, shooing me away from the table.

When Granddaddy Polard died, Grandma Nellie gave us a lot of goats, sold the rest along with the house and farm, and moved to Chicago. As subtly as I'd drifted into recollection, I was called back by the distant voice of my mother. "Osei, baby. Where have you been?" My fanciful daydream abruptly came to an end.

Spring Begins

I had just turned twelve in the spring of 1967, had a job working with Uncle Lucius, delivering 16 ounce pops, and I spent my free time getting lost in the

company of my first Chicago girlfriend, Autumn. Uncle Lucius worked full-time at a puzzle-making factory. He sold pops on his off time, from an old converted bread truck. Our deliveries were Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons, to a clientele of about fifty or sixty customers who were scattered throughout the city's West Side. I started off carrying one case at a time, but soon became strong enough to match Uncle Lucius's two cases by heaving them up onto my shoulders. And though the pay was only \$25 a week, I was allowed to drink as many of my favorite pops (red cream sodas) as I wanted.

Shortly before Grandma Nellie passed, I had a fight at school (James Weldon Johnson public school) with a kid from the sixth grade by the name of Juan. As soon as we started to get into it, Juan's twin Jose took his side. When Sugh, another kid from the sixth grade, saw that it was two against one, and that both boys were bigger than me, he decided to step in and break it up, but when Juan and Jose wouldn't stop, he beat up both of them. After school, I went to Sugh's house to thank him for helping me. To my surprise, his cousin Autumn answered the door. Autumn was eleven years old just like me, and she was the absolute prettiest girl I'd ever seen; her eyes were hazel like Grandma Nellie's, her skin that of a golden peach, and her hair was a mass of frizzled, brown curls. At first, it was almost eerie, how she reminded me of Grandma Nellie, but the Autumn I came to know was uniquely Autumn and I grew to treasure everything about her.

I had originally enrolled in James Weldon Johnson in the fall of 1966, as a fifth grader, but my teacher (Mrs. Kennedy) had questioned my right to having doubled from third to fifth. She even insisted that my name (Osei) wasn't an acceptable English given name because the midwife failed to correctly spell it when she filled out my birth certificate. She spelled it O.C., like it sounded, instead of Osei, as it should have been. Thus, I was given two lists of common English given names under the letters O and C. Under the O were names such as: Oscar, Oliver, and Otis, and under the C: Christopher, Charles, Curtis, and Carl. I was told to select one name from each list. Because I refused to cooperate, I was sent home and told not to return without my parents. My mother was infuriated, but ultimately Mrs. Kennedy got her way, at least most of it. I changed my name to Otis Carl, and after a long session with the school's clinical psychologist, I was given to the end of the school year to prove that I deserved to remain in the fifth grade. Flustered by the treatment, I became focused on proving Mrs. Kennedy wrong. I utilized all of my spare time studying and when the end of the school year arrived, I was told that my test scores were all at the seventh grade level. When school resumed, I was transferred, sent to the Willis Wagons section of Hess Upper Grade Center, a school for exceptional students.

While at James Weldon Johnson, I had worked my way into a hall guard position and would leave school fifteen minutes early every day. This gave me adequate time to run from the 1400 block of Albany to its 1100 block, pick up two pints of pineapple sherbet, and be waiting on Autumn's front porch when she got home from school. We both loved pineapple sherbet. My transfer from Johnson changed my routine. After walking seven blocks to and from Hess, I wasn't able to get to the sherbet shop before the gangs, or to visit Autumn until late afternoons. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were out of the question for us as well, for I was much too tired after work to do any visiting. Though we still enjoyed talking on the phone, sitting on her porch, visiting the neighborhood candy stores, and drinking red cream sodas while walking in the park, we soon began to drift apart.

That summer, Autumn's cousin Sugh was shot in the stomach and died from internal bleeding. (Sugh was treated at Mount Sinai, the same hospital where Grandma Nellie had passed away.) After that, things were never quite the same. Either I'd be too tired to visit, or Autumn would be too depressed. One day, her phone just rang and rang when I called, so I went to check on her. Sugh's mother was the one to tell me that Autumn had moved with her back to their old South Side neighborhood. It had something to do with Autumn's mother being concerned about Autumn's safety. And so I was left without the chance to say goodbye to my closest and dearest friend: the only person (other than Grandma Nellie) whose mere smile could warm the chilled heart that had grown accustomed to losing so much at such a young age. And although I never saw Autumn again, her memory remains a seasonal repose.

A Photo to Remember

David Todd

“When I catch y’all, y’all know what’s up!” Dee-Dee said while stooped over on the corner of 71st and Vincennes, heavily breathing. He’d chased my cousin Boo and me around our building because we had snatched his bag of potato chips out of his hand. Dee-Dee was one of the older guys who lived in our building. We looked up to him and wanted to be like him when we reached his age. At the time, we were ten years old and he was nineteen. We revered him. In our impressionable minds, he had every girl in the neighborhood. After all, the girls in our building were feverishly allured by him. They catered to his every whim. Whenever he came around, he had a different girl with him. One day, he let my cousin and me take some pictures with him and some of his girlfriends. As we took a picture, one of the girls flirtatiously played with me, saying, “You are such a cutie pie, with your pretty brown eyes.” I felt like Dee-Dee at that very moment; that girl didn’t know that she was my girlfriend now.

It seemed like Dee-Dee had a constant flow of money. Every time he came around, he brought us ice cream, candy, and chips, or he’d pull out a wad of money and give us a couple of dollars. He also had one of the most impeccable cars in the neighborhood: a ’79 two door Chevy Malibu that was a gleaming royal blue, with rims that sparkled like diamonds. And we always knew when he was around the building because we could hear the loud thumps as far up as the fourteenth floor. And he always played this song “I Got It Made,” by a rapper named Special Ed. When we heard the thumping where we stayed, we immediately ran downstairs.

Part of my upbringing as a youngster took place in the Englewood neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. I stayed with my aunt during the summer months in a high rise building on 71st Street, between the streets of Lafayette and Vincennes, right off the 71st Street turnpike of the Dan Ryan Expressway. One of the most noticeable buildings in the neighborhood, it is the only seventeen story building in the area. My entire summer revolved around that building. It was a neighborhood within a neighborhood, sort of like an island. It provided us with all of our needs and wants. There was a candy store, a laundromat, fun, and girls. Everyday we had something to get into. We played hide-n-seek, catch one-catch all and, my favorite, catch-the-girl, kiss-the-girl. And when we decided to venture outside we'd play basketball, football, softball, or strikeout against the boys from the surrounding blocks, or have egg fights on Halloween. We also went out of the building when we heard the older kids were hanging out on the side of the building. In our minds, we were having fun and being cool, but to the older kids we were annoying and nosy. Dee-Dee was the only one who allowed us to hang around, but there was a price. He'd send us back and forth to the store to buy junk food for the girls. We'd buy dill pickles with peppermint sticks or Doritos with hot sauce. That stuff was disgusting. But we didn't care, as long as we were with our idol, Dee-Dee.

It was one of those overly hot summer days, when the old lady in our building would say to us, "Baby, be careful 'cause the devil is in Chicago." For the elders, it was the time to stay in the house to avoid dehydration and heat stroke, but for us youngsters, the boiling weather was perfect. Our energy seemed boundless. Through my innocent eyes, everyone looked beautiful and flawless. The only problem was that we hadn't done anything mischievous since we snatched Dee-Dee's bag of chips earlier that day.

My cousin, three of our friends (Mookie, Tiny, and Rico), and I sat under one of the trees on the side of the building on Vincennes, having boy talk about our favorite cartoon, *ThunderCats*, while six girls, not too far from us, played double-dutch jump rope. Vincennes was a busy street. Our space to play was limited, but we utilized it well. We heard the loud thumping sound of a car coming near. We knew it was Dee-Dee. We all got excited. We knew he was going to buy us snacks, and we were also eager to brag to him about how we beat the boys in the other neighborhood in basketball, and tell him how all of us were playing like Jordan. He parked in the middle of the street, turned the music down, cut off the car, and hopped out the car. "What's up Dee-Dee?" all of us shouted as he walked toward us. "What's up with my little men?" he replied. He gave all of us high-fives when he reached us. The second he stopped, we all began talking, simultaneously vying

for his attention. He probably couldn't understand anything we were saying, but he just smiled, nodded his head every four seconds, and replied with an occasional "Straight. Up." or "Fo' real."

"Hey, Dee-Dee," a voice called out. We all looked in the direction of the voice. Before I could get a vivid glimpse of the person approaching, a loud sound blasted off. BAM! BAM! BAM! No one moved. The sound paralyzed us all. I think my breath stopped as well. My senses were only able to detect the screaming and watch Dee-Dee's body move backwards. Each blast pushed him closer to the tree we stood under. I was now afraid to look at the person doing the blasting because I felt that if I looked at him he would blast me. I wished the blasting would stop, but it continued. Dee-Dee stood against the tree with blood surging out of his head, chest, and stomach. His body was on the verge of collapsing, but a thick cut-off tree stub hooked on to his body and kept him upright, like a statue.

The next day, I saw a newspaper on the dining room table. I looked at it, and the front page read, "A nineteen-year old boy slain on the South Side." There was also a photo of Dee-Dee. He was posing happily, just as I had seen him the day before. It was a photo to remember.

The Making of a God

Kemuyah Ben Rakemeyahu

My calling began with violent knocks upon our front door. As I was being shaken from my sleep by the noise, I heard my mother's house shoes chime amidst the commotion as she scurried to the summons. The concern in her voice as she said, "Who is it?" brought me to my feet and put me en route to her aide. I arrived at her side just as a voice familiar to my mother convinced her to unlock the door and I witnessed the 3 a.m. darkness enter our home.

My mother became acquainted with that voice when two of her siblings were murdered many years before this day, but I had never met it. I perceived the voice to be a bearer of contradiction, for it attempted to convince my mother that my brother Michael was "alright" even though he had been shot. Fear was painted on the mural of her face. But not just any fear, it was that particular emotion that seizes a mother's heart when her offspring is in danger.

Something had to happen between receiving the news and the moment of our arrival at the hospital, but my memory has no record of it. If the sun and the moon had switched places at that moment, I would not remember that either. My mind was held hostage by the thought of my big brother, who I thought was a god among men, being shot. I asked myself how it could have happened, but I could not come up with a solid answer.

At the hospital, the smell of the sanitized world filled with the sick and the injured began nagging my nostrils. It seemed as if every object, desk, door, bed, floor, wall, and person had been submerged in bleach, peroxide, and rubbing alcohol just to rub my nose in the fact that we were at the hospital to see my

wounded brother. I can't recall how much time elapsed between the initial moment that my nostrils were ambushed and the moment my brother was wheeled through the emergency room doors on a gurney. It could have been an hour or the breadth of a blink. All I can remember is that the sight of my brother commanded my full attention.

My mother and I rushed to my brother's side as the emotionless repairmen and women wheeled him toward the operation room. Michael just looked at me and smiled. One tear rolled down the side of his face. "What's up boy," he said and he was gone. He was wheeled into a mysterious world where some make it out and others do not. My brother was one of the fortunate ones. Nevertheless, at that moment my mother and I were as uncertain as all families are who wait on their loved ones while the jury composed of God, medical professionals, and the patient's will determine if he or she will be condemned or acquitted.

While we waited, my mind replayed the smile and the tear on my brother's face. I tried my hardest to figure out what he was trying to communicate to me, but I was unable to make sense of it. I could not understand how a smile and a tear could co-exist at that moment. One expression typically reflected happiness and joy while the other usually reflected pain and misery; however, on the canvas of my brother's face they were painted in an intriguing, yet abstract manner. I was bewildered and captivated, but unable to interpret what I'd seen. I finally concluded that this must be the manner in which gods show their emotion.

Later that morning, after the repairs had been made to my brother, my mother and I were given the clothes that my brother had worn when he was shot to take home in a hospital bag. The bag returned the sanitation smell to my nostrils. However, by then I had built up a tolerance to the smell. It was as if I had become desensitized to the scents.

When my mother and I returned to our house, I noticed that the place looked the same and smelled the same, but it was not the same home. The house was still neat. My mother did her best to make sure that our section 8 home looked immaculate and upscale. At times, our house was so neat that it looked like no one lived there. I believe that my mother was trying to make a statement with our home. She wanted every visitor to know that although we were poor, we had class. Everyday my mother would plug in a potpourri, and the aroma of the pot would fill our home with the sweet scent of pine. Upon our return from the hospital, the neatness and the smell of our home was still the same, but the violent knocks seemed to have altered its complexion. It felt like each knock had chipped away at the peace of our house until it was no more.

As I pulled my brother's clothes out of the sanitized bag, I looked at the blood redecorating his designer apparel and I thought *gods must bleed too*.

Tension and sorrow grew as the day matured. My mother cried incessantly from the moment we received the news that my brother had been shot, at the hospital, and even when we returned home. When her first tears fell, I thought they were a response to my brother's injury. However, when we returned home it seemed like her tears were no longer shed out of concern for Michael; instead they seemed to be a response to what was happening to me. She looked directly at me while tears rolled down her angelic face. She looked brokenhearted. She could sense that her youngest son was being called to war at the age of fifteen—a war that had no winners.

Our war began when the first African resisted his captivity and struggled to break free from the clutches of slavery. In its inception, it was a natural response to injustice and a protest against inhumanity. The fighting spirit was in the heart of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and every other slave who revolted against captivity. It was the inspiration behind Frederick Douglass's eloquence, Martin Delany's defiance, and W. E. B. DuBois's genius. It encouraged Martin Luther King to dream and Malcolm X to agitate. We are not strangers to struggle and combat, but we somehow lost an objective, a reason, and an absolute enemy.

Our war became a struggle with heroin and crack cocaine. Its spirit became the inspiration for the emergence of modern pimps, gang bangers, and drug dealers. It became the cause behind black men fleeing their households, black on black violence, and the increase in black incarceration. It discouraged Africans in America from dreaming and encouraged acceptance of failure.

There is no record of the date and time that this transition took place. It just happened. It was unnoticed by African watchmen and was not felt by African sensitivities. No one notified our political and spiritual leaders and soldiers to inform them that they were relieved of duty and that their eloquent rhetorical weapons had become ineffective. It just happened. The war just changed like a hair that turns gray—unnoticed in its transition. There was no ceremony to honor soldiers of the past or to swear in the new. It just happened. And I became a part of it. I became a part of a war that began with a struggle to be free from physical and cultural captivity, but had become something ugly that justifies captivity. I had become a part of a war that once had the color of pride, but now wore the shade of shame.

My mother lost two of her siblings to this war and she vowed to protect her household from it, but her best intentions and maternal instincts were not strong enough to keep it away. When she heard the violent knocks and the familiar voice, she knew that the war had finally arrived once again. Now, as her eldest son lay wounded in a hospital bed and her youngest son was being called to join, there was nothing that she could do but cry. I did not try to console her, for I knew that there were no words that could serve as dams to those rivers.

Of course, something had to happen between the moment that my mother cried for me and the instant when a .38 revolver found its way into my immature grip—the day I stood in a gangway awaiting my target—but my memory has no record of it. If the earth had skipped its rotation on that day, I would have not remembered that either. I had blood on my mind: the blood of a god that needed to be avenged.

The .38 was rusty and was the same colors as its casualties—black and brown. Its weight was as heavy as its capability of destruction. Although I held it close to me, I never felt close to it. It was cold and had no pulse. It did not attempt to befriend me or even empathize with my immaturity. I was just another soldier who was bound to do its bidding.

We were neither friend nor foe; we were joined by circumstance.

Waiting in the gangway of the housing projects, I was accompanied by other soldiers. Although they were no older than I was, they were seasoned vets. Many of them had joined the war before they entered puberty. Their faces were stoic, as if they had never known emotions. Their aura was just as cold as the .38 that I held in my awkward grip. We were neither friends nor foes; we, too, were joined by circumstance.

The sun was shining that day, but it felt gloomy. The housing projects were filled with people moving about their day-to-day affairs. Some of the people who lived in this virtual war zone tried to find a sense of normalcy in an abnormal environment. While they moved through the projects on their way to and from work, school, grocery store, or a friend's house, they were compelled to walk past drug transactions, prostitutes, alcoholics, gangs, gambling, and even fifteen-year-old boys like me who were standing in gangways with guns in their hands.

I cannot say which soldier yelled out, "Get ready! He's coming!" I just heard the alert. At that moment, my heart abandoned its normal rhythm and began to beat like the violent knocks that shook me from my sleep. Bam! Bam! Bam! My eyes were locked on the car that was slowly approaching, carried my target.

I ran to the passenger side and pointed the rusty revolver at my target's head. I could feel every muscle, ligament, and joint in my finger tighten as I pulled the

trigger, but nothing happened. My target finally turned and looked at me. Our eyes locked. I felt nothing. We were neither friend nor foe; we too were simply joined by circumstance.

When my target told the driver to take off, I pulled the trigger again. But this time, the .38 fired, missing the target and shattering the front windshield as the car sped away. The sound of the rusty revolver was loud and powerful. I could smell its breath, a fragrance that I had never encountered before. Burnt metal and gun powder. The smell of war.

As I ran away, I felt my heart still beating violently. I struggled to breathe, but I ran until I made it home. I hid the gun in the bushes and laid across our front porch until my heart returned to its normal rhythm. After my heart calmed, I went into the house. As I entered the front door, my mother and I came eye to eye, silently, not as mother and son, but as casualties of the war.

Michael received the news of my actions before he left the hospital. I was certain that he would be proud of my attempt to avenge his blood. When he came home, I heard my mother tell him that I was in my bedroom. He came to my room and stood in the doorway. The painting on the canvas of my brother's face had changed. The one tear was still there, but the smile turned into a frown. His eyes were filled with the same pain as my mother's eyes. He did not say a word. He shook his head dejectedly and left the doorway. I thought *this is what it looks like for a god to be disappointed*.

Over the following three years, my grip matured as I held more guns. Although many of them were in better condition than the rusty .38, we were no closer. We were all just strangers brought together by circumstances.

I became a decorated soldier. The more rank that I acquired as a soldier, the more I seemed to become detached from my emotions. I eventually began to forget what it felt like to be happy or sad—I was just a soldier. Despite my valor and focus, I was discharged from duty and sent to the forgotten world to serve a prison term of fifty-two years.

Today marks my seventeenth calendar here. Most of my neighbors are veterans like me—men who have dedicated their lives to a winless war. The other day, I received a letter from my mother informing me that my nephew had just been drafted. He severely battered two men because one of the men insulted his brother. He is only nineteen years old. His retaliation earned him a five-year sentence in the California State penal system. I was devastated. The war had succeeded in claiming another generation of my family. After I read the letter, I looked in the mirror. I noticed a tear rolling down the side of my face and I noticed the pain in my eyes. I thought *this is what it's like to be a god*.

The Little Man

daniel e. graves

A young boy, trying to be *the man of the house*, especially in a household with three women, is taught he can feel no pain. He can shed no tears; he can show no strain when called upon to lift this or carry that. This little man has to be even bigger and better than all other men; this is the unwritten code.

The man of the house, the ten-year-old man, a title nothing and no one may challenge—none of the house's residents, none of its vermin, which may scare the ladies a lot less than they pretend to be scared (just to make the little man feel like a big man). Speaking of rats, the fair-weather boyfriends (who at times, are quite worthy adversaries) always fail; never do I allow them to enter or be a random passerby and go unchecked. I want them to remember me. I want them to always remember me.

There was a time in my childhood when my toes turned a purplish blue and the bottoms of my feet were tinted a greenish hue. One might assume my frostbite was caused by foolhardy activities: staying outside sledding, building snow forts or throwing rock-filled snowballs at little girls and passing cars, but that wasn't me and that wasn't my frostbite.

It happened on a cold night. All winter nights in a house without heat are cold, but this night was the big man of all winter nights. School had been canceled earlier that day because the wind chill was so sharp and cutting; a mere exhale produced white mist that crystallized instantly. And I'm not talking about the outdoor temperature; that is how cold it felt on the inside of the house.

I was bundled in a stocking cap, mittens, two pairs of thick wool socks, pjs, blue jeans, and a winter coat with several blankets piled on top. I was bundled up quite well, but there was a moment when I was asleep (maybe longer than a moment) that my feet became unbundled and stayed in the cold a bit too long. Keep in mind that I was exhausted. The daily hustle and bustle of being *the man of the house*—the big man at that—made me extremely tired, therefore sleep came fast and heavy upon me. I knew a man was not supposed to cry; I knew men were not supposed to feel pain; and under no circumstances was *the man of the house* supposed to show any sign of weakness, but I did. I think I had to. Even though every thought in my mind had no control over my mouth, I showed a chink in my armor. But it really wasn't me who showed that weakness. It was my feet.

“Mooommmmy, ahh, mommy, my feet, they're burning, mommy, mommy, mommy come quick.”

(My slightly older sister would later say I sounded like a girl, a fairy, and the princess of the house instead of the man—something she would use against me each time *the man of the house* was asked to save the day. She would hurt my manly pride, ego, and sense of self-worth with her slanderous comments. Yeah, I know I was to protect the house and all of its occupants, but she was trying to remove my title with such mean remarks. If I were not *the man of the house*, she might have hurt my feelings, but of course that couldn't happen to me because men aren't supposed to have tender feelings. Besides, that title is something I earned with the countless bags of groceries I had carried, the numerous insects I had squashed, the boyfriends I had screened, the tears I withheld from my cheeks and wiped from theirs. I absolutely deserved of the title, *man of the house*. Just days before that cold, cold night, I was walking in the hallway at school and noticed her shading her moist cheeks from view. When I touched her chubby cheek with my boogie-free hanky, she swatted my hand away as if it were a worrisome fly.

“Boys are sooo gross!” she shouted.

I knew she wasn't talking about me. I knew I had a man's work to do.

“Tell me what's wrong.”

“He grabbed my butt.”

Instantly I knew who he was, and after the whole hallway witnessed my big red-white-and-blue moon boot stump his toes as if it were a project rat, the once slippery cheeks of my sister gave into a big smile.

After the squashing of that pest, I was given extra chocolate milk for lunch three days in a row.)

“Ouch, ooh, mommy!” I cried out on that cold night.

The blood-curdling screams for help seemed to go on for hours, although they only lasted a few seconds. The three ladies I was supposed to save in their times of need came to my rescue.

“Baby what’s wrong?” my mother asked.

Hmm. Until this very moment, I hadn’t realized how my mother changed my title from *the man* to *baby* during my only moment of weakness. If I had been on my toes, I wouldn’t have missed that. However, in that moment, my feet weren’t just speaking for me, they were thinking for me. I continued yelling—I mean my feet continued yelling and screaming, because men don’t do that. My body was paralyzed; I couldn’t reach my eyes with my mittened hands to swat away the embarrassing tears.

“Baby, tell mama what’s wrong?” Mom asked, while wiping my tears in the dark.

“Ah, ooh, ouch, mommy—it, it’s my feet, they’re burning,” was my response.

Though I said much more, and cried many more tears, I shall refrain from elaborating upon a ten-year-old’s agony because my ego, even some thirty years later, won’t allow my pen to confess any more.

My mother ran out the room and, within seconds, had returned with a candle and the same old lighter, which never seemed to work when most needed. Maybe my pain, mixed with her impatience, caused her to discard the lighter after the tenth attempted strike, and to run out of the room to return moments later with a box of wood-stemmed matches.

Those trusty matches lit up the entire room right away. In the blink of an eye, the candle was lit, my socks were off and the room was filled with feminine oohs, aahs, and gasps.

When my mother touched my foot, my body was instantly rejuvenated. Though my toes had been numb, her touch felt like ten million needles being stuck into my foot and toes over and over again. I sat up and looked into the six eyes that were so intently staring at my feet.

“Here, hold the candle, you rub that foot while I rub this one,” was my mother’s stern order to my oldest sister.

Boy, oh boy, did that hurt. I gritted my teeth, balled up my fists and watched as they frantically worked to fix the problem.

“Blow, blow on his feet. Blow, damn it!” mom shouted.

Eventually, I must have slept.

Morning sunlight shone through a hole in the dusty gray pillowcase, now a curtain covering the creaky, summer-ready window. This beam of light was alarm clock, one that always seemed to go off too late. It warmed the tip of

my nose. Quicker than any magician pulls the tablecloth off a table, leaving all settings unmoved, I removed my swaddling and was upright and ready for work. As soon as the gravelly, purplish-gray, drab floor met my full weight, I stood as tall as the Washington Monument for a split second, and then I collapsed. The pain of the needles returned. No man could have withstood the pain of ten thousand splinters in each toe and remain standing.

On my chilled hands and knees I crawled. My eyes focused and I could see my mom asleep and shivering on the floor, on guard, on my guard. With a grimace and maybe even a tear, I stood again. Not because I was stronger than Superman or had some supernatural power of healing. Mom always said, “A man never lets a woman touch a door knob.” She taught me that men do not lie, play games, forget special dates, or mistreat women in any way.

“Mom, why aren’t you in your bed under the covers?” my voice shuddered as I spoke. “Mom get up now and get in the bed. I will be back to check on you later.”

“Baby, are your feet—

“In the bed now, I don’t want to hear another word, bed, under the covers and I will be back.”

I was *the man of the house* and I had been on guard before, so I knew why she was there. No different from when she was there to wipe a runny nose. No different from when one of my sisters wrapped a scarf around my neck extra-tight hoping it would keep me extra-warm. And no different from when I woke up before everyone each morning to thaw the milk, to wrap a coat around the can of peanut butter and jar of honey, to warm them up for our breakfast. We stood guard.

Now I look back on that cold night and smile because it was a teaching moment. On that extremely cold night I learned to cherish the love of a mother and two sisters—a love I can’t fathom being without. It is a love we will always be able to turn to for warmth in the coldest moments of our lives. *The little man is a man* who is thankful, not for having two good feet and ten wonderful toes, but thankful for learning love, true love: the love of family. I’m also thankful for a memory, a painful, tear-jerking memory a man has to wipe his eyes for remembering. But of course we know it isn’t my eyes that are filled with tears, because a man would never allow that to happen.

Memories Created by Choices

Andra D. Slater

*I wrote these words for everyone
Who struggles in their youth
Who won't accept deception
Instead of what is truth
It seems we lose the game,
Before we even start to play
Who made these rules? We're so confused
Easily led astray
Let me tell ya that
Everything is everything*

—Lauryn Hill, “Everything is Everything”

Boys and girls run around a yard, spraying each other with the water hose. They laugh, they play, they move through life without a worry in the world. Innocently, a boy pursues a girl he has a puppy crush on. He pays more attention to her than the other kids. On occasion, he's even spent all of his hard earned nickels and dimes on Mr. Freeze popsicles for them both. Her name is Mia. He and Mia are nine years old.

At twelve, a boy tries out for the wrestling team at his junior high school. He's actually good at learning techniques and moving around on the wrestling mats. He makes the team. The coach pairs him up with a teammate named Shane to wrestle off. This part of practice will determine who represents the team in a

particular weight class at the coming meet. The boy sizes Shane up, knowing he has the win in his pocket. He soon discovers that he has clearly underestimated Shane. Soon he is lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling. Shane has body-slammed him three times within five minutes. The boy goes on to travel the state with his team, winning some matches and losing others. He learns about discipline and strategy. His three-year tenure in wrestling serves a meaningful purpose in his life.

His worries begin to set in as he watches the clock tick. An hour passes. He knows his mother will soon arrive to retrieve him. The fact she's being called from work is what worsens the situation. The boy begins wondering whether the dollar he'd usually receive for each pack of cigarettes was worth the stealing of them. The police station would give any thirteen-year-old the creeps, but it's the anticipation of his mother's reaction that inspires true fear in the boy. He briefly considers whether he could ask the officer to call a different relative to pick him up. Finally, he overhears his mother talking with the desk officer. "Where is he?" she asks. His heart beats faster. She steps into the room where he sits. "Let's go," she says to him sharply. Her look is stern. He knows she means business. The boy is taken home and grounded for one whole entire year. His restrictions include everything from no after school hanging to no summertime fun.

Bringing home a paycheck for the first time is a wonderful feeling, especially for the boy. The summer days are not all about play. Mama asked if he wanted to join the summer work program. He did. The job is with J.T.P.A.'s Roven Work Crew. Cutting grass and painting city parks are the required tasks. The assignments occupy him and keep him out of trouble, and there are actually fun times on the job. It is not strictly work. The greatest thing is that at thirteen years old, he's able spend \$180 at the mall every two weeks on clothes he likes. That's the bomb.

Standing in the middle of the project row houses, a boy mistaking himself for a man at fourteen, has chosen a path. He stands alone, dressed in all black. The front pocket on his hooded sweatshirt conceals his shivering hands. The fingers of one hand clutch a gun. He looks up from the ground when he's approached. "You, you, uhh, workin,' shorty?" The boy pulls the drugs from the pocket and sticks one trembling hand out to retrieve the \$10 bill from the man. Not quite sure how to navigate this new lifestyle, the boy steps back from the man, timid, frightened, unsure that this new life he's chosen is for him.

The two lines on the indicator would mean it's time to ante up for diapers, formula, clothing, food, and even money to quiet the young, nagging mother-to-be. At fifteen, it may be time to take care of what he, himself, is: a child. The boy

sits on the edge of the bathtub while she sits on the toilet. They never take their eyes off the prize. The masked smile the boy wears, if unveiled, would expose a much more nervous look. Beads of sweat roll down his forehead. She smiles genuinely at the thought of becoming a mother. *A few more minutes*, he thinks. The result? Negative. This is a true relief to him. *We're too young*, he thinks. *I ain't got time for no babies. Close call. Never again. I'm wrappin' it up from here on out.*

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! is the sound as bullets cut into the metal of the van. He lay on the floorboard, one arm around his friend, covering him, while gripping a gun in the other hand. He and his friends rode knowingly into the wrong neighborhood. Their intention was to only come through to pick up some girls. The archrivals viewed their arrival as a threat and ambushed the van with gunfire. Now the van has stalled in the center of an alley. Glass shatters from the gunfire coming through the windows. Looking up to return fire could mean death. He wants to raise up. Courage and fear tangle inside of him. He decides against it. Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! The driver is brave enough to reach up and turn the key in the ignition, and the van starts. "Go! Go! Go!" The driver gets up, smashes the gas pedal and drives recklessly out of the ambush. While fleeing the area, the boy discovers that his partner in the passenger seat has sustained gunshot wounds. They rush all the way to the emergency room. His friend lives and he silently thanks God for watching over them.

He lies back on the sofa chair looking up at the ceiling. His mother paces the floor in front of him, giving her usual lecture. She's drilled the heartfelt words into him all too often. Her disapproval of the life he is leading is constant. The boy listens. "End up dead or in jail" is the phrase that always resonates. Her words and fierce emotions make the boy give thought to how he lives his life. As much as he desires for the lecture to end, he listens to his mother's ranting.

The man who was once that boy opens his eyes. He lies in his bunk, staring up at the ceiling of his prison cell. He's been incarcerated for over fifteen years. He wonders *where did that child go? That innocent, naïve child. Life moves so fast and in so many different directions. How did I end up here? Could things have been different for me?*

I am the man who was once that boy. I was nineteen years old when I came to prison. My time spent here is almost equivalent to my amount of time lived in the free world. Having now acquired maturity, knowledge, and great deal of education, I well understand that had my choices in life been much wiser, the "college experience" could surely have been a great memory of mine.

I sit here in prison, a paralegal, with eleven years of legal experience. I've

proven to be very proficient in the field of criminal and civil law. Being privy to such information viewed by some as foreign makes me wish I'd chosen a life that positioned me to study law. Making better choices could have very well set me on that path.

When I reflect on my life, I wish that I could recollect more pleasant moments. Some day I'll have to disclose my past life to my children. I imagine this will be a moment that educates. Maybe it will happen as I'm strolling through a park with my with my son or daughter; I will begin walking him or her through my most difficult life experiences. When my child asks, "Dad, why was your life like that?" I'll have to account for certain indiscretions. My involvement with street life, irresponsibility in relationships, and the saddening and stressing out of my mother—these are all things I am not proud of. I will share this painful history along with lessons I've learned as I've created balance in my life, setting and accomplishing goals. I will tell my child, "We all hold the power to create a past more joyful, less grim, more colorful, less painful. Shape your own course," I will say. "Construct your legacy with the experiences you engage. Move deliberately toward your destiny."

Someday

Agustin Torres

I was six years old when we moved to Mexico from the U.S. The same day we arrived, I met my Uncle Gilbert for the first time. He was a thin man with kind eyes. He couldn't have been more than thirty years old back then, but he looked closer to forty because his body was worn down by his illness.

No matter the situation, Uncle Gilbert always seemed to be smiling, and he always had a funny story to tell. There was never a dull moment with Uncle Gilbert. People were drawn to him because of that.

Uncle Gilbert and the rest of his family (his wife, three daughters, and one son) moved in with us to our newly finished place. The house still smelled of wet paint when we all arrived, and I wondered if it would smell like that forever. That scent eventually dissipated as the aroma of home cooked meals and Pine-Sol-mopped floor replaced it. The house took on the feeling of a home.

Uncle Gilbert's son was Albert. He had three sisters. I had two. We immediately took to each other and soon became inseparable. We became best friends. Best cousins. As we shared the same roof, we were practically brothers, sharing almost everything: food, toys, adventures, and even the same neighborhood friends. One thing we didn't share was our feelings. Throughout the years, Albert and I never talked about his father's illness, or how it was affecting him.

By 1988, I had nine birthdays under my belt. I still didn't know much about life—not as much as I claim to know now—but one thing I did know was how to be a kid. I knew how to watch cartoons, and how to eat too much candy. I knew how to hate vegetables, and how to love the days I didn't have to go to school.

Among the long list of things I didn't know was how to empathize with someone else's situation. Back then I didn't have the ability to put myself in Albert's shoes. It must have been tough knowing that his dad was living with an illness that didn't announce when it would collect his soul, but only that it would be there as sure as the sun rises each and every morning.

"Come on, I gotta get something for my dad," Albert would say as we finished breakfast or when we got home from class. It seemed we were always going somewhere, either on foot, or on an old ten-speed my dad had left for dead several years back. We would alternate between pedaling and riding on the back pegs of the old bike. Sometimes we would go clear across town in search of what my cousin had been asked to retrieve. What we retrieved was always the same thing; a *remedio*, a folk remedy, always from a different place and a different person, as if my Uncle Gilbert was in search of a wonder cure from some old lady's kitchen. Each time we came home with a *remedio*, I'd keep my fingers crossed that it would work its magical powers, but I'd learn otherwise when Albert and I had to set off in search of the next one. My uncle could afford those would-be cures. They were a fraction of the cost of the medicines he should have been taking. Those were too expensive for him to purchase.

Back then I knew my Uncle Gilbert would eventually die due to his illness, but someday always seemed to be just that at that age: someday. A time far off in the distance. Dad would say, "Someday I'll buy you that bike you've been wanting," but someday never seemed to arrive, whether it was because I hadn't been behaving (according to my dad) or because we didn't have any money to be spending on bikes (according to my Mom). I half-expected that *someday* would never arrive for my Uncle Gilbert either.

The day my Uncle Gilbert passed away, I cried harder than I had ever cried before. I thought I would never stop crying. I cried for my cousin, knowing that his *someday* had arrived. The day his father would stop smiling and telling jokes; the day he would give his father his last hug; the day his father would leave, and go to a place where he could not follow.

Reflections on a Monday Mourning

E. K. Sanders

Heaven wept that cold, gray Monday morning in late May of 1984. Heavy drops of rain, normally so refreshing and reminiscent of life to me, splashed corpse cool on my face as I stood, head slightly bowed, small hands clasped before me. The clean scent of wet mountain grass and freshly turned earth did little to dissipate the somber, ethereal haze that hung in the air as the sky shattered, pouring its pieces to the world below.

As chilly as the rain felt on my skin, I was still grateful to the sky for its tears, for they helped to mask my own. Though I was but a child of eight, I was wise enough to understand that men weren't supposed to cry, so I wept silently. My tears mingled with the cold rain and trickled from my eyes down my face to the lip I bit to keep from trembling.

The dark wool suit, so different from the t-shirts and shorts I usually wore, prickled against my skin as it became saturated. A steady rivulet of icy water rippled down my spine. I stood indifferent to these small discomforts, however, focusing intently upon the horribly beautiful scene before me. At that moment, every ounce of pain my small body could muster was devoted to the hurt I felt as I stared helplessly at the grave before me. The grave of the man I had known as my grandfather.

A native of southeastern Tennessee, he'd been born and raised in this mountain land. He'd come north with my grandmother about a year into their marriage, my infant mother in tow. They'd been reluctant to leave their home, but work was scarce and it seemed the only way to escape the coal mine whose darkness could

get inside of a man, waste his body away to nothing before his children's eyes. Eat away his soul. He'd seen his father consumed and had wanted better for his children than to see the same. So they left, settling in Illinois. He spent the next twenty-eight years in that Yankee state. He worked there, raised his family there, lived there, and eventually, he died there. Still, no matter how long he was apart from it, at heart, he remained a child of the South. And, as is the way of things of this nature, when he died in that familiar, foreign land it was his wish to return home a final time and be buried in the land that had borne him.

That was how I found myself in Wartburg, Tennessee on that cold, gray Monday morning, hoping no one would notice my tears in the rain.

"... was a good, honest man. He led a good life and touched many in his time. He will be missed dearly. But the good Lord says..." the preacher man droned on the way a Southern Baptist preacher man will. The hymns would come soon, I knew, but for the moment, the preacher and his words faded from my perception.

I glanced over to see my grandmother, a woman of fifty years and countless smiles who had always exuded such strength and resilience to me. I couldn't count the times she'd carried me in her arms through troubled waters, nor could I forget the dozens of "switchin's" I had suffered at her hands for eating the unripe, green apples off her apple trees after she'd told me not to. As I looked at her quietly then, I saw a side of her I had never seen before and had never expected to see. She looked so frail, so broken. She wasn't ashamed of her tears though. They streamed freely from her dark eyes as she listened to this stranger describe the lost love of her life and tell her what a good man he had been. She cradled in one arm an American flag folded to three corners, a gift to the widow of a veteran. Her other hand clutched my uncle's as it rested upon her shoulder.

"...how sweet the sound/ that saved a wretch like me/ I once was lost, but now am found/ was blind..." the hymns began. It was eerie to hear the usually jovial, rejoicing voices of a Southern Baptist congregation be so somber and subdued. It felt unnatural, in a way.

My uncle stood behind his mother. Clearly his father's son in both appearance and character, he stood with his hand upon her shoulder, forming an almost symbiotic bond, each drawing and giving strength to the other. He looked at the grave unwaveringly. Proud and strong. A vision of manhood, right down to the way the rain trickled from his eyes, down his face, and to his lip.

"...of Ages/ cleft for me/ Let me hide myself in Thee..."

My blurred vision found my mother. She held my baby brother in her arms as my sister stood by her. A picture of both dignity and endless compassion, like my grandmother, my mother made no attempt to disguise her tears. Softly, she sang

the hymns in that same, serene, soothing voice that had lulled me to sleep when I was a baby. The eyes are said to be the window to the soul and I saw then the strength in hers as a soft, sad smile played on her lips and she bid farewell to her father, singing to him one last time.

Confronted by the courage I witnessed in my family, I found myself embarrassed by my tears and the weakness they betrayed. I lowered my head to hide my shame. It was in this act, by mere chance, I discovered what would come to be my definition of grace.

Amidst this ocean of grays and subdued shades, a tiny pinprick of vivid color struggled to be seen right beneath my sodden dress shoes. Captivated, I bent down to investigate, only to discover one of the strangest, most out of place and oddly beautiful things I have ever seen. A tiny flower, a Mountain Bluebell, undaunted by the weather, the hymns, even by the grave of a good man, peeked out from the wet grass.

It struck such a jarring contrast in that dour setting that I couldn't ignore it. I plucked it from the earth simply because it seemed right, and felt the velvety softness of its delicate petals brush my fingertips. In that moment an understanding came to me.

This flower didn't grow because of, or even in spite of the rain or the grave. It grew simply because it was a flower, and because it must grow. Life must go on. In this instant, I realized this was true of all of God's creatures. We go on. We keep striving to grow, to survive. Not in spite of the broken hearts and the tears, but simply because we must. This is the nature of Divinity's children. Whether we are a flower, a widow, a mother, a son, or a child of perhaps eight summers masking his tears in the rain, life must go on.

“...and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.”

Amen.









My .22 Special

Tyrone F. Muhammad

Enthralled by the gangsterism celebrated on television, from Al Capone to *The Godfather*, I was an impressionable kid who saw gangsters as heroes waging war against the evils of crooked cops. I viewed the police department as an institution of wicked white men who used their authority to keep black men under their feet, crushing our hopes of ever raising out of the poverty we affectionately called *The Ghetto*.

The police were the enemy of the *hood-gangsters* whom we all loved and admired. We loved the hood-gangsters because we perceived them to be men with authority who protected the community from outside elements. The hood-gangster's ability to push against sweeping social, political, and economical injustices gave rise to their hero persona.

Every time the police abused their authority by harassing and frisking the hood-gangster, it enhanced his street credibility. The tyrannical displays of *them people* (an expression that conveys an adverse difference between the hood and the police) produced in us a disdain for law enforcement. *Them people* couldn't be trusted because they lacked the compassion and understanding to grasp the plight of the hood-gangster who aimed merely to survive in an unjust environment that was and is regulated by bureaucracy. Furthermore, it didn't help that *them people* were often white men with no socio-emotional ties to the very communities they were assigned to police. At the end of the day, after harassing and locking up men from the community, creating even more dysfunction, *them people* returned to their plush communities as if nothing had ever taken place.

My uncle was one of the hood-gangsters I came to emulate. I thought the best

way to achieve his gangster-like status was to somehow get my hand on a gun like the one that drew me to his holster.

My uncle was a person who enjoyed shooting guns. He possessed over forty of them. There was never a time when I'd see him without one. Because I looked up to him, I watched his every move. The bulge from his waist and his jacket created by the custom holsters he wore drew my complete attention, like an airplane in the sky attracts the attention of an earthbound toddler. Being a *mannish* thirteen-year-old boy, it wasn't long before I followed my curiosity to the stash spot where he kept his guns.

One day after cutting class, I arrived home around the time I thought everyone was either at work or running the streets. I soon found myself prying open my uncle's bedroom door with one of Grandma's butter knives retrieved from the kitchen drawer. (I can't exactly remember where I picked up the idea to use a butter knife to open up doors. Maybe I learned it from the television, or maybe I saw someone else do it when I was younger and the idea just stuck with me somehow.) After about five minutes of wiggling the butter knife back and forth between the doorframe and door like a skilled thief, the sound of success surprised me as the door lock detached itself from the frame.

Upon entering my uncle's room, I began rambling through the obvious spots, starting with the dresser drawers. Being careful not to disrupt the contents of the drawers, each piece of clothing was handled as if holding the head of a newborn. Ten minutes into my search I discovered nothing, so I moved on to the closet, beginning with the floor. Making careful note to replace everything back just as I found it, I grew more frustrated with the opening of each box and the investigation of every bag. Beads of sweat trickled down my forehead. Since my uncle was a no-nonsense type of dude, I knew if he caught me rummaging through his things, a well-whipped ass was soon to follow.

My fear of my uncle catching me had me on edge. Every sound I heard frightened me; every car that pulled up near our house summoned my presence to the window. It's amazing I had the heart to carry out such a devious act. Having found no success on the closet floor, my attention shifted to the upper-shelves. At thirteen, I wasn't yet tall enough to reach the upper shelves, so I had to use the wooden school chair my uncle had at his desk as a makeshift ladder.

The makeshift ladder was one of the items stolen by my uncle when he was younger. According to the story my cousin told me, my uncle was then around the age of fifteen. It was said he and about five of his gangbanger homies broke into a local grammar school with a stolen U-Haul truck and practically cleaned the whole school out of computers, typewriters, projectors, TVs, desk, chairs,

and other classroom materials. I was also told my uncle and his crew fenced the stolen material to a cat that owned a junkyard for five thousand dollars. The money from the stolen school equipment was used to purchase guns and drugs. This act of deviant behavior was said to be the only crime it took for him to start his criminal enterprise.

What's funny about this story is no one was ever caught for the crime. I always wondered *Who did the Chicago Police put in charge of the investigation?* They obviously were incompetent. Even at thirteen, I was smart enough to know that if you got a search warrant for all the local gangbangers' houses, you'd be able to uncover something linking individuals to the grammar school robbery. And to think, here I was standing on evidence of my uncle's deviance—evidence that could have landed him in prison for years. At the same time, the very chair from my uncle's criminal past was aiding me in my criminal activity against him. Some irony huh?

Five minutes of lifting and raising the lids of shoeboxes recovered nothing. Too frustrated to move, I stood on the chair looking defeated and stupid. I thought to myself, *I know my uncle has guns in here. Where did he hide them?* As I pondered my next move, I recalled seeing my uncle fumbling with something under his bed. When I asked him what he was doing under his bed, he responded, "None of your business." He told me to get my bad ass out of his room. Replaying that day back in my mind, I instinctively threw myself under his bed like Detective Colombo (a favorite television character of my mother) and immediately started searching for clues that would lead me to my treasure.

More than five minutes elapsed as I slid under the bed, my new school clothes picking up every speck of dust and lint balls. The dirt on my clothes gave me an indication of how long it'd been since my uncle had last been underneath that bed. My adrenaline insulated me from the thought of my mother placing me on punishment for getting my clothes so dirty. My dirty clothes were the least of my problems compared to the beating I would endure if my uncle caught me under his bed. Such a beating would have received the approval of my mother once she was informed of my *mannish* activities.

I slid back and forth under the bed, hoping to discover any clue to help me in my search. I thought to check under the lining of the box spring mattress to make sure nothing was stashed in between. Nothing was found, so I flipped back on my stomach to continue searching on the floor.

Sweating and frustrated with my exploration, I noticed two of the 2 x 4 floorboards didn't have nails in them. I attempted to lift the boards, but the space between them was too tight for my fingers. About two minutes passed before I

thought to use the butter knife that had gotten me into the room to begin with. Once the butter knife was inserted between the floorboards, I flexed it back and forth until one of the boards snapped open. Moving the 2 x 4 to the side, I put the butter knife down and used both my small hands to pull apart the second board and then I stuck my face in the space for a look. To my amazement, sitting on top of what seemed like black garbage bags were an assortment of black and chrome weaponry neatly arranged in a space four to five feet in length and two feet in width. Everything from handguns to shotguns fitted snugly in place. Momentarily transfixed, my eyes danced upon the harmful sight as my nose took in the fumes of raw steel and gun oil.

My uncle possessed an arsenal of weapons the Army would have been proud of, an arsenal that could get him sent to prison for the rest of his life. One by one, I pulled out every gun he had in the floor, carefully noting which side and in which order to place them back in: One by one, I examined each weapon like a trained marksman. I counted at least three shotguns, three sawed-off shotguns, two rifles (one with a small scope, one without), a machine-type gun with a banana clip (I didn't know it was a banana clip then but I do now), and a host of handguns from .380s to .357s. But none caught my eye like the .22 special that would come to define my teenaged indiscretions.

I believed the .22 special was made especially for me. Why wouldn't it be, since it seemed to fit so snugly in my hand? At a length of five inches or so, it was designed to be concealed. What stood out the most about the .22 special was its sterling silver frame and the pearl inserts attached to the handle. When I got older, I'd learn that this particular style was the most expensive of all the .22 specials produced. For about twenty minutes, I fondled and caressed the weapon as if a virginal boy discerning the angles and curves of a woman's body. As I began to point it, shooting at the air, I felt like a giant, and from that moment forward, I knew my days of playing with toy cap guns were over. The hard part now was plotting how to remove the gun from my uncle's stash without him missing it.

From My Cot I Imagine

Tyron F. Muhammad

Each day I awaken from a state of second death. Transfixed. Staring at the ceiling. Seeking confirmation of my subjugated reality. Drawing from awakened consciousness, sleep reveals an unpopular truth: the beauty of death. If death is as enjoyable as sleep, I welcome the possibility of eternal rest from this grim reality. Unfortunately, the forces of heaven still have need of my isolated shell. So eternal rest escapes me, and has escaped me for fourteen years.

I imagine my 3-foot wide prison cot as a 3-foot wide wooden plank aboard a merchant slave vessel. I imagine traveling several million square miles across the Atlantic Ocean, shackled hands and feet at the ship's bottom. Temperatures of 100 degrees and lava, with no movement in this 3-foot wide space. I imagine the treatment of those captive souls. I imagine the stench of soiled bodies as death permeates the air like a long-unkept morgue with no refrigeration.

On my 3-foot wide prison cot, I imagine the cries of the dead: the agony, the pain as rats nibble on month-old, untreated sores, with each nibble producing the feeling of being eaten alive. I imagine dying in a confined space with no human dignity, only to be thrown overboard as dark meat for the trailing sharks.

From a distance of 30 yards, I hear a familiar voice scream for the God of her people to deliver her from the clutches of savages finding joy in their ravaging. The voice of the woman given to me as a wife. How frightened she must be and how I lie, less than a man, helpless to defend the woman who has given me so much of herself. Over and over she screams out my name. With each scream, the God of my fathers grows void. My faith in the God of my fathers is no longer

binding. So lie $3/5$ or less on a 3-foot wide plank, wishing and hoping this ship (prison) would sink.

My 6'1 frame lies motionless on my state-issued, 5 and $3/5$ -foot cot. I soon rise from my stupor after realizing my condition of isolation is nothing compared to the condition my ancestors were relegated to. My rise becomes more focused. My rise becomes more methodical. I now rise with a purpose to grow beyond my concrete and steel box. My purpose for rising now gives me the energy to overcome this prison industrial hell.

This plot is played out each and every day I awaken from second death. Prisoners must tap into their inner greatness in order to survive this unnatural condition: a condition that pushes against the very nature of the human will. The ancestral slave ship analogy is my way of finding strength, as well as downplaying the hell that has engulfed me for nearly two decades.

The very nature of prison engenders uncertainty. Prison wasn't designed to be a ship for healing. The way each prisoner navigates his unavoidable reality is the difference between peace and stress, life and death. In order for me to make sense out of the reality that is prison, I'm forced to engage my ancestral spirits. I figure, if they were able to overcome their dehumanization at the hands of man, then who am I complain about my perceived inhumanity with the freedoms I still enjoy while enshrouded by concrete, steel, and barbed wire.

Tika

Tony Hillard

When Tika was a young girl, her father walked out on her and her mother. After that, her mother started abusing drugs and physically abusing Tika. She would always say that her father left because of her, and so Tika felt that she was never good enough for anyone or anything.

Tika and her mother lived on the fourth floor of a fifteen-story public housing project. On the fourth floor was where the drug dealers hung out to sell their drugs. Every morning, Tika and her friend, Tony (who lived next door) would have to scuffle past people who were looking to buy drugs or were using drugs, in order to get to school.

Tony was the only friend Tika had. He had known her all her life. His mother would take Tika into their home when Tika's mother left for days. One time, she was gone so long she never came back. Tony felt sorry for Tika, but at the same time, he was ashamed to be seen with her in public. At school, the other children would make fun of her outdated clothes; they talked about her nappy hair and how ugly she was. Tony would just stand by as though he did not know her, afraid that the same kids might ridicule him if they knew they were friends.

When Tika and Tony got older, Tony became so fascinated with the drug dealers who sold drugs on the fourth floor in their building that he became one of them. He was seventeen years old at the time and a high school dropout. This left Tika without a friend and alone. Tony began to treat her like others did, but to her it was worse because he would not even talk to her. Tony became cold and arrogant toward her. Tika missed her friend, but she knew he was long gone. This

became a theme in her life. Her father left her, then her mother, now her best friend. She felt so alone in the world. Every night she would go home to an empty apartment. She would just cry, hoping that someone—anyone—would love her, care for her, and treat her the way other sixteen-year-old girls were treated.

One day, while walking home from school, Tika ran into a guy. He walked up to her and introduced himself as P.G. P.G. was a known drug dealer and drug user. He asked her name and then asked if he could take her out on a date. She agreed. No one had ever asked her out. She thought it was a joke until he came to pick her up. They went to dinner and a movie. When the date was over and they were on their way home, he asked if he could spend the night with her. She immediately said yes. She did not want to be alone anymore. She believed P.G. would be her comfort and relief from loneliness, but P.G. had other things in mind.

Tika and P.G. arrived at the apartment building where Tony and his friends were hanging out, selling drugs. Tony looked at the couple strangely and shook his head. He thought P.G. was a scumbag and that he only wanted to use Tika. Tony did not say anything because it was none of his business. Once Tika and P.G. were inside the house, they went to the bedroom; there, he started kissing and touching her. In that moment, she felt happy. She relinquished her virginity to him. Afterwards, P.G. started putting on his clothes. Tika asked him, “Where are you going?” P.G. gave her a dirty look, walked over to her and slapped her face red. Then he told her, “You are mine now.”

When morning came, Tika was thinking about what happened with her and P.G. Just when she was about to leave, P.G. came in with three of his friends. He asked Tika where she was going. She replied, “To school.” He pulled her to the side, looked in her eyes, and apologized for hitting her the night before. He hugged and kissed her and told her that all would be fine, and she believed it. While they were in the room, three associates of the P.G. were in the kitchen, packing drugs. When they were done with their illegal activity, they summoned P.G., gave him a wad of money and exited the apartment. P.G. gave Tika a fraction of the money and told her that she did not need school because he would take care of her. After that day, she never returned to classes.

P.G. made packaging drugs at Tika’s apartment a business. He only gave Tika very little of the earnings. But she did not care. As long as he spent time with her and claimed her as his girlfriend, she did not mind. The times that he spent with her, touching and kissing her and having sex with her, were worth the beatings.

This went on for about six months until one day, while there were men in Tika’s apartment, the police rammed down the door. They found two kilos of cocaine and took the men to jail. P.G. was on probation for drugs so he was looking

to do some serious time in prison. On top of that, Tika had to move out of the apartment because the housing authority did not allow any of their tenants to sell drugs out of their units. When anyone got caught, they had to move. Tika moved into her aunt's house. Her aunt wanted her to pay rent to live there, so she got a part-time job and applied for public aid to get food stamps.

Tika had settled into her aunt's home, but the only thing that was wrong was her aunt's boyfriend came into her room every night. He told her things, like she was pretty. He said he would take care of her and that he thought she would make someone a happy man. One night, when she was feeling lonely, she started believing the things that he was saying and gave herself to him. After it was over, he never spoke to her again. He acted as if nothing had ever happened.

This became a theme in her life. Men and young boys would tell her that they really liked her and she would give in to their wants. Most of the time, Tika knew that what they were saying was probably not true, but as long as there was a chance that someone could love her, a chance that someone would spend time with her, and a chance that someone could make her feel like she was somebody, the way P.G. did. For that small chance, she was willing to give her body, mind, and soul away. Man after man lied to her until she was branded—branded a slut, a runner, a rat, and a ho. This was her identity, and when she walked by guys who had conquered her, they would say, "I hit that." She felt dirty, shameful, and worthless.

One morning, Tika felt sick and was throwing up her food. She went to the store to buy a home pregnancy test and discovered that she was indeed pregnant. When she got home, she wanted to tell her aunt because she did not know what to do. She was only a teenager. To Tika's surprise, her aunt yelled at her as soon as she entered the home. "Get the hell out of my house!" Tika's aunt had found out that Tika had had sex with her boyfriend. The boyfriend had told the aunt when they were having a heated argument. She did not want to hear anything that Tika had to say. She just wanted her gone, and so Tika left, having nowhere to go.

Later that afternoon, Tika ran into Tony and some of his friends. When Tony's friends recognized her, they started hollering obscenities at her. She just put her head down in shame and kept on walking. Tony called her name and she looked up. He asked her, where are you going? "Nowhere," she replied. Tony asked her to come with him and she did. He took her to a restaurant because he knew she was hungry. While she ate, there was silence. Tony just watched her eat and started remembering that sweet, pretty little girl he knew long ago. Tony wished that the world could see her the way he did. He knew that her shortcomings did not define who she was. If one would strip away all of what people thought of her, they

would see who she really was, but neither of them knew people of that maturity and insight. Tony knew that this was wishful thinking. Tika would forever be labeled “damaged goods.” While Tony was lost in thought, Tika looked up at him. With food around her mouth, she asked, “What’s wrong?” He said, “Nothing,” and smiled. She smiled back at him and they both broke out laughing. This was the first time in a long time that either of them smiled and laughed. Tika said to Tony, “I wish I had friend like you.” Tony replied, “You do, Tika. You do.”

Visiting Day

Earl Walker

She awakes at 5 a.m., full of anxiety about the exhausting day that lies ahead. Even though groggy, she realizes what must be done. Her mind is made up. This is a journey she has made on many occasions. She's done it so often that she has mastered the ordeal and overcome the obstacles she has yet to face.

A yawn escapes her. There are no physical barriers to deter her from what lies ahead, but she must mentally process and prepare for several challenges. She readies. *Are my teeth pearly white? Did I mess up my hair last night? Should I bathe or shower? Where are my Bath and Body Works? He enjoys the scent of Peach Blossom.* As she ponders these questions, time escapes her.

He rises to the sound of a key penetrating a lock. Even though he has heard the familiar but peculiar sound everyday for the past ten years, it still startles him from sleep. He exchanges a cold stare with the key holder, as does an animal looking to establish dominance and a boundary between himself and an intruder.

Once the unwanted party leaves, he begins his day. His mind begins to race. He hums to himself incessantly, creating a mood of joy to mask the butterflies in his stomach. Every tooth must be brushed. Gums, cheeks, and tongue as well. "Got to gargle and floss, my nig," he tells himself audibly.

A shower comes later. He has no control over the exact timing of this. Every other aspect of preparation must be carefully assessed and followed. *I'm a player*

and players stay creased up and swaggered out, he thinks. He begins to make his living quarters meticulously clean. At this time, a fluffy bed and polished stainless steel should be the least of his worries, however, he tends to these tasks as if an inspection is soon to follow. His sneakers are next. A pair of eyes watches him while he buffs the shoes as he would a new car. She bought these for him.

It would be nice if I could wear my new hip-hugging capris and my sheer top and my open-toe sandals, she thinks, but she knows anyone dressed provocatively is not admitted. A smile crosses her lightly hued, sun-kissed face. *I'll send a picture of myself wearing that*, she thinks. Her eyes settle on a sexy, classy sundress. Nothing sheer or above the knee. Her mental checklist begins. *Clean car full of gas. Phone charger in purse. One hundred dollars cash and my emergency debit card.* She skips breakfast, waiting to dine with him. Whatever he wants, even though he will allow her to decide what meal combinations they will eat.

He is in the gym, his mind focused on two things. "Arms and chest." *A firm and warm embrace will let her know how much I've been taking care of myself and how much I love her.* "Ten sets of this, ten sets of that." He imagines her looking at his pecs jumping as he massages his forearms. After his workout ends, he showers. Multiple fragrances emit from his various soaps and shampoos.

Now begins the waiting game. He isn't sure what time she left this morning. His mental checklist begins. *Where and what did she eat? Is she riding solo or is she bringing someone with her? Will she surprise me with a new hairdo or a new tattoo? How much is on that card? Is she safe? Did the car stall? It's after 10. Why haven't they called me yet?*

She arrives at her destination with one thought in mind. *He's waiting to see me.*

His gait is double-timed as he approaches the visitor's room. No running is allowed. His prize is waiting.

My Life In Numbers

Otilio Rosas

762-6649. That is the first phone number I knew and a number I have never forgotten nor ever will, because it carries the best memories of my life as a child.

Lincoln-Erving Grade School seemed miles from home, when in reality it was merely a two-block walk away. But everything becomes magnified when you are a kid. Our house seemed like a mansion that housed my parents, my sisters Maria, Patty, and Ira, my brother Mike, and me. I remember moving to Mexico when I was about eight years old. The inconsolable sadness that is felt when one's world is turned upside down is so upsetting, especially when compounded by the sadness of one's siblings as well. Decades later, what I remember about my sadness was not so much the pain of leaving Moline, but having to leave my baseball card collection behind. The "Big Red Machine," better known as the Cincinnati Reds, was the unstoppable team of the 1970s, with players like Joe Morgan, Johnny Bench, and "Charlie Hustle" (Pete Rose) along with their great manager Sparky Anderson. I had all of their rookie cards and most of them eventually became Hall of Fame members. This does not include all of the hundreds of other players that I had in my possession. The emotional value, compounded by the outrageous monetary value of these cards in today's market, still stings.

After we had moved away, I returned a few years later to my old house. It reminded me of the small, wooden toy houses that one sees in window storefronts during Christmas. It was hard for me to fathom how all those people could fit in such a tiny house. There was a window on the second floor of the house on the side of the driveway, and I would always open it and wait for my dad to come home. I would sit there and wonder what would happen if I ever had to jump out

“in case of emergency.” *Would I have the courage? Would I hurt myself?* My dad would pull up, and I would yell down to him as if the distance between us was enormous. He would answer back matter-of-factly, “*Como está mi Indio?*” Being outside that window years later, I could stand on the gravel driveway and touch that windowsill without jumping. It was about six feet from the window to the ground. No wonder my dad looked at me funny whenever I yelled.

762-6649 sparks many memories, sad ones also. There was a summer camp called The Tom-Tom Club, which focused on Native-American culture. We could learn to shoot a bow, shape arrowheads out of flint, listen to tales around a campfire, and true to the camp’s name, we could also construct a Tom-Tom drum.

Robbie Appleman and his dad came to our house one night to ask permission for me to join the club. I answered the door and I told Mr. Appleman that I would ask my mom. She was on the phone with my aunt, very caught up in conversation. I kept nagging her about joining the camp. I must have seemed like one pesky gnat to my mom, those gnats that you can’t ever swat away, because after a couple of minutes of me interrupting her conversation, she paused abruptly, turned toward me and said “*No, dile que no puedes!*” (With two emphatic no’s in one sentence, there is no need to translate her reply to me.) I walked dejectedly to the front door, “*Sorry Mr. Appleman, my mom said I can’t.*” Even now, relating this to you, I can still feel the disappointment.

This number represents the first part of my life, full of great moments for me personally—moments that make for great anecdotes whenever my brother Mike wants to have a good laugh. One particular instance was after I learned to ride my bike. What freedom! I could get to places in a matter of minutes, I could go places that I had never been to before (much to my mother’s chagrin), and best of all, I could do things my brother could do, or so I thought.

It was neat to watch Mike and his best friend John get a running start from one end of the block to the middle of the block where we lived, and where my dad’s car ramps had been set up on the sidewalk. They sped up on their bikes; they would hit the ramps and soar high up in the air, land, and speed off around again, all in one smooth motion. I finally built up the courage to try it on my little Huffy bike. I pedaled as fast as my little eight-year-old legs could go, and as soon as I hit that ramp... Man, I knew the landing wouldn’t be fun. In all of my preparation and the many instructions by Mike and his friends, I forgot the one thing they told me was most important: standing up when I hit the ramp. Don’t get me wrong, I soared through the air in my seated position (Evil Knievel would have been proud), the trajectory my bike followed, however, was not the sidewalk; it

was that big, blatant sticker bush right on the edge of our walk. I went in head first, but I never relinquished my bike. It too, went in underneath me. Wow! One thing's for sure: none of the other guys had such a spectacular landing. To this day, my brother and I joke that we're not sure whether we invented motocross or the program *Jackass*. It took about ten good minutes to dislodge me from the sticker bush without causing any more scratches.

As painful as it was to get out of that bush, it is also one of the funniest things that ever happened to me, and I truly relish the memory, especially when my brother Mike and I reminisce. I can almost see the youth returning to his face when we laugh about those days. 762-6649. I could write forever.

I Was Never Good At Math

Chris Garner

The seventh grade was a long year for me. I had the hardest time with math. Formulas and timetables, in particular. My teacher would verbally pound me into the ground by putting me on the spot for the answers to the most difficult math problems. I figured that my brain couldn't operate quickly enough to answer in a reasonable amount of time, so she would chew me out, day after day.

Part of the problem was that I hadn't learned the timetables completely. The even numbers were easy because I could double the answers, seeing that two times two was four, four times four had to be sixteen. The only odd numbers I knew were the fives. This handicap put me in a bad position because I was the popular and funny guy who made fun of everybody else, but inside the classroom, I was upstaged by math.

No matter how much I would study those tables, I was just not good with numbers. I spent the next four years cheating and winging it. I would have people sit near me in classes when I would need answers and I would get them quickly. Teachers didn't take notice until my junior year of high school, when I was asked to work out a problem in class. It was no problem because my *plants* were already on top of it. Once the math problem was worked out and slipped to me, I'd drop my pencil "by mistake," and cleverly pick up the answer and continue to pretend to be working it out myself. Mr. Bear told me that my answer was correct after I blurted the answer out. I wasn't prepared for what he said next. "Now will you please work the problem out on the board so that your fellow students can learn something?" He didn't know it, but Mr. Bear had put me so far out there that there was nowhere to go.

What was I to do? I couldn't go up there and expose myself, nor could I continue to sit there and act as if I was preparing myself. "Mr. Garner, to the board. Let's go!" Mr. Bear ordered. Pouring with perspiration, I noticed the class was unusually quiet. I had a choice to make. Neither outcome was going to be a good one. So, I did what I knew would result in my getting out of the situation without exposing myself completely. I started a verbal altercation with Mr. Bear.

"Man, quit yelling and ordering me around like I'm a dog or your slave or something!" I said with a frown.

"What are you talking about, Chris?" replied Mr. Bear.

That's when I got ugly. "I said I'm not your mutherfuckin' slave, man, and you don't tell me to do nothin.' I'm tired of this bullshit!" I shouted as I pushed the desk forward and stormed out the room, leaving all my belongings behind. I went straight to the bathroom down the hall, threw water on my face and touched both eyeballs with my dirty fingers, to cause them to water and turn red with irritation.

I sat on the toilet of the first stall, with the door open for a couple of minutes before Mr. Bear's tassel-less penny loafers appeared in the entryway. I held my ground by looking at the floor, frowning. In the kindest voice possible, my teacher asked if I had anything to talk about. Afraid of saying the wrong thing, I decided to keep quiet and play out the silent *troubled youth* role.

"Chris, this is not like you to act in this manner. If there's something going on, you can talk to the headmaster or me, and together we can take care of it. We're here to help you and you need to know that we all want you to succeed," Mr. Bear added as he squatted down with his hands pressed together in a prayer position.

I remember thinking *this guy is good!* And as badly as I wanted to give in and get that help, I was committed to my role. I didn't give in. I told Mr. Bear that it was impossible for him or anyone else to help me because I felt like I was being targeted as one of only twelve black students at The Chicago Academy for the Arts, and I needed to call my father to come and get me the hell out of there.

The look on Mr. Bear's face told me that I had won because he had no idea what to say or do. I jumped up and brushed past him, on my way to the phone. The telephones were on the first floor of the small, four-level building. I dialed my home number and Kirk, my older brother and partner in crime and conspiracy, answered the phone. Within a split second, I had told him what I did, why, and what was happening while we spoke on the phone. I also told him that I needed him to call the school as Mr. Garner, and to tell the headmaster that he was going to send his son, Kirk, to pick me up. Kirk would also reassure the headmaster of the father-and-son-talk we would have to work everything out.

By then, Mr. Bear had gone directly to the headmaster's office to fill him in on our odd encounter. The headmaster and Mr. Bear walked down the stairs just as I hung up the phone. It was clear to me that they were worried about the delicate, racialized aspect of our situation and wanted to talk, but just as the headmaster asked me to talk with him, his secretary called him to his office for a phone call. I was then asked to walk with him to his office, while he asked me if I would allow him to help and rectify this "misunderstanding." I was silent and kept the frown on my face to see what options awaited me.

Once we got to the office, the headmaster asked me to come with him while Mr. Bear stayed in the hall. I sat in a chair by the secretary, while he took the call. As I listened, I could tell that it was Kirk on the other line. He was pulling off our plan, because the headmaster was trying to explain the situation and finally agreed to have a staff member accompany me as I waited for my ride. I heard the headmaster thank "my father" and ask him to trust in him to help me in every way possible. I was relieved that my stunt had worked, but as I sat waiting for my ride, with one of the secretaries from the main office comforting me, I was sick to my stomach because I had successfully cheated myself out of an education.

Courage

Robert Garite

Outside the steel shell, the bright summer sun warmed the earth and drew people outside to bathe in its light. It was early June; school had just let out, and this particular summer promised to be especially radiant for kids my age—high school was finally over and life could afford to wait a few months longer...

Inside the steel shell, things were much different. The only light came from a few rays of sunlight that had mistakenly entered through air holes drilled into the roof. The air was hard to breathe and rolled in waves of exhaust fumes, steel, and sweat. At nineteen, I had found myself in the back of a prison transport vehicle, headed toward the state penitentiary, where I was sentenced to spend the next twenty years. My time under the sun was over, and inside, only darkness reigned.

Two other men sat in shadowy silence a few feet away, obscured in their own worlds of shame and regret. Sometimes, the sound of nearby traffic whispered in and soothed my troubled mind, but the handcuffs mercilessly biting in to my wrists wouldn't let me be. A small black box encased the cuff's chain, and locked my wrists in a fixed position, palms touching. Through the back box ran another chain that snaked tightly around my waist, pulling my wrists close to my stomach. If my hand sagged even a little, the metal bit deeper. After awhile the sharp pain was replaced with a tingly numbness. My hands had fallen asleep, and eventually my wrists fell limply against the unforgiving metal. A deep indentation began to form where the cuffs sank into my skin.

The chain around my waist terminated somewhere in the darkness below, where it was padlocked to a metal loop welded to the floor. Briefly, I wondered what type of person designed all of this, but not much surprised me anymore.

As I sat there, shackled in the darkness, I noticed that my body was in a familiar position: I was hunched forward, my head was bowed, and my lifeless hands were clasped together. To someone up above it may have looked as if I was praying—but no longer did I think anyone was listening.

Intent on restoring some feeling back into my hands, I began stirring restlessly. The metal chains grated menacingly as I thrashed about in the darkness, but it was useless—I was completely shackled by my sins and bound securely with man-made restraints.

Light poured in from a portal opened at the front of the vehicle. “Welcome home,” an unseen voice announced solemnly.

Past the windshield, an immense concrete structure loomed in the distance, an impenetrable stone castle with walls at least 20 feet high, and watchtowers at every corner. Rolls of razor wire glinted in the sun and added to its intimidating presence. With a loud *Crack!* the portal slammed shut, yet the image remained. Darkness returned.

Soon the engine’s hypnotizing hum began to falter. The vehicle made a series of starts and stops. The engine died.

Voices from outside filtered in and the back door of the vehicle began to rattle and shake. The world paused in one last second of shadowy silence and then burst brilliantly into light. Fresh air rushed into the tomb, intoxicating.

One of the guards jumped into the vehicle and unlocked the padlock securing me to the floor. He then bound my ankles with leg irons and ordered me to stand. Avoiding the eyes of the others, I staggered to my feet. My body felt numb, but I was young and recovered quickly. I started to shamble toward the light. Upon reaching the edge, another guard grabbed me under the arms and the two hoisted me out of the vehicle and into the bright summer day. Through squinted eyes, I saw that here the earth was scarred with concrete buildings, chain-linked fences, and yards of razor wire. Home?

The guards prodded me toward a large brick building where the exchange of custody would take place. They were anxious to be free of their charge and tried to quicken the pace, but I wouldn’t let them; I was not going to punish my ankles any further—they were still tender from learning how to walk in leg irons earlier that day. Defiantly, I slowed the pace; but inexorably, we forged ahead.

It didn’t take long before we reached our destination. Once inside, I was led to a small cage and told to sit. Lock by lock and chain by chain, the officers recovered

their restraints. With each turn of the key, I felt anger welling inside—anger at being shackled like some deranged beast. I eyed my captors closely. But it wasn't their fault—they were just doing their jobs.

Once the final cuff had been removed, they backed out slowly. Once they made it out, they slammed the door and locked it behind them. Through the bars, one of them said, "Keep your head up, kid," and then disappeared forever. They were headed back to our hometown, while I had to stay and try to make sense of my new surroundings. I was now completely on my own. From here on out, everyone would be total stranger.

A short while later, a new prison guard appeared. He told me to strip and face the wall. What else could I do? So there I stood, naked and exposed in a new world made of concrete, locked doors, and chain-link fences. After the strip search was complete, the guard tossed me a prison jumpsuit and told me to follow him. He led me toward the inner portion of the building, where the air thundered with the sound of many voices. After walking through a set of double doors, we ran into a mass of people; most were dressed just like me. I was joined to a group of ten men who shared my fate, and told to stay with them.

Like a well-oiled machine, we made our way through various checkpoints: photos were taken, fingerprints documented, measurements recorded. The proceedings culminated when we were handed our prison ID cards, complete with a photo and our own unique prison identification number. We had officially been tagged as property of the Illinois Department of Corrections.

After eating some unidentifiable lunchmeat, bread, chips, and a bruised apple, I was ushered into a small room for an interview. When I entered, I saw a middle-aged man, wearing thick glasses and sporting an enormous belly, sitting behind a desk overflowing with paperwork. The room smelled of cigarettes and sweat.

With one huge paw, the man motioned me toward a wooden chair placed haphazardly in front of his desk. Dust swam lazily through the hot summer air and sunlight forced its way in through a window encrusted with years of dirt and grime. Before I sat down, I approached the man's desk and offered him my hand. He looked up at me and scowled, causing me to retract my hand instantly. After staring me up and down, he spat out distastefully, "First time in prison, huh?"

"Yes sir," I said as I shrank into the wooden chair.

The man returned his attention to the open folder before him, turned a page, and then shook his head slowly. After a short whistle, he remarked, "Sure got yourself in one hell of a mess, didn't you?"

I didn't think I needed to reply, so I just remained quiet and watched him as he read whatever the file said about me. I got the sense that this interview was

one of the most important ones of my life, but I didn't feel like I even needed to be there.

"Well, you have forty years to do, so you're going to a max joint; I take it you've never been hooked up?"

"Hooked up, sir?"

"Jesus, you're screwed, yeah hooked up," he barked. "That means have you ever been in a gang?"

"No, sir."

"You're in big trouble, you're white, you're not hooked up, and apparently you don't know shit."

"Should I get hooked up then, sir?"

Turning his steely gaze toward me, he uttered, "Son, you don't ever want to get hooked up."

"What should I do then, sir?"

I could feel the man's cold gaze upon me, but then he took off his glasses, massaged his eyes, and with a labored breath, reached over and grabbed a smoke. Surprisingly, he offered me one, and after an awkward silence said, "Son, listen to me, when you get to the main prison, you mind your own business, don't trust nobody, and don't tell nobody your business. When people talk to you, don't be rude, but tell 'em that you're just doing your time and you're not trying to make any friends. Just try and keep things real simple between you and everyone else there." After a slight pause, he went on, "And son, for God's sake, don't mess with any of the drugs, booze, punks, and especially the gangs, don't even mess with the staff, just do your own time and don't ever forget where you're at. There are some real bad people where you're going, and don't let anyone get too close."

After he finished speaking, he made some quick marks on my folder and then threw it with the others. His face lost all signs of compassion as he returned to his job of indifferently assigning inmates to one of the many penal institutions in the state of Illinois. Thankful for his advice, I offered him my hand again and said, "Thanks."

This time, he shook my hand. As he glanced up, I smiled in appreciation, and when I did, I noticed him look at me closely. After a surreptitious glance toward the door, he whispered, "I'll try to keep you across the street. It'll be safer for you there. Son, remember what I said, don't trust nobody, and do yourself a favor, try your hardest to keep that smile. Take care of yourself, now go on and get outta here."

That was over seventeen years ago. My smile doesn't come as freely as it once did, but it's still there, reserved for special occasions. That day, I began to learn

the lessons penitentiary life teaches. It wasn't easy. Maybe it was because I grew up in a small town—or the fact that I've always been a bit naïve—but I definitely wasn't hip to a lot of the games played inside of prison. But it wasn't long before I realized that the only one in here who truly cares about me is me, and once I started following that man's advice more closely, doing time got a lot smoother. Other than relationships born of a mutual convenience, I learned just to keep things moving, and to look out only for myself.

Thankfully, my prison experience has not been a particularly violent one, and in a few short years, I can leave this place and try to forget everyone and everything I have encountered here. But now, I'm not so sure that I can.

Recently, I met some people who caused me to change my mind. They are professors and graduate students from the University of Illinois, and they have taught me some things that contrast sharply with what seventeen years of incarceration has tried to instill in me. They have also opened my eyes to responsibility that I didn't realize I had. The people I've met are part of the Education Justice Project (EJP) and they came to Danville Correctional Center in the summer of 2008. Over the past few years, we have worked together and built something good in here, and with their help, I've realized that life is so much more than this place makes it out to be. One night in particular, I learned something that extends beyond any classroom, and will stay with me for the rest of my life. So, when things get tough in here, and they always do, I reflect back on that night I know what it is I must do.

About a year ago now, I signed up to attend part three of the guest lecture series offered that semester. The guest lecture series is an activity where a guest speaker is invited into Danville Correctional Center to discuss a particular book with the student body. The night's speaker was Professional Antonia Darder, and it was her first time ever visiting a prison. She came to discuss Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (That semester, I'd been taking a class that examined the history of education, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was part of that class's curriculum. I was familiar with the book; however, when I read it for class, I had approached it as homework, and I didn't make a whole lot of effort to connect what it said to my everyday life.)

The evening of the guest lecture started innocuously enough. Most of the student body assembled in the prison chapel in preparation for Professor Darder's visit. When we arrived, it was early evening, and sunlight streamed in through windows that line the chapel's walls. Rows of chairs had been set up to face a makeshift stage, and I found a seat near the front. On the stage sat two large cushiony chairs, a pair of microphone stands, and a small wooden table.

Volunteers from the University of Illinois had yet to arrive. A video camera was set up in the back of the room to tape the event, and one of the EJP students experimented with the sound levels of the microphones. Through the window, I noticed the EJP volunteers making their way through the crowd of people scattered across the main walk, and as they approached, a sea of almost forgotten humanity parted to let them pass.

Once they made it to the chapel, we exchanged hurried hellos. After everyone was settled in, Professor Rebecca Ginsburg, the Director of EJP, took the stage along with Professor Darder. As they sat down, the big cushiony chairs almost swallowed their slight frames. The chatter in the room began to quiet as Rebecca pulled the microphone to her. After introducing Antonia to us, Rebecca began the discussion by asking Antonia about her work on campus and about some of the books she had published. The two addressed each other by their first names and conversed in an affectionate tone, and soon a warm familiarity settled over the room. As Antonia briefly talked about her career, it became evident that she is a very accomplished and successful woman. Significantly, while she spoke of her life's achievements, she was very humble, making it clear that personal accolades had never been her motivation. Instead, she said that her main priority has always been helping people, and that everything else just seemed to work itself out.

Antonia explained that she decided to discuss *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with us because the book helped her discover her life's path. Antonia revealed that she grew up in a very poor Chicano barrio in Los Angeles, and as young girl, she fell into some of poverty's ensnaring traps. Before she knew it, she found herself struggling to raise three kids by herself, and felt the tiredness of work beginning to settle into her young bones. But she loved to read, and a friend gave her Freire's book. After reading it, she said that something clicked inside, and she knew that she wanted to go back to school to learn more about what she could do to address the problems she saw plaguing her community. She talked with her children about going back to school; with tenderness, she admitted to us that she wouldn't have been able to make that decision without their support and encouragement.

During her academic journey, Antonia said that she got the opportunity to meet Paulo Freire, and that they quickly became good friends. She then started to discuss Paulo's vision and why his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has inspired so many people round the world. At this point a deep-rooted passion filled Antonia's voice, and she began to shift restlessly in the oversized chair. Soon, the big chair could no longer contain her. She glanced over to Rebecca and asked if

she could stand. With a knowing smile, Rebecca nodded, and soon everyone's attention was riveted to a teacher doing what she was born to do.

Professor Darder is a small woman, but when she spoke, she towered over the entire room. She didn't need a microphone. She started by asking us if we knew what true courage was. We all kind of stared blankly at each other. After a short pause, she told us that true courage is the ability to love other human beings as much as you love yourself.

She said that it takes true courage to love other people because it seems almost as if the world teaches us we can't. All the time, she said, we see and hear about people hurting each other, but physically and mentally, and it seems that people are always trying to take advantage of the kindness of others. Everyday, she said, the headlines are filled with one horrible story after another. I looked around the room and wondered how many of us there had contributed to some of those headlines.

She went on to say that since we see people acting so terribly to one another, most of us just give up thinking that the world could possibly be any different. Furthermore, she said, it doesn't feel good when we get hurt, so we try to avoid it at all costs. Trusting others is hard, she said, and the world only makes it that much harder. So, because of our fear, we try to keep ourselves at a safe distance from everyone else. We think that we can close ourselves up in our own little world.

But fear, she insisted, won't ever stop people from hurting each other. She explained that Paulo Freire taught that the only thing powerful enough to overcome the cycle of violence and fear is love. He taught that without love, there is no faith, and without faith, there is no hope. She told us the key to understanding Paulo Freire and his work is to recognize the tremendous amount of love and faith he had in people, particularly those who were the most oppressed. She said that Paulo went to some of the most oppressed places on earth and talked with the people there, and through dialogue, helped them reach a critical awareness of the world. Through this critical perception, people realized that their lives could be so much more than what others said it had to be. She explained that Paulo's greatest hope for *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was that he could somehow help to create a world in which it was simply easier to love. He wanted oppressed people to realize that they had the power to shape and transform the world, and furthermore, that they were the only ones who could do it. He taught that only when those who are oppressed find the courage within their hearts to love, to love even those who are oppressing them, could the world begin to change. She looked at us intently, and allowed that to settle in.

Her words stung. For almost two decades, I had constructed my own little world, one that I thought was safely removed from everyone else, and I had learned to ignore all the ugliness around me. I began to look about the room, and I wondered if her words penetrated anyone else as deeply as they did me. Everywhere I looked, I saw people who I knew had experienced so much pain, people who I knew had even caused so much pain, and I couldn't help but wonder, *After everything we've been through, could the men inside this room find the courage to love one another? Could we find the courage to love even those who oppress us every day?* I didn't know.

During the question and answer part of the evening, I wanted to ask Antonia a question, but I didn't know which one to ask. There were just too many. For example, when someone does something wrong, don't they deserve to be oppressed during their prison sentence? Isn't that the only way to punish someone? Don't people in here deserve whatever they get? I was confused. I started to think about my actions, about my life, and I realized that for the most part, I had been part of the problem, and not the solution.

It seemed as if Antonia had only spoken for a short while, but almost two hours had passed. Although we could've listened to her for much longer, time was running short. Soon Rebecca joined Antonia and we all stood up and showed our appreciation with thunderous applause.

As we stood there, clapping, Rebecca put her arm around Antonia, and together they stood before us, undaunted and unafraid. During our applause, they gave each other a hug and exchanged a look filled with such profound conviction and dedication to purpose that I suddenly felt tears welling in my tired eyes. Over the years, I had witnessed so much indifference, but here these two college professors were, along with the rest of the EJP staff, people who could've found a million reasons not to gather with a bunch of convicts in some prison chapel that night, asking us, with their actions, to join them in their fight. The look they shared radiated out into the audience, and suddenly I felt connected to a part of humanity that for so long had been hidden by the daily struggle of prison life. And when I looked about the room, I began seeing the people around me for the first time; I felt their pain; I understood their sorrow; but I sensed something else, too—hope.

Guards rushed in and shouted that we had to leave. Stunned, I averted my eyes, and tried to collect myself. As we were herded out of the room, I wanted to tell Antonia and Rebecca what I saw. I wanted to try to make more sense out of how I was feeling, but there was no time. It was time to go. On the way out, I managed to shake their hands and utter softly, "Thanks for coming," but my heart wanted

to say so much more. When I exited the chapel, I was confronted by more prison guards, manned towers, and fences surrounded by rows of razor wire. Out of habit, I turned back into stone.

On the walk back to my cell, the sun was about to set. Through a hardened shell, I observed the world beyond the fence flicker in a golden light, and then grow dark. It was so close, yet so far away. I looked down, and closed myself off from the others walking beside me. When I returned to the cell house, the petty existence of prison life once again assaulted my senses. Grown men scurried about, waiting eagerly for guards to dispense the daily allotment of a handful of ice cubes. A wave of heat, mixed with the odor of too many people living too close together rolled over me, and I felt nauseous. I made it to my cell and sat down heavily. I tried to block out the noise and to sink comfortably back into my shell, but something inside wouldn't leave me alone.

Later, I hopped in my bunk, and tried to rest for night, but when I closed my eyes, I saw the image of Antonia and Rebecca standing in the chapel, arm in arm, and looking out into the crowd. I tried to follow their gaze, but they seemed to be looking through me. Determined to see what they were seeing, I glanced around, but I couldn't see anything. I closed my eyes tighter and then Antonia's words started to echo in my mind. I thought about true courage, and I began to take a deep look inside myself.

I reflected back on the relationships I've had, even the ones I had before I came to prison. I wondered if I had ever truly loved someone as much as I loved myself. Images of my son, my family, and the smiles of old friends filtered through my mind. Surely, I loved them. But was my life a reflection of that? If I had loved them so much, then why was I lying in some prison cell, completely cut off from the world, unable to even pick up a phone and tell them that I love them? In my position, what could I do to help them if they were in trouble?

And then a sense of horror started to flood through me as I realized that I was in prison because I neglected the humanity of another man—he was gone forever because of my selfishness. A terrible darkness overwhelmed me. My thoughts turned to all of the years I'd spent building a wall around me, and trying my best to live safely detached from the rest of the world. Suddenly, a sickening thought transfixed me—I deserved to be alone.

In terrible anguish, I thrashed about in the suffocating silences of my prison cell. I fought hard to fight back the feelings of despair; I pressed the pillow firmly to my face, but there was nowhere to run. There was no way to take things back. But through the darkness, the image of those two professors returned, and I noticed their eyes looking at me intently. They seemed to be waiting for

something. I could feel their eyes looking past the color of my skin, past the mistakes I've made, and beyond how selfish I've been. Patiently, they waited. Feeling confused, I again searched deep within, and all of a sudden, a question burned into my consciousness. *Do I have the courage to love other people more than I love myself?*

Through an immense fortress of solitude, I searched for an answer. Excuses sank me deeper into a twisted labyrinth of fear and regret. Faces of loved ones passed fleetingly, and it was so hard to see past my own mistakes.

But just when I thought I was lost, I sensed a warm glow emanating deep within. As I focused on the light, my heartbeat quickened. And then I saw it; I felt it. My thoughts coalesced and the darkness inside shrank. A brilliant light turned seventeen years of isolation into dust, and a lifetime of running away came to a halt. My thoughts turned to the future, and with radiance, my courage illuminated the man I still have a chance to be. I saw my son, and I saw what I still had to teach him. I saw my mom, my grandma; I felt their love, the love they have always shown me despite all of my mistakes. I was overwhelmed. The tears I held back earlier that night flowed freely, but this time, I welcomed their cleansing moisture. And, through a torrent of emotion, I saw a pair of eyes beaming toward me, and I understood that that was all they were waiting for. They simply wanted me to see what I've always had inside; they wanted me to know what they see inside of us all. From the bottom of my heart, and with courage I never thought I had, I smiled.



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The mission of the Education Justice project is to build a model college-in-prison program that demonstrates the positive impacts of higher education upon incarcerated people, their families, the neighborhoods from which they come, the host institution, and society as a whole.

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