

Among the incarcerated participants of our poetry workshops, a wife was murdered, two partners died of overdoses, one participant died of a treatable medical condition. All within the past year, victims of devastatingly unstable communities are left in the wake of mass incarceration. Several participants are facing 10, 20+, 30+ years in prison for the petty crimes of poverty. By the time you read this, some will already be there. We have heard – repeatedly – that our local jail is one of the best in the country. And yet, jails were intended for only short-term incarceration; “short-term” in Indiana now means any sentence up to two years. Pre-trial confinement as a stretch on even longer; one participant hears his third year of incarceration as a

One of our – the organizers of the New Leaf New Life poetry workshops – mothers was murdered this year: in many ways, she was a victim of mass incarceration. The man who killed her was previously incarcerated for nearly a decade for low-level, non-violent drug crimes. He was surely destabilized by his time in prison. After release, with ten years’ disconnect from family and friends, and with the additional difficulty of finding work as a former felon, what could be expected from him?

The New Leaf New Life dorm was an addiction recovery program inside the Monroe County Jail. Inmates chose to live in this small space, and although outside volunteers offered weekly programs, like AA meetings or poetry class-program – no one can be forced into sobriety. Inside the NLNL dorm, the men established a culture of trust and a strong, supportive community inside the confines of the jail. Tragically, this program was recently canceled, replaced by court-mandated rehab, but this publication and letters (from people like you) to the sheriff are working to reinstate it.

If you are concerned about mass incarceration and would like to take action in Bloomington, please contact, get involved with, or donate to New Leaf New Life (newleafnewlife.org) or the Midwest Project (Prisoners Project) (prisoners.org). From elsewhere in the country, we recommend you contact, get involved with, or donate to the Southern Poverty Law Center (splcenter.org) or Solitary Watch (solitarywatch.com).

Our response to harm begets harm.

Mass incarceration disproportionately targets and ravages poor and marginalized communities and persons, and causes harm beyond the loss of freedom. The courts’ reliance on police informants saps trust in friends, families, and neighbors. Innocent children suffer trauma when families are sundered by a parent’s confinement. People who need medical help or counseling are instead placed under traumatizing industrial control. Many correctional facilities have been privatized: corporations reap profit from malnutrition, overcrowding, and under- or uncompensated inmate labor. Upon release, many people leave broke, job-less, and med-less, long after their former support networks have dissolved.

mass incarceration endangers us all.

The FOLLOWING PAGES OF POETRY were written by men confined in the Monroe County Jail in Bloomington, Indiana. The raw facts of mass incarceration are familiar to many: the United States locks up more people than any other country, almost 2.5 million in total. The magnitude can seem numbing, but each of those numbers is *a person*. Poetry is a midwife delivering truth from fact, drawing forth from cold information the reality we need to feel:

POEMS FROM THE JAIL DORM

A COLLECTION OF POEMS BY PRISONERS AT MONROE COUNTY JAIL

EDITED BY JOHN-MICHAEL BLOOMQUIST & FRANK BROWN CLOUD

Craig Grimes Pouncho Tio Blake Likeness

Brad Vieira Max E. Cody S. Waldrip William D. Booker

Brett Wagner J.G. Satish Brown Azul X Drama

JUNE 2017, BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

John-Michael Bloomquist & Frank Brown Cloud

Thank you again,

more—they deserve support, connection, and friends on the outside.

And we, the ostensible teachers, were enlightened by the experience. Despite their circumstances, the men in our classes gave so much. We all share responsibility for the harm caused by our criminal justice and prison system. Anyone who feels dismayed by the suffering imposed by mass incarceration should reach out and visit, write to, and teach in our prisons and jails. The people inside deserve far more—they deserve support, connection, and friends on the outside.

Our class approached poetry with an eye toward revision: revising our writing, our selves, our relationships, our communities, our country. Members of the Aryan Brotherhood wrote about befriending black men in jail. Many men wrote of forgiveness: for informants who put them here; for judges and prosecutors; for thieves and murderers. In poetry, they found beauty and redemption.

our jails and prisons are no place to send those who need to heal.

our participants spent almost a year without a glimpse of the sun. At a time when medical doctors have realized that access to nature, as meager as a single tree outside a hospital window, significantly increases healing, this much is clear: legally innocent man. In jails, people can go months without fresh air. Several of

CONTRIBUTORS

Craig Grimes, 37, is a Kokomo, IN native who started writing poetry 20 years ago. He only recently has tapped into the travels, experiences, and education that he now uses as the subject of his poetry.

Albert C. Jones, AKA Pouncho was born in Detroit, MI, & moved to Indianapolis in 2000. Big family of 16 and the oldest. A breeder by nature, but creative writing is a must!

Cody S. Waldrip, AKA Miami, comes from a half-tightly-knit Italian family, the other half a loosely stitched biker gang from Florida. In & out of jails, prisons, and programs since 15, he is now feeling his life is worth something.

Max E. was born in Peru, Indiana. Living in this realm, but experiencing others.

Brett Wagner is from Tennessee, on the shores of the Dale Hollow Lake and plays bass with Sasquatch Rock.

William D. Booker is from Fort Wayne, Indiana and would like to become the creator of poetic drywall.

Azul X, Tio, Satish Brown, J.G., Brad Vieira, Blake Likeness, & Drama were moved – to jails or prisons elsewhere – before we finalized this publication. We were unable to acquire their biographical information.

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John-Michael Bloomquist has a dual MFA from VCU and has been published in *The Superstition Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and *Third Coast*. He is the founder of PoetryForTrash.com, a public arts project that encourages gift economics as a solution to pollution.

Frank Brown Cloud (@FCBrownCloud) received his Ph.D. from Stanford and has been published in *The Coachella Review*, *Stirring*, and *The Journal of Cell Biology*. He directs the Indiana Prisoners Writing Workshop, an offshoot of the Midwest Pages to Prisoners Project.

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William D. Booker

Communion of the Saints

It's 6 a.m. in the Monroe County Jail, I've been awake since breakfast, which was served at 4:21 a.m. . . .

It took 3 minutes 25 seconds to eat a tray of eggs, sausages, hash brown, biscuit and jelly. Then I lay back down on my steel bunk and closed my eyes.

I try to elude

the thoughts that I know are going to come: what have I done? Visions of the outside that I don't see anymore. What have I done? I pull out my photos, some are actual pictures mailed to me by my sister, others printed on computer paper.

As I look at each smiling face,

I whisper I love you to each one, three deceased but all still have smiles—my mother, my brother, my nephew Charles—their smiles and hearts I wish I could borrow so that I could feel better as I get on my knees and begin to pray,

I hear them say

we need you God to take Dwayne's hand today, so that he knows when we say

“We love you,” we mean it in every way.

Though his flesh is weak and his heart is troubled, we want him to be ready

when you speak, and his spirit to be humbled.

Tio

Lake Images

Reflection peering back of happier times, laughter & smiles from the undisturbed glowing morning lake

Reflection slipping from my mind . . . the same way our smiling faces faded . . .

when the cool morning autumn breeze blew . . . across the

top of our neon mirror lake

Pouncho

People cry rain.

Stop this tornado from tearing down homes, cities, and crops.

The world crumbling into vapor, the air thinning a cold crisis of fumes.

Minds are flat-line to their last breath.

What is society's motive?

Corruption, lies, abandoning people in jail for life. Period.

Destroy the tools

So families, kids here & overseas,

Stop crying

World.

Craig Grimes

Synthetic Aphasia

If writing music is like dancing architecture, our silence is an absurd text. Still, what architecture I have found the dead conjure up on that sublime night—spirals & whorls; geodesic domes

The most intricate tile work in the algorithms of the holiest Moroccan mosques; fractals, recursive trails in the finest colors, echoing out into infinite, starry space.

The sound infused cheap glistening plastic beads with the finest diamonds; gave life to dazzling moments the way children animate toys. In those instants, I was at the white-hot center of every experience, beyond words but craving expression.

from the editors

FOREWORD

Pouncho

(Delusion Minds)

They say 20 to life for dealing cocaine. Got me gasping for air.

My family crying, screaming, and yelling in the courtroom. Were they aware? Naw!

Their mind is delusion, spacing out, taking a multiple question test, stuck on “C.”

I guess they don't know the rule.

This isn't the school of hard knocks, the streets I was on my own at 15, feeding myself hand to hand, selling drugs to grown ups—

pimps, prostitutes, professors, mechanics at Ford and Chrysler, everyone that had nothing to do

with the justice system. It was like a battlefield, my mind racing a hundred miles an hour.

What have I done?

This is not like clubbing, playing ball, or the movies when I was young. They say 20 to life.

The walls are closing in, I'm short of breath. What is the next step? I got to fight for my 1, 3, 8, 17, 18, 23, 27, 28 year old children. They say 20 to life.

Craig Grimes

Travels of a Martian Hermit

catapulting into space the journey begins dreaming of the unknown, hearing whispering winds brain amiss in disbelief of seeing the dark-held stars become the frost of breathing.

Craig Grimes

Fizzling Fission

May not be by our hands or decision

Acid trashed oceans crash

Once – dry

deserts hollowed

Humvees litter bomb scarred ground

The barkeep hollers, “Final Round”

our blues & greens become brown & red

everything once alive no longer said

Satish Brown

Untitled

Love myself

Don't be selfish

Love being N love with love

Lady luck is what

She is, she is the

Lady for my kids

My heron, who

doesn't fly away

My heroine but

am I her hero

– O, maybe O.V.

E No I., does that

spell love, or loath,

Oath would be something I should stay true to, for

myself & her.

My Chelsea, my port

but the sea leads me astray. The siren

seductive, Lady of depiction.

A succubus her name is Heroin. My companion is my compass

Craig Grimes

Fox Knows Fox

Flipping through pages of poets past I inhale an odiferous scent that entombs me through the Vanderbilt's Biltmore Mansion's Library, its two story sliding ladders, wheeling among volumes, anthologies, and first editions— I transfix on the image of a Victorian man pouring a sniffer of cognac from his Reidel crystal decanter, giving it a swirl, watching as the legs walk back

into the pool of amber. The springer spaniel's tail on point as the hunter carrying the muzzle loader steps gingerly on the fallen oak for a moment, himself catching the whiff of the pursued fox. Wealth forever held captive by the imported mahogany frame mounted above the mantel of the study's fireplace.

Brett Wagner

Bird Town, TN

Picture this young boy whose favorite color was the blank white of a fresh page. We went running once on the spring green grass.

And I've heard it said,

“There's nowhere to go but everywhere” so we ran anywhere in this jungle gym world.

Somewhere the clouds didn't smother us and the hills didn't exhaust us, where robins, blue jays, and cardinals sing like bodhisattvas that have taken wing.

Pouncho

Phenomenon in Turmoil

My shadow is quick as lightening
that makes the hair stand up on my arms.

My heart is pure as water
that runs over the waterfall.

Life is like an exploding volcano,
lava coming down the mountains.

Time is like a clock that never stops
ticking. Freeze—

a bomb, rolls around
the world.

Being away from my kids,
taking my son to his basketball game,
taking my daughter to school,
learning about their goals—

writing, reading,
to learn about their life.

J. G.

Being The Paddle

I was cut from my family
of cedar trees

now I am a member
of yours. I hang

on the kitchen wall to catch
you when you're slippin'.

I always made you cry
necessary tears.

It's my job. To hurt you,
Like Thomas the train, I'm just

happy to be of service.
Don't I make you stronger?

I construct a fortress
with building blocks of bruises.

Every suit of armor a weakness,
but you'll be soft everywhere.

Brad Vieira

Summer

This is my favorite time of the year. Sun burns, sandy beaches & long nights full of beer. Working hard all day to go home to your family & light the grill. Going on vacation to our dream destinations. Fireflies in the night, kids run around and try to catch them with all their might. Rain storms and foggy nights only too soon the sun shines bright. Windows down, wind blowing around. Radio up just loving life. Fireworks light up the sky, seeing true love in your lover's eyes. Going from May flowers to fall pumpkins. The summer days are coming to an end. Watching the sun go down once more.

Blake Likeness

Taxing The Golden Flow

1.
I had a dream, taken to the grave
A past always lost in thought—
Mind war: I wasn't comfortable
with who I had been, another part of me
taking over, each fighting for control
when the lion's roar broke the chains.
Waking up no longer a slave,
Now with vision from within,
Sight is a door behind the eye.

Open up the steel door to a new
dimension, you'll see the yacht
on Lake Oroville with a shower
and T.V. where I'll be spending the rest
of the summer, where it's okay to be who
I've always been. Meet yourself, shake
Hands, and become your friend.

2.
A belly and pit full of snakes lies
behind the dam, stagnant and deep
waters always looking for an exit.
Patient and slow one day it will return to flow,
pushing a river between land, a snake
eroding the earth and churning corners
in the sand to slow the drought
from free-falling into the light.

3.
Unplugging the power of mind
(you think it won't see) the water
was meant to flow, but man
figured out how to tax its leak,
the lowest of the low. Thinking
the big body will never know
a river once small now wide
and deep, a dried-up land
with visions of springs that seep.

Satish Brown

Could I Be

– a peacock, so vibrant
& bright, but vulnerable
for lack of flight, a
turkey that flutters
searching for height.

A dove that flies so
high, so pure & clean.
I'm none of these.
Just searching for a
balance – in between.

Maybe a phoenix, mystical,
reborn from fire &
ashes.

Max E.

San Diego 1985: I Felt Your Presence in the Absence of Time

Out of the military, I'm waiting for an opportunity
on one knee, showing a stereo to a dope dealer
as pretense to steal a bundle of tai sticks
and a pound of meth. It didn't seem to matter
until now that I'm in a Hell's Angel's living room
on an unrighteous tip, waiting to elbow him
in the forehead and take his shit. I didn't know

my thoughts were heard. I begin to see time
in the hollow-souled faces filling the room,
the rest of the goofball dealer's gang file in
to kill me. All making small talk as tension builds.
I can feel it, and see it with random eye contact.
Everything but fear rushes out of me—
a sandy blond haired woman, an Alpha, sits
on the light blue couch across the room
below a drape closed window. As her eyes roll

up into the third—I've seen that look, but
before I can get beyond the thought, Oh Fuck,
she speaks the truth of my intentions—
*The only reason you're here is because you forgot
about Reality.* Realizing I would be killed
if I tried to rob an Angel, I say, maybe I shouldn't
be here. Speaking of my death in that moment—

When you took me up into the stars
I knew you in the absence of time. Nervous break-
down to absolute calm, still on one knee
I think of my childhood, waiting for the church
bus, holding hands with my brother,
little bowties beneath a blue sky.

Max E.

William D. Booker

Pow Pow

Drive it in deep, into a vital organ—
Indifference is a sword, don't act

as though you can't see
it's so much easier
alone in the fight—
a division in thought penetrates
the chain.

We don't write our own parts
As blue collar works in the factory of mind.

I show up, on time, ready to work.

Tio

Open Eyed Nightmare

Thin as paper
cold as ice...
Pointy

like a nail
I see only a reflection of
fear peering back, sound
ripping & tearing

Yelling is not, running is
not... Screaming, yes, but
only inside
all I can conjure in this
open-eyed nightmare

Azul X

Crazy Ass Dream

Damn I had this crazy ass dream! I was living in America but it was a different America. In this dream all of our nation's former presidents were African-American males and our current president was a caucasian male. Damn I was having a crazy ass dream!

A lot of our young white males were being killed due to white-on-white gang violence. Most of them had come from lower income communities and felt there was no hope. Thousands and thousands of these young white men were killing one another every year. But suddenly our great country had come up with a solution. They decided to ban all guns outside of law enforcement and our U.S. soldiers. It was something to be proud of. America realized that all white lives matter. Damn I was having a crazy ass dream!

When it came to drug cases, most white men were denied meaningful legal representation, pressured by the threat of lengthy sentences into a plea bargain, and then placed under formal control. But once again America had come up with a solution. They decided to change the drug laws and put more of our young white men in treatment programs instead of prisons. No longer was our justice system sending our young white men up the river, because America finally realized that white lives matter, too. Damn I was having a crazy ass dream!

Now I'm lying in bed with my eyes open inside a prison dorm. I see so many men of my color, who have been convicted for selling drugs. It looks like I made it back to the real world. The real world where black lives don't matter.

It was a cool ass dream though.

Tio

20/20

In the world living free ...

sockets full of mud ...

deepest shade of blackness ...

ego & swag larger than Zeus ...

clarity ... clear as mud

O ... shit! Blk & wht ...

gotta ... go! ... Gotta ... go ...

in this tomb ... hindsight is

20/20

Whatever color we are you are
still my brothers, my sisters, my fathers, all
my beautiful mother whose been dead since the 80s
but who is a people person who cooks fried chicken
and pork chops for everybody that comes along—
get a plate.

When the police come to collect
evidence at our house, the bullet casings they find
will open their mouths to the plate of food
before them. No one had died
from the pow pow of my gun, but realized
that we are very much alive and we eat as one.

Cody S. Waldrip

Transcending the 9th Gate of this Altered Illusion

Damn this place,
Damn this brain,
Damn the man,
Damn insane,
Not knowing,
Not caring,
Can't help but showing
My distance,
This system is fucked,
So is my brain,

I'm trying to rationalize things in my mind—
Why don't I just sign a plea
And go to prison? Why do people keep
Falling out of my life? Why do they want
To put any of us in prison?
We didn't hurt anyone,

We just got high. There is a guy
Who stabbed someone in the next cell
And he's going home tonight.
Who can you trust? All I wanna do
Is kick the door, scream at the shit
Eaters till I go blind,

So pissed off,
But still at ease,
All conflicted
I wanna fall on my knees,
Give it all up.
Since I have no control,
I loose myself.
I want to take my own
Free will, my voice,
Back. I don't give a fuck
About my soul.

J. G.

Mama's Boy in the Man Box

Growing up, I was "groomed"
into what a man should be. Not always
from my father but from many forms—
watching a WCW wrestling match, or
Kung Fu movies. It seemed only right
to be a tough guy type. Or maybe
by doing all those things, the old man
would say, "that'll put hair
on your chest, boy."

How about watching my dad grab
mom by her brown hair and throw
her against the wall for the pork chops
not being ready when he came home
from a long day in a big rig. Softer,
I went the other way, promising myself
never to be *that* dad. He was a monster,
but he was our monster. And my brother
became well groomed to the stuff
we don't talk about.

Everyone remembers Kelly Bundy
coming on the sets with her short
black leather skirts getting all
the woos, or the tits from scary movies—
I knew every one. What about all
the times us boys had to get firewood
while my sisters washed the dishes?
And I could never forget the rush
of the hunt on the 400 acres
of my grandfather's land, a half Sioux
Native, who said we had to drink
the blood of our first kill.

I was proud to honor the law
of the land—kill only what you plan
to eat. Getting that deer, starting that
fire, having raw power.

J. G.

A Walking Woman

Stranded in darkness
Following never-ending yellow lines
Chased by bright eyes
And left by so many
Feet ache these broken hills
Thoughts race through my head
Of what can happen before dawn
In need of an angel to stop
I hope for a devil
I need money.

Drama

Untitled

Opening your eyes to joy
But only after the sorrow

Knowing hate from the shameful pain of love

Learning the value of truth from lies

Learn to swim or drown
Life vest made of lead

Your life line an anchor. Aboard the Titanic.
Just enough lifeboats except for you
aboard the U.S.S. Justice System what should I
do.