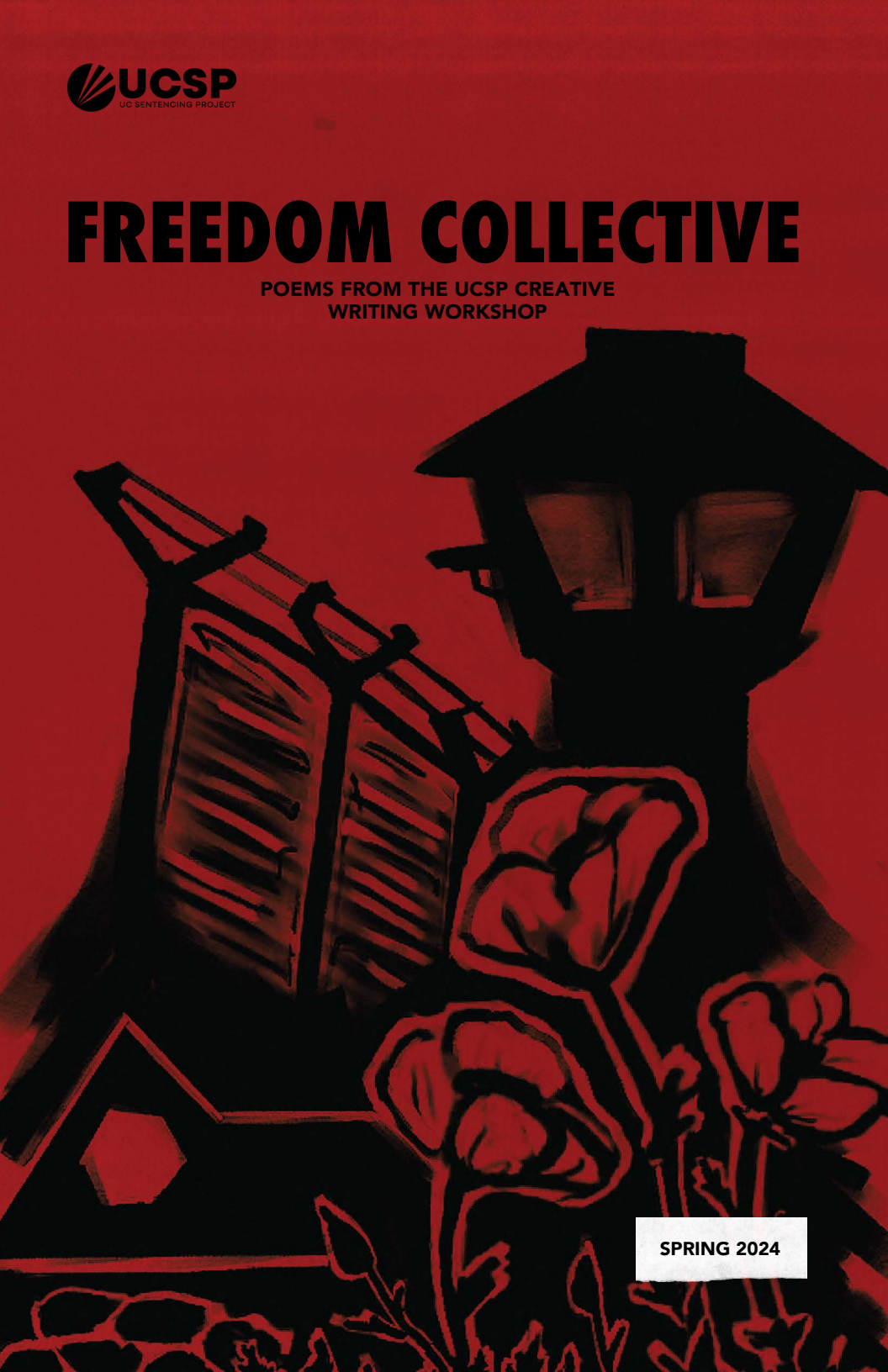


FREEDOM COLLECTIVE

POEMS FROM THE UCSP CREATIVE
WRITING WORKSHOP

A stylized illustration in a dark, moody color palette. It features a house with a chimney on the left, a large lantern on the right, and several flowers in the foreground. The style is reminiscent of a woodcut or a high-contrast photograph.

SPRING 2024

POEMS BY

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Collective Statement on the UCSP Poetry Workshop

California Institution for Women, Spring 2024

What does it mean to be able to freely express oneself while not a free member of society? That is the question that the Spring 2024 Writing Group at CIW answered with heart, enthusiasm, reflection, openness, and candor. Whilst reading many different styles of poetry, our group was able to create our own expressions in a loving, nurturing, educated, and safe environment. Casting aside our differences, we came together united in expressing our innermost fears, realities, thoughts, and desires. The writer's workshop at CIW has brought several different types of personalities and women together and as a group we created a lasting bond between us. It has allowed us to dig deep and share raw emotions without judgment therefore fostering unconditional trust among us. We gave each other a combination of positive feedback and constructive criticism, allowing each of us to grow personally and as a collective. As poets, we consider ourselves not a people but a collaboration of mental intellectuals bound by unspoken feelings. We are one, we see our words and feel our thoughts of pain and happiness.

In this workshop we experimented with different styles of poetry, and wrote poems using prompts to aid in writing that particular style. This group's acceptance of each other's writing has allowed each of us to spread our poetic wings. We put aside any structured style and adopted a new free form way of expressing our emotions. Reading each other's work, we opened windows into each other's souls. We found each other to be witty, insightful, and profound. We became friends and relayed our own literary dreams and possibilities with each other.

To us, writing poetry means telling the whole truth that would be too ugly to speak: the blood and guts on the walls, not the beautiful mask you wear day to day. Poetry is the expression of our inner voices and can be expressed without judgment or criticism. To us, poetry is never wrong when it is from within one's soul, heart, mind, or experiences. Poetry lets others see our true selves and is a vehicle to express the things we cannot find the words to say in plain English. Poetry is a drawing together of our collective journeys, a way to find commonality despite our differences. As Incarcerated Poets, we often feel stifled or gagged, unable to say what we really think or feel without fear of repercussions. Poetry allows us to transcend that fear. We feel freedom. We feel free spirited. We are on another planet when we are writing. Poetry gave us a voice to shout bravely into the wind or lament our pain into the void. It is ours and through it we are unconquerable.



DAREA ROWANS

Heat Waves

next to you
as we walk together holding
one another's hands,
as the sweat makes our fingers slide
between one another's,
making the grip go tighter
and then further apart

as I'm walking and thinking to myself,
oh how sexy a man can be in the shimmer
sweat,
as the sunlight heats his face and body
thinking to myself how can one be so evil
to a person who he says he loves
and be so sexy at the same time
Is he real or is the sun making me
have heat hallucinations again
as the sun cools off,
I start to see the monster again
that I have not loved the night before

trying to fall asleep to wake again
and hold the hand of the shimmer I long for

Locked Up Away

locked up away
no one to love me
no one who loves me
only words from strangers
so I learn to hate
 Fake,
betrayal
sit here just to rot, till time is up
is it a test or just a time out
wherever it is, I'm learning
learning to be a better kind of bad
badder than before, than I have ever been
love fails, walls built high
isolation
loneliness in a dark, dark place
darker than ever
with nothing to survive
with no one by my side
headaches all the time
no one to trust or talk to
no friends as I look around
it's loud in the quietness
of strangers' voices
can't cry anymore, it's weakness
bullies, learn to survive and fight
prison is hard to survive alone
but I have no choice today

How Far I'll Go

I am from where the cold river runs down the middle
Where I'm from love forever waits
Where I would walk till my legs grow tired and skinny
That's where I pick up
Bright spark with a twist, then
Just to start all over again
Love is why I stay
If not then I would want to
Fly far away to a bright day
I'm from where the trees grow tall and green
There I'm lost beside myself
Shivering purple fingernails forced to finally sleep

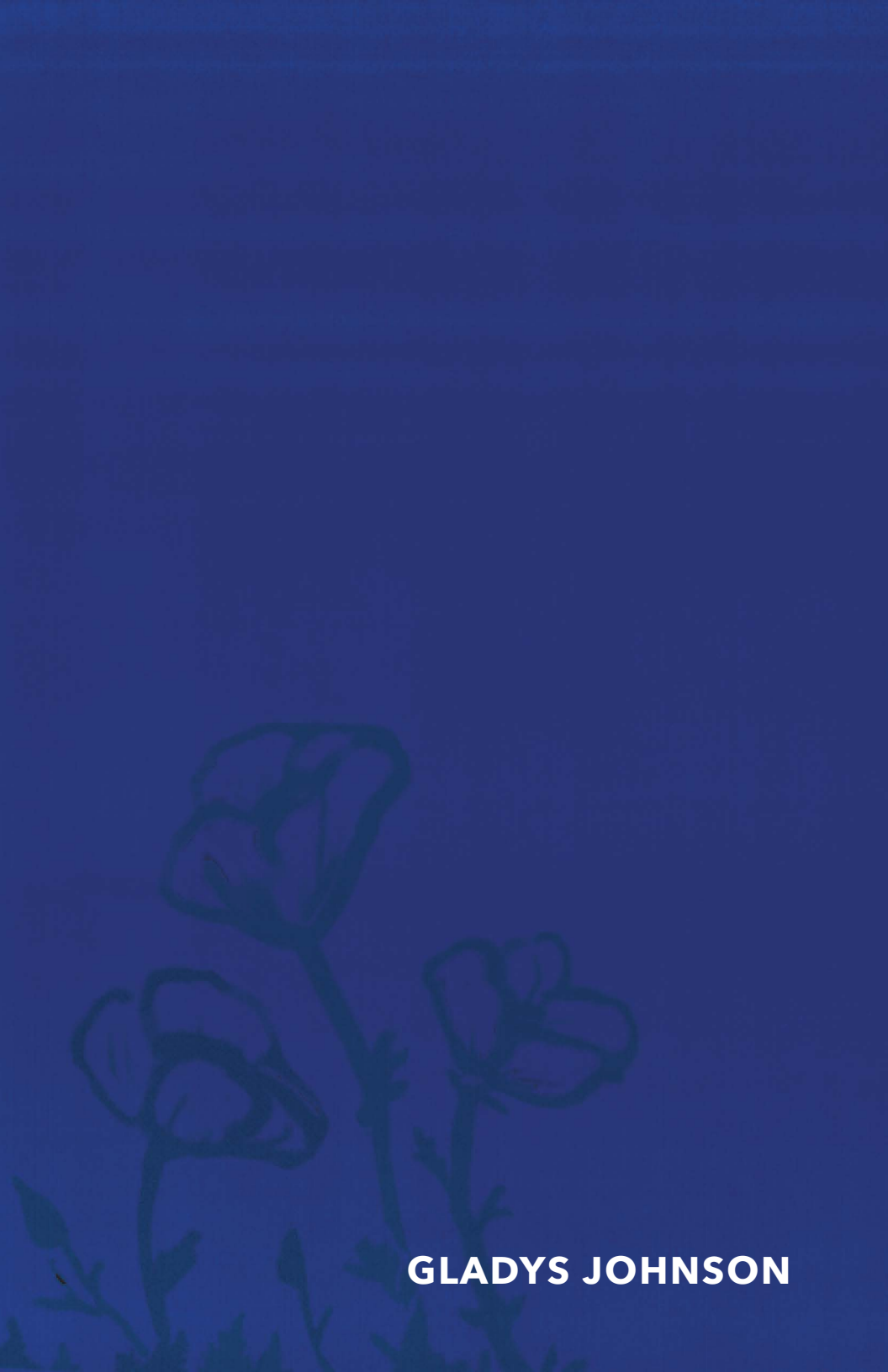
With You

When I am with you, I am strong
Even though I can't think straight
I'm dizzy in love spells
Is my mind playing games on me again?
How does love think straight?
Does love follow if you try to go another way?
What if love doesn't know what love is
What if love has too much pride
Is it really called pride
Does love ever hate the other side?
What did I do to deserve what looks like revenge?
Love is not what it seems
My love is ugly inside or something revengeful
Not towards you or anyone else
Just to me
That's what I love, something that's
Mean and hateful towards me
Only me

Love Wish

Wishes
Things that we all wish for
What do wishes look like
Do wishes look like something
Do they feel like anything?
Maybe they do
Wishes to me feel like happiness
They feel like completion or Joy

Or to some they are different
They are sad
They have no end
They always end up just being
The wish that you wish you
Never would have wished in
The first place
Wishes are broken dreams
Dreams that repeat themselves



GLADYS JOHNSON

L.O.V.E

When I say I L.O.V.E. you
I mean it from the very depths
of my soul.

When I say I love you sometimes
I feel you don't accept my words.

When I say I love you do you
believe me?

When I say I love you could you
ever love me back?

When I say I love you could
you ever forgive me?

When I say I love you do you
think it is all hot air?

When I say I love you
I truly L.O.V.E. you

I Am From

I am from heroin. Everything else
was just a condition, experience,
and aftermath from this thing
called heroin.

Purpose

It's not actually a wreck per se
It's been an accident over and over again
Tripping over a curb all throughout my life
and never being able to stay up right.
I fall. I get up. And I fall again.
Could this be purposeful?
Could I want this to happen?
How do I stop these continuance wrecks?
Will my final wreck be self compulsion?

Tamed

You are like a snow flurry
You are like a scuttlebug
You are like raging teeth baring carnivorous beast

Is this like the infamous question
"Who are you?"
Or is this me telling you what I want you to believe
What I only want you to know.
Wait! I can't get too in depth!
I can't let you know my inner workings.

But do I even care what you will find out about me?
Do I even care what you'll think of me?
Hell no I don't care!!
Wait! The little scuttlebug does care.
The carnivorous beast wants to be tamed
and the snow flurry I live in
just wants there to be an easy snow fall.



MINDY JONES

Disposable

I need to get in touch with who I am
As I stand on the dusty stage it is dark
There is no handy script to guide me
A spotlight suddenly shines on the velvet curtain

I fear parting the heavy folds to explore
I am filled with painful secrets
My well-fed demons lurk
They are a part of my story but not me

A chorus of laughing voices wait in the wings
I am many jagged pieces of a human puzzle
I take a shaky bow to applause from faceless
But I stand alone in the cavernous space

No closer to a "who am I" answer
Than the nameless janitor
Slowly sweeping the litter strewn floor
To dispose of my puzzle pieces easily

Ode to my Eyes

You show me there is great beauty
surrounding razor wire topped fences

Seeing trees breathing in and out sighing
dropping dead leaves to crunch under foot

Eyelids gently shielding you from the night
though your visions continue, now called dreams

My gift to you: dark glasses to block bright sun
Your gift to me: fewer wrinkles. Thank you

Invisible Middle Child

Beautiful baby LaCinda first born
Duplicate daughter MaLinda afterthought
Cindy and Mindy. Names so alike but...
Brunette and blonde, quiet and boisterous
Different as night and day
Waiting for the son to be born and shine.

My name should be Meat
smothered between to pieces of white
bread called siblings

Neither smart nor stupid, just there.
Neither pretty nor ugly,
just there - nothing special.

Always in the middle, invisible.

Colorless

I am a colorless lump of clay today
My tears create grooves where my face
should be
but isn't

Cruel, cold, hands force shape
without kindness or care.
Fists of hate pound relentlessly
Returning me to a colorless lump of clay.

Is this what I am meant to be forever?

Haiku

A dying tree weeps
No longer casting shade down
Now feeding the earth

The clock ticks slowly
Watched by student's blank stares
The teacher drones on



ZABEL KAZANJIAN

Wreck

I lean my head as you
I aged as you
Your demise is noticed
My crippleness is obscured
We both need structural changes
My changes incorporate emotional
I sense your obscurity as I rise upon you
Do I hide mine well?
Your ribs are many
Your ribs are worn on the sides
I once felt your ribs
Now I am not allowed to feel your ribs
You are not alone
You have a family
Yet you define the kingdom wreck

Where I'm From

I am from Paul Revere
I am from Climbing Mulberry Trees
I am from Amethyst Bracelet
I am from the Impressionists
I am from Stuffed Grape Leaves
I am from Raking colorful leaves
I am from Tulips
I am from crispness in the air
I am from Immigrants of Pine Flag
I am from museums and gardens
I am from snowballs
I am from worldwide traveling
I am from achievement praises
I am from homemade string cheese
I am from survivors of genocide

Ode to “Mayrig” Mother

Devoted to all of you
Loved us unconditionally
Erected us stoutly
Nurtured us endlessly

Peacemaker of us all
Always in a positive manner
Fond of our goals
Oversaw our achievements

Always excited to greet us
Embracing us with love
Comforting us with careesses
Teaching us love, faith, and hope

Enthusiasm for love of life
Accepted our individual characters
Instructed us excellent values
You had a soul of an angel

You Are Difficult to Love

You are difficult to love
You are a tigress with beautiful lines
Your destiny is unknown
You devour class
You are locked in a gold cage
You travel among the unknown
You were never meant to be silenced
You want him out of your life
You are afraid of the unknown
You know that love is not enough
You know that trust is gone
You know that respect is gone
You realize that there is never a better time
You must unleash the energetic tigress in you
You will prosper without him



ELIJAH LEÓN

From Victim to A Survivor

I'd light a match to get out of the dark
I'd take a drink to drown the nightmares
Nightmares that happened in the day
Weekend visits with Dad, open parks with no one around
Always looking for love
A normal love... unbroken
Cause I hated the kind I'd been given
Behind closed doors with angry hugs...
And quiet nights that didn't feel right
I changed my identity, burning it down to ashes
I spun in disaster trying to run from the pain
I lost my freedom from walking broken...
And numbing hurts substances
Breaking loose from addiction
I found true freedom in prison ...
stronger...letting go of all the pain...
Healing within... survived.

Love Rescues

You are a dog mistreated and left on the roadside
Your growl is deep
Unsure of what comes next
Wrapped up in a blanket of abandoned love...
Then a comfortable breeze walked by you
Tongue hanging, tongue twisted, you wagged your ragged tail
She has kind eyes
You let her walk you...
But you tugged too hard
Tugging at skeletons in your closet
Unruly, wild but full of love and hope
Uncontrollable dishes fling out of cabinets during heart quakes
Barking raindrops and running in rectangular circles
Why would anyone bother rescuing you?
Apprehensive shadows making what lies beneath...
All the while craving snacks of affection
Used to devastating, punishing rejection
But her love for this rescue
Wouldn't derail her caution signs
Why can't you obey, just be a good boy?
See that not everyone comes with red eyes
Not everyone fails to love kindly
You can stop running in circles
Jump off the uncertain love merry go round...
And... let love find you...
And wrap you like a blanket.

From Destruction to Discovery

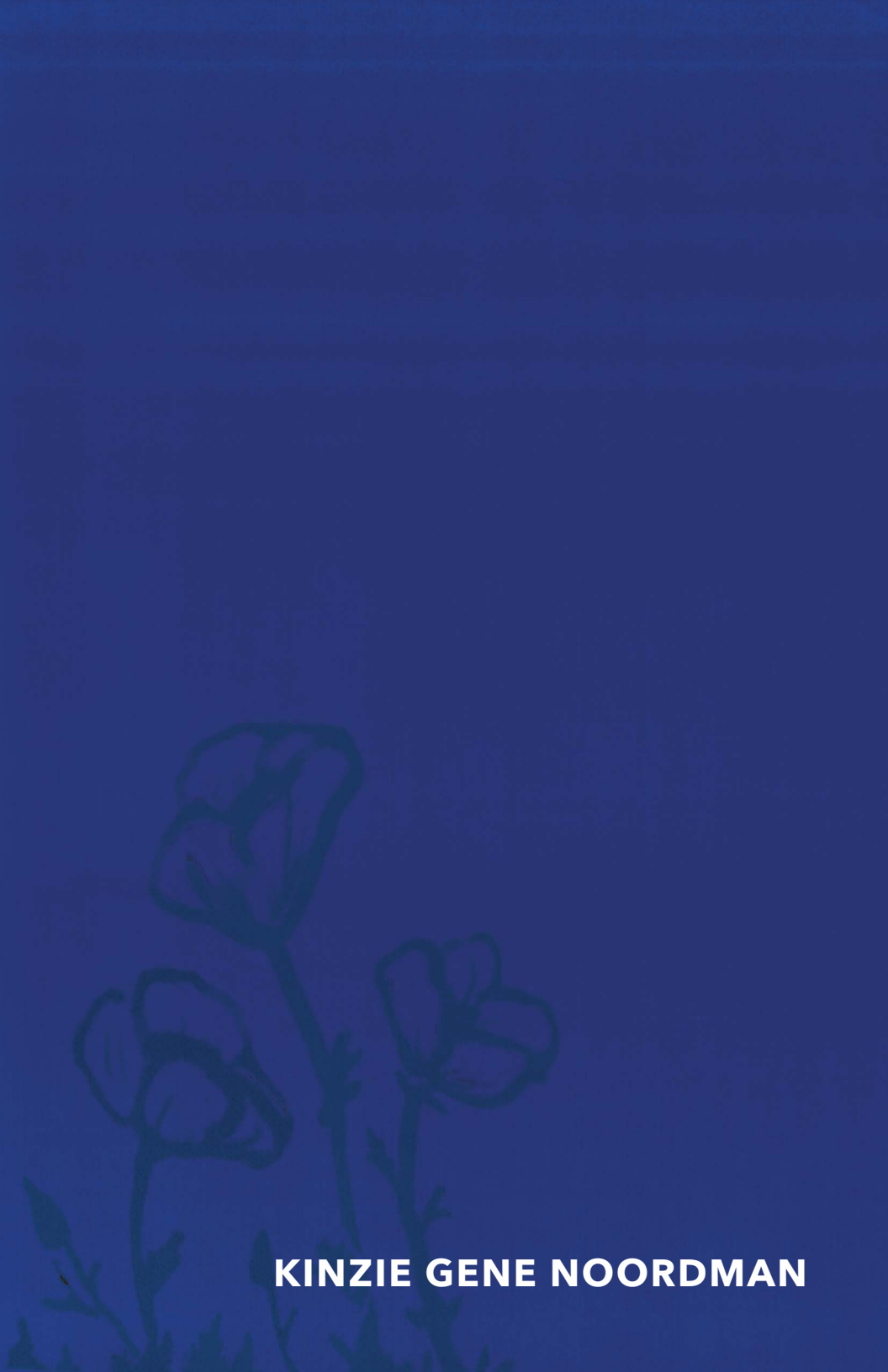
I dabbled with substances of destruction and dalliances
caused pain, havoc, damaged lives...
I was defective, defunct, to society,
I dealt with someone else who was just like me.
That day we decided to commit a robbery....
I knew deep inside it was definitely the wrong thing to do
but the fact we needed the money for our habit was undebatable.
The adrenaline, lack of fear... damnable and dangerous
I'd reached my dead end, dead duck, dead loss, debauched
And now debacle I'd become would soon have me subdued
Now...behind steel doors, brick walls and concrete...defeated
I'm left with a deep impact due to my then, here and now... with no delay.
I continue to reconstruct any brokenness I see within,
deleting everything that is no good for my new way of life,
never again will I deprive myself of all the potential I have...
I will continue to move forward and design a different,
more developed, dignified way to live, anxious to discover
all the possibilities due to the drive I have within myself

Beautiful Ruins

You're a volcano erupting green smoke
bleeding love lava seeps down...
I breathe in the pain,
Knots in my throat–
Knives in my back...
I choke on your sharp turns
Edges cut invisibly deep–
Inside I burn cold,
My heart beats rapidly...
Caught in a web of confusion,
dreaming of your beautiful ruins–
As I nap in a far away land...
Days fly by, feelings lost inside a black hole
Things matter less more...
Having to avoid the stress
Your secrets fall short
Yet land high...
A midget walking on a tightrope
As I look up at the sky
I don't need eyes to see blind
Seeing what lies ahead from behind
A loss for words, a lost voice
Reaching for empty spaces
Surrounded by smiling faces
My bed lying empty
Yet I'm full of hopes and dreams
As you remain surrounded...
In your far away land.

My Crazy Life

It's like a revolving door
I can't take it no more
It's like the madness I just can't avoid
I trip over my feet. I toss and turn in my sleep
The madness is getting too deep
I wake up like rubber on my feet
Now I'm surrounded by steel doors, bricks, and concrete
Paying for my crazy life I made on the streets
My high life kept me so dizzy
I tried to stand up but just kept on slipping
Slipping into darkness surrounded by madness
Lost in my head feeling so reckless
I've had so many exes I can't even count
Searching for a love that just wasn't around
I've spent most of my life in paces like this
Surrounded by concrete, steel doors, and bricks
I keep hoping and praying it is not as bad as it seems
I keep hoping and praying this is all just a dream
This is my crazy life.



KINZIE GENE NOORDMAN

Ode to the Eugenic Practices of CDCr

Let's remember the good days for a moment.
The old times when eugenics was the hope for the future.
When you believed society could be saved through selection and control,
The criminals, the crazies, the druggies, those who weren't "normal."
How it all made sense back then to deny those undesirables their right to breed.
Wasn't it a happy convenience that most of them were "colored"?
What a grand and ambitious plan you had for the future!

From 1979 on, you continued your plan behind institutional walls.
They'd come in whole and leave half a woman,
Oh how easy it was to use medical terms to get them to comply,
After all, who would argue with a doctor suggesting a "necessary" procedure?
What a glorious idea to pressure and confuse those females to agree with your plans.
How cunning to make them a part of their own spaying,
As if they truly had a choice!

Once the lawsuits began you were clever and shifted blame where you could.
"It was the actions of individual doctors!" you cried,
But you and I know the truth.
For decades you condoned and encouraged such actions,
Transferring complicit doctors and nurses across the state like chess pieces,
Ensuring every clinic had one of your "agents"
Chomping at the bit to rid the world of that "criminal" gene.

When the din of all those whiners finally became too loud,
You decided just to settle.
I'm sure it was easier for you to admit some culpability,
Make a few public "apologies" and move on.
"Monetary settlements," "class members" and "coerced sterilization"
became new buzzwords.
You pretended to care about reparations and hoped
If you threw money at the problem it would go away.

Quick thinking to use such resolutions to distract them from the truth.
I know you, you had bigger plans.
They told you to "Stop the sterilizations!", and you did...
Until you found a new way to continue your plan.
Oh so clever, your designs and schemes.
The way you continue to use distance, restrictions and "gender
reassignment"
To keep them from propagating.

Wildwind

You are a wildwind:

Directionless, frantic, demanding.

You are a honeybee stuck behind a pane of glass:

Erratic, uncommitted, sullen.

You are a mouthful of too much food:

Riotous, decadent, suffocating.

You are a cornered wolf:

Bristled, unpredictable, wounded.

You are a lone poppy on a hill of dead grass:

Unexpected, loud, resilient.

You are a wool coat on a drowning man:

Clingy, lingering, familiar.

You are a wildwind,

Nothing and no one can hold you

Things I Left At the Gate: 8 Haikus

1. Human dignity
Agency over body
a thing of the past.
2. All signs of weakness.
Never let them see you cry,
regret is fatal.
3. Being satisfied.
Hunger never gratified,
always wanting more.
4. Hope for motherhood.
Empty arms long for children
never to be born.
5. Aging gracefully.
Body aches from lack of care,
rock hard mattresses.
6. Some variety.
Deprivation makes us crazy,
same thing every day.
7. Privacy and pride.
Dignity and sense of worth
ends with cough and squat.
8. Dreams for the future.
Nothing to look forward to,
you will never leave.

Insight

DAMAGES were negligible. I'm not a DEBTOR, so I'm unwilling to pay. I don't owe the DECEDENT or anyone else. It was my DECISION but not my fault. I will shout my DECLARATION that I am innocent. My DECREE of accident. I DEEM myself not guilty to avoid the DEFAMATION. It's not my fault that violence was my DEFAULT. My traumas made me a DEFENDANT, and that's the truth, it's my DEFENSE.

DAMAGES done, too numerous to count. Forever a DEBTOR, willing but unable to pay. The DECEDENT gone, yet never forgotten. My selfish DECISION, to end your life, his life and mine. I thought it was a DECLARATION of love, but truly it was a DECREE of cowardice. I DEEM myself unforgiven and bear the DEFAMATION. I used to believed it wasn't my fault that violence was my DEFAULT. That my traumas made me a DEFENDANT. But the truth is, I have no DEFENSE.



C. RAMIREZ aka DUDE

Haiku

1.
Paying it forward
With Mother Earth
is beautiful
Where am I right now?

2.
Makes you think
Really big
I'm going far
In ocean
Not sinking under

3.
Wilderness roams far
My beloved Mother Earth smiles
Thank you for shining.

4.
Love should be laughter
Love should not be painful
Love is very confusing

5.
Smell of the sage pipe
Makes me float above the sky
Where has the chief gone

Love

Why do you say I love you?
What is it you love about me?
Why do you feel I should accept those words from you?
Do you know me long enough or intimate enough
to be honest with me truly, I ask?
Where does love come from?
I have more questions about love
than answers — Why?

Lioness Roars

You are a lioness roaring who cannot be tamed.
Don't try to catch me — The Tornado,
because I will swallow you up —
which can turn into a hurricane if you don't watch out.
You may want me but you can't have me.
For I the lioness roar loudly and cannot be put on a leash.
The lioness chooses to wander all over Mother Earth!
Enjoy the Lioness for a short while, she will soon roam
again and fade into the wilderness.
And I may be spicy to taste like
chili peppers — Let me roam.

My Ladder

Climbing the ladder in life.
Always falling to the bottom
because of obstacles:
being molested or traumas
that haunt me.

Do I sit at the bottom of the ladder
because of the darkness I've had inside me for so long
or climb up and try again?

For I see the top of the ladder with the sun above.
Not allowing those to keep me at the bottom
of the Ladder of Life.

Keep your chin up C.! You are strong!
You are a survivor!
Grandma's spirit will guide you back up to the
top of your Golden Ladder.
It is within reach C.! Dry your tears.
Grandma is near!

I am healing. I am moving forward.



RENEÉ SOTO-RAMIREZ

Does He Know?

The first time I saw him, I remember getting nervous and my upper lip started to sweat. I passed by several times just so I could get a good look at him and his cuteness.

Does he know, could he know that I exist?

Does he know, I want to share his breathing space, that if it wasn't for doing time that, "I" wouldn't be getting any of his?

I ask him: do you need anything?

Yeah, I remember you from back in the day.

I said it twice as if we were old friends but we don't really know each other. We talked a while about mutual friends, bringing up things like do you remember when?

But I'm thinking, could he know? I want to invite him to my house for drinks, or maybe a movie, or a dinner table for two. Does he know that I'm in love with him right now at this very moment? Or that he's my roommate and hasn't even moved in yet?

There is no home, no cinema, not even a table for two?

We did move in together, together

We both never felt so safe in the care of someone else's love.

I kissed him a lot, and said I love you more. Bit him in places well, he's a man and yet my baby. So I bite my baby's butt, I call him poopy.

Does he know that it's over now and I still love him like back in the day, in the backyard, sometimes in late May. Maybe June or July I don't know anymore.

Was our love a winter's lie?
He was the most beautiful thing I ever laid eyes on

Does he know that I can't listen to the radio cause every song is about
him,
the lyrics are about us and yet,
it's all about me
so I need to just get over it

Could he know that this is the worst love pain I've ever endured?
It hurts and pains me like death, because he's gone and it seems like
I'll never see him again
Does he know that pain?
Could he know that this kind of love will kill me quicker than life will
Does he know?

Lover's Forecast

You are a blizzard and then a mini tornado,
changing from one to another like a
chameleonic acrobat.
So hard to stop, so fast, you can't keep up.
Coming and going as you damn well please.
Someone who could be whatever her hosts
wanted her to be.
Carelessly caring for those things that
you love.
Tornado is coming angry and as lonely
as you are.
Wrecking everything in my life, skipping
over others.
Did those other guys get hurt like myself?
Blizzard, so cold you are. Have you
no heart?
So beautiful you are, yet so monstrous.
To love your blizzard is an inconvenience.
To hold you tornado would be a
discomfort.

When Dawn Breaks

As my life turns dark nothing
is ever what it seems; under the moonlight
everyone is much kinder, peaceful, even myself.
The quiet at midnight, staring
up and into the eons beyond.
This same stillness runs wild
inside my home when I am there.
I sit at the table and can feel
the kindness of the morning paper
flapping its corner at my skin
as the breeze winds through the kitchen.
The words on this paper speak
to me louder than human nature does.
All the days are meshed together
as though weaved by an elderly
woman who hates to crochet.
The colors don't match making it
hard for them to get along.
Dawn breaks and my life turns
dark, just like the midnight before.

No One Ever

No one ever asks me if I didn't want to go,
I didn't like that movie, I never saw it before,
anyway.

No one ever asks me how I am not doing.
That's okay thank you, I'm not fine.

No one ever asks me are you hungry,
because you look full.
I'm starving, I'll just have a salad and
a glass of water.

No one ever asks me what my name isn't.
Because I'm nameless, it starts with an M.
Still, I'm nameless to them.

No one ever asks me shit anymore about
anything.
I know everything about nothing.
So don't even ask her.

Wrecks

Wreck: to destroy by crashing into something.
The very definition of my DNA and chromosomes.
Passing down shipwrecked genes of destruction.
Hitting harder than rapids, roaring
waves so angry, pulling me under
as the current is made to do.
I stroke like oars fighting hardness
of water that is unfriendly and judgemental.
I've been doing this for so long,
I can't be defeated. There is a
place past the roughness of waves
deep in the ocean that is a friend.
When I arrive, making peace with the sea.
Leaving the wreckage behind I let
the current know,
"you tried to drown me
and you failed."



VENESSA VOYLES

Fixing the Ghost

Healthy, my skin glowing,
no insecurities showing,
Well adjusted and unabandoned
because it never happened.
I know and choose love because I grew feeling loved.
My babies and I playing free and so hugged,
We are at home and I'm not in prison,
Because to my voice, my Dad did listen.
No one needs rescue, no one needs fixing,
I've picked a spouse so complete, so understanding,
he is gentle, not jealous, not a walk-away Joe.
A gal like me will pick a man like her Dad, you know.
My Dad didn't hit Mom, have to feel guilty or stray,
He loved all his girls enough to just stay.
The example he set so loving and good
Unselfish, not brooding or misunderstood.
He is alive and well,
not leaving my Mom to suicide's shaming spell.
He put the key back into the ignition
Backed out of the garage, peacefully sat down in the kitchen,
He tore up the suicide note, he poured the booze back in the bottle.
He took his foot off the throttle,
rather than letting the carbon monoxide put him to sleep,
Not leaving behind his girls to weep.
My father did not kill himself
Leaving me to seek love from a bottle off a shelf.
No, in my dream he didn't commit suicide,
I don't wake up still crying because Daddy died.

Vivienne & Jack

When I say I love you I mean
you are a cool breeze on a warm day,
the exact moment I walk under an old oak into the shade.
You are my air.

When I say I love you I need you to know
I will be your shelter even when caught in a storm
You are my home.

When I say I love you I mean
You're the most perfect being I've ever seen.
You are my beauty.

When I say I love you I say I want to be
the person you wake to when you've had a bad dream.
You are my comfort.

When I say I love you I want you to know
I want to teach you to read, help your brain to grow.
You are my knowledge.

When I said I love you I mean
I want to ease your pain and frustration.
You are my patience.

When I say I love you I mean
I want to help usher you in the right direction
You are my North.

Vivienne & Jack cont.

When I say I love you
please see you are my reflection and
you are the best parts of me.

I say I love you as I close my eyes,
meaning you are:
my air, my home, my beauty, my comfort,
my knowledge, my patience, my north,
my reflection, my best parts.

You are my children.
I love you means you are my all.

Ode to Shame

I haunt your utterly sleepless night,
Lurking as you wake with fright.
I tell you, "go ahead pick up the drink,"
If I were you I'd not want to think
I explain all the ways you just aren't enough,
Should simply existing be this tough?
I hate your weight, your voice, your hair,
Your goddamned nose I can hardly bare.
I have chosen your lovers, even your friends
Hoping your choices bring your life to an end.
I occupy every single corner of your mind,
It makes me angry you still long to be kind.
You are not enough, not worthy at all
You have no soft place left to fall.
In this bed your thoughts are screaming,
You threw your Son while he was still beaming.
You've nothing left and you matter not,
I am you every waking thought.
Your parents didn't love you, they didn't stay
Yet even they didn't get their babies taken away.
Your kids were much too good for you,
The court said they desire better, too.
So here you are in this dark though cell,
So you really hear me I will yell:
You couldn't keep them, couldn't even be a Momma,
Because of me: your regret, shame and life long trauma.

Girl in Pigtails

You are not the little girl in pigtails
Sitting on the curb in front of your Elementary school, forgotten
You are no longer abandoned.

You are not his broken pieces to be fit together.
You are not a dumpster for his tossing of low self-esteem.
The extra of your hips is not baggage but the life of two extraordinary
beings.

You are hair blowing in the breeze,
Hot days, warm nights, windows down,
Smiling imperfection.
You are meant for the strong;
You are made for one who knows how to love.
You are remembered.

You are too much sun;
Too smart;
Too brave;
Too opinionated;
Too analytical;
Too fair;
Too much for hands over your mouth,
Too much to be silenced.
You are uninhibited survival.

He couldn't stand that close to sunshine.
He didn't dim you.
You are still breathing, still breathtaking
You are a woman with her hair down,
wild and free against the wind.
You are blazing trails.
You are not the girl in pigtails on the curb.

Spilled Perfection

I am from the illusion of perfection, expectation;
The smell of Mama's fried chicken, home made
Pumpkin pies and beechwood aged ale on his
Breath.

I am from 12 step failure and pretending to be okay;
The beautiful housewife and the Jarhead biker,
His suicide is my abandonment. Forever holding
on too tight when I should let go.

I am from the perfect house with the white trimmed
Front porch, blossoming flowers, the American flag,
And grass freshly cut in perfect lines.

I am from straight A's, awards and accolades
So no one sees my covering my eyes when he
Hits her. Screaming. Domestic Violence. The cleanest
Home, the dirtiest secrets.

I am from doing all we can with what we have
Cycles of generational trauma trying to be broken but
Falling short. I am from spilled potential yearning
For normalcy. I am the haunted and the sorrow.
I am from the amber colored liquid, the
Broken dreams.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Darea Rowens grew up in a small town up north in Red Bluff, CA. She has lived there for 30 years, where she has 4 children and a husband. She is learning from life as it goes on each day. She is finding that writing is a great way to express herself and feelings, and is turning it into a passion of hers. A second passion of her life, is taking photos of anything.

Gladys Johnson is a beginner in poetry, but making her way. She was born and raised in San Francisco, CA. 50 years on this Earth and still keeping her mind open to keep on learning everyday.

Mindy Jones is a state certified drug and alcohol counselor who embraces poetry as an escape from everyday life. Her two beautiful daughters blessed her with eleven amazing grandchildren. Poetry allows Mindy to express her joy and gratitude for their loving support.

Zabel Kazanjian lives in LA, and grew up in Boston. She enjoys travel, museums, gardens, cultures, and learning. She was named after a famous Armenian poet.

Elijah León grew up in San Diego, CA. Since a very young age he has always displaced a passion in the arts. Poetry has given him the ability to communicate how he feels when he couldn't find the right things to say.

Victoria Martinez has an infinity of love for animals, and adores to watch old Black and White movies. Bollywood music always puts her in the best state of mind on a bad day. Even though she doesn't speak a word of punjabi, except this: Namaste!

Kinzie Gene Noordman's endeavor into writing began at 15 when she wrote a love poem about her cat Winston. She has continued both her writing and education despite being incarcerated shortly after graduating highschool. During her 21 years of carceral experience, Kinzie has earned three associate degrees, a bachelors, and is currently a graduate student in the CSU Dominguez Hills HUX program. She is an editor of CIW's prison newsletter, The Razor Wire, and also published her autobiography under a penname in "Embracing Dawn" by Marie Rodriguez. Kinzie's passions include sci-fi, octopuses, restorative justice, and showing the world that true change is possible.

Born on the East Coast, **C. Ramirez aka Dude** and has love for the great Albert Einstein, who has inspired him in his adult life. Poetry has given him the space to express himself. He likes being in the ocean freely. He loves mahjong and coffee to relax.

Reneé Soto-Ramirez is 49 years old and originally from Los Angeles. She is a published author and inventor. In her spare time she enjoys doing arts and crafts, using splash art. Reneé spends many hours expressing herself using these outlets. She hopes one day she can share them all world wide in hopes to connect with others alike.

Venessa Voyles is a graduate of UC Davis who resides in Northern California, the left coast, the best coast. She hails originally from Detroit. Venessa has a life long love of all things San Francisco Giants and attended a game of every World Series they've played since 2002. She is an advocate and a dreamer, adores her children and her dog. She is named with a V, a ridiculous family tradition she passed on to her own children.

About the UC Sentencing Project, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, and UCLA Center for the Study of Women|Barbra Streisand Center

The **University of California Sentencing Project** (UCSP) mobilizes interdisciplinary and multi-genre modes of research and dissemination to address the needs of people who have faced long-term sentences in California's prisons designated for women.

To find out more information or get involved in UCSP, contact us at ucsentencingproject@women.ucla.edu or see our website: <https://csw.ucla.edu/ucsp>

The **California Coalition for Women Prisoners** (CCWP) is a statewide organization of people inside and outside prison walls that monitors and challenges abusive conditions inside California prisons designated for women and advocates for the release of incarcerated people through legal advocacy, campaign organizing, policy advocacy, grassroots media production, and mutual aid efforts. CCWP sees the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the prison-industrial complex and prioritizes the leadership of the people, families, and communities most impacted in building this movement.

The **UCLA Center for the Study of Women|Streisand Center** works towards a world in which education and scholarship are tools for social justice feminism, improving the lives of people of all genders. The UCLA Center for the Study of Women is an internationally recognized center for research on gender, sexuality, and women's issues and the first organized research unit of its kind in the University of California system.

Acknowledgments + Sources

During the course of this Creative Writing Workshop, we read many poems and pieces of creative writing, and created writing exercises responding to their work. Below are some of the poems we read and wrote alongside:

Nazik al-Mala'ika, "Revolt Against the Sun"
Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art"
Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me"
Diane Di Prima, "I am a Shadow"
June Jordan, "Intifada Incantation: Poem #8 for b.b.L."
Etheridge Knight, "Haiku"
Yusef Komunyakaa, "Corrigenda"
Robin Coste Lewis, "The Wilde Women of Aiken"
Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival"
Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not A Luxury"
George Ella Lyon, "Where I'm From"
Adrienne Rich, "Diving Into the Wreck"
Solmaz Sharif, "Safe House"
Solmaz Sharif, "Look"
Warsan Shire, "Backwards"
Warsan Shire, "For Women Who Are Difficult to Love"
Karmyn Valentine, "Mikaya"
Sara Ylen, "Intentions"

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