

FREEDOM COLLECTIVE

POEMS FROM THE UCSP CREATIVE
WRITING WORKSHOP



Spring 2025

Poems By

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Collective Statement on the UCSP Poetry Workshop

California Institution for Women, Spring 2025

On Thursdays, we write. We map our edges and curves, find our feelings, and set out through the wilderness of undiscovered ideas and truths. The freedom of being more than our number, more than our last names, more than our crime or our coverage, means we can see ourselves more clearly. The words and warmth of the poets we write beside show us where we've been, where we are, and where we want to go.

The UCSP Creative Writing group serves as a portal into the lives and inner worlds of incarcerated women. In it, we tap into our inner muse and self-expression that would otherwise be dormant. For us, it creates a diversion that takes us away from both the chaos and the sadness of prison life. We support each other, give feedback, and express ourselves without judgement and the self-criticism so easy to hide behind. This group is an outlet that not only allows and encourages exploration of feeling, but also gives us a deeper, more vivid understanding of what poetry can do. Any conversation we have had is with the purpose of encouragement and opportunity for improvement and collective growth. We have connected with the poet in our soul. As incarcerated writers, we discovered a freedom we never thought possible behind these walls. By sharing our work, we allow others a glimpse behind the razor wire.

For us, poetry is an escape from prison. Lightning bolt moments of heart and mind. Explaining truths about the system not widely known. Fundamental healing. We nurture the creation of beauty through words. Like a glass of marbles - delicate to the eyes. Like rippling waves of the ocean - we are poetry.

This group fits like an ugly handmade sweater. Raw and real. You might not always wanna wear it. Sometimes it pokes and scratches where you wish it wouldn't. But the sweater knows you, knows your flesh. Each thread has you in mind. Writing our truths is hard, it is thoughtful, it is a catalyst for revolutionizing our being on the page. But like a tiny shameful seedling, beaten and helpless and destined to fail in the confinement of the prison, we have found our way between the littlest crevices of concrete, through the solid cinder blocks of darkness and chains. In our writing we have crawled through the pain, growing softer with each poem. Blooming into happiness of self love, hope and transformation, in these poems we are freeing ourselves. Never to be forgotten.



AIMEE GANA

Our Fight Poem

I shine some hope,
I really try.
To free you from shackles
That constrain your mind,
Body, and spirit.

I present myself to you,
To illuminate a hidden world
Where nobody seems to hear your cries.
To gently remind you,
Of what it means to be human.

In this, our tormented world,
I regard you with tenderness and grace.
You quench my warmth toward you,
Leaving me drained yet still
With utmost regard
For your deplorable conditions
That smack of unnecessary restraints.

Living invisibly, you explore your own pain
As it hits your broken, aching bones
To its core, with
Strength mustered
From years of abuse and oppression,
From decades of carrying guilt and shame,
From losing connection with loved ones
Feeling forsaken and abandoned
Not knowing how your story will unfold.

I hold you up to continue our fight,
Even as your hunched body unwillingly resists
Mirroring tension
Between surviving and clinging to dear life.

Vulnerable and emotionally wounded,
I urge you not to surrender the fort.
You and me.
We continue this fight.

Alliteration

I wanted to do this homework but instead
I dilly dallied and dragged my feet
Waiting for pure inspiration, in its pure form.

To form a mental image in my mind, over
Immense imaginations of freedom from these
Constructed constraints, because I have

Nothing normal to write about, until
Everything returns to normal soon, and
Who even knows what normal is anymore.

Remember Me

I want to stay vigilant in the wake
Of this seemingly unending nightmare. I never want
To get lost in reverie.

I want to stand up to your abuses
And not cower to your authority and rules
That don't make sense. I want to never be
Apathetic from seeing too much of your
Deliberate indifference. I want your insults
To inflame me
And move me to protect my dignity even more.
I want to rise above the putdowns spewed out
Under the guise of constructive criticism,
Making me feel less than what I believe I am.
I want you to stop holding me down in shackles,
Or silencing me with censorship, repressing
The reality of my surroundings.

I want to rise above your condemnations and
Escape from the confines of your judgment.
I want your efforts to hold me down with
Your labels, match my own attempts
To reach my potential.
I want this whole experience to empower me
And reignite the voices that have always been in me.
I want to be a champion for what is fundamentally right.

I want you to remember me
For fighting a good fight, for freedom, for all.
I don't ever want my work
To have no relevance, as if
My efforts were all in vain.

I want a second chance
To make things right. I never want to forget
So I don't get to repeat.
Remember me for my present actions
As these are my redemption.

Waiting for You

Folded in the seams of my heartache
Is a nagging pain
That stubbornly remains.
A reminder of relationships, now tainted
By my callous actions.

Etched in my memory
Is that look of disdain
Silently speaking of my unworthiness,
As though undeserving of your love.

There is always that watchful eye that
Questions the return
Of the trust I once shattered.

There's that cautiousness in your embrace
When you tighten and loosen your grip
As if analyzing each hurt I inflicted.

I hear hesitation in your voice,
And that awkward quaver
Caused by years of disconnect.

But I see your guarded optimism
Even as things still look bleak.
And so, I continue
To fumble for forgiveness
Between sporadic conversations
And the way I live today.
As I wait for you
To come around
Eventually.

Please do not see me
As a mere token
For what we can still become.
An object you discard and forget about.
But rather,
Remember me as a penitent
Who'll forever be seeking
Your unspoken absolution.

Please. Remember. Me.



C. RAMIREZ (DUDE)

Maple (Haikus)

Maple tree lick them
The taste of syrup lingers sweet
Hug the sticky tree

How tall can you grow
I look up past the snow wow!
To the sky I climb

Maple tree lick them
Gathering the syrup for me
Pour on my waffles

Water (Haikus)

with Shawnda Sapier

Beautiful water
Not going under it flows
Will water stand still

Mysterious love
Be still while I swim or sink
Your waves are calming

Beautiful Ocean
Great mother earth of the seas
Water love please be.

Carry me to peace
Wrap me in security
I love you water

C. RAMIREZ (DUDE)

I Want

I want freedom - I want to
 wander Mother Earth
I want pink beaches in the
 Virgin Islands with wild horses
 roaming free like me
I want clean air to breathe
I want no more pain - I want
 no more judgement from my
 past; cause it doesn't define
 me now. I come a long way
I want you to see the new me
I want to hug more, I want
 to make you laugh more, cry
 less. I want a diverse world
 around me with the Ocean at
 my feet, I want us all to
 be free. I want us
all to hug a tree. I want.

My Toxic Love

I see her - she wants me - I say ok
I give in, give her what she wants.
Wine her - Dine her. Then damn it's over.
The arguing then comes, the drinking to tune
her out. Fall asleep - wake up - she's still
in my face and space. Oh shit here we
go again. Toxic love is not for me.
Why can't I see we don't fit like a puzzle
together anymore. Why am I consumed with your
eyes! But your obsession with me turns
into resentment for me. Because your insecurities
drive me bonkers - I don't want to drink - I don't
want to fight - I don't want to be with you
no more. You have control issues - I can't
be controlled by love - your fake love for me.
Toxic love is not for me.
I can be alone - I want my love.
Self Love.



ELSA THOMPSON

The Green Cathedral

The New York City Housing Court is remarkably efficient at processing payments. My banking account was zeroed out by end of day, and we dragged our suitcases to different couches in different neighborhoods, kissing long and sleeping by the Borough Hall station.

Twelve years is a long time – too long, I guess, so you called it quits at eleven. I found out at your grandmother's funeral, the one you didn't make it to; your family's odd greeting filled in the blanks that you'd left me.

I'll never know what you did with the money, or how many women how many times. Numbers tell strange stories. I saw that you called when my name hit the papers. I was busy standing in the river in Big Basin State Park with trees growing impossibly fast all around us, up up up up up, they arch toward one another knitting into a great green cathedral —

The light glitters off the impossible dome and I lower my laughing gaze. You're standing in front of me, smiling the way you do and I feel such love, for you and from you and- your feet aren't wet, how come your feet aren't wet? I don't know where you are anymore; last I heard you lived in the Pacific Northwest with the woman you left me for. A friend of a friend told me you were a locksmith. I'm sure there's a metaphor there, but I'm tired.

Shelf Life

"I'll never forget you," you whisper in my ear,
 Our arms and legs off whispering in corners of their own.
 You have placed me on a pedestal
 A high shelf
 Out of your own reach.
 Once you rushed in the door
 Bursting with the delight of me —
 Now your sighs enter the room
 Before you do.
 I wonder when I stopped being your favorite place.
 Even now we sit
 Six feet away and six hundred,
 The not-touching between us a continent of its own.
 I'll leave, soon. Or you will.
 You can have
 Your share of the dishes
 The sweatshirt I borrowed
 And the absent-minded melodies I'd hum.
 Keep the book we didn't finish reading
 And the weight of my kiss on your collarbone.
 I only ask: fulfill your whispered promise;
 Take me down from this unreachable place.
 Do not immortalize me as a porcelain trinket
 Whose hips shouldered decades of dust.
 Remember me as a snowglobe who,
 Once shaken by your capable hands,
 Refused to settle.
 Our shelf life for show, not for keeps —
 In broken china tchotchkes and souvenir spoons
 We were always saying goodbye.

What's Needed

7. I wanted to write a love poem but
the ink had gone cold while I waited
My pen frozen in its ardor
the night you never came home

12. I wanted to write a love poem but
you wouldn't lend me the paper
suggested I look through my wallet
for a scrap of receipt-back, perhaps

3. I wanted to write a love poem but
could find no stable surface
of you to rest my words against
my heart had to hover midair

9. I wanted to write a love poem but
your meter never matched to my meaning
I started in iambs and waited for you
Your caesuras two weeks at a time

2. I wanted to write a love poem but
I faced the wrong way, and the sun
blinded me- I couldn't separate
who you were from my too-bright desire

6. I wanted to write a love poem but
you started it without me
your capitals filling the margins
until I found somewhere else to stay

Then.

I wanted to write a love poem but
before I could press down my pen
before I could select the bond and size of my paper
before I settled on a rhyme scheme
or the me
or metonymic device
before I was clever
before I was ready

You

stood behind me
your very presence a yes
and the ink is always there but never needed
because instead of writing a love poem
you told me I was one.

Control Trap (Dinner with Friends)

with L.A.M.

We arrive at their home and you park the car.
 (For a moment, I dream that I am the road itself,
 hard like asphalt with endless aways.)
 Seatbelt retract and door open we step;
 the sulfur sizzles of your attention
 press into the small of my back.
 We hello and hide the singed skin of your lying
 a dripping and burn our hosts cannot detect.
 Full glasses are filled and flow and refill;
 Our friends inhale your pungent, charming spell
 Ingest your disgust and deceit.
 I bare my teeth bitter in a smile-like shape
 nod contribute laugh small bites repeat
 Acrid intensity of pain suppressed, ignored.
 I have no desire to feel this;
 Will comment on the meal instead.
 You parade and present and produce me
 And dessert and your kiss
 Vie for the right to cloy my throat.
 Goodbyes and next times wasn't this fun me home;
 My shoes dress earrings hair tumble down
 But your stagnant particles cling to my skin.
 No pumice stone can slough you off, though
 I push the heat and stand in the stream—
 (I close my eyes and dream myself a volcano.
 I scorch the land with my lava: my tears matter here.)
 Thank God for the wine. I claim headache,
 Turn off the light to feign sleep.
 I have turned my heart from you, twisted it
 toward the earth: a spade now
 to burrow in the quiet of
 a damp and mossy somewhere.



EMILY PACO

Walk in Faith

When my whole world is shaking
I pray to my God
and I ask him to help me
find a way & to please
keep my family and friends safe.

Movement Song

Remember me as a lioness that walks with her head held high, so fierce respect & beauty radiate off her. So loyal, attentive & protective to the ones she loves so dearly when thoughts of me come to mind little butterflies begin dancing in your stomach, chocolate fudge pours over your heart, and a smile suddenly appears on your beautiful face.

Remember me as a best friend whose loyalty has no limits. Please do not remember me as a drug addict whose pipe stole all my dignity and filled my void with false pride.

Please do not remember me as a heartbroken little girl who pushed you away because my guilt spoke volumes with only one look from you.

Your promise to always be there for our children is without a doubt the only solid ground I have to stand on.

We were always saying goodbye till we finally found the strength to let go.

I just hope when thoughts of me come to mind little butterflies begin dancing in your stomach, chocolate fudge pours over your heart, and a smile suddenly appears on your beautiful face.

Not Another Love Poem

I wanted to write a love poem but I couldn't,
wouldn't find the time. I wanted to
write a love poem but decided it was a waste
of time. I wanted to write a love poem but when
I finally sat down to write, you
were no longer mine.

There Is Life

Thank you God for these
beautiful loves of mine.
How did I get blessed with 2 little mini me's.
Thoughts of your handsome smiles pop
in my mind, late night giggles
and movie nights. Your warm
Little fingers wrapped around mine.
Your soft heads curled into my neck.
My baby boys
I hope you choose to live the right way
You have grown so much and I'm
sorry I didn't always get to show you the way.
My strong babies you always have so much love
to give. So because of you,
there is so much life to live.

Not Ready To Go

Short moments with you when I close my eyes,
unconscious to everything going on around me.
That's all this life has left me with,
Visions of you saying you are not ready to go
And me being your right hand always. End up on a
Mission trying to figure out a way
I can get you to stay your determined little sister...
That's me, my favorite is when its me & you cruising
Down the street, it almost feels like I'm reliving a memory
Never did I think I'd go through life without you,
You my best friend, ride or die, protector & secret keeper.
I enjoyed the best of days with you & endured the worst
Of them by your side. My heart cries for the bond I lost the
Day they took you away because I know I can never figure out
A way I can get you to stay. Till we meet again.
C-boy.
Xo your fav. Little sister.



FREE

Everything Within

I was built of the dirt that nourishes
as it turns in my curled toes.
Clumpy minerals fiber my insides into a mulch.

I have been made by the air that drips
onto and off a juicy ripe strawberry.
The smell of sugar seeps through my blood.

I am the stupid bunny eyes wide with simple
need and naivete. My desires hardly reach
further than a field of bloom.

I have traveled impetuously like the
seeds that the wind carries hoping to
find safety and firm ground.

My avian friends have shown me that
freedom must be a ruse, wings have
tethers, songs lack commiseration.

I wear the rings of Saturn humbly
around my flesh. I can stay hidden
within our universe's wide eye
cosmic divinity ricochets
off my pulse.

I am taught by the stars to remain small
so order lives on while we remain glorious

I'm In A Day's Work

It started off for fun
No big deal young & dumb

Who could they be but
What could they give me

What was I missing? What did I lack?
They thought I was an easy code to hack

I looked into dozens of eyes and touched any faces
Haven't we all fallen from God's graces

No is a word in camouflage unheard, unseen
I knew what I was doing, already eighteen

The world was mine if I wanted I only need ask
Still I'm standing behind her just failing to grasp

Ridiculous of you to ask about myself
I'm the flavor of the day fresh off your shelf

Comical of you to ask who I am
We both know you don't give a damn

Pick me pluck me always ripe for the harvest
I'll never be able to leave when you're just getting started

Tilt the head reduce the exposure
Let her out of the king sized enclosure

Lost in our own world, unscrupulous
Dirty magic just the two of us

Hitting pavement with bare heels
Praying I be struck down by errant wheels

Am I feeling empowered? Did you make me ten feet tall?
Did you make me the girl who has it all

Everyone has a price anything can be bought
Except for my freedom - this was all for naught

They can't clip my wings
You can't pull my strings
I must move on to better things

I Love You, But

I wanted to write a love poem
But I arrived too late because
I can't ever manage my time

I wanted to write a love poem but
Tears blurred my vision and
Made pools of self pity in my eyes

I'm crazy, remember? I couldn't
Possibly know what I'm talking about

But I thought I speak with conviction
With verity in every untruth

The building blocks of human expression
Must be made of stale bread the
Way they crumble upon my steps

I wanted to say something sweet
But I choked on my own laughter
Because I can't seem to take anything
Seriously

A giggle I hid in the tresses of
Your hair last week untangled
To slap me back where I
Thought unreachable

My lips always ask how your day
Was I can't possibly sit through
More tales of woe in the workplace

My flesh wins every argument
Put my bones back in the closet
Where they belong

Can you find me in dirty plates
In shower scum?

Did my serpent tongue betray me
And go nearly one hiss too low

I wish I was a child again to
Show you just how adult I can be

I want to write a love poem but
By the time I'm finished here
My love, my pen will have run out of ink.



INDIGO

Open Window, Closed Doors

I have observed your ups and downs,
Your mood swings in hatred and out of love,
Demands, broken dreams, and heart that's sore
We were always saying goodbye in age and spirit
Both wanting, need more,
Less of each other
Behind respective closed doors
Drifting away over hot grits and fried eggs,
Up river and down stream
A silent goodbye as loud as a scream

Do not remember me as a paper doll nor a puppet,
A fish in a bowl, nor a bird in a cage
You never owned me, never pulled my strings or made me dance.
I don't swim in circles to amuse you, while wishing to be free,
You don't get to cut out fashions and dress and re-dress me
When I sing, it's for the heavens, the flowers, tress, grass and sun
A song of love for days to come
A melody unrecognizable in your Native tongue

Do not remember me as something to be folded nor stuffed
Into your pocket, like cash, a receipt, or an old gum wrapper,
I am not your currency, nor am I made to make
You fresher, confident, or more inclined to speak
I am merely here to fix the bed, and quickly forget all the insults you've said
Do not remember me as a reflection in the cracked mirror of your soul,
Nor a cuff link holding your life together at the ripping seams,
A gleaming but of refinement and gold
I am simply a phantom, barely heard, hardly seen, rarely felt
Easily dismissed as wind or summer breeze,
Shutting the door quietly as I take my leave

Dream with Me...

Memory.
Water.
Falling deep, awake when I sleep
Time, Space, Travel
Garden of my familiar
Scent of Lemon
Apple juice and soda fizzing down my throat
Red Jell-O, Red Rence
Thunder storm lullaby
Trains rushing by
Leather trench coat
Some kind of spy,
Dark glasses, afternoon tea
I think someone's following me
Burning house, find my way out
Willow tree, knotted roots
Dark, wet dirt under my boots
I feel your heartbeat,
I hear your whole song
Soon to be in my arms, won't be long
White curtains, cold sheets
Blue Ocean, Warm Breeze
Sea shells and lace
Sticky thighs, whispered sighs
Rapid heart pace, rolling sweet
Fluttering eyelids
Moon chasing the sun,
Dawn kisses the stars goodnight
Another Day begun

Penny For Your Thoughts

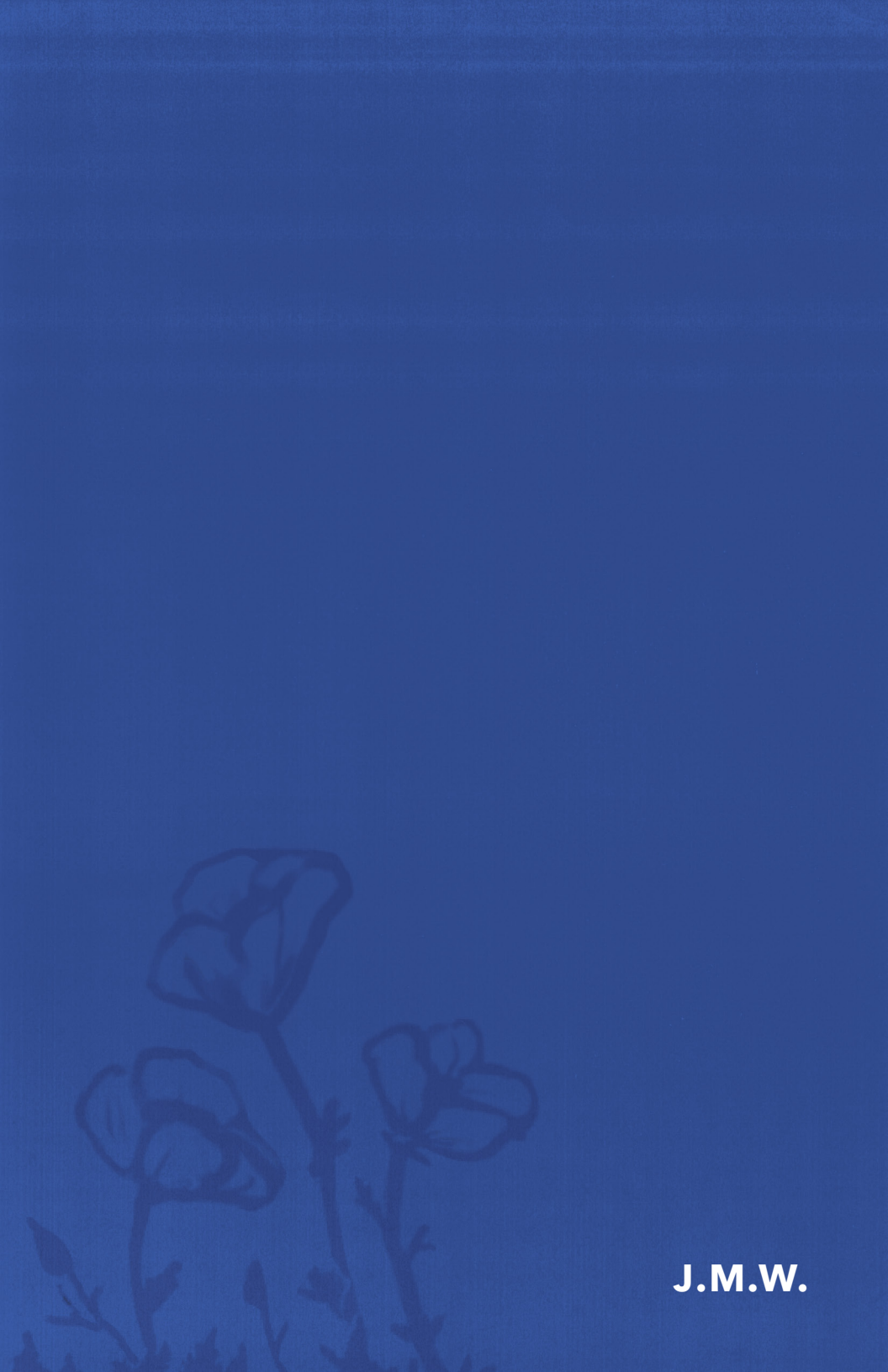
I want to touch the stars, and fall into the Milky Way of you.
Swim through the Galaxies of your thoughts and complexities, your words,
Desires and hopes
I want to travel deep into the Black Holes of yesterdays, your pain and disappointments
Nourish the garden of our now, and mend the pieces of your Broken heart
I want to take my needle and thread, and sew a quilt of dreams and aspirations
to keep our Visions warm, our bodies touching souls intertwined and Ablaze
Past, Present, Future
I want the moment, the millisecond, the fleeting thought,
I want your time.
your smile, your embrace, a sweet caress on my face
I want to leave behind the Icy Winter of the unfulfilled,
the snake, slick road of flies, and the thorns of bitterness,
Salty tears, and cold sweat fears
I want tomorrow's sunshine, and the blooming flowers of our familiar
Inviting Jasmine, delicate Rose, Enticing Lotus,
a swirling scent of Love's Promise
I want to grow, Strengthen, and expand with you,
I want to Rise from the Ashes, a Phoenix anew, I want to
Drop a coin in the wishing well for your heart, Asking that we never Part.

A Love Poem, But...

I wanted to write a love poem, but I don't love you
You don't inspire me, you tire me
You deflate me, and press the air from my being
You push me in a corner, and force all feeling from my heart
I wanted to write a love poem, but I'm fresh out of cares
I reach down deep, yet there's nothing there
A dry well, a desolate pit,
A half empty glass of Broken Dreams
A Good Life ripped apart at the seams
Love poem, where? All I feel is despair
I wanted to write a love poem but,
I would have to love you for that
Want you, need you, and desire your presence.
I would have to taste you on my tongue,
And feel you on my skin,
You would have to light my fire deep from within
But, you don't
So I can't
I wanted to write a love poem, but
That requires love
Like, love the way you walk, smell, smile, laugh, and talk
However, as it stands
I don't love anything about you as a man
Thus, a love poem for you will never flow from my hands
I wanted to write a love poem, but, well, you understand.

Seasons Change

I've been taught by the thickening effervescence
 Of prickling pine and sticky amber sap.
 Staining the atmosphere following a thunderous, reverberation
 Soul crashing snap
 Branches, twigs, unsettled nests
 Proud, strong, trunks broken, my emotions a splintered and scattered matchstick mess
 I've learned the meaning of a raven's shriek, the silent woodpecker,
 And the mourning dove's lamenting cry
 I watch my ambition, ideas, youth, without a home on the wind, fly by
 My livelihood fallen, lost to the permafrost
 Your biting, hungry, penetrating chill
 Quickly devouring creativity's green meadows and lush possibility
 Soft, rich sepia beauty turned obsidian
 Rosy reds and sunset pinks drained opaque and ashen
 Slate tongue, and gravel voice, what was once velvety and moist
 Icy cruel water begins to seep, creep, rushing vein deep
 Where blood once ran warm, fresh and blushing
 I've learned to endure Brittle Muscles, a parched heart
 Thirsty stream beds of happiness, and dry taut sinews
 I stand a vulture picked carcass, finally giving into the thinning
 Abundance that once fleshed all I was built by,
 My smooth pliant peaks, Juicy ripe curving mounds
 Honeyed rivers, and blooming nectar filled wild flower valleys,
 A sparkling waterfall spilling free, glistening crystalline,
 Refreshing, opalescent, pure...
 Reduced to a stagnant, tainted drip, no longer a stunning roar
 Gone are the bright flecks of golden mica, prismatic rainbow shimmer
 Or seductive secret peaks of desire playing hide and seek with the sun,
 I've learned how a trickle struggles through mud and cracked stone.
 All that remains is now my hardened skin, and frail, fragile bone.



J.M.W.

Bugs

I've been taught, sandy hugs on
warm summer days are the cure
for a bad day.

The smell of buttery popcorn and
snuggles on the soft bed will
always make for a great movie night.

I've learned that walking hand in
hand down main street Disney will
forever feel like magical fireworks
bursting through my heart.

The sound of "Mommy" squealing
through the halls bring a feeling
of heartache to the thought that
one day "Mommy" will be cut
short to "Mom."

I was built by the tiny sound
of your heartbeat growing inside
me.

Our love will only grow stronger
like the Ocean's waves my sweet
Boy.

It is you and me, always
and forever.

J.M.W.

You

You might not have been
my first love but you were the
love that made all other loves
irrelevant.

Never intended for this casual
encounter to end up with Real
feelings, heartache, or love. We
were simply having fun. Releasing
music our bodies craved.

I wasn't ready for you. But I
always wanted you.

I want your fingers wrapped
around my hair and pulled into
your body.

More than anything I want to
save you from myself.

Your body is still the only
one I want to be undressed under.

I Want

I want tiny arms wrapped around
my waist, the little voice saying I love
you mommy, the giggles and squeals
of tinkle fights.

Not the glitchy 15 minute video chats
with loved ones. Phone calls that
take forever to connect and an operator
that interrupts in the middle of your
goodnight song.

I want the coziness of warm cashmere
blankets pulled up to my nose. With the
smell of lavender wafting through the
air. Soft beds that conform to my tired
body. I don't want metal cookie sheets
stiff plastic body bags to lay my head
down on.

I want the sounds of guitars and
drums blasting through speakers, the
feeling of base beating through my soul.
I don't want the sound of a shotgun
door pops, keys jingling down the hall
way , or alarms blaring as someone
is yelling "Get Down."

I want salty sea air sprayed against
my body. I want my toes buried in the
white sandy beaches. Not grey blankets
of clouds that loom overhead. I don't
want the hopelessness that lingers in the
air from this poisoned place.

I want to be home!

J.M.W.

Birthday

The beating heart that once
was inside.

140 beats per min
listening.

Feeling every stretch, kick, and roll.

Seeing my body change with you
growing inside.

The belly that I always sucked
in was no longer.

Tee-shirts that fall just short of
covering the round and firm home
you have taken up.

The ankles that once were are
no longer.

The soothing music and scent
of lavender engaging the room.

The nervousness
in these final moments overcomes me.

I cant do this!

There is no turning back, 3 long
pushes and I have you in my
arms.

The love that floods my heart
is overwhelming.

You are my greatest accomplishment
forever and always my sweet boy.

Just you and me.
Always.



JESSICAH

Poetic Love

I wanted to write a love poem
But what the hell is poetic love?
Do I write about the
 Shameful cling
to something long gone or that never was?
What is there to say about
 unrestrained distancing
that evokes
 unbridled grasping?
Do I paint a picture of
 salacious hope and sacred beauty
as though our intentions would suffice.
Do I sugar coat the salty truth of
 shallow attempts
to salvage a mutual fallacy?
In so many ways
ours was no poetic love
 And yet...
I can write about
 strength gained
through countless weak moments
There is so much to say about
 each innocent and love filled gaze
that stole a breath and simultaneously
 sparked life.
I can paint a picture of
 fall leaves that scattered with laughter and
 danced with rambunctious joy.
I can tell of sweet kisses
that simply dwell in every beat of my heart.
It's because the pain of us
I know poetic love.
Twice.

Hidden

Don't look this way.
 Consumed with a stifling fear
 that a lingering glance
 could expose the proof
 of your dagger like words
 the ones that painfully illuminated
 the screaming silence
 of my own silver tongue.

Sleep to me with your
 eyes open to your fallacy
 the one born out of
 your spurious desires.

Safe here. Unseen.
 Self oppressed through your
 shallow and delusive demands.
 Hiding behind daisies and dust clouds
 the shadow of the sparkle
 that catches your eye.

Don't look this way
 then maybe it won't be true
 to you.

Beautiful Mud

Through this picture
 that even a blind man could see
 I want you ruminating in all that you caused.
 In the ponderance of reflection
 Remember.

All the cavernous gestures in your theatrical show
 revealed what I truly deserve.
 All your murderous words that severed me at the core
 exposed how strong I am inside.
 Your incessant neglect left me longing for your winters touch
 only because I know no other season.

Remember.
 I am the rainbush that flowers absent rain
 I am a lotus
 You are the mud that gave me life.

Liberated

I want complete freedom
and not just freedom solely of mind.

I want absolute liberation.

With all senses.

I want the contradiction of granite against
a blossom's fresh bloom under the spring sun.

I want sharp blinding euphoria.

I want the absence of this desert nothingness.

I want perennial currents that quench
my neurotic isms.

I want the summer's warmth that leaves chills.

I want this lifeless pulse to mirror
the leaves of fall and reverberate like a tumbling boulder,

I want the tremorous volcanic eruption that
silences the Earth.

I want the fervor of blurring clarity
that ripples from the core.

I want the shiverous exhale of winters last storm
that ends in enervation.

I want the lingering taste that evokes
the thunderous jolt of a lightning's strike.

I want the wondrous scent that draws
a provocative depiction of every season.

Absolute.

Liberation.



KELLY J. SORRELL

One Day of a Memoir

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by the wildness certain people gave off. People like Cyndi Lauper with her half shaved checkerboard hair, Billy Idol's rebel yell. I secretly revelled in the appearance of defiance in a day of mundanities. I have a mundane side myself, I like laundry, I sew, do ceramics, and crochet. Vacuuming is fun.

As a young adult, I was the wildness, defiance run amok. My hair was blue - a pretty shade called Blue Velvet that shone like jewels in the sun against my own red. Metal ran through my pretty face in various places; one a long sharp spike. I never went anywhere without leather and combat boots.

I ran the streets doing drugs and committing crimes. I had a few friends and hung out in various places. My friend Jaime and I would hang out at Lisa's house. Lisa was a little older, a lot tamer, more every-day Jane. On one particular visit, Lisa happened to be crocheting a blanket, or trying to anyway. Taking an interest, I saw that she was struggling with a pattern. Sitting beside her, I took the crochet hook and yarn and walked her through the pattern. I looked up and Jaime was standing in the doorway, mouth agape.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"What are you doing?" she replied, her voice sounding slightly incredulous.

Apparently she was shocked to see me in all my spiked and blue hair glory crocheting a blanket like a grandma. Gives rise to the saying "My grandma wears combat boots." Eh?

Love and Such Doth Crush

When last I breathed the sunlight in
and then expelled the moon
a halo of vapors round my face
choked out my bitter croon.

Burst into glittering slivers,
throw myself into the wind —
Wanting that you would catch the cut
from where you were unkind

Teeth clenched on a scream:
No sound from b'tween my teeth
Salt runs a hot stream
Burning rivulets underneath

On the other side of the sea
is where you tend to be from me;
Tho I swim with all my might
I can only drift in a moonless night

It is not water that I tread
but an amalgam of desire
Unmet, wretched and dead
I repose in the mire.

Laid aside the cracked pottery
colorless turned to ash
are the remnants of nature's beauties
No dew left on the lash

A breath that grazes my ear
Brings a trill from within the cage
Stretches the bones with all its might
and seeps hope into my face

Your words take hold my heart
squeezed between mean fingers
until it bleeds the slivers of glass
from when I broke apart

Glittering glass, saltwater ash
is collected and put on a shelf
A reminder of what it costs me sometimes
when I hand my heart to someone else

No Love for the Poet to Write

The pleasure of your presence
is sullied by amicable ambivalence
disguised as disarray in
anticipation of what comes next.

Visions so visceral
of the willful wonder of you:
silently strong in your
assholery and attention to
your superficial self.

The fitful fluctuation of
emotional ejection
like a hammer and nails
beaten into a board

is how my discordant days
pass and prevail upon me
to linger in the lush misery
of my mental distortion
until I can move on in peace.

Untitled

How sad and often have I seen
the prosperity of the doubtless mean
to hoard Old Mother Hubbard's dream
Because of past abuse unseen.

Ghostly fingers rake the gut
When emptiness was like a cut
Accompanied by a churning growl
Fear silencing hunger's howl.

Years gone by and still there's much
Of the memory of hunger's clutch
That fills the cupboard and the head
With food that could feed the dead.



KINZIE GENE NOORDMAN

Arlow

I never played with baby dolls when I was young. Motherhood, the real or the imaginary, never interested me. Even as a young adult, I swore I would never have kids. My parents felt differently. They dreamed that one day I would give them grandkids to spoil and love. But I chose another path.

Incarcerated twenty-two years now and still, no chance of motherhood. The longing never even struck me until a few years ago when I met Arlow. At visiting one day, a friend walked up to me and my mom, holding her two month old grandson. "Here, meet Arlow," she said as she gently placed him in my arms despite my protests. I had no experience with babies. As my friend stepped away, I awkwardly held Arlow and looked down into his little baby face. He wrapped his chubby little hand around my finger and gazed at me with his big, clear, blue eyes. Something within me shifted. I saw innocence in those eyes. And wonder, hope, possibilities, the future, a whole universe of stories, experiences, emotions yet to be, swirled through those eyes like galaxies. Suddenly I felt wetness on my cheeks and realized I was crying. Why was I crying? I looked up to see my mom standing there watching us with barely contained glee. "You want a baby now, don't you?", she asked. From that moment on, my mom's dream became mine. Motherhood here I come.

Desire Count Down

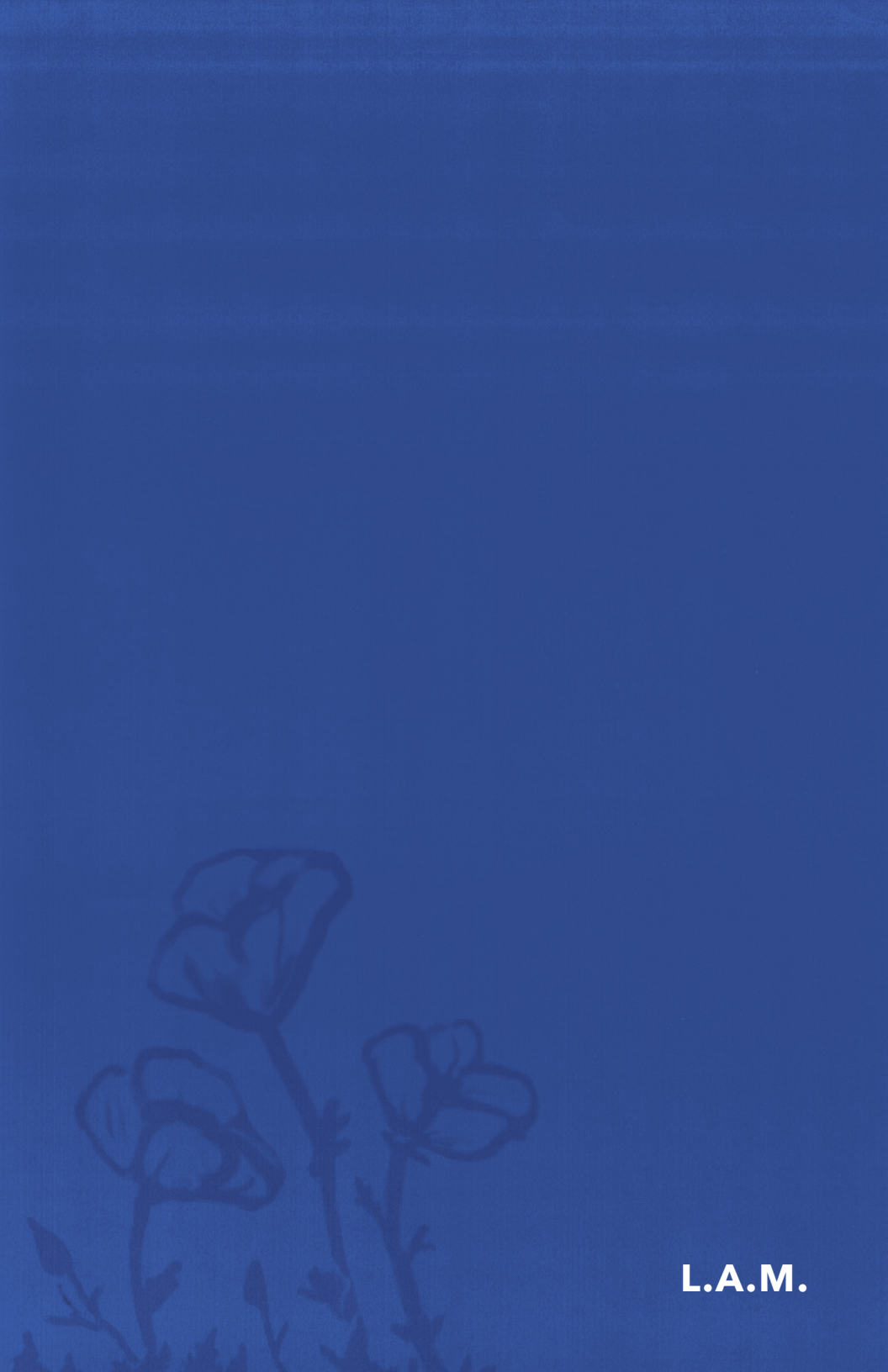
I want the adventure of StarTrek but without the responsibilities.
I want to head out into the void, while keeping my feet on the ground.
I want to stop the merry-go-round in my head,
 its faded plastic ponies long rusted.
I want to fall into purple and run with teal,
I want to embrace green and hold hands with orange.
I want to stand in the rain without worrying about getting wet.
I want to be wiser than my years while still looking half my age.
I want to take a moment to stand in the sun.
I want one dreamless night
 and two full days living my dreams.
I want three Ps: pizza, popcorn, and pepsi
 and four Fs: freedom, freedom, freedom, freedom.

Untold

Mama never told me love could be like this, that
 love could be a place I never want to leave.
Mama never warned me not to rip my chest open with
 both hands, laying bare the crimson gem of my heart
 as a gift, a sacrifice, a covenant to the soul of another.

I cherish every part of him.
 His soulful dark eyes that flash with mischief and mirth.
The way his lips always seem to curl in amusement,
 even when he sleeps.
His proud, prominent nose.
The way his dark curls caress and embrace my fingers
 as I run my hands over his head.
I know he loves me just the same.
Everything I do fascinates him,
 his ears forever alert, like two cupped hands spread
 wide to catch my every word.
He wants to be by my side always.
For him, being apart from me is endless torture,
 even if it's just for a moment.
He can barely contain his excitement each time
 we reunite.
I am his favorite place and he is mine.
 I want to stay in this place always.

Mama never told me I would find love like this.



L.A.M.

My Childhood Nostalgia of Mother Earth

An autumn forest foliage of mahogany, molasses & birch white
 Tapestry of tangerine strokes
 Splashes of golden daffodils swirled majestically
 Marvel of marshmallow whipped cream clouds
 Air feels an attitude of lady bugs ambiance
 Wonder of fireflies sparkling like shooting stars in mason jars
 Silver spoon / glowing womb
 Silver moonsleek
 Courage of tender emerging sprouts peep
 Barefoot in backyard, grass, a springy sponge
 Damp sticky tickle on my feet
 Wift of citronella, it burns with longing
 For mosquitos thirst for blood
 Suppressing emotions, stomping on dandelions
 Skin tinted yellow as pee
 Stained blueberry fingers, raspberry prickers
 Furiously sticky humid mugginess mist
 Of summertime enchantment
 Point prickly pin needles fall of trees
 For new growth
 I retreat to the maple woods, cliffs of mountain laurel
 on the hillside
 My refuge.
 I am spiritually connected with
 Here I cultivate strength,
 To face the world
 Resilience of the seasons
 Saved my life eons
 Flipping rocks with no socks
 Searching for slithering slipping
 Slimy salamanders to catch sticky as a snail
 Nightfire on the moon's fullness
 Swifts of char
 The luxurious bright yellow gibbous flowing on the view of the horizon
 In step with never ending game of hide & peek
 Making dream catchers
 collecting bird feathers
 I am a dancing moon chaser
 Goals, shooting for the stars, not just the sky
 Comfort on the sun initiator with
 Lunar perseverance
 Unfazed by disappointments
 Hum of a bee, intensity of honesty,
 Stings the heart humbly
 As positive optimism within,
 Everything a lesson, a purpose
 As I climb the fiery spiral staircase of my mind,
 I found coral pink seashell,
 I put it up to my ear,
 I hear the limitless ebb and flow of the ocean waves calm embrace
 I whisper, thank you loving mother nature,

For raising me.

L.A.M.

Never to Let This Out

Dad, I miss you
The real you,
Sober you,
But, the friend part of you
I'll salute a toast,
Cause this is how,
I remember you the most,

Our bands of addiction dysfunction,
Caused lives of our destruction,
Fun memories of parties
All night long,
Blurred lines sight
Of Father's love

Gallons of hard cider,
Moonshine, fresh from the orchard
Quenching my thirst for Alcohol
Was all that you nurtured

Woke up black & blue
Passed out on rocks
My locks in knots
Sore from tearing my hair but too,

You were laughing all night long
With soot on your face, till you looked in the mirror,
What a disgrace

It was so funny
Lots of pictures to prove
We'd blast music all night long
Sing to a dance to beatles grooves

We spent all the money
On all night parties
No money for christmas
Oh well, won't miss it,

Frightened awake,
The very next day, I was shocked, needing to pray,

"Dad, why are you still up?"
He puts the gun to my head,
"I'll kill you and your mom"
"Then I'll shoot myself dead."

"Please no I love you dad"
He puts the gun to his temple,
"Dad, well get through this,
It's all in your mental"

"Please put the gun down dad"
We have much life to live,

I want you to watch me grow up,
And enjoy your grandkids,

I promise I'll be good, It will be okay
Lets go have a drink
And forget about today

Now tomorrow's here, and you're gone
I'm reminded, every Beatles song

2015 January you died
And we laid you to rest
You dying was one of my biggest life's tests

But I still didn't learn
Kept on with my shit
Lost my kids now
They didn't see me fit

I didn't teach them to lie
I wanted to give them
the love I didn't get

It came full circle / who woulda knew
Now I always wonder
What kinda trauma did you go through

Life happened, now in thriving from growth
From my mistakes in my addiction
You reap what you sow

No tools were you given
Trust me now I know
God only knew

The way this would go
It will be okay
I've become healed
You taught me strength to persevere

I've changed for the best
And healed from the pain
I hope you're proud of the
Woman I became

So goodnight daddy
I hope you rest well
Writing this poem
Makes my heart swell

When I see you in my dreams,
Know that I forgave you
For all of the things
I know you didn't mean

Can't wait until the day,
I see your sober smile beam.

L.A.M.

Stay on Repeat Don't Press Pause

Booze runs down the counter
Beer cans & cigarette butts
Clean up takes hours
And there's spit in the cups
The forest I return
Many starry nights
As I search for Neptune
Marveling lightning buy lites
Alcohol lives here
Seen a dead doe gutted
I need another beer
It's bambi I stuttered
A timid unsure child
Leaned self-medication
Became the dedication
Soon turn wild
A spirit ugly and dryer
Forbidden to cry
Little girl lost
In a dysfunction of lies
I hid my sad face
Nuzzled in a pillow
Branches of tears
A weeping willow
Cypher of trouble
Blood river drips
Bubble of gum drops
Liver stuttered cancer grips
Not allowed to hit pause
Be a kid take a seat
Grew up too fast
Drunk on repeat
Nothing worth having
Comes easy

Onyx Silent Transformer

Star scissors zig zag & stab
 Dancing moon chaser enchants hope
 Suns veil toasty gold rays seep vibrance
 Sky marshmallow marinade wishes
 Fluffy feather tickle toes
 Loyalty of marigold kisses
 Rhythm of life's rush reflects running waterfalls
 Harmonica happy laughs giddy flutter

Water murky
 Pond mysterious, mysterious god rising
 Windy oblivion lurking
 Smoke stench clouding barrel puff
 Gasps of coaching maturity
 Descending lost innocence, stolen
 Scorned
 Empathy fuel
 Bloody bones of soul
 Pitter Patter Ambiance, blur
 Sniffle, salty seeing
 Drip drop dripping the essence
 Plushy passion apple lush
 Vines of clusters, purple rubies flourish grit
 Internally interior orbits its disclaimers aura
 Lucky tinge of tinsel shoots across the dark super nova
 Spiritual magic wand
 Infinity star blazer
 Eye roll lasher
 Fire minion blaster
 Green polished sea glass smooth
 Opaque silk & dainty
 Fragility of a lady slipper

Roaring sea lion
 Rotten flesh ocean beach
 Sudoku anxiety blur
 Tune of the end, Life flow off
 Frozen
 Satellite waves of bondage
 Icicle barriers
 Pluto's trumpet exhales hardship thorns
 Artistic tragedy,
 Escaping origami majesty

Toil new soil,
 Break free the broken root
 Ivy arms tangle, reaching

L.A.M.

To chamomile heal, matcha soothe
Charming as the twinkle of mornings
Dew gleaming jewels,
Diamond tears flickering in awe, cherishing eyes
Dazzle, awakening dawn master
Moon swallows emotions glowing,
Frequency, sympathy white
Midlife volcano, becomes grounded
Erupting confidence
Bleeding river or Lava
Vaporized into trees of potential
Forever family, nourished by loving spirit
Mother earth's sphere embrace
And a sworn oath of father forgiveness
Piano of the universe, song of miracles



MINDY JONES

"When justice isn't just... it just is"

- Amanda Gorman

Heavy chains and painful cuffs
Wrapped around your soul
Such over zealous punishment
For that loaf of bread you stole

So many invisible people
Black, brown, poor or weak
Let's hide them all in prison
Then throw away the key

WHEN JUSTICE ISN'T JUST...IT JUST IS

The DA throws out theories
Doesn't matter if they're true
As long as the jury buys it
And thinks the worst of you

Sit still, you must be silent
No reason to hear your voice
It's the judges and greedy lawyers
Who get to make the choice

WHEN JUSTICE ISN'T JUST...IT JUST IS

Paraded in shame for court
Where liberty goes to die
Shuffled off in shackles
With a whimper and a sigh

Soon you'll be forgotten
As you battle for your life
The heart cut out of families
The law used as the knife

WHEN JUSTICE ISN'T JUST...IT JUST IS

Children cry for parents
Only seen behind the glass
Their lives forever altered
And the pain will never pass

I know it's never easy
The road to change is rough
But the question must be asked
When is enough... ENOUGH

Change

I want fairness and compassion
Speaking louder in justice than politics.
Not punishment and prisons overpowering
change and rehabilitation.

Democracy should be an example
for the world.
Not arrogant men crowning themselves
King of my country.

I want to capture children's laughter
in a mason jar, lid unscrewed on a sad day.
No more babies suffering
For the sins of the parents.

I don't want crosses or color
catalyst for hatred.
I want prayer to be the go to cure
for all diseases.

No more should body image
define a person's self worth.
I want sausage pizza and peppermint ice cream
to be a new weight loss breakthrough.

I want companies blind to disabilities
when seeking new employees.
I want an end to slinging drugs
As a job opportunity for impoverished teenagers.

I don't want brave returning soldiers
sleeping in flimsy tents on cold, dirty streets.
I want mental health issues supported
with the same empathy given loved ones with cancer.

I don't want intrusive laws
preventing terminally ill from
celebrating their decision
to choose death.

I want to savor
that sweet scent
Unique to babies
As I exhale my last breath.

Perfect Imperfection

I nurtured a perfect little human under my heart for nine months and I finally met her August 29, 1976. My tiny perfect daughter, Kasee Cherise Jones, entered this world without protest feet first. Nothing average about this little girl. Early to talk, early to walk, and always on the move. So smart that I questioned my "Mom radar" when I began to see signs that her vision might be less than perfect.

Who knew babies had their own eye specialists? Only eighteen months old and suddenly labeled as legally blind! Sure she sits in her little red rocker too close to the T.V. but she already knows her ABCs, can count to 20 and finishes her puzzles faster than me, so how can this be!

I refused to see her future as white canes and seeing eye dogs so Mama Bear geared up for battle. The merry-go-round of therapy, Dr. Janet and insurance forms began. Coke bottle glasses so thick they robbed her of needed depth perception were not an option. But wait, there is a new miracle on the market called soft contacts! Corporate greed screams "DENIED" because they are cosmetic and for the vain. Are you nuts? Toddlers have no vanity, just a need to see!

At last we win and therapy combined with contacts helps so my beautifully imperfect daughter flourishes. She finds new ways to compensate throughout her life and I am so proud. She is strong, tenacious like her Mama and the most perfect person imperfection ever created.

No Matter the Journey

I was built by raging, abusive, Mothering
Quietly alcohol fueled Fathering
Frightened, cowering siblings
Don't ask why, I can't tell

Cruel irrational lies parading as truths
Proper young ladies show no anger
That privilege reserved for bi-polar Mothers
Suck it up buttercup, secrets build character

"Because I love You" the terrifying name
We gave to the dreaded pink belt
"This hurts me more than you," NOT!
"No one will ever love you like me", THANK GOD!

Escaping alone to shiny stained glass windows
Welcome relief from expected pain and fear
Blessed peace for never enough minutes
God loves me in this safe place but he lost my address

I've learned Mental illness needs help loving
No matter the harsh twisted journey
A bright rainbow of forgiveness cleanses bitter souls
The rusty distorted chain broken by true love.

Know Me

Remember me as blanketing comfort
Tucking you in tightly for sweet dreams
As love of spending happy time together
A warm lap to climb onto with a favorite book

Don't think of me as abandonment
My soothing arms ripped from your life

Feel me quietly murmuring in your mind
Words of encouragement and validation
A familiar voice welcomed into your trouble heart
The sound of reason in an unreasonable world

Don't hear me as a Mother expecting compliance
For all I know you can become

Remember me as music of your childhood
Slow dancing with your dad in the kitchen
Accompanied by girlish giggles of delight
At the sight of parents in love

Don't cry me as tears for what is missing
Instead applaud yourself for standing on your own

Remember me as kisses on a feverish forehead
Long nights finishing last minute costumes
Proud cheers in the audience for achievements earned
Smell me as homemade bread to nourish your soul

Don't remember me as a hollow connection
through pathetically inadequate phone calls

Call me sorrow, color me guilt, I am pain
I promise atonement, compensation for lost time



RUBY PADGETT (L AND R)

Twenty Years

As the bus slid into the sallyport I heard the gate clang shut. I turned and over my shoulder saw my future dissolve.

What brought a girl from the palmettos to the sunshine state only to live in darkness.

When I was young I would go to the Piggly Wiggly with my parents each Saturday. Ordinarily you wouldn't think a grocery store sold children's books. My father bought all three of us kids a children's book each week. He was such an avid reader and wished to instill it in his children.

During this time, encyclopedia salesmen came to our home. I still remember the young men who walked everywhere with their satchel of books. These salesmen would sit out in the yards sipping ice water or lemonade on a hot day with housewives telling stories of their lives.

This is how we came to own a set of encyclopedias, science year books, a set of Disney children's books and a beautiful chocolate brown pictorial bible.

My father was a carpenter by trade and my mother a housewife. We grew up in a rural town. Owned horses, chickens, rabbits, and ducks. We learned to cultivate the earth to grow vegetables. My father being an organic gardener long before it's popularity.

I was taught by my mom to plant and grow flowers. We were further made to mow the lawn, weed, and water the gardens and rake leaves in the fall.

My mom would send us out with baskets to pick berries, wild grapes, cherries, peaches, and apples.

Of all these fruits and vegetables, my mom taught me how to can and freeze them. We made jellies, sauerkraut, etc. That was stored away to supplement our meals through the winter.

These were days when I would leave the house on summer mornings and not return till late afternoon. I explored the woods, ran through the meadows and rode my bike miles from home. No one ever worried that we wouldn't return.

This was the life of a carefree child, until it wasn't.

My grandmother died. Rifts within the family widened until it was too late for turning back.

We moved, alcoholism set in. It became my father's companion. No more nightly walks after dinner for my parents. What replaced the kind, caring man I once knew was a violent monster.

I longed for the man who sat in the swing under the apple tree with my mom on Sundays after church and we made hand churned ice cream.

The man who taught us to laugh and play baseball; to ride a bike.

I wanted the mother who had cared for me when I was sick. Who taught me to fry chicken and make salmon patties. Who I believed hung the moon and the stars.

Not the cruel, bitter, sometimes silent woman she had become.

I wanted to save her from the broken bones, the feelings of worthlessness that were brewing. Like a truly dark storm on the horizon... my resentment, guilt, and shame were what festered like a vile infection for years that brought me here to live in darkness.

My Tribe

My tribe, a colorful gaggle
 of squawking loyalists.
All, variations of felons,
 three to twenty years
Solidifying invisible bonds,
 foundations leveled
Sisterhood our pillar.
 wedging untruths
Belief in the myths.
 Impossibility, women united.
Sharing addiction and violence
 strength no man could fathom.
My tribe, CDC's surprise.

Illusion

I remember dreaming of you
as usual; you were elusive.
Slipping around corners
my breath catching
a glimpse of your profile driving by.
Reaching for your slim freckled hand
only for you to remove it
seconds before I could feel
its warmth leaving; and wanting
in the aftermath of your lingering
scent.
I used to find it maddening
now I take pleasure in you
Just being there.
I miss you, seeing that sweet,
sometimes scowling face.
Blessed are those whose hearts
can bend
for they will never be broken.
Guide me every time I make
a decision
Protect me wherever I go
Heal me whenever I am tired
or in pain
Be with me
Never leave me
whenever my struggles become
too much.

Bare

I want to feel the rumble of the earth.
I want to hear thundering hooves. Never
again astride galloping horses.

I want to taste raindrops; salty in my
mouth as tears.

I want to know days without aching
devastation. I want to be your skin,
soft and supple; not suede. I want to
know Jovan; remember tenderness
not missing the abuse.

I want to know approval, not collapsing
egos. I want to be howling red,
striding barefoot through greens
and browns.

I want to lie unclothed in the
moonlight; accepting no judgments.

Only the tickle of the grass as it
moves. Reflections from the pond;
eyeing my image. Not echoes of
inadequacy.

I want to know tomorrow. Today,
yesterday, passing fancy. I want
to know the soil; not the rot. I want
to be silk, not gauze. Hiding my
secrets within.

I want to be transparent; sharp and
solid.

I want to be blind; eyes, ears, and mouth.
I do not wish to be forgotten. Leaving
without thought or mark. I want to
be loved, bare, beautiful, infinite.

Freedom and CDC

Furious, anger roils my stomach
 seconds tick, ticking by
Anxiety, heightened pacing
 as a cat
Consumed, breathing without air
 lackadaisical attitude
Frantic, emotions invisible
 future's taste slipping
Panic, I am a bull in the ring
 of a matador
Fear, insensitivity of custody
 wrenching life from my grasp
Incompetence, an innate ability
 allowable within institutions
Allowances, suffering silently
 nonexistent accountability
Rage, my compliance expected
 deserving of nought
Sadness, denial my companion
 choices removed; hands tied
Acceptance, parroting in capability
 obliviousness their partner
Despair, reigning hopelessness
 this grave in which I lie



SHAWNDA SAPIER

Renaissance Woman

I truly am a renaissance woman.
I do all that I say I can.
I've sampled the brews that twist the soul.
I've lived and loved like I was out of control.
I follow the path that seems right at the time.
And embrace each dream with a love sublime.
I'm a romantic fool chasing impossible schemes.
Jousting Life with a heart bursting at the seams
by the beauty of the Spirit my soul it touched
And I believe the lies that promise so much.
The men have been varied and many
And I swear I love each one true
But whenever my plate is empty
I find myself still looking for you.

I Have No Secrets

That's a lie.
I have a lot of secrets.
How come nobody gets close enough
to want to know them?
How come nobody gets close enough
to want to know me?
I am not bi-sexual.
I am not homo-sexual.
I am not hetero-sexual.
I am not anything.
Unless I am with you.
Then I am sex.
I am mouth.
I am Tiger Lily.
I am sweat.
I am coming.
I am whatever
you want me to be.

A Pig's Game

my dreams
want to tell me
I know if I listen
I might find out
why tears create rivers
why some mountains seem too high
again always again
repeat dance
my heart screams a tender kiss
never really know what to say
if only flowers could speak
what the tongue
seems to lose
as words form away from what the heart feels
crippled, broken,
it's easy to fuck
it is so easy
get tired
but still pretend
its a pig's game
create a good lie
never speak the truth
the shadow is warm
the light knows no love
morning never comes
a simple conversation
anything in town with no charm
a man just one
sometimes when the ocean
speaks I listen
And know which arms might hold me
sometimes I know who I am
beneath everything that I know
isn't real

Commitment to Forgiveness

A wrong move here or a bad choice there
Have often left me to much despair
My anger and emotion when not given a chance
Lead me to tirades, arguments and rants all too often

I've decided to try my thoughts, caution, and care
When I make decisions and I'll try to be aware and
improve myself, I'll go to great lengths when
I awake I will always try to use all the
character strengths, and I will guide you on the way.

I commit that I will look before I leap
And to utilize forgiveness is a promise I'll keep
I will think before I act, I give my word.
And in my use of forgiveness, I'll ask for it in return,
I will not be judgemental.



ZABEL KAZANJIAN

Leaving Behind

The years built a garden maze of laughter
tears and memories.

Upon her eyes a story told of battles lost
and humbleness gained. Her eyes speaks
her many sad experiences of her past.
Looking forward to her last chapter of her
life. Filled with many joyful desires. She still
embraces her Joie de vivre wondering how
society will adhere to her return.

She made good use of her time tutored,
mentored, gardenened
crocheted, educated herself.

Most importantly became remorseful and
empathetic.

Will society notice her reform?

How will the community adapt to her return?

Freedom Awaits

My day is approaching to walk out
of prison gates. Freedom awaits for me

Wondering What my future holds.

Society may accept or rebuff me.

How I yearn for the life I once had.

How many employees are willing to
hire an exoffender older woman?

Two of closest friends that I once knew
but haven't seen or heard for many years.

Will they accept my friendship now without
any doubts or fears?

Who and What is there awaiting me?

When I walk out of the gate? Looking forward
to watching my grandchildren growing up and
being present at the milestones of their lives.

The Finale

The first distant memory that I have
Brought me feelings of a budding Rose
Whose thorns stings sometimes
When I think back on my Love who became my foe
I have so much resentment
That had become my thoughts and behaviors
Do not remember me as a vicious person
Whose crime was so horrendous
Your promise is a hungry fox
attempting to grasp your hands on everything
We were always saying goodbye
in the courtrooms

Equisite Corpse Poems

In these two poems, each poet from the group wrote one line, responding only to the line above it. What resulted are these two “exquisite corpse” style poems, which was a poetic technique of writing invented by the Surrealists in the 1920s.

I.

Under the same stars we find ourselves laughing –
the moon gazing down on us, our own personal spotlight.
Embracing my infamy, my deepest urge to
puncture the forbidden juice box,
feel it course down my throat.
The taste of defeat lingers –
what is lost, a relief.
Broken in pieces like a discarded statue –
and there lies your strength.

II.

It was in the umbra of a sky filled with stars
that love overwhelmed me to a vomiting of longing.
A longing so intrusive, I felt its entirety
like thousands of volts of electricity
moving through my body. Feeling
like I was zapped to another planet.
Stagnation, it's killer. Disposal of your insides.
Sick, lurching from thoughts of you–
Coming out my gut, eyes wandering
and walking about late at night–
larva, larva, maggot.
But we keep moving forward
to what we love.

Author Biographies

Aimee Gana relishes the idea of being physically free again. She wants to be remembered as an eternal student that always hungers for something new to learn. Her whole journey is a lifelong process of education and healing from her past. She is also a frustrated singer and a game show addict.

Free is from the best city on the planet, San Diego. She mostly loves two things: reading and her small floppy-eared dog, Taco.

Elsa Thompson has wanted to write since she was a little girl. She's grateful for the opportunity, humbled by the guidance, and delighted at the thought of you, reading this anthology.

Indigo is a mom of three. An avid reader, creative writer, and a lover of sunsets. She is deeply interested in history and how the past influences and affects the present and future. She loves poetry and poetry has saved her many times. It is boundless, limitless expression without rules. It is healing. It is the freedom of her spirit while her body is captive. It is the salt of the soul, and the water of emotion. Essential, everywhere, cleansing, and fresh. It is the air creativity breathes. Poetry is the wings she soars on through dreams, wishes, pain, and happiness. Poetry is life.

L.A.M. is from the east, changed for the best. Never to turn back.

Mindy Jones is a seventy year old woman currently residing in Corona but her heart remains at home in the warm sand of the beach.

Ruby Padgett (L and R) is a willowy white girl with Southern charm.

Kelly J. Sorrell is only as old as she feels, and everyday is different. Today is what it is.

C. Ramirez (Dude) is healing and learning through poetry and enjoying myself. He is from the wonderful east coast, missing crows and humid weather. He loves himself the Movie Arrow (series), the ocean, and Mother Earth.

Shawnda Sapien is from the rural area of Westwood, CA. She has 3 adult children, born and raised in Northern California. She loves the finer things in life and is waiting for a life changing miracle to happen. She lives at home with her dog.

Kinzie Gene Noordman is the proud daughter of wonderful parents who taught her the value of persistence and to never be afraid to share her voice. She is a dog mom to Leo and on her way to earning a Masters degree from CSUDH (Cal State).

J.M.W. is from SoCal and loves her son, the beach, and strong coffee.

Jessicah is a proud mother of two amazing children and striving to be free both emotionally and physically.

Zabel Kazanjian awaits her freedom after 18 years. Lives in LA and grew up in Boston. She enjoys traveling, museums, gardens, cultures, and learning. She was named after famous Armenian poet.

Acknowledgments and 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:

Ahmad Almallah, "Love Poem"
Mariam Barghouti, "(re)painting love"
Anne Boyer - "excerpt from Garments Against Women"
Billy Collins, "Litany"
Natalie Diaz, "Postcolonial Love Poem"
Natalie Diaz, "From the Desire Field"
Terrance Hayes, "Wind in a Box"
Asia Johnson, "Before My Incarceration, I Was Just a Depressed College Student"
Asia Johnson, excerpts from "An Exorcism"
Audre Lorde, "Movement Song"
Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not A Luxury"
Zy'aire Nassirah, "Unseen Leadership"
Jackie Wang, "The Crypt Seed"

Special thanks to the Spring 2025 Creative Writing Workshop facilitators Rosie Stockton and Asia Johnson, and the Spring 2025 UCSP Creative Writing Research Stream members Aimee Gana, Ayesha Waraich, Grace Hong, Jane Dorotik, Kelly Sorrell, Kinzie Noordman, Mindy Jones, and Zy'aire Nassirah. Zine designed by Kaya Napachoti.

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.

