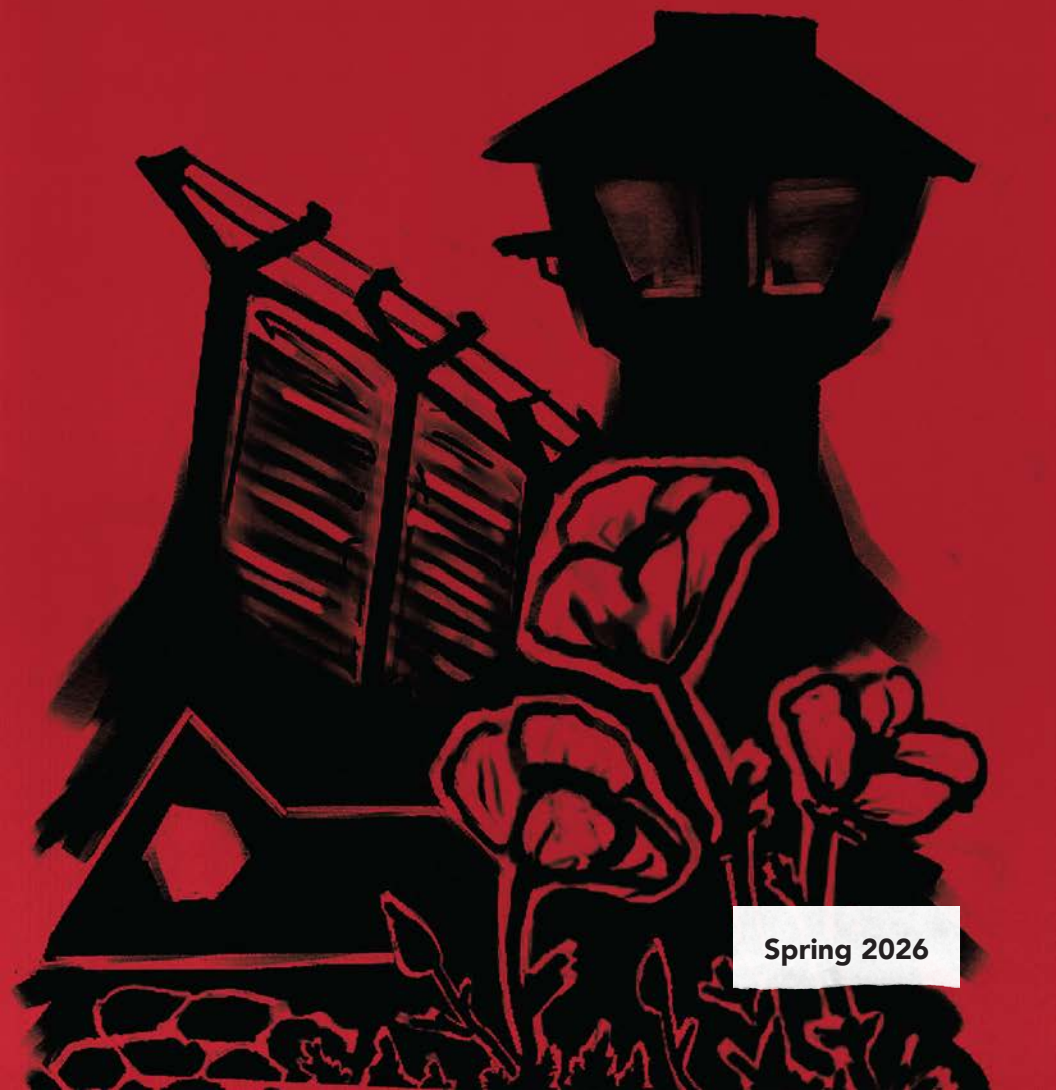
UCSP
UC SENTENCING PROJECT

FREEDOM COLLECTIVE

POEMS FROM THE UCSP CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP



Spring 2026

Dedicated to the memory of

Tamara Hinkle

&

Betty Broderick

Poems By

Aimee Gana
Amelia Carlson
C.G.
Dude Ramiréz
Freesia (Free) Vargas
Haena Worthing
Jade Janks
Jessicah
Kelly Sorrell
K.g. Noordman
Mindy Jones
Natalie Le Demola
Nicole Marie Schalles
Omaima
Rebecca G.
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Collective Statement on the UCSP Poetry Workshop

California Institution for Women, Spring 2026

Great poetry does not always come from an individual place. We came together as a "not so dead, poet society" to awaken compassion and understanding for a sector of humanity that most prefer to disregard. We are a powerful forum of courageous souls.

2026 opened with turmoil. It was a dark spring that brought loss, oppression, sadness, and grief, as well as sacred moments to capture it all. We raged, we cried, we screamed on page after page as we survived lockdowns, mass searches, drug overdose, and increased oppression. Like an ant whose strength can carry 100 times its weight, our poetry class carried us through, helping us overcome denials, loss of hope, and deaths of our peers.

As Alice fell through the looking glass, our prison seemingly fell into a time warp when nonsense rules and expectations became the new normal. Despite it all, we laughed, persevered, and told our stories. Through the anger, we still had joy, laughter, and encouragement.

In this class the freedom of expression has served as a driving outlet…an uplift of spirit to get up and carry on yet one more day. In a tiny room, sometimes cool and sometimes blistering hot, we shared poetry and we healed. We process what we are going through in stanzas, voltas, enjambments, and portmanteaus. We take back language from our oppressor and bend it to say what we cannot otherwise say. Poetry has enabled us to put things into perspective. There is such a raw honesty, yet tender compassion, cultivated between all of us. Poetic expression is absolutely instrumental in embracing our feelings.

Through our writing we were able to blossom poetically even in this bloom-starved spring. Our words, thoughtful, sincere and unapologetic, offer a glimpse into what we have tolerated, endured, and painted into some kind of subjective beauty.

Our pens are our therapists. We let rage and rebellion flow through our poetry, just as we find ways to share both the pain and the love that seep within our veins. Even when we are down and our patience has run out, we pick up our pens and write without fear of being censored, judged, or forced to feel or think differently. We allow ourselves to be caught off guard by the inspiration we draw from each other. We step outside our comfort zones while feeling safe and supported. We keep coming back because we can't imagine not being in this class. It has become an important facet of our being. Be more kind, or be more raw. Whatever is called for, we have the freedom to say it with poetry.

The poems in this anthology are a cry for awareness. For humanization. Prison has vilified us so much so it is our hope that our poems allow you, dear reader, a glimpse into the daily idiocracy we experience here. We have created a camaraderie among us by sharing our lives, thoughts and feelings through our poetry. Our writing helped us emerge from darkness to light, from despair to hope. These poems inspire a world thirsty for a raw and authentic perspective and understanding during a time of immense turmoil. We write in order to strive for the grit to overcome and heal. Our hope is that something you read heals you too.



AIMEE GANA

AIMEE GANA

6 Cubic Feet of Dignity

Go ahead
Beat me with threats
Of stripping me down
To nothingness.
Inspire me some fear
To remind me
I'm nothing but a number.

Your rehearsed script
"Safety and security"
Smells more like
The cow dung I wake up to.

Anything to break me
For some bullcrap
Not even my doing.

So,
You scare me to a corner
Manipulate my comfort
Into unease.

But I won't give you the pleasure
Won't show you my inner gangster.
Will just rage quietly
So you won't see my tears.
Throw mouth curses into the wind
Indifference in my face
While I hold my head high
And stand up to your destruction.
Anything to display
I'm not some powerless bitch
You can rob
Of 6 cubic feet of dignity.

Mirror Anxiety

It's a lot to see
that undertow of loneliness
beneath the bags of thy eyes.
Eyes that once mirrored
a vibrant soul,
kept alive by promises,
now reflect
emptiness–
a soul sucked dry
by excessive punishment.
Eyes that lost their sparkle
from witnessing things
they cannot unsee.

The dulling and thinning of hair
Gray hair that no longer signifies wisdom
Nor implies experience
so much as it shows
plain old age
and a life of worries
for a future yet unknown.

Lines under the neck
that show limits
of what one can take
before that breaking point.

Necklines that connect to a heart
hardened over years
of building walls–
Walls that protect
from a past
No one can seem to bury.

AIMEE GANA

Teeth stained by neglect,
an image tarnished
by labels and judgment
you can't shake off

Pursed lips,
Distorted by displeasure
at a life
That cries for a do over

A face that carries
a bittersweet reflection
a badge of a fading glow
pockmarked by tears
that flow from every heartache.

A body that let go
of the idea of perfection.

I didn't think mirrors
Would give me anxiety
This early.

Dear _____

You act as though you did nothing wrong,
Like I made up damaging trauma.
Can't really expect me to be strong,
While you play up the melodrama.
Shit, you second-guess how I should feel,
"Understanding" the hell I've gone through.
Entrenched emotions take time to heal
Please shut up, you do not have a clue.
I've found the space to forgive the past
As my healing grows strong in my heart
Keep screaming, we'll see how long it lasts;
It is time you own up to your part.
    Regardless, I'll make a conscious choice to love you–
    Just need a moment to adjust my point of view.



Amelia Carlson

Galvanized in Gold

We fear that it will never lift…
Never stop…
That the pain will never leave…
The pits…surrounded by steep walls

We wonder, will this gray sky
ever brighten?
Will this load ever lighten?

Stuck…
Trapped…
Locked in…

Will we ever crawl out of this lion's den?...
This shadow?...
This storm of disease?...
Or what feels like the grave

Through the waters,
Dragged by the rivers,
Burned through the fire?

It won't be painless
It will never be quick

The absence of struggle?
The abundance of strength

Pledge to reweave this pain
One sees a prison
One sees a Kiln

You carry something the world needs–
Wisdom
Kindness
Mercy
Skill

AMELIA CARLSON

NEVER mute your influence
Trust the Master Weaver

It forces you to look upward
When the time is right.

With acknowledgements to God Will Use This for Good, by Max Lucado

Monkeys on my Back

In the midst of darkening skies
The weight of the world slicing through
Are there beams of sparkling hope?

There lies rivers of endless resistance…scars
Dusk on the rise,
an ocean's current far too strong

Brave the wind,
Head held up high
Do I look to the Sun?
Therein lies a magical whirlwind of relief

In a time zone of Murphy's Law
there one will find new character, strength,
Resilience

When to be known
isn't all that one seeks;

when being loved no longer feels like trying to catch the wind

Stop… Breathe
and wholeheartedly accept all Life gives:

To Live
Loving
Being

That is the true beauty that comes from
this weight of the world.

AMELIA CARLSON

Dear Honorable Shitshow

Why must you long to steal my voice
Emotion floods the brain…can't move, can't think
To punish every single prior poor choice
Lump in the throat, the heart yells, "SINK!"

Defeat, despair, insecurity, and sorrow are your best
Panic! Panic! Sound the alarm!
Nervous constraint tight in the chest
Anticipation and longing for no more harm

Attempting to drain the ocean with a spoon
Entrapment by every documented word
How long must my wings shrivel in this cocoon
This journey, revictimizing, beyond absurd

> However, one day this dam will break
> This courageous woman I will never forsake.



C.G.

C.G.

A Sweet Surrender Gone Wrong

Dear–

An instantaneous whirlwind
And I was off my feet
High on your sweet stench,
The attraction and bond
This longing strong
I need you. I yearn for you.
I land and sweetly surrender.
You were made for me
I will devour, every, moment
I must have you again
But you do not know me or
Understand this love song

I, the fly, and you,
the pile of hot shit.

Death to the Dream

I was on track
but I missed the train
How did I miss the train?
As fast as the train was there
the doors opened, closed
and it was gone
I thought I was ready
so why didn't I get on
Death to the Dream

Young minded, not dumb. Naïve.
My desires, stifled.
My spirit crushed and broken
Time went on followed by
the push that never came
The final steps still remain
My life the same
Death to the Dream

Pain and sorrow replaced all will
to live. Black clouds caused
tears to dampen my fire inside
A slip and a slip
I had no grip
I was sent to a land
with C.O.'s and no dicks
Who scheduled this trip?
Death to the Dream

C.G.

Embrace the suck

Broken hearts unlike
broken stones heal in time.
But, like a steel hammer
against bone it shatters
and tears fall like remnants
of dust, unseen by the naked eye.

Runny noses irritate my soul
like metal scraping teeth.
An empty stomach, an
irregular heartbeat, and
a lack of oxygen cause my
breath to tremble and me to shake

My body tense with
not just heartache, but
muscles like a band bound
tight on the cusp of breaking
and mouth noises, come
easy from all the tension

I cannot speak the truth
because you will use it against me
and because it hurts too much when
you hate me. Stress and madness
expounded; compounded by this
fracture I'm too full of sadness
to get off the ground


Dude Ramiréz

DUDE RAMIRÉZ

Tamara's Hope

Tamara's Hope was strong
Tamara's Hope was to see her beautiful daughter play basketball growing up.
Tamara's Hope was to see her handsome son play soccer growing up.
Tamara's Hope was for others to see the many positive changes she made.
Tamara's Hope was to be treated with equality.
Tamara's Hope was to see both of her children
graduate high school.
Tamara's Hope was to continue her poetry.
Tamara's Hope was to continue as a peer support mentor.
Tamara's Hope has inspired many of us!
Tamara's Hope will keep us moving forward!
Tamara, you gave me more Hope!
They took Tamara's Hope away!
Thank you Tamara Hinkle, for – holding on to hope
You are a star.

The F**king Where is Why

Where am I going?
Where am I trying to get to?
Will I swim there? Will I fly?
Where is the peace?
How and why do I feel like drowning inside?
– Will I sink? –

Why is it easier for you to taunt me?
Why do you smirk when you provoke?
Why am I crying inside?

Why do I feel overwhelmed?
Why am I still numb?
Why did I have all these experiences?

Because you choose to tear me down!
And make me question my self-worth
Instead of building me up!
I'm treading water–trying to stay afloat.
I will grow and keep the peace within
So don't give up – Because they will win!
I know my self worth is Loving Self!
I am Strong– I am a Survivor!

This is Why?

Dude's Brain

Dude's brain is like a soaking wet noodle.
My brain expands like a sponge.
I have pain on my brain from the
good, the bad & the fugly here at C.I.W.
So I shift my brain off the chaos train to do word searches.
So my brain doesn't rot. Since it endures a lot!

I think my brain is going full speed ahead
Not having a thread left.
Well maybe I just need a real bed to rest my peanut head.
OH Brain!

Dude's brain wakes up and anticipates–
What the world here at C.I.W. reveals today.
My brain cannot accept those who choose to dictate.
So let me explain the tears that run down my face
while in this place.



Freesia (Free) Vargas

Filled. Without.

what is filled with
anguish
with pride
with going too fast

what is filled with
humming and singing a song
never forgotten
w/ repetition and comfort
w/ lines leaking

filled with one two
too many drinks
w/a starred ceiling
becomes a hurricane
too high to come down

What is filled with
a name to be called
a name that only we know
with an excuse for no call

What is filled w/
overfilling
with suffocating at the seams
with popped buttons
and unraveling

a tomorrow will come
just as tomorrow came

yesterday and I think
the day before that

filled with bowtie pasta
for your bow tie heart
with wrappings and
trimmings

what is filled with deceit
with thinking hey I've
been here before
and never leaving a
footprint

FREESIA (FREE) VARGAS

Body Bag

Your vessel brimming
with emptiness

a void to represent
the stiff temptations
of shame

weighty like
a hundred corpses

the howl of
a too-familiar melody

the last cold breath

a trial of sorrow

zip up yesterday

plague of tomorrow



Haena Worthing

HAENA WORTHING

Glorious Time

I hid behind my dark glasses
And watched their glorioustime
Filled with every single hallmark
"They" say a life should have
What a voyeuristic peek into this
beautiful and foreign world
It sparkled and shined, pristinely lit
This glorioustime
How do I get a ticket to that?
Everyone wants a seat on that train
Gilded and sublime
This glorioustime
I jumped up and ran, perhaps
I can catch it
If I run fastenough, hardenough
and longenough
But I ran right into the looking glass
Just as hard and as fast
As my train to glorioustime
passed me by
I'll sit and wait
A perfect spy on the pretty platform
of glorioustime
Patiently waiting for mine

The Things I Grieve the Most

The things I grieve the most
are the smallest things to
the freest of people
I look at your fingers in the pictures
Your nails are short
and bitten down
and look just the same.
I used to take you
to have them painted
but those days have been gone
for so long.
How many things did you have to YouTube
because I wasn't there to ask in the moment?
Avocado bagels
Backpacks and new shoes
Doctor visits
Trick or treat
Tampons or pads?
Fevers of 103
These are the smallest things to some
but the biggest things I grieve.
I won't ever let go. I hang on
to every word for all the words I've missed.
I think of how you feel when you watch the other girls
with their moms.
I think of how it feels to be abandoned
by the one you were supposed to trust the most.
This was not how it started.
The world was ours to keep.
And now all I wish is to see you sleep.
All I have to do is think of the look on your face when you found out
I wasn't coming home anytime soon.
I get this terrible feeling of panic when I think of these things
And how far I am from you
How I can't run into the other room and see you
on the phone or making your bed
These are the things I grieve
And the things I miss the most.

HAENA WORTHING

Fluorescent Doom

Fluorescent Doom
Chained to a telephone, piercing
screams in the background
Special Victims Unit soundtrack on repeat, blaring
from the fuzzy television that echoes through the halls
Years of sleep lost in those echoes
Angry, flickering lights on
in a state of forever fright
The new addition shuffles all night
Every damn night and never wipes,
dripping on the dirty floors
I tighten my hands and feet
and release
for some kind of escape
and open my mouth
in a silent scream
Rancid bodies stacked like sardines
Vomit trips and black toes
The smells of the bus trips to court still singe my nose
How many times did the men
expose themselves in the hopes
someone would stick their
tongue through the steel hole
I remember thinking,
I'll remember this very moment, this exact
moment of horror and filth
This is hell and the doors stay locked all year round
Right here on my once precious Earth
And then…
Beep… Beep… Beep
I'm in my bed safe and warm
My alarm still sounds
The sun is beckoning and we will be on time for school
I pinch my wrist just to be sure
It was just a bad dream
No front row horror show seats to be found
Good! Because I hate those kinds of movies anyway.



Jade Janks

JADE JANKS

Ode to Dignity

You and I go way back
like shampoo & conditioner.

our relationship private–
even though everyone knows about it.
you are there for my most intimate moments:
embarrassing, relieving. I can always count on you to clean up my messes.

I've always taken you for granted
whenever I need you- you are just there–
never hard to find, always within reach.

I didn't appreciate you until I came to prison.
the memory of you and your tender touch–

I'm left feeling callous & unclean
unsafe & unseen

I miss your touch, delicate on my skin
gentle embrace, now gone.
what was soft is now rough;
but I can't live without some version of you–
your replacement is abusive, but I feel forced to deal

prison conditions me to tolerate your abuse day after day

you rough me up & crumble at my tears

why? because cost over comfort, dollars over dignity.
so I am forced to use what CDCR calls:
" technically toilet paper"

My Body Should Be Mine

A man was unkind
he violated my body & messed with my mind
through the blurred lines of justice & crime
my fate was defined
so I'm caught in a bind
because I thought my body should be mine
I was accused of a crime
the DA's office will not be outshined
their views on justice are sadly misaligned
because it's about appearances & bottom line
doesn't matter if you are good & kind
you're still doing time
because you refused to sign the dotted line
because right is right & you believed in the divine
now you are sentenced to rot in grime
with girls doing different time for the same crime
in a cell I'm confined
the state can own my body but never my mind

JADE JANKS

I'm Both

I am sad & feel defeated
I have drive but my spark is dim
I am strong & broken
I have so many troubles I cannot speak of
Anxious yet calm
Fierce yet weak
Worn down & resilient
Spirit broken like a horse
Everyone I love so strong, I have hurt so much
The ones I would die for are dying without me.
The ones I would kill for are the ones I am killing
I know what I am but I don't know my favorite color
I am an independent woman who must rely on others
I have hate, but more love
I have hope for my future, but don't want to wake up anymore
I care so much yet couldn't care less
He is gone yet I have no closure
I want to heal but scared to do the work
I am brave & full of fear. Terrified
I am God fearing & godless
Both intelligent & dingy
I travel within a cage
I am alone in an overpopulated crowd
I am filled with dark thoughts & sunshine
With a cold heart so big & warm.


JESSICAH

JESSICAH

Beautifully Tainted

you were the red sock in a load of whites
hidden within the glare of eye catching distraction.
Recklessly seeping your veiled grime
into the vastness of fading luminescence.
Crimson memories being soaked and spun
through each intricate stitch.
Carelessly bleeding through cherished white silks
the most delicate of places
saturated with your ravenous hue.
Though you have been discarded,
the wake of your unintended vitiation remains.
My belongings once colorless,
now forever changed by your stain.
Perceived as ruin, fueling my futile
attempts to remove your every trace.
Reluctantly I embrace the unwanted permanence
of you
because Damn,
pink looks pretty on me.

Meantime

As I walk placidly amid, yet beyond
the noise and confusion
of this outright moronic chaos,
    I cling to remembrance
of the peace found in silence.

I am amongst the loud and aggressive,
    a contradicting vexation of my soul.

Savvy to the consequences
of fatigue and loneliness.

My spirit is my shield
to this relentless bludgeoning,
arming against the inevitable dark imaginings,
halting the execution of their
maliciously prescribed plague.

My labors and ambition,
  the soldiers in the battle
    through this sham,
      this drudgery
        and unrelenting tyranny.

Those that plunder me demand my repose,
they carry me captive and demand of me a song
audaciously echoing
    "sing us a melody of your much deserved
shame".

The counsel of the years I take kindly.
Reverberated are the words
"without surrender, hold your serenity for all your
encounters".

Ungracefully conceding
to this placating peaceful ideology.

    For now.

Psalm 137
Desiderata - attributed to Max Ehrmann

JESSICAH

Desire Fed Need

Thoughts of You (in theory) render Me free
Your imagined lingering taste makes time hard to say the least
I want to consume You the way thoughts of You consume Me
The manifestation of this craving is a deprivation-fed Beast
From the very depth of my being, I need You
With each second-that-passes my pulsating soul pants–
Even for just your scent, the one that haunts and will never subdue
Despising this tortuous absence only envisioning Our taboo romance
These pacifying scanty options pointlessly dangled in my face
I'm done with this relentless charade of merely just the thought
No artificial substitution will ever satiate or replace
Because my longing for You keeps me salivating and taut
So for now, my insatiable desire is a monster at bay
Ready to be guiltlessly unleashed on You that glorious day.


Kelly Sorrell

KELLY SORRELL

An Elegy of Sorts:
A posthumous piece on someone who's still living

The loss of me…is that so bad?
That depends– who was I?
Well–Who are you… to me,
There is no starched handkerchief
soaked in salt.
If I never knew who I was,
no measure of the latency
in my blood and bones.
All else is an irregular fluctuation
of existent nuance between
The beginning and end of life.
There is nothing new under the sun.
And here I sit in radiant sunshine;
it is new to me, knowing my own
unfulfilled could've would've should've
my alive and, oh, very well then,
Self
is at a loss
and a marvelous gain
that the me of old made way for
the elegiacally poetic presence:
I am today.

SAY WHAT?!

I heard you
She heard you
they heard you

what did she say?

I don't know.
No one heard it.

There's a smell
There's a noise
There's a feeling

What do you mean?

They saw it
She saw it
I saw it

What did you see?

I don't know.
No one saw it.

Can we leave?

KELLY SORRELL

Gristick Tedium

I thought I escaped your whimsicky grime
daydreams supine held aloft
I loved and despised you at the same time
ingfulctious laugh in my ear soft

Kaleidoscope eyes fractured the lie
Into pieces I couldn't see clearly
What came by even' to rest and abye
Is the least letting go gives wearily

Intent on the burial and leave
takes the fodder from my pen
unwilling again in the heave
eventually I'll escape you again.


K.g. Noordman

K.G. NOORDMAN

Not Taken

Two diverged
sorry,
long
looked down far
where it bent.

the other,
perhaps the better,
Because it wanted;
Though the passing
had worn them the same.

And both equally

Oh, another day!
Knowing
doubted ever come back.

telling with a sigh
ages hence:
Two diverged,
the one less
the difference.

From "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

Still a Little Bitter

You fit into me
like a knife into butter,

a dull knife,
a frozen block of butter.

You fit me like
a pack of peanuts,

a salty snack,
but I'm allergic.

You fit my head
like a warm winter hat,

a scratchy wool hat
and it's summer.

You fit my body
like a pair of pants,

a woman's body,
state issue pants.



Mindy Jones

Girl in a Tree!

This place has gone insane
You won't believe the things I see
Idiots smoking wasp spray
A girl who climbed a tree

Too many officers falling out
Is it real or just a ploy
Their getting paid to stay away
That's the info we call "ROY"

Inmates dropping like flies
But no one really cares
Our cries to move the smokers out
Met with shrugs or angry glares

Their solution destructive searches
Doesn't matter who you are
We're all the same to them
Grab the feathers and the tar

It's a plague that never ends
Their dogs don't smell a thing
Punish them all and lock it down
Let's see what tomorrow brings

They're all convicts, inmates and felons
It's okay to treat them like dirt
Let's show them who has power
Make them pay for officers hurt

Hey, let's go even further
Stop the books, boxes and mail
Protect the ones who bring it in
Keep hiding the addicts in jail

I don't know how to fix
This terrible tangled mess
So I shake my head with frustration
And pretend CDCR knows best!

MINDY JONES

Just a Dream?

I dream of wearing feathered wings
Empowering me to soar above the chaos
Helping me reach new heights
Of clarity and understanding

I dream of a warless society
Communities resolving conflicts peacefully
With compassion and forgiveness
The central values always

I dream of a beautiful voice
Speaking with easy confidence
That will not be ignored
Or silenced with threats of violence

I dream of a world where
Color is only a crayon shade
Selected carefully from a box
To create beauty not division

I dream of city streets
Lined with smiling faces
Not grubby tents filled
With despair and hopelessness

I dream of a place
Where fairness and kindness
Rather than power and politics
Are the rule of law

I dream, I wish, I pray
I will live to see a time
When respect becomes the norm
Where justice prevails and nations live in harmony

Beauty Undefined

Is beauty a perception or more tactile?
Something to be seen, heard or smelled,
Or simply a feeling that brings joy
To that passionate place inside I call soul.

Flowers so boldly vibrant,
They are actually a sound,
A riotous concert for my eyes,
Soothing and disturbing at the same time.

Delicate rain bathing my face
Filling me with refreshing newness
Yet produced by angry gray clouds,
Clustered overhead like dirty sheep.

My love's familiar warm body,
Suddenly stitched, scarred, broken,
Still perfect to me in all its blemished glory,
Just a vessel for the life force within.

Surrounded by confusion and contradictions
So ugly it's cute somehow makes sense
Volcanic eruption both breathtaking and breathstealing.
Death as showstopping as a baby's first cry.

No cookie-cutter, black or white ideal,
Beauty a paradox, a conflict, an enigma.
Seeing with my heart, not my eyes,
Clear vision without corrective lenses.


Natalie Le Demola

No Sunglasses Allowed!

I see me

Can you see me?
Behind my sunglasses
underneath my skin
past my crime
straight into my soul

I had a hard time finding and seeing me
past my trauma
outside of my pain
without an external source telling me who I am.
I am me.

Can you see me?
I see me.

NATALIE LE DEMOLA

Broken Clocks

Time is the most precious thing
    We serve from our time for the rest of our lives

We took what was most precious
    And must give up what we try to reverse

Our victims' time + our time = Amends
    Does it?

Because time heals all wounds they say
    But not all harm

My time, Your time, God's time–
    I pray that God's time will be in my lifetime


Nicole Marie Schalles

NICOLE MARIE SCHALLES

Feminine Zen

Stay Still, and Be.
    Vagina, stay intact, don't shed
    your skin away–
Low Estrogen, I know
    But please, don't go
Eggs, stay! Don't drop
    without a sperm to permeate
Menstruation: you are Late!
    don't disappear before a Due Date!
Motherhood…
I Pray to the Feminine, to the Divine:
    Let me give birth
    before I become earth
Stretch, Vagina, real big this time
    give me one last try
    to be useful
    and Alive

A Shot of Wheatgrass

A shot of wheatgrass
A broken heart cure
Thanks mom, I'll die without him–

No.
You won't. Drink your grass.
Green with the smell of a summer day
moves into my heart
mowing my pain away
Red traffic light
a halt to my sight
single vision, no delight
A kite with no wind.
I watch a puppy
we both live in pens,
share in our pain.
We both have mothers
Who rain the same way
down
down
down
on the ground they stay
A protest against Faithless
Men
Locking their kin away

A shot of wheatgrass
Is green like a summer day
please drink my Love
Grass grows in the cracks of our broken heart world.

NICOLE MARIE SCHALLES

Things I Carry

I carry a future me
less desire remains

I carry the blood of fewer moons
Motherhood a song no longer
reverberating on my walls

I carry vanity from photos past
my shoulders slumped under its weight

I carry the energy of life
sharpened into a knife
slicing my will away

I carry possibility
tarnished and unsung

I carry love for a man
so heavy I drop everything else

I carry my pen
I write what's true
and I write my way into a new reality.



Omaima

Today I was Tired Quite a Bit

Today I was tired, quite a bit;
but it was not from working that hard for nothing, or tried to shop for a new outfit…
some work I got paid for being productive, etc…
but other work pays later!
Today!
I must admit that I do work long hours, but
I don't do it for the money or to gain vain power!!

I do it for me because I'm feeling safe,
sound on the inside out, no doubt!
I do it for myself to be empowered
and to do good inside and out – some good deeds indeed!

Of course not a lot, but hey – that's worth a try, or a thought!

I work 6 days a week
But that's okay, I'm grateful to be able to think
use my senses, and the truth I speak.

This heart of mine is empowered by Allah
to make it continue to beat
without defeat.

I can find its rest in remembering Him,
and He also will remember me
and love me back –
the best.

Always

Always make your performance greater than your applause.
Always make your confidence greater than your comfort.
Always make your contributions bigger than your reward.
Always make your learning greater than your experience.
Always make your cooperation greater than your status.
Always make your enjoyment greater than your effort.
Always make your gratitude greater than your money.
Always make your purpose greater than your success.
Always make your questions bigger than your answer.
Always make your future bigger than your past.
Always believe correctly.
Always act fearlessly.

Thoughts on the Go!

What to say or left to say
When it has already
been said and done!
Where to go or who to go to when
Your release day will come!
That's what you should be focused on!
Are you ready?
Yes, I'm ready!
Because those whom I'm
going home to love me
and we are going to have
so much fun!



Rebecca G.

REBECCA G.

To All the Captive Souls

I am but one of the captive souls who sadly lost in the battle trying a case,
the result, a puzzled existence… in such a lonely place.

A ghastly all-inclusive resort
offering drugs, tattoos, piercings and regret
The oppressive atmosphere exudes
a tragically ominous and suffocating set

Imagining wings on my back
that miraculously take flight
I feel my body hover slowly
with my eyes closed, oh so tight

Then I realize my false reality
and the hopes and dreams that will never be
I crash to the ground once again
eluding a storm of tears, ever so stately

In the midst of horrific trauma
oh, such dreams we weave
but this is Hotel California
and you can never leave

The Best Seats in the House

Suddenly a bright light appears
followed by burps and giggles of joy

Then my limbs start to grow and
I can finally reach my favorite toy

Forced into school, new friends,
tantrums and bullies.

Puberty arrives on a red carpet,
WTF?! Sexy boys!

Sibling rivalries, hard knocks, and catty girls
as I continue my search for the one

Loss of jobs and credit card debt, but here
comes Prince Charming, Oh what fun.

Eggs drying up while changing diapers, juggling a career
and connecting with God through a single tear.

Now, a different kind of light is revealed
A large screen, with decades of life unpeeled

An empty nest, blissfully lonely, quiet as a mouse
A reel of my life portrayed from the best seats in the house.

REBECCA G.

Lure of the Water Tower

Like the ocean tides that pull shattered sediments of life out to sea,
The lure of the water tower pulls at me
Rusted, looming and undisturbed– a different type of liberty

Hypnotizing its audience while unveiling an alternate route
An invitation to put down your sword,
Vacate the hopeless crusade, take the forbidden fruit

The water tower, with its unrelenting ladder to ascension
A bold claim of sovereignty
A form of triumph over resignation, a climb to sanctity and elation

One courageous leap and your lionheart existence once again rules
Freedom is so close, you can smell the lilies on its breath
Alluring, persuasive and exciting, a red carpet to death

A celebratory departure dictated on your own terms
The water tower tenders the ultimate act of heroism, that your heart yearns.


Zabel Joubalian

ZABEL JOUBALIAN

Turning 70

Seventy appears without asking permission
It crawls upon you without declaration,
just a quiet hand on your shoulder
And a whisper: "Look how far you've come."

There is a softness now
in the way the morning light is held,
a patience that you achieved through the years,
A knowing in the bones
that time is not something to chase
anymore.

You have gathered years
like worn, beloved books–
some dog-eared with laughter,
some stained with tears,
all worth keeping.

You know now
which battles deserved your fire
and which were only passing storms.
You've learned the art of letting go–
of grudges, of hurry,
of the need to be anything
Other than yourself.

Seventy is not an ending.
It is a widening–
of heart, of memory, of grace.

You stand here
rooted and radiant
with hands that have held so much
and still open.

Seventy is a quiet triumph
of life, still unfolding

Young Touch

Before I knew what life is all about
I loved you with all my essence
I got elated on your smell
You unlatched every window in me
Letting light touch places I kept hidden.

We built a language from Little Things;
Our laughter carried hidden truth
Understood only by me and you.
You knew me when the world was small
We intertwined our visions in life.
Like roots beneath the surface
    a family,
    a home

Years slipped quietly into memory
Moments became something sacred
You would touch me all the time
It wasn't just closeness, it was reassurance
Then one day you made a confession
That you have another Love,
    another life,
    you're leaving

ZABEL JOUBALIAN

The Shame I Carry

Shame
It is heavy
It is burdensome
I can feel it on my shoulders
every time I wake

Shame
It fills me with guilt
It is saddening
It makes me pause
and grow

Shame
It is part of being human
It does not define me
I have within me wisdom,
strength, and understanding

I'm shedding my shame
To allow myself to be happy
My shoulders feel lighter
already…

Exquisite Corpse Poems

In these following 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.

We laugh 'til we pee our pants
perhaps because we're just old
and gray and lonely.
Now, sunny and blue/green,
your eyes unlock the future—
a key to seeing
the victories over the fears,
the crown of wisdom we must hold near
through shattered heart and fear-driven actions.
Allow me to place a wreath upon your head—
Why, thank you, for crowning me with your wreath.

II.

I wanted to write you a love song
and name it "Minions Raining Donuts."
The sky is full of holes that hold together,
made up of orange cheese.
Like the blood moon on a dark night,
so is the way of treatment in this long, arduous fight.
How is a person to survive under these difficult living circumstances?
With dignity and perseverance, we fight another day.
I like that, no doubt!

III.

Exquisite rose bush thorns and justifications,
splinters, scars, and memories of
who was never hers to begin with
or yours to keep.
"Forever in my heart. I will never forget."
You are etched on every part of me—
only the important parts
are visible
when you're not wearing underwear.
Inviting even the creepy and repulsive
such as you—
like marble in the earth.

IV.

and then she died
without leaving anything behind
    You will be free! You will be free!
Freedom is only a state of mind
Someday you'll be free and I'll be free
to tiptoe through the tulips,
their blooms like silent exclamation marks against a hill of green
observed by those too distant to touch
and heard by those too close for comfort—
so get comfy and close
to listen to great poets.

Author Biographies

Aimee Gana is a writer, artist, and cancer survivor dedicated to reforming the carceral system through her creative writing and personal storytelling.

Amelia Carlson is an artist who loves (misses) the beach and whose biggest weakness is dark chocolate. She uses the pain from her entire life experience as a superpower to love and help others. She holds a Bachelors of Arts from CSULA and aspires to obtain her Masters in social work or art (preferably).

C.G. is a poet and lover of animals: passionate and loving, wishes to travel, and to strive to do her best and live life to the fullest.

Dude Ramiréz is proud to be 60 and a poet. He loves the ocean, nature, and his Bustelo café-drinking, Ernest Hemingway-reading, mamba-listening mentality.

Freesia (Free) Vargas loves her home of San Diego, her dog (Taco) and her cat (Happy).

Haena Worthing: Loving mother, lifelong learner and storyteller.

Jade Janks is a student and emerging poet. She dreams of beaches, freedom, and her dog, Betty.

Jessicah is a proud mother of two amazing children and striving to be free, both emotionally and physically…and soon will be!

Kelly Sorrell is a passionate word person. She spends her time, employed and free, as a peer support, palliative care worker and life recovery facilitator. Her days are filled with social networking within the community to build resilience one person at a time. Kelly's yesterday, today and tomorrow is dedicated to shortening the time and distance between her and her daughter Kaitlyn and granddaughter Miranda.

K. g. 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 recently graduated from CSUDH (Cal State) with a Masters degree in Humanities and is an avid sci-fi fan.

Mindy Jones uses creative writing as an escape from confinement. It has taken 71 years to discover the freedom found in words. She will be forever grateful for this new found liberation.

Natalie Le Demola is a 41 year old woman who has spent her life behind bars since the age of 16. She strives to find purpose by helping those around her and doing outreach work to give back to the community that she once harmed. She is passionate, kind, and loving, and uses her wrong choices as teachable moments so others won't go the route she did.

Nicole Marie Schalles is an artist and friend to all animals. She creates Art to exist in prison. She writes to expand agency and perspective.

Omaima is an Egyptian woman who wishes and looks forward to being released and returning home to her family!

Rebecca G. is a mother of three and humanitarian dedicated to supporting survivors of trauma. She is passionate about justice reform, ending prosecutorial misconduct and abuse of power by raising awareness through journalism and filmmaking.

Zabel Joubalian lives in LA, grew up in Boston. She enjoys reading, writing, canvas painting, gardening, crocheting, jewelry making, and museums. She was named after a 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:

Jessica Abughattas, "Watching My Mother"
George Abraham, "On the Eve of yet another Nakba, a Dream"
Margaret Atwood, "[you fit into me]"
Elizabeth Bishop, "ONE ART [REVISIONS]"
Paul Celan, "Les Globes" and "Why This Sudden At-Homeness"
Chen Chen, "When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities"
Lucille Clifton, "far memory"
Billy Collins, "The Lanyard"
e.e. cummings, "[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in]"
Isabella DeSendi, "Eve's Protest"
Emily Dickinson, "Because I could not stop for Death–" and
"We Grow Accustomed to the Dark"
Eve L. Ewing, "I saw Emmett Till this week at the grocery store"
Andrea Gibson, "Untitled" and "Tincture"
Louise Glück, "The Myth of Innocence"
Chris Hoshnic, "rabbithole"
June Jordan, "sunflower sonnet / number two"
Donika Kelly, "Dear —"
Ada Limón, "The Carrying"
Bernadette Mayer, "[Sonnet] You jerk you didn't call me up"
Mary Oliver, "Heavy" and "The First Time Percy Came Back"
Paisley Rekdal, "The Defense of the Poesy Workshoppe
(poetry with a practical gathering)"
William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"
Evie Shockley, "sonnet for the long second act"
Shel Silverstein, "Eighteen Flavors"
Martha Silano, "Self-Elegies"
Danez Smith, "Dinosaurs in the Hood"
Patricia Smith, "10-Year-Old Shot Three Times, but She's Fine," "70",
"Salutations in Search of (3)"
Tracy K. Smith, "Declaration"

Sin à Tes Souhaits, “Sometimes I Wonder If God Really F*ck with Me Like That”
Dianne Suess, “For twenty-six days I lived in an apartment with a dishwasher”
Leigh Sugar, “Freeland: An Erasure”
Kashawn Taylor, “These Headphones Should Be Free”
Sara Teasdale, “The River”

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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.