Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project (PNAP) is a collective of artists, writers and scholars who organize arts and humanities classes for people at Stateville prison. Each year, scholarly and creative work is developed in the prison that is then exhibited in neighborhood galleries. PNAP understands access to education and art to be fundamental human rights capable of transforming people, systems, and futures.

Published in 2015:

*Latinos: The Struggle is Real*

*Let Brotherly Love Continue*

*Political Theory at Stateville*

*Reading and Writing Our Lives, Stories and Commentary From Stateville Prison*

*Reflections on Criminalization and Violence in the Lives of Black Women, Essays by Black Men*

*Weight of Rage*
Reading and Writing
Our Lives
Reading and Writing
Our Lives
Stories and Commentary
From Stateville Prison

Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project
# Contents

Introduction: Tim Barnett 7

Addiction, by John E. Lombardi 9
Black Sheep=Hurt and Confused=Who’s to Blame? by Marvin 11
Hood PTSD, by Samuel Karim 14
A Changed Me, by Terrence Jenkins 17
Recognizing the Invisible Chain, by Michael Key 26
A Real Conversation With Yourself, by Pierre White 34
Homesick, by Tremayne Willis 37
Isolation, by Matthew Davis 44
Poetry, by Jason Samuels 50
Art, by Jermel Hyde 53
Love in Prison, by Joseph Wilson 55
When the Concrete Speaks, by Alex Negron 57
In the summer of 2015, I taught a class titled “Reading and Writing Our Lives” at Stateville Prison and in this class, most of the students created a piece to be shared with a wider audience.

We live in a violent world that places more value on things than on people and sometimes seems only intermittently interrupted by moments of compassion, empathy, beauty, and art. I think all of these things can be found in this booklet, however, and am proud to have played a small role in its production.

Tim Barnett
Megan Foss, a.k.a Mickey, tells a story in “Love Letters” that is pretty much unknown to the general public, but all too well known to us, the prisoners here at the Statesville maximum security prison. She lived the life of the streets — the nightlife. I can identify with that lifestyle because, I, too, lived my life on the never-sleeping streets of Chicago.

We both have something else in common too, and that is, we were both addicted to heroin. These life tragedies need to be told for everyone to hear and understand. We started out as innocent, young, and susceptible to the dangers of drugs such as heroin, crack, and alcohol. Most of us were never educated or warned of the almighty power of heroin and the likes.

Once addicted, your most valuable priorities no longer take precedence. King heroin takes top spot over milk and diapers for the baby — and self-esteem. One no longer cares about anything or anyone but the king. Hopelessness, helplessness and homelessness take on new meanings. Spiraling out of the control of addiction opens the eyes of the naïve. Now you get a look at the real world as you’ve never seen it.

Although the involuntary refrain of abstinence through incarceration temporarily relieves the withdrawal symptoms, the deeply embedded psychological craving lingers in wait, a sleeping cell, like it did in Robin Williams and Philip Seymour Hoffman.

The criminal justice system throughout America has no idea what to do with the addicted, but they make up more “lock them up and throw away the key” solutions. They have no idea, nor care that under the callous skin of the addicted there lies the sensitive and vulnerable little boy or girl that they once knew and loved. Now they see, and treat us, as disposables they never knew. They have no idea, nor care, that criminal punishment is not the solution to social problems. They have no idea, nor care that their jails and prisons are hate factories that aggravate and magnify the state of mind of hopelessness, helplessness and homelessness of the incarcerated.
and the majority of the addicted. The halls and prisons of America are creating monsters out of human beings. No wonder the recidivism rate has skyrocketed.

The common title that we use to tag these incarcerated human beings is antisocial — a cover-all phrase. Then we have the many TV shows like COPS, where they call us scumbags and creeps, evoking more contempt from the public. America has more prisoners incarcerated in its jails and prisons than even the communist countries of China and Russia, which have combined populations of billions. There is definitely something wrong with this picture! What is going on, America? Does the average American know that after the closings of the majority of mental institutions in Illinois (and I’m sure the same is true in many other states) a large portion of the mental patients who were released are in here with us at Stateville prison? What is going on, America?

I have a starting solution, America — how about we invest the wasted monies spent on punishment, banishment, and prisons and jails and invest these monies into treatment, therapy, and housing for our poor, suffering, and addicted. How about we invest and embrace, instead of punish and exile, starting with the media and television and programs such as COPS, which elicit contempt, scorn, and derision for the poor, suffering and addicted. How about we challenge the mandatory and enhanced outrageous sentencing statutes that take away any possibility of parole.

With the “get tough on crime” mandatory and extended sentencing statutes, long in place now, the jail and prison population has not lessened. In fact, the jails and prisons house more human beings, and have been far over capacity for many years. And because of the mandatory sentencing and sentence enhancement statutes, state budgets, as in Illinois, are so far in deficit that they are off the charts, and there is no plan to fix these budget deficits, except to borrow and pay additional interest — digging us all deeper into the black hole.

Drug and alcohol addiction are long-term problems that require a thorough, thought out plan and execution. Dehumanizing the poor, homeless and addicted is not the solution. Punishing social problems through the criminal justice system has long been the rule for decades, if not, longer. This logic makes me think of the old adage and truism of the definition of “insanity” — doing the same things and expecting different results. Wake up, America, or get ready to relinquish your crown as the greatest democracy on earth.

John E. Lombardi
Rockford, Illinois, in the mid 1970’s, was the beginning of this life. I was born to a single mother, and the third of five. Life wasn’t easy for me, as for most black children. Even worse was living in the Fairgrounds Housing Projects. Mom would often say she was the “black sheep,” and she rarely went to any family gathering because she felt as if her mother didn’t treat her well growing up. As a child I didn’t understand what mom meant by being the “black sheep,” but, in 1989, when my mom passed away of a drug overdose, I felt the harsh abuse she had experienced.

My siblings and I were all separated; my oldest sister got an apartment and months later moved down south. My oldest brother went to a foster home. My little sister and brother went with my mom’s twin sister. My mom’s twin sister never came around the family either. As for myself, I moved in with my grandmother (mom’s mother). When my mom died, it felt as if I died as well. I made it a top priority to find out what drug caused the death of my mom and promised myself to never touch cocaine, heroin or any drug other than reefer. “I never knew anyone to change forms from reefer!” Mom’s death affected me both mentally and spiritually. Where was God when people needed him?

To understand what a black sheep is you must think of a lot of white sheep, with one black sheep. Looking at them, you would immediately see something that stands out: the black sheep. Arriving at granny’s house, I was met with discomfort. “Take all your belongings out the bags and shake them out,” she said. This was meant to exclude any roaches from entering her house. That was understood; coming from the projects, I could have brought more than roaches. I really felt embarrassed deep down inside. My grandmother hurt me so bad mentally that I’m still recovering. She was a very beautiful woman with long black silky hair. She had Indian in her family, I believe on her mom’s side. On the outside she was a very beautiful woman. Inside, something else.
Have you ever wondered what could cause a person who gave birth to a child to disown that child as though she didn’t give birth to him or her? I believe that something may have happened to her as a child that triggered something in her that she never overcame. I didn’t have a close relationship with her due to the circumstances between her and my mom. Granny never supported me nor my ideas. I honestly believe that in the three years living there she bought me probably three pairs of pants, one coat, a pack of underwear, and a few shirts.

I was on a basketball team for the Boys and Girls Club. Our games would always be on the weekends. I had a promising career, “boy, I had skills.” Never did she or my grandfather attend any of my games. This would hurt me and to see other families there supporting their children was a major blow to my confidence. I would walk from the Westside to the eastside of Rockford, Illinois during the cold weather or snow.

After one game, it was so cold; the coach saw me leaving the Blackhawk Boys Club and asked how I was getting home. Embarrassed as hell, I lied and said “my aunty lives over there,” pointing towards the apartments in the Blackhawk Housing Projects. I would play basketball in the same shoes I wore to the games. One day, the coach gave me a ride home. The coach said to me, “You should ask your grandmother to buy you some tennis shoes to play basketball in.” The coach really did like me. I wish I could have been adopted by him.

I asked my grandmother, “Coach said could you buy me some shoes to play ball in?” She was reading something, looked up at me, and put her head back down without answering my question. Wanting to do better without proper guidance, I went to the Rockford Park District to apply for a summer job. They gave me some forms for my granny to fill out; she never did.

Cousin Chub was my aunt’s son. He would come over to granny’s house to spend a night mainly on the weekends. We would be in the basement playing and watching television. Granny would call Chub upstairs, and he would come back down with pizza or Kentucky Fried Chicken. I would be left with hot dogs that were in the refrigerator for me to eat. Christmas was no different. When I was about 13 years old, at least ten grandchildren came over to the house and everyone was opening up gifts. I received no gifts. One day I overheard a conversation between granny and some lady. I heard the lady say, “Who is that?” Granny said, “That’s Sandy’s son, as soon as he’s 18, he’s out of here.” What was I to do? I had no one to talk to, and I had all this pressure on me. Seeing my mother die in my face, being neglected... I felt helpless. I would act out in school; I couldn’t stay focused. Therefore, my grades started to fall.
Whose fault was it that led my grandmother to treat her daughter, the women she gave birth to, so harsh that it would in turn also lead to neglecting me? Growing up, we as humans have all types of things that we deal with. They can contribute to bad choices in life. If I were given a real opportunity from a caring and loving family, who knows where I’d be today? Mothers and fathers must love their children and support their ideas. Some people never know why others act out. We are all Gods’ children, but we must find a way to figure out what’s causing children to act out, pick up a gun, and pull the trigger.

Could my grandmother have been affected by slavery? Could that be a contributing factor to this whole treatment of my mom and me? Could the depression and neglect have contributed to my mother using drugs, which ultimately led to her death? You never know what somebody is feeling and going through. Why are kids dropping out of school? Could they have been treated the way I was? Would all this have an impact on your life? Love your kids.

Peace,
Marvin
I have a secret that I know most men and women in prison and in urban America suffer from. Our secret is Hood Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Hood PTSD). Understanding Hood PTSD means understanding that men, women, and children coming up in war-torn ghettos of the U.S.A. are facing the same historical harms, anxieties, mental disorders as our soldiers who serve in the military and go to war.

I believe my mental disorder (i.e., Hood PTSD) has been caused by numerous elements from the ghetto, such as abusive parents, violence in the home, violence in the neighborhoods, gangs, shootings, rape, and all the stuff we see in the war-torn school-to-prison pipeline that we are taught in. Being exposed to this level of prolonged violence and stress in my environment has led to a very long term effect on me, altering my way of thinking both psychologically and physiologically.

With that being the case, I look back at how I developed Hood PTSD to understand the reoccurring nightmares I face to this day. It was the mid 80s, and I was coming out of the movie theater in Hawthorne, CA at The Hawthorne Mall. There was a man laying on the ground with multiple holes in his face, and I can still hear all the hollering as I look around and I see this man on top of a car with the biggest knife I had ever seen attempting to fight off what looked to be security. I remember getting into the car asking my dad, “Why didn’t you help or call someone to help?” and him saying back “That isn’t our business.”

At or around this time, I started to think different, but I was never asked what do I think or see, which left me to deal with life as I saw fit. Then around 1988, as fate would have it, I was shipped off for real violence training 101 with my big brother and his father (whom I look at as my father because he never beat me and showed me how to have things). While looking up to both of them, I was being molded to handle urban violence in America. But what I saw as a young man has changed my
reality forever. I, to this day, still smell the gun smoke as well as still feel
the first- and second-hand weed smoke in my lungs as that adolescent,
and still have other anxieties from that life style.

Being exposed to this obviously was detrimental to my development,
but some of the otherthings I saw as a young kid haunt my thoughts to
this day, like being in a house fire when my family lived in TX, or when
I had my headed busted open with a baseball bat or when I was in a gas
explosion when my family lived in Los Angeles, CA. Or the many shoot-
ings I saw growing up. Or the enforcement of the drug spots around the
communities I grew up in. This stuff really hurt how I viewed the world.
For one, growing up I hated how my father treated my mother, but, on
the other hand, my brother whom I looked up to, slapped his women
from time to time, and I ultimately became what I hated and what I loved.

But in saying that I don’t believe that pre-prison I had any truly healthy
relationships with any women. I started out with a cuss word, then I
moved to a slap, then I moved to doing whatever I wanted to do without
thinking. Then dealing with alcohol and smoking weed, I just moved how
I wanted to without any regards. Then I think back to my father becoming
a full-blown alcoholic, and his out-of-control behavior showed its face
by way of yelling and most of all being very abusive to our whole family.
I took the brunt of it. My father had already run my brothers and sister
out of the house at different times. I really don’t know what it was, but I
guess his Dad raised him the same way. What I do know is that he made
me hard to everyone in the world, and I really did not care what anyone
thought about it.

I do know that living with Hood PTSD growing up, you start to self-med-
icate yourself with drugs and alcohol. I started to love the alcohol because
I could blink out in a way that I wouldn’t remember anything and, more
importantly, I could stop the nightmares. Even as I look back at school, I
think about all the drawbacks that made me look down on myself, such
as not knowing how to read or even the fact of not being able to think
for myself. So when my brother’s father took interest in my life, I found
a voice — but it was the voice of the devil. This voice was the voice of
hate, distrust, and anger for all. This was the voice of the little boy who
said “Won’t anybody make fun of me;” this was the voice of “Won’t any
one ever abuse me again.”

This was the voice of pain times 10. But I found out that the voice
needed to feed off of hate, pain, and hurt from others to operate. As I think
back, if I could have stayed at the mental health doctor, I just maybe could
have gotten some help. But instead I got help from the gang. The gang
gave me that false sense of love and truth. It was a fake brotherhood. It
was like the meeting of a pain body. Even the leader of the gang is a pain body himself. The pain body is a person that walks around in pain not ever really dealing with the cause of the pain. And he takes it out on the world.

I still believe, had I gotten help it would have saved my life. I believe that at some point I knew that prison was in my future, but with the weed and alcohol I didn’t care because I really wanted to be dead.

I even know now that Hood PTSD played a big role in the decision-making that got me to prison. When you don’t trust and something inside of you won’t allow you to trust, then you live with the thought of “me against the world.” I believe it doesn’t help much that most of the people in that life style are really out to get theirs by any means. What’s even more crazy about Hood PTSD is that if the lawyers took the time to look into my past or had the judge been told about my PTSD, then I don’t believe I would be here in prison. I would be getting the real help I need. As I think forward I just pray that people in prison and urban America are able to read this and get some real help.

Hood PTSD is Real. Just think if a U.S. soldier goes to war and comes back after a couple of years of active duty complaining of posttraumatic stress disorder — his complaints are taken seriously (usually). If that same soldier has issues with violence and breaks the law, uses drugs and alcohol, the community with the judicial system and the media might come together and recognize PTSD. In fact, in some cases the neuroscientists can diagnose PTSD from an MRI or CT scan of the brain. But when a kid from a ghetto is acting out and has been to war in the hood, the community, the police, the judge and lawyers come together to give the kid a life sentence, which is not right. Like the soldier, a kid coming up in a city like Chicago who saw more murders in the past 10 years than American soldier deaths should be availed of the same medical community and judicial resources when faced with the same kinds of circumstances that produce PTSD.

So since the secret is out, can we get America to get some help because this Hood PTSD is killing me!!!!

Samuel Karim
A Changed Me
by Terrence Jenkins

“Oh great. Another day at this place. I hate my job, In fact, I hate my life.” This was the anthem Tanya recited just about every morning to herself in the mirror as she pinned up her once long, wavy black hair, now brittle from the lack of love and attention it needed and longed for over the years. Memories of her grandmother began to fill the surface of the mirror like a screen of an old picture show. “Make sure you take care of your glory. It is delicate and precious. Never neglect it,” her grandmother had told her when she was a child while she was washing, drying, and combing her hair. “Mamma, why do you call my hair my glory” Tanya remembered asking.

“Well, child,” grandmother said as she looked down at the wide-eyed girl with equal parts of love and wisdom, “that is a story in itself, but I will give you the short version. When I wasn’t much younger than you, my mom told me the same thing. She said I was a beautiful princess full of God’s wonder. My hair was like my very own crown that represented my glory. I was to always take care of it.” Just as quickly as Tanya snapped her hairpin, she was snapped back to reality. Bang! Bang! Bang! The rhythmic beating on the bathroom door confirmed this unwanted reality. “Are you almost done in there?” came the voice from the other side of the door. “I need to use it. I can’t hold it much longer.” As if on cue, a smile appeared on this young, but worn, face. “Yes. lil man,” she replied as she turned to open the door.

There stood Tan’s (as her friends called her since childhood) five-year-old son. Christopher was not only the apple of her eye but the center of her world. He was a male clone of Tan, right down to the dimples and wavy hair. His smile could melt glaciers. “Hurry up, mommy has to finish getting ready for work.” As Chris ran past her in frantic haste, he paused at the toilet with his head slightly turned and in a sincere voice requested, “Mommy, can you give me some privacy. I’m a big boy. I’m 5 ½ years old.” “You don’t have anything I haven’t already seen, boy,” Tan quickly
responded. “But hurry up before you make me late for work” were the words that gracefully fell from this proud mother’s lips. Gently closing the door, she couldn’t help but smile and shake her head in amazement and pride.

Soon she was ready and five-fifty was the time on her watch. She quickly, but as quietly as a lioness pounces on its prey, entered Chris’ room to kiss him goodbye as she did every time she went off to the “hell hole.” This was her interpretation of work. Hell was her interpretation of home too until Chris was born. Then it became known as the place where the devil stays. Speaking of the devil, she could hear him speaking in his second favorite language in the next room. The language was snoring, and he was in a deep conversation. His first language: insults and cursing. “I love you lil man,” she whispered. “I love you too, Mommy,” returned what sounded like an angel’s voice. Tanya left for work.

“Hey, little lady,” chimed a voice from over Tanya’s shoulder as she closed her front door. “Good morning, Aunt Josie,” she replied. Aunt Josie was no kin to her but everybody’s aunt. Aunt Josie was in her late eighties, heavy set, with a head full of gray hair. She wore her crown of glory well and with great honor. The virtue in her reminded Tan of her grandmother.

“Have a good day.”

“Yes, Ma’am. You too.”

As she stepped onto the sidewalk, the familiar smell of burning trash filled the air. One would think that the salivating aroma of crisp bacon, cheesy eggs, or a fresh-brewed pot of coffee would take command of the air. Maybe the the scent of fresh-cut grass. But no, not in the community of East St Louis, IL. Well, maybe in a very limited area, but not in her neighborhood. In the middle of June, with the kids on summer vacation, most people were still asleep. A handful were going to work, with more coming from there. It wasn’t the type of work that taxes were paid on. And the grass you smelled wasn’t being cut...but more like smoked. It was a distinct, undeniable smell. Not to be outdone for attention were the sounds of her society. The day was not a day without the blurring sounds of sirens and blazing pops of gunfire. It was so common that you didn’t react unless it was near. People, in fact, could identify the caliber of the gun and approximate distance and direction the shots came from. That determined when and where a head count was done.

As Ms. Tanya Simpson walked the five blocks to the Metro link, a welcome cool breeze brushed her soft, light brown skin. To get to the station at Fifth and Missouri, she had to walk past an abandoned lot next to an old tire repair shop. On that lot stood an oak tree. Under it sat four elderly men who seemed to have been around as long as the tree itself. Cement
blocks and lawn chairs were their perches. Just as sure as the sun rose, these men were there playing cards, dominoes, or reading the paper and drinking coffee. Two other things were certain. The radio was playing blues and all of them had a snub nose 38 on them. They didn't mess with anyone, nobody messed with them, and they didn't tolerate anyone being messed with in their presence.

“Morning, young lady,” they said, sounding like a male quartet. “Morning Mr. Jones, Mr. Rodgers, Mr. Floyd, Mr. Young,” she replied. She could have spoken in general but felt that they deserved the respect of individual acknowledgment. “How’s that boy of yours?” Mr. Rodgers questioned. “Fine, getting big and thinking he’s as old as you and me combined,” she said with a smile. It seemed to be contagious because all of them smiled as well. “Well, you be safe,” cautioned Mr. Floyd. “I will. You too,” Tan answered. While patting his waist where the gun was tucked, he returned with “I always am.”

“Stand clear! Doors closing!” announced the conductor through the speaker. Tan had assumed her usual spot of standing right by the doors. She never sat since she was only going three stops. By the time she would get comfortable sitting it would be time to depart. She scanned the crowd of familiar faces and made her normal gestures of greeting. Once exiting on Washington St in beautiful downtown St Louis, she headed south on 4th St for a four-block trek. Each step seemed painful going to ‘this place.’ While she didn't mind working and liked the people she worked with, she couldn’t stand who she worked for. The hotel was a blessing and a curse. A blessing in that it got her out of the house and away from her boyfriend Scott, aka, the devil. It was a curse because she was away from her son and her boss at work, Amy, reminded her of Scott. At least at work there were 910 guest rooms where she could escape Amy’s presence. At home there were five including the bathroom, and none of them were off limits. Even the basement held no solace for her.

As Tan entered the door of the employee entrance, the sound of a soothing voice welcomed her. “Good morning, beautiful,” announced Immanuel. Not even noticing it, Tan brushed back some hair that had come loose and fallen over her right eye. Accompanying this movement was a little school-girl smile. Her entire demeanor changed. In the back of her mind she knew that another blessing about the hotel was that Immanuel worked there. He was always nice and respectful to her and made her feel like a person and not a piece of property.

Immanuel Jennings was the Room Service manager. He stood at 5’9” and was medium built. His skin tone was a shade darker that that of Tanya’s, and he kept a clean-shaven head. Even though Immanuel was
only 25 years old (one year younger than Tan), he spoke with maturity and conducted himself likewise. Being that young in management made him a target; older managers were cautious of him, and some employees with more seniority were jealous. His work ethic moved him up from server to manager quicker than anyone. The flip side of that coin was that many female employees wanted to be with him, but he never accepted their advances. That is what made Tan feel even more special because he took time to have meaningful conversations with her. That burned many people up.

“Good morning, Mannie,” she managed to force out. It was at this time she took the opportunity to ask something that had been burning at her like a crack pipe to the fingers of its user. “Why do you always call me beautiful?” “What do you mean,” he curiously responded.

“You know what I mean. If it’s not beautiful, it’s beloved.”

“Why do you call me Mannie? By the way only you and my mom are allowed to,” he returned with a smile.

“Because it is your name or at least an abbreviation of it.”

“For the same reason. Even though it is not your name, it is who you are. To me it’s just as important.”

“I guess, I don’t think I’m beautiful and definitely not anyone’s beloved.”

“See there lies the problem. The problem is not that I call or see you as beautiful or beloved; it is that you do not. I wish you could see you through my eyes.”

Feeling like she did as a kid at Dunbar Elementary school, redness filled Tanya’s cheeks as she began to blush uncontrollably. She lowered her head trying to think of something to say but found no words, none that she believed could be appropriate for the moment. Like a silent prayer being answered, Nora, her coworker, walked through the entrance. “Hi guys,” she greeted. Tan released a sigh of relief and whispered “Thank God” under her breath. “Girl, we better clock in before we are late. It’s already ten till,” commanded Nora as she gently nudged Tanya.

“Ok.”

“Maybe we can continue this conversation another time,” Mannie suggested.

“I would like that.”

“Good. You ladies have a good day at work.”

“You too,” they chimed together as they began to walk away.

“Oh yeah. Tanya, whenever you get a chance and come across a Bible, could you read Psalm 139:14 and meditate on it. Maybe we can talk about it later too.”

“Ooh, girl, what was that about?” Nora questioned.
“Nothing and none of your business.”
“Not yet, but it will be!”
“Will be what? Something or your business?”
“Both!”
“Anyway, let’s clock in and get our boards and cart before the only business we have is looking for a job.”
“Since your man doesn’t work, T, that will be both of you unemployed. He needs to get off of his ass and get a job.”
“You got that right, but don’t get me started.”

After the preshift meeting, Nora and Tan grabbed their boards, which informed them of the rooms they had, how many, which were VIPs, and any special requests or conditions they needed to know about. The amount of checkouts and how many housekeepers were working dictated how many rooms each person was required to clean. On average, it was about 16-18 rooms. Today was no exception, and, as usual, they were assigned the same floor along with one other girl.

The time was 7:30 am, and a sea of soldiers dressed in light grey and white dresses departed the basement with their marching orders, all equipped with a radio, their boards, and their carts containing cleaning supplies, linens, toiletries, and other items. The good attitudes and smiles didn’t come into play until they hit the floors or at least came into contact with the guests or management.

“Here you go,” a man said as he handed Nora and Tanya two 20 ounce cups of soda filled from the cafeteria. It was Jimmy, who was a lead houseman assigned to their floor. “Thanks, Deebo,” they said. Deebo was a nickname give to him by most of the staff. It came from the character in the movie Friday. Jimmy was the size of a linebacker with the voice to match. His presence was strong but his soul was gentle.

Jimmy was very protective of them but for different reasons. Tan was like a little sister. This kept most men at bay; the ones that were more daring quickly discovered they were not as daring as they thought. As for Nora, it was more personal. They even had their own nicknames for each other. She called him Sexy Chocolate because he was dark complected and sweet, and she wanted to just eat him up. In private, Deebo referred to Nora as Juicy. Nora stood 5’10” with hazel eyes and long sandy hair. She was bi-racial with a black father and Hispanic mother who had blessed her with a 36” 26” 38” figure. Deebo professed that every time he saw her, his mouth watered. It was obvious the attraction was there, but nothing had gone past the innocent flirtation. Sexy Chocolate respected that Juicy had not too long ago gotten out of a long relationship that ended roughly.
In no uncertain terms, though, he let her know he cared for her and was willing to wait. They had been friends since shortly after she started working at the hotel 4 ½ years ago.

Knock! Knock! Knock! “Housekeeping!” Tanya politely announced herself. “One minute,” a voice answered from behind the door. As the guest opened the door to room 1120, she was warmly greeted with “Do you need any service today?”

“No. Just some clean towels and soap please.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Is there anything else I can get you at this time?

“No that will be all, but wait right here.” As the guest left the door ajar to retrieve her purse, Tanya got four bath towels, two hand towels, and two face towels ready for her, all as white as winter snow with the smell of a morning spring dew. On top of this neatly folded mountain of softness were two bars of soap, shampoo, and conditioner. When the guest returned to the door with a grin on her face, she asked with amazement, “How did you know I needed those things too?”

“I just thought you might.”

“Well, bless your heart. Thank you. And this is for you.” As she took the items, she handed Tan a $5 bill.

“Thank you,” Tanya graciously accepted, “and have a nice day.”

“You too, baby!”

The door was closed. Tanya folded the bill in her pocket and marked the room off her board. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Nora approaching.

“Have you had a chance to read that scripture yet?” Nora asked.

“No, I was going to do it at home or when I had time. Why?”

“Well I did and I’m curious about why he asked you to read it.”

“I don’t know, why? What does it say?”

“You have to read it yourself, but I do have questions about it. Just make sure you do. Let me get back to work; we have about an hour before break. I’ll see you then.”

“All right.”

Now Ms. Simpson’s curiosity was sparked. What was the big deal, she asked herself, as she entered room 1122. Before she knew it, her curiosity got the better of her and she headed to the nightstand. Pulling open the top drawer where the Bible was kept, she figured she had a little time since she didn’t have to clean the previous room. While she searched for the Scripture, she peeked down the hallway to insure that no inspectors were on the floor. She decided to read it standing up because she didn’t want to be caught sitting on the job. She could explain the Bible in her hand but not sitting with it.
Here was Psalm 139:14. She read aloud as if in front of a class. “I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well.” Taking a moment to receive some prophetic insight, she read it again. Now her questions had questions. “What does this mean?” she asked herself. “I wish Big Mamma was still alive. She could explain it to me. I really miss her.” As her eyes began to water, Tan thought about how disappointed her grandmother would be in her if she were still alive. She was eight when Big Mamma died of a stroke.

“Maybe Aunt Josie can help.” Taking a tissue from the box, she wiped her eyes and told herself “Get it together, girl.”

“Let’s see what Slime Street is serving us today,” Nora spat out. “Slime Street” was the name they gave to the cafeteria, which actually was called Pine Street. Both opted out of the Salisbury steak since the gravy looked chunkier than the meat and chose a salad and fries. “Hey, look, there’s Immanuel. Let’s sit with him,” Nora suggested.

“No, how would that look?” Nora protested, “Who cares? He always comes up here even though he doesn’t have to; that’s why no one will pay any attention to the both of us sitting with him.”

As a manager, Immanuel had an in-house account. He could eat at any of the restaurants or eat through Room Service and charge it to his account. Since he came from being a server, he could relate to the employees, though, and that is why so many respected him. He never let his position go to his head and thought he was better than anyone else.

Just as Tanya attempted to go to another table, Mannie saw them and motioned for them to join him, and as much as Tanya wanted to decline, she also wanted to accept his invitation. She felt like she was at war with herself. As they neared the table, he stood and pulled out their chairs, then sat again. Tanya felt eyes on her and she was right. While she was sitting down, her peripheral view observed a table of three women looking. She felt honored and special and embarrassed at the same time.

“Thank you,” they both extended.

“You’re welcome,” he returned.

Being the feisty firecracker she was, Nora blurted out, “You know there are some jealous heifers in here.” They all three laughed. If looks could kill, half of the cafeteria would have been arrested for murder.

“They’ll be ok,” Tanya added. “Yes, they will,” Immanuel confirmed.

“How have your days gone so far?” he continued. “There he goes again,” Tanya thought to herself, “Being a gentleman and asking us about our day. The thing is he genuinely cares.”

“Fine,” Tan nervously answered. Sensing her nervousness, Nora jumped
right in, “Can you explain the Scripture to us?”
“Tell us? Did you read it as well?”
“Yes and we don’t know how to perceive it.”

Immanuel turned his attention to Tanya and looked her directly in her eye waiting for some sort of response. All she could muster up was a smile and a nod. “Well,” he began, “since we are short on time, I will give you the elevator version.” The girls looked at each other, confused. “That means the short, direct version,” he said.

“There are three parts. The first says that you two are fearfully and wonderfully made. That means while you are not made perfect, you are perfectly made. You are perfect just the way you are, quirks, idiosyncracies, and all. The second part says that God’s works are marvelous. You are his works, His masterpieces. You are marvelous. God doesn’t make mistakes or junk. The third part is the most important. Your soul, meaning you in your heart and mind, must know and believe the first two parts. If you don’t, the first two hold no power. You have to know your value and worth and know you are important. A diamond is still a diamond even if someone fails to acknowledge it. I call you beautiful because to me, you are. But it doesn’t matter if you don’t believe it.”

“My grandmother was the only one that told me I was beautiful. After she died, I didn’t hear it anymore.” Tears began to show their presence. Nora quickly held Tanya’s hand in an attempt to comfort her. Mannie wanted to do the same but knew it wouldn’t be appropriate. “It’s ok, girl,” Nora whispered.

“I never knew my dad,” Tan continued. “My mom always complained that having me changed her life. She said I looked like my father, and, because she hated him, she resented me. I never heard her say she loved me or was proud of me. In fact, all I heard were insults and complaints; it was drilled in me that I was worthless and wouldn’t amount to anything. I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok. Do you think that is the reason you tolerate the relationship you’re in?” With shock in her eyes she questioned, “How do you know?” “I apologize, it is not my place.” “No, no, tell me.”

“Well, it’s simple. In the years I’ve known you, you’ve only mentioned Scott’s name maybe three times. Each time seemed like it pained you. Most of the time, you refer to Scott as ‘him,’ ‘he,’ or some other words I can’t repeat.” A slight smile crept on her face. Immanuel continued, “But when you talk about Chris, which is all of the time, I can feel the warmth and love. It’s like when Jimmy speaks of you, Nora,” shifting his attention to her. Her reaction said it all. “What? That’s my boy. Do you think he doesn’t mention you to me?” Tan took this opportunity to take her hand
and close Nora’s mouth by raising her lower jaw. Tan added, “Nora! First time you’ve ever been speechless.”

“Look, Tanya, and this goes for you too, Nora, you can’t do anything about the past, but you can about the present and future. Be careful about what you allow people to speak over and to you. But more important about what you speak over yourself. Tanya, I’m going to take a guess. I bet Scott was the first man that said he loved you, gave you some attention, or filled the void your absent father left. Once Chris was born and he felt he had you, things changed. Nothing you did or said was good enough.”

The atmosphere began to change from sorrow to anger. Realizing this, Mannie attempted to lighten the mood. “Hold on before you all go ‘waiting to exhale’ on him. Calm down. Both of you are smart, beautiful young ladies. You have a lot to offer and deserve the best. It’s not what people call you but what you answer to. I know you two have to get back to work, but I want you to do me a favor. Starting today I want you to tell yourself how you see yourself. Do that everyday throughout the day. It doesn’t matter what it is, except that all negativity must be rejected. You are smart, beautiful, successful, special, important. You make your own list. Ok?”

“Ok,” they confirmed.

“Feel free to sit with me at lunch any time or visit me in Room Service if you don’t want to be stared at. And have a great rest of the day.”

“Thanks, Mannie. I have a lot to think about.”

“You can do it. Both of you don’t forget my offer...”

“Oh, she won’t,” Ms. Nora slid in with a smile and nudge. Immanuel stood as they did and let them leave before he did. Once in the hall, Nora looked at Tan and in a sarcastic voice asked, “’Mannie?!’ Where did that come from. I wonder what he calls you!” Tan continued to walk and didn’t say a word but thought, “Whatever he wants.” For the rest of the work shift, both women, unknown to the other, spoke positive words to themselves in each room that they cleaned starting in front of the mirror. By the end of the shift Tan felt something she only felt in small spurts. She felt good. She read the Scripture a couple more times before leaving. She knew it was time for a change. That change began with her and at home.

Terrence Jenkins
Recognizing the Invisible Chain
by Michael Key

Dedication: I’d like to dedicate this writing to my dad who has taught and continues to teach me the responsibilities of being a man.

Chapter One: History

The history of my life is as follows: I was born 36 years ago to a mom destined to be a drug addict and a father destined to spend more than half of my life, as well as his own, apart from me because he was in prison. Now my mom was a great mom, all the way up until one of her best friends introduced her to heroin, and, because my dad was in prison at the time, he wasn’t there to prevent or save her from her inevitable fall — something he blames himself for and still regrets to this day.

Growing up in Chicago, I was the fourth of five children, but there were only four of us because the Department of “Children and Family Services” took my older sister before I was born. Because my mom was out chasing her next high, the raising of the smaller children fell to my brother Darnell. My mom, Delois, couldn’t keep a job, so she eventually went on public assistance, which my mom spent on drugs. Sometimes she paid the rent, sometimes she didn’t, so we ended up moving around a lot.

During those times when we were in between homes, we — the children — were shipped off to stay with our grandparents, of which I had two sets. There was my mom’s Mom and Dad, Elizabeth and James, then my dad’s Mom, Judy. Most times my brothers went to my mom’s parents, while I was sent to my dad’s. I loved those times, for even though they took me away from my mom, my grandma Judy and Uncle Eddy, who also lived there, and my Uncle Lannie made my stay welcome and full of love. But eventually my mom would find an apartment and we would go to our new home and the cycle would begin all over again. When I was six, my mom had another child by yet another man who wasn’t there and had no
intention to be; the baby was a girl and her name was Lisa. It’s a miracle that she was born healthy and strong because by that time, heroin was not the only drug in my mom’s life. As I said, I was six by the time Lisa was born, and her life was almost ended before it began at the hands of her very own big brother — me. I was under my mom’s bed playing with matches, lighting the strings hanging down from the box springs. My mom and baby sister were in the bed asleep when the bed caught fire. In the end, everyone got out — me, my sister and mom, my grandparents, and my brothers — with no other damage to the house but the destruction of the upstairs.

Once again, I was six when my sister was born, but I might as well have been 26 because it was left to me to take care of the new addition to our family. My older brother Darnell continued to be the father and the man of the house. My brother John, who I remember being bigger than life and my hero and who I wanted to be just like, continued to be bad as hell, listening to no one, especially my older brother. They stayed at odds, which in my opinion pushed John into the streets, and, while they were at odds, it was left to me to take care of my little sister and myself because my mom was out doing her usual.

I remember a time (and the comedians make fun of it, but I lived it) when we had two broken tv’s stacked on one another. One was for the picture and the other for the sound. We had to turn the channel by using vice grip pliers and when we didn’t have those, a fork. I remember times going to bed hungry and not being able to sleep until my baby sister cried herself out all the while my mom sitting there in a drug-induced stupor. I remember times not having any electricity, gas, or heat, sometimes all together, sometimes one or two at a time. When we didn’t have gas, we usually had electricity so we used a hot plate to cook with. We’d also use the hot plate to heat the apartment when the heat wasn’t on, or the stove (when the gas was on). Sometimes we’d jack electricity from the hallway outlets or run extension cords to our neighbors. And sometimes we didn’t have water and had to fill up jugs from the fire hydrant on the corner to eat, drink, wash, and bathe with.

I remember those times as being hard and sometimes embarrassing, but its crazy because I also remember those times as being some of the best times of my life. Except the being hungry times! I think that, even though those times were hard and full of struggles, facing them together made it all a little better. Because often times the whole building was out there trying to get water. And for the kids it was like having our very own water park. Not once did I make it back home dry, or without a big Kool-Aid grin on my face and getting “love tapped” by my mom for soaking up her
floor. In truth, the only times I hated having to fetch water was when kids from my school would happen past and see me and laugh. Those were the times I would go in and not be smiling, and when my mom would notice she’d know something was wrong. And she would always tell me, “Don’t worry about it. We won’t be down long.” At least that what I interpreted it to mean when I got older. In reality, what she said was “Fuck those little bastards, next time one of them laughs at you, come tell me and I’ll kick their little asses.” That always made me laugh because when she said it she always had a comical look on her face; then she’d swat me on my butt and tell me to stop being a punk and get that water in here, and it would all be good again.

By the time I was ten, my older brother Darnell was off to the Marines, and my brother John was in prison. I can’t tell you how many times we moved or when my mom finally realized that her lifestyle wasn’t conducive to raising children, but, eventually, me and my little sister went to live with our grandparents, me with my dad’s mom and my little sister with my mom’s parents. But for me, it was already too late. I was hooked on the street life and the freedom to do what I wanted when I wanted, a freedom I knew would be over at my grandma’s place.

Chapter Two: Culture

The culture of the streets when I was growing up was simple: hustling, drugs and violence. Hustling was the only way it seemed for a black man to get ahead and rise up out of the systemic poverty plaguing Black communities across America. Now I use the word hustling in a broad sense because there were many ways to hustle in my neighborhood; you had drugs, pimping, auto theft and chop shops, murder for hire, boosting and pick pocketing, check and credit card fraud, singing and rapping, and sports.

If you were good enough and could survive the danger in the hood long enough to make it to the NFL or NBA, you were one of the lucky ones. There was hustling for the kids as well and I did all of it. I carried groceries, pumped gas, mowed lawns, raked leaves, and shoveled snow. I did all that all the way up until I graduated to selling drugs — I was 11 years old. But with hustling of any kind comes violence and a violence in very sense of the word. A violence with two inevitabilities — death or, if you’re lucky, prison.

I’ve seen a lot of death in my 36 years, the very first time when I was only seven years old. I saw a friend of mine hit by a freight train while we were playing on the tracks. But the very first death I saw from gun violence was when a guy I knew was shot in the head by another guy after
an argument. I can’t say what the argument was about, probably drugs, but I can remember seeing the back of the guy’s head being blown open and seeing brains and skull fragments all over the sidewalk. I was 12 years old.

At the time guys were dying all the time, and while I can’t say for sure why they were killed, I can speculate. Some were killed for no other reason than being at the wrong place at the wrong time, some were being hunted for something they did or a perceived wrong, some were killed for money and/or for a block neither of them owned, and some were killed over women. Some of these killings were brutal and for everyone to see to as an example, and some were so covert, you never found the bodies until a little kid playing in an abandoned building or parking lot found them.

I can’t remember one day passing from the age of 8 to 14 that I wasn’t lulled to sleep with constant gunfire. And as I got older, oftentimes that gunfire was aimed at me. Most of those times I was either high or getting high. I carried a gun everywhere I went because I’d rather have been caught with it than without it. Having a gun oftentimes determined if you lived or died on that day. All through my teenage years there wasn’t a day I wasn’t either drunk or high or both while I was hustling, because, like violence and hustling, drugs and hustling go hand in hand. I was so indoctrinated into the street life that one time I went down south to visit a relative who lived in a small town, and I was there only two days before I was bored out of my mind and ready to go home. Do you know that I couldn’t sleep because it was too quiet? I was so used to hearing guys talking, gun fire, and police sirens out my window that when I didn’t, I was uncomfortable.

Society looks down their noses at guys like me and says lock those people up and throw away the key, never once admitting to themselves that I’m simply what society forced me to be. Growing up poor, black, and in a dangerous neighborhood is akin to growing up like a pit bull raised to fight other dogs. Placed in the pit and forced to defend its life, it must be learned early on it’s kill or be killed. Some died their first fight; for the ones that survived with every fight they became more smart and cunning, but also more vicious. Sometimes that’s their whole life until one day they’re locked in cages, rehabilitated, and eventually let go and placed back into society. Some die in the pit, but for the ones that are lucky enough to be released and placed in a warm, loving environment they thrive. Some reoffend, though, because they can’t shake what they’ve known and been their whole life. And for the savage feral so-called “lost cause,” they’re put down.

There’s another thing I realized as well in my 36 years and it’s that it doesn’t matter if you’re black, white, red, or brown. If you live in America you probably know someone in prison. Whether that someone is just a
friend or relative, a husband or wife, or the perpetrator in a crime against you makes no difference; the likelihood of someone you know becoming a victim of the prison industrial complex is upwards of 40%, and if you're black or brown you can double that number. In the poor communities, a child with a parent or relative in prison is 90 times more likely to end up in prison themselves. I speak as a child, now grown man, whose father has been in prison almost my whole life. Not only is he still in prison, but we are in prison together seven cells apart.

When I was young, in my neighborhood, prison was glorified as a right of passage if you will. You went to prison and when you came home, it was like having a celebrity returning home. Your guys hit you with clothes, jewelry, money, and cars, and the woman loved you. I can also remember my grandmother taking me to down to see my dad in prison. Sometimes we’d sit in the visiting room where there were toys, junk food, and ice cream, and we would go down for family picnics the prison was having. Those times are really vivid in my mind because those were the times I had the most fun with my dad. We played basketball and ate junk food. What more could a kid ask for? I think too that those were the times that really solidified in my mind that prison wasn’t that bad, which shaped the heart of my pubescent and teenage years. It wasn’t just that guys were coming home and then driving nice cars, wearing the latest jewelry and clothes and getting all the girls. No, it was the fact that I had been there already, and, from what I’d seen, it was like a summer camp.

No one ever told the Michael of seven, eight, nine, or 10 that prison was one of the most dangerous places on earth and on a daily basis made you fight for your sanity, your virtue, and most importantly, your life. I remember one time talking to my dad on the phone, and asking him what he was doing and him telling me he was watching the Bulls game on TV in his room. I was thinking, damn, they got TVs too; the place is great! And nothing I saw or heard dispelled that notion.

As a child, it never occurred to me to wonder why my dad never came home. I don’t think I had one friend at that time whose dad was not in prison or just simply not around. Besides I had uncles — my dad’s brothers that were always there to protect me and comfort me if I hurt myself. To my young mind that’s how things were supposed to be. It wasn’t until later in my life that I realized that, even though my uncles were always there, they were not my dad. I’m still today realizing all the things I missed out on not having my father there with me. I was asked once if my dad ever told me the bad side of prison, and, if not, why do I think he didn’t? The truth is, I don’t think it ever crossed my dad’s mind to tell me the bad side of prison life when I was young because I don’t think he ever
foresaw me going the route he went. I think, though, that by the time he realized the route my life was going — because he still had eyes on the street watching out for me — I don’t want to say he thought it was too late, but I think there was a disconnect from the relationship we had when I was a child to the one we had when I was a teenager. He was still in prison, and I was running the streets with my homies. If I’m being honest, the street became my daddy, so even if he wanted to pass on that knowledge of the perils of prison life he never really had the chance, not to mention at the time he was living through those perils. So I was forced to get my education from my “other dad.” I’m just now realizing that that education was packed with lies and deceit and manipulation.

I realize also that everything I saw with regards to prison was designed to pull me in. Guys came home from prison and became ghetto superstars. Don’t get me wrong, not everyone who went to jail was met with fanfare when they got out, but there were enough to make an impression on my young mind. It wasn’t long before I was approached by one of those ghetto superstars and given a job, which I took to like a fish in water. That job was packed full of dangers, but I realized that those dangers were just what came with the game, and if I wanted to play the game I had to accept the risk….

Chapter Three: Family

When I speak of a family, I don’t speak of my mom, DeLois; my dad, Kenneth: my brothers and sister, Darnell, John, Lisa; my grandparents, Judy, Elizabeth, and James; or my uncles, Lannie and Eddie. No, I speak of my brothers and sisters in the hood! Because me and my real brothers were so far apart in age when I was young, we never really hung out and did things together. They had their own crowd. Darnell, who ran track for CVS high school in Chicago, had his own friends. And John, who ran the streets, had his own friends, and neither of them wanted their little brother tagging along. So I made my own friends. Some were the little brothers of my brothers’ friends, and some were kids from school and the neighborhood. But a few stand out above the rest. I like to call them my “immediate family.”

There was Kenneth, Don, Billy, Roland, and Spann. These five guys were my family, and we did almost everything together. Don and Kenneth, though, who are brothers and whose mom was like my mom, were my closest friends as we grew up together the longest. We went back so far, we used to sleep in the same bed as kids. We met Billy, Roland, and Spann later. They were friends already. Growing up we called ourselves cousins,
but we were more like brothers. To mess with one was to mess with us all, and everyone knew it! Everything that was lacking in our home — love, attention, fellowship, brotherhood, and just having someone to have your back — we provided for each other and more, and our bond was strong. Kenneth was the first to be taken as one night he was killed in a gas station, gunned down in the prime of his life. Such are the perils of street life!! As for me, Billy, Don, and Spann, our stories end and begin in a prison cell. As for Roland, he was released from federal prison in 2013 and I hear he’s doing well.

I think back to the days we were all together, having what we thought were the times of our lives, and to us we were; it makes me nostalgic. Sure, those times were packed with risk and violence that could lead to death or imprisonment, but, if I’m being honest with myself, I loved every minute of it. Knowing better, would I do it all over again? Who can say, but I do know I’d do it differently. We all thought, as the youth of any race does, that we were invincible and immortal! We thought that way, and we lived that way, and our actions, choices, and decisions all bore that out. But wrapped up in all of that was an attitude of “I simply just don’t give a fuck!” As the years passed, our family eventually became larger, but we will all always be the original six.

Conclusion

I read somewhere once that your life is already predetermined based on your race, gender, and economic status as well as where you were born. It said that if you are born black, male, poor, and in a bad neighborhood, you are 90% more likely to turn out poor with a high probability of either death or imprisonment. It also said there will always be some to beat the odds, but because they are born into systemic and abject poverty, that number will be extremely low. You need only look at the statistics for Blacks graduating high school and college, the percentage in the workplace and owning homes, and the number of Blacks now residing in the prison industrial complex to see the truth of that statement.

White middle- and upper-class society judges my people harshly. Anyone not having gone through even half of the things I have in my life shouldn’t judge me or say to themselves “they were given the same education and opportunities we were.” Because the sad fact is I wasn’t given the same opportunities as a middle- and upper-class kid my age. Fifty Chicago schools public schools were closed last year because in those Black neighborhoods and communities, the Black residents don’t own the homes or buildings they live in. They are single-parent homes because the judicial
system has systematically rounded up all the black man and imprisoned them forcing their children to grow up without dads, and mothers work 80 and sometimes more hours a week just to make ends meet. And because she’s not home, the child is actually raising him or herself.

These kids have to go to schools that are part of what is now referred to as “the school-to-prison pipeline,” where test scores are more important than what the children are going through at home or at that particular time in their lives. A school system that is creating a hostile environment with Nazi concentration camp-like situations, which are only forcing our kids out of schools and into the streets and hands of the very people society claims to be so afraid of. There is such a thing as being so afraid of a thing that everything you do only helps to create the very thing you’re scared of in the first place.

In my opinion if Black fathers were allowed to remain free and given proper education, jobs, and opportunities then more children would know and follow their fathers’ example. If Black women and mothers had their men/husbands at home, then they would have the time to do what mothers have been doing since creation began, and that’s instill the proper family values and morals the children need to reach their full potential. When a man is allowed to be a man and a father and given the tools to take care of his family, he cherishes them more. But when a man is made to feel less than a man, which is so often the case, that man lashes out at the people closest to him and pushes them away, essentially abandoning them even though they’re still there. Somewhere along the way we have lost what it means to be a family and to take care of one another, and until we get that back we will continue to be lost. Yes, it’s economical, yes, it’s educational, and yes, it’s racial, but the truth is, it’s always been that way since we arrived on the shores packed into slave ships. But we’ve always had something up until now, that they couldn’t take, no matter what was done to us, and that’s each other!! But now, we’ve finally allowed the enemy to do something no slave master was ever able to do, and that is to divide us and sow dissension and mistrust amongst our people. I can’t tell you how we get back the trust, but I tell anyone I meet or who will listen that I recognize a problem exists and what that problem is. Do you??!!

Michael Key
As a kid no one imagines waking up the next morning with no place to go, no money, no food, and just the clothes on their backs, out in the streets. As a kid you don’t have to really seriously care about nothing. Nothing matters to you at all. Only thing we think about is kicking it with our friends the next day, or what girl we got a crush on. But it can feel like with the snap of a finger or turn of the head that’s where you can end up, out in the streets. How can we get that far gone? We all have some type of story and this is part of mine...

I don’t remember ever being mistreated or abused by my family. As a matter of fact, my mother always worked and provided the best she could for me: the best clothes, the best shoes, money in my pocket, and I was straight. But I wanted more. To me something was missing, but, even though I was as mischievous as they came, I was all good.

Just like any other kid from the hood growing up in the mid to late 80’s, early 90’s, we did similar stuff. From playing hide and go seek (which meant to us and our lil girlfriends, hide and go get it), to playing basketball using the crates in the alleyway, to stealing candy and chips out the corner store. This was my life as a kid without a care in the world. Then I began to grow older (11, 12 & 13), and I started to see exactly what was going on. I started to make different choices, choices that would in the long run have me in a bad situation. It’s supposed to be a cliché, “Hindsight is 20/20”, but I believe that to be true. Looking back over my life, “Hindsight is 20/20!” Life for me became real.

I started to see that because my father wasn’t around, it really took a toll on moms. She wouldn’t say so, but it did. She loved and loves her kids with every fiber in her body, but she had to assume both roles (moms and pops), and she did as best as she could. She just started to work so much. She got a job driving trucks and would take trips that lasted 3–4 months at a time. During that time, my sister took care of me and her two boys. Both
of my brothers were locked up at that time so I had no one to teach me how to be a man. That’s when I took to the streets. I was doing stuff that not only endangered me, but my sister and her family. I started robbing, breaking in houses, stealing from people I’d befriended just to get close enough to get their stuff. Man, I was no better than a dope fiend looking for his next fix. It got so bad that I graduated to the next level of bad when I turned 13, and I got locked up for putting a gun to somebody’s head and taking their car (carjacking), just to joy ride. Imagine that!

The judge decided to place me in a group home because my family couldn’t control me, which they couldn’t, but what made him think that a group of strangers would or could do any better? So I ran away and kept running away until they discontinued my stay at the group home and locked me back up. A year later I was back on the streets, literally on the streets. My people couldn’t handle me cause I thought I was grown. At 15 years old I did what I wanted, when I wanted, how I wanted to do it, and I had an equalizer for anybody who tried to tell me any different (a glock nine). I thought I was the man, but I was just a wild shorty with a small crew of shorties from my block behind me with no guidance and no direction. Then drugs became my go-to thing. My drug was weed. I smoked it every day, all day.

I tried selling crack, but that wasn’t my thing. My addiction was robbing and I was hooked. I loved to see the fear in the eyes of my victims. It was another high that I couldn’t control. I stayed noticed in the hood, and it made me feel important. Why, though? I was a broke, homeless lil nigga that was lying to everybody and anybody around. Most of all, I was lying to myself. My reality was a lie. My life was a downward spiral and I was really for real on my way to the grave or to jail. Older people always say “The route you going is gone end up one or two places, dead or in jail,” and as outrageous as that may seem, it’s true and that was my reality. I knew it, but I really didn’t care.

When I wasn’t scheming or on some bogus stuff, my dreams had me thinking about all of that still. It was an ongoing nightmare cause I knew I wasn’t right in what I was doing, but couldn’t nobody tell me nothing. A few months later they finally got me. I did three years in juvy (IDOC) for getting caught with a gun and twentyfour bags of weed. That didn’t turn out better for me either cause I just got better at being bogus. I learned how to read people better and I made a plan, but it wasn’t to do good; it was to get better at doing bad. I got out and got up with a few people I grew up with and a couple people I met along the way, and we became a tight group of stick-up boys. People thought I was bad before? I was worse now. I had a place to stay I could call my own, a decent car that kept me
mobile, clothes that made me feel like I was something and money in my pocket. The people around me, I believed, had my best interest at heart, and I knew they had my back. I felt loved or what I thought was love, but after a few years I would come to realize that was a lie too. One of the biggest lies I’ve ever allowed myself to believe.

It took me years to realize that the people (not all of them) that we socialize with or grow up with or call our homies, who we think love us, really don’t. I’m sitting in jail for a bogus murder with 100 years because my homeboy told those people I did it.

The life that we live has to be the best life because we don’t get a do-over. Life is for real, the system is for real, and 100 years is for real. My reason for being open and honest with y’all about me is to get you to take a look at yourself, and it’s helpful to me also. If you can have a real conversation with yourself about what’s really going on in your life, you’ll be able to see that our choices not only affect our lives, but the lives of our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, kids, nephews, nieces, and the women in our lives at the time. By me already being in this mess, if I can help you take an honest look at what you got going on because maybe you may see a few similarities in your own situation, then I’ve made a difference. I had nobody to pull me to the side and say “Aye shorty listen, this what you got going on ain’t how you do it, this is a better way,” or just talk to me about really what was going on, or how to work to become somebody for real.

I may have been able to live my own life, but at this point, my life is not my own. I chose to turn it over to the system, but here I am. I’m talking to you, little brother and little sister. I’m telling you that you’re worth it; you are somebody and you can make it. I’m begging you to use my situation as an ‘app’ to place on any device of your choice so you can pull it up at anytime and look at it to help you make a better decision beside the one that will cost you more than it’s worth in the long run. I beg you to say enough is enough and do it the right way. I apologize because I knew I could’ve been a part of helping you see things in a different light. I know I could’ve been the ‘pick up’ if you ever fell. I’m here asking now, begging, and pleading that you have a real conversation with yourself.

With all my love, Pierre
Chapter One

I think we were all scared, leaving our family, our friends, our home to willingly go into enemy territory knowing there was a chance we wouldn’t make it back home. For months during training, our sergeants and officers repeatedly stressed to us how dangerous Iraq would be. I remember thinking, maybe for the privileged rich kids, straight out of mommy and daddy’s house, yeah, it was going to be rough but, me, I’m from the streets. I wasn’t worried about it. I’ve been on my own since I was 16. I’ve already been at war in the streets so shootouts are nothing new to me. Twelve months in Iraq wouldn’t be a problem.

Instead of going straight into Iraq, our unit settled in Kuwait where we were supposed to stay for the first month of our 12-month appointment, acclimating to the heat and continuing training. However, after only three days, orders came down the chain of command requesting a 14-man team to assist with security of a small base on the border of Iran immediately. The N.C.O. (non-commissioned officer in charge) of the 14-man team was to be Staff Sergeant Edwards, who held the title of Gunny. Gunny had made rank fast, and it was well-known he would soon be promoted again during this deployment. He was a short black man thickly built with a powerful chest and arms. At age 30 he had already been through the adventure of three deployments along with the stress of three divorces; the latter he claimed was the cause of his bald head.

Gunny had always given me a hard time during training back on US soil, so I was surprised when, not only did he select me for the team, but he placed me as a team leader, above others who outranked me. After selecting me he told me, “Pick one man you would trust with your wife.” “My wife?” I asked. “You mean my life, right Gunny?”

Homesick
by Tremayne Willis

Chapter One

I think we were all scared, leaving our family, our friends, our home to willingly go into enemy territory knowing there was a chance we wouldn’t make it back home. For months during training, our sergeants and officers repeatedly stressed to us how dangerous Iraq would be. I remember thinking, maybe for the privileged rich kids, straight out of mommy and daddy’s house, yeah, it was going to be rough but, me, I’m from the streets. I wasn’t worried about it. I’ve been on my own since I was 16. I’ve already been at war in the streets so shootouts are nothing new to me. Twelve months in Iraq wouldn’t be a problem.

Instead of going straight into Iraq, our unit settled in Kuwait where we were supposed to stay for the first month of our 12-month appointment, acclimating to the heat and continuing training. However, after only three days, orders came down the chain of command requesting a 14-man team to assist with security of a small base on the border of Iran immediately. The N.C.O. (non-commissioned officer in charge) of the 14-man team was to be Staff Sergeant Edwards, who held the title of Gunny. Gunny had made rank fast, and it was well-known he would soon be promoted again during this deployment. He was a short black man thickly built with a powerful chest and arms. At age 30 he had already been through the adventure of three deployments along with the stress of three divorces; the latter he claimed was the cause of his bald head.

Gunny had always given me a hard time during training back on US soil, so I was surprised when, not only did he select me for the team, but he placed me as a team leader, above others who outranked me. After selecting me he told me, “Pick one man you would trust with your wife.” “My wife?” I asked. “You mean my life, right Gunny?”

Homesick
by Tremayne Willis

Chapter One

I think we were all scared, leaving our family, our friends, our home to willingly go into enemy territory knowing there was a chance we wouldn’t make it back home. For months during training, our sergeants and officers repeatedly stressed to us how dangerous Iraq would be. I remember thinking, maybe for the privileged rich kids, straight out of mommy and daddy’s house, yeah, it was going to be rough but, me, I’m from the streets. I wasn’t worried about it. I’ve been on my own since I was 16. I’ve already been at war in the streets so shootouts are nothing new to me. Twelve months in Iraq wouldn’t be a problem.

Instead of going straight into Iraq, our unit settled in Kuwait where we were supposed to stay for the first month of our 12-month appointment, acclimating to the heat and continuing training. However, after only three days, orders came down the chain of command requesting a 14-man team to assist with security of a small base on the border of Iran immediately. The N.C.O. (non-commissioned officer in charge) of the 14-man team was to be Staff Sergeant Edwards, who held the title of Gunny. Gunny had made rank fast, and it was well-known he would soon be promoted again during this deployment. He was a short black man thickly built with a powerful chest and arms. At age 30 he had already been through the adventure of three deployments along with the stress of three divorces; the latter he claimed was the cause of his bald head.

Gunny had always given me a hard time during training back on US soil, so I was surprised when, not only did he select me for the team, but he placed me as a team leader, above others who outranked me. After selecting me he told me, “Pick one man you would trust with your wife.” “My wife?” I asked. “You mean my life, right Gunny?”
“No, I mean your wife,” Gunny answered. “Shit, you can trust me to save your life, but leave me alone with your wife and the bitch will come home pregnant.” I had to laugh; anywhere but the army that would be considered nothing less than disrespectful, but looking into his hard eyes, I knew there was a method to his madness. Without thinking, I answered him, “Specialist Collins, Gunny.”

“Tell him to pack his shit. You are alpha team leader; he is beta team leader. Birds will pick us up at 0815,” Gunny ordered, dismissing me. Gunny knew who I would pick. Specialist Collins, or Tommy, and I were best friends. Tommy was born and raised right next door to my home state of Illinois, in Indiana. In appearance he was your average Joe, standing 5’8” with black hair. He had tanned skin and defined forearms, the results of years of hard labor in the sun. He had always been a hard worker, but back in Indiana he had had an addiction, at the end of each day stopping to buy his dope from the neighborhood drug dealers. After 10 years of living with his addiction he decided enough was enough, that his kids deserved better. He kicked his habit and joined the army. At first sight I didn’t like him at all, but after five minutes talking to him he had me rolling with laughter. He had an infectious laugh and smile, with a mole on his left cheek that drew the eye. A proud man and a great father, there is no one I would trust more with my life or my wife than Tommy.…. The base was tiny, only eight soldiers and six civilians. They had been receiving intelligence of a possible raid on the small base and needed us for additional security. We were now security guards, boring work but it came with plenty of downtime. Even with our arrival we only numbered 22 soldiers, and with no officers or other high-ranking personnel the rules were very relaxed. The next couple of weeks were quiet without much activity or excitement, other than learning the original eight soldiers we came to secure were actually scheduled to go home, and we were to take over as their replacements.

It was normal for Iraqis to drive down the road right outside our walls and shoot in the air or for mortar shells to land laughably short of our perimeter — endangering no one but entertaining everyone. The day of the original eight’s departure came and went with no hiccups or excitement. We escorted them to the same location where we were dropped off by helicopter just weeks ago and secured the landing base zone until the helicopters took off.

Two nights later would be our first real test. Gunny, Tommy, and myself were in the gym working out when the all-too-familiar sound of gunfire erupted. This time the alarm sounded and a second later an explosion shook the ground. Thanks to Gunny’s defensive strategy and drills, I’m
proud to say of 14 soldiers and six civilians we took zero casualties and only two soldiers were wounded, while 47 Iraqis were killed in their failed raid and an unknown number escaped, choosing to run and fight another day.

Chapter Two

A few nights later, while in the USO tent, I could tell the difference in the men. A few were still shaking from the attack; I thought nothing of it other than kids becoming men. While they were quietly watching movies without really watching — but staring through the screen deep in thought — others were taking turns bragging and telling their version of the attack to anyone who would listen around the pool table. As I waited my turn to use the phone, I noticed PV2 Roberts getting loud on the phone.

Roberts had been one of the quiet guys. He was a young kid, only 19, and could go a month without having to shave his baby face. His life centered around his high school sweetheart, now his fiancé, Chrissy and his body. A Jersey kid, he took pride in his tan and was ripped with abs that made you jealous. The floor under his cot was lined with supersized jars of protein powders and other supplements. Back in the states, we worked out together and the trend had continued up until a little over a week ago when he stopped going to the gym. Moments later he slammed the receiver down and got up, grabbing his weapon. “Hey, is everything alright?” I asked him as he walked by with his head down. “It’s Chrissy bro, shit is just falling apart,” he answered without looking up.

“Give me 30 minutes on the phone, then meet me at the gym. We can work out and then talk more, sound good?”

“No, I’m good bro, I’m just going to lay down.” He finally raised his eyes and looked around the tent. “I just can’t handle all of this at once,” he said and walked out before I could reply. I looked down at my watch and saw I only had 20 minutes until I was supposed to meet up with Gunny and Tommy at the gym. I sat down and called my wife. Sometime during our call, between her telling me how much she missed me and asking for more money, I heard a shot go off. Everyone in the tent stopped what they were doing, and we all tensely waited for the alarm to sound. After a few seconds of silence, we all relaxed and kept it moving. Fifteen minutes into the “miss you’s” and “love you’s,” I ended our call and headed to the gym, right next to the USO tent. Right on time I saw Tommy coming from the barrack tents, so I lit a cigarette and waited. On his way, Tommy stopped to use the port-a-potty, but when he opened the door, he stopped mid-step and stared inside. Slowly he backed away and looked toward me, waving me over. I ground my cigarette out and placed the butt in my pocket before
walking over curiously.

Tommy silently pointed to the closed door, and I opened the door to find Roberts, rifle between his legs and his head slumped back against the dirty wall. I turned on my flashlight only to see the blood running out of the back of his head pooling on the seat and dripping onto the floor. The scribbled gang signs scratched into the walls were now emblazoned with blood. I told Tommy to go get a body bag from the TOC, while I continued to stare inside. I could still see the faint lines left by tears streaking down his cheeks. Closing my eyes, I closed the door and stood guard. I didn't want anyone else to see him like this.

Suicide is sometimes associated with cowardice, but I had seen this man in action. He was anything but a coward. Roberts was a hero. Lying in my cot that night, I watched a video my wife had made for me on my cell phone, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the result of Chrissy breaking Roberts’ heart. I made my mind up then and there that to make it home to my family, I needed to detach from them now and focus all of my energy on the immediate threat of Iraq. I decided to stop calling home every night and to call only once a week....

Chapter Three

For the first time, not everyone made it back. Twelve men carried three boxes, through the TOC, none of which bore a name and rightly so. We had done the best we could, but the fact is not one of the boxes held a sole body, but undoubtedly pieces of all three soldiers. To this day I wonder if, once in America, anyone ever determined what was what, who was who, or if each family received a box, burying my brothers together.

I spent the evening detailing what had happened to Tommy as we sat outside smoking cigars and drinking cheap whiskey. I told and retold the story, sometimes remembering new details and forgetting others. He knew I just needed to talk, so even though he couldn’t stand the story, he listened in silence. As I babble on and on, he would occasionally fill my greedy glass or relight my ignored cigar. Later with the whiskey gone, cigars smoked, and daylight a few hours away, we rose to go to bed. Tommy hugged me close and said “I love you, brother.” “I love you, Tommy,” I replied and drunkenly stumbled to bed.

That night I didn’t open my phone or scroll through any pictures. I wasn’t lonely. I had my family right there with me. Five months in, seven months to go.
In mid February my name was finally called for R and R. I had been in Iraq for seven months, and once I returned from R and R, I would only have four months left.

Even going on vacation was dangerous. The route between Viper and the Air Force Base was a two-hour drive loaded with IED’s. From the minute I was told it was my turn, all I could think about was being home with my family. During my seven days of waiting for flights, my excitement began to dwindle, though, and almost ceased to exist. The thought dawned on me that I was leaving my brothers to fight without me. Guilt set in as I wondered who would still be there when I got back.

Reality fully set in as the morning of my flight came and I found myself in line to turn my weapon in. For seven months my weapon had never left my reach, whether I was showering, sleeping, or shitting. Next I had to turn in my body armor; you would think it would be a relief to shed 40 pounds in an instant — but no. Lastly I was told I would fly home in civilian clothes in an attempt to blend in and not be targeted. Before I placed my uniform into the locker, though, I removed my patches and put them in my pocket. Even with this small victory, I walked away with my head down, feeling naked and vulnerable. To me these items were more than just equipment. They were a part of me. I was being stripped of my identity. I don’t remember boarding the plane. I was still struggling with the idea that I was no longer a soldier.

When the plane touched down in Atlanta, I was surprised to see a small crowd of civilians thanking us for our service and offering to buy us drinks. Like any good man, I accepted a few drinks before heading to the ticket counter and receiving a round-trip ticket, destination optional to any major airport in the U.S. St. Louis is the closest major airport to my home, so I picked a flight for the next day, giving me a night to myself, time to adjust. After booking a hotel room, and a long hot shower that I had been thinking about for seven months, I lay down on the soft bed and fell into my old routine of scrolling through the pictures on my phone. Only now, instead of pictures of my wife and daughter, I was looking at pictures taken in Iraq of bodies, weapon caches, drunk nights with the guys.

I closed the pictures and looked at the time, still set to Iraq time and reading 0538. My brothers were gearing up to head out on yet another mission, and here I was in a fluffy bed safe and sound. I couldn’t help but feel guilty while wondering if everyone who went out today would make it back. Looking at the time again, I noticed for the first time I had full bars of signal. No lines, no waiting; I could call home right now. Forgetting
about Iraq, I was actually excited to call Kendra for once. I love my wife, but it had just been hard to connect. All I knew to talk about anymore were tactics and strategy. As the phone rang, I got up and walked around the room nervously. It was another awkward conversation, so I made sure she had my flight info and ended the call shortly afterward, blaming jet lag for my need for sleep.

I couldn’t sleep though, too busy thinking of Iraq and feeling guilty, so I decided to go out and find a drink. A random bar led to a random woman; I didn’t have to say much, only that I had just come home from Iraq. She came back to my room and spent the night thanking me for my service. She told me I was a hero.

My flight landed in St. Louis a little after 10 AM. On my walk from the terminal to baggage claim I constantly adjusted and straightened my shirt, unable to calm my nerves and restlessness. Turning the corner to baggage claim, I saw Kendra looking around anxiously while holding my little girl, Jenifer. My pace quickened and my smile widened as Kendra saw me and her face lit up. Holding her in my arms I forgot about all the awkward phone calls and remembered just how much she meant to me.

I leaned back from Kendra and reached down for Jennifer who turned away and hid her face in her mother’s legs. Kendra kissed me and assured me Jennifer was just nervous and shy, but I recognized the look in her eyes before she turned away. After seven months, I was all too familiar with the look of fear.

I’ve heard before that children see people for what they really are. The army had taken my uniform, but they didn’t change what I’d become. Embarrassed, I was ready to leave, but there was still more change waiting for me. As we turned to go, I saw my mother making her way around the roped barriers with tears in her eyes. I wanted to think they were all tears of happiness to see me safe, but I knew some of those tears were from her misplaced shame. While I had been in Iraq, my mother had been diagnosed with MS, and, unfortunately, in the late stages. The strong single mother who had worked 16-hour days ever since I could remember to raise two boys on her own was now in a wheelchair.

On the drive home, I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep, lost in thought. I didn’t understand how I had left to fight for my country, and slowly lost everything. My daughter was scared of me; my mother would never walk again; and even though my wife and I loved each other, we didn’t know how to communicate anymore. Nothing here made sense. I wanted to go back to Iraq, where nothing changes. There was stability in the chaos of war.

After a few days Jennifer warmed up to me, and we were inseparable. Kendra and I spent the first two nights together; the physical chemistry
was there, but we still had trouble communicating, so I started going out at night drinking with old friends. I met a beautiful woman and spent the last few nights in a hotel with her. She wanted me to remember her when I went back to Iraq. She thought I was a hero.

Chapter Five

Whiskey 25499. I ran my fingers over the serial number of my rifle and read it aloud, smiling to myself. I was back, back in Iraq. Uniform on, body armor hugging my chest and back, my rifle back in my arms. I was at ease, myself again. Climbing into the Blackhawk helicopter I took the seat next to the gunner. Adrenaline pumping. Placing a dusty headset over my helmet, I looked at the gunner with a smile on my face. He looked at me knowingly, nodded, and said “Welcome home, brother.” Eight months in, four months to go. Tremayne Willis
What I am about to tell you is true. You will be tempted to reject it as a lie. You will find it easy to dismiss as the exaggerated complaints of a disgruntled convict. You will think that this could not, would not, happen in America. For, to believe is to accept that what you thought you knew about “civilized” society is a fallacy. You will not want to believe it. Fight that urge. Open your mind. Open your eyes. This story is true. It happened to me. It is happening every day

I

The first thing I noticed when I entered the isolation cell was the word “shit” written across the wall in feces. I couldn’t help but laugh as I thought to myself “Well, ain’t that some shit.” The next thing I noticed was that there was no toilet. There was just a small hole, about the diameter of a baseball, in the corner where the toilet should have been. As these two things rolled around in my head, I began to fill the chill. It was really cold. Freezing cold. It was the beginning of March, and while it was not exceptionally cold outside, it was, technically, still winter. I put my hand up by the vent in the ceiling and felt ice cold air blasting through. To make matters worse, I was naked.

II

I had been in the county jail for one year and four days on the morning of March 5, 2005. I woke up that morning as I had the previous 369 days, to someone banging on their metal bunk, or arguing with the voices in their heads. I didn’t let it bother me on that morning, though, because I knew that my attorney was coming to visit me later that day to discuss my living situation. Up until this point, I had been housed in the “special

Isolation
by Matthew Davis
housing unit" or SHU, due to my case being “high-profile.” Of the 20 men housed in the SHU, I was the only one housed there for that reason. The other 19 men were warehoused there due to mental illness. Being the only sane man in the asylum was taxing to say the least.

I had been petitioning the warden to move me to general population for about nine months. I thought that today was finally the day that my request would be granted. Later that afternoon, when I met with my attorney, I could tell as soon as I saw his face that he had bad news. He informed me that the warden had agreed to move me, only not to general population. I was to be moved to segregation. Anger doesn’t even begin to describe what I felt in that moment. I went back to my cell and began demanding that the warden come speak to me. After about an hour, he sent his lackey, the assistant warden, to speak to me. The conversation that followed was incredibly frustrating, yet hilariously stupid. He was sent to answer my questions, but every answer was the same, “It’s the warden’s decision.” My anger finally boiled over, and I began yelling a string of profanity-laden insults that culminated with me throwing a plastic drinking cup full of water at him. I guess he got the point after that, because he left me to stew in my anger.

A couple of hours went by, and I was beginning to believe that my logic had won the day. That I was not going to segregation. My hopes were dashed however, when a little after 3 o’clock, four officers came to move me. I was only a little surprised when, instead of going to the segregation unit, I was led to an isolation cell. I stared into the entrance of a small, dark, concrete box. I was told to strip naked. Then I was pushed into the cell, the door slammed shut behind me. Now entombed in darkness, my nostrils were assaulted by the foulest stench. Human excrement. Mace. Body odor. And a bunch of other stuff I couldn’t even describe. Suddenly, a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling blinked, grudgingly, to life. Once my eyes adjusted to the light, the first thing I saw was the source of one of the smells. Written across the wall, in three-foot letters, was the word “SHIT,” written in feces. Directly beneath the word, on the floor, was a huge pile of feces. Next to that a small hole in the floor. Nothing else. Just a filthy, bare, concrete box.

III

That first night was the worst. I quickly learned that the light was never turned off and the flow of cold air was constant. I did not sleep. I just crouched in the corner farthest from the pile of feces, and tried my best not to touch anything. I didn’t think that I would be left like this for
long, so I just waited. I think that was the longest night of my life. One
day turned into two, then a week. I was able to keep track of those first
few days only because every day brought a new disturbing element for
me to overcome.

The first hurdle was sleep. I had to sleep. Unfortunately, the cocktail
of body fluids covering the floor made it impossible to lie down. Every 15
minutes, an officer would come and look inside the cell to “check” on me.
I found that, while none of them would respond to my questions, or speak
to me for that matter, if I asked for toilet paper, they would give me about
10 squares. So, every 15 minutes I’d ask for toilet paper until I covered a
small patch of concrete to curl up on. It was only then that I discovered
that I would not be allowed to sleep for more than 15 minutes at a time.
The officers would hit the door until I woke up every time they “checked”
on me. This was supposedly done to “make sure I was alive.” I personally
believe the reasons were much more nefarious, but who am I to say for sure.

It was becoming very clear that my previous thought that “I wouldn’t
be left alone like this for long” was wrong. I decided that I would try to
make my situation a little more comfortable. I began trying to clean the
cell as best I could. I had no running water, and nothing to clean with
except toilet paper, but I did the best I could. I used a milk carton from
lunch to scoop the pile of feces into the hole. Then I used the toilet paper
to wipe the filth off the floor. I still couldn’t touch the walls, but at least I
could walk back and forth now. When I was able to sleep, I would always
wake up with the toilet paper bed shredded, so I slept on the bare concrete,
and used the toilet paper to keep warm. I realized, also pretty quickly, that
they would bring my meals, which consisted of “meal loaf,” at irregular
times, making it hard to keep track of time. After a week or so, I stopped
trying to count the days. “Meal loaf” for those who don’t know, consists of
whatever food was served that day, blended into a liquid, and then baked
into a loaf. It is entirely disgusting, and requires no utensils, so you eat it
with your bare hands.

I didn’t eat too much at first anyway, because I was dreading using that
hole in the floor as a toilet. After a few days, however, I had no choice.
I finally squatted down over that hole, and of course, I missed. It took
some practice, but eventually my aim improved. And so the days passed.
I am still amazed by what the human mind can, if pushed, adapt to. Once
I accepted the fact that the floor was as clean as it would get, the filth
on the bottoms of my feet no longer bothered me. I didn’t think twice
about eating with hands I hadn’t washed in weeks. And in spite of being
disturbed every 15 minutes, I was able to sleep peacefully. Most amazing to
me, however, was the ability of my mind to simply occupy and pass time.
I would sit and count the number of bricks it took to construct the cell. I would count those bricks, then immediately forget the number. It was like my mind knew that, if I remembered that number, I’d have nothing else to do. I probably counted those bricks a thousand times and, to this day, I couldn’t tell you how many there were.

I had been in isolation for nearly 2 months. I had not had a shower. I was not allowed to send out or receive mail. I was not allowed visits except with an attorney. I spoke to no one. I had nothing. Only my own thoughts to occupy my mind. I could feel myself fading. I think that, if not for the following events, I would have lost my mind.

IV

I knew that what was being done to me was, if not outright illegal, very close to it. I felt like there was nothing I could do to change my situation. So, in desperation, I went on a hunger strike. I should have foreseen the outcome, when not even the slightest concern was shown for my refusal to eat. I wasn’t eating much to begin with, but, at first, hunger overwhelmed my every thought. After a couple of days, I wasn’t even hungry anymore. The days passed in a blur, until finally, on June 14, 2005, a little over three months into my ordeal, I was found unresponsive on the floor of my cell. I do not know exactly how long my hunger strike lasted. I do not remember passing out, or how long I lay there before they found me. All I remember is waking up in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. Doctors put an IV in one of my veins and stitched up the gash on my head from my fall. And, after a total of four hours in the hospital, I was taken back to the county jail and promptly placed back in isolation.

Later that day, my attorney came to visit me. Turns out that the hospital staff was so appalled by my condition — I weighed 120 lbs, was filthy, and covered with open sores — that they contacted the public defender’s office. I had become so numb to my situation, that I didn’t even notice, or think about, my appearance. When my attorney saw me, I woke up. The look of horror on his face actually scared me. He then informed me that he had petitioned the warden for me to be let out of isolation and the warden’s response was that “When I left that cell, I’d be in a body bag.” In that moment, I knew that if nothing changed, I would not survive. My mind shifted. I saw clearly that they were trying to kill me. I could roll over and die, or fight. I decided to fight. I declared war.

On the way back to the isolation cell that night, I collapsed in the hallway in front of the nurse’s station. I faked a heart attack to get the doctor to see me. I showed him the sores on my body and told him about the
condition of my cell. The next day, I was finally given a shower, and my cell was cleaned.

Bolstered by this small victory, from that day on, my every thought was about attacking the officers and the warden. Every time they opened the food slot to my cell I would reach out and try to grab them. I would try to pull their arm into my cell. I would try to rip it off, bite it, whatever I could do to hurt them or make their job miserable. I also figured out how to get a shower. If I wanted a shower, I would jump up and hit the light bulb hanging from the ceiling until it would break. When the officers came to replace it, I would refuse to be handcuffed, forcing a cell extraction. They would spray me with mace, then rush into the cell, and handcuff me. Protocol required them to give me a medical shower after using mace, so I would get my shower — and they would have to work for it.

V

For over a year I had some form of altercation with an officer at least once a day. It could be anything from insults to physical altercations. I was constantly lashing out and plotting my next move. I would attack the officers to, more or less, pass time, but my real target, the focus of my anger, was the Warden. I thought I had the perfect plan to get him. I just needed an opportunity to execute it.

That opportunity came one day when my attorney visited me. Shuffling past the Warden’s office in handcuffs, leg shackles, and a paper hospital gown, I began to, slowly, separate myself from the officers escorting me. As I neared his doorway, I asked, “Do you mind if I ask the warden a question?” When I reached the doorway, I had separated myself from them by about five feet. The warden looked up just as I lunged across his desk. I had my hands gripped onto his tie, and I yanked as hard as I could, intending to choke him to death with his own tie. Up until his point my plan was flawlessly executed. The Warden was so surprised, he didn’t even try to stop me. Then two things happened that I could not have foreseen. First, in the melee, the paper hospital gown was torn away — so I was naked. Second, and more importantly, the damn tie was a clip on. The fact that it immediately pulled away, instead of cutting off his supply of air, somehow confused us both. Time slowed to a crawl as we both stared at the tie in my hands, then at each other, our faces inches apart. It seems he was less surprised because he recovered first and hit me with a right cross. Hard. Really hard. All I remember after that is lying naked on his office floor, then being dragged back to isolation. From that point on my attorney visits would take place in my cell.
VI

I would end up spending 27 months in isolation. For two years and three months, that was my life. During that time, maybe 200 or 300 men were put into the isolation cell next door to mine — the only other isolation cell. None lasted more than a week. Every one of them broke down at some point crying and begging to be let out. In 820 days of isolation, of freezing cold, of humiliation, not once did I break down. Not once did I beg. In 2010, I won a federal lawsuit for the unconstitutional treatment I endured at the hands of Joe Gulash, the Warden of the Madison county jail. The now former Warden, Joe Gulash. They now have a toilet and mattress in the isolation cells. They no longer serve “meal-loaf.” They now have guidelines restricting the amount of time a person can be left in isolation. The isolations cells are still hell.

Matt Davis
Poetry
by Jason Samuels

America

You can kill for America, in a foreign desert
Kill in America they'll sentence you to jail for a century.
This shit is real
The brainwash starts at elementary
All the teaching of white America's history
We'll teach your black ass in February how you can slave for me.
Fuck Malcolm X! He used too much militant bravery
You need to march like King
And protest peacefully.
So what! It's a black body laying in the street
That was gunned down by white police.
Who cares that your neighborhood is filled with poverty.
We know some of the American way
We annihilate the greats
Murdered Pac & Big
Put O.J away
Even got Cosby on rape
Give you a black president
But we all know
Jim Crow & Uncle Sam are the leaders of this land.
Now everybody stand for the rising of our flag
And the singing of our National Anthem
God Bless America
My Version Of When I Go

Troubles in my life
Streets got me on the brink of elimination
I see angels, I see demons
I see them day, I see them night
Caught in-between heaven and hell
Angels sing to me
Demons’ gunshots ring for me
Nightmares of dying in the bing in me
A Dr. King balcony headset
But it ain’t all a dream to me
When the blood splats, hope I’m not holding my daughter
Hope I’m not holding my mother
When the reaper comes
Hope it ain’t the first day of summer
If I got a say-so about it
Send me on my way during autumn
Know I died with all the bullshit the streets taught me
Dress me in a blue suit, blue casket
One last ride through the city’s south and west sides
Burial grounds place him next to his grandmother
Tombstone reads
He took shit from nobody and did numbers.
Never Be Forgotten (Dedicated To Flint Farmer)

Remembering the times we shared
But now that you’re gone
I want you to know my memories will never be impaired
Me and you through the city
On some alcoholic shit mixing vodka and Remy
Phone calls on my birthday
Telling me you got jumped at a house party
The same night fat lip and all
You on the dance floor grinding women in a mansion party
Everyday waking up chasing cash and ducking F.E.D’s
100 dollar shirts, 300 dollar jeans
All from serving fiends
Me and you living the fast life
In search of the right way to do the wrong things
We a lifelong team
Had lifelong dreams
Out for that lifelong cream
A bond forever born
So we balling for life
Even though you gone
Got a clear picture of you in my mental sight
And with your footprints long washed away
You forever living through the time we shared everyday
Art
by Jermel Hyde

It’s therapeutic for me, my discipline that gives me control gained by obedience to myself: a willingness to invest time and energy in opening my mind. Art is an irresistible desire that wants to be irresistibly desired...

It allows me to get a clear conscience while simultaneously tackling my goal of creating the new. I love all art types, cultures, and styles, old and new. Being able to draw and create art is one of many blessings from “God.” When art comes to mind, it’s to heights undreamed...

Perfection doesn’t exist without Art. In a world crowded with people, there’s a comfort only Art can provide, a quiet calm at the center of things only its therapeutic power can give. When I first started drawing, I didn’t realize how much my first attraction would grow and reach beyond passion to the comfort of knowing I have something very special here, which might be helpful. My very first time I actually sat down and tried to draw was when I saw my godbrother drawing cartoons out of the newspaper. So I took the same newspaper home and was really determined to draw. I was better than I expected. At fourteen there was no looking back. To this day I appreciate “God” more than he realizes for this gift.

Art gives me satisfaction in my task. When I sit down and draw, I just feel gratitude. It unleashes the freedom to live content in the moment, rather than being anxious about the future or regretting the past. Art pleads no excuses of impossibility, for it thinks all things creative for itself and all things possible.

Art must be learned and learned again, there is no end to it. That’s why I admire the discoveries along the way, my personal growth and knack for finding new ways to create it. I do it because the challenge is there and because the feeling of wanting to have achieved it overwhelms the many sound reasons for not doing it.

With art you have to be a risktaker and not afraid to be your true authentic self in any situation. You’ve got to show originality and that is
being your whole self. But the truth is, even a minor slip can expose you. No matter how comfortable you feel, it’s best to keep your mind clear.

For any image or symbol or creative act to mean something, it has to touch something deeper, connect to something true. Make artwork by giving it layers of meaning, so you can use it to get at complicated truths in a way that straightforward art fails to do. Art elevates and refines and transforms experience. And sometimes it just fucks with you for the fun of it. Or is it all connectedness, an embedding to be stretched or bent? Without order, theory suffers. As color, in its infinite variety, exhibits itself on the surface of living beings, it becomes an important part of the outward indications, by means of which we can discover what passes underneath.

“To love is to admire with the heart: To admire is to love with the mind.”
Jermel Hyde
In the beginning, God created Man, and he did not want Man to be alone. So he put man to sleep and took one of his ribs and made Woman, not to be above Man or beneath him but to forever be a part of him. It’s beautiful that God made it where Man and Woman can come together to create another life.

God’s plan did not end there, however. God wanted Man to grow and one day leave his father and mother, to join with the Woman he loved so they could create their own family. This is an ongoing process known to some as the infinity reaction. Now, when Man creates an act against God’s plan (which is our choice), the courts convict and sentence the Man to lengthy sentences — without Women. That’s a disconnect. Man can never be normal in an environment like this. How can one claim to rehabilitate when the system, prison, takes us out of our natural habitat, out of the Creator’s plan. Away from our loved ones, especially Woman!

Then you have those who approve of these acts and support the mass incarceration of the innocent and the guilty — without losing any sleep. The devil who says “Well, they can get visits!” In my experience if you are one of the fortunate ones, you can get two hours a day, five times a month. That’s ten hours at the most to be divided up between your Woman, your kids, your family, and your friends. No Woman will be satisfied with that. So most Men in prison end up alone!

But give Men credit for our survival instinct, for we do our best to try to hold on to the Woman we love until we come home. Because we are separated, we learn how to speak from our hearts and, at first, it’s unbelievable because our Women are not used to hearing what we feel. And we offer, as Men who desire to connect, letters to comfort your thoughts. They can be filled with different topics, feelings, responses, and answers from the heart. So Women be quick to ask “Do you really mean what you say? Or is that jail talk?” I apologize for all Men for this doubt we create in

Love in Prison
by Joseph Wilson
Women; they are not at fault, but just don’t understand that we are trying to reconnect with what has been lost to us.

But my plea to Women: it’s true we cannot be with you, day in and day out. I know the average Woman has a desire to be held and kissed and told that things are going to be alright, especially in the midst of chaos, and you want a simple “I love you” when you feel that emptiness. Therefore make each visit account. We only have five a month. Love your Man, even more each time you see him. And miss him even more when you leave without him.

You possess strength since you are now standing for two! Real Men recognize your efforts and sacrifice and once again, for all Men, I say thank you. Without physical intimacy, we have to come up with that same energy and satisfaction without the touch. So that mental connection begins to form, which allows us to ask questions, about sex and about love, and this allows two people to find out what’s missing, what’s misunderstood, what’s needed! And ultimately what’s desired. After a situation like this, a couple can be brought closer than before. But the survival rate is low. The more years you’re sentenced to, the less likely you are able to reconnect. And most fall to that just settling phase of “If I can’t be with the one I love, I’ll love the one I’m with!”

Women, we Men need you to fight for us, be there for us. Let your strength make a statement that says our love means something to you. Women, you know the Men you chose to love, and some are from the streets, which may be what attracted you to them in the first place. So don’t get mad when something street happens. When you cannot be there for the ones you love, it hurts! We as Men want to reconnect — we want you in our lives! We need you in our lives. Yes, we Men act out and sometimes say things we don’t mean. But Women do the same thing! We are all human. Don’t let this system destroy what the Creator has put together. Man and Woman. We must come together, find each other, and reconnect.

I am a firm believer that every Man in prison should have that Woman to love, so we can finally get back on the Creator’s plan. Blessings upon blessings beget more blessings. So we must move in the steps of the Lord with our past as a testimony to what we’ve been through. How we overcome it is what defines us. My crime, my time, my choice have me in this position, and I don’t want to force a Woman to go through this. But love is powerful. And the need for physical and spiritual love is demanding. No one is perfect. But if we allow ourselves to just accept life the way it is, then there will always be a disconnect! There will always be a glitch in the Creator’s plan. But it is a choice. It is our choice and every Man in prison chooses love. You have my vote as I push to reconnect. To find that love I have lost due to prison! These words are from the heart of Joseph.

Joseph Wilson
When the Concrete Speaks
by Alex Negron

I’ve been running these streets for a long time. My mother tried so hard to shield me from this lifestyle but in the long run, it was all in vain. These streets are cruel and, in my life, I’ve seen them swallow the best, and they’re never the same once the streets spit them back out. Shit, some can even say that my life is on that never-ending list, but that’s another story for another time.

Let me take you to a place in Chicago, that back in the day was a place that gangbanging, drug-dealing and killing was what people knew. Now-a-days, you can see a Starbucks, plenty of yuppie hangouts and bars and people jogging with their friendly Labradors where street-gang strong-holds used to be. I’m talking about the Logan Square neighborhood.

Shh, do you her that? Listen closely, that’s the streets. If you listen closely, you can hear the concrete speak...

Chapter One: Naomi

Naomi was this young Puerto Rican girl, who in her mind had life all figured out. She was a very petite young woman at five foot one with very curly black hair that just barely reached past her small shoulders. She had the sexiest set of lips that I’d ever seen. Her thin waist just added to the curves her body sported. Yeah, Naomi was a bad chick! Her silky skin, angelic face and heavenly smile drove all the guys crazy. She looked so good, that I actually saw a guy crash his car staring at her at the Fullerton and California intersection.

She was more than just a pretty face, though; she was a talented singer and dancer. She was also taking acting classes to fulfill her dream. Ever since Naomi could remember, she wanted to be famous. She wanted it all, the fame and glam that came with it. She wanted her fifteen minutes and nothing was going to stop her.
At the age of nineteen, Naomi was living with her grandmother. She'd been staying with her since she was five years old. Her mother got stabbed in front of her by her step-father. The jealousy over his own wife's beauty got the best of him, and it drove him to take her life. Regardless of the hardships she faced, Naomi had made her mind up; she was going to succeed no matter what. The more people tried to tell her it was never going to happen, the harder she pushed to get even better at her craft...

You see the year is 1993, and the summer is just approaching. The sweet spring air has everybody out. Just like bears breaking out of hibernation, Fullerton Avenue is packed with thugs, balla's and of course, the cuties passing through flirting with the homies. You can see cars with nice rims and hear trunks rattling with the bass of the music pumping. It's Friday afternoon and you can see those driving around looking for something. Some looking for trouble, others looking to score their choice of drugs and the rest looking for someone to hook up with. Most of the time, it's all three things at once.

Naomi is finally getting off work from the Brickyard Mall and is cruising down Fullerton Avenue. She’s enjoying the nice, warm weather and she pops in one of her favorite songs, “Spring Love.” She sings along as she finally gets to her destination. She hasn’t smoked weed all week, she thinks to herself. She turns right on Rockwell, to buy a couple bags.

She pulls up on Lyndale with her ’86 Buick Skylark and notices that the block is empty. She spots a pudgy kid leaning against the wall of the apartment building wearing a Bulls hat, White Bulls jersey, jeans and a pair of Jordan’s. “Hey Shorty, where’s Stoney at?” she asks. He gets off the wall and says, “He’s not here what you lookin for?”

Naomi is surprised by his response but says, “I’m looking for some weed. You know who got some?” He walks towards her car and pulls out wrappers with some small cigars in it and says, “I got honey blunts for a nickel.” Naomi can’t believe this kid is selling weed. “How old are you, Shorty?” she asks. The kid never gets tired of that question, so he smiles and says, “I’m thirteen, are we straight or what?” He licks his lips like his name is LL Cool J and then says, “They call me Lil Heavy, so what’s yours? Damn, man, you real fine!”

Naomi cracks a smile and begins to blush. She always cherishes a compliment, regardless of who delivers it. “Boy you so crazy!” she exclaims, “My name is Naomi. Don’t let me find out who yo mama is, I’m a tell her what you out here doin!” As he still smiles, he says, “I don’t care if you tell her, but check it, I’m a make you mines one day, you’ll see.” Naomi gets a little surprised by his confidence and smiles some more as she says, “Boy I gots to go.” Lil’ Heavy steps back and says, “See you around, gorgeous.”
Naomi begins to drive south on Rockwell and turns right on Milwaukee. She gets to California and sees her friends hanging out in front of the Sierra Liquor Store. When you pass by now, there's a currency exchange where the store used to be. “Hey Naomi,” yells out Naomi’s longest and closest friend, Nena, “park it.” Her other two friends, Erica and Candice, wave her down.

Naomi’s friends are just as pretty as she is. Nena has the body of a model. She is tall, five foot ten, with green eyes and a beauty mark on the left side of her mouth. Nena has known Naomi since the second grade, when she moved from New York to Chicago. Their passion for being famous forged an unbreakable friendship. Nena wants to be a supermodel, and Naomi wants to act.

Nena’s dream of being a model almost came true. Just when she was about to be discovered, she ended up getting pregnant by one of the homies from Campbell Ave. Rico was doing time for a murder that happened on Western Avenue two and a half years ago when their son was just born. She had to put her dreams on the side, take care of her son, and hold it down until Rico found his way back home.

Erica is seventeen years old, two years younger than Naomi and Nena. Erica is the wild one, who says what is on her mind and always wants to have fun. You don’t want to piss her off because she always finds a way to make someone feel very little after a heated exchange of words.

Erica’s father was Lucky, who was the first member of the neighborhood to lose his life to the Streets. He lost his life to the fourteenth district police in a shoot-out during a car chase. She ran away from home six months ago and moved in with Nena because her mother’s boyfriend tried to force himself on her.

Erica is the true definition of the Bell Biv Devo song, “Poison.” Her dangerous curves, lethal looks, and her honest remarks can kill any man that stands in her way. By the time she was fourteen, she learned that she could get her way with guys and manipulate them for her own advantage.

Then there’s Candice; she is the youngest of the girls but the fastest. Her free spirit gets her labeled the neighborhood “slut.” She doesn’t care; she is just having fun. She shares the same height as Erica at five foot four. Her complexion is between Erica’s and Nena’s. When the Sun shines on it, she looks like her body is dressed in honey.

Candice’s father was Lil’ Man; ironically, he was the second member to lose his life. Lil’ Man got killed by his best friend during a cockfight gone bad. Lil’ Man took his rooster to the roof of the building that’s on Rockwell and Lyndale for the weekly cockfight tournament. Lil’ Man’s rooster kicked everyone’s else’s rooster’s ass, and he was bragging about
it. Lil’ Man’s best friend had anger issues and shot him six times for losing his best rooster in the cockfight.

Candice tries to always stay out as much as she can, not wanting to go home. Her father abused her and beat her severely. Candice’s yearning for some kind of father figure in her life is part of the reason she is labeled a slut. She also gets into occasional scuffles for messing with guys who happen to be already taken.

These four came together and formed a single group. They called themselves “Scoops of Flavor.” They would go to neighborhood house parties and events and sing freestyle music that they wrote and produced. The neighborhood loved their music; they even had shirts that they wore to promote their group.

Each member’s personality compliments each other. Naomi always dreams big and keeps reminding them they are good enough. Nena keeps them in line, focusing on the business at hand. Erica is the one that makes sure that the others don’t take shit from anyone else, and Candice’s light-hearted personality always reminds them that they will only live once and not to worry about the negative opinions of others.

“Girl, where have you been?” asks Erica, “we’ve been pagin’ you all day, did you get our message?” Naomi checks her page and notices that the pager died out. She says, “Damn, I’ve been at work all day, and I guess my battery went out. Why, what’s up?” Naomi then pulls out a blunt and says, “Here, why don’t y’all spark this up while I go in the store.” Candice recognizes the wrapper and says, “You got that from the boy on Rockwell, right? He got some flame-ass weed; it’s better than Stoney’s.” Naomi replies, “Yeah, I did, do you know him?”

Candice smiles and says, “No, I want to. I think he’s a lil cutie and his weed is real good.” Naomi shakes her head at Candice’s remark and then says, “Shorty tried to holla’ at me.” The girls burst out in laughter as they admire the kid’s courage.

Naomi walks into the store and the first person she sees is the last person she wants to see; it’s Flaco, her ex-boyfriend. He’s buying some fortyouncers and when he turns, he smiles and says, “What’s up Naomi, how are you?” Naomi tries to maintain her composure and says, “Hey Flaco, I’m straight.” She hates him because she still misses him, but at the same time, she wants to crush his balls with a monkey wrench.

Naomi caught Flaco with a female on Richmond and McLean. He was all hugged up and kissing her when Naomi strolled through trying to find him. She always said that fighting over a cheating guy was never worth it. That day, her logical thinking went out the window. With Erica putting wood in the fire, she was dragging the tramp down the block by her hair
while the crowd instigated for it to continue. Today is the first day she has spoken to him since.

“So what you doin’?” he asks. Naomi flips her hair and replies, “Just chillin’ wit Nena and the girls.” Flaco reaches for her hand and looks into her pretty brown eyes and says, “I’ve been tryin’ to reach you baby, you know I miss you. Can we talk please?”

She starts to melt like butter, and then she remembers his actions that caused the breakup. “Nah, we can’t talk, Flaco!” she snaps back at him; his charm didn’t work. “Don’t be like that, babe,” he replies. “Like what?” she asks, “you should’ve thought bout that when you fuck’d that hoe, Delilah!” Three weeks later and the pain is still embedded in her precious heart.

She walks over to the cooler display and grabs a pineapple juice and walks back to the counter. She asks for rolling papers and batteries from the cashier. She notices that Flaco is still standing there. “Not now Flaco,” she says. She sighs, “I don’t need this shit right now, leave me alone.” Flaco gives up his attempt at reconciliation and leaves out the California Street exit. Naomi pays for the merchandise and leaves out through the Milwaukee Avenue exit.

She walks out and sees Candice coughing from the weed’s potency as the blunt gets handed to her. She takes a huge puff, a puff so huge that she can’t hold it any longer. Naomi lets out the huge ball of smoke and starts to cough extremely hard. The girls start to laugh at her. Candice asks her, “What took you so long?”

Naomi gets a little upset and says, “Flaco was in there. Why didn’t y’all say something?” Nena replies, “We didn’t see him, where did he go?” Naomi responds by saying, “He left the other way.” Naomi passes the blunt to Erica and asks, “So, what’s so important that y’all been pagin’ me?” Erica gets excited and gives Naomi the good news before she inhales the blunt, “We got an audition for this summer’s ‘Freestyle Mania’, can you believe it? Stevie B, Lil’ Suzy, and Cynthia is gonna’ be there. It’s gonna’ be a freestyle battle and the winner gets to go on tour with them!”

Naomi excitedly asks, “What? Y’all playin’, right? When is it?” Nena replies, “It’s two weeks from Monday!” They all gather around each other and hug. They yell out for joy and Candice says, “You were right, Naomi, we are good enough.” All the hard work and practice that they have endured is starting to pay off, and their rise to stardom seems inevitable. Naomi says, “Come on, Let’s go to the lake and chill.”

She sees Flaco come around the corner and walk toward them and she says, “Come on ladies, let’s go.” Flaco says, “Hold up, wait. Nena, let me holla’ at you.” Nena stops as the others begin to walk towards Naomi’s car and asks, “What’s up, Flaco?” Flaco pulls out some money and says, “Here,
this is for you and the baby. What’s up wit’ Rico?” She grabs the money and says, “Thanks, we really need it. They gave Rico thirty-five years; other than that, I guess he’s okay.”

Flaco then says, “Yeah, I heard; but I promise you, I’ma get him out. Look, I gots to go but take care. Holla’ at me whenever you need anything. Bye, Naomi, bye ladies.” Erica and Candice say, “Bye” at the same time while Naomi pretends to pay him no attention.

The girls finally get in the car and light up another honey blunt and decide they want to buy more weed to take to the lake. “I told you he was up to no good,” says Erica, “He thinks he can do whatever he wants ‘cause he got the ‘hood on lock. You don’t have to put up wit’ that shit.” Candice chimes in and says, “Maybe you should hear what he has to say. Maybe he’s sorry and won’t do it again.”

Nena gives Candice a sharp look and says, “Are you trippin!? What the fuck is wrong wit’ you!? Flaco was bogus the way he did Naomi! He tried to make her look stupid in front of the neighborhood! You just don’t do that, I don’t care who you are!” Naomi takes a deep pull from the cigar, and when she exhales she says, “Fuck Flaco, I’m on to newer and better things. Let’s focus on our music and finally leave this place.” Truth be told, Naomi feels Nena is right; she does feel stupid.

Naomi passes the blunt to Nena and does a U-turn back towards Maplewood Street. She turns left and drives north to Lyndale Street and hangs another left to get to Rockwell. When they pull up to the stop sign, they see Lil’ Heavy directing traffic, selling weed to a long line of people. Erica is amazed at all the people lined up to buy weed, at least fifty. She asks, “Damn, do you see all these people buyin’ weed?” Lil’ Heavy spots Naomi’s car and signals them to park. He finishes serving the customers and approaches the white Buick Skylark.

“Hey gorgeous, what’s up?” he asks as he scans the girls Naomi brought with her and says, “So who’s your homies?” Naomi replies, “These are my girls, Shorty. You got some more weed?” Lil’ Heavy says, “Nah, but if you want to, you can take me to pick it up, it ain’t far.” Naomi then says, “Get in Shorty, where we goin’?” Lil’ Heavy jumps in the back seat next to Candice as she scoots over and he replies, “Go to Richmond and Dickens.”

He gives Candice a smile and he says, “Hello.” Candice flashes a smile back and hands him the honey blunt. She says, “I’m Candice, this is Erica and that’s Nena.” Lil’ Heavy then says, “Hi ladies,” as he smiles. Candice flirts with him as she says, “You have a real cute smile, why haven’t we seen you around before?” Lil’ Heavy senses that Candice likes him, and he starts to check her out. He likes what he sees and replies, “I be around, my uncles are Gus and Nellie. I stay wit’ my uncle Gus, so I go to school in the suburbs.”
Erica's curiosity leads her to ask, “How many bags did you just sell on Rockwell?” Lil' Heavy says, “Bout one hundred-fifty blunts.” Nena looks at Lil' Heavy and notices how young he looks with his round baby face and puppy brown eyes and asks, “Why are you out here, don't you know you're too young to be hustlin' on the streets?” Lil' Heavy doesn't even respond to her questions. To Lil' Heavy, the lifestyle is part of his birthright. His uncles are the neighborhood's cream of the crop. As they get closer to their destination, he says, “Pull over right here. So what are y'all lookin' for? I only got dime sacks left.” The girls each pull out ten dollars and hand it to him. He gathers the money and says, “I'll be right back.”

He gets out the car and crosses the street. He runs into a few of the homies; it's Smiley, Berto, Jig and Froggy. They give him a hard time and mess with him, and then they let him in the store. Smiley walks over to the car and says, “Hey Naomi what's up wit' you?” She replies, “Just getting' some weed and goin' to the lake.” She then yells out and says, “Hey Jig, hey Froggy and Berto.” They recognize her shoutout and wave at her while they serve cocaine to a couple customers. “What you doin' hangin' wit' Shorty? Look after him for me, okay?” he asks.

Naomi starts to laugh at the irony of Smiley's request and says, “If you care 'bout him, why you got him out here sellin' weed and gangbangin'?” Smiley laughs as he admires her candor and changes the subject and asks, “So what's up wit' you and Flaco? You not rockin' wit' folds no more?” She replies, “No, yo' boy was out here reckless. He probably learn'd it from you.” He replies, “You trippin' 'cause if you was my girl, I would give it all up for you.” Naomi smiles as she begins to blush and says, “Is that what you say to yo' lady? Don't play wit' me Smiley, I'll tell her about yo' scandalous-ass.”

Lil' Heavy makes his way back from the store and Candice taps Naomi and asks her to invite him to go with them to the lake. He gets to the car and Smiley gives way as Lil' Heavy says, “Here goes your bags.” He hands them to Naomi and she says, “Hey Shorty, you want to chill wit' us? We ridin' to the lake.” Lil' Heavy looks at Smiley to get his approval and Smiley says, “Go 'head lil' homie, have some fun. We'll holla tomorrow, a'right?” Lil' Heavy shakes his hand and says, “Amor!” Smiley replies, “Amor!” back to him.

Lil' Heavy jumps in the back seat and Naomi takes off towards the lakeshore. Lil' Heavy pulls out a green cigar that he bought from the store and begins to peel the green leaf and break the cigar to roll up some weed. Nena pulls out their demo tape and pops it in the cassette player. The girls start to sing as the music plays through the speakers.

Lil' Heavy is amazed at how beautiful they sound. He asks, “Whose song is that? I never heard it before.” Candice replies, “That's 'Scoops of Flavor.' Do you like it?” Lil' Heavy then says, “'Scoops of Flavor'? Yeah,
I like it, but I never heard of them before.” The girls all start to smile as Naomi says, “We’re ‘Scoops of Flavor’.” He gets a little confused and says, “That’s y’all for real?” Candice leans in and says, “Yeah, that’s us.” He then says, “Wow, y’all sound beautiful.”

He finishes rolling up the green monster and lights it up. The girls start to tell him the good news about their big break and how if they win they will finally go on tour. Lil’ Heavy just excitedly listens to them about their dreams. He then jokingly says, “Y’all gonna’ need a manager; it could be me that manages y’all. I’m real good wit’ money, and I can make sure y’all get paid.” Nena, Erica and Candice look towards him while Naomi looks in the mirror to get a peek of him. The silence was a good fifteen seconds, then they all burst out in laughter. “What?” he asks. Erica then says, “You’re just as crazy as the rest of the folks, that’s what! You’re too young to be a manager, let alone ours.” Lil’ Heavy shrugs them off and says, “Y’all trippin’.”

They finally get to the lakefront. They enter the lakeshore at the Addison Rocks entrance. The parking lot is jumping with House music. It’s packed with guys and girls; there’s cars with trunks open to let the speakers thump a little louder. You can see Caprices, Regals, Cutlasses and Malibus filling the lot. Lil’ Heavy is in complete awe; he’s been to the lake plenty of times, but never on Addison. The Addison Rocks was considered to be for “grown ups” only.

He has heard lots of stories of what goes down at the Rocks, but the scene surpasses his imagination. Naomi finds a parking spot, and, as she parks, she sees that Lil’ Heavy is very caught up in the moment. She begins to shake her head and wants to really let him know that the lifestyle he glorifies is not all that it’s cracked up to be.

They get out the car and Lil’ Heavy recognizes a long-time friend of the family named Polaco. Polaco was a stocky Polish and Puerto Rican guy with Blonde hair and blue-eyes with his hair combed back. Lil’ Heavy use to always hear his uncle Nellie crack jokes about how perfect Polaco’s hair was. It would stay the same way no matter what. He would say that Polaco would wake up with his hair combed back.

Polaco recognizes Lil’ Heavy and says, “What’s up lil’ brotha’, what you doin’ here? I’m a tell yo’ uncles on you.” Lil’ Heavy replies, “What’s up Polaco, I’m just chillin’, how ‘bout you?” Lil’ Heavy gives him a big smile. “You always smilin’ lil’ homie,” Polaco says and then curiously asks, “Why you always smilin’?” Lil’ Heavy then replies, “I’m high, that’s why I can’t stop smilin’.”

Polaco starts to laugh as he notices that Lil’ Heavy can’t even open his eyes. Polaco then asks, “Do you have some of that good-ass weed you be
sellin’?” Lil Heavy asks, “How many do you want?” Polaco replies, “Let me get all of them.” Polaco then turns towards his homies and yells, “Let me get ten dollars from each of you and come check it out.”

Six guys walk over towards Polaco and Lil’ Heavy while Polaco says, “This is Lil’ Heavy from Rockwell and Fullerton. He’s cous’ and Nellie’s lil’ nephew. Lil’ Heavy, this is Coon, that’s Shorty, this is Perico, Loco, Chico and Tiny.” Lil’ Heavy shakes each member’s hand and says, “Amor.” They each respond back saying, “Amor, Lil’ homie, amor.”

Polaco and his homies run the Lakeview and Wrigleyville areas and Addison Rocks is an extension of their territory. Lil’ Heavy has known Polaco since he was in diapers. He was always taught that Polaco and his homies was family, that’s how they rolled.

Lil’ Heavy introduces the girls and says, “This is Naomi, Nena, Candice and Erica.” The girls greet Polaco and his homies. Naomi pulls Lil’ Heavy to the side and says, “Excuse us.” Lil’ Heavy asks, “What’s up?” She asks him, “What are you doin’, Shorty?” He gets a little confused by her question and asks, “What are you talking about? I’m just chillin’, why what’s up?”

Naomi then says in a motherly manner, “I know you think that this is what’s up, gangbangin’ and shit, but it ain’t ‘bout shit! You can do so much better than sellin’ drugs and being a thug. You’re only thirteen years old.” He starts to change his demeanor and gets defensive as he says, “Why you trippin’? You messin’ wit’ my high! Besides, you don’t even know me or what I’ve been through! I’m out here tryin’ to get paid, that’s what it’s all about; getting’ money and holdin’ down the folks.”

Naomi gets frustrated as she says, “You’re right, I don’t know you and I don’t have to know you to tell you where you’re goin’! Erica’s dad, Lucky, got kill’d by a cop. Candice’s father, Lil’ Man, got kill’d by his best friend on the roof you was just hangin’ out at! Do you know Rico, Nena’s man?” Lil’ Heavy replies, “Yeah, that’s a real brotha’, he kept his mouth shut.” Naomi gets even angrier as she sees she can’t get through to him as she says, “Yeah, look at where it got him. It got him lock’d up and left his son without a father to raise him right.” Before she gives up on her advice she says “Whoever sold you this stupid dream is lyin’ to you, it’s all a lie.”

Naomi gets frustrated as she says, “You’re right, I don’t know you and I don’t have to know you to tell you where you’re goin’! Erica’s dad, Lucky, got kill’d by a cop. Candice’s father, Lil’ Man, got kill’d by his best friend on the roof you was just hangin’ out at! Do you know Rico, Nena’s man?” Lil’ Heavy replies, “Yeah, that’s a real brotha’, he kept his mouth shut.” Naomi gets even angrier as she sees she can’t get through to him as she says, “Yeah, look at where it got him. It got him lock’d up and left his son without a father to raise him right.” Before she gives up on her advice she says “Whoever sold you this stupid dream is lyin’ to you, it’s all a lie.”

Lil’ Heavy isn’t tryin’ to hear it, he thinks he is different and those outcomes don’t apply to him. He decides to flip it on her as he says, “So what about you? You talk all that shit, ain’t you Flaco’s girl?” He catches her off guard as she asks, “Who told you that?” Lil’ Heavy replies, “Smiley and Jig said it. If that’s how you feel ‘bout the ‘hood, why you wit’ one of the folks?”

She catches on to his scheme but replies, “I’m not wit’ Flaco anymore. Plus, I have plans to leave this place and never come back.” Lil’ Heavy tries
to keep her talking by asking her, “What plans?”

“Once we make it singing our music, I’ma use it to start acting” Lil’ Heavy wants to make sure he heard what she just said, “Acting?” She replies, “Yeah, I want to be the next Rosie Perez.” Naomi then begins to pose her petite body like a movie star in a drama and asks, “What do you think, Shorty?” He starts to laugh as his high kicks back in. He says, “I think you’re trippin’ off this weed! This shit got you blasted!” Naomi joins in on his laughter and pushes his head gently to the side and says, “Stop laughing, I’m serious! You’re so stupid!”

The other three girls interrupt their conversation and Erica asks, “What’s so funny?” Lil’ Heavy can’t stop laughing; he thinks she is really tripping and says, “Yo’ girl is crazy! She can’t smoke weed no more!” Nena asks him, “Did she tell you about her dreams of acting?” Lil’ Heavy catches his breath for a little bit and says, “Yeah, she did. They should call y’all ‘Scoops of Locas’!” He laughs again.

Candice gives him a love tap on the shoulder and says, “Don’t be such an ass, Lil’ Heavy. Don’t make fun of us.” He stops laughing and says, “I’m sorry, I was just fuckin’ around. This weed is the shit!”

They break towards the lakeshore cliffs and spark up some more weed as they sit down on the rocks. They can see boats, jet skis and windsurfers shoot past them while the crisp breeze begins to cancel the sun’s heat. The waves gently bang against the rocks and the sun begins to give way to her little brother and baby cousins, the moon and stars. The city’s skyline doesn’t let many stars shine, but the Big Dipper will not give in to the city’s broad shoulders.

For so many, the lake is a moment of hectic-free peace. Peace from rival gangs, crooked cops, shootings, poverty and funerals. Naomi breathes in the cool, crisp freshwater air and begins to sing a song called “Free.” She wrote it just days after her messy breakup with Flaco. She finally feels free. Of course it was painful, but when a person is in darkness for a long period of time, the light hurts at first. Nena, Erica and Candice join Naomi and sing the song. The crowd gathers around them and enjoy the sweet acapella harmony. When they finish, the crowd claps and a couple guys whistle.

Latin romance is in the air. Candice grabs Lil’ Heavy’s hand and leads him towards the lakefront’s clock tower to get a little privacy. Polaco and his homies are proud; they see that Lil’ Heavy is a Mack. Shorty runs a little game on Erica and convinces her to leave with him. Nena’s eyes have been on Loco since they got there and Loco finds the courage to ask Nena to take a walk with him.

Polaco walks over to Naomi and says, “I’ve been tryin’ to remember where I seen you before and after I heard you sing, now I do. You’re Flaco’s
Reading and Writing Our Lives

Reading and Writing Our Lives

girl. Y’all call yo’selves ‘Scoops of Flavor’, am I right?” Naomi nods her head as Polaco continues, “Yeah, I saw y’all play at the winter bash at Centrum’s.” She responds, “Yeah, that’s us, but I’m not wit’ Flaco anymore.”

Polaco is shocked by the news, he says, “What? I told Flaco not to fuck that up. When I seen you on stage performing I said, ‘She’s a keeper, she’s gonna’ go places, Flaco.’ Anyways, he ain’t doin’ nothin’ but holdin’ you back. Just keep doin’ what you doin’. You gonna’ make it.”

Naomi smiles as she says, “Thanks Polaco, you’re a real nice guy. You know we got an audition for ‘Freestyle Mania’. Are you goin’?” Polaco replies, “Of course I’m going. I already got tickets; my brother manages Lil’ Suzy. Maybe I can introduce you to him. You cool wit’ that?” She got excited as she asks, “Are you for real, you would do that?” Polaco then says, “Yeah, I believe in y’all. I think y’all can make it.” Naomi begins to stare at the sky as the stars are aligning before her very own eyes. Her dreams are finally going to come true.

“Oh, shit!” Polaco starts to yell out, “It’s Mari, everybody be cool.” The cops stroll through in an unmarked maroon bubble Chevy shining the light. The driver shouts, “Alright everybody, let’s break it up; come on, let’s go.” He spots Polaco and says, “Polaco, bring yo’ ass here!” Polaco walks towards the narcotics officers and they begin to harass him and shake him down for weapons.

Nena approaches Naomi and says, “I’m gonna’ leave wit’ Loco and have him take me home, okay?” Naomi says, “Okay, be careful; but where’s Candice and Lil’ Heavy?” Nena replies, “I saw them go that way,” as she points towards the clock tower. “Well bye, Naomi, I love you.” They hug and kiss on the cheeks as Naomi says, “I love you too.”

Candice and Lil’ Heavy are walking back towards the parking lot, now holding hands. Naomi sees them and smiles; she thinks they look cute together. She says, “Let’s go you two” as Candice looks around and says, “Where’s Erica and Nena?” Naomi replies, “They left wit’ Polaco’s boys.”

They get into the Skylark and Candice and Lil’ Heavy get in the back. They head back to the neighborhood and as Naomi drives them back, she glances from time to time and catches them fooling around. Candice says, “Ooh baby! No be cool.” Naomi says, “Hey, not in my car!” They straighten up as Naomi then says, “Lil’ Heavy, let me get some money for gas. I’ll give it back when I get paid.” He goes in his pocket and pulls a twenty dollar bill out and says, “It’s cool, you can keep it. I had a lot of fun today.” Naomi replies, “I’m sure you did, Shorty.”

She then smiles while she looks at them through the rearview mirror. The way those two interact with each other clearly says one thing: Candice gave him a slice of heaven. She can’t wait to get the details. She then asks,
“Where do you live?” Lil’ Heavy answers back saying, “Richmond and Palmer.”

Naomi takes Addison to Western Avenue and then she turns left towards Fullerton Avenue. When she gets to Fullerton, she turns right at the intersection. There’s a big commotion; bottles are flying and shots get fired. They hear a loud, “Bang! Bang! Bang!” as a gold ’86 Oldsmobile Delta Eighty-eight begins to lose control and a loud “Boom!” fills the late night air as it hits the light pole on Campbell. Like piranhas, the homies attack the vehicle and devour its occupants.

“Oh, Shit!” Lil’ Heavy exclaims as Naomi and Candice stay in silent shock. He then urges her to keep going, saying, “Go! Go! Go! Don’t look back, keep goin’!” Naomi then asks Lil’ Heavy, “What the fuck was all that about?”

To Lil’ Heavy, it’s just the night cap to a normal day in the neighborhood. That same Oldsmobile had been riding around all day looking for trouble. They must have thought since nothing was done earlier, they could do the same at night; what they didn’t know was that the homies was waiting for the perfect time to give them what they were looking for. Naomi looks at him waiting for an answer, but he ignores her question.

They finally get to Richmond and Palmer in front of Lil’ Heavy’s mother’s apartment, and he says, “I’m right here,” as he points to the right where Richmond ends. He gives Candice a deep-wet kiss and says, “Bye, baby, I’ma see you tomorrow, a’ight?” Candice kisses him back and says, “Bye, I’ma call you. I’ma miss you baby.” He smiles and says, “Bye, Naomi; nice meeting you,” as he reaches for another kiss from Candice’s sweet lips and she hops in front.

Naomi then says, “Okay, Okay, that’s enough Shorty; take yo’ young-ass home.” Naomi drives off as Lil’ Heavy waves goodbye and then heads up the stairs to go home. “Girl,” Naomi says, “tell me everything.” Candice just smiles and takes in everything she did that day.

Naomi takes a deep breath and sighs as well while they drive away. Just another day in her crazy life. “Do you want to stay at my place?” She asks Candice. She knows Candice hates going home, with her step-father’s abusive ways. Naomi lets Candice stay on the weekends as much as she can. “Yeah,” she exclaims, “You know I want to see Abuela. It’s been weeks, how is she?” Naomi laughs as she drives west on Palmer towards Spaulding and simply says, “Same as always, vieja loca!”

Alex Negron
Acknowledgements: Thank you to the PNAP teaching collective members for the dedicated work of organizing classes and guest lectures at Stateville, and exhibitions and events in the community. Thank you to additional volunteers Christian Saucedo, Simon Kim, Nancy Traver and Tess Landon who have offered their expert skills in editing and typing. And thank you to students at Stateville who write in the late hours of night, during the loudest hours of the day and against the odds. Your dedication makes us all work harder.

Generous support for this PNAP projects comes from: Northeastern Illinois University’s College of Education and Justice Studies Dept.; The Poetry Foundation; American Studies Association; Illinois Humanities and School of the Art Institute of Chicago Museum and Exhibitions Dept. of Exhibitions and Exhibition Studies.

Booklets direction and watercolors: Sarah Ross
Booklets design: Jerome Grand

Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project (PNAP)
www.p-nap.org

2015