



WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

A collection of poems and essays about family, love, loss, time, and hope

ABOUT

This anthology is a collection of works created by members of a weekly creative writing group in partnership with the Right/Write To Heal Initiative based at the Columbia University Center for Justice (CfJ) (centerforjustice.columbia.edu/right-write-to-heal). The authors and artists include current and former residents from the Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center and the Women's Center at the Maine Correctional Center as well as some of the group members from New York. Additional contributions from our partner facilitators at the CfJ and other advocates are also represented in the Forward of this anthology. Each week participants in the writing group chose writing prompts that empower and inspire them to tell their stories in their own voices. The participants from Maine were inspired by this initiative to continue meeting throughout the summer of 2023 to develop additional pieces about the impact of incarceration on themselves and their families. It is our hope that these pieces bring awareness to the experiences of women and their families and inspire change.

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Our Partners

This anthology is the result of the collaboration of all of our partners: The Maine Department of Corrections (MDOC), Center for Justice (CfJ) at Columbia University, the Opportunity Scholars, and the University of Southern Maine (USM) Place Matters project.

While this work is the result of a collaboration between the partners as noted, the views expressed throughout do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Southern Maine, The Maine Department of Corrections, or any of the other partners.

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FORWARD

Our Partners in New York

Why I Write, Cheryl Wilkins

I write to use my words as a form of therapeutic journaling; to work on overcoming racist, fat shaming, homophobic, harmful attacks on my character that has torn me down in the past because I am different. I write to heal.

I write because you finally want to hear from a woman who has been othered her entire life; a woman who has been excluded and beat down just like her mother, her grandmother, and her great grandmother. I write because generational trauma is real.

I write as an activist who attempts to change the narrative on how women entangled in the criminal justice system are viewed; to put a face to her name that is often-times described as a number and statistic; to add children, families, and communities to the stories of people who are left out of the conversation. I write so that you can feel.

I write to use my platform that sheds a light on the experiences of my sisters who are currently incarcerated; to take you into a place where there are no cameras; where sexual, emotional, and physical abuse occur daily; where a community of women are under-represented. I write to be a champion for their causes and proudly carry that shield.

I write to say no more!!! To say we will organize around kitchen tables, mobilize communities that are not being invested in, lift-up the voices that are muted, and use our voting power to elect people into office who will fight for the rights all or get them out if they don't fulfill their promises. I write to say we are coming and we are forreal!!

Dreamkeeper, Yolanda Johnson

Why should I be the keeper of your dreams?

Why do you have the right to dream?

You took that road to prison, not I.

Like they say, you get what your hand calls for.

Now you want to dream big... and journey on my side.

You're becoming voters, teachers, executive directors, advocates for social change.

Wrap your dreams up? Please.

I am not concerned with your heart melodies.

Why should I be the keeper of your dreams?

I don't really want you to dream at all.

Because (guess what?) your dreams just might come true.

Cheryl Wilkins is the Co-Founder and Co-Director at Columbia University's Center for Justice (CfJ) and adjunct lecturer at the Columbia University School of Social Work. Her work focuses on ending the reliance on incarceration and developing new approaches and effective criminal justice policy. For more information about the CfJ please visit: centerforjustice.columbia.edu

Yolanda Johnson is the Executive Director of Housing Initiatives for the NY Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice where she leads policies and programs to increase housing opportunities for people with justice histories. Prior to this role, her career has been focused on supporting formerly incarcerated individuals as an advocate for prison reform and building pathways to support women with justice histories.

Both Cheryl and Yolanda were co-facilitators and essential partners in bringing the Right/Write to Heal initiative to the women in Maine.

Poem – Untitled, Roslyn Smith

In shadows cast by walls of gray,
A spirit yearned to find its way,
From iron chains to open skies,
In a prison's shadow, time did unwind,
A woman's spirit was determined to find,
The essence of healing, love's sweet embrace,
Liberation's dance, a newfound grace.
39 years of solitude's hold,
Yet within her heart, a story was untold,
A symphony of resilience, a melody of might,
She rose above the darkness and took to flight.
With each passing day, she learned to forgive,
Embracing the wounds, learning how to live,
Love's gentle touch, a balm for her soul,
A river of healing that made her whole.
In the confines of barbwire, cinderblock, and bars, she found inner grace,
A garden of hope, where dreams she could trace,
A tapestry woven with threads of her past,
Liberation's journey, a voyage so vast.
Through letters and whispers, connections were made,
Love's tendrils reaching, a sweet serenade,
A network of hearts, in Unity's song,
Together they lifted, righting the wrongs.
Emerging from chains, a butterfly's flight,
A metamorphosis didn't happen overnight
Her heart was a canvas, to paint a new picture
Love's radiant power, her beacon to guide,
As healing and liberation walked side by side.
Oh, how her story does beautifully unfold,

A testament to love, to strengths untold,
From prison's grip, her spirit took wing,
A symphony of healing took time in appearing.
Oh, but how the winds of change did blow,
A tale of growth, of strength aglow,
From incarcerated depths, she rose,
A journey, the world now knows.
So let her story echo far and wide,
A testament to the human stride,
From darkness to healing,
She found liberation,
A phoenix rising from the ash,
To break the chains of the cruel cruel past.
A dance of grace and bravery,
She faced her demons, forged her fate,
And learned that healing is never late.
So let her story boldly show,
That even in the depths of woe,
A formerly incarcerated soul,
Can rise, transform, and be made whole.

Roslyn Smith is the Beyond Incarceration Program Manager with V Day and was one of the partners who worked with the residents in the Right/Write to Heal group. V-Day is a global movement that evolved from Eve Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues* which aims to bring art and activism together. Roslyn works with formerly and currently incarcerated women to engage and lead dialogues around restorative justice worldwide. For more information visit: www.vday.org

Where Does the Cycle Break?, Caylynn H.

What do our parents do with unresolved baggage, where does the cycle break when one is unaware of how damaged a human being they are? This is a question I asked myself when looking in the mirror with genuine fear of becoming my mother or father. Growing up as a child with two incarcerated parents I always wondered what life would have been if I had been dealt better cards.

As I began my teenage years, I subconsciously subjected myself to unnecessary chaos in an attempt to feel normal. I wanted to feel as though a piece of each of them was living with me even if that meant I was inheriting their worst qualities. On the days I watched my father slam the door without hesitation of looking back at me, I began to think of the stories my great grandmother told me as a child, and I knew my father was walking away from me as his father did the same to him. When I watched my mother cry as she secretly injected herself with a substance of choice, I sat there as a teary eyed seven-year-old who could only feel apologetic for my mother as she was doing to me what her mother once did to her. As a child who grew up with no choice except to excuse the behavior of my damaged mother and father, this trait began to follow me into adolescence.

The acceptance of toxicity slowly became the normalization of the people surrounding me, I subconsciously searched for individuals who would inevitably disappoint me. This realization is something I had avoided and denied even. For years, I had completely convinced myself that this was the life I deserved, it didn't matter how damaging it was because it was familiar. For as far back as I can remember, I have been internally raising myself. This came with creating my own morals, being resistant towards authority, and never having the capability of asking for help. These traits landed me in an immense amount of isolation, I self-sabotaged things in life that could have potentially saved me before I had disconnected myself from the world around me. As quickly as I used to excuse the behavior of my parents, I began to excuse my own as well. I allowed myself to fail because it seemed acceptable to do so considering my circumstances. Unfortunately, I very easily fell into the stereotype of a broken child who couldn't break the cycle, I was the type of person everyone had predicted I'd become.

Considering all these factors, the type of person I was not the person I wanted to be. From a very young age, despite the circumstances, I knew I had potential to become whoever I wanted to be. Although nobody would have known by looking at the surface of who I was as an individual, I wanted nothing more than to feel as though I was more than my story. I no longer wanted to fall victim to myself, I no longer wanted to be a product of my environment. I began taking responsibility for my actions, I single handedly relearned life as I once knew it. I can proudly say that who I am today is a product of every obstacle I have ever overcome, rather than allowing myself to feel pity when I think about how different things could have been during my childhood, I am thankful. Thankful to be considered one of the lucky ones, somebody who can be grateful for every characteristic I developed while becoming a self-sufficient human being. I now have the power to use my story as an advocate for children in need. I want to be the person for the world that I needed for myself growing up.

Circling back to my original question of “What do our parents do with unresolved baggage, where does the cycle break when one is unaware of how damaged a human being they are?” I can confidently say that the cycle breaks with the one strong enough to love from a distance.

Caylynn H. is an aspiring college student with an interest in justice advocacy. She wrote this essay for her college applications and offered to include it in this collection to represent her experience as someone who has been impacted by intergenerational incarceration. Caylynn was featured in a documentary about her mother’s incarceration and struggles with substance use, and has since traveled the country with her mother, speaking on behalf of the rights of children who have similar experiences to her own.

Women's Incarceration Continues to Grow.

Women's incarceration has grown at a faster rate than men's incarceration in recent decades and the latest data shows there are approximately 173,000 women incarcerated and another 800,000 under probation or parole in the U.S. This includes 5,400 young girls in juvenile facilities.¹

- ▶ Women are disproportionately impacted by pretrial detention compared to men. There are more women incarcerated in local jails (76,000) than in state prison facilities (72,000). A large number have not been convicted (60%) and are incarcerated while they await trial.³
- ▶ Women are more likely to be incarcerated for non-violent crimes. In 2020, 56% of women were incarcerated for non-violent drug offenses, compared to 47% of men.²
- ▶ In Maine, there were 128 admissions to an adult state correctional facility in 2022 who were identified as women. Of those, only 58% were for new crimes, meaning 41% were incarcerated for probation violations. The average daily population of women incarcerated in a Maine state prison facility in 2022 was 139.³
- ▶ The county jail system impacts a much larger number of women in Maine. The latest data shows 7,440 female admissions to jails and an average daily jail population of 290 women for Maine in 2019.⁴

1 Kajstura, A., & Sawyer, W. (2023). Women's Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2023. Prison Policy Initiative, Northampton, MA. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2023women.html>

2 Brenson, L., & Bair, N. (2020). Women in Prison: Seeking Justice Behind Bars : Briefing Report. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Washington, D.C. <https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/2020/02-26-Women-in-Prison.pdf>

3 MDOC Data Team. (2022). 2022 Year End: MDOC Adult Data Report. Maine Department of Corrections, Augusta, ME. <https://www.maine.gov/corrections/node/44#Year-End%20Reports>

4 Zeng, Z., & Minton, T. (2021). *Census of Jails- 2015-2019- Statistical Tables (NCJ 255406)*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington, D.C. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/cj0519st.pdf>

Gender-responsive practices are key to minimizing harm and improving long-term outcomes.

Gender responsiveness means that policies, programs, and practices recognize and address gender specific differences to promote equal outcomes. This means that all residents (men, women, and nonbinary individuals) have appropriate services, supports, and programs that meet their individual needs.⁵

- ▶ Women are more likely to come from backgrounds of trauma. As many as 90% of incarcerated women in 2020 experienced trauma prior to their incarceration.⁴
- ▶ Incarcerated women are more likely to struggle with mental health and substance use challenges. As of 2020, 55% of men in state prisons indicated they struggle with mental illness/substance use challenges, compared to 73% of women.⁴
- ▶ Women experience more positive outcomes when carceral programming is gender-specific, including increased visitation and successful community reintegration.⁶

5 This definition is adapted from the language in the [UNICEF Gender Continuum model \(2019\)](#) and a 2013 Annie E. Casey Foundation report, [Making Detention Reform Work for Girls](#).

6 Cramer, L., Goff, M., Peterson, B., & Sandstrom, H. (2017). Parent-child visiting practices in prisons and jails. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/89601/parent-child_visiting_practices_in_prisons_and_jails_0.pdf

Incarcerating Women Impacts Families and Children.

In 2016, 58% of all women incarcerated in the U.S. in state prisons and 80% of women incarcerated in jails were mothers.⁷

- ▶ In 2022, over 5 million children in the U.S. had experienced parental incarceration at some point during their childhood. This equates to 1 in 14 U.S. children having experienced parental incarceration.⁸
- ▶ Further, a 2010 study showed an estimated 1.3 million people living in the U.S. had been separated from their mothers as a minor child because of their mother's incarceration, and over 500,000 mothers had been separated from their minor children.⁹
- ▶ A recent study (2020) showed that 3,403 children in Maine were impacted by parental incarceration between 2015-2020. Of those, 575 children in Maine had experienced maternal incarceration specifically during that time.⁹
- ▶ The federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) requires states to automatically terminate parental rights after a child has been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months. This means that incarcerated mothers lose parental rights of their children after a period of 15 months if their child is placed in foster care. Maine is one of only 22 states allowing for parents to petition this loss of rights.¹⁰

7 Sawyer, W., & Bertram, W. (2022). Prisons and jails will separate millions of mothers from their children in 2022. Prison Policy Initiative, Northampton, MA. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/05/04/mothers_day/

8 Murphey, D., & Cooper, M. (2021, March 6). Parents behind bars: What happens to their children? Child Trends. Retrieved November 4, 2022, from <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/parents-behind-bars-what-happens-to-their-children>

9 Foley, J., King, E., & Benner, C. (2020). Breaking the Cycle, Interrupting Generational Incarceration in Maine. Catherine Cutler Institute, Place Matters, Portland, ME. <https://placemattersmaine.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/BreakingtheCycle.pdf>

10 Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). Grounds for involuntary termination of parental rights. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/groundtermin/>

Maternal Incarceration is an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) that can be avoided.¹¹

- ▶ Children who experience parental incarceration are more likely to: Experience psychological difficulties; Exhibit antisocial behavior; Get suspended or expelled from school; Experience economic hardship throughout life; Be incarcerated themselves (6 times as likely as children whose parents have never been incarcerated).¹²
- ▶ Research shows that children of incarcerated mothers have more negative long-term outcomes compared to those with incarcerated fathers. In fact, they have higher rates of future incarceration themselves, with more frequent and earlier arrests.¹⁴ Incarcerated mothers are 2.5 times more likely to report adult child incarceration than incarcerated fathers.¹³ Children of incarcerated mothers are also at higher risk of dropping out of high school compared to their peers.¹⁴
- ▶ While research suggests that keeping a connection is often key to minimizing harm for many of these children, mothers who are incarcerated often face more barriers to face-to-face visits. In addition, they face more challenges and are more likely to face economic instability when they return home to their communities which impacts reunification with their children long term.¹⁴

11 See the CDC website on ACE's for more information: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html>

12 Martin, E. (2017). Hidden consequences: The impact of incarceration on dependent children. *NIJ Journal*, 278, 1-7.

13 Robillard, A. G., Holliday, R. C., Dehart, D. D., Lewis, K., Rutherford, Y., & Amutah, N. N. (2016). An exploratory study examining risk communication among adolescent children, their incarcerated mothers, and their caregivers. *Journal of health care for the poor and underserved*, 27(2), 101-119.

14 Sawyer, W. (2018). *The Gender Divide: Tracking Women's State Prison Growth*. Prison Policy Initiative, Northampton, MA. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/women_overtime.html#:~:text=And%20although%20women%20represent%20a,of%20the%20growth%20among%20men

We whisper to our families through a cold telephone that records our every connection.

“Mama, don’t cry, I’ll be fine.”

“Baby, I will be home soon, Mama is in a timeout, but I am stronger than I thought, my love.”

When a woman is incarcerated, her loved ones are deeply affected too. This collection will take you deep into the hearts of those who are inside the walls of Maine’s only women’s prison. These women express trauma, pain, struggles, and loss, but most importantly they focus on their strengths. These women are refusing to be lost in a narrative that is not their own.

My name is D., and I was living my life behind those same walls. My story is similar to many of the authors in this anthology—trauma, addiction, children, and growth. I encountered trauma throughout my life and rather than deal with it, I numbed it. The disease of addiction I was living with turned me into someone I did not recognize, and eventually it placed me in prison. I was in denial, I had no hope, I was lost. My children and family were hurting, and I knew I needed to make changes. My goal was not to be the same person walking out of those doors as I was walking in. Today I can proudly say I am a woman in long-term recovery from many things. I wear several hats in my life, and I do not let my mistakes define who I am, but rather I use them to advocate for others who were once in my shoes.

I am N., a system-impacted social justice advocate, and a woman who is determined to help change the narrative about incarcerated women. I was incarcerated, but I learned how to love myself again with every opportunity I was given to grow and reflect. The community around me has supported my reentry, and here I am today, working with that community to change the hearts of others. I’ve had the privilege of sharing many spaces with the strong, brave women who vulnerably share pieces of their stories here. Sharing space with my impacted sisters is a joy like no other.

Like the pieces you are about to read, these spaces are filled with humor, love, sadness, and, most importantly, hope. Those impacted by systems are often forgotten, counted out, and have had their voices muffled. We are here to change that.

Just like the women in this collection, we needed to learn ways to overcome, fight, and build self-esteem by changing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. What better way to do that than to dive into art, school, trainings, and other activities that allowed us to grow while incarcerated such as the writing group called Right/Write to Heal. It is a beautiful collection of the voices of other social justice champions advocating for the women and their families. For many, writing has been an opportunity for growth and healing.

Through these pages, we share our truth, heartache, and hopes. These stories come from deep within the souls of our beloved mothers, sisters, children, and friends. Collectively, they speak the language of women who are not willing to let their voices be forgotten. While this is a vulnerable time in their lives, they do not hesitate to use their voices. This book will bring both happy and sad tears and will exhibit the beauty and growth that these women exude.

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the women who poured their hearts into this book. Ladies, we see you, and we thank you!

We ask you as the reader to help spread the word of the work that often goes unnoticed: Women striving for gender justice within these systems.

Sincerely,
D.W. and N.L.

WHAT ARE *YOU*

WAITING FOR?

My art is a direct expression of my happiness and frustration, my drive and skill, and my need to create comes from a deep desire to craft things that will see the outside world and hopefully make an impact in someone's life.

Art saved my life, and so every piece I create is directly related to that.



O.L.

family





WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

B.H.

& love

WHAT IS FAMILY?

K.S.

Family is where your life begins. Everything you're given, your truth, values, honor, respect, forgiveness, morals, tradition, culture, aspiration, upward mobility, level of aspiration, childbearing and rearing, and generations before you of advice and rules to ponder and accept.

At the end of your life, your family is there to support you in your journey toward the steps to the golden staircase where you stand in the last judgment in your life that your family has prepared you for. Through their prayers you make it through to your permanent house.

Sometimes at the end of your life, your natural family has left you far behind for a myriad of reasons, sometimes replaced by a very special person—nearly a saint who cares for you as a sister and even accepts the responsibility of taking care of the remains at the end of life rather than see the person go to the unknown pauper's grave for the unwanted prisoner. Now that is called a real-life angel on Earth and family.

TO MY SON...

L.P.

It broke my heart to leave you
I feel it every day
Everything I love was taken
The day you went away
Every day I think of you
And every day I cry
I would give my soul to turn back time
And get just one more try
Now all I have is a picture of you
A frozen piece in time
I look at it and reminisce
On the days when you were mine
If there's one thing I could show you
One thing I could say
Though you're gone from me right now
In my heart, you'll stay

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

LET GO OF YOU....

S.C.

I'm waiting for the day
When it doesn't hurt anymore
I'm waiting for the day
When you admit your wrongs
And make things right.
I'm waiting at a distance
For you to change
But narcissists do not change.

What I'm waiting for
Will likely never happen.
Your love will never be
unconditional,
There're always strings attached
And bars to measure up to
And I feel I'll never measure up,
I'll never be good enough for you.

I'm waiting for you to show
Your support
Your love
Your gentle guidance
Your sympathy
Your understanding
And to make me feel like I belong.

I'm waiting for you to love me
Like a mother should.

I'm waiting for you
To put aside

The toxic, venomous words,
Your hate speech
Your constant lies
Your gaslighting
Your abuse.

I'm waiting for you to be
Something you are not
Something you may not be
capable of.
Evil lives within you
And I've felt it since childhood.

I'm waiting for you to
acknowledge
The decades of abuse,
Manipulation,
And control.

I'm waiting
To be free of the pain,
The torment
And all the tears that you have
caused me.

I cannot allow you in my life
And you hate that I'm not under
your thumb anymore

So your viciousness towards me
spikes.

I tried to extend the olive branch
But you still deny everything—
All the abuse,
The lies
The gaslighting,
The emotional neglect,
And all the pain you have caused
me.

It is sad for you,
What a sad way you live—
You live in the past
And you are full of hatred for so
many people.
You play the victim,
Always making things about you.

I'm waiting for you to say,
"I understand what you're going
through is tough. How can I help?"
But I'll never hear those words.
Instead, you play the blame game,
And even blame me for the
actions of others.
You have blamed me for every
bad thing that has happened in
our lives.

I'm waiting for you to apologize
for blaming me for dumb things
Like when a household appliance
broke
Because I had nothing to do with
it breaking.

I'm waiting for you to apologize
For digging your nails into my
skin, making me bleed,
On several occasions.

I'm waiting for you to apologize
for the time you told me,
"I wish I never had you."
I was only thirteen years old.
I'm waiting to be able to let go
Let it all go
But I don't know how.
My mother is a narcissist
And has never shown me
appropriate, unconditional love
And she may never be able to.
I need to find my peace
And let go of the hurt
Let go of you.

FATHER

L.C.

I am strong because you made me strong
I am wise because you made me wise
I was weak because you had things to teach me
I was broken because you planned to fix me
I was lost because you came to find me

Dear God, I see now you are always near
No matter the distance, no matter how high the climb
In you I can trust, I can turn to, I lean into
You are my savior, my salvation
My redemption, my eternal love!

GIN & TOXIC

F.J.

Some people are like Gin & tonic. More like gin that's toxic.
Small-minded people who make me dizzy, nauseous.
Tomorrow isn't promised, yesterday is forgotten, and these days, common sense isn't all that common. Let's talk about our differences in ways that don't wage wars. It's priceless to love a stranger, is that something you can afford?
Do you love someone for who they are, or hate them for who they're not? No more hashtags with R.I.P., no more graveyard plots.
People get killed almost every day, because they look different or because they love in different ways.
It doesn't have to be this way, maybe I can make a difference.
I can tell Generation Z about the magnitude of your magnificence.
So I'll throw up a peace sign, for peace of mind. Because we're all equal, but we may be different by our life design.
Whoever is reading this, be proud of who you are.
I love your melanin, I love your queerness, and I accept you, superstar.
Black, white, red, yellow or brown.
Gay, Lesbian, or Straight, you rock that damn crown.
I see you, you're perfect.
I know there's so much more than what's on the surface.
You make life worth it.
You have a purpose.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

WOAH.

D.S.

For my oldest son.

To see you grow,
from your head to your toes,
Where will you go?

Near, far, to and fro?

Will it be the same path I know?

God, I pray, no,
Please, don't let it be so.

Don't go chase the dough.
Use your manners, don't say, "yo."
Have the willpower to say, "NO."
And be the one to break the status quo.

Watch over your little brother.
Make sure you teach him how to throw.
Maybe you can both go pro!

...One day you will know...

You are all I think about, and I miss you so...
And I'm sorry I wasn't there to see you grow.

WAIT FOR IT

L.C.

I'm waiting to go to a movie.

To pick a show with my son, buy tickets, and wait at the concession for some popcorn and candy.

I'm waiting to go on a date. To feel butterflies in my belly as I apply some CoverGirl and fuss over a hairdo.

I'm waiting to enjoy a family BBQ, to prepare a macaroni salad because that's the one dish I'm confident others will eat. I'll be on time since this is actually where I want to be.

I'm waiting to take my dogs to the lake, on a walk, or a hike. To play fetch and give treats, and squeeze into my own bed between them when we're done.

I'm waiting to go camping. To saddle up the troops, fill the coolers in the car, and hit the road for an adventure to remember.

I'm waiting to go to the ocean. To smell the salty air and hear the sound of the waves that remind me of my youth.

I'm waiting to do Christmas. To go shopping, set up the tree, spend time with family, check the list, twice, and celebrate.

I'm waiting to sit beneath the stars, knowing that I am free. Most importantly, experiencing life sober is how I plan to be.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

WHAT DOES FAMILY MEAN TO YOU?

D.O.

Family is everything;
family is my genetic past
the variations of who I've been
and could become
family is a collective replication of
what I believe in,
all the things my ancestors stood
for, fought for, lived to define.
the purpose of living, all tumbled
down to my one perspective,
seeing the world by the eyes of
the past. Everything I am came
from them.

Family is everything;
That has destroyed me, that sent
me down this purpose-driven
road through hell, I fought against
them because of my love for
them.
I lost myself when I was without
them. now I stand ready to
embrace destiny, to let go of all
that cast me out

Family is everything;
that my broken past created
the two best things I've ever
birthed
day by day and year by year
I kept going, I overcame, and
soon will come the day
I go home
reuniting with family is like walking
into heaven

Family is everything;
that I taught them, that I've
protected them from
family is me teaching my children
all my lessons
so that one day, despite their past,
they will become all they were
meant to be

Family is everything;
one day I'll have grandchildren
and I'll do nothing less for them,
so they know who they are, to
know I have faith in the future ME.

THE PERSON I KNOW I CAN BE

J.K.

Something I've asked myself multiple times throughout the last 12 years of my life. I have struggled being an addict since the age of 12. Throughout that time I have put myself in endless amounts of chaotic situations I would have never imagined myself in. Life changed when I had my first daughter in 2013, I was able to clean myself up during that period of time until a year later I fell back into my old ways.

My daughter's father and I used together until we lost control of everything, including our relationship. Seemed to be a wake-up call for him but for myself, I gave up and eventually lost my parental rights to her. Four years later we went through the same situation.

When was enough going to be enough? My world fell to pieces losing my dad, grandfather, and friends, then I became incarcerated, but what am I truly waiting for? When am I going to change and be the person I know I can be?

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

IMPATIENTLY WAITING

B.H.

I am waiting for so many things
the place where I will start
is with all the things essential
to fill the hole inside my heart.

I'm waiting first to leave this place,
all of its pain and degradation,
everything that's left me full of
shame and humiliation.

I'm waiting to meet my
grandbabies,
two beautiful baby girls
I've only met through pictures,
they're the most precious in this
world.

I'm waiting to hug my daughters,
my mom, and all of my friends.
Waiting to be called Gigi, Mom, or
Buffy
feeling human once again.

I'm waiting for freedom,
freedom to look, freedom to find
the life I've always dreamed of
and I now know can be mine.

I'm waiting for the chance to
apply
the many things that I have
learned,
to climb to a place that I can
proudly say I've earned.

I can't wait for all these little
things that,
to you, may seem small or
microscopic.

I once thought so too and
would've agreed with you.

I took it all for granted until the
day I lost it.

Like sleeping in, cuddling in bed,
or taking my kids to a movie or
the mall,

riding my bike, swimming in the
lake,

My God! I miss them all!

I'm waiting to be content in this
world

no more worrying or
contemplating

To be happy where I am, knowing
where I'm going and to no longer
be waiting

5 SENSES

S.V.

(sight)

Shooting stars, rainbows

Watching movies on the couch

Seeing you smile, all the things

I haven't seen for a while

(smell)

Campfires, cooking a meal

The way the woods smell

After it rains, these are

Things that bring great memories to my brain

(touch)

Picking flowers on the side of the road,

Holding hands, the way

Your arms feel around me when

We dance

(sound)

Music playing and our hips are swaying,

Dancing slow, then switching gears,

That sounds like music to my ears

(taste)

The rain on my face, the way it

Tastes, making cookies and mmmh,

Those pancakes, these are some

Of the things I'm waiting for.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

THE BEST DAY

S.C.

The best day of my life was the day my daughter was born. It was also one of the scariest days of my life. I was a 20-year-old single mom. It was eleven days after my due date. I had gone into labor around 10 p.m. and by 1 a.m. my contractions were 5 minutes apart, so my dad, my step-mom, step-sister, my uncle, and I headed to the hospital. By then I was in excruciating pain. My uncle was so funny, he kept fussing over me being in pain and kept asking, "What can we do to ease the pain?" So my step-mom gave him the job of keeping my washcloth cool on my forehead.

My birth plan did not go as planned. I wanted a water birth, but her heart rate was fluctuating so the nurse said a water birth was out of the question because they had to insert a heart monitor directly on her. Around 5 a.m. I was only 5 cm. dilated and her heart rate dropped significantly. The doctor told me I needed an emergency C-section. Between contractions, I kept saying, "That wasn't my birth plan." I was crying and then my step-mom came to my side, squeezed my hand, and told me the doctor needed to deliver her safely and a C-section was the only way. I cried harder, fearful of a C-section, and then said, "OK."

They asked who I wanted to come with me in the room. I've always been closer to my step-mom than to my mother, so I chose her. My mom was hurt, but it was my choice. My step-mom kept one hand on my arm and the other

on my head in the operating room. I felt tugging and pressure, but thankfully no pain. I felt them pull her out and I waited for her first cry. Only, it didn't come. My eyes welled with tears as I looked to my step-mom. I kept asking, "Why isn't she crying?" My step-mom got up to check and came back, silent. I asked again, "Why isn't she crying?" but she only said, "They aren't letting her." I didn't know what she meant by that. Waiting to hear my baby make a noise, any noise, felt like an eternity. When she finally let out a wail, I was blinded by the flood of tears, full of more love than I've ever known before. My heart swelled with pride and joy. They brought her to my step-mom, all bundled up, to hold her up to my face. I kissed her little cheek. The day I became a mom was the best day of my life.

Years later, my step-mom finally told me the truth, that my daughter was born blue and not breathing, but she didn't want to scare me then. Despite the scary experience, nothing before or after compared. She was perfect in every way. When I finally got to hold her back in the room, they placed her on my chest. Nothing and no one else mattered. It truly was the best day of my life.

LONELINESS

F.J.

I thought I was content with the loneliness I created for myself. I wasn't
looking for love when you came my way.
I've woven myself into the tapestry of your future.
It's crazy how fate did me a favor like that, hmm?
Eight billion people in the world, but I only want one. Now there is no me
without you, and without you, I don't want to be. Your voice is my new favorite
song.
Your laughter is a smooth melody I never tire of.
Serenade me with promises of forever.
Lay down the lyrics of how I'll take your last name one day. Let the beat of
your heart sing me to sleep.
I want to love without limits.
Together we are timeless.
Everlasting.
With you is where I want to forever be.

MAMA

Betsy Ramos

Mama, I had hoped that the
relationship we built while I
was away would sustain once
I was released

Mama you apologized...
I thought you meant it
I apologized and I meant every
word of it

Mama I'm here now and it's like
I never left, like the distance
I felt is still present even now
between us

Mama I changed while I was
away and although I made
many mistakes back then I'm
not my mistakes...that is
The past

Mama why haven't you changed?
What makes you so afraid to do so?

Mama I've been where you are
afraid of change...comfortable
with my dysfunction...

Mama it gets better and you
don't stay where you are...
I'm proof of that...change is only
Frightful if you allow it to be

Mama are you there? Are you
listening...can you hear me?

Mama let me in...I love you!

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

GIVE ME THAT OLD THROWBACK KINDA LOVE

S.R.

Give me that old school love, a groovy throwback kind of love.
That's black & white, simple like the old TVs.

A tapered leg, acid washed jean trouser and a crop top
Feeling good kinda love.

A striped mini skirt with leg warmers & gogo boots: to swirl on
the dance floor.

Give me that classic kind of love, like a caddy ride or die
Commitment kind of love. Something that means more than boo
or bae.

A mature kind of relationship, where i'm the only girl you
chase.

Write me a love letter & create a mixtape for me. Dedicate to
me a song that fills my ears with sweet loving
endearments, as we get lost in a deep embrace.

Give me that love, jones, a jazzy soul, under the moonlight.

Serenade me by singing me my favorite song.

Put some money in that jukebox and spin me like quilts of silk.

We will dance the floor on fire, as our favorite old school jams play.

Dim the lights, and caress me in a slow dance, as our souls
intertwine and bodies sway to the fading rhythm of the night.

Give me that sensual old time, vintage love, the backyard
barbecue parties, movie nights, and a nightcap.

The kind you don't see in these times, the type of love that's a mystery, and a craving to many.

A love that was groomed under the stars and bloomed during the Harlem Renaissance.

A deeper more tangible connection than video chat, or the internet and *facebook*, or is it *match.com*?

A strong bond that builds relationships and kept families together.

So give me that real old school love, the kind fabricated in romance movies, visualized by poets, painted by great artists, and reproduced in a song by sensual soul musicians like Gerald Levert — *You Got That Love*, Luther Vandross — *A House Is Not A Home*, Teddy Pendergrass — *Turn Off The Lights*, Anita Baker — *Same Ole Love*, Chaka Khan — *Through The Fire*, and Miss Regina Belle — *Baby Come To Me*.

Make it sensual and sexy, deep and mind blowing, as tasty as chocolate, and as smooth as butter.

Create a carnival procession in my mind, feed me with romantic vibes.

Let's fill the streets with our own mushy public display of affection.

Let's talk for hours on the telephone, or take a cab, and travel anywhere.

Fill my head and heart with talks of forever sail me back to that old school love I can keep and treasure.

O.L.



LOSS



WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

loss

MY OLD MASTER, KING-H.

H.G.

My cousin started molesting me at the age of 9. He said, "Don't worry you'll be just fine."

You told me I was special, said I was great but when my sister walked in she fell in a faint.

I finally met my master, King-H.

King said, "Don't worry I'll make you feel great.

You want freedom? I'm your means of escape."

Eager faces with open eyes and empty minds.

Day and night, with no release in sight.

Cotton, needles, blood, and bruises.

From 9 to 5, I pray to stay alive.

The drugs are gone, I am so sick.

Time to go, to turn a few tricks.

Filled with loathing and so much hate until I hit and yes, I feel great!

I say, "How did I end up here?"

Incarcerated for the next 19 years.

I hate this addiction, this awful beast!

You said you would give me freedom, a means of release!

But all you did was break me and make me lose faith.

I will serve this master no more, you're the one I hate!

As I lay down with a feeling of bliss, it's only after my reality hits.

There is still life inside where all the demons hide.

I'm finally beginning to fix the broken pieces inside.

Finally, starting to see a new view of this life.

I am a new person, nothing like my past life!

I am no longer filled with hate inside. Maybe it's compassion or some pride?

I let it all go, I'm a new individual, finally free to grow.

I know this road is not easy, not made to please me.

My life is on the line, so just watch and see me.

THE BIG IF...

D.O.

What if fallen angels are you and me?
I never meant to become the one who took this path.
It's all wrong according to my heart;
The thing is I think maybe my heart led me here.
I fell in love with broken things,
People who shined, meant for more, yet lost,
Left here on Earth with nowhere to go,
No how to be, they had clipped wings.
I could have flown too, yet I choose to give that up
So I could learn
From people like you, and you, and you.
I wanted to understand how this happened,
Along to hell, I went for the ride,
I saw desolate views, I saw dead eyes.
Souls screamed for help while their mouths told lies.
I gathered a few,
I told them the truth, who they really are.
Their master took notice, he said,
"Good as whores that's all they ever are."
3 a.m. I'd stayed too late
I tried to run, but the trap stopped my escape.
I tried to hide but I'd sealed my fate.
How did this happen?
We're all meant to be free.
My wings are torn, with strength that is Mortal
I must climb out of the darkness of this damned pit.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

THE WORST DAY

S.C.

The worst day of my life was the day I had to leave the hospital without my newborn baby. I was on house arrest and staying with my mom. Due to the abuse my children and I endured at the hands of my ex, my daughter and my son were taken from me and living with my dad and step-mom, and I was in trouble with the law. I was not allowed to take my newborn baby home with me.

After my C-section, we stayed another three days at the hospital because the nurses knew we would be separated, and they wanted to give me time with my baby. I was discharged around noon, but they let us stay as late as we wanted.

Around dinner time, my sister wheeled me and my newborn to the lobby of the hospital. I held my baby close and kissed her chubby cheeks a million times. I slowly stood up with her, walked to my sister's car just outside, and amid never-ending tears, I placed her in the car seat in my sister's car. I buckled her up and kissed her cheeks and forehead. She held onto my finger, as if to say, "Don't leave me." After a few minutes, I told her I loved her and would hopefully see her soon. I shut the door to my sister's car, saying goodbye to my newborn baby, and got into my mom's car. I watched my sister drive away with my baby.

I felt a deep ache in my chest and felt my heart shatter into a million pieces. That was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I can't even begin to explain the torment in my heart. I felt it throughout my body too. My womb was empty and my baby was not with me—there's no pain like it. I also didn't know when I would see her again. I had to wait to go to court. I didn't get to see her again until she was six weeks old. But I called my sister multiple times a day, every day. Leaving the hospital without my baby was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, and it was the worst day of my life.

BEAUTIFUL BLACK WOMAN

D.G.

Beautiful black woman are you talking to me?
Of course you are because that's what my momma told me. Black woman
full of beauty and grace are you talking to me? Of course you are because
that's what my daddy told me. Beware black Queens take your place high on
your throne For No one can take our throne
My heart is full of pure gold
But you would never know because we were discarded to be Bought or sold
Broken spirit, lost and confused
Empty, scared, used and abused,
My Love is Patient and Your Love is unkind
We're always trying to bring joy to others
even when we aren't happy ourselves.
Keeping in mind what my mommy and daddy told me. A good woman is
what I am.
A woman who should be proud of who she is and what she stands for
Never seeking a definition from others
A strong Black woman is what they will see when they look at me. One who
can pick up the small pieces
And carry on as if I was never hurt in the first place. When talking about this
woman I can't help but smile Knowing the woman that I can speak so highly
of is ME.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

THE PRIVILEGED WHITE

K.S.

The privileged white defines for me what gives me the right.
The ancestors came from Europe afar on ships and invaded a land,
A land that belonged to the Red Man, the Native Indian
We acted like we wanted to have peace
But the real reason we wanted all the lands piece by piece
We stole those lands from those peaceful people, the true settlers
Of America their land
Did we stop there? No
We even stole their children, put them in new schools, and tried
To turn them white, deny them to be Native Indians, take away
Their birthright.
Did my ancestors stop there?
No the ships again went to another place and again entered another race
Black slaves made to serve the white privileged. Is that what we deserve?
Blacks made to feel less because of the color of their skin?
This brought on because of my privileged next of kin!
African Americans were and are killed because of who they are
Just because of their color
You allowed this without a thought

And still do

I need to express white doesn't mean all are privileged

I'm not my ancestors, I'm me.

I believe everyone should be free

If I could rewrite history everyone would have stayed in their homeland

Everyone would never be judged because of their race.

The Natives would be in the Americas roaming the territories the way they always had. Africans would be in Africa living as they had, dancing to the beat of their drum, singing, laughing, and living.

The whites would be in Europe living as they had, very opinionated ideas that were self-serving, Manipulations of the day and, who knows, maybe, just maybe, all those wars might not have needed to happen.

Just think no Civil War, no World War 1 or 2

No president assassinations, no hangings, no white sheets,

Just a world where all are privileged to live their lives in their culture

God chose for them to live

The answer is evident, the white privileged must pray for our ancestors to be forgiven.

STRUGGLE

J.L.

I struggle everyday
Just to get out of Bed.
To Kill the thoughts in my head,
About all the things I dread.
Should I love? Or should I hate?
Stay Single? Or get a mate?
Am I straight? Or am I gay?
Or do I simply just wanna play?
Am I ok? Or not even close?
Screw it! Give me another dose!

I struggle everyday
Did I deserve that?
And What is this?
What is it, I don't know I miss?
A day of Bliss? Or a Simple Kiss?
Do I smile? Do I Cry?
Bother to try?
Why can't I just be shy?
Better yet... Why did
he want to die?
And was I a piece of that pie?
Jamie! Let Sleeping dogs lie!
They all say, Stay Strong!
Do they even know what's wrong?
My head is playing ping pong!
I don't need the sad song.

I struggle everyday
To keep my head high
and stand tall
When I only want to
collapse and fall.
Can I be loved? Am I able to be?
What will it take to set me free?
Should I be cared for?
Need less or more?
I can't see, I hurt so bad
I couldn't be more mad!
Hate to say it, but, I'm
glad I have no Dad!
I hope he hurt before
he hit that dirt!
I'll always blame him
for my life so grim
Turning to shit, making
my light go dim
This pain just hurts in every limb!

I struggle everyday
To be happy for any
mercy or grace
Just to put a smile on my face
Wishing I could find my place.

Do I shine? Do I tone it down?
Am I serious? Do I
act like a clown?
All these thoughts make me frown.
Do you Even see me?
Should I Even let you?
Will you try to help?

I struggle everyday
When my kids were little, thinking...
Should I run? Should I stay?
Do I deserve them?
Look at them play.
Will I fuck them up? Do
they really need me?
Leave it up to the powers that be?!
Do they know their
mom is damaged?
I don't know how I've managed!
Now all 3 Big and strong
I guess I didn't go too wrong.

I struggle everyday
To hide all the pain, to
find what's to gain.
How to live? How to maintain?
Should I give it my all?

Make that call?
Do I call it Quits? Listen you ditz!
Is it too late? So much
to contemplate!
Does my mind want
to participate?
Oh my GOD! I can
NEVER concentrate!
I lay down at night to
a constant fight.
Yes, I can miss this flight.

I struggle everyday
Should I do this? Why'd I do that?
Who? Why? When? And
was that a cat?
Make this madness stop!
Remember all the pills I'd pop?
All the dope I'd shoot, and drinks
on the stoop?
Damn it felt good! Thought I
understood.
Laughed, joked, and did what I
thought I should
No matter what, I always could!

I struggle everyday
To forgive myself and all of them.
All of them that made me hurt
That made me cry and want to die
That made me not wanna try, and just want to fly.
To Run and hide and have no fun
The fun in my life is over and done.
Getting too old, so I've been told
Time to grow up and act my age
At this stage, too old to be bold
let's just turn the page.
Don't let yourself fold, while out in the cold.

I struggle everyday
I feel like I should be Proud
Act carefree, Be smart and loud
Then I look up and see the dark cloud
To put me in my place
Flat on my face, Always on the chase
Oh Damn! There's the mace!
And here I am!

I struggle everyday!

AS I SIT

D.G.

As I sit so lonely and far from home Lost in my thoughts
Not knowing where to turn
I ask myself
What happened to me?
At one point I had it all
Instead shattered by choices that led To bars and chains
I feel every bit of hurt and sadness Flowing through my heart and veins In
darkness and in light, stuck is how I feel. All this built up without knowing
How to deal, with so much hidden pain Tucked deep down inside, wanting to
Scream but I have my pride
Nothing but hills and valleys, never a rest, Always a new experience and a
new test I sometimes see but don't want to see Where am I going up? Who
knows? Almost up, wait a minute something just Grabbed me and pulled me
back....oh yeah Reality check, I still sit lonely
Without knowing which direction
Tired and drained, when does it end? My appetite for freedom
I'm starving, give me a plate
Let's see how hungry I am
As I live for new all I have is images And a tarnished dream deferred How
much more can I take?
But yet here I sit still waiting
For that date.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

COVID-19 & POVERTY

Selina Fulford

It was during the beginning of the pandemic when Covid-19 hit the shores of America when I began to worry a little more than the rest of the world. I say that because as a Black woman I thought about the health disparities in my community and felt if this virus is hitting hard in the White community, we were going to catch hell in the Black community. I remember hearing over and over, there is a shortage of ventilators, masks, gloves, but get tested as soon as possible. As I was hearing that message, I did not see any places to get masks, gloves, or to get tested in my neighborhood.

In addition, I was an essential worker in a homeless shelter, and we were like sitting ducks exposed to a virus. It was just a matter of time that I caught Covid. I went to the hospital, and they were not testing, but the doctor assumed that I had Covid by my symptoms. I was told to go home and take Tylenol and that was it. I began to demand a ventilator because I was under the assumption that if you had Covid you needed a ventilator or you would probably die. I am glad that I never needed a ventilator because if I did, I probably would not be here to tell the story.

The other community that I was very concerned and worried about was our sisters who were in prison. They were in there with no masks, no visitors, no contact with the outside world and yet getting sick. I worried about what was going to happen to them and who even cared.

COVID isn't over yet. And it's impossible not to keep worrying.

HOPE

Betsy Ramos

Hope died today. She'd been dying a slow death for two years. I tried to keep her alive by nurturing her, I played her favorite music hoping to strike a chord in her that would bring her back to me and when that didn't work I tried other things like speaking to her softly and telling her how much she meant to me. I stood faithful in my vigil hoping that my presence would awaken something in her. I held her hand willing her to take those first steps that would set her free from her slumber, I sang to her hoping that the sound of my voice would help her remember a special memory. I'd lay my head on Hope's chest and cry tears of desperation willing her to reach for me but Hope had gotten comfortable in the dark little world she called her own and nothing I did could entice her back to the world of the living. I didn't give up on Hope easily, as you can see from my story. Hope died a slow death but Hope wore me down. I lost myself in trying to keep alive, don't think of me harshly for laying her to rest, it's the hardest thing I've had to do...but Hope couldn't be reached despite all I did so for once instead of thinking with my heart, I thought with my head.

R.I.P. HOPE, I'LL MISS YOU!

time





WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

S.C.

DOIN' TIME PT. 1

V.S.

I am waiting for my swan song, my second wind.
I am waiting for my victory lap, as the hands on the clock clap back,
shattering seconds until I cross the finish line at the end of my miracle mile.
I am waiting on divine timing, for God's plan to ripen, so I can taste the
sweet fruits produced by blood, sweat, tears, and blessings.
I am waiting until I am ready. I'm waiting for my moment, carefully chosen,
and orchestrated to a perfectly imperfect masterpiece.
I'm waiting for patience, so that I never take for granted what didn't come
easy, what I worked so hard for, and spent so long chillin' in limbo for, as I
held my faith like a blanket to keep me warm.
I'm waiting to let loose, to choose, to unleash my truest self on the world
waiting for a shake-up.
I'm waiting for a miracle. I'm waiting to come home.

SUNFLOWERS & ROSES

D.O.

Surely, dearly, I can only be waiting for my dreams to come into being. I'm waiting for the day when you and I are happily living. Together, that's the important part, the very thing I've wished for every day spent apart. Next to that, I can only pray to embody the person you've always had faith in me becoming. No point in settling, no point in just existing. I want to do more than I've ever done, be more than I thought I was. I want us to run across water, climb some mountains, and see who's taller. I want to race faster than I've ever run. I want to live in sunflowers and roses, look at how we shine in the sun. I want to explore the forest and collect wonderful things. I want to stand center stage and let my heart sing. I want to discover magic, mermaids, fairies, and other unlikely beings. I want to fly with my very own wings. I want to discover places unknown and visit all of the eight wonders of the world. I want to dive into deep waters and swim with non-stinging jellyfish. I want to take a rocket to the moon just to dance. I want to eat cotton candy and ride roller coasters. I want to be surprised by your silliness, tell me a joke, something so clever. Most importantly, I want to hear your voice just tell me once, "Mommy, this is the best day ever."

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

D.G.

Honestly, life to begin again. What would that look like?

“What are you waiting for” seems like such an easy question, but guess what, it isn’t. When you are incarcerated you are waiting for everything. The prison is run on a timetable. Let’s start with you eating at a certain time, you do chores at a certain time, you shower at a certain time, you work, you are waiting for a visit, you get mail at a certain time, or waiting for someone to write to you...etc. Everything is a waiting game.

I’m waiting on the day that I can be a real parent to my son

I’m waiting on the day that I can hug my parents

I’m waiting on the day that I can walk out of here

I’m waiting on the day that I don’t have to deal with B.S. everyday

I’m waiting on the day that I don’t have to share a room with anyone

I’m waiting on the day that I can cook my own meals

I’m waiting on the day that I can wash my own clothes

I’m waiting on the day that I can open my own mail

I’m waiting on the day that I can express myself the way that I want to

I’m waiting on the day that I don’t have to fight for everything I need

I’m waiting on the day that I don’t have to explain everything I do

I’m waiting on the day that I can fully be me.

However, the real question is

I’m waiting for the day that I step foot out of this place and can

Start my life all over again.

I miss everything about my old life, especially my child, and my culture. What does my new life encompass?

Since everything I know is no longer.

The question is where will I end up?

Since the world is a big place but you can't forget the
People that have been there for you, especially when you have a long
sentence.

I know that I would love to have my house set up,
wherever that may be, with everything I would need
inside of it that I need to nourish my mind,
heart, and soul.

Will I work after leaving here? That's another question!
Will I feel like I belong in society? That's another question!
How do you pick up the pieces? That's another question!
Can you ever leave behind the life of prison?
How long does it take to feel semi-normal again?
I seem to have lots of questions and little answers,
so I guess I'm waiting on answers.
I seem to have out-waited lots of things but I'm still waiting for Me to go
home and to be me

I am still waiting for the day I don't have to have someone open my mail
I'm still waiting for the day I can decide what I want to eat and drink
I'm still waiting for the day that I can walk into the store and purchase The
kind of clothes I want to wear
I'm still waiting for the day I don't have to ask someone to sign a check
request
I'm still waiting for the day I can be with my only child
I'm still waiting for the day that I go to the hair salon and get my hair done
I'm still waiting for people to stop looking at me like I'm crazy
I'm just still waiting for parole to surface so that people can get Home to their
families.

DOIN' TIME PT. 2

V.S.

I am waiting for a chance to spread my wings. I'm waiting patiently for the golden hour I reemerge from my uncomfortable chrysalis and fly in the free and open. I'm waiting as the seasons, my feelings, and my mind all change, preparing to become acquainted with the new world. I'm waiting for the winds of fate, the gusts to come that will sweep me off my feet into a flow state that shifts the shape of the universe all around me.

Tom Petty once said that "the waiting is the hardest part."¹ Yes and no. I try to relax into the time and soothe myself through growing pains. Maybe I'm not the one waiting. . . maybe someone, somewhere, or something is waiting for me. When I forget that I'm waiting and just breathe, when I commit myself to embodying the fleeting moments, the waiting isn't so hard. I'm waiting to appreciate everything I waited for, knowing I'll never forget every horse I had to hold onto get where I was going.

TIME

1 From "The Waiting" (song) by Tom Pett and the Heatbreakers (1981)

WAITING GAME

V.A.

My life is a waiting game.

I rely on others to make my decisions, Blues and shoes ladies, that's where I'm at. I gave up my control, or shall I say the Illusion of control. I give my life to my creator. He's in the driver's seat, and me? I am Along for the ride. Not always smooth, Sometimes bumpy and sharp turns, but I'm learning. As long as I do the next right Thing everything will work out.

So in conclusion, what am I waiting for? I'm waiting to see where my road will take me. I'm on a journey of discovery.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

DOIN' TIME PT. 3

V.S.

I'm not waiting anymore. I don't want to waste my days in suspended animation, hoping for everything to be different. No, I won't hold and listen to Muzak for hours while the wait line drives me crazy. No, I'm not Carly Simon, I can't allow myself to linger in anticipa-a-a-a-tion. Even if I'm not living the fantasy in this moment, why sit on my thumbs instead of doing everything in my power to make those dreams come true? I'm not waiting for my birthday or Christmas morning, I am opening my present all the time.

127 DAYS & COUNTING

S.V.

I'm waiting to go for a walk
Listen to the birds and
Hear all the beautiful sounds
of nature
I'm waiting to go for a nice long drive out in the country and sing along to all
the songs I know and even the ones
I don't
I'm waiting to be stressed out because we're running late to your game or
dance recital because I never realized how much I'd actually yearned for
those moments again
I'm waiting for Sunday breakfast and making four separate meals because
everyone wants something
different
I'm waiting for spur-of-the-moment bonfires where everyone just laughs and
talks about old times and s'mores
s'mores please
I'm waiting for freedom so I can get back to life the way life should be
All these things I can't wait for
127 days and counting

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

S.C.



hope

I AM WOMAN

B.H.

"I Am Woman, Hear me Roar"²

I'm part eagle, watch me soar.

I am royal, see my bling?

I wear my crown, I am a Queen.

I look down deep inside my heart,

I find the words, this is my art.

I am woman, I am strong.

I am faith when struggle is long.

At times I feel I stand alone,

My character I've set in stone.

I never divert from what I believe.

'Cause at the end of the day, I'm
stuck with ME.

I am woman, I wear many hats

I'm human, imperfect, these are
just facts.

I am a mom, a grandma, I'm a
daughter, a friend

I'm loving, I'm forgiving, I'm loyal
to the end.

I am a prisoner with a number for
a name

I've been stripped down, gawked
at, filled with shame.

Yes, I am a woman, powerful and
strong

on a quest for the place in this
world I belong.

I'm a person, a being, I'm locked
up but I'm free

to be eminently, imperfectly,
intrinsically me.

It's the one thing in this world I

alone can do,

know who you are and be free to
be you.

2 The saying, "I am woman, hear me roar" is originally from the song "I Am Woman" (Helen Reddy, 1971)

RECOVERY TO ME

D.S.

Recovery to me is being
incarcerated.

They say you don't stop till
prison, institutions, or death.
Thank god I came to prison.

Being here has been my saving
grace
and has honestly saved my life.

I've found stability that wasn't
there before.
I now know who I am, I'm
relearning how
to feel and how to deal with those
feelings.

Discovering hobbies, new ways to
spend time,
things I've never tried before.

Recovery to me is finding new
friends, and
learning who "real" friends really
are,
It's about finding out about "red
flags"
even when we want to dismiss
them.

Recovery to me is MAT
(Medication Assisted Treatment),
without it, I would have fallen back
by now.

Recovery is about my health, my
diet, my hygiene.

Recovery to me is planning a
future that keeps
the new things I've learned,
and keeps finding more—every
day.

Healing environments,
reconnecting relationships,
and constant support.

Recovery to me is sharing the
things I've learned
and letting others know
you aren't alone

If someone hadn't told me that,
I wouldn't have been where I'm at.

Recovery to me is coming back
here on my own terms
to be that support person and
help volunteer
to find ways to keep giving back
to
the place that saved me.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

UNAPOLOGETICALLY THE WOMAN I WAS MEANT TO BE

S.M.A.

HOPE

What are you waiting for?
I am waiting for the day that I can
put my feet in the sand,
Having my boys back together,
My family,
When I am ready to have them
hand-in-hand.

What would I want to wait for?
To see and find the correct
pathway,
To be stable for
Me and my boys

What do I need to wait for?
Patience,
A deep breath....
To slow down,
And genuine happiness.

The choices are endless,
And can be virtuous of
Our character.

Why should I wait for it?
Life moves too fast,
To let one dream,
To sing,
To dance,
To hum,
To imagine,
Be able to allow their mind
To wander to meaning they
encompass.

What is worth waiting for?
A long-term career
I should be passionate for,
My family unit as 1,
That is no debate.
A stable foundation,
To life.

To live out of the shadow
Of my trauma.

But allow these notes to be
solidified and free.

What you are waiting for
Is worth waiting for.
To prosper and attain,
What I now need.

What passions bring strength to
what I am waiting for?
That the purposes
I have found reignite the power
In my soul to be unapologetically
me.
That people are me and I am
people. That what once was the
crutch
Is now the key to find the strength
in me, the individual and what I
specifically need.

To now see my wings once again
unfurl,

To take flight and to soar,
To be genuinely happy,
That once was caged by trauma
is finally free.

The woman,
The individual,
The alcoholic,
The veteran,

Nothing hinders me,
From where I set my eyes...to be
unapologetically the woman I was
meant to be.

What am I waiting for?

I

Am

No

Longer waiting

Because that woman is 100% me.

BKLYN BED STUYVESANT IN THE 80'S

Teronia Scott

Free cheese/paper food stamps
Drug infestation on every corner
Poor school opportunities/ no community centers
The street was my only source of information
My overall influence came from a population who
abused alcohol, crack, heroine
Take a puff it will make you feel good
What a fall I took
Systems got its grips on me
Disgrace to human race
My integrity was erased
But what a relief, I was blessed to get free from the
horrors of the drugs
Freer to help other's change
Free to be me

HOPE

ALL OF US

Judy Clark

We are
intertwined vines growing from the rich dark soil of straining
to live free in captivity

growing up and over brick walls
our roots reaching out to attach to each other to anchor us,
that we can flourish
despite them

We bear impossibly sweet berries
of song and laughter,
we collect all our salt tears
and turn it into nourishing spring rain we are miracle makers of
industry and faith
we breathe life into each other's
dreams and bear witness to hard
truths

We prevail

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

CODEPENDENT NO-MORE

J.L.

After doing research to get the
true meaning,
I used to be codependent I have
a feeling.
My mom said she was when I
was a child,
And in her case it wasn't very mild.
Guess it didn't help, dad was wild.
Then add us kids, no wonder
she'd need a snooze.
She'd hide his pills and dump his
booze.
Her family she didn't wanna lose.
Compelled to help solve his
problem,
A waste of time as she groveled.
Holding it together to hide her
sorrow,
Always believing it'd be better
tomorrow.
So enough about her, and to how
I used to be
I always asked what's wrong with
me?
But I'm not in control of his
destiny.
I don't wanna deal with loss of

control
And all I was doing is living in fear.
Doing the same as my mom, as
she sheds a tear
She says, Jamie, he's abusive,
isn't it clear?
Don't worry mom, it's my fault.
Shit he's here!
In he comes with his violent
temper
Next thing I know, he throws the
hamper.
Hole in the wall, I run down the
hall.
Fist to my face, I'm trapped in this
place.
No matter how hard I cried, I
could get by
It will get better, I'd always lie.
All I have to do is comply.
I finally got tired and sick of it all.
Decided I will no longer take the
fall,
I was done and made the call!
Mom came over with truck and
trailer,

Packed so fast, before he woke
with anger.
I loved him, but now he's a
stranger.
My very last trip to the door I go
Then he woke up and put on a
show
Pushed me down, my teeth...
There they go.
Head hit the ground with the
strongest damn blow.
Then to jail we both go.
Why us both, I don't know

Got bailed out, found a new home
Decided I'll never be another
man's drone
I've been through hell and can
think on my own.
Built up the courage, the bullshit
I've blown.
Never again that way I'll be known
I'll stand up, speak out, let myself
be shown.
Fill my bottomless pit of unmet
needs
To love myself and see some
growth
To feel how I feel and not think for
us both.
To get what I want and have a
desire,
And find something new to ignite
my fire.

The guilt and shame, me I'd
blame,
Ignoring myself, no longer the
game.
And now you get to feel the
shame

As I gain my confidence back
loyalties to myself, life no longer
black
I do what I want, no one to say
how to think and act
Back to my life, that is a fact.
To myself and family I've made
this pact
To a man like that, I'll never be
shacked
I forgive myself, for being so naive
Now I'm good and for sure
believe
Codependent no more
That shit's not for me
And now I'm ok, it feels good to
be free
I opened my eyes and love what
I see
Accepting myself, Can it be?
Some days it's a struggle
So with my dog I snuggle.
Now I'm fine

One day at a time.

WITH TRUTH SHOULD COME CHANGE

Edna Sams

Can I / Dare I, speak this out loud?

It was so long ago but... I believe it impacted the trajectory of my life /
OUR LIVES!! Or maybe not, I don't know.

Will I ever know...Will we ever know.. Shit, is it now necessary to know
as it's done!

I never really ever spoke it out loud...we never did.

How many more never spoke it out loud?? Now that they have, does
The work truly begin?

To change routes would indeed confuse the masses — seeking a better
life with the same underlying, subliminal messages IN THIS COUNTRY!
A MESSAGE which includes hatred, segregation, exclusion, defamation
of a Black and Brown nation — of a people —

Uncloaked now to the point that we can fully see them—with or without
OUR blinders on!

The only way to make things change is to be the change – Commit to the
process of change....

YES, YES...we dared NOT say a word back then!! But that was then
and this is NOW!

We can now sing it!! Shout it!! Loudly to the mountain tops... Y'all
remember Martin, when he said "*We shall overcome*" but we must
remember the task at hand requires persistence, tenacity, and
commitment from us all.

We no longer have to stand in fear but NOW stand rooted in
Dignity, Confidence, and Pride!!

The time is now, let's stop the bleeding! Let's get it now!
We deserve better!

WE RISE

Judy Clark

from out of your gulags
we rise from invisibility to illumination
we rise from silence to outcry
from violence to healing
from suppression to truth-telling
from disdain and despair and desperation
we rise to tell a new story

We rise from isolation and fear
by folding into each other's arms and hearts,
by joining together into an intricate
 patchwork quilt of affirmation
We lift each other up and in so doing,
we rise

We rise together,
and we rise for each other
We rise to bring about a new day
for ourselves, our sisters, our children
everyone.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

HERO

R.W.

I'm waiting for a hero.
Someone to love me unconditionally. Someone to give me all the things I
want and need.
I'm waiting for someone to rescue me from me.
Someone to tell me it will all be OK.
Someone to make it all go away.
A hero to tell me I'm beautiful and great. Someone to tell me I'm all they
need.
I'm waiting to be enough. I'm waiting for a hero to keep me safe.
A hero who shares my undying faith. Sometimes I wonder if they exist.
Will they be someone I cannot resist? Someday I'll wake up and be ready to
see the hero I'm waiting
for has always been me.

HOPE

S.V.

In this place it's so easy to feel surrounded
by darkness masked by fluorescent lights
The internal struggle is real.
All the arguing, all the fights
It's easy to lose sight
through the tunnel to light.
But at the end of each day
after all the battles inside
I hash all of them out.
That day's war is mine.
There are no other voices
to discourage or break down.
I can look deep inside myself
where my hope is found.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?



This anthology is dedicated to all of the children who have been impacted by intergenerational incarceration. We hope that you will be supported in pathways to breaking the cycles that have come before you.



PLACEMATTERS

