

i am
climbing
the stairs that
i create with these
words all the way to the top



Introduction

At the moment we write, we each engage the uncertainty of what the page at hand will become. This experience bears both surprise and remembrance.

The act of anthologizing poems sheds light on the space between this personal, mystic experience of writing, and communal, joyful creation. Perhaps this space is not a distance but a place filled with many bridges.

National Poetry Writing Month (NaPoWriMo) is an exercise in being in community with each other via the act of writing. Throughout the month of April, writers attempt to write one poem a day in response to a shared list of 30 prompts. Like its predecessor, NaNoWriMo, the number of poets taking part in NaPoWriMo has grown exponentially since its first year, but it has retained its grassroots informality. That writers from everywhere commit to the same endeavor during this month is not just an afterthought about NaPoWriMo. The knowledge that many are crafting poems from the same repertoire of prompts, moving through the days of April guided by shared creative challenges and surprises, lays the foundation for a community that writes itself into being. Through participation, writers become bound together by April, by each other's imaginary or physical company.

At PEN America, we reached out to incarcerated writers who had previously taken part in our initiatives with a list of prompts sourced from mentors and influences in our community. The prompts asked participants to weave through the alphabet, craft lists, dream from birds, see something two ways, and much more. The result is a cornucopia of poems; some grappling with identity and change, some sublimating from an upset with the ways in which the criminal legal system limits expression, and some documenting nature and beauty in everyday life in prison.

We hope that this zine before you is not only an artifact of NaPoWriMo 2022, but also a space where creative individuals and collectives continue to envision their work and their growth. It celebrates a literary community – one divided by a myriad of administrative and spatial barriers upheld by the US prison system – and attempts to present its work in a tangible, textured, and interactive form.

We chose to present our writers' works in the format of a zine. As a do-it-yourself, non-censored, non-commercial printwork medium, zines have served as vessels of expression and prescient dreaming for marginalized communities throughout history. In 1926, the publication *Fire!!* featured writers of the Harlem Renaissance including Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes. In the 1930s and 40s, the term "zine" was first used by sci-fi fandoms sharing their love for other worlds. In the 1970s, the punk community embraced zines as a format for voicing their discontent with the elitist mainstream music industry. Easy and affordable to make, zines have always been an accessible grassroots method for artists, musicians, and writers to share their work with peers and collaborators—without waiting for the fickle approval of gatekeepers.

In honor of this exercise of using imagination and creativity to anticipate, celebrate, and exist in solidarity with each other's mind and being, we have also left space throughout the zine for you, the reader, to add your own poems and drawings. You will find that the zine is already decorated with lovely illustrations hand-drawn by my talented fellow intern Peter Watson.

We would like to thank Secret Riso Club for printing this zine. Secret Riso Club is a graphic design and risograph studio that focuses its work on the intersection of social justice, art, design and community building. We are thankful to print with a studio whose mission as well as dedication to community are aligned with ours.

And finally, thank you to all the contributors to this zine for sharing their beautiful work. We hope that this zine will help keep near and dear the memory and reward of NaPoWriMo 2022.

Mia Xing



Contributors

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Tracy Leigh

Taj Alexander Mahan-Haft

John Corley

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Michael J. Richardson

My letter got denied today. It boarded the censorship and sailed away. "Send home or destroy" is what they said, some things are better off left unread. Don't want dangerous thoughts getting in my head, so here's a safer idea instead. Shut your mouth and do as you're told, over and over until you grow old. If you be a good dog and obey what we say, you just might make it out alive someday. If you bark, yell, and try to rebel, you'll just end up further in Hell. Propaganda is what we'll feed you, because conform is what you need to. Don't worry about the news out there, following the rules should be your only care. Your humanity will be saved, when your debts to society have been paid. But I'm not buying what they're selling, because radical change is the only money in the pocket of a felon. Time to rise against the powers that be, not gonna buy anymore of your commissary. Not gonna work in the kitchen for free, don't care how many chicken patties you give me. Not gonna cut the grass, take out the trash, or mop the floor. Not gonna do that anymore. Not gonna wear this uniform that makes us all look the same. I'm more than a number, I was born with a name. Not gonna wear this mask that covers up my mouth, because it's time to scream and it's time to shout! Let it be known, uncensored around the globe, we will no longer unrightfully do what we're told. We all have a voice, so let it be heard, every conversation starts with a single word. We gotta break down these walls and come together as one, because too much time is being spent in prison. I never got my letter, but I already knew what it would say, "You are not a slave and you will be free one day."

LAUGHING LIGHTS

Bryan Harris

Laughing lights
They giggle and keep me awake
I just wanna get some sleep but
these lights wanna play
Ha ha ha ha so bright is what they say
While I'm stuck in jail over a fine I couldn't pay

Now these lights keep torturing me
they think all this is funny
I would break these lights out but I might get fined for more money
Then I'd be stuck in jail longer and these lights would really laugh out loud
I sure don't want that but I gotta do something now

Ah I know here's something I can try
I can remove my shirt and wrap it around my eyes
Wow - relief darkness and silent
The lights can't laugh, I fall asleep in an instant

DRY HEAVE

Desi Agader

Here I am, not being there,
never was I there
nor here for that matter.
Can I not be here nor
there at the same time?
Isn't nowhere a place wanting
or not wanting to be?
By me not knowing
of this place
regardless of its actual
existence solidifies
it as being a place.
A place that I am
neither present nor
absent from, a
place I have grown
accustomed to
for a while...

ACTIVE REST

George Wilkerson

i am surprised only four of us made it out.
maybe we are the survivors; the rest
are casualties of inactivity induced by The Pandemic:
staff shortages had languished us on our pod since Christmas,

a month of gloomy gray air
since the dayroom lights stay off. most guys watch
our two TVs flicker narcotically — nonstop
weather, game shows, reruns, soap operas. not me.

though all it takes is an extra pair of hands
on duty to remove the giant slumber-boulder
blocking death row's rec yard door, only four of us
clamber out, like miners. our yard is drenched

in shadow, except for a strip of warmth glowing
on the basketball court. i stumble toward it, squinting
in the light, start walking figure-eights in that tight
space. more like a straight line. sun on face, pivot,

sun on back (facing the others), pivot, sun on face...
fifteen seconds each way, dodging goose shit with every step
on uneven concrete cracked by tufts of crabgrass
and orange anthills sprouting up like dusty magma.

we have thirty minutes and are prohibited to touch
each other or the snow that lies inside the wall's shadow.
a semitruck rumbles past beyond the perimeter wall
and a chilly breeze slants down out of bright blue sky.

i notice Lyle, a northerner, grinning like a kid and chomping
on a huge egg. i wonder where the fuck he got it — did he raid
a goose nest? — until i realize it is snow. energized, he climbs
onto the exercise apparatus, cranking out endless reps

of pull-ups, push-ups, sit-ups. i pivot, take sun on face,
hear little birds zip by, tweeting happily. i pivot,
see Vinnie jumping rope like a maniac for a few seconds
until it tangles in his ankles. his boxer's body is flabby, clumsy.

i note Jerzy in the guard's chair, imperious, silent
for the first time in weeks — smug and defiant, as if daring
the guard to tell him to get up. the guard turns his back
and i, too, pivot into the sun, walking side-by-side

toward the wall. the guard hollers up to the guntower
guard about the upcoming Super Bowl, while i start
writing this poem in my head, trying
to get as much mileage out of recreation as i can

as i stomp up a sweat. it might be another month
before i touch sun again — maybe less, maybe more —
so i breathe and blink in the light, i listen
to the sky, the road beyond the wall. toward the end

of our time, i let my body go
wide on the loops, less pivot more swoop, expanding
my laps, loosening my lines. suddenly i see
Vinnie break toward the snow

with only seconds left of recreation, so i too veer
onto damp and muddy grass
before the guard can stop us. we scoop up contraband,
the first snowballs we've made in decades

of incarceration, and launch them like spirits in a high arc
toward the prison's brick exterior
as our bodies swagger and skip
indoors.

never ask yourself

WRITE A POEM BASED ON THE FOLLOWING
OPENING: "NEVER ASK YOURSELF..."

WHEN IS A DULL SLOT FIT FOR
A QUARTER MILLION MILES?

Jason Centrone

Never

ask yourself

beyond probability's asylum—
its consolation span. Else the answer
luke warm.

Pen you a pal. If you trick
or you treat yourself
with cocoa-bronze

pseudo-analytics.

Or continue this wading
by day, your scrapbook moments.
These lobbing buzzard shots

to the 45

gallons of back alley drum? Won't do.
Of history by night
burned in a barrel, who said it?
Son, you cain' squeeze warm
from thin air. Is the mail slot wedged?
Is that it?

Muskellunge,

most days, flop to the pond-
green scatter rug—*watchè'm fingers*
on the annual rates. Once a year,
through the door's slotted ingress,
the moon slips.

You know this.

You polish the days leading up
to the flapping brass clink.
Sweep at the stoop,
head in the chimes—

remember?

Your hacksaw through stainless—
soften that chord, you thought.
Because a larking seventh?
Won't soothe. So, give it a twist—

the old Claddagh—heart in,
down on its finger.

Its spindle.

From the hall's alcove Windsor, now
the foot falls
through a door's slotted ingress,
padding the seconds down.
When history's hands meet again,
it's not the chimes that peal,
but the clink.

You know this.

You catch the bright gibbous
flash to the pond—
a year to sink in.

Who better

never to ask than you, when a moon
slips through a slot, why,
in lo-gravity, why

you jes' sit.

BLIND TO THE MYSTERIES

Never ask yourself
If you are blind to the mysteries
Of the soul,
For even the blind can grasp and touch
And taste the world
Through the music of the birds
And the bitter of the cold;
For the light upon their skin
Is no less warm than your oranges
And reds,
Their experience of being
No less obscure and blotched
With dread.

So, never ask yourself
If you are blind to the mysteries
Of the soul,
For you would never know
The difference
Or be any less whole.

U.S. SOLDIER

Widener Michael Weems

A U.S. Soldier peers through the mist
Always calculating the risk,

Standing within an enemy's field
Flashback to Kansas wheat fields,

Not doing it for the fame
Only for the families back in Maine,

Driving humvees not lexus'
Protecting the ranches down in Texas,

Soldiers are a one of a kind
Hope someday return to California's sunshine,

Never once giving way to doubtin'
Remembering the blue skies over Montana mountains,

Through all their misery
Forever stands the Statue of Liberty.

DEJA VU

Justin Dismuke

She sits at a cluttered desk
A kinky curtain grazes shoulders
Cradling the future
Maple spheres
Glow against ebony skin
A row of pearls
Bruise luscious berries
Tapered fingers grasps a pen
Scratching away at a pad

I peer over her shoulder to read its contents

Tall regal bearing, dark as the space between us
Shoulder weighed with the past
Onyx eyes haunted with sorrow
Peeks over my shoulders
Brow creased in thought
Deciphering
The words that describe me
From the ones that define him

WRITE SOMETHING TWO WAYS.
A SCENE, A DESCRIPTION, A THOUGHT, A
CONVERSATION, A LETTER, A RECIPE,
WRITE ANY DISCRETE THING. THEN WRITE
IT AGAIN, DIFFERENTLY.

SOME IDEAS: WRITE ONE QUICKLY, THE
OTHER SLOWLY. WRITE ONE ELABORATELY,
THE OTHER PLAINLY. ONE VISUALLY,
THE OTHER USING ONLY SOUND. ONE
MOURNFULLY, THE OTHER HORNILY. UP TO
YOU. WRITE SOMETHING TWO WAYS.

WRITE A POEM OR PROSE POEM THAT IS 16-
26 SENTENCES IN LENGTH. EACH SENTENCE
MUST BEGIN WITH A DIFFERENT LETTER OF
THE ALPHABET. THEY CAN BE IN ANY ORDER
(NOT NECESSARILY ALPHABETICAL). YOU
CANNOT USE ANY STARTING LETTER MORE
THAN ONCE.

ADDICTION TO ZENITH

John Mudd

Addiction is an insatiable abyss.
Bottomless in its hunger,
Craving souls continuously,
Devouring lives.
Eternal in its existence.
Fathomless are its depths,
Gorging on despair.
Hellish demons
Inhabit the obscurity
Jealous in their nature
Lusting for feelings
Malignant in excess.
Narcissus blooms in its bowels,
Oblivious to the transformation.
Planted in the pursuit of pleasure,
Quelled for only a moment.
Rooted in pain, past and present.
Soiled souls must be cleansed,
Traversing time to heal,
Unyielding in the quest for restoration,
Vulnerable voices heard and heeded.
Willing to repay price
X.
Yearning to grasp recoveries
Zenith.

Answers
 Become
 Conscious
 Decisions
 Effecting
 Fluidity
 Granting
 How
 Integrity
 Jostles
 Kindness
 Leaving
 Moments
 Nestled
 Often
 Poised
 Quietly
 Reassured
 Simplicity
 Throughout
 Unified
 Variables
 Woven
 X
 Yearning
 Zest!

I come from a fractured blacktop
 scattered with butts, blunt guts and broken
 butterfly jars.
 I come from broke and broken families
 where broken window theories clip wings early.
 I come from No Child Left Behind and Just Say No
 to three-for-tens and five-for-twenties,
 ten-ten skinnies and one twenty five by fives.
 I come from penny candies and two-for-a-dollar wings,
 fifty cent hugs and dollar dutches —
 blocks where boys slapbox while the girls double-dutch.
 I come from humble homes where grandmothers are saints,
 where everyone's got a father they don't know
 named John Doe.
 I come from late nights looking for my mother
 in the back-alley of a bar,
 peeking through the crack in the back door.
 I come from where crack is king,
 where the crack of dawn brings crack
 head neighbors to steal our newspaper.
 I come from crockpot dinners that simmer
 while our grandmother works with swollen feet,
 ravaged hands and twice-dead heart.
 I come from hunger —
 from rumbling stomachs in the classroom
 to cutting class and rumbling in the bathroom.
 I come from red brick row homes with glass ceilings,
 smoke-stained walls and tear stained cheeks.
 I come from big iced teas and big white-tees,
 dirty dickies and dicked sneaks that talk while you walk.
 I come from coupons and food stamps.
 I come from group homes and bootcamps.
 I come from false prophets
 who sold me money green dreams
 who never told me that god is
 dead and life is hell.
 I come from the otherside
 where trying to survive is a waste of time.
 I come from the end of the line.

FREER THAN I'VE EVER BEEN

Santonio Murff

As I awake to the tantalizing thrill
of a life without fears
I rise with tears
at the overwhelming joy
of a love-packed heart

As everyday starts
I dine on the Divine
delicacies of serenity
and peace of mind

As I victoriously scream
I lap in the luxuries
of a fulfilled dream

As I ask in the beatific love
of a heavenly hug
I'm ever grateful
for the kiss of bliss

This is the shit!

From damnation to salvation
a standing ovation
for the grandest creation
San-Man to San-God
Allahu Akbar

The anointed one
prophesied to come
for he is me
and we are the one

A prisoner they see
a prophet I be
Even in the pen
a blessing to the multitudes

Freer than I've Ever Been!

ENVISION YOUR POEM
AS A SET OF STAIRS.

WHAT IS THE STAIRCASE MADE OF?
WHAT IS THE TEXTURE OF THE STAIRS?
WHAT COLOR? WHAT LENGTH?

MOVE THROUGH YOUR POEM BY ESCALATING
OR DE-ESCALATING THE STAIRCASE. FIND YOUR
RHYTHM. EDIT ACCORDINGLY.

Your staircase



UNTITLED

Jamar Russell

I am
I am climbing
I am climbing the stairs
I am climbing the stairs that
I am climbing the stairs that I
I am climbing the stairs that I create
I am climbing the stairs that I create with
I am climbing the stairs that I create with these
I am climbing the stairs that I create with these words
I am climbing the stairs that I create with these words all
I am climbing the stairs that I create with these words all the
I am climbing the stairs that I create with these words all the way
I am climbing the stairs that I create with these words all the way to
I am climbing the stairs that I create with these words all the way to the
I am climbing the stairs that I create with these words all the way to the top

UNTITLED

Jamar Russell

I've seen you glide
Wing span
O man, oh my
Then swoop down to snatch prey
How could you see from way,
Way, way up in the air?
Circle
Purposeful
On a mission
Body in suspension
Commanding or obeying the law of airflow and drag
Surveying for the next creature for your talons to grab
I see you and marvel
Knowing when you're out all the smaller birds are startled
What it would be like,
To see like,
To be free like
With each strong stroke be taken to new heights
Or common flight
What is remarkable for me
Is just life for you
I stand and gawk
At the magnificent hawk



BABY OWL

Tracy Leigh

Baby owl staked out within
entwined branches of grandfather maple
ogling me as if a spy.

Wide-eyed mechanical blinks
inquisitively shout, "Who.. are you?"
Transfixed, I mimic your prey

as you bobble foot to foot
anticipatory of a next move.
With variegated vest of oak, slate

blue-grey, yes baby owl
you've made soft in my day.
Captivated, to my chagrin

half in disbelief, half intrigued
in your proud stance
you emit an accosted baby hoot.

Who... young owl, who...
authorized you to be so fowl?
Who... taught you to hunt and fly?

Who... consoles you when you cry?
Baby owl hoots in reply
then releases the maple

in exchange for the sky.
Baby owl, so would I!

(Inspired by Ingeborg Bachmann's *My Bird*)

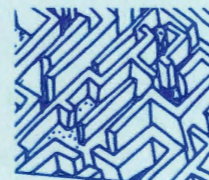
TURN AROUND

Taj Alexander Mahan-Haft

Wind bites even spring's poking nose
draining what little warmth from beneath frayed and greyed longjohns.
"Outside rec" implies fun
while the sun stands behind
concrete sentinel with M16 cyclops
ever colder when so clutched
by concertina-framed vistas.

Turn around.

Unseasonal sun shimmers casually
with an early jazz wiggle
off impromptu lawn pond
filled by yesterday's showers
reflecting unlikely silver
dazzling away doldrums
while that wind whispers waves
reminiscent of distant shores
seaside summer glistens
when I look this way instead.



MORNING GLORIES

Taj Alexander Mahan-Haft

Why do morning glories hate sunset?
for they can only sing their
splash of color arriettas
in the certain glow
of endless possibilities

by the end of the afternoon
the conspiracies of freedom
have drained the ultraviolet
from our minds
dwindled and tired

they are secret poets
daring each day
to dream
climbing prison fences
anoointed on barbs
to see us in need and regret



THE FIRST ONE DOWN—

John Corley

big, round, bad
knees, wheelchair bound, caught the covid,
in the wind, took a ride to the outside

where he signed a DNR,
did he realize?

Do Not Resuscitate if things go south—

they didn't when they did—
(see ya) gotta plant you
in the rich black earth
beneath you state issue number
scratched into a concrete cross

they dropped quick
fast and in a hurry—
we buried them deep,
mumbled a few words
and got the hell

out of the cemetery (*wouldn't
wanna be ya*)—

hard to evade the unseen pursuer—
easy to imagine our number in concrete

HALF MAN - HALF AMAZING (THE MAN'S WORDS)

Vaughn Walker

From the broad of my shoulders to the curve of my loins
I am... **Half man - Half amazing, Half amazing - Half man that's me!**
From every step I take to every tender heart I might break;
I am... **Half man - Half amazing, Half amazing - Half man that's me!**
From man, boy, to birth. I repeat...
From man, boy, to birth, I'm defined by each hug that guides my worth.
Who am I? **Half man - Half amazing, Half amazing - Half man that's me!**
From Maya Angelou, to Robert Frost, to who I am at nobody's cost.
I am... **Half man - Half amazing, Half amazing - Half man that's me!**
I am amazing... amazingly handsome, amazingly strong
Through adversity that others can't fathom!
I am... **Half man - Half amazing, Half amazing - Half man that's me!**
From the "ooh childs", to the contours of my face that
Manufactures my smiles, whether they be happy, sad, disappointed, or glad
I am — the man that truly resembles the essence of my dad!
Not the man that strays, disobeys, and doesn't love,
But the man that I whisper to within, while others whisper to up above.
I am... **Half man - Half amazing, Half amazing - Half man that's me!**
I cannot describe too much of who I really am;
Mostly it's defined by what makes a genuine man, or
The love from my heart that makes a true woman understand
Amazingly, I tend to be me at all times!
I tend to be me in hard times!!
I tend to be, I... TEND... TO... BE...
Half man - Half amazing, Half amazing - Half man that's me!

(Poem inspired by and depicted from the poem "Phenomenal Woman" by Maya Angelou)

ON PALMER ROAD

Michael J. Richardson

With Tiffani an' dewberries,
a steamy Summer morn,
with honeybees and dirt robbers,
and hummingbirds buzzing,
bumbling and borrowing nectar and love-dust
and Time.

Afraid
of innocence and aloneness,
and admitting we were wrong
or right or careless,
or lost (in Love)
or found (in Lust...)

Sugary whispers
like songs on vibrating wings
of jittery little birds
and devoted, golden bees—
all secretly weeping
for loss and limits and lessons learned
while biding borrowed Time
with Tiffani an' dewberries.

On a steamy summer morn

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ABOUT OUR PROGRAM

For more than five decades, PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing program has amplified the work of thousands of imprisoned writers through providing resources, mentorship, and audience outside the walls. To learn more about our offerings, write to us at prisonwriting@pen.org.

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