

# CALL ME LIBERTAD!

## POEMS BETWEEN BORDERS



**CIVIC**  
end isolation

# Call Me Libertad: Poems Between Borders

Edited by  
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Christina Fialho,  
and Kristina Shull



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and abuse of people in U.S. immigration detention through  
visitation, independent monitoring, storytelling, and advocacy.

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Dear Reader,

Twenty years ago, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act on April 24, 1996, ushering in an era of mass detention and deportation of immigrants. A few months later on September 30th, the President signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Together, these laws doubled the number of people in U.S. immigration detention from 8,500 each day in 1996 to 16,000 in 1998. They gave the U.S. government the ability to deport lawful permanent residents convicted of certain crimes, required victims of persecution abroad to be immediately detained when claiming asylum at a U.S. port of entry, and took discretion away from judges to grant release to certain immigrants. Over the last two decades, the immigration detention population has increased fourfold to approximately 34,000 per day. This rapid rise in both the number of immigrants detained and the length of their detention also gave rise to the expanded use of private contracting in immigration detention, bolstering America's growing prison-industrial complex.

The immigration detention system is now a multi-billion dollar industry that enriches local governments and private prison corporations at taxpayer expense. The U.S. detains so many people because it is extremely profitable to do so, not because it is necessary. The prevailing myth is that our current immigration detention system helps protect the United States. In fact, the two 1996 laws were born out of fear, following the first World Trade Center attack and the Oklahoma City bombing. If the U.S. immigration detention system was constructed out of fear, then our only hope for ending this system is to counterbalance this fear with the truth: that our immigration detention system has failed everyone involved.

There are alternatives to detention that are practical and have been proven effective. The prospect of building a country aligned with our values as a land of liberty is not out of reach. CIVIC's goal over the next five to ten years is to abolish the U.S. immigration detention system. To do this, we must not only say no to detention, we also must say yes to communities empowered to welcome and care for all migrants. As a network of visitor volunteers and formerly detained people, CIVIC is building a movement at the grassroots, community level. We are proactively monitoring detention conditions through weekly visits and a national hotline that allows people in detention to call us for free. We are educating municipal, state, and federal legislators on how our tax dollars are

funding a system that perpetrates human and civil rights violations. And we are supporting alternative to detention programs run by community groups that allow asylum seekers and other immigrants to remain with their families and friends while the courts process their immigration cases. Our community-initiated programs demonstrate that people nationwide can build effective and humane pathways away from our punitive immigration detention system.

The cost of our current immigration detention system in both dollars and lives cannot be justified. It is time to show humanity a better version of itself. This book is an effort to liberate our country's political imagination and to remind us all of our capacity for deep compassion for our fellow human beings.

In hope and solidaridad,

Christina Fialho  
Co-Founder/Executive Director,  
CIVIC

Christina Mansfield  
Co-Founder/Executive Director,  
CIVIC



## Preface

By Christina Fialho

Isolation is the key component of oppression. Throughout history, the voices of those who have been colonized, exploited, and marginalized are rarely heard because those who are in power develop systems of isolation. These systems have taken many forms, such as Nazi concentration camps, Japanese internment camps, South African apartheid, and Jim Crow segregation laws. But we must not make the mistake and assume that this is merely history. Structures of isolation, oppression, and racism are as alive today as they were 100 years ago.

On February 6, 2016, President Barack Obama spoke about religious tolerance after visiting an Islamic Mosque for the first time. He said, “When any part of our American family is made to feel isolated or targeted, it tears at the very fabric of our nation.” His beautiful words touched something deep inside me. I co-founded Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC) in order to end isolation, not just the immediate isolation experienced by people in U.S. immigration detention, but also the systems that seek to isolate.

But sadly, President Obama was not talking about people in immigration detention when he spoke about “our American family.” He was not talking about the nearly 2,000 detained Muslim asylum seekers and immigrants who went on hunger strike last year to protest chilling human rights violations and their own unjust confinement in the United States. He was not talking about undocumented immigrants or asylum seekers fleeing religious and political persecution. For them and for the 34,000 people who remain in U.S. immigration detention today, we dedicate this book. They are part of *our* American family.

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The current U.S. immigration detention system is designed to isolate us from one another. Human beings are transported miles away from loved ones and warehoused in cages. Immigrants in detention include asylum seekers, victims of human trafficking, and legal permanent residents with longstanding community ties. Because immigration detention is technically a civil form of confinement, immigrants in detention lack many of the safeguards of the criminal justice system. They have no right to a court-appointed attorney, a free phone call, or a speedy trial. Many go without any form of visitation from the outside community.

Immigration detention is designed to humiliate, destroy, and reawaken the howling ghosts of past trauma. Some people, such as 34-year-old Tiombe Kimana Carlos, have committed suicide in detention because their past trauma, exacerbated by this system of isolation, is too much to bear. Others such as Teka Gulema, featured in our book, are slowly killed by a system with little accountability. In November 2013, we met Teka—a healthy, vibrant man originally from Ethiopia. In two years, the immigration detention system turned him into a man paralyzed by an infection that he contracted at the Etowah County Detention Center in Alabama. U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) conveniently “released” him from immigration detention so they would not have to report his death to Congress. U.S. immigration detention is designed to deny humanity to each person caught in its web by snuffing out the capacity to hope. It is designed to silence dissent and deport and kill our stories.

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*Call Me Libertad: Poems Between Borders* is a statement on freedom and unity. This book is the first project to combine the voices of people in immigration detention with their family members and allies to design a new narrative—a new fabric—and give unprecedented insight into immigration detention. In putting pencil to paper, we claim our own stories and leave a record of today’s immigration detention system for future generations.

A pencil is not in itself political. But the written word is a vehicle for spreading awareness and spurring reform. Not all the authors in this book consider themselves activists, but we are all agents of social change. The authors are people who have been directly affected by immigration detention, such as Sylvester Owino who spent over nine years in U.S. immigration detention. They are the family members of people in U.S. immigration detention who have become advocates against the system, such as Eldaah Arango, whose father was detained and ultimately deported. They are the CIVIC volunteers, such as Katherine Weathers—a retired U.S. Army civilian employee—who visit people in immigration detention each week in facilities across the country, bringing hope and comfort.

The poems are intermixed with artwork created by people in U.S. immigration detention, who have limited access to therapeutic activities such as writing and drawing. In fact, art supplies are difficult to obtain in detention. Some commissaries offer colored pencils, but most artists use small graphite pencils without erasers. As Marcela Castro, the cover artist for this anthology, explains, “Every time that I had something

new, something different that I could do to distract my mind while I was in immigration detention, the officers would come and confiscate my supplies. In doing so, they would take my options to be free.”

This book has an urgent message. We are calling for freedom, for an end to systems of isolation, because we know that the problem before us—the U.S. immigration detention system—affects us all. We know that it is tearing at the fabric of our nation. As the final poem in our anthology reads, “Is this your problem or mine? Your story or mine? Your grief or mine? Yes.”

## Foreword

*By Kristina Shull*

When immigration authorities arrested my husband in 2007 shortly after we were married, we had no idea of the vast, hidden system we would soon find ourselves entangled in. What should have been a honeymoon turned into a nightmare: every night after work for three months, I traveled from New York City to the New Jersey seaport to visit him in a blank brick building in a warehouse district. Inside, forty men or women shared a room to sleep, eat, and bathe in. The lights were always on, but they never saw daylight. Most were held for months, some for years. We were allowed to visit for an hour, through glass, if the detainees behaved. The touch, the smell, of a loved one torn away.

The authorities told me I was lucky. This was a nice facility, and my husband could have been sent to a “real prison,” or to Georgia, Louisiana, or to a location unknown. I could never tell the difference between this for-profit detention facility and a “real prison,” though, and I confronted this system as most do—terrified and alone. In a way, we were lucky. We could afford a lawyer, my fare to visit, and to pay the commissary for letters and phone calls. Most cannot. Ultimately, my husband’s order of deportation trumped our marriage and we were forced to live half a world apart, never to live together in the United States again.

Each year, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detains around 400,000 people in a network of 250 local, federal, and private facilities. Each day, the government holds approximately 34,000 people in detention, costing taxpayers over \$5 million per day. The U.S. government’s practice of detaining migrants largely ceased after World War II, but resumed in the 1980s with a new, more punitive intent. The immigration detention population in the

United States has grown exponentially since, driven by increasingly restrictive immigration laws, foreign policy commitments, soaring enforcement budgets, private prison interests, and, more recently, a daily detention bed quota written into federal law in 2009.

We publicly disavow previous episodes of unjust detentions in the United States: in the era of Chinese exclusion, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, or the mass deportations of Mexicans during the Great Depression and the 1950s. These are now labeled dark and shameful moments in American history. Why, then, do we remain largely blind to the collective suffering of those caught in today's system? As one Cuban man detained in the 1980s asked of Americans on the outside, "Do they know we are here?"

In 1974, a man named Edison Uno encouraged fellow members of the Japanese-American community who had been interned during World War II to tell their stories. "It is a history which no one can deny," he said. "We who have survived the experience have a responsibility to make certain our perspectives are documented." As people began to speak out, they challenged prevailing notions that their prior silence meant complicity or forgiveness. The public began to understand that it was fear and trauma that had silenced them, and it was through the collective power of their storytelling that our nation came to deliver a national apology with reparations paid.

As I visited my husband in detention, I formed strong bonds with other friends and family members. As we sat in the waiting room in our state of emergency, we all said we would not let this happen to us. We vowed to support each other and tell our stories to anyone who would listen. We vowed to write a book, together. But one by one, as each loved one left the detention center, we never heard from one another again. Detention silenced us. Some of us lost our homes, our businesses, even our lives. I lost my marriage. We all lost our stories. Years later, mine is still in pieces, scattered between notebooks on my shelves or in flashes that wake me in the night. Some pieces are gone forever.

I became a historian because I needed to find out for myself how our nation got to this point. I became a historian because "doing history" is a form of activism, recovering stories that would otherwise be lost. And I became a historian because sometimes telling the stories of others is easier than telling your own. But none of this work can be done alone, and over time I discovered I was never alone. Beautiful, powerful networks of resistance always form in the face of injustice, and herein lies the answer. Community Initiatives



for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC) has given me a home, hope, and a place to tell my story alongside others.

At CIVIC's annual retreat in September 2015, Spanish Professor and former Argentine political prisoner Alicia Partnoy led visitor volunteers, people formerly detained, and affected family members like myself in a "Transformative Storytelling" workshop. We struggled with the prompt given to us: write five lines about your first time entering a detention center. "I'm not a writer," I heard someone whisper to nods of agreement. But soon, words began to flow and the message became clear. We all have a story to tell.

This book puts the shattered fragments of our stories back together. Here, they are made whole again to form a truth that is overpowering. Together, they will in turn shatter the system that tried to break us.

## Introduction

*By Alicia Partnoy*

### My Story

During what the Argentine military dictatorship called its "Dirty War against subversives" between 1976 and 1983, thirty thousand human beings were abducted and disappeared into secret prisons. Most were tortured and killed, and their bodies never returned to their families. They were the "disappeared." Very few of us survived and were kept — without charges, as political prisoners. After my five months in a secret detention camp, I spent two and a half years as a political prisoner.

In those prisons, there was a reason for poetry notebooks to be confiscated, for drawings to be crumpled and stepped on, for rings crafted from soup bones to be thrown by the guards down the latrines. Even the letters we sent to our children were stamped as "dangerous content" and returned to us. They were, indeed, dangerous: Poetry, art, and crafts lifted our spirits and reminded the world of our humanity.

By Christmas 1979, I was driven from prison to an airport and forced into exile. One could say I was deported from my own country. I could not smuggle my notebook out of there, but it did not concern me much to leave my poetry behind. I was only looking forward to being finally reunited with my little daughter and joining her father in the United States. When I landed in Seattle, Washington, I found a refugee resettlement

program, a solidarity committee, a Chicano center, and a Catholic Church that embraced my family and helped us heal. My husband was waiting at Sea-Tac International Airport where all local newspapers covered our arrival. Reporters illustrated their articles with the Statue of Liberty and the American flag. Their message: What I had endured, only happened in other places, and I was now safe.

Today, almost four decades later, most people in the United States continue to ignore that in the land of liberty, a perverse prison system makes invisible millions of women, men, and children “guilty” of being undocumented refugees or job seekers. The reality of the U.S. immigration detention system, poignantly described by my coeditors, makes the book before your eyes so urgent, so necessary.

## The Workshop

In September 2015, Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC) invited me to lead a workshop. When I walked into their luminous retreat room overseeing the Pacific Ocean, I immediately felt the solidarity in the air. I had brought with me poems to share, ideas about testimonial texts to present, and a couple of writing prompts. I knew that everyone in that group had much to tell the world about their experience with the U.S. immigration detention system. However, since people tend to be shy about their ability to express themselves in writing, I just expected to leave with two or three collective works and a long-term plan to gather more writings from people in detention and their visiting allies.

During the workshop, I read poems by Evangelina Arce, a mother of Ciudad Juarez who began writing after her daughter Silvia was kidnapped. I passed around the poetry collections produced by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo during the dictatorship in Argentina, and I shared my mother’s and my daughter’s poems about their own visits to me in prison. I told workshop participants of exiled Chilean poet Cecilia Vicuña and her idea of “palabra/armas,” or “word/weapons.” Then, I showed participants how Vicuña “opened” the word “solidarity” in Spanish to read “sol-i-dar-i-dad.” In Spanish, the sounds in that word illuminate a new meaning: “to give and give sun.”

The next task during the workshop was for the participants to gather in groups and talk about their experiences in immigration detention centers. When ready, they would write collectively about their memories, their feelings. In less than an hour, many pages were filled with meaningful, strong words of denunciation and hope. While Sylvester Owino and Claudette Hubbard—who had spent

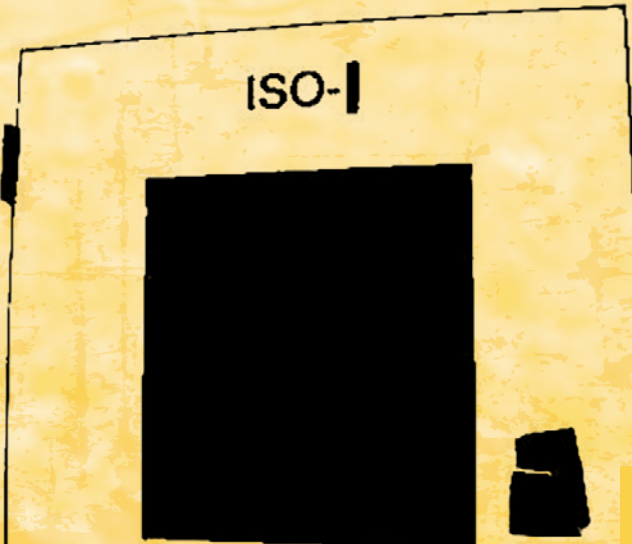
long years in immigration detention facilities—took the opportunity to discuss with me their future testimonial books, most workshop participants found themselves writing out of their deepest need. Sunflower Petals and Seeds

Chole Díaz, a bilingual visitor volunteer at the Otay Detention Center in California, wrote a poem during the workshop that speaks to the power of this book and of CIVIC's work:

Como los pétalos de un girasol  
nos tomamos las manos  
para darnos valor.

“Like sunflower petals/we hold hands/to share courage.”

Nurtured with compassion, watered with tears of impotence, and fertilized with solidarity, many testimonial texts blossomed that September morning. Others were harvested from the notebooks and letters of people in detention and their visitors. They gather in the following pages, like sunflowers shedding their seeds to inspire us. These words, these drawings, and the work in solidarity with CIVIC will give us the courage to bear witness to injustice, and work together to end systems of isolation.



## About the Editors

Alicia Partnoy is a poet, translator, and survivor of the Argentine genocide. She is best known for her memoir, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (Cleis Press, 1998). Her most recent book is the poetry collection, *Flowering Fires [Fuegos Florales]* (Settlement House Books, 2015), and other works include *Little Low Flying [Volando bajito]* (Red Hen Press, 2005), *Revenge of the Apple [Venganza de la manzana]* (Cleis Press, 1992), and with Gail Wronsky, *So Quick Bright Things [Tan pronto las cosas]* (What Books Press, 2010). Partnoy teaches at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, and presides over Proyecto VOS-Voices of Survivors.

Christina Fialho is an attorney and the co-founder/executive director of CIVIC. She serves on the Board of Directors of the ACLU of Southern California and the Steering Committee of the Detention Watch Network. She is a 2012 Echoing Green Fellow and a 2013 Rockwood Leadership Institute Fellow. Christina has a blog on the Huffington Post, and she provides frequent commentary for both traditional and new media, including MSNBC, The Washington Times, The Hill, Voice of Orange County, JURIST, and others. Her scholarly work has been published by *Refugee Survey Quarterly: An Oxford Journal*, the *Forced Migration Review*, and Springer Publishing. Christina also has produced award-winning documentary and non-narrated shorts. She is the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants from the Azores and Madeira, Portugal.

Kristina Shull is a Lecturer in History at the University of California, Irvine. She received a B.A. in History from the University of California at Los Angeles, an M.A. in Humanities and Social Thought from New York University, and a Ph.D. in History from the University of California at Irvine. She also has taught at the University of Southern California. Her work explores the origins of the modern U.S. immigration detention system and prison privatization in the early 1980s at the intersections of Ronald Reagan's foreign and immigration policies. Kristina is a contributor to Oxford University's *Border Criminologies* blog, has worked as a researcher for the Detention Watch Network, and has published numerous essays on immigration detention, the Mariel Cuban migration, the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, and anti-immigrant movements in the United States. She is currently working on a book manuscript titled *Invisible Bodies: Reagan's Immigration Crisis and America's First Private Prisons*. She also has been directly affected by the U.S. immigration detention system as the spouse of a former detainee.

## Acknowledgements

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Above all, we would like to acknowledge the courageous immigrants who have inspired this book, their selfless family members, and the CIVIC volunteers who visit people each week. Together, they are the reformers and the revolutionaries of the present day.



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## Call Me Libertad

Some of the things we see are apples with worms,  
Maggots, expired juices, and other badly spoiled food.  
Others are denied basic care, like fever or cold medicine.  
The medical department solution?  
“Drink a lot of water.”

Every day we wonder who will be deported next.  
Every morning we look around for our friends.  
We make sure they are still here.  
Those who are deported are taken at the wee hours,  
Setting that fear among us as if we were kids afraid of the dark.

While we wait behind these walls, all we can do is watch.  
Watch all that we've worked for all these years go down in flames.  
And our families?  
They are scattered, living with relatives.  
And our children?  
They ask and wonder, “When is Daddy coming home?”

We don't ask for much. Just for liberty and justice for all.

*~ Carlos Hidalgo was twice detained at the Adelanto Detention Facility in California. While he was in immigration detention, he used the pseudonym “Libertad,” or “Liberty,” to communicate with the outside world.*



## Mon Ange Gardien

Je me suis retrouvé dans les quatre murs au fond de ténèbres  
Les humains harcelaient mon esprit sans la moindre peur  
Les hurlements de militaires et leurs pas de botte me faisaient peur  
Pendant que cette peur envahissait mon esprit à chaque prière  
Mon cœur battait comme un coup de foudre  
Je ne voyais plus ni les étoiles ni le soleil  
Même les lumières artificielles étaient obscurs  
Toutes mes pensées étaient plongées dans les ténèbres  
Le jour et la nuit étaient toujours incolores, maussades et amères  
Je venais de très loin pour fuir la mort et le massacre  
J'ai traversé des océans, des forêts et des mers  
Personne ne saura la fin de mes jours, ni mon père ni ma mère  
En laissant derrière moi des cris de violence et de viol  
Ces cris tourbillonnaient dans ma tête comme les chants de Rossignoles  
Sur un lit de plaque métallique ou par terre  
J'ai eu des sentences très lourdes comme un criminel  
Pas de témoins, pas de participants; on dirait une sentence martiale  
Pas de communication, pas de visite; j'étais au cœur de la souffrance

Après une longue période des immenses souffrances  
J'ai vu de mes propres yeux mon ange gardien avec complaisance  
Elle était douce avec une voix enfantine d'une bonne résonance  
Je ne pouvais la toucher car elle était entourée de lumières  
Sur son visage je voyais de petites étoiles qui brillaient  
Elle souriait pour me reconforter malgré sa peine  
Et elle m'a demandé : que veux-tu mon ami ?  
Pourquoi tu as de l'angoisse mon ami ?  
J'ai commencé à lui raconter mon histoire en pleurant sans crier  
Elle aussi elle m'écoutait attentivement en pleurant sans crier  
Et puis sa lumière commençait à éclairer mon cœur  
Une étincelle de sa lumière se transformait  
à une carte postale de son visage  
Cette belle carte se posait dans mes mains et je voyais son visage  
Ses cheveux éclairaient très fort et étaient blanche comme de la neige  
Elle avait des grandes ailes blanches mais j'étais le seul à les voir  
Sa présence était accompagnée d'un climat de paix et d'amour  
Les anges des ténèbres commençaient à me lâcher avec des difficultés  
Car ils voulaient anéantir mon âme et briser ma progéniture  
La réaction de mon ange était imminente  
pour me faire sortir dans l'abîme  
Avec son épée de lumière elle a brisé les chaînes  
de mes pieds et de mes mains  
Sa lumière était d'une grande intensité pour me



faire sortir des ténèbres de l'abîme  
Cette lumière perçait les murs en béton et les portes blindées de la geôle  
Doucement elle m'a fait sortir dans les ténèbres de l'abîme  
Elle s'est étendue dans les différents coins du monde  
Pour donner le sourire, la joie et l'espoir à mes proches et amis  
Mes proches et amis voulaient à tout prix voir mon ange et le toucher

~ Emmanuel Zessa was detained at James Musick Facility and Theo Lacy Facility in California

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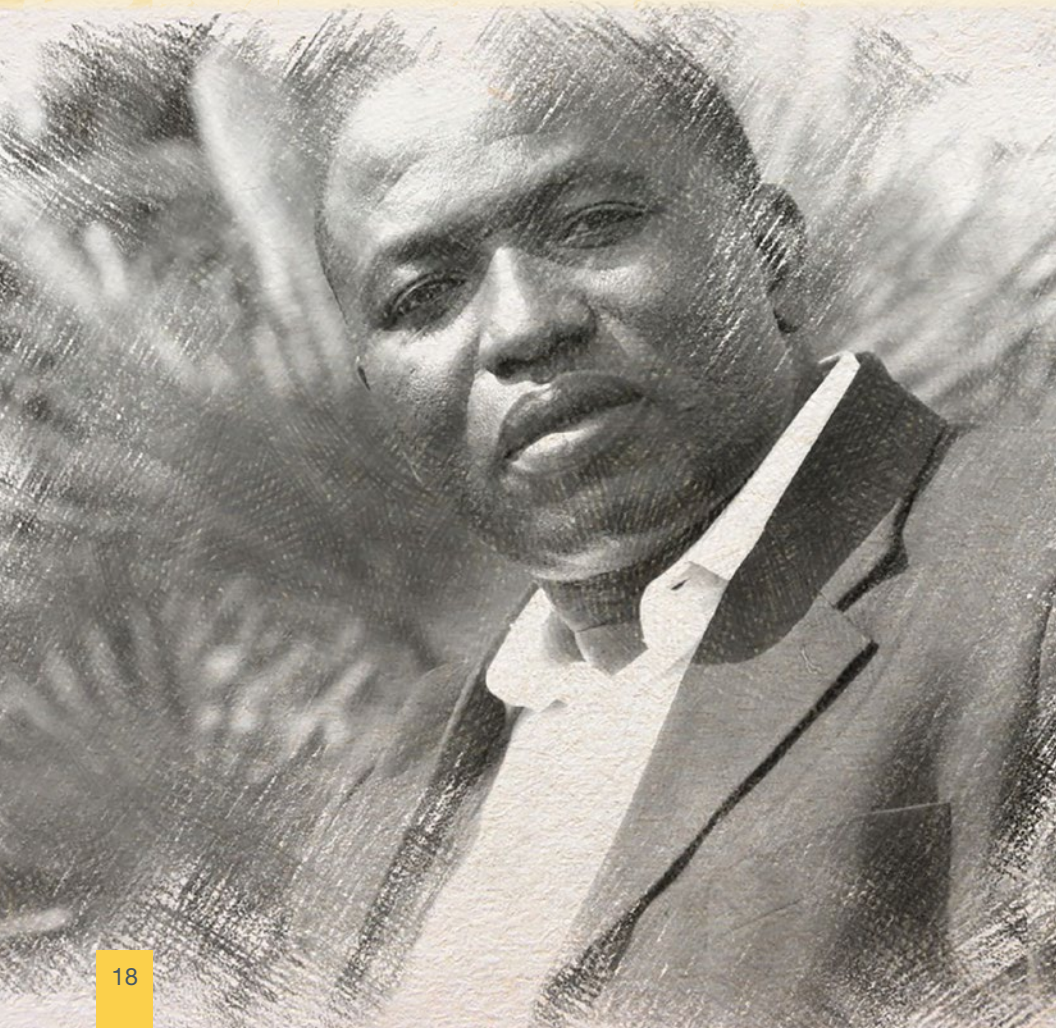
## **My Guardian Angel**

I found myself within four walls in the deepest gloom  
Humans harassed my spirit without the slightest fear  
The shouts of soldiers and the stamping of their boots frightened me  
As that fear invaded my spirit at every prayer  
My heart beat like a bolt of lightning  
I could see neither the stars nor the sun  
Even the artificial lights were dark  
All my thoughts were cast into shadow  
Day and night were always colorless, gloomy, and bitter  
I came from far away to escape death and massacre  
Nobody will know of the end of my days, not my father nor my mother  
Leaving behind the screams of violence and rape  
Those cries spun in my head like the songs of nightingales  
On a flat metal bed or on the floor  
I had a heavy sentence like a criminal  
No witnesses, no participants; one could call it a military trial?  
No communication, no visits; I was in the depths of misery  
After a long period of immense suffering  
With my own eyes I saw a guardian angel of kindness  
She was gentle, her voice like that of a child  
I couldn't touch her: she was surrounded by light  
On her face I saw little glittering stars  
She smiled to comfort me in spite of her pain  
And she asked: What do you want, my friend?  
Why are you in anguish, my friend?  
I began to tell her my story, crying silently  
She too listened attentively, weeping silently  
Afterwards her clarity enlightened my heart  
A spark of her light turned into a postcard of her face  
This beautiful card cradled in my hands for me to keep  
Her hair shone brightly, as white as snow  
And her big white wings, only I could see Her

presence created a sense of love and peace  
The angels of darkness began to leave me reluctantly  
For they wanted to destroy my soul, shatter my progeny  
My guardian angel was fast in lifting me out of the abyss  
With her sword of light she broke the chains from my feet, my hands  
Her light so intense lifted me out of the shadowy abyss  
Her light pierced the concrete walls and the windowless doors of the jail  
Gently she lifted me out of the shadowy abyss  
And she extended her light to all the corners of the world  
To give a smile, joy, and hope to my loved ones, my friends  
My dear ones and my friends yearn to see my angel, to touch her.

~ Emmanuel Zessa

*Translation by Betty Guthrie, who visited Emmanuel while he was in  
immigration detention until he was freed in February 2016*



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## The Tree Unmoved

A tree that's green blows to and fro,  
the wind beats up against its leaves,  
rain also comes  
and beats against it,  
hurricane,  
all manner of natural disasters come up against that tree,  
but like solidarity  
that tree is determined not to be moved.

*~ Claudette Hubbard was detained at the Yuba County Jail  
and the West County Detention Facility in California*



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## Unknown Identity

Childhood interrupted  
Demon crossed  
Cunning, friendly youth  
You dragged me to the gloom and society ditched me  
Silence established threat and protection  
Established survivorship, I'd say  
Night of madness, punishment for my evil thoughts  
Again afternoons of madness,  
Stolen adolescence  
Family without shame, protective Father who is in heaven  
Darkness and groans, bitter experience, .380-caliber gun to my temple  
Forgive them, Lord, but me the most  
I am a sinner.  
Puzzling puberty, mysterious identity  
A light shines in the darkness  
Jesus is with me  
Why me, Father? Beautiful smile, invitation to happiness,  
Alcohol, cunning foe, the company of my loneliness papery trench.  
One thousand days of my freedom, I am sad with God  
Oh not again blaming others for my mistakes  
I go back to where I came from  
I do not know, Lord, help me  
At the end of the road I am free  
I am a woman  
But who binds me?  
I do not know  
I'll hide myself and pretend to be happy.



~ *Gretta Soto CM is a transgender woman and LGBTQ activist.  
She was detained at the Santa Ana City Jail.*



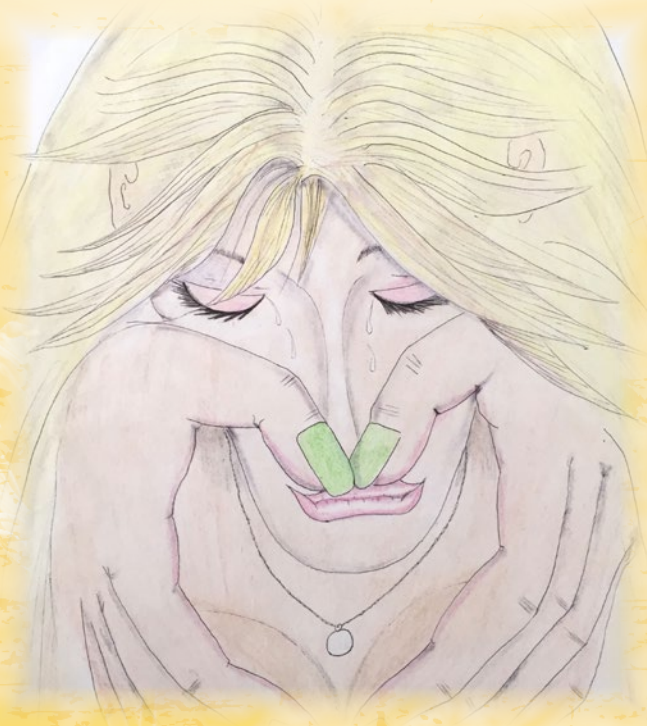
*Drawings by Gretta Soto CM, who was detained at the Santa Ana City Jail in California*

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## If We Were Kinder Sooner?

What would it be like  
If we were kinder sooner?  
Met them at the border  
With an excited “Hi!”  
Would you like to join us?  
Or have a drink of water?  
Like dogs meeting in the park  
Instead of picking a fight  
Demanding they prove  
They’re desperate  
Abused,  
At risk of death  
Where they came from  
Or rich.

~ Carol Ann Jones, a visitor volunteer with Faithful Friends-Amigos Fieles  
at the Yuba County Jail in California



*Drawing by Gretta Soto CM, who was detained at the Santa Ana City Jail in California*

## Plegaria

Dime por qué estás triste, mujer  
si crees que Dios te ha olvidado  
y tu estés llorando también  
lágrimas de sangre tal vez...  
Porque la prueba es grande, yo lo sé,  
pero El está a tu lado, ya lo ves  
y no te has dado cuenta.  
Jehová nunca llega tarde hacia tí  
no desmayes en tu fé mujer  
porque se affige tu alma también.  
No digas me ha dejado caer  
pues El se inclina a tu voz donde estés  
y escucha tu oración. Para El  
es bienaventurado el que cree,  
quien confía en Jehová su señor  
no sera avergonzado, lo sé.  
El que sabe esperar con amor...  
aunque los días pasen y pasen  
y en la prueba tu estés,  
Jehová no te dejará caer  
Jehová nunca llega tarde hacia tí  
no desmayes en tu fé mujer.  
Confía en El y te fortalecerá.  
Sólo espera a Jehová  
y sigue tu obediencia.

*~ Rocío Sotelo Perez, detained at the Eloy Detention Center in Arizona*



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## The Lie Is Easier

A man wanted to speak with his daughter. When connected to her by phone, she began crying and he consoled her by saying that he was at a five-star hotel.

Francisco told me that he had been held in a detention center for children where they woke him at three in the morning to wish him a happy birthday as they shackled him and transported him to an adult facility. “Do they think I’m a murderer?”

I stepped into a space where air was limited to the quiet breaths of women looking at our group and wondering why we were there. It never made it easier because every response had an answer I knew, but did not want to hear. All that mattered was her son. I still ask about him when she calls.

~ Collective poem by Nick Castro, Ivan Medina,  
and Delma Hernandez (CIVIC staff)



*Drawing by Ulises, who is detained at Polk County Adult Detention Center in Texas*



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## Visitation

She sits behind herself.  
Disconnected.  
An out of body experience.  
She sees double,  
yet they are alone,  
isolated behind the wall.  
Behind many walls.  
Then a hand rises to meet the hand beyond the wall.  
There is no touching  
But there is feeling, immense feeling.

And then a voice.  
A voice that breaks down the wall.  
It is not my voice.

It is the voice that will set us free.

~ Christina Fialho, co-founder/executive director of CIVIC

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## Sueño Americano

Yo cuido tu espalda... ¡no temas ya!  
Ya saliste del peligro... dejaste la barranca atrás.  
Los sicarios ya no te buscan... es un recuerdo ese tiroteo...  
Cruzaste la línea, herido... y los sin alma te llevaron preso.  
¡No temas ya! Alejémonos juntos  
de tu pesadilla.  
Serás parte del sueño americano  
algún día.

~ Smitty Smith, a visitor volunteer with Detention Dialogues  
at the West County Detention Facility in California

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## Hunger Strike

For some it produces release  
For others it produces deportation  
Solidarity with the outsider  
Makes the difference  
Money and power  
Also speak

~ Christine Ho, a visitor volunteer with Friends of Broward Detainees  
at the Broward Transitional Center in Florida

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## **Acróstico**

Simples  
Oportunidades  
Llevan  
Inmensas  
Dedicadas  
Acciones  
Representan  
Increíbles  
Duraderas  
Amigables  
Demostraciones

~ Loyda Paz Pérez, a visitor volunteer with El Refugio  
at the Stewart Detention Center in Georgia

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## **Until They Are Free**

A mountain stands, unmoving,  
Against the weather, through all time,  
Providing shade, minerals, and water  
to those creatures who depend on her.

So will we stand, unmoved.  
Against a failed system and injustice,  
Providing comfort, humanity,  
and hope to those who depend on us.  
Until and after they are free.

~ Sarah Wheeler, a visitor volunteer with SOLACE  
at the Otay Detention Center in California

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## **A Haiku: On Solidarity**

Fasting and praying  
A protest, march or vigil  
A meal together

~ Pierre Thompson, ally with Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service

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## What Time Is It?

Most noble  
of human spirit  
Solidarity  
South Africa  
Black Lives Matter  
Karnes  
You don't have to be affected  
to take a stand  
Solidarity  
Feel it, taste it, live it  
Time is now  
Solidarity

~ *Folabi Olagbaju, ally with Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service*

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## Como Los Pétalos

Como los pétalos  
de un girasol  
nos tomamos las manos  
para darnos valor.

~ *Chole Díaz, a visitor volunteer with SOLACE  
at the Otay Detention Center in California*



*Drawing by Gretta Soto CM, who was detained at the Santa Ana City Jail in California*

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## To Give and Give Sun

A storm comes, terrifying, and uproots all.  
The young sapling, its roots dangling, yearns for its soil.  
Fear of death courses, its tears of sap seep  
But no one can hear the silent suffering.

Suffering which is not heard  
or felt by others  
does not exist.  
Alive, still alive, but unable to root.

Morning arrives, and sun dapples the forest, blessing with calm.  
In my forest I walk, ambling. Pleasant day.  
All is well in my world.

I stop at the sapling, wondering.  
Its leaves shimmering, green,  
so full of life. Pulsing.  
I lean in, I root it.  
Though far away from its habitat,  
In foreign soil it takes root.  
Now metallic where the soil was rich and verdant,  
no matter.  
The sun it shines, the natural balance restored,  
All forces together, enabling life.  
In solidarity.

*~ Sofia Casini, a visitor volunteer with Grassroots Leadership  
at the Hutto Detention Facility in Texas*





*Drawing by Gretta Soto CM, who was detained at the Santa Ana City Jail in California*

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## Unity in Sorrow

My children gather for the holidays, for Christmas,  
for Thanksgiving, for the 4th  
of July, for birthdays.

We hug, we talk, we escape from each other.

The men I meet in detention sit alone far  
from their children.

They grieve. They miss the joys of parenthood.

They experience only the sorrow.

Now we are one in our experience.

~ *Katherine Weathers, a visitor volunteer with the Etowah Visitation Project  
at the Etowah County Detention Center in Alabama*



*Drawing by Hindndley, who is detained at the Krome Service Processing Center in Miami*

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## **Doubly Marked**

The thing we both know  
But that you are far too polite  
to say  
Is that I might leave  
Walk away  
Disengage  
At any time

Knowing this, my solidarity  
will be doubly marked  
By never pretending that possibility isn't there,  
and never making it a reality  
I will stay.  
Persistent.  
Dependable.

Those of us out here  
Aren't a hurricane that blows in  
Flattening everything,  
even the particularity of your voice  
in our rush  
Rather  
We are the high tide  
the low tide  
The predictable ebb and flow  
of waves gently arriving on the shore  
Slowly eroding the rock face of this injustice.

*~ Mary Small, ally with Detention Watch Network*

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## **Grey Punctuated Red**

Green fresh cucumber crunch  
Falling water pooling deep  
Lost, found never asleep

Grey punctuated red  
vital or dead?  
full of dread  
Surprise, laughter  
looking ahead.

*~ Elaine LeCain, a visitor volunteer with KWESI  
at the Mesa Verde Detention Facility in California*

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## Holding Us Together

Holding

Softness-firmness-all

Seeing

Wholeness-diversity-similarities

Feeling

Strength-love-unity

You-me

Me-You

Us

All

Together

~ Sherry Purcell, a visitor volunteer with the Immaculate Heart Community  
at the Adelanto Detention Facility in California



*Drawing by Gretta Soto CM, who was detained at the Santa Ana City Jail in California*



END  
ISOLATION



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## Accompaniment

To ICE check in  
For me: blue, lapping water, slow walking  
Of him I think: orange, earth shaking tumult, held breath  
Green, life again

First time I visited  
I was excited to meet  
Someone fleeing political persecution

He was happy to share his life inside with  
someone from outside. He was apologetic about his appearance.  
A broken front tooth from the struggle he fled.

Later he spoke of being taken shackled,  
to a dentist office—humbled in jumpsuit and chains.  
Vindicated as dentist insisted chains be removed.

*~ Lorna Henkel, a visitor volunteer with First Friends  
of New Jersey and New York*

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## Woven Words

Muscle, rounded arms,  
Greasy, shiny silvery sheen of a halo.  
Who are you, who am I with you?  
Where do we find the parts of speech that will weave our connection?  
First link, very weak.  
Second attempt, kind of felt.  
55' red-finned Oldsmobile of my Aunt Mary,  
the ride we began to take  
together.  
Many miles on twisted roads traversing blocked pathways we connect.

*~ Mary Helen Doherty, a visitor volunteer with Faithful Friends-Amigos Fieles  
at Rio Cosumnes Correctional Center in California*

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## The Thank You Is Too Much

The thank you is too much.

A tear filled hug, grateful for a warm touch from outside.

I have nothing to give.

No shower shoes, deodorant or legal advice.

Words that make a difference?

We share fluent language,

Halting Spanglish

broken efforts

with no common tongue.

Tears.

Names.

“Please call my family so they know how to reach me.”

A prayer and a Bible story.

But I bring nothing.

I am just here – with you

The thank you is too much.

~ Rev. Linda Theophilus, a visitor volunteer with Walking Together/Caminando Juntos at York County Prison and the Cambria County Jail in Pennsylvania



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## The Choice

It's made of everyday cinder block. It could be a dorm. I journey from my life to another. Not far in miles--such a disconnect. A man greets me with a bright smile, behind a barricade--no touching. I visualize bars on his white teeth. A woman, ashamed to be here, worries about her daughter on the outside. The daughter is bouncing from foster care to foster care while she can do nothing to protect her. I chose my food, my clothes today. I drove here. I look at their faces as they pass, arms back, hands linked behind them. No power to make anything happen. Living with the insecurity of NOT KNOWING. The rug is pulled out from under them time and time again. Capricious life-determining rules are decided by others. The irony of these two worlds existing side by side is stark. I'll make the journey again and again. He says, "I look forward to this visit all week."

~ *Collective poem by Laura Torkelson (Detention Dialogues), Grace Meng (Human Right Watch), Peggy Rhoads (Friends of Orange County Detainees), and Nancy Pape (New Hampshire Immigrant Visitation Program)*

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## Silencios

Detrás de los muros los pajaritos caen en silencio  
Las memorias suenan como tinieblas  
Las dudas brillan como relámpago  
Largado de la mano de Dios  
Who is my judge? Is it you?  
Who can dare to judge you?

~ *Pam Shearman, a visitor volunteer with Interfaith Committee for Detained Immigrants at the Broadview Staging Center and the McHenry County Jail in Illinois*

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## Otay Detention Center

3 deep rounds of razor wire  
curl over the heat parched waiting zone  
Bored children where toys and comforts  
are forbidden  
balance on steel stools.  
This is "excellence in partnership correction"

~ *Steven Gelb, a visitor volunteer with SOLACE at the Otay Detention Center*

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## Journey

The hallway that led to his pod frightened me  
A long cold empty corridor  
Nothing to provide  
even the illusion of welcome  
But I don't think  
he ever once walked  
down this corridor  
It was  
for those of us  
who left  
this place  
and went home

~ Kay Chandler, a visitor volunteer with SOLACE at the Otay Detention Center

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## Walls

The walls are not tiled but feel hard and shiny like tile  
They echo  
Hard plastic tables, hard metal chairs,  
make a ruckus when they screech across the floor

Noise, noise perhaps 100 people with voices soaring to the ceiling  
Expressionless guards watching  
What do the colored jumpsuits mean?

~ Collective poem by Rev. Toni Stuart (Immaculate Heart Community)  
and Iris Anderson (Friends of Orange County Detainees)



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## **A Visit to the Detention Center**

Juntos caminando

~ *Andy Richardson, a visitor volunteer with the Friends of Johnson County Immigrants at the Johnson County Detention Center in Texas*

Con sal, de dos mujeres  
Una isleta plástica  
La mantra de blanca  
Sangre de mi...  
Sangre de mi hijo  
Sangre de mi familia  
Un río  
If I am not here who else is here to witness  
Lágrimas  
Salty

~ *Julia Jarrell, a visitor volunteer with the Interfaith Welcome Coalition at the Karnes County Residential Center in Texas*

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## **Otro National Anthem**

Mexicanos al grito de guerra  
I would not shout for war.  
I would weep for Carlos and Ana.  
I looked out the cell window,  
Looking at the bare desert.  
Never again.

Mas si osare un extraño enemigo  
I am the enemy of the man in uniform  
Always  
His face is always siempre seria  
Formal, enojada.  
Mine looks back at his, now and tomorrow.  
Again.

Un soldado en cada hijo te dió  
¿Por qué? No puedo soportar otro soldado  
Y guardia.  
¡Ya basta!  
¡Ya!

~ *Paul Murray, a visitor volunteer with Friends of Adelanto Detainees at the Adelanto Detention Facility in California*

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## Buen Amor

En la hielera del salón de visitas  
siento en mi piel, en mi Corazón  
el calor del cariño corriendo  
entre tú y yo

Vivimos diferentes realidades  
pronto me voy y tú quedas  
El calor de tus palabras  
llenas de gracia  
aún  
en esta circunstancia  
tan insoportable  
seguirá brillando dentro de mí

Y espero que mis ojos, viéndote  
y mis oídos, oyéndote  
te den calor.

~ Tina Schlabach, a visitor volunteer with Casa Mariposa  
at the Eloy Detention Center in Arizona

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## Esperanza

Estabas solo estabas triste  
Pero to'va cambiar  
With a nervous smile,  
you sit not knowing  
Exactly what to say, or how to say it.  
Estoy triste de ver tu rostro  
Las paredes blancas y te miro con  
una expresión "de no sé qué va pasar"

Pero mira en mis ojos, ya no estas solo

~ Eldaah Arango, CIVIC national volunteer

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## Verdades

The day when I told la guardia  
Que quería ponerte en mi bolsillo y llevarte de aquí  
Reimos  
But the longing remained.

~ *Bethany Carson, a visitor volunteer with the Hutto Visitation Program  
at the T. Don Hutto Residential Center in Texas*

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## Our Daily Bread

Solidaridad tiene un sabor como pan dulce  
Es pan  
Miren qué pan de polvo, brought together  
con mantequilla de amor y los hornos  
de diversidad y cambio

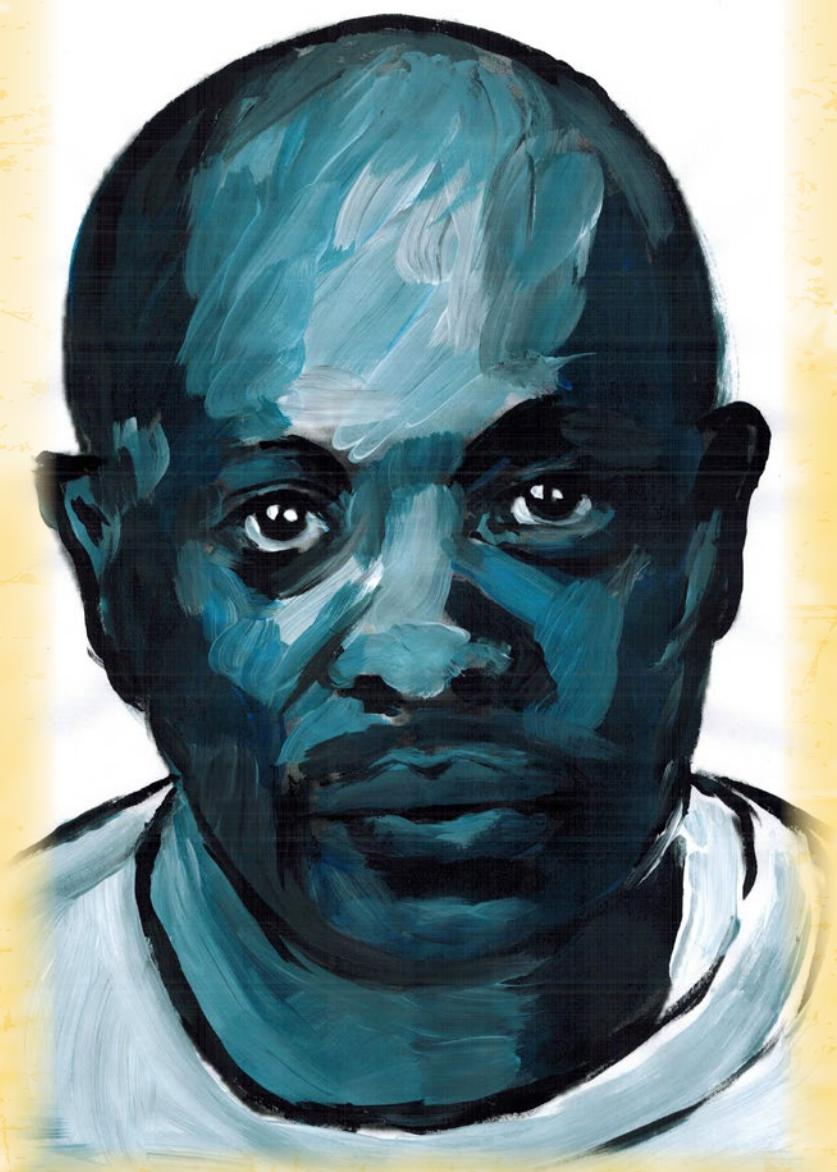
~ *Paul Pfeifer, a visitor volunteer with the Interfaith Welcome Coalition  
at the Karnes County Residential Center in Texas*

Towards a brighter tomorrow

~ *Andy Richardson*







*Portrait of Teka Gulema, who died as a result of an infection contracted in the Etowah County Detention Center in Gasden, Alabama. Members of Adelante Alabama Worker Center, the #ShutDownEtowah campaign (which includes CIVIC), and local faith leaders created and carried this portrait during a memorial action they conducted on the street outside the center to remember Mr. Gulema and express outrage at his death and at ICE's attempts to disappear him.*

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## My Only Home

I.

What will we talk about?  
Shocking orange shivering  
Amazed surprise

A strong community leader.  
He entered, sat, cried.

I'm here to talk to you,  
I should have said with you.

II.

Sitting in a cold, group waiting room,  
the 23-year-old shared  
fear, loneliness, hopelessness.

How can they send me back?  
I don't even speak Spanish.  
This is my country.  
My only home.

III.

Don't visit me  
unless you will stay with me  
as a friend.

So many people have abandoned me.

Four years later, he is still inside.  
We are still friends.

~ *Collective poem by Miranda Manners (Friends of Orange County Detainees)*

*Margie King (Casa Mariposa)*

*Peggy Morton (Hutto Visitation Program)*

*Gehl Davis (Friends of Orange County Detainees)*

*John Guttermann (Conversations With Friends)*

*Kate Winder (New Hampshire Immigrant Visitation Program)*

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## When You Detain ME

When you detain me,  
you're detaining my spouse,  
and my daughters and sons,  
too.

And my uncles and aunts and grandparents,  
too.  
And, my friends and neighbors.

Free one day, like me,  
imprisoned the next...

My family is outside the cellblock,  
outside the pod,  
outside the walls,  
outside the detention center.

But inside the pain,  
inside the horror,  
inside the fear,  
inside the anger.

Sharing the sobs,  
the separation,  
the loss.

Waiting,  
wondering,  
hoping,  
worrying,  
praying,  
asking why.

I plead, I beg, I pray:  
Save my family!  
All these families!  
Save me!

~ Steve Kraemer, a visitor volunteer with *Conversations with Friends*  
at the Ramsey County Jail in Minnesota



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## Separation

Adelanto. Door Slams. Visit over.  
We stand in the no man's land leading outside.  
Across the way, four women:  
Mother  
Baby  
Teen  
Ten year-old

Tears streaming down her face.  
Who did they leave behind?

*~ Merilie Robertson, a visitor volunteer with Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice in Ventura County at the Adelanto Detention Facility*

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## CCA

No one would know human beings live  
inside this windowless warehouse.  
I enter, wait, and pass through three doors, the air staler, staler, staler.  
A 9/11 mural says "Never Forget," and I know I never will.

My husband in blue scrubs picks up the telephone  
and our hands press together.  
I am sickly jealous: Our lawyer can touch him.  
I pretend to smile, for him; he pretends to smile, for me.

Next to us, a man meets his newborn child  
for the first time, through glass.  
I am sickly lucky: At least that's not us.  
I wear Andi's jacket through the New York  
summer, because it smells like him.

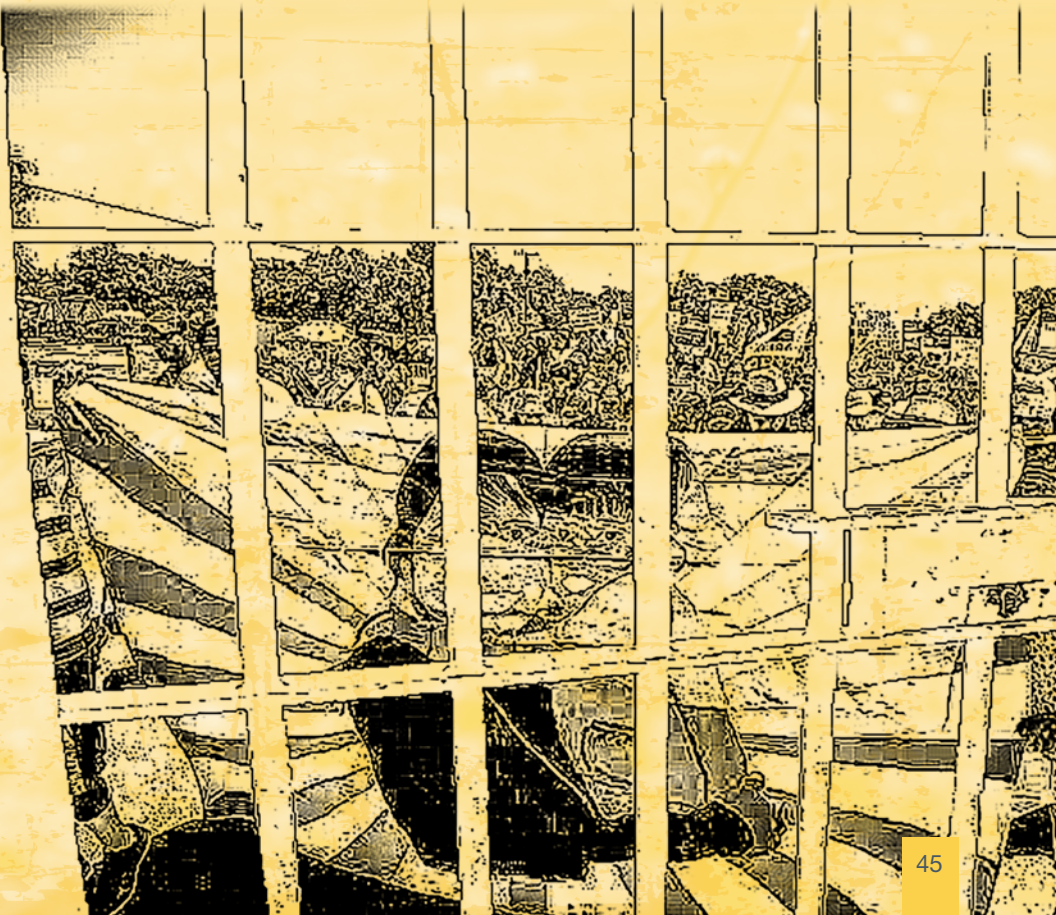
*~ Kristina Shull, CIVIC national volunteer*

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## I Will Not Forget

I will never forget the first day that I met Sylvester Owino at the Etowah County Detention Center in Gadsden, Alabama. He was one of many individuals I interviewed that day. I remember his smile and how upbeat he was compared to the other men surrounding him. When I asked him how long he had been in immigration detention, he replied: "8 years." I couldn't believe this and asked several clarifying questions until it was clear that he really was in a form of prolonged indefinite detention. I felt immediately haunted and overcome by emotion. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. All of my training as an Anthropologist about how to interview survivors of terrible things and not betray any emotion was lost in that moment. And in that moment, I robbed Sylvester of his smile. My recognition of his pain and suffering caused him more pain. I imagined his life flashing before our eyes and wondered how he had endured 8 years worth of moments like this, with no one as his witness.

~ Christina Mansfield, co-founder/executive director of CIVIC



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## My Story

Humiliation. It is devoid of humility. Fingers and hands running across my body, sometimes 10 times a day, to let me know that I am subjected to anything they please. I cannot bear to leave my cage. Peering eyes and surveillance in the most intimate moments. The body is under attack and the mind and soul take refuge deep within. Sometimes the body wants to revolt from this treatment, assert its power—but there will be consequences. So instead you have to let it dissolve in your body. Writing about the abuses against us was the only way to let it out, slowly, so slowly. It is still coming out. I wonder if it will ever end. I wonder if I can ever purge the humiliation.

*~ Sylvester Owino was detained at El Centro Service Processing Center and the Otay Detention Center in California as well as the Etowah County Detention Center in Alabama*



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## Our Story

Tears, tears, there are the tears  
Are they mine? Are they yours?  
It's hard to tell now.

Is this your problem or mine? Your story or mine? Your grief or mine?  
Yes.

Water slowly wears away at rock. How can we be strong enough  
to wear away a system as tough as stone? Collecting tears.

ID  
Check  
No ID  
Sit outside  
Held inside  
Locks  
Freedom

Just going into a jail makes you feel guilty. Like these  
men who've done little called "wrong."

*~ Reverend Joel Walther, a visitor volunteer with Justice For Our Neighbors  
Southeast Michigan Interfaith Visitation Program at the Monroe County Jail*



“As this volume attests through the power of poetry, immigration detention in the United States is an affront to human dignity. Let the beauty, sadness, the humanity, and the dignity that is captured in these pages be a part of the long struggle to end immigration detention.”

*Alison Parker, Co-director, US Program, Human Rights Watch*

“There is no justification for the extreme isolation immigrants in detention face in this country. When I was isolated for 410 days as a political prisoner in Iran, the only thing that made me feel like I could survive was knowing that I was not forgotten on the outside. This book reminds all people in detention and their families that they are not alone, and they are not forgotten. Even more, the collective power of these voices shines a light of hope on a dark, unjust practice.”

*Sarah Shourd, CIVIC Ambassador & Editor of Hell Is a Very Small Place:  
Voices from Solitary Confinement*

“Poets & Writers is pleased to have provided support for the CIVIC writing workshop that helped bring the stories and poems of immigrants formerly detained and their allies to light. The telling and transmission of these experiences plays a vital role in bringing about understanding, change, and the reaffirmation of human dignity.”

*Jamie Asaye FitzGerald, California Office and Readings  
& Workshops (West) Director, Poets & Writers, Inc.*

“CIVIC’s work is crucial because it provides a platform for people whose voices have been silenced and it helps tell the stories of the millions of human beings who have been detained and subjected to a broken and inhumane system. This compelling book will make you dream of a better country, a better world without immigration detention.”

*Sara Weiss, CIVIC Board Member & Senior Editor  
at Ballantine Books, Random House*