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A ROOM OF ONE’S OWN

Juicy

Imagine a chair, big and fluffy. A nice desk. The area airy and spacious.
 High ceilings, lots of windows. A nice ocean view.
 When opened, the wind and salt will tickle the nose causing goosebumps.
 The carpeting so plush and velveteen. The walls stark white with pitch black
 Writings carved – like into the walls. A beginning with no end. The lighting dim,
 Everything else precise. There aren’t any pictures adorning walls neither counter
 Tops. There’s a built in stereo and T.V. just in case of writer’s block or boredom
 There’s no noise beyond the waves slapping against one another.
 No distraction at all. It’s a room of one’s
 own. A nice big chair, however just a chair. A room full and all at once
 a void. A space unfulfilled. Walls baring crisp old adages and past writers.
 The only thing missing is the writer, her imaginations and words of her own.

You are careful.

Time favors some.

You know that you have little of it to spend.

You've used up most of it already. Is there a solution?

Having deep pockets was only an illusion.

There were gaping holes all along.

With every step you take, time slips out like loose change.

You have learned a hard and valuable lesson:

You can never pocket time.

You are empty.

You fill the room, yet nothing fills you.

How can a place be so small, yet so immense?

You want to dream of better times,

But your mind can't think of many.

Keep yourself occupied.

Don't lose yourself.

Put the past on a shelf. Pocket the present.

Bury the future.

You are light.

You've been broken. Missing pieces.

But the cracks in your skin and the holes in your heart

Allow light to come in.

It pains your eyes and it stings your soul.

It needles its way through.

A kaleidoscope of stars, shapes, and strangeness.

Flinching at the feeling of the sun.

Sparking like an empty lighter.

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Foreword

"For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.

-- Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a Luxury"

In her essay Audre Lorde identifies the radical potential of writing to create both individual and social change. For Lorde, writing is an assertion of self. It is a radical act to claim one's value in a context of devaluation, to claim personhood from within a dehumanizing system, to create art in a context of deprivation. This volume represents the work of 24 writers who have made language into action. Collaborating across institutional and social boundaries, these writers offer their individual stories and creative work, as well as a collective argument for the value of every voice, and for the potential for writing to support social change.

For 16 weeks two classes wrote together but never met. One class consisted of women incarcerated at Homestead Correctional Institution, enrolled in an advanced creative writing class. The other class consisted of graduate students in English at Florida Atlantic University. We came together first as writers, beginning our exchange with a "Why I Write" essay. This assignment illuminated the gaps in our knowledge of each other, but it also revealed commonalities in our experiences and in the role that writing plays in our lives. Our cover brings together our essays from this assignment in a visual representation of these connections.

In this volume we include examples of the various writing we produced through our exchanges. The pseudonyms we used, like the distance between our two classes, allowed us to come together equally as writers. Our responses to each other demonstrate the thoughtful ways we were able to explore each other's identities and ideas. Some writers explored new genres or forms through the support and encouragement of their classmates and exchange partners. Other writers provided new

YOU ARE

Vivien

You are dark.

They tell you that you're safe.

You know better than to believe what you are told.

You've got a foothold in the dark.

If you show yourself, just once, you will be bought and sold.

That's why you do all your kicking and screaming on the *inside*.

If you had any pride, you would hide it.

Keep your eyes closed when you can.

You'll get used to the dark.

You are middle.

You can't feel much, but something tells you that it's cold.

You are not here or there. With or without.

You want to be yourself, but who is *that*?

You float, feet forgetting the feeling of the floor.

Hit the ceiling. An endless fall. Bracing for impact.

How is it that you are broken but remain intact?

Awake or sleeping,

Chasing a dream that's ever fleeing.

You are spent.

They don't need to shut you down.

You can do that on your own.

You descend into the floor, becoming everything you touch.

You remind yourself, more and more, that time still exists.

Time doesn't seem to be on your side.

You can't hide from time.

Time cannot be earned, only spent.

No deposits. No returns. No exchanges.

that I have experienced far too often with my academic writing that makes me fear that I do not have anything of my own to say. I will get over it though. Once I have got that black robe with the pointy sleeves and another mortarboard and tassel to add to my collection, I will have the time and the courage to put what I want on the page. I will write for me. Hopefully the world will get a chance to read my work and like it, too.

interpretations of familiar texts: for example, writers at Homestead responded to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, an essay that explores the historical and material conditions that have shaped women's access to writing. Through memory and imagination these writers summon the personal space necessary for creative life and for survival.

After writing across social, institutional, and geographic distances, we find ourselves somewhere in between our two spaces: neither here nor there. This collection reminds us that the impact of our writing can continue well beyond the confines of our institutions and the short time of our exchange.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the students at FAU and HCI for their commitment, their dedication to each other, and for their willingness to take risks. This is the best way that we learn, and I think we have all learned and grown a great deal together. Thanks to Claire Ibarra for her hard work this semester, for the creativity and excellence she brings to all of her work. And thanks to Kathie Klarreich for her leadership and her energy. Without her there would be no Exchange for Change, and none of this would be possible.

Wendy Hinshaw, Florida Atlantic University

A ROOM OF MY OWN

Jolly Roger

Women writing, women writing in Prison, although once thought to be taboo, and unheard of; nowadays, women write, women become published inside and outside the walls that bind so many of us. There are many programs now offered to women in prisons, and a large percentage of them are writing workshops that are geared to encourage women to write in prisons. Being a prisoner in an institution where these programs are offered, I believe that I can offer a unique perspective to the needs of a woman writer in prison.

Here is the ignorant perspective. I'm not sure what the point of all of these programs are. It's hard to believe that there are people out there who volunteer their time and money just to come and offer me and my friends some prompts and a place to go hang out for a few hours a week. Although I do see how it is benefitting me, I have to speculate as to what the motivation is. In my position, it is very difficult to understand how anyone would want to do anything to help us. It is nice though.

I have been writing since I was a child. In one form or another, I've orchestrated the flow of words from a pen in my possession. It is genetic, my father writes, my mother writes, and that's enough for me, I don't know much about any other family members. But the ones that matter, have always encouraged me to write. The second that I took the pen off the paper, I stopped being accountable to myself for any life. For this woman writer, the writing workshops were a bus that took me right to the doorstep of my Home.

What does a woman writer need? What does a prison writer need? Is it a room of my own? Not many of us have a room of our own. Many of us live in large rooms that belong to over 50 women at a time; or a room, shared with only one other person. Having to deal with another person (or many) in such close proximity offers many unique challenges. For example: my current roommate loves to go to sleep at 5:30 pm. She sleeps about 20 hours per day. So that means that I have to take my trusty pen and take it to the Day Room of one's own with a blaring television and rowdy card games. In prison, there is zero privacy. When we have classes, it's like a pep rally

WHY I'M A WRITER

Ray

I write because I have to. In my day job as a paralegal, I write to make my way in the world. It is my task to convince people of things: *I'm sorry but you gotta pay your rent; your heartless landlord doesn't care that you have cancer. Hey, judge! Don't listen to that jackass attorney; he's wrong and this isn't fair. You don't wanna sue us! We'll sue you back.* That is what I wish I could say, but I am trapped in the rhythms and clichés of professional legal writing and Florida bar ethics. After ten years, there is very little enjoyment to be eeked out such dry and cold words, but I find it where I can. A well-placed semi-colon here. A skillful use of passive voice. And of course there was the one time I was privileged enough to sue a Catholic bishop who was trying to get his kept-boy off the title of their secret love nest. On the whole, though, it is the same writing day after day after day, after year, after decade.

I also write because I want to better myself. I love to learn, and writing is the means to prove that I have. I wish it were enough to go to classes, learn the material, and get that "A." Unfortunately, they make you write to prove that you have learned anything, and to me, this is the most difficult and least enjoyable writing possible. It is hard. It is not enough to just regurgitate what you learn in graduate school, but you have to "create new knowledge." The research is easy. It is trying to pull some new meaning out of a universe of letters that makes my brain break. I worry that my difficulty and the stress of this kind of writing makes me a bad academic. But I do it anyway, because I am hungry.

All this being said (or "notwithstanding the above" in legalese), I want to write creatively. I want to create new places, new stories, and new people to share with others. I want dredge from my soul stories that will make people think, smile, laugh, and maybe cry. I want to leave a part of myself on a page instead of pieces of other people's old clichéd phrases or academic concepts. I want to write artistically in ways no one has thought of before, though what these new ways are I do not yet know. I want to experiment and hopefully find within myself something truly new. To me at least, this is a scary thing to want to do. What if I can't? What if I don't have new stories or new ways of artistic writing? There is a fear that goes with a blank page

I'm going to school for writing, so as you might imagine, I see a lot of power in writing. I wrote a passionate letter to Bodicca about how I used the power of words to stabilize my identity and my place in the world. I am glad you have found something similar. I am glad that writing has saved you as it did me too. I'm especially happy that I get to talk with you and the others through Wendy's class and organization. I can't imagine what being in there is like and I hope you continue to write.

I never know how to end these letters. I want to empathize, but I couldn't possibly know what it is like and I wouldn't want to insult your experiences by pretending I understand. I just hope you continue to write and participate in workshops like these. I don't know what I would do without writing in my life.

I look forward to hearing from you again, Beanie.

where I become inspired, amped to write, and retire to the space provided only to be left white washed under everyone else's constraints.

Then there is the time. I once attended a yoga meditation group where I was told that being in prison is like being in an ashram where we have tons of time to sit and meditate and ponder. Likewise one would assume that there is a lot of time to write the Great American Novel, but in reality this is not the case. Now I can only speak from personal experience, but I barely have any time to bathe, let alone sit and ponder the great plot lines floating in my skull. First of all there is a single matter of economy. The state does not provide a damned thing for the inmate. I was shocked when I was first locked up to find out that we were not provided deodorant, shampoo or conditioner. This may be silly to some, but I work outside, in the South Florida sun for 8 hours per day. I get a Hotel sized piece of soap per week, one razor per week, one tube of toothpaste & toothbrush per month, and that's it. In the first prison that I was in, we were served rotten food, also food that was infested with insects, basically, inedible food. I lost twenty pounds my first month. So economy, in order to receive goods from the canteen that is the sole provider of hygiene and food items you need money, if your family doesn't send you any money, you must take part in certain "jobs" for people in order for them to purchase items for payment. For example, you can do someone's laundry each day for three to five dollars per week. It may not seem like much, but it is nothing to scoff at, it will take care of the issue of deodorant at least. These activities take time. I draw, thankfully it is on a higher rung of the prison economic scale, I am grateful. But it is time consuming.

On top of that, is my job that I was given by the Department. I work a very time consuming job. Others don't, but I do, and I don't have a choice. I work hard and long and by the time I am able to return to my dorm, I am so tired I can't open my eyes. If they payed me for my labor, even a few cents per hour, I could afford not to have to do anything else but write. But I am enslaved. I use my hard earned education each day for the good of this compound, and I can't buy myself a bar of soap.

So it seems that I have similar issues as the writer out there. Time, space, money. So it's not exactly the ashram that people believe it to be. It's not a summer camp where we eat s'mores and pow-wow. I do realize that I

have it easy, I don't worry about rent, lights, cars. I don't stress about bills and appointments. Everyone has their own obstacles.

Thankfully people do care. Thankfully women like the one that gave me a prompt last week, come each time and sit with us and teach us. They talk to us like people, it is really startling to realize how used one becomes to being talked down to. When someone treats you decently, you stand back and are in awe. It doesn't take much. I take time, I take time away from the "Hustle." I take time away from my job, to write these prompts, solely because they make that effort. Each page is easier, each though clearer, so that one day in one of these pages the idea for my one great novel will appear. But if not, it helps this woman, this prisoner, feel like a human being just for a little while.

RESPONSE TO A LETTER FROM A WRITER WHO HAPPENS TO BE IN PRISON.

Brecht

I agree with you 100% when it comes to your opinion about the expectation of women in prison. My aunt was in prison for six years and I know her to be an extremely intelligent and capable person. She just made one bad decision and it changed her life forever. When I first started taking this class, I must admit, I was expecting a lot of what you say people expect. I was expecting narratives about abuse mostly, but not lies. Why would you lie? It wouldn't benefit you in any way. But most people are trapped in the mindset that only bad people/criminals lie. If anything, incarcerated people probably tell the truth the most because they would have nothing to gain. I think another expectation people have about inmates is that they will only want to write about their crimes or time served in prison. My aunt doesn't talk about it unless one of us asks her a specific question or she fills us in on her current lawsuit with the state for her lack of medical treatment while she was imprisoned. So many people forget that prisoners are people first and foremost and I see that way too often when I hear people talking about "decisions that were made." Sometimes the decisions aren't decisions but moments of necessity for survival. Maybe I'm wrong, but I want to learn more.

Part of the problem I see is that media makes those who are imprisoned the other. "We on the outside, you on the inside." Countless institutions, including law enforcement, make it seem like everyone on the inside is broken or twisted. My aunt is just like everyone else. She isn't bad. She isn't twisted. She just made a bad decision and that can happen to anyone. I'm not sure if my mom thought of her sister differently when she was put away or if she still thought of her as her sister. If I remember correctly, my aunt has a genius level IQ. I know it isn't a great example, but I see the Netflix series *Orange is The New Black* as an important step because it shows "realistic" prison life and how many of the incarcerated women made momentary mistakes that got them in trouble. It really acts to humanize prison life and prisoners, and I think the conversations of mistreatment and human rights are finally starting to creep through the stereotypes in everyone's minds.

I write because maybe
if you can see what I mean
you'll know me, the way I grew to know myself in the words,
and knowing someone that way is the greatest thing
you could ever possibly give to them
because that's all anyone ever really wants in this life—
to be understood, and to be truly seen
the way that they've come to see themselves.

RESPONSE TO WHY I WRITE

Ladybug

To Leah

From Ladybug

Isn't it something beautiful that two diverse people in two completely different places can find commonality through writing?

You mention that you find that writing helps you discover who you are and this has been the impetus for my continued writing. There are many times that I want to forsake my writing because I feel as though I couldn't possibly communicate all that dwells within or all that needs penning. This is especially true in this soul draining place, when my art makes me vulnerable and reveals my deep sensitivity. I wonder if my words are adequate for the topics I approach. Do I paint an accurate picture with my verbal portraits? Does what I write matter? Does anyone hear me? Those are a few of the questions that clutter my mind when I am tempted to forsake writing.

However, only a short lapse of time passes before I am reminded of its importance to my existence. My writing gives me sustenance through the consumption of emotions via the written word. I glance back at the person I was before documenting my journey with this simple blue pen and realize that my evolution has only come through this outlet. My former self would not recognize this remodeled person that sits in a writing class with educated people who reside outside of these restricting walls, people like yourself. Your words helped to encourage me and convince me that I am heard by someone, so thank you.

Even when writing is sometimes a struggle and painful at times, I can be reminded of who I was before discovering myself through writing. I was sad; I was lost; and I was miserable. I was a shell of who I am today. As I have realized who I am, I have discovered other areas that bring me satisfaction. Yet, nothing has proven as therapeutic and cathartic to me as writing. It's the life raft that was thrown to me when I was drowning in the depths of monotony and depression. Consequently, I will continue to write even if I am the only hearer or the only speaker amid the cacophony and chaos of the world.

I enjoy all different genres and styles of writing. It seems as though each serves its own purpose and satiates specific needs. I have a journal I write in daily that contains mostly prayers and such musings. I also have pocket folders full of writings – poems, prose, narrative, fiction, non-fiction, and everything in between. I write to cry the tears that I am unwilling to shed among the vultures of prison, who are always seeking weakness. I write to beam the smiles of joy that are an enigma in this institution. Like you, writing helps me to make sense of my experiences – both past and present.

I truly believe that we all have a story to share. My story. Your story. And now, our story. When combined these stories change the trajectory of our lives. And in writing my personal redemption story, I hope to change the trajectory for some who are headed in this devastating direction.

Can a social movement start with the ramblings of one convicted soul? Can one exchange spur new ideologies and agitate old prejudices? For this reason, I continue to write.

WHY I WRITE

Nicole

I write because it's the first thing I ever did that felt like it was right because there's no use fighting it.
I've been a poet all my life; I have to get it out somehow.

I write to establish myself, in light of other's thoughts—
to challenge the things that have been said about me.
I write to address those things of which I cannot speak
to prove to my mother her pain is real
to show my father his choices can hurt
to bury my ex-stepmother
the way she buried me.

I write because for a while, my closest friends were characters in books
and I know the joy that comes
from finding friends like these—
magic horses and little girls with secrets just like me—
the ones who stay with you your whole life.

I write because if I didn't, I'm afraid I would go crazy
the way my mother almost did
when she felt the world wasn't listening to her anymore.
I write to prevent implosion
the way I'm sure my soul would
collapse into itself
if I didn't—
a spindly tent of twigs and sheets
falling inward on a gaping emptiness.

I write because it's the only weapon I have
that feels good in my hands,
the only wave of brightness
in an otherwise dark and dusty
file cabinet of worry and regret.

dynamic. They are different from me in substantial ways. They do not write. They do not read. They do not see the world as I do. But each of us comes from some type of broken past and the togetherness within the activities we do share a passion for help in some way to mend our fractured backgrounds.

I write for lost lovers. I write to explain my point of view or to state I understand their point of view. I write to say sorry I should have tried harder or I am sorry you did not try harder or to say I hope we are both sorry that we could have tried harder. Ultimately, it's all underhanded tricks to own the last words and create a fragile affirmation.

I write for my future. I write in the hopes I can somehow make a living off ink and paper. Or maybe make a living teaching about other people's ink and paper. I want my writing to be both a lifestyle and a livelihood. I want to need it in order to survive.

I write for you. Maybe somewhere between my *writer* and your *reader*, between the giving and the sharing, a bond will form. A bond that traverses time and distance. A connection so personal that neither of us will ever know if the reading or the writing has impacted the other. It happens at a moment of solitude during a time of tranquil seclusion. It's a feeling that lingers after the last word is read or the last period is written. It's a sigh at a shared experience. Or a memory built on the word of another. Or empathy from an unknown experience.

THE STORY

Kristine

How do I grow from a story I've been weeding out of existence for decades?
Can I graft hope into these gnarled branches?
How do I remember what to write when I've willed myself to forget?
What would it mean, anyway? Is it really the story I want...
To tell, to live, to breathe life into, to recreate?

Does it have to be a palimpsest?
Or could I start anew? Would it be true,
Or a horrible lie, empty and meaningless?
The hole in my heart may be semantics to you,
But it's an abyss I can't articulate.

I'm trying to express what's happened,
But I deconstructed all those hurtful words
Years ago.
Savagely ripped them up from the roots and threw them

Down

Down they

S
p
i
r
a
l
e
d

All the way to the

o t t
B O
M

Of this well that's run dry.

My throat like sandpaper,
My fingers, calloused and cracked
I search the earth for each letter lost.
Each character in need of richer soil.

Blind and dumb, I dig deeper into
Fathomless layers of rocky clay.
Stubborn sediments and detritus rip
Flesh to bone,
But blood, too, gives life.

Lovingly, I pull each letter through layers of deadened emotion.
Painstakingly, I piece them together like covalent bonds
That create a holy trinity of nourishment.
Mouth upturned, I stick my tongue out to catch even a drop,
Life's elixir, I breathe it in
Exhaling blue pigments
To paint pictures on empty pages.

Like strands of DNA,
I ply my words into interwoven threads of metaphor.
Phosphates and sugar sweeten the soil with
New growth.

My words grow stronger as I begin to

Write

WHY I WRITE

Edward

I write for me. Writing is the only thing I feel I'm naturally good at. It comes to me simply. I have an instinct for what works and for what might not work.

I write to practice. In many areas in writing I am weak. I can't spell. Grammar is a challenge. My focus can linger too much on myself. My imagination feels lacking in my desire to only depict truth.

I write despite the above. Despite my limitations, I still go to the page. I incorporate the weaknesses into my work. I make them a part of my writing. In turn, they become a part of me, a sort of self-assurance and self-worth that makes both my work and my-self feel as complete as possible. A confidence emerges, and in those instances the struggle is worth it.

I write sometimes just to write. To give shape to the voices and the feelings and the thoughts in my head. To make them tangible and real and to exhort some level of control, whether or not that control is even possible. Writing can make those lingering thoughts, the destructive ones that whisper to me in private moments and echo throughout the reminders in a day, muted and subdued. Sharing these words, the private and the public, the ones that make me proud and the ones that make me frightened, take away their sometimes erosive power, leaving me the control to build my own confidence and slay my own inner demons.

I write of my family and for my family. Being a non-fiction major everyone close to me runs the risk of being a future subject, a future exercise of examination that hopefully reflects some type of universal human condition. I write about my family often. Not that we are particularly interesting or worth reading about, but it helps to remember where we came from and the instances that are inspiring our trek onward. I write of my mother and her sacrifices to retain normalcy after my father left. I write of my father, at first blaming him for his absence then understanding when we shared a sin. I write of my three sisters and their individual methods of replacement. I write of me and my growth as a son, a brother, and a man, hoping we all can find each other once again on the pages I write on.

I write for my friends. Stories that illustrate their impact on me and my impact on them and of the brotherhood I never received in my family

but do we push back? Do we cave under the pressures of life and the struggles we will inevitably face?

I hope that my untold story makes an impact. I hope it inspires others to trust in themselves and have faith in what the future holds. When we are faced with pain and hardship, I hope my story allows others to see that darkness and sorrow are not the only options. Whether it is taken and heard is up to the listener. I don't need to tell my story; I live it every day. My life is my example. My untold story affects my every day, but all my days are not filled with sadness. I don't need to tell my story to make an impact on others. I make my impact in my actions, my words, my kindness, or my hate. I have the power to affect others and inspire change and new outlooks.

January 17th was my wedding day. It came and went. The dress still hangs in my closet, the rings are still tucked under my bed, and 480 wine corks are still sitting in a bag, waiting to be used. What is my untold story? It's just life. It continues moving whether I like it or not. We are the only ones who can live our lives, and we are the only ones who can tell our story.

This story inside of me

Insistently tugs at my insides,
Like a petulant child.

This toddler's eyes, though blind are bright.
Her jarring screams wake me from the night terrors
She's lived.
She looks to me, milky-eyed and hopeful.

Incoherent sobs subside to soft breathing,
As my words give voice to her pain.
Bloody fingers wrap around small, shivering shoulders,
Transmuting crimson decay
into
tendrils of glossy golds and greens.

Together we frolic in this garden of our creation,
Through vibrant worlds of books long ago written,
Their leaves falling to the ground.

We will burn them all.

There is but one line that need remain.
A muted refrain tells an archetypal story
That must be retold,
Until each voice beneath our dancing feet
Breaks through the surface,
Soiled and triumphant,

*The past can be rewritten, so grow child, grow,
And I promise, you will surely reap what you sow.*

WHY I WRITE

Leah

My dad gave me a blue notebook when I was very young. The cover was hard, a deep blue, marbled; the pages were lighter, and more delicate. My parents had always given me crayons and felt-tip pens, and I drew pictures and patterns everywhere. That notebook probably came from my dad's office. Most likely, it would have been a spare that someone left behind at a conference, unused and untouched. Drawing on these pages didn't feel right. I took the blue more seriously. I waited to write in it, but as soon as I learned how to make the right words, I turned the book into a diary. In the years that followed, my diary turned into more diaries, to poems, to stories, to essays, to a mixture of all of them.

Sometimes writing is heavy. But it's heavier not to write. It's heavy in the way that sometimes I don't have the words, but I desperately want them on the page. Heavy in that when words do come, my pages hold secrets and details, things I don't know about myself until I write them down. Writing in any way, even the simple act of keeping a journal, allows me to let go of the heaviness. I don't have to carry the words around inside me anymore. The experiences I have had are able to exist eternally in a place outside of my body. Writing is the conversation between me and myself. It's cathartic. It's relaxing. I don't have to worry about what I say or how I say it, because I am the reader and I am the writer and I have the power to edit, erase, and start over. Speech is different. All speech is done in the dying breath. Once those words are said, there's no taking them back. Writing, I don't have as many regrets. Writing is not final until I am finished with it. My decisions are calculated. I can monitor the parts of me, which parts of me, I want to share with my readers.

When I write, I follow a process, although I'm only truly aware of it after the piece is complete. I pour myself on to the page. There is no use holding back, because the writing feels forced when details are missing or I skirt around the issue I really wanted to write down in the first place. So I write continuously, even though this is difficult, and I try not to stop until everything is there. When it's all there in front of me, I can pick out the pieces I want and polish them. Just because I got everything out on to the page doesn't mean it all needs to be there. In this way, I'll often discover I

MY UNTOLD STORY

Ella

I remember everything about the night he told me. "I'm sorry, but I have to leave. It's my calling." The feelings of shock, of overwhelming fear and sadness came swiftly, but were quickly followed by a numbing, dull ache.

It was the night my fiancé, my future husband, and my partner of four years told me he was called to another life, a life apart from me. I knew it was for something good and worthwhile, but why did it have to happen to me? "It's two years of major seminary, and then three at minor seminary." Five years. Five years until my best friend sitting in front of me would be ordained a Catholic priest. How could I reject the humbling decision? The decision to give up a wife, a family, a life all for this? I couldn't be mad. Where would I place my anger? Who would receive the blame? I was trapped with these feelings, and they had nowhere to go. After months of invitations and flower arrangements and first dance choices, the ten months of blissful preparation came to an earth-shattering halt. New plans filled my mind—call my family, cancel the reception venue, return the rings ... and the dress? That gorgeous, fitted, trumpet-silhouetted, lace-covered, buttons-down-the-back dress that I had dreamt about. The dress I imagined him tearing-up over as I walked down that aisle. I'd pictured and fantasized about that day for months, years even. And now, it would never come.

It's shocking how quickly a moment can turn from the greatest joy to the deepest sadness. What is my untold story? It's one of faith and patience, of seeing the best in people, even in the hardest times. My untold story is filled with both acceptance, but also with regret. It's not a sad one, but it does have sad parts. I once heard someone say that personal stories are usually sad, especially the untold ones. We want to share our joy, but not burden others with our sadness. We'd rather fill them with happiness than see them squirm with discomfort, not knowing what to say or how to react to our pain.

I'm sure my untold story is similar to so many others. While we may not share the same experiences, we know all too well the feelings of grief and hopelessness. We go through hardships and can either come through them triumphant or diminished. Outside forces will always be pushing in,

I am envy green, blazing in the eyes of the jealous.
He is rage red, lashing out at the meek with his superior strength.

I am split pea green, a complete annihilation of my previous state.
He is cayenne pepper red, just a small amount packs a powerful punch.

I am ocean green, enjoying the freedom having escaped his abusive
confinement.
He is embarrassment red, having lost his strong hold over me.

She is sunshine yellow, the astounding brightness manifested from our
darkest years together.

end up writing about something else, something I hadn't intended to write about until after I'd already written it. Writing, for me, is a process of both discovery and expression. Probably because I have been writing for so long, I never have to force myself to write. It is difficult sometimes to produce the kind of writing, or to reproduce the emotion I want on the page, but I take great pleasure in writing and working through these moments. It depends upon the moment I am trying to convey. As a creative nonfiction writer, my challenges mostly lie in trying to capture my characters in their true and original light, without paying anyone a disservice. I often write about my family and my experiences of moving from England to America as these topics are regularly inseparable. I am desperate to document my story, to get it out of my head and on to the page, but I find myself restricted when trying to portray my mother or father. What if I get their characters wrong? What if my readers don't see them the way I do? What if I offend my own family? This is the hardest part of writing, for me: creating something that is worthy and respectful. Thinking about my readers is strange for me. Writing has always been very personal, and I have only just recently started to share my creative work with others. I haven't had to think of how my writing will be received until now. Since I started to think about other people, strangers reading my work, I have experienced more difficulty in getting my words down on to the page. As I continue to write, I have had to factor my potential readers, an outside audience, into my thoughts in order to keep going. As a creative writer, my goal now is to produce work that is unique in style and subject matter, yet universally accessible. As a human being, in my own personal writings, I write to keep myself organized, and I write to remember. Periods of time I have spent not writing have been miserable and unproductive. I am – or rather, my writing is – shaped by the events and experiences I encounter. I am influenced heavily by my family. I write about them and about our moments of success and failure. I write about the relationships I have had with family and other human beings, mostly in remembrance – to figure out why we are lost and why things didn't work out the way we wanted them to. I am shaped also by the writing community and the group of friends I have here. We tell each other that writing is important to us and to the rest of the world. We have stories to tell, and we have to find ways to share them. I keep a notebook with me, just

in case. The first notebook is still in my bedroom closet. It is full and it is one of a great many.

YELLOW

Beanie

I am a hundred-dollar green, tucked safely in the purse of the rich.
He is candy-apple red, a hard shell over a bruised inner core.

I am chameleon green, blending into the background trying not to be seen.
He is fire-engine red, with his loud sirens wanting to be heard.

I am pond-algae green, floating on the surface of life.
He is fireball red, burning the tongues of everyone he comes in contact with.

I am ziplock-baggie green, locking in the freshness of my every breath.
He is lipstick red, staining the air that passes through his sneering lips.

I am keylime green, buried deep under the surface of a thick layer of meringue.
He is strawberry-field red, crowding the fields, suffocating those around him.

I am Emerald City green, shining brightly at the end of the yellow brick road.
He is ruby red shoes on the Wicked Witch of the West, seeking to destroy all the goodness around him.

I am green tea green, cleansing and hydrating my inner self, replenishing all he has taken from me.
He is blood red like the eyes of a vampire, draining you of the very substance you need to live.

I am oak tree leaf green, waiting patiently for the wind to carry me away.
He is prison warden red, holding the key to my freedom.

I am grass green, growing taller and thicker every day.
He is lawnmower red, cutting me down whenever he feels I've grown to high.

When June, another member of the practical minority, let slip to the director of the MFA program that she might not pursue writing after she graduated, the director refused to believe her, refused to believe that any writer (let alone a writer in her program) would have other priorities. The director told June that she is too ambitious to give up on writing. June replied that while she is ambitious, she will probably apply her ambitions to starting and raising a family, maybe she'll teach writing part time or keep a mommy blog, but that would be the extent of it. The director seemed disheartened and stubbornly offered, "No, you're a writer. You'll write," as though a mommy blog is not writing enough.

But there are benefits to being a member of this minority. We may suffer the guilt of failing to meet the expectations of the greater writing community, but there are endless other pressures that we escape through our practicality. My practicality allows me to embrace writing as both art and work. While I love to write essays of my own invention, I am also happy to be assigned writing, to be handed a tube of lipstick and told to write some copy about it. And in many ways, I find copy writing as enjoyable as creative writing. The stakes are low and the process is ultimately the same: it's a matter of arranging and rearranging words until I find them sufficiently clever.

Many of the romantic writers I know would not be content with copy writing. They would call it selling out. They dream of writing something important, something that will make a difference, something *not* about a tube of lipstick. And I hope they do. Knowing there are people out there writing the important things means I don't have to. It frees me to write the frivolous things. Whether it's copy about a tube of lipstick or my latest comedic essay about family vacations gone awry, in my own writing, I seldom reach for world-changing subjects. My ideal is to offer readers an escape out of the hardships of life and into its silliness, to laugh at myself and the world around me. That kind of escapism might not change the world, but it might brighten a bad day. And that's enough for me.

ESCAPE

Amber

Today has been a pretty hectic day, nothing seemed to come together. I wish I had just one easy day where everything runs smooth with no snags.

No matter what I always have a place to go, want to join me? Just this once and I'll have to blind fold you because I don't want you to know how to get there.

So turn around, the blindfold is dark so I know you can't see.

There we go, it's a little ways so relax and take a nap if you want.

We're here; I'm going to remove the blindfolds now. Be prepared for a wonderful surprise.

Doesn't it look gorgeous and peaceful? Here comes Rambo, my dog, he loves everybody.

Let me explain about this place and how I found it.

I have always loved going for long drives in the country and taking nature walks.

This day I drove for a while and then got out to stretch my legs.

I had gone a little ways when I saw what looked like a maze of bushes. I started walking through these mazes and at the end of the path was a meadow of lush green grass under elm trees.

It looked so cool and inviting. I bent down and the meadow was just as cool and soft as it looked. I always carry a poncho in my backpack so I spread it out and sat in the meadow.

The meadow is very dark green and in little patches here and there and wild flowers, sunflowers. It looks like someone threw wild flower seeds everywhere.

My first thought was *I never want to leave*, but I know reality will come soon.

I go home and find out from a real estate agent that the meadow and land around it (2 acres) were on sale.

Oh my gosh! If I could really own this, I would be so happy.

I found out that the land has been on the market for a while and the asking price is reasonable.

I got a loan and made a bid on the property. Within two weeks we were closing on the deal and it was always mine and Rambo's. Now we never have to leave.

I love the solitude, miles away from a neighbor. Beautiful country. I am going to buy horses and breed them. It is in my blood, 3 generations of horse breeders.

Yeah, its so peaceful. Rambo is going to want company. I am going to get another dog he can play with.

It is time to go now. Turn around; I am going to put the blind fold on now.

10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1 Wake up. Slowly open your eyes.

I keep this place in my mind and features each time I visit it.

WRITER ENOUGH

Beth

"I can't imagine my life without writing," Clay says. "I mean, what would you do if someone told you that you could never write again or you would die?"

"Well, what do you mean by 'write'?" I ask. "Are we just talking about creative writing or are we talking about all writing?"

"What?" He looks perplexed, as though creative writing is the only writing.

"I mean, can I still make grocery lists? Is data entry acceptable? Can I pay my bills online, or does typing numbers count as writing? If my life depends on this, I'm going to need more detailed instructions."

"No," he shakes his head in a *stop being difficult* kind of way. "I just mean: if I couldn't write, I wouldn't be living. So I'd rather die than live without it. Don't you agree?"

He looks eager, expectant. He really wants me to say yes.

"Well, *no*, Clay. I have other interests. I would still enjoy my life. I wouldn't *die*."



In my MFA program, Clay's voice represents the majority—the romantic artists, who consider writing their life's blood, their heart's song, their...insert any combination of (1) a synonym for the soul and (2) an idealistic noun.

I am the dissenter—not that it's a position I'm unaccustomed to. And not that I'm the only one, but myself and those like me are the minority. Like many minorities we have largely remained silent—out of fear of reprisal, of being crushed under the weight of majority voices. And out of guilt. Guilt that maybe we are not artist enough, not writer enough.

Every time I or anyone from my minority group of practical, rather than romantic, writers has breeched this subject, the response from our majority peers only confirms our guilt. At the end of my conversation with Clay, he held up his arms in surrender and dismissed the conversation with "Alright, I guess it's just me." The subtext of which, I understood as "I guess it's not *you*. I guess *you* are just not *there* with your writing."

muddled. Writing allows me to process the fact that I and everyone I know will eventually die. I write because I'm afraid of being forgotten. Perhaps fear is the biggest reason why I write. I need to write because writing presents the façade of immortality. Just like writing comes close to, but never encompasses—never captures—reality so too can writing sometimes (extremely rarely) come close to immortality, but it can't ever reach it. The struggle of reaching it seems to me to mirror the struggle of the writing process itself. Eventually nothing will be remembered and all will be covered in dust. Our only consolation is to hope that burial won't happen until an inconceivable amount of years from now. We have to hope. A project is never finished, never flawless, never good enough.

A ROOM OF MY OWN

Stephanie

I sink into down. Down pillows, comforter and mattress top. Dark grey and dark red paisley print on my pillow cases this week. My blanket is black. My sheets of Egyptian cotton, thread count 1,000, are deep red. They match my walls. My African Grey, Dali, sits on his perch, bobbing his head to my playlist with Phantogram, MGMT, Enger Shikari, Deftones, Radiohead and Portugal. He mimics some of the sound effects on occasion. My speakers are huge. Small speakers cannot displace air the way my speakers can. My system is new, but the speakers are old school. I want to feel the bass.

Glossy cherry wood floor-boards and crowning match my Queen size bed frame. Bronze accents give dimension to my dark red walls. The lighting is subtle. A golden glow.

My floors are stone tiles of a medium shade of grey that go through the entire house. Every room has a different vibe, but the grey floors bring all the rooms together.

I take a deep breath of contentment and inhale the vanilla cherry sent of the Glade plug-in.

In the corner my laptop alerts me to an incoming message. It sits on a brushed-steel lap desk on wheels next to an oversized dark red chair. This is where I write and do some of my work as a dietician.

But right now I'm atop my covers looking up at the ceiling. This is where my 62" flat screen is mounted. Being on my laptop aggravates my scoliosis so I mounted my TV to the ceiling so that I don't have to strain. I allow myself 10 hours a week. Roughly 3 movies and 1 or 2 shows. I have a lot to catch up on, but I'm not a TV junkie. On my bedside table is the journal I keep of all the books I'd read, all of the quotes that inspired me, and all the movies and shows that looked worthy of watching upon my release.

On my vanity sits my jewelry, perfumes, make-up, and hair styling apparati. My jewelry is simple, elegant, and ranges from stainless steel to platinum. My perfumes are Issey Miyake, Prada, Alien, and Polo. I threw all the Dolce and Gabbana away. I probably shouldn't have smashed it on the

oil spill on my carport. Whoops. My make-up is clean, simple, and multi-tasking SPF, anti-aging, and corrective.

The doors to my modest closet conceal labels that impress, but most of them I found at estate sales and the Salvation Army. I'm a ferocious bargain hunter.

I guess it's time to get up and do some yoga-stretches. My circular yoga mat sits in the corner opposite my big, comfy chair.

As I slide off of my bed, my feet sink into a plush oriental-style rug. My feet luxuriate before their work on the sticky mat.

I turn off the TV, finish off my coffee, and call out to Dali to join me for our routine.

WHY I WRITE

Wallace

I write to convey what I can't convey by speaking. I hate small talk and because of this people assume that I'm rude even though I like to think that I am not. Each time I say the wrong thing or worse, remain silent, I can make up for it by channeling it with my writing, by creating something. I like to think that writing allows me to compensate for the fact that I don't express myself in speaking particularly well and that I don't mind long periods of silence. On a hopeful day I believe that every missed opportunity, every failure to connect can be magically atoned for in writing about it. I think that writing never completely encompasses the present. It never captures reality because it cannot. But it gets close enough to capturing reality such that I can succeed in writing where I have failed in reality.

I write for a vain sense of achievement. I write to (hopefully) be remembered. I write so that I won't be forgotten the way the vast majority of people become forgotten after they die. If I write and especially if my writing is published, then I can console myself by imagining that I will last, that I will be read in the future by people I'll never know. It's an arrogant reason for writing but it works for me because it scares me enough.

I write to change the world but I know that it is very hard to do this. It requires producing something that you are satisfied enough with that you can share it with others. It also requires that those that you share it with are inspired by it and understand what your aim in writing it was. I'm not the first to think this, but to me a happy person has no need to write anything beyond the basic utilitarian note, email or shopping list. Writing to me comes from a source of pain due to the way the world is unfair and unknowable. The act of writing eases that pain but it never makes me forget that unfairness and unknowability. The pain is eased when I know that someone connects with my ideas, that someone reads my work and is inspired to continue the conversation. I think that literature is about shared inspiration; one text begets another after a person thinks that this writer, this stranger, gets it, they get what is wrong with the world and they propose some means (however modest) of fixing it.

I write out of the fear of wasting my life having achieved nothing. The connections with people eventually end just as the bloodlines become

THE BOX

Izzy

Marie received her as a gift for Christmas. Marie never touches her; she stays inside of the hot pink box undisturbed. She is perfect: her long silky hair, flawless make-up, and her slender body frame. Marie holds the pink box gently, careful not to bend or dent the box. The bright hot pink box is sturdy except for the large clear window on the front. The window is there so that everyone can gaze upon Barbie and appreciate her beauty. Marie stares into the box at Barbie for hours. She never removes her from the safety of the box.

Available for a limited time only, Special Edition, National Aeronautics and Space Administration approved Astronaut Barbie. She has all of the equipment needed for an outer space galactic adventure. Full body silver space suit, bubble helmet, oxygen tank and American flag included. Ready to travel beyond Earth's atmosphere, if she ever makes it out of the box.

QUIET SPACE

Grayson

I don't ask words
to textualize

experiences
of spirit,

outturn the internal,
or ask pride why

speech aids process
and process aids speech.

I don't expect to agonize
over the excision of nods,

or sizing of letters,
the paper not enough

to fuss poetic resolution
from her post,

her old landing gear
from the hutch,

church-torn
chicken scratch

from the hours between
and far after

the short walk
to the field

where I may have to demonstrate
the ways a wild horse

is just as capable.

EXCERPTS FROM 1.28.15 RESPONSE

Train

"I guess that people on the outside would think that I know why I write just because I am in prison, but often I do not. I continue to learn techniques of writing, but the reasons why I write are sometimes allusive to me. As I am revealed to myself, so are the reasons I write" (1).

Sometimes it is for healing. Sometimes it is for others to heal, sometimes it is for awareness, but mostly it is just for freedom. "I was never able to instill in my younger brother the things that I thought I could save him from prison, but I'd keep trying and maybe one day someone would benefit" (2).

"Society has such an obscure view of the reality here and only with a connection to the inside can that be changed" (2). Until someone knows someone or has a loved one in prison, they cannot fully grasp the reality of who people in here are.

In "Building a Program based on Solidarity" Sadie Reynolds writes about the problem of the rehabilitation model being based on the premise of illness. Being a lifer, I watch the recidivism of short timers. Most of them have minimal education and continue to do the same things over again. It's hard to watch and I blame the fact that there is no rehabilitation unless they are self-motivated. The stakes often are not high enough for them to be 2 or 3 years, 5 at the most, they always have light at the end of the tunnel. My light is green with envy. I struggle to hope for that 2nd chance.

"So, in describing the problem of rehabilitation as being deficient because it implies illness or deviance; if the shoe fits, wear it. Half of the women I know are on some kind of anti-depressant and/or lead a deviant lifestyle. If rehabilitating them means there is something wrong with them, or claiming it, then I'm sorry if this is not 'politically correct:' but there is. Most of us were broken somehow" (3-5). Addiction is a disease. Rehabilitations is needed.

"Szabo talks about her own path of rehabilitation, but if she had not had the drive to self-rehabilitate, she wouldn't have been so encouraged. So imagine how many woman leave prison never healing from abuse, never furthering their education and never realizing their potential" (7, 8).

Wouldn't you like your new neighbor to be enlightened?

is that I can live without picking up another drink, but I can't live without eating.

I just can't I don't kid myself that I have beaten alcohol or any of my other addiction problems. Cliché, I know, but sometimes I just try and make it to the end of the day, the end of an hour, the end of a minute. I probably won't be successful forever. It's a process of constantly starting again, and again, and again. Sometimes it's easier to just give up like your aunt, I guess.

In vino, I am in love with the world and feel that everyone is wonderful and fantastic, and amazing and beautiful. I must compliment everyone and let them know how marvelous and beautiful they are.

When I am sotted I like myself more. I am less self-conscious. I feel beautiful and vivacious. My friends like to invite me to parties because if there is enough liquor churning around inside of me I am very entertaining. I play the piano and sing jazz standards. Drunk, I am very happy, glowingly happy. My face flushes becomingly and I get that sparkle in my eye. For me, liquor is like the super pill from that episode of Star Trek: Mudd's Women. It makes all well with the world even when all is significantly not well.

Everything seems like a good idea when I am drunk. I began most of my romances when I was a few sheets to the wind. This is probably why I keep choosing the same guy to fall in love with. Sure they all look different, have different careers and interests, but the men I end up committing to are all the same person in four specific ways.

Boudicca's Romantic Checklist

Emotionally Unavailable	✓
Anger Management Issues	✓
Oedipus Complex	✓
Physically Undemonstrative	✓

Why, why, why do I keep choosing the same type over and over? Of course booze is a factor. And I find it quite easy to solve every relationship problem by having sex. This really doesn't solve problems and it is a sneaky, underhanded way to end an argument, or better yet to avoid one.

When I'm unhappy in my relationships, drinking makes me not care too much that things are not going swimmingly well. Your aunt probably feels the same way. Also, drinking allows me not to care if I have been smacked in the face with my lover's fist.

What is really difficult, I think, is for people who don't have addictive behavior problems to understand alcoholism or binge behavior. Also, because these things keep happening over and over, your friends and family get tired of hearing about it, tired of trying to help, etc. "Why don't you just stop, Boudicca?" This is what the therapist I am seeing in prison says. "Just control what you are eating." *Gee, thanks! I never thought about that.* Reality

A ROOM OF MY OWN

Capone

In this room that I live in, it's one filled with so many sorrows. Pains and hurts undecipherable. Happiness is so limited. What have I done to deserve such confusion? Even more disturbed by love, and wondering, "really how does it go, in order to operate? In this room that I dwell in every damn thing I love, how, somehow, some way it's snatched away. Be it by God, or some envious masked enemy dressed with a smile or perhaps a couple of tears. Does God hate me? Don't answer that. Just looking for someone to blame. Trapped behind this door loneliness begins to crawl up my spine. For there's nobody bold enough to attempt to help me out of this room. They all have their own set of problems. Sad to say but somehow I'm the problem to those I seek to want help from. Everyone's judging Capone for past mistakes I've made earlier in my life. Guess that's why they won't open this damn door. To be the world's friend means to be God's enemy. Realizing He's all I got, I'm defined by my neighbors judgmental remarks of past mistakes. Desperately seeking love. Giving it my all, but would it ever understand? Happiness and love. Beauty of life I believe. Sadness and tears. Why? Someone is always blocking the beauty of life when it comes to Capone. The energy spent trying to get revenge is better spent creating an amazing life. (those of us who actually have one) Forget about them. Remember you. Read that quote somewhere before. Trying my damness to recite it daily. But again, today, I'm in a room of my own. Who do they see or think they see when they look at me? The child that was sexually assaulted at a tender age? Or am I the teenager that carried on in the streets with a death wish because the loss of her family member was very excruciating? How about the forgotten adult looking for an infinite love? And to think, I didn't know who or what was my identity. Because in this room of my own, who's the prisoner. If I'm the story that being left out. The blues I wear, somehow manipulated me into this certain being. Desperately I'm fighting to get out this door, but the opinions keep me stuck. Mixed emotions jumbled inside of me. Should I just lay down and die, or live to be tortured? Some options huh? Racing thoughts. When I stumble and fall flat on my face, "on my face," that story is talked about for many years to come. But my efforts, nor my progress get an award, praise, nor "remember that time

when.” Thank God that I’m somewhat normal and the chemicals in my brain aren’t unbalanced enough to not see the bigger picture. My story doesn’t have to repeat it’s self. Especially for my viewers discretion. I can relocate to a room in which there aren’t any locked doors. All I have to do is change my thought process.

Okay Change!

Change and Growth!

Growth and Change!

As I turn the knob on the door once more to no avail. If I’d changed and growed I wouldn’t even be here. Fuck! I’m stuck in a room of my own. But if it’s my own room, how does other people control my change of room or the process of my growth? Whenever I make it out of this room, people are the least thing I want to surround myself with. The truth of the matter is: In this house there’s plenty rooms. If you’ll allow someone to bring you down, steal your joy and happiness, they constantly keep you in a locked, dark, musty room. It’s yours because it’s familiar. Change come from unfamiliar territories. All I know is whenever this door opens I pray nobody ever goes in there. Now I’m on a journey in search for a room more unfamiliar but familiar.

slight inhalation. I smiled brilliantly and said, “I’d come back later for what I needed.”

Then I hotfooted it down the stairs to my sponsor’s room for a counseling session. The intense desire only lasted for an hour, but all night I had longing liquor dreams.

In truth, it’s not just alcohol. I have bizarre addictive behaviors. I became very focused. I can’t do things that absorb my attention completely. I’ll be working on a crossword or jigsaw puzzle and I just cannot stop. Or I’ll be in charge of a project of one sort or another and I just can’t turn things inside of myself off until everything is complete. Sometimes a friend has to peel me away while I am holding on with my finger nails shrieking, “There can be only one!”.

God forbid it is a party or event. Not only do I have to do everything amazingly well but is has to appear that I did no work or planning. I must look as if I am surprised at myself at how well things are going. Why, the fairies must have come in the night and done all this work!

When I am depressed or stressed, eating is the first thing I do to console myself. Fried foods are my favorites. After all, I am from the South. I love, love, love fried chicken. I like to eat it smothered in garlic cream salad dressing. Feel free to lick your lips while you are reading this.

Sometimes on a binge craving, I would buy an 8 or 12-piece chicken box and sneak it into the house inside my gym bag. Entering the house quietly, I would slip up the stairs undetected to the master suite. Our bath had 2 rooms; a vanity room with closets and long marble counters, then, through a second door, a luxury tub bath. In the linen closet on the top shelf, behind a stack of old beach towels I had stashed a jumbo bottle of Dat’l hot sauce and a Tupperware bowl.

Hidden behind two closed and locked doors, I would run a bath and sit in the tub gorging myself on chicken with hot sauce. It was completely delicious.

Meanwhile, my two Lhasa Apso dogs would be sitting, staring attentively outside the first door and whining. Not very discrete.

If my husband came to the door knocking, I would call out that I had a stressful day and needed to relax. I’m not sure if he wondered why the dogs were sitting so alertly in front of the door. I was always able to hide the evidence by stashing the bones in a Ziploc bag secretly for that purpose.

Speaking as an alcoholic I can't say staying longer in prison would have made a difference for your aunt. There's a difference between being "dry" meaning unable to get alcohol and making a choice not to pick up a drink when it is available to you. At Camp Prisoney Land it's available. A 16 ounce water bottle filled with Grey Goose costs \$15-\$25. After the first 5 years in prison, I decided to get sober. That was 10 years ago. I started going to AA meetings. I lied about being an alcoholic for 2 years. I would only admit to other addictions and binge behaviors. I started working the steps.

Horrible, outrageous, disgusting, demoralizing, and shameful.
But true...all sadly true.

There are plenty of mind-altering substances available in prison if you have money. I have money. I have enough to indulge in any type of lifestyle I choose in prison.

Saying no to other inmates is not a problem. My vulnerabilities are not on display. When these women come to my cell with their "for-sale" items, I have emotional barriers in place. Also, I know where all the serious sober people live in case I have to find help or need a booster shot of sobriety.

One night in July, I was feeling particularly old, unattractive, worn, and yucky. It was my birthday, which also happens to be the birthday of a senior staff member. It was about 9:30pm, I was standing in front of the officer's station when he opened the entrance door to the dormitory and rolled in a wave of Jack Daniels fumes.

At that moment the beast inside roared to life and I wanted to chase him into the laundry room, throw him on the folding table, and rifle his pockets for the flask I was certain he had stashed in his pockets. I also wanted to nuzzle him all over while whispering, "just lie back and think of Homeland Security, sir."

This sort of behavior is cute when you are young and in your 20s but not so cute when I am looking distinctly older than twenty.

Really it's quite pathetic. All these years of conscious sobriety and this thing still lurks inside of me waiting. I guess this is why they call it alcoholism not alcohol-wasm.

As if the alluring aroma of Jack wasn't enough, the staff member gave me an up-and-down look and asked me if I wanted anything. I promise you that I only sniffed the air delicately, just a little flare of my nostril, and a

WHY I WRITE

Eleanor

I'm somewhat of a hoarder. However, my hoarding seems to be specific to papers—bank statements from banks where I am no longer a customer, books, lease agreements from everywhere I have lived in the past 8 years (and I move frequently), instruction manuals to appliances I no longer own, letters, to-do lists and a number of journals and diaries, the oldest from 1995. I worry that my home is a fire hazard.

Every so often, I will go through my old journals. It's an odd experience—almost like I'm spying on myself. Reading them is cringe-inducing, particularly the ones from high school, which are filled with overblown, angsty emotions, and the raw, self-involved, self-righteous anger that is characteristic of teenagers. And even though I laugh at my hyperbolic teenage self, I also feel empathy for her. As ridiculous as all the drama, petty fights, and "soul-crushing" love (yep) seem now, it was very real to me then. And I'm grateful that I kept a journal and that all that anger and grief and confusion had a place to go.

What I notice, though, is that I write now for the same reasons I did back then (although I like to think I go about it in a somewhat less dramatic fashion these days). I write to reflect—to make sense of things. Writing removes me from the sharpness of the moment and allows me to step back and examine whatever it is I am going through a little more objectively. The clarity I gain from the process of detaching forces me to be honest. I suppose it's because writing acts as a kind of mirror—and it's hard to look into a mirror and lie to yourself. I realize that were it not for writing, I wouldn't pause to consider the truth as much as I should, as it's often buried a couple layers below the surface. So writing becomes both a process and an act of excavation. Sometimes the truths that are uncovered surprise me. Sometimes they embarrass me. I will often put on paper what I would never say out loud. I guess that why it always surprises me to hear people say that writing allows them to escape reality. For me it has always been a process of confronting it. But I think one of great contradictions about writing is that the more vulnerable you are willing to be, the more powerful the writing is.

I write when I have something to say, and I write to figure out what exactly it is I'm trying to say. For me one of the more frustrating aspects of writing is the struggle to articulate what's going on in my head, to perfectly capture the experience or emotion on paper. There are times when words feel completely ineffective—too small, too limited to describe what the Everglades look like as the sun sinks behind the sawgrass, or what shame feels like. But then there are also moments when everything comes together perfectly, when I can't write fast enough to keep up. In those moments I experience a tremendous sense of purpose and fulfillment. It's as though not only is my writing coming together, but I am seeing more clearly the experience I am writing about as well. In my head, my memories are amorphous, blending together without beginning or end. On paper, they take form. I can pull purpose and meaning from them. I can control the narrative. I write because I need those moments.

I believe that the things I hold on to tell my story. Not just the journals, but all of it—the receipts, the school essays, the no longer relevant documents. Laid out together, they form a narrative; they offer concrete and tangible proof of my past. These things help me remember. I hold onto to things because I don't want to reach for something one day and find that it's no longer there.

RESPONSE AND REPLY

Boudicca

To: Boudicca

From: Brecht

I have visited prison. It has been quite a few years, but when my Aunt was incarcerated we would visit her as often as possible. Some times were easier than others because she was transferred around a lot. I remember checking in, waiting in the cold grey rooms, going through the scare tactics of the guards, and finally getting to see my aunt. That was when I first learned the word "canteen."

Now that my aunt is "free," I've heard her stories. Heard about the mistreatment, her lack of medical attention. She's a really tough woman, but the medical stuff really got to her. She had reconstructive surgeries after she fell asleep behind the wheel and slammed into the rear of a semi truck. Her face was destroyed. She lost an eye and walks with a limp; her face looks like it's in a constant pucker. They actually declared her dead on arrival, but as my grandfather was talking to the police she chimed in "I'm not dead." So, while she was in prison, she developed an infection between her eyes and never received medical attention. Now she has to place a finger between her eyes when she has to blow her nose, otherwise the skin will bubble up. If I remember correctly, she attempted suicide a couple of times after getting "freed."

I think my aunt got out too soon because she went right back to drinking. She didn't find an outlet like you have. You and I write for very similar reasons, to escape and challenge and rationalize what we experience. I really hope you share you poetry with the world. Just reading this letter has hit me. I understand how the dry writing for court can really numb your creative spirit, but I love your resolution of writing one poem a day. I really hope I get to read one or two of them.

Your dedication to expression and creativity inspire me. I'm glad I get to meet you through this program and I hope we get to exchange again.

To: Brecht

From: Boudicca

UNTITLED

Mister

Purple velvet dotted with diamonds, bleeding magenta that gives way to light.

Whispers of winds caressing the senses, vapors of mists trapped near the ground.

Shedding beads of glimmering dew, arouses the fundic scents released by the night.

Sentries of saplings spring from the loam, sway to the rhythm of early dawn.

A canopy of arbor limbs shrouded in boas of feathery firs embrace all around.

This protective dome harboring mixed species, varied and many as they stretch and yawn.

Bursts of staccato from the hammering pecker trumpets a cacophony of sound.

Annoyed larks ignore the chattering jays, all have noticed the circling hawk.

The stream's congregants stand still, aware of the hovering winged menace.

Fear fueled spikes of adrenaline rush and the inhabitants rush for their cover.

An early morning's peace evaporated and gone, leaving this paradise without a trace.

LA CORONELA

Logan Wolfe

I was awoken in the middle of the night by loud banging on the front door. I rubbed my eyes as I walked towards the front parlor to see who was at our door. As I arrived, I heard my mother, Elisa, screaming at the top of her lungs towards the men who had just arrested my father, Fulgencio, to let him go. Three men dressed in fatigues came into my home to arrest my father. My mother was hysterically pleading with them to let my father go. The men sneered at her and explained that my father was under arrest for stealing cattle from the farm. She pleaded with them that this was false, because there was no animals left on the farm, and that they were arresting the wrong man. The men pushed my mother away and dragged my father kicking and screaming over to a truck. There they push him into the back of the truck and then drove off. That same night, my mother told me to pack my clothes and that we were leaving. She was scared that they would return later to also arrest her or me. This was the last night that I spent in my home on the farm.

My mother took me to Marta's, my grandmother, home that was about two miles away and just outside of town. There we waited for news about my father, many months passed and still we heard nothing. Once 1962 came and went and more than one year into this ordeal, my mother began to lose hope that my father was still alive. In the summer of 1963, my mother finally received a letter from the government explaining that my father was being held at "Presidio Modelo" or "Model Prison" located on "La Isla del Pinos" or "Pine Island." As soon as she read the name of the prison, my mother fell to her knees and broke down in tears. Seeing her reaction baffled me because I would have thought she would be happy to know finally the whereabouts of my father.

Marta had to explain to me the gravity of my father's situation for me to understand my mother's reaction. She explained that my father was a prisoner at the worst prison that Utopia had. She told me that seventy-five percent of the men who would walk into the "Model Prison" would never leave its clutches alive. My mother spent many days thinking of what she can do to help my father leave this prison. She did not want her husband to die and she did not want me to grow up without my father. After many

restless nights, she decided that she would go and speak with La Coronela. Amongst the people, La Coronela was rumored to be an espiritista, a woman who dealt with white magic and could talk to both good and evil spirits of the dead, which could affect the health and luck of the living. She used those gifts to assist those unfortunate in need of help. My mother and I left in the morning because the trip was to be on foot and we had approximately ten miles to travel in order to arrive at La Coronela's home.

We arrived in the early afternoon, at a red brick farmhouse surrounded by a black painted iron fence. We walked up to the house and knocked on the door. Several moments later, La Coronela opened the door and warmly greeted us. As I entered the house, I immediately felt a warm glowing energy that surround my body and I felt as if I was home. My mother explained to La Coronela that my father was in the "Model Prison" and needed help to get him out for she feared that he would die in the prison. Upon hearing this, La Coronela stayed silent for what felt like forever but then she told my mother that she would not only help us but would bring my father home in about a month after she would see him personally. My mother hugged La Coronela and thanked her profusely.

La Coronela revealed that this plan would require my assistance to make the ruse believable. She stated that she would create a ruse as being my father's wife and with my help would visit him in jail where she will give him a talisman. This talisman would set my father free after working its magic. Immediately and without hesitation, my mother and I agreed to do whatever was asked of us. La Coronela then told my mother that she was to go back and stay at my grandmother's house until she received any further information about my father from the government. La Coronela then invited us to stay in the spare bedroom in her house because it was nightfall and too late to return home. She then turned to me and told me particularly to get a good night's rest tonight because tomorrow we would begin our journey and it would be the last sleep we would get for approximately two days.

Before the crack of dawn, La Coronela woke me up and we had a hardy breakfast. Before our departure, La Coronela went into her room to get something. As she walked out of her room, I saw her place something small inside her pocket. She then grabbed a basket and filled it with a small cake, a bottle of milk and some vitamins, which she carried. She decided to take

given him because immediately after we left him, he would be stripped searched by the guards. Once in his cell, he did as La Coronela had instructed him to do. He waited about two hours after we had left and then swallowed what she had given him. He explained that she had given him what appeared to be a small rock with writing on it that seemed to be alive because he could feel it pulsing. La Coronela told him that he would fall gravely ill after ingesting it and it would cause him to fall unconscious for a couple of days. He would appear to most people that he was close to death but that it would not kill him.

La Coronela told him that he would be taken to the local hospital. Once there the ruse would take hold. The guards would begin to believe that it would be only a matter of time for him to die. Consequently, the guards would stop watching him since he was going nowhere and would take the detail off him. He told us that when he swallowed the rock, he felt a sharp pain in his stomach that intensified into his chest and he had trouble breathing. My father does not remember anything else until he woke up at on the hospital bed. Upon awakening, he noticed that he was alone and the only ones entering his room where the nurses and the doctors. A couple of days later, we showed up and he was allowed to sign himself out of the hospital as a regular patient. Ironically, no one from the prison or the government ever came looking for my father again after this incident. It was as if he truly died at the hospital in the summer of 1963. To this day, I have never fully understood all of the events that transpired in order to obtain my father's release yet I am and always will be grateful to La Coronela.

the prison that she had received two days prior. La Coronela told me to bring my mother into the living room and sit her down, while she made some tea for us. I took the letter from my mother's shaking hand and walked into the kitchen to read it to La Coronela. It stated that my father was gravely ill and had fallen unconscious the very night of our visit. He had been taken off "Pine Island" and taken to the local hospital in town. The letter further stated that the doctors believed that he would die soon. Upon reading the letter, I too became frightful by it, but La Coronela picked up a tray with three cups of tea and told me to follow her to the living room. La Coronela put the tray down on the center table and handed a cup of tea to my mother and then me. She then calmly reminded us that she had told us that a letter would be arriving before we left for our journey. Both my mother and I looked at each other and this calmed us down. La Coronela stated that we would go to the hospital tomorrow to see my father, since it was too late tonight. Needless to say, I did not sleep a wink at all that night.

Early in the morning, my mother and I went with La Coronela to the hospital to see my father. Once at the hospital, we were taken to a room on the second floor. I noticed that the floor had no guards anywhere to be seen and my father was in a regular room as any patient would be. My mother had a reaction to my father's appearance but I noticed that he was a bit fuller in appearance than when I had seen him at the prison. When he saw us, he smiled and then began to cry as both my mother and I hugged him. My father voice was a bit stronger in tone and he told us that he wanted to go home. About an hour later, I inquired with the doctors about the release of my father. I was told that my father needed additional observation of approximately three or four days before they would release him. I was told that he had been unconscious for almost four days when he had been brought to the hospital. We came and visited him every day for several hours until he was finally released four days later. My father simply signed the release paperwork and he was released from the hospital into our care.

Approximately one month later after being home, my father woke both my mother and me up in the middle of the night. He told us that this would be the only time that he would explain to us what had transpired. He told us that when La Coronela had kissed him she had transfer an item to him in his mouth. He had then taken it from his mouth and placed it in the lining of the back of his pants. This was the only way to keep what she had

these items to my father because she imagined that he was malnourished by the prison. We then set off on our journey across several provinces for "La Pila Del Tiburon" or "Shark Pier" on the opposite side of the island of Utopia.

We traveled on the bus all morning and into the mid-afternoon, arriving at the province where the pier was located. At this point, we began to walk towards the town that was several miles away. We walked the rest of the afternoon and into the early evening; we arrived at the pier just after seven o'clock. As we neared the pier, I noticed that La Coronela took whatever she placed in her pocket and placed it inside her bra. I remember that I decided not to question her about it at that time. On the roadway outside of the pier a group of about hundred plus people waited by a pair of locked gates. About two hours later, I saw a man in military fatigues arrive on the opposite side of the pier fence and open it. The man directed the group to step upon a barge at the end of the pier so that the tugboat could take us to "Pine Island" where "Model Prison" was located. La Coronela told me that the pier was so named "Shark Pier" because the ocean waters between the pier and "Pine Island" were shark-infested. Consequently, she directed me to step into the middle of the crowd and stay away from the edges of the barge.

The barge was barely big enough for the hundred plus people to fit in. It was flat on top with a thin flange on the edges, it had no seats to sit down on, no handles to hold onto, and no protection whatsoever from the elements. Consequently, one had to stand up during the trip out to "Pine Island." Because the driver of the tugboat was in front, he could not hear anything happening behind him. Therefore, if someone were to fall into the ocean, they would be left behind and likely eaten by the sharks if not drown first. I became afraid for our safety but La Coronela took my hand and told me to be brave and strong. Since we were a woman and child, the men visiting their families at the prison allowed us to stand in the middle of the barge.

It took all-night and part of the next morning to arrive at "Pine Island." When we arrived, we disembark from the barge and were directed by several guards to the back of a fleet of trucks. The group was driven into the interior of the island. Just as dawn was breaking we entered the compound

of the prison, I could see in the morning mist the shape of five circular buildings against the background of a mountain ridge.

When the trucks stopped, the group was directed to walk towards the middle building which I discovered was the Administration Building. Once inside, the group of visitors was told that our items and persons would be searched before being allowed entry into the prison. Upon hearing this, my body started to tremble because I worried that the item La Coronela had placed in her bra would be discovered. She bent down and whispered in my ear to stay resilient in my belief that we were here to help my father. She told me that the talisman would disappear from their sight if necessary. I nodded my head and continued forward in line. We stood in line until our turn arrived to be searched; La Coronela's basket was searched thoroughly for contraband. The men in fatigues took out the cake that we brought to give to my father, and cut it up into small pieces. Luckily, they did not destroy the vitamins or the milk that we also had. Next, we were to be searched physically. When we reached the next set of guards, they started to check our bodies for contraband. What surprised me was that I saw their eyes glazed over for a second and the next thing I know they are telling us that we could go forward. The guards barely checked us but I was not going to complain.

Next, we sat down at a line of benches waiting to be called up to a desk and tell the guard whom we had come to visit. The guard would then look thru the rolls and advise the visitor to which of the four buildings their loved ones was housed at. When it was our turn, we were told that my father was located in building number #3. Once all of the visitors were processed and the corresponding prisoner had been taken out of their cells, each of the four groups was led by a guard to their perspective building.

When I entered building #3, I noticed that the first floor was an open yard with only an observation tower in the middle. The cells were on a circular platform raised off of the ground by a solid concrete base. On each tier was located at least two guards keeping an eye on their floor. From the central tower, the movements of the guards were controlled and a watchful eye on all of the inmates was maintained. In a section of the yard, there were about thirty inmates waiting for their loved ones to find them. I frantically started to search for my father but I could not see him. It was not until he stood up in front of me that I recognized him. My father's

appearance had completely transformed. He had been a strong powerful man with dark brown hair and a powerful voice. The man that could barely stand in front of me was all skin and bones, very fragile and was barely audible. I was scared of hugging him in fear of causing him more pain and suffering. However, he knelt on the ground and hugged me as fiercely as he could as he cried in joy from seeing us. Afterwards, he went to hug La Coronela and thank her for bringing me to see him. As they hugged, I noticed that La Coronela was speaking softly in his ear to him so that the guards, who were constantly watching us and walking on the second tier above us, would not over hear the conversation. I could not hear what La Coronela was saying but then I saw my father kiss La Coronela on the mouth.

Internally, I became outraged that my father would kiss another woman that was not my mother. I did nothing because I knew if I did we would both be arrested. After their kiss, I noticed that my father slowly coughed something into both his hands and then acted as if he was wiping off his left hand on the back of his pants. I noticed that when his left hand came back, it was empty. He looked at me and winked as if to say that everything was o.k. We all then sat quietly there and allowed my father to eat what we had brought him. I mentioned to him that the milk was no longer cold and a bit warm due to the amount of time traveling to get here. He stated that he did not mind it because he had not had a drink of milk since the night that he was abducted from our home. Once he finished, I picked up the basket because we could not leave anything with him. My father and I talked a bit more about the rest of the family until the guards informed us that the visit was over. They allowed the visitors to have a little more than an hour with their family members.

All of the visitors were then escorted back to the trucks and driven back to the pier. We reached "Shark Pier" in the late afternoon and gladly disembarked. I was exhausted and knew that I could not go much further. La Coronela told me that she would find accommodations for us in town because we would not be leaving without my father in tow. I did not understand at the time what she meant but I was too tired to question her. We walked into town and found the place to stay.

Ten days later in late evening, my mother arrived at the door of the apartment visibly shaking from head to toe with a letter in her hands from