

**IF WE STOP
WE ARE
MEANINGLESS**

POEMS FROM INSIDE

The poems in this book were written by residents of the following institutions: Everglades Re-Entry Center, Dade Correctional Institution, Everglades Correctional Institution, Homestead Correctional Institution, South Bay Correctional Institution, and Hollywood Work Release Center.

They were collected by instructors from Exchange for Change, a non-profit organization that uses writing workshops to combat social barriers. O, Miami began working with Exchange for Change in order to create poetry-specific workshops in area correctional institutions taught by Miami poets. The program is part of O, Miami's newest initiative, *The Sun Room*.

Simply put, *The Sun Room* pays poets to teach workshops in communities where writing instruction is not guaranteed or expected. So far, the program has created workshops in three detention centers and in two elementary schools in Liberty City, and we're currently planning a new workshop in the behavioral ward of an area hospital.

In all of these classes, the goal is not to bring poetry to new places but to discover poetry that already exists and give it an occasion to emerge and sharpen. As you'll see in these poems, it would have been an impossible task to bring poetry to these detention centers because it was already there.

PSC

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Ceaseless
Christie Wildes

We are the marching captive minions.

One
by
one.

We march confined to broad yellow lines,
to sharp toothed fences
that mark obedience
from rebellion.

We silently proceed
stripped of human rights
that the free abuse.

We turn a head or
an unseeing eye
to the deliberate torture
meant to shroud prejudice.

We are aliens in a classless land.

There is no democracy behind these walls.
We are dictated to
and ruled by anarchists.

Yet, we march on.

If we stop,
we are meaningless.

**We are a portion of a system
meant to darken our minds
to injustice.**

We cry invisible tears.

**We tell stories
that mate our fate
to our circumstances.**

We make choices we wish would kill us.

**We don't yearn for stronger backs
or softer beds.**

**We dream of turning the cacophony
into a chorus
of change.**

The what-ifs turned into the will-bes

So, we march.

One

by

one.

Why I Play the Piano

Dustin Lofty

In 2005, my dad's girlfriend lets me have his old guitar.
"He would want you to have it," she says.
The strings hurt my fingers.

In 1995, I sneak a sip from the beer my dad told me to fetch him. "I even opened it for you," I lie to him.

In 1991, a Rottweiler bites me in the ass. The doctor gives me a shot of antibiotics, adding another hole.

In 1996, I jump my bicycle over 16 Budweiser cans.

In 2003, my mom's boyfriend teaches me to play gin rummy. I've yet to win a game.

In 1992, Dad tells me I'll be a great pitcher. We play catch almost every day.

In 2008, I buy Mom a gallon of cheap white zinfandel, the second one this week.

In 1997, I wait all day on my aunt's front porch, my new MLB endorsed cleats blister my big toe.

In 2009, my family and I burn a small Styrofoam cooler lid floating on the Caloosahatchee River. It holds one Red Solo cup of wine, one bag of original Lays potato chips, and my mom's ashes.

In 2015, I start playing the piano, the keys are flat.

Memories
Heather Coffey

I remember the taste of fresh mulberries
– from my grandmother's tree
I remember learning to drive
– on deserted back roads
I remember my sister's birth
I remember the click of the door
– as our mom walked out on us
I remember breaking the heel of my shoe
– at my first job interview
I remember my grandmother's funeral
– the smell of too many flowers
I remember my first record
– Purple Rain
I remember record players
– scratchy sound
I remember my dad's tears
– as I packed my bags
I remember his hard fists
– and even harder apologies
I remember apple fritters

How I Long for the Streets
Gary Reid

As I lay in your bunk, I could
only think of the streets I left for
months that turned into years, but now
seems like for life. I keep going up for parole.
They turn me down, is it the DRs
or is it because my complexion is brown.
I'm truly sorry for my feeling this way
but Tallahassee has gotten the best of
me, my mother has passed, and many more.
Sometimes I wonder, is there anywhere to go;
but mind is so strong
I keep hearing voices saying Gary don't
give up! Because in God we must trust.

Invisible
Kimberly Smith

What if I were invisible?
Could you still see the shame through me?
Is it possible to cover what cannot be seen?
What would I have left to punish?
Can you embellish what you've abolished?
What if I were invisible?
Could you hear me better if I were?
Would you notice if I walked away?
If I just vanished?
What would be left without the visible?
Would I be finished?
What if I were invisible?

Where I'm From
Helen Seroki

I am from makeup and hairspray
From Lancome and Tresemme
I am from the many mirrors on the walls
That reflect facades
And are cold to the touch
I am from the morning glories
In the cast iron planter
And the salvia in my nannies' flower bed
Both causes of distorted perceptions
I'm from many win jugs, home-made bread
And alcoholism accompanied by addiction
From Pony the Gummy Bear who changed my life
I'm from the disguised deceit
And hidings of truth

I am from empty prescription bottles
From Xanax and Oxycottin
I am from the house that never sleeps
Because everyone is up searching for more
Even when nothing is there to be found
I am from my grand-daddy's rose bushes
And the dogwood tree I received when my poppa died.
Both beautiful representation of those I've loved and lost
I am from the walks in the woods
And the arguments that followed
I am from Erikson and Grogan
Two men whom I thought were my fathers
And from a man who almost succeeded
At being a father figure
I am from the pursuers of forgiveness

And the ones who never forget
I am from places I'll never remember
And nights I'll never forget
I am from promises to never do it again
And pleads of just one more time
I am the girl that's in constant debt with the fiddler
The girl with an urge to dance

It's Just the Way it is
Jorge Roman

Desires, viruses, plane crashes, car accidents,
volcanoes, tornados, hurricanes, landslides, wild fires,
it's just the way it is.

Catastrophe, tragedy, surprise,
serial killer, burglar, car jacker, dope dealer, marksman,
coke, weed, crack, molly, flacka, woman or addicted man,
F.B.I., D.E.A., D.T., A.T.F., police special task force,
S.W.A.T., Army, Marine, Navy, Air Force,
Terrorist, Terror, horror, panic, psychofrantic,
crazy, lost soul, white, black, Hispanic,
45, 38, 22, 25, 32, 9, 50, blood run,
Mack, AK, AR, short clip, long clip, banana, shot gun,
blood, water, gasoline, diesel,
burn, explosion, commotion, loud whisper,
night, sun, day moon, rain, blue, heat, black,
Las Vegas, L.A., M-I-A, N.Y., inner city, action pack,
smart, dumb intelligent, artistic, computer whiz,
Why should I say more? It's just the way it is.

In Your Honor
Vin Dici

Who can speak for us
when there is nothing to say?
Who can bring light
to a clouded day?
Where can we find hearts that see
what others tend to miss?
Who cries at sad stories
and ones full of bliss?
Who laughs at our jokes
when others wouldn't crack a smile?
When a few more steps seem impossible,
can go the extra mile?
Who, when time doesn't permit,
still lends a helping hand?
Always encouraging us
to do what we can?
Who sticks up for us
whether we're right or wrong?
And rocks us to sleep
with the perfect song?
Where else can we find one
not too proud to ask directions?
Who speaks gently
when giving correction?
Who, with the strength of ten men,
carries the burden put upon her?
To all God's women,
these words are in your honor!

Here in the Shadows
Kortini Robinson

When you saw me it was
the look in your eyes that told
me of my scars. The language
your body spoke that made me
aware of judgment. Don't know if
it was the shadow or the fact of not
knowing what was hidden which
caused my fear. In the dark I am me.
No one knows my problems. Can't
judge me based on my race.
Can't use my ignorance as rejection.
My voice can remain silent.
My emotions cannot be analyzed,
nor my mood labeled. My figure
can't be compared nor my smile
misunderstood. Here in the shadows
my scars go unnoticed.
I could be anyone.
Don't know if I'm frightened by
knowing or not ever being known.

The Loner
Luis Hernandez

I'm drowning,
I feel like someone invisible is pulling me down.
He's stronger than I am.
Who dropped me in here?
Who threw me in?
How did I get here?
I'm in the middle of nowhere.
Who knows where I'm at. Where is everyone?
Nobody sees me, I'm going down.

I see all kinds of people passing me by.
I feel frozen my whole being is tired.
I try to speak but only a low yelp or whimper comes out.
Will I be missed or will they not know I existed?
I can't stay afloat much longer.

Nobody knows me or understands me.
I barely speak, yes and no are my words.
I won't give more than that.
Listen to who or what
I didn't have time for anyone but myself.
All I cared about was me.
I never helped anyone,
Why should someone help me?
I want to ask but who can I ask
if I didn't speak to somebody.
Anybody.

The Traveler
Lesmes Caseres

A traveler forgotten
Unwelcomed and unexpected
Whether worn or untrodden
All roads end connected

To an ego-id collision
Records kept of what was said
He dines with his decisions
All positioned at the head

A visit from the past
The baggage of a troubled man
A spirit-filled flask
Tucked inside a duffle bag

He masters misdirection
Complicates his path
He saddles a suggestion
Without a compass or a map

At a dusty, withered inn
Like a dream he's seen before
He abruptly slithers in
Through a weakened, creaking door

Pay the traveler no attention
Hat lowered and rifle raised
He beckons! Beckons! Beckons!
But silence sends him on his way.

Untitled
Debra Jones

I was in Vietnam.
I served two tours of duty.
When I came back nobody
would look me in the eyes,
everybody acted like I had
leprosy.
I did what my platoon
leader told me, I was
fighting for my country.

I can't sleep at night,
I hate to close my eyes,
when I do, it all plays
back like a movie.
Every life I took, every
face I had to look
into before pulling the
trigger, haunts me.

How do I live with myself?
It doesn't seem to matter
if I was following orders
or not, they are still dead.
They never did me any harm.

I have been back four years
and it is so hard to
function in everyday life.
I have a family that
loves me, but they don't
understand how terrible

I feel.
I don't see any way
of things getting better.
No one understands, those that
were over there don't want to talk
about it.

I have a gun, I went to
the store and bought bullets. I
can't get my mind off,
I hope when I die it will
finally shut down
The movie will stop
playing
and it will be
"The End" forever.

My Darling Mo
Michael Painter

She's got a smile, that's so sweet to me,
and eyes as blue, as the Caribbean Sea.
Her heart is so pure, like warm summer's rain.
It tears me apart, to see her in pain.

Her cheeks, they turn red, like a blushing rose.
And a zillion cute freckles, splatter her nose.
She has long golden locks, of silky smooth hair.
She's cute and so cuddly, and fat like a bear.

Her laugh is so sweet, it drives blues away.
It vanquishes darkness, and brightens the day.
She's oh so much more, than just a simple girl.
She's a bright beacon of light, to a lost lonely world.

I love her so much, much more than she knows.
I love her long fingers, and cute chubby toes.
Lift up your chin, and don't be so sad.
God loves you so much, and so does your dad.

P.S.

You wanted me to write a poem to you
I knew not what to say.
How could I ever ease your pain,
Now that I've gone away.

I tried to be a good dad.
I'm sorry I let ya'll down.
If only I could turn back time.
I'd turn it all around.

Unauthorized and Violated
Catherine LaFleur

A woman boldly steps
out of the bathroom
named. Wrapped only
in a tiny thread-bare
towel which is not
nearly enough
to cover her
width
and girth.

Flesh jiggles, giggles
all over. She
prances along the
tier, dainty hoofed
as any gazelle dancing
on African veldt.
and notices

No one can look
away. Or stop laughing.
As her buttocks
disappear with a slam
behind her cell door,
I think
of your favorite song
lyric.
Don't look!

But it's too late.
We've all done
been violated. The
officer looks down
into the dayroom
we are watching t.v.
at an unauthorized time.

Love for Your Face
Laurie Gulas

My mother once wrote:
With patience I was not so gifted
And many a time my hand may have lifted
To strike—realize too late—
Ah but one mistake.

I pray that when I leave here
I arrive at my friend's house
And find that poem one of the few things salvaged from
my past.

I always knew my mother loved me despite our turbulent
relationship.
One day while digging through an old cedar chest
I came across some of her poems—
I hadn't even known that she wrote.
And this beautiful poem that she wrote about me when I was
such a young child,
Spoke volumes of being a young single mother,
Full of fear—
 Uncertainty—
 Despair—
 And bravery...

At kicking out my drug-addict father when I was but a month
old, And of my mother's determination to keep me.

She loved me with all her heart.
She loved me as best she could.
It was just not her nature
to cuddle and hold.
I remember her words of apology:

Please, Daughter, part of me
Don't take from this
That there is no love for your face—
Ah but yet a second mistake.

My mother was beautiful,
Genuine and kind.
A real go-getter,
Fun all the time.
She held all of our ridiculous personalities together
So that we enjoyed a family bond that was fast disappearing
in changing times.
She was the rock of our family.

I was the comeback kid once again
When I noticed something wrong with my mother.
I never hesitated, I never thought twice—
I dropped everything, put my career on hold,
It was the very least I could do for her.

It came silently
It came swiftly
It seized her brain in its evil hold
Once young, healthy and vibrant
And now dementia had made her old.

I got her the best doctors
I made sure of the best care
Nothing was inconvenient—
It was all about her.
She was so graceful—
She smiled through it all
And so I did my best to always make her the belle
of the ball.

When the nurses didn't clean her well enough
I would load her into a wheelchair
And take her to be pampered in her own personal spa.
I would hold the showerhead and say, "Laurie at your
service, Ma'am!"
And she would light up my world with her smile.

Suctioning the track?
I got you Mom.
Help put in your feeding tube?
I got you Mom.
Hold you through your seizures?
I got you Mom—
My strong loving arms are your safe place.

When you want to go for a walk and you are well enough
I unhook you and bundle you up.
I.V. capped off, urine bag carefully strapped on the chair,
You laugh as I zoom you through the streets of downtown
Toronto.
You point at the last Mohicans braving the late fall breeze
To sit outside in the sidewalk cafés.
You smile and wave back to all the street people who
recognize us now.
These moments are so precious to me, Mom.

Rough spell after rough spell
I sit ever vigilant by your side.
The tiny fissures in my psyche, starting to rise.
Every time you wake I hold your hand.
I take a deep breath
And ask if you want to go on.
We have a system worked out:
I explain the scenario as simply as I can for you.

You have complications but you are not dying.
That is why you are on life support once again.
I tell you how much I love you, the whole family loves you
That I know you are tired and I understand.
So raise your eyebrows Mom if you want it to end.

Round and round we went
In this macabre dance.
You're still living
As I'm slowly dying
But I'm running so fast and hard
Even death can't catch me yet.

The second to last time I see you,
Just as I'm leaving to race back to my false highs,
You call out and stop me.
You said, "Laurie, no matter what, I will always love you...."
Those words so lucid and pure
Were the last I was ever to hear.

You lapsed into a coma
And seizing, I held you in my arms.
I whispered in your ear and you slowly grew still.
The nurses' kind words of how you respond only to me
Only tortured me further still.

You passed away
And my fury was unleashed.
I lifted my face Heavenward
And screamed my rage.
I did everything to destroy and kill myself
Yet my heart betrayed me and continued to beat on.
I acted out terribly,
Ended up in prison,

Took to planning my demise
Worked to finally end my ride.
Yet I continued to fight on despite my foolish pride
No matter how hard I kept trying to hide.

It surely had to be you, Mom
Still so full of unconditional love,
You are still smiling down on me
Still my Guardian Angel from above.

And here I am
Working out, working through
The complexity of me.
So one day, I'll truly be free,
And Mom, you'll be so proud of me.

I love you Mom. Happy Mother's Day. Love, Laurie

"Imagine 53"

A. Dante Dottin

"Fifty-three. Dead. It could be worse. How many is fifty-three? The first eruption catches you unaware. Proverbial pants down around unsteadily Achilles you trip over your own feet. Restoring your equator line only at the buzzer. Glancing North from your Antarctic your irises strafe a form on the ground. Indistinguishable mound. Frowning you take double. Recoil. He was two steps before you two steps ago. His two parts now lie two steps apart. Heart in chest flutters, heart on ground seems to pulse still. With will of iron tear nature's co-burners away. Away from number one.

In panorama others lay sprawled, splayed, some still. Some still spasming. Too distant. Discounted rubble smoke screams. Prone person progressing on personal path just two deeply-breathed lungful's ago. Partitioning of time. Frozen in the stares of those still afoot. Each holding identical inquiries in gaze. No answer forthcoming. Too horrid. Please don't answer. Question overwhelming, stench...

Another flash. Time begins anew. No sounds register. Realization of dormancy of Great Architect's typan drum. Visual monitoring and motioning continues across

startled expression. Cryogenic tableau still
held in place, members part. Win place
show lengths in between
frames. Silent film.

Heart beats inside you. She,
heartbeats ago, beside you. Now
over there. And over there. All
around all over. Your soaking clothes,
agony and char-filled olfactory
orifices two. Exposing panic
raw, at the sight. The sight of number two.

Many others felled, falling to dismember,
to disintegrate each second, along with the second
long before the third is transcribed
in turbulent flows trapped by delicate imprint
banks, you abandon all reason aside
from escape. Fleeing to...
Anywhere but here. Thus, you never
Made it to number three.
Heaven-forbid, fifty-three.

Media reports flow over
and around us. Fifty-three.
One thousand four hundred sixty-eight
wounded and dying – unconfirmed. All in
a passing thought. Far removed, desensitized, we express
opinions of sorrow. Briefly. Blowing horn at discourteous
driver. But you were there – unable to generalize
euphemize, minimize, politicize...
Or were you?

**A single life from your own household would devastate.
Two deaths before your eyes would confetti sanity's fabric.
What of three?
What of fifty-three?
Imagine. Weep. Act.**