

## PROLOGUE

Winter 2011

*I*f someone had told me two years ago that I would become inspired through working in a men's prison, laughter would have followed. Truth be told, I actually do laugh (a lot) when working with the Penned Thoughts writers at the Oregon State Penitentiary; I also get sad and angry and joyful and inspired by our writing and ensuing discussions.

I met James, our de facto leader, and Josh, a former group member, about two years ago and was moved by their intelligence, attitude, and wit. James shared with me then that he was a poet, and an idea began percolating. Five scarred metal gates and four flights of steep concrete stairs are all that now stand between my most rewarding professional work and me.

That I am trusted to be part of a group that shares a devout love of writing is awe-inspiring. Grateful I am to each and every past and present writer (but especially our Mighty Seven current writers) for allowing me this privilege. I am so excited about this, our first, anthology.

Special thanks are in order for James and for Chemeketa Community College Corrections Education Director Nancy Green for leading me to this work.

—*Michele Dishong McCormack, Chemeketa Community College communication and performing arts professor, and anthology editor*



## *My World*

*ANTHOLOGY INTRODUCTION BY THOM*

Welcome to my world. A place I must now call my home. I wake up to the same bars guarding windows, the same doors locking closed each day. The surrounding wall reaches 35 feet high and hides that which is within.

Outsiders may look and see the buildings taller than the walls, resembling somewhat of a cage. Their perceptions might limit them to view this place as a world of anger and guilt, despair and darkness.

Where do these ideas come from? How can you pre-determine my situation when you are not in my shoes—and yet still, you may've only just learned my name.

Not that I am above guilt; but one thing I've learned is that dreams don't stop just because of a mistake. We keep on fighting, through the hardest parts, learning to grow in the grace we've been given.

Those scattered faces walk along, each foot one step ahead, each hand reaching even closer, to that hope and that future so constantly looked toward.

Yearning again brings another smile, and seen within are the treasures hidden in darkness.

Imagine this—something different than what you thought—our hearts changing now, and affecting yours. Let compassion unfold, as you now come close, to look upon my world.

## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

The group would like to thank:

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*Nature*

## *The Symphonic Ballet*

*By CHIP*

*M*any species of birds ride the thermals back and forth as skilled acrobats that fly across the big top without the safety of a net. Unlike their clumsy, awkward steps upon the ground, they are graceful in flight, following an unheard concerto as they dance across the sky in blissful harmony with what they were created to do.

The wind blows them off course as it brings raindrops with it, attempting to disrupt their ballet between gusts, but to no avail for without a thought the birds just seem to sway back and forth in rhythm, unphased without a care.

The clouds overhead loom heavily, dark and threatening to unload fury upon all who reside beneath, but yet they continue to dance their silent symphonic ballet. What beauty, what wonder, what freedom.

## *The Break of Day*

*By CHIP*

*S*hadows fall as the sun rises, silent brush strokes across the sky. Hues of red and orange collide in an explosion of radiance, causing even the destitute to take notice. Calling us as witnesses, alluding to greater spectacle eager for discovery. Just clouds dance as billowing pillows unable to stifle the advancing warmth of the rays of sunlight that pierce through them, an eternal promenade played out for all to see. Before the break of day meets its demise, one last descending ray of midmorning sun radiates through to envelop the remaining bystanders, announcing the arrival of a day made just for them.

## *Blind Boy*

BY ANDREW

*A*s a fourth grader, I was a young boy whose teacher gave a handful of nicknames to, one of them was “not obedient.” Rules, I have always believed, were meant to be broken. Rules are as fragile as a glass piggy bank, and whenever you feel the urge to smash them, all you need to do is pick up a hammer and swing away. After that, all that will be left of society’s precious rules will be shards of broken glass.

Another young boy who was in my fourth grade class was a Blind Boy. I must apologize because I’ve forgotten his name.

Our teacher knew how cruel kids could be, so to ensure that Blind Boy had a playmate everyday, she assigned every student one day to play with him.

For reasons that I still believe were devoid of logic, she assigned our playdate last. This would only give me plenty of time to devise the funnest possible playdate my devious little mind could conjure up. Our future friendship would be short-lived. Oh, how our social contracts are so fleeting.

Finally, our day had arrived. I was sitting at my desk listlessly starting out of a window. I remember that the sky was dumping buckets of water onto the play ground. My fourth grade teacher was rambling on about something I didn’t care to pay attention to. The only thing I could even remember her saying was when she dismissed us for recess.

“Andrew, don’t forget to show Blind Boy a good time. And be nice for once...” she called after us.

Since blind folks don’t fare too good in games that involve hand eye coordination, I didn’t know what to do, except that I knew he loved mud.

“Blind Boy, what do you want to do,” I asked, but I knew the answer.

“I love the mud puddles because they’re all wet and squashy,” he said.

All of us in the fourth grade knew that Blind Boy was not allowed to get wet or muddy. I couldn’t devise a more deliciously sinister plan than allowing him to do what he loved. I grabbed his arm and led him out to the kickball field.

When we finally reached the biggest mud puddle that I could find, I just announced it. “Blind Boy, here is the biggest, muddiest puddle on the whole playground,” I said. I stepped back and watched complete bliss take control of his face and then he began to jump and sing.

I heard my teacher before I saw her, and, boy, was she pissed. My stomach told me that I wasn’t getting out of this one. Oh, and I was laughing, which wouldn’t help my cause, but that boy’s happiness was infectious.

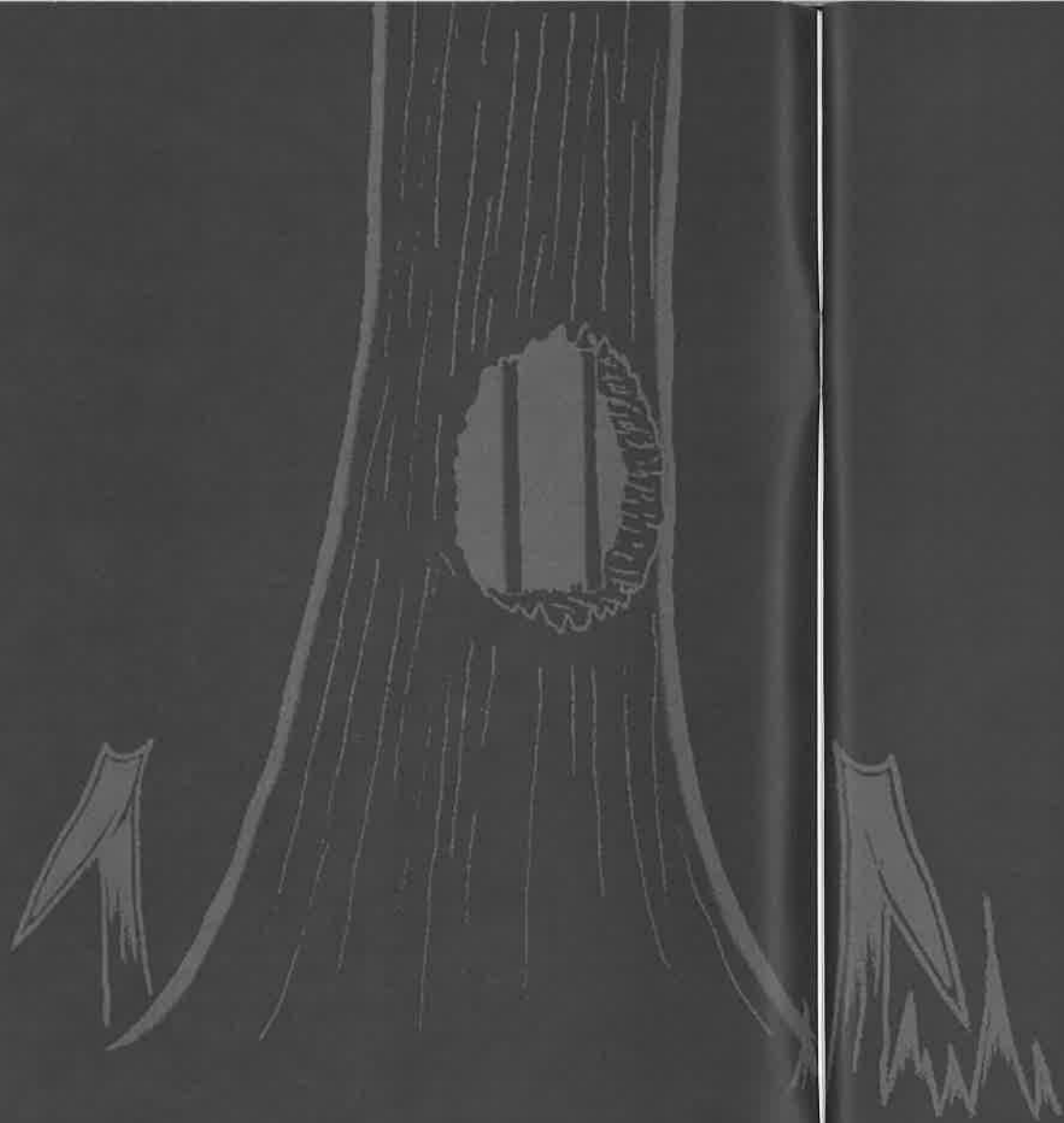
As she was dragging me to the principal’s office to sentence me to my punishment, she threatened me with a two-week suspension. You mean to tell me that the school was going to punish me by not letting me come for two weeks? Oh, that was such a sweet sounding idea, because I downright hated school.

Suspend me they did. My parents grounded me but since both of them worked and all six of my siblings were too irresponsible to see to it that I behaved like I was grounded, I just ended up with a two-week vacation in the fall.

Even though I was the class humanitarian, Blind Boy's mom demanded that we were to be separated. I got moved to a different class room. It sort of saddened me, because anybody who could enjoy a mud puddle like Blind Boy could easily be a friend of mine.

I'm not sure how life developed for Blind Boy. Whatever happened, I hope that he is happy and muddy. I'm still suspended in one sense or another, and I'm always looking to accomplish humanitarian acts that are laced with a touch of prankish fun for the betterment of a world that I find to be too sad. I believe that there needs to be a gentle touch of mischief in this world or there would be nothing but storm clouds lurking over every single one of us, but, hell, think of all the mud puddles.





*Inside*



## *A Forgotten World*

By JIMMIE

**I**t is called MHI. The abbreviation stands for the Mental Health Infirmary. It is anything but what the name insinuates. A deception and play on words. A far cry from a place of healing. Like any horror movie, seen a thousand times. Yet, this one is based upon real stories. The characters are played out with real lives. The drama impossible to script. Individuals with mental problems, caught within their own nightmares. Tucked away by a system, as if hiding the wounds of society.

It is a world lost within a world. A ward behind these brooding gray walls and cold iron bars called the Oregon State Penitentiary. The cell block is like any other building fabricated by our great advanced societies to house the incorrigible and misfits. The names used—Penitentiary, Correctional System, Penal Institution—change with time, but the cold basics never do.

The unit is tucked away on the third floor of this man-made dungeon, hidden away from the general population. As you climb the three flights of gloomy stairs, you get a sense of entering another reality. The hairs on the back of your neck begin to stand. Made more intense by a scream coming from the other side of the door. Completely shut off from the world.

At the top of the stair, an iron door awaits. A button is pushed by the officer on the inside to let you in. The click of the lock opening is loud and echoes in the stairwell. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can prepare you for what is to come once the door swings open.

You are assaulted, not by the mentally ill inmates, but the stench to your nostrils. The smell is so foul, you gasp in shock and fight the urge to vomit. Blood, feces, urine, and food-stained walls, for more years than most of us have lived. Attempts to cover up the stains with another paint job have been made. But, the odors of death continue to bleed through.

Within minutes of entering this hellish nightmare, the odors, like individual's screams, have permeated into the fabric of your clothes and pores of your skin. You can't wait to end your shift into this nightmare, change clothes and scrub your body again and again.

I signed on for this. My job is a Crisis Companion. Sitting with the forgotten souls whose only hope in life is suicide. I signed on to be a light in darkness, a ray of hope, an escape from the madness. But, I always question my own sanity.

## *Struggle*

BY JIMMIE

**T**hey say it is talent  
But I don't know.  
I am just trying to  
express what is in my  
heart and soul.

I like to play with words  
through rhythm and rhyme,  
to share the thoughts which  
are upon my mind.

To articulate ideas I could  
not otherwise say,  
but in that respect my  
talent seems to fade away.

For I am always left  
with these verses that go  
nowhere  
the depths of my soul  
still unable to bare.

## *Mask*

BY CHIP

**B**ehind the eyes of a lost soul that is bound from the ascent to hope and regeneration, whose perpetual indulgence into misery has quenched the spark of light that leads to rational thought, there is found a dim glimmer in the shadows of gray that emanate outward from the supposed window into the inner sanctum of who and what is reflected. To encompass such a creature may elicit a shudder as a familiarity from a past state of mind intrudes upon the fringes of stability. The vitality of life has been replaced by an existing shell that from all appearances is normal and functioning until you pass by and decide to take one last glance. There is no substance to behold, all that is left is the charred remnant of what once was filled by animacy and purpose, no longer a heart beating in cadence with the whimsical dream of something more. Oblivious of this present condition, they continue to walk by faceless and charred by the flames of a lifetime spent molding and nurturing the façade of enlightened understanding, seeking to portray the essence of hope only to betray their own ruse by revealing their true state as their empty vessel begins to crumble while the light that radiates from above them draws the remaining moisture from all that is left of who and what they used to be. Shattering with every step that has shown to be beyond their own means, they continue to push until all that remains is dust that is tread upon by those that have little more than a glimmer to sustain their own walk into dust.

## *The Lost Art*

BY BEN

I am fast becoming a lost art form.  
I am nearly as ancient as mankind's origins,  
Persisting from the distant past  
I have long been a source of pleasure and rapture,  
Sorrow and misery and sometimes...  
All of these simultaneously  
I have been both acceptance and rejection  
For the student and the athlete.  
I am goodbye and hello to the lover,  
I am both good news and bad  
I have been ever the birthplace of comfort and pain  
For the soldier and his wife overseas, in both war time and peace.  
I am a companion to the deepest loneliness  
My words can calm you through tumultuous times  
I have long been a source of light that pierces a dark world  
Yet I can be the darkness which hides the light for a time  
Solomon once described me as cold water to a thirsty soul.  
I am all these things and more yet...  
I am just a vessel, given life only by the hearts of men  
And women and sometimes their tears  
I am timeless once sent  
I have been and am today something kept and revisited  
At times, to remind one they are loved  
I've been around long before the sat. phone  
Or even the bat phone but...  
I am dying a slow agonizing death,  
That began with the telephone  
And will end with the computer.

I am referenced to a snail,  
I have helped develop character traits such as  
Patience as they wait on me.  
Even today when my ancient art is practiced,  
The longing with expectancy or hope to receive remains.  
I am not always answered, even when I cry out from prison  
But I am a lifeline to many, carrying their heart  
Out of prison and from every corner of the globe to millions  
But I am fading fast and times, times are changing...

Technology today is taking some of our human touch  
Everyone is hooked up to something.  
We've got high speed internet, instant text messages, chat room,  
Wireless remote, CD Rom, DVD, BlueRay, Net Flix, PlayStation,  
Sat. TV, digital high tech, high fi, Wi Fi, and the  
Danged if I know why!  
Kids don't wait around for me today.  
They would rather log on with sexting and texting  
Killing the English language with TMI,  
To their BFFs ASAP while LOLing.

I'm barely breathing today on life support  
And slowly dying!  
I am letter writing, pen to the page  
I am the letter good ol' fashioned snail mail  
Don't let me die!  
I speak for the soldier, the lover, the prisoner  
And a trillion countless others  
Don't let me become just a place in history.

## *Forever Locked*

BY ANDREW

**P**ast and present is the theme and  
time is the king of all thieves.  
Time drowns the past and steals our  
future. Time steals our youth and  
masquerades as our teacher.  
Time is infinite and short, all in  
the same breath. But, eventually  
time will lead to our timely deaths.  
Time's grip is so tight that a  
mortal breath turns into gasps  
in the middle of the night.  
We fight and we struggle, but time  
knows he has us in trouble.  
Tick tock, tick tock . . . goes the  
clock, and that is the sound  
of our fate being forever locked.





*Love*

## *First Phone Call from La Pinta*

BY PHIL

The phone is ringing.

“Hello,” she says.

A recording comes on the other end. “This is a call from the Oregon State Pen. This call will be monitored and recorded. To accept this call, press 5 now.”

Her heart just about pounded out of her chest. She nearly dropped the phone because her hand got sweaty. She gripped the phone with excitement. The anticipation of the caller was nearly more than she could...

Whispering in her head, “It’s him. Oh my God! What? What is the recording saying? Did the recording say to press 5 to accept the call?”

It was all she could do to move the phone away from her ear and focus on the number 5.

“Please, fingers, don’t fail me now.”

## *Maybe*

BY TAREQ

Dedicated to the point that it hurts  
But can one truly be happy without it

Only when it’s unconditional  
inevitable heartbreak attaches itself

Is to love and lost really better  
than to not have known at all  
Maybe.

## *Armoni*

BY TAREQ

*A*rmoni was my pet scorpion who I loved so much. My twin bought him for me as a gift for my 18th birthday. He was an Emperor scorpion. His shell was jet black and he would shed it the more I fed him live crickets. He was like my child. He would be the first thing I would check on when arriving home. He would scurry around his cage at night glowing in the dark under his black light.

Armoni died from a severe case of pneumonia. He caught it because his water tank spilled and soiled the sawdust that covered the bottom of his cage in the cold month of December, and I didn't realize until it was too late.

Just how would I bury my child? I made sure that Armoni went out with a bang. He had a wonderful funeral in an all-white casket courtesy of Harry Richie's Jewelry, and everyone, friends and family, came to say their goodbyes and sign his card. Even those who had never met him came to pay their respects. I had talked about Armoni to them so much that they felt as if they knew him. My friends cooked for the reception dinner and as the guests viewed his lifeless body for the last time, Mariah Carey belted out "We Belong Together." It's funny because it was like a true-life funeral with dim lights, candles around his casket and flower arrangements. Straight Phill's yard and living room served as the sanctuary.

After all of the ceremonial stuff, we decided to celebrate his life because he wouldn't want us to be sad. So, it turned into a fiesta and on the way to the Greek, we sent him down the Willamette River, Hawaiian style.

## *Family Tree*

BY JAMES

*S*omeday  
Though still so far away  
I pray that my dream  
Will blossom into reality  
And I can only hope  
That somewhere out there  
Someone else has planted the seed  
For a similar dream.  
I mean  
I only wish for what others take for granted.  
I simply want the chance to have a son  
So that my family tree  
Doesn't die with me.

## *Other Mothers' Sons*

BY MICHELE DISHONG MCCORMACK

Curious George story before I tuck him in.  
Warm milk for restless nights.  
Hand-made quilt with frogs around a blue flannel edge.

Two cells could fit in his modest room  
With its hand-me-down dresser.  
Two narrow metal beds.  
Two thin scratchy blankets.  
Two metal chests of worldly possessions.

Are those mothers' sons  
hungry,  
elated,  
cold,  
sad?

The 501<sup>st</sup> visit from James's mom  
on his 4,381 day  
falls on Thanksgiving this year.







*Regret*

## *Inmigración*

By PHIL

**B**orn in Arizona, he has been driving truck since he was 17. He is a hard worker, he loves his family, and he provides for his family. He now lives in the Northwest, but every so often he will go to Arizona to pick up a load, and while he's there he visits his brother, sisters, nieces and nephews. Then last week he was "detained" because in their words police thought he looked "suspicious." They even tried to deport him. They didn't care what he said, all they saw was he is Mexican. It really pisses me off that this happened to my dad.

## *California Son*

By PHIL

¿Fun?

When I was young  
You needed a knife  
or a gun.

¿Sun, surf?

You hold your ground  
You fight for turf.

never realized this was wrong  
never thought I'd live this long.

didn't think my childhood was bad  
it seemed normal and yet so sad

I'm still alive and I am glad  
Looking back on my life makes  
Me mad, I'm a California son.

## *Thunder and Rain*

BY JAMES

**F**our walls of concrete and stone  
Impenetrable by everything but the mind,  
Years of isolation and self doubt  
Making reality seemingly impossible to find.  
Raging rivers of regret and remorse  
Water levels rising through punishment and shame,  
Caught in the eye of a strengthening storm  
While searching frantically through the thunder and rain.

A growing sense of hopelessness  
Disappointments outpacing the tunnel's light,  
A never ending cycle of consistent misery  
As though I'm drowning in the regrets of this life.  
Why endure and shoulder these conditions  
Continuously struggle with so little to gain,  
What reasons could you possibly give  
To encourage pushing on through the thunder and rain.

Trying to believe that rehabilitation matters  
Despite years of the system's deceiving illusions,  
Sunless skies, strained and swollen eyes  
Fooled by false promises and inner confusion.  
4,866 days stranded  
Hunkered down and humbled by memories ingrained,  
A desperate search for fleeting forgiveness  
Despite each step forward being slumbered in pain.

Lost in the winds of a runaway storm  
Headed in a directionless tailspin of sorrow,  
Loneliness, emptiness and heartache  
Rough enough today I can't imagine tomorrow.  
No one understands the ironies faced  
Or the inner battles I fight in vain,  
So difficult to move beyond my past  
When it's littered with stains I can't explain.

Seclusion a foregone conclusion  
Absentmindedness a way to medicate the mind,  
An unshaven and unkept appearance  
Walking these halls as though I'm blind.  
Muffled sobs heard throughout the night  
Silence only briefly contained,  
All these tears shed in loneliness  
Only adding to the thunder and rain.

## *A Prisoner's Stance*

BY JAMES

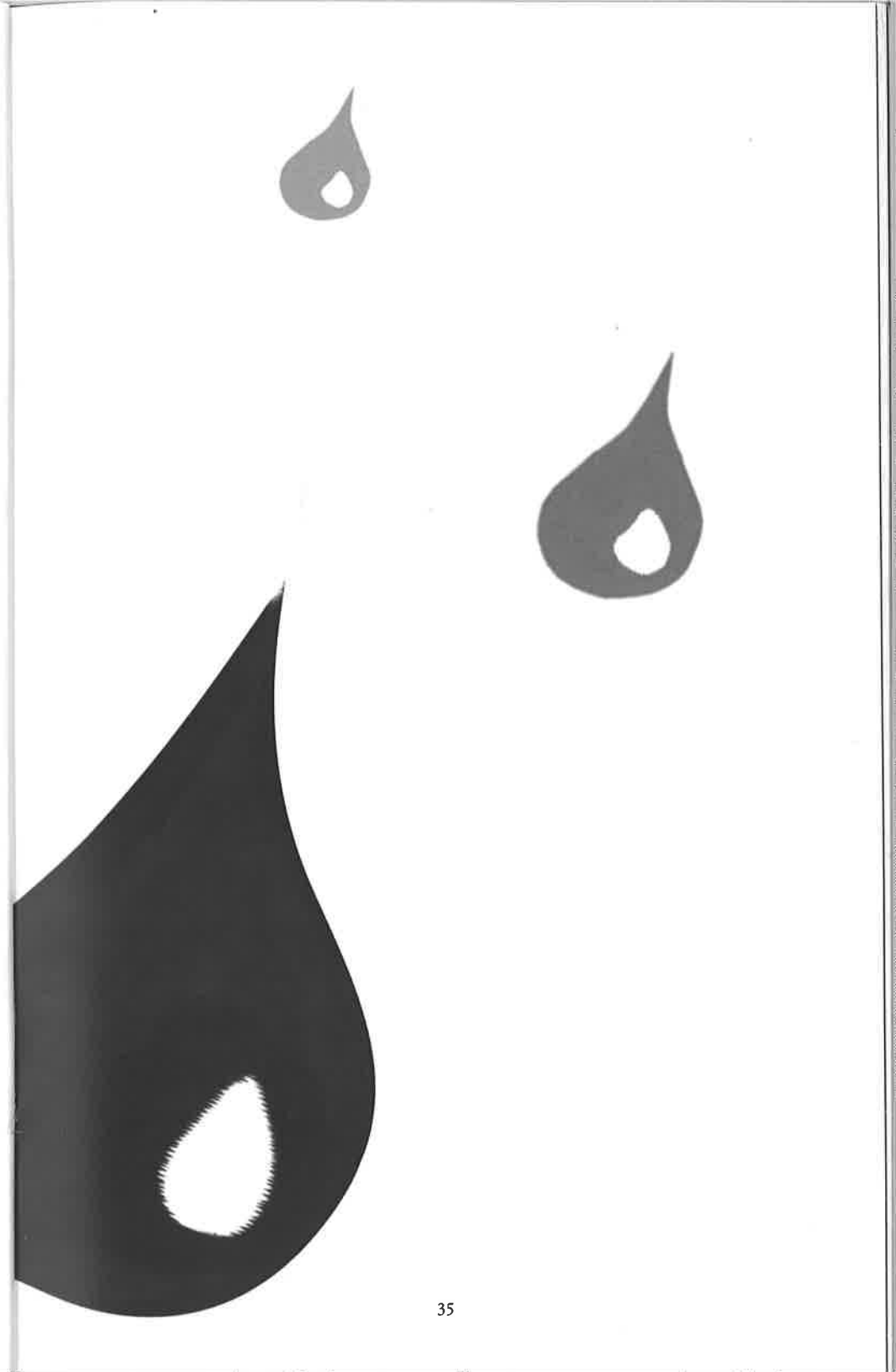
**T**he sun comes up, my eyes open  
I'm still here  
I fold my blanket, then get dressed  
And the count clears.  
I'm lonely, it's suffering  
It's depressing,  
I'm losing, I'm sinking deeper  
I'm stressing.  
Same rules, same routines  
Nothing changes,  
I sit here, I wonder  
My body ages.  
Time drags, letters fade  
Feelings wither,  
Unkept appearance, unshaven  
My body thinner.  
Hopes dwindle, dreams fade  
Attitudes flare,  
Pain inflicted, no one listens  
Just icy stares.  
No mercy, no forgiveness  
No second chance,  
Walks alone, dials but no one's home  
A prisoner's stance.

Things forgotten, my mind slips  
Memories gone,  
I walk unnoticed, I sit by myself  
Composing life's song.  
Wanting love, needing affection  
Someone to hold,  
No one's there, no one cares  
My body's cold.  
The sun sets, I close my eyes  
I relive the years  
I lay back down, still a prisoner  
Still just here.

## *Us/Them*

BY MICHELE DISHONG MCCORMACK

*W*e are us.  
We are them.  
We have created  
a labyrinth  
so complex,  
so hard to find a  
way out of,  
That we may never  
be free of  
the shackles.





*Faith*

## Seeking Truth

BY THOM

Walking through the streets with your eyes and your ears open  
Hoping victory, but you're still broken  
Still no more or no less opened  
Just need a dream, need a vision, need direction homie  
Plus, thoughts is rough  
Can't seem to fit in cause you've lost your touch  
And it's never enough, may be on that stuff  
Pain goes deep like the rawest cuts.

And if you only had another plan  
Another way set straight so you could understand  
But nobody ever lends a helping hand  
So you stay to self and always be your own man  
Tired of the people so deceitful and see through  
Walkin' up to meet you, never real when they greet you  
Wanna smile eye to eye, lookin' at you when they speak to you  
But it's fake, they walk away as if they needed to  
And you feel it to your chest like you're beat through  
Like a disease, it only just wants to make you puke  
You're looking for the answers, and always out there seeking truth  
But still feeling defeated as if it's just repeatin' dude

And like you mentioned, said your thoughts was rough  
Here's somethin' you need to hear, you oughta listen up.  
God loves you and He sees your situation  
Even feels your pain and wants to heal you from this aching  
And all the tears that you've cried, man He saves them  
Puts them in a bottle 'cause they're special, and He made them.  
He's got His hands out and arms wide open

He wants you to trust Him, and He wants you to know Him.  
His love is real, no faults, that's a fact  
A friend so close that He never turns His back  
He gave His only Son for you to save you from the wrath  
Invite Him in, all you gotta do is ask  
Man, I'm praying for you, that you will really hear this  
Turn to God and He will make a real appearance  
He will never hurt you, never lie, always be your guide  
Show you the way, show you truth, and shine the light  
Then when the time is right, you will behold Him in sight  
So you can stay by His side, and enjoy eternal life  
A lot of people got a lot of things to tell ya  
But if you're seeking truth—here's the real answer.

## *As I Am*

BY THOM

*A*s an artist, I could draw what I see  
until I run out of ideas or get tired of the similarities.  
As a writer, I could share a story  
through the chapters, through the pages, through the ink.  
As a poet, this is my dancing rhythm  
words fit uniquely together drawing you a vision  
As a speaker, I could talk about descriptions  
As one saved, I am a Christian  
As one free, I'm not a slave, this is the way that I am living.  
As a child, I am learning new ways  
each day to keep growing in this magnificent faith.  
As a sinner, given grace I stand today  
unashamed of my Savior, and I will proclaim His name  
As a son, I am following footsteps  
even though my toes cannot fit in the steps perfectly  
It's an attempt that I can walk in if I trust.  
as I follow my Father, it is done successfully.  
As I am, here I am as He intended  
nothing different, nothing wrong, not misdirected.  
As the things that I have been  
will grow to things that I will be  
I will always be a servant of Jesus Christ the King.

## *The Statue*

BY THOM

*I* do not know where my home is or who my closest friend is. I don't know which way I should be looking; but I stand here with my eyes open.

I look in every direction, searching to find that light which shall guide me. A chilling breeze grazes my cheek, and I see gray in so many places, even a rain falling in the distance. It is far, but it will come this way. So, I look away, looking for solace, a place to walk, just to walk away and escape the dim depression.

Where is my home? And where am I going? This journey is taking me away; I am walking in what feels like hopeless direction. Where are you, friend? Why have you left me abandoned?

My feet feel stuck. I am a statue in this valley. I want to move, but my figure is like concrete. No longer can I turn. My gaze is fixed in one place. This one place I stand has become my home. I will remain. And my mouth must now become silent. Like a statue that never moves, let the breeze blow over me and my emotions.



## *Reality is Not Always Truth*

BY BEN

Some mornings my feet hit the cold concrete floor thoughtlessly, and I just go through the motions. The bell rings, the door pops, and I drift down the tier past the many faces empty and lost in routine. Other mornings I lay in my bunk wishing I could open my eyes outside this prison cell, outside these prison walls. But on a clear day as I stand to stretch and gaze through the bars of the window, the sun is rising in the east. The horizon is a line of cloud formations like clear smoke with pockets of iridescent colors of purplish pink and fire orange, slowly pushing into the fast becoming blue, overshadowing the guntower breaking through the reality of the concrete, and penitentiary steel and razor wire. Pushing to what? Yes, this is a prison cell and in the winter the icy walls a conductor for the cold, but heating up like an oven in summer time. But, there is a window in this cell the cool air comes in each morning like God's mercy, and I breathe it deeply.

Behind me are the realities and sounds of the prison now awoken, but here at my little desk the sun, yes, the sun, now risen, is cascading through the bars exposing the dust and driving out the remaining shadows. I feel its warmth on my face reminding me that just as the darkness cannot hide the light so my reality is not my truth. The rays of sun are shining beyond the reality of my confinement to the truth of the freedom in my heart given to me all those years ago; when the Son of God's light shined through the iron bars that held my heart captive and set me free.

On days when I cannot see the sun, I still know it's there, just as the earth moves and I don't feel it move, reality is not always the same as truth. Truth is ain't nothing on this earth can lock me up except me! The truth of this freedom travels that 18 inches from my mind to my heart, undermining reality and flying free out over these walls. When I get tired of gray clouds and shadows, I remember and I give thanks. I turn to my picture board—there's my mother and father and there are no unspoken words between us; there is my faithful friend Jim who visits each week; there is Michelle, she makes me forget the stigma I feel from prison about human touch; there is Jeff and Sherrill, who've given me the privilege of being part of their family; there's little Eli, who runs me from one end of the play room to the other; there is Anya, an outgoing and playful spirit; and there is Eliya's beautiful smile and kind eyes; and the rest of the whole family I hope to meet some day, who have let me share their sorrows and joys.

They cannot lock me up! If tomorrow they took away all my pictures and shut me away in a hole away from the sun, my heart would still be unchained, full of the Savior's light and all those I love and free I would still be. I am free in spite of my reality. This is my truth.

## Gray

BY BEN

*I*t's a mixture of black and white  
Pulling me two different ways,  
And I feel like I just can't fight  
Chest getting tight  
Right from the start  
Didn't guard my heart  
And all I seem to find,  
Is rebellion rules my mind.  
I've crucified Him afresh,  
Just by walking in this flesh,  
Feels like nails in my chest.  
I wish I could help how I feel.  
Sadness, depression, and melancholy  
All because of my folly.  
The situation's getting grave like a tomb  
And only He can save because He knew me before the womb.

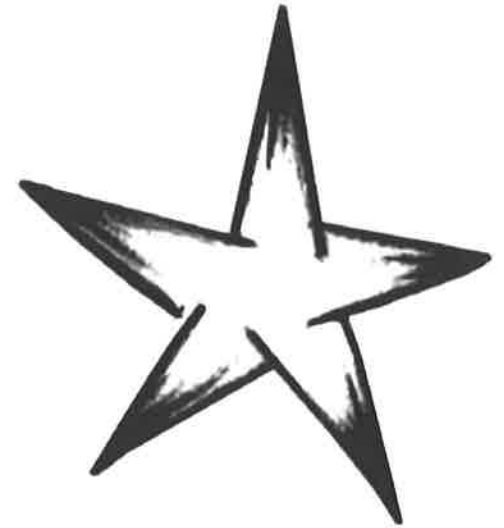
It's weighty, somber, and consequential.  
If my mind is the battlefield,  
Then my sin's left it a wasteland.  
I need heart and mind transplant surgery  
Because I've committed this perjury.  
I can't take it back.  
So, it's gray, gray like this day  
Which is the price that I pay.  
Gray like the paint in my cell,  
And the clouds, that try as I might,  
I just can't put the raindrops back in.

Drab like the color of my faded wings  
Gray and neutral like this prison  
Void and without partiality, aimed at my soul  
How can I rise and seek His face when my sins got me shackled  
I can feel His gaze penetrating my soul,  
Please don't leave me this way!  
But as I look up, there in His face  
Is only grace.

## *I Don't Know*

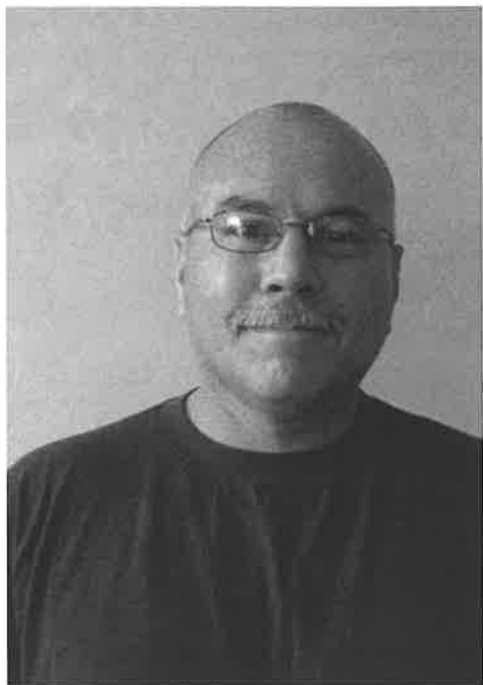
*By JIMMIE*

**I** don't know what lies in the future, but I am sure I can't be afraid of it. If I see nothing but constant doom and gloom, there is never any place for enjoyment in each day. Instead, I'll be paralyzed into inactivity. Then, when the future does arise, not only is it not what I feared, but now the past is gone, never to be again. So, I can't fear what lurks in the future, but I can know each day. Today is all that is really given. Today is your future and past. I don't know what tomorrow may bring, but I am here today. Today, I celebrate.





*Writers*



### *Phil*

I thank Michele for allowing me into her creative writing class Penned Thoughts. This has been a good experience for me. My classmates are very talented and I admire them and have a lot of respect for them. Every class, I learn something about my teacher, my classmates, and myself.



### *James*

Poetry is an emotionally creative outlet that I've really treasured during the past 14 years of my incarceration, partly because it allows me the opportunity to work through my feelings and in turn express them in meaningful and memorable ways, and also because I've created pieces that I'm proud of and will forever hold dear.

Poetry enables me to breathe in a prison atmosphere that would otherwise be devoid of oxygen, and in here, with almost half my life locked tightly behind steel bars, that is the difference between living and merely existing.



*Thom*

This gift of writing both allows me to realize my deepest emotions and entrusts me to encourage others. Through the love that I've found, my only aim is to share the grace, mercy, and love of Jesus Christ. All glory to God. Amen.



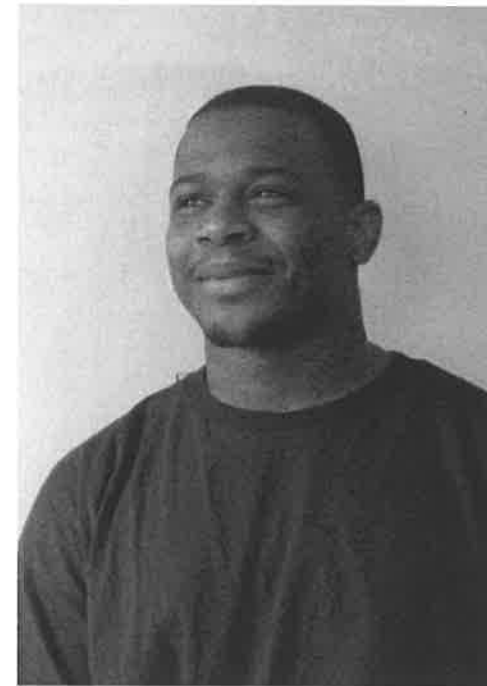
*Jimmie*

I am fairly new to this class, but already its benefits have been a real bonus. It is giving me confidence in my abilities and the yearning to confide myself on paper. I look forward to the journey.



### *Chip*

Writing to me is an expression of experience in emotion that allows me to relate to people on a level that I could never express in mere words. It is an opportunity to elicit a response that can cause change in thought, perception, and sometimes even ideology. It is my umbilical to the heart of those who would listen.



### *Tareq*

Writing helps me get out some of the quirkiness and humor that from time to time become pinned up inside of me. I also write because I like to share things that make me happy and smile in hopes that I can bring smiles to others. Writing also time stamps my thoughts, and it's always fun to see what you were thinking at particular times throughout your life.



*Ben*

Without writing I wouldn't be able to express or accurately articulate what I want to say. Writing is important to me because it is a release for me, it helps me remember things I've learned. Through writing I can pour out and sort out the things in my heart and then share it with others. Over the years I've been in prison, writing, especially letters, has been a companion to me. Writing is also important to me because the spoken word is often impulsive and damaging. Writing is a process where I can take my time and consider also God's heart. I love writing.



*Andrew*

Andrew has released from OSP. The group hopes he continues to write about "roses in the concrete" and other meaningful things.





FRONT ROW: Andrew, Tareq, Michele Dishong McCormack, Thom, Phil  
BACK ROW: Jimmie, James, Ben, Chip

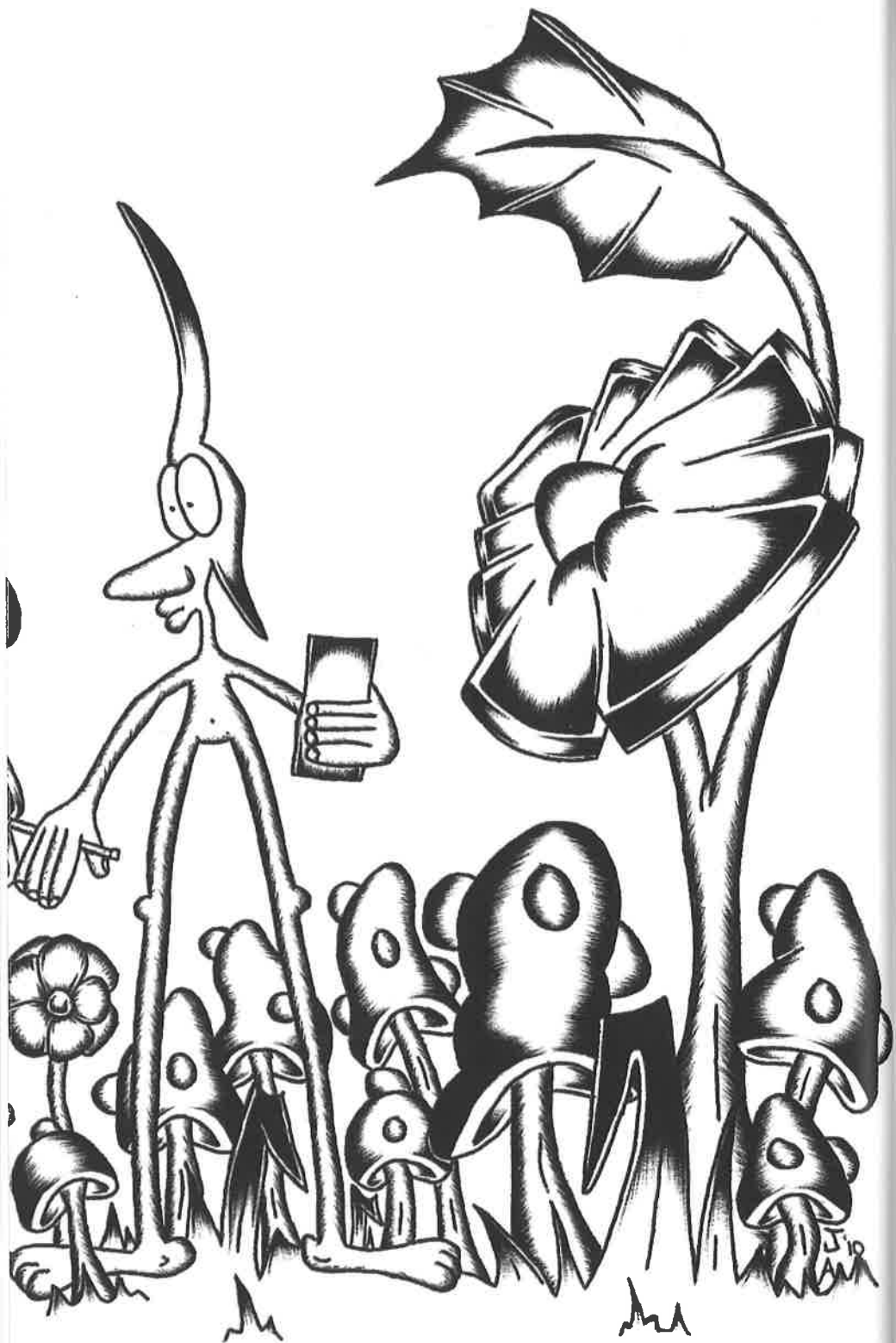
## THANK YOU

By JAMES

The members of Penned Thoughts would like to thank Michele Dishong McCormack for providing us with the opportunity to gather as creative writers. Without her, none of this would have been possible, and we truly appreciate the dedication, vision, encouragement, and insight she constantly provides.

Prison is understandably a difficult place to volunteer, yet Michele has done it selflessly time and time again, and always with a friendly and engaging smile. If she ever wonders if she's made a difference in peoples' lives, we'll always be here to remind her that she has.

Thank you so much, Michele. You inspire us all to explore our creativity until we place the final period at the end of our masterpiece.





# Ebb & Flow

volume 1



College Inside  
Chemeketa Community College

Writings from Penned Thoughts  
Winter 2011 • Oregon State Penitentiary