

25

Witnessing through Memoir A Restorative Justice Tool

Erika Duncan

If I let you into my life, will you not judge? If I let you into my life, will you not look at me with those forgiving eyes? Please just listen. Do not have sympathy for me, for your sympathy I do not need. Just know the words on this page [is] my life. It's neither good nor bad. It's my life.

The women of “Herstory Inside” Writers Workshop are reading today, not only for their intimate group made up of women who once, on the streets, had been rival gang members. Seated on the honey-colored wooden pews of the Riverhead Correctional Facility alongside the women in their greens are members of the grants committee of Long Island Unitarian Universalist Fund, who have come to listen to the stories that have been crafted with rare diligence week after week, as their authors pursued the study of what would create empathy in a reading stranger.¹ On each lap is a regulation pebble-covered composition folio containing a book in progress, whose lines each participant fills to capacity while time seems to stand still in her cell. At one time, these notebooks were confiscated in shakedowns, but now they are treated by the prison authorities as an important part of the recovery program.

“My story unfolds in a small afterhours called Papa T’s. Papa T’s was a backwoods watering hole with illegal gambling . . .,” a new voice joins the medley to allow the assembled listeners into what is affectionately known in Herstory lingo as “the Page One Moment.”

“They keep telling me it’s orders to come outside,” another voice chimes in. “She says, ‘I’m not telling you what you’re arrested for until you’re handcuffed . . .’” One minute the women are laughing with a freedom that makes one forget that all of this is taking place in jail. The next, they are handing around tissues. A guard passes—one of the

sympathetic ones—then another, more surly, but the women are unstoppable. They are writing not only for their own healing, but so that they can be heard in a way that might undo the cycles of violence and pain they have known all their lives.

Linda Coleman and Lonnie Mathis, Herstory's prison workshop facilitators, move slowly, stopping to put their arms around a woman who needs reassurance, as she reads of a difficult moment. Their arms touch for a moment, Lonnie's dark and large enough, it seems, to hold the whole wide world and Linda's so very, very white in this place of overcoming barriers across race, class and culture through writing side by side. The reader they comfort wasn't going to write about what happened with her uncle, but when she began to understand that it would help other people, she decided she would do it, no matter how hard it would be.

"At three months old I was left on a doorstep," another voice picks up, as even the surliest of the guards has stopped pacing, while those prison authorities who have mothered the women have tears in their eyes. "My great-grand-aunt is what I called her. She was my grandmother's aunt, my mother's aunt, which made her my aunt. Get your ass over here. . . ."

As the voices subside, I think of how the Herstory project² began—not in a prison but in the cultural center of an affluent Long Island village hall when I asked a group of women from "the other side of Dune Road" (as one would later name her book) to find a moment in the larger stories that they wished to tell that would evoke empathy in such a way that the "Stranger/Reader" would be a stranger no more. What I was asking, although I couldn't have articulated it at the time, was that the "dare to make another person care" be passed along from one woman to another in every aspect of the writing process, with each workshop member playing the role of helper/listener and writer in alternation. It would take another almost fourteen years (at the time of this writing) to develop the multiplicity of tools that would allow us to engage over 2000 women in what would become a life-changing journey, involving community building, skills mastery and the fight for social justice alike. At the time that I posed this dare, I could not have imagined that soon I would be driving 300 miles a week to facilitate workshops in labor halls, counseling centers and senior residences, while the words "Stranger/Reader," and "Imaginary Page One" would echo in Spanish and behind prison bars.

THE DARE TO CARE

Too often when someone is in jail, the first question that comes up is "What did that person do?" It comes up before that person is allowed a face or a voice or a story that is her own creation. In the case of women especially—and beyond this for those coming from backgrounds of poverty, violence, and discrimination—we must train ourselves to reframe our questions, thinking from the onset "What happened to them? Who are they, and what can they teach us?" What would happen if we were to make a commitment to linger until the story of each incarcerated woman found its rightful space—resisting all temptations to rush toward resolutions, wisdom or repentance that might not yet (or ever) be part of her truth—what might we be able to learn from the process? What would happen if we were to welcome with wide open arms, not the stories we might wish for, but those that come out when we give the permission to drop all pretending? Could this make a difference, not

only to those who find healing in bringing their past selves back to life on the page, but to a society that doesn't know what to do with its own violence and pain?

Herstory was only a couple of days old when I realized the therapeutic effects of helping victims of severe trauma to stay with each scene until it came alive for a reading stranger. For, while the direction "to love one's inner child" has little meaning for those inexperienced in love, the dare to write about a past self so fully that another can inhabit your skin provides those who haven't developed compassion for themselves a back-door entry into accepting the selves they have been.³

Now, take that dare "to help another person to truly care" a step further, to imagine what it must have meant to women who had been incarcerated—discarded not only inside their own hearts, but by family and the larger society? Imagine how foreign this must have sounded at first, but also how it startled the women into a whole new way of thinking and acting. Imagine the dare being enacted around the written word—of all things—in an environment where the majority of women were convinced they had no writing skills. However, I will argue, it was the very oddness of the mandate, as well as the depth of the expectation ("*You can do it! With each line that you write, let me come inside you! Let me walk in your shoes!*"), which, in the end, brought such powerful results.⁴

By the time Linda Coleman and Lonnie Mathis went into the prisons—seven years into the Herstory project—we had a pretty good idea of the power of our empathy-based method with women coming from all walks of life. However, we could not have imagined the sense of family, community and healing that it would create "in a place where," as one member put it, "there was none."

What started out as a single workshop in Riverhead Correctional Facility in New York's Suffolk County quickly turned into two, with long waiting lists on the cell block as word of mouth spread. Not only were rival gang members writing together, but family members—forbidden by prison rules to touch one another as they passed on the tiers—were suddenly coming to know the stories and secrets that had perpetuated cycles of violence and despair. The work soon spread to a second correctional facility at Yaphank, where in a DWI trailer women slept, defecated and ate in the same quarters, and where the program was made a compulsory part of every resident's recovery plan. While there was a lot of very fine work being done with writing in prisons all over the country, what made what we are doing a little bit different was our focusing people on writing a book—a strange thing to suggest to someone who has never written. Here again, I believe, it was the audacity of that added dare that allowed so many of the women to keep writing an actual book in their wish list, so that whether they were released back to neighborhoods where temptations abounded or were sent to serve long-term sentences upstate, the project became a lifeline.

In 2007 Herstory published our first magazine of prison writings that was passed around from cell to cell, as new inmates kept joining the group. It soon became the basis for readings and sales on the outside as well. In 2008 we established our first "Bridge Workshops" as welcoming sites for women who had begun to write with us in jail, who would now have an opportunity to take their stories to the next level with Herstory's full community of writers—politicians, school teachers, graphic artists, teen mothers, foundation heads, nurses, and nannies—a full spectrum of women who might never have come together save for their desire to convert their memories into chapters that would come alive for another. While many of the writers from the prison project had little formal education, what they brought in the way of raw access to their feelings and the willingness to take

risks became a guiding beacon for those who were used to performing to please a teacher, an editor, or a supervisor.

In 2009, through an Education and Activism grant from the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls, we were able to publish a second issue of *Voices* in an expanded journal format, designed not only to give the women whom our society incarcerates a face but to raise the most important questions facing families undergoing cycles of imprisonment, rupture of relationships, and closed doors. We created a series of mini-forums, classroom presentations and readings for students of criminology, sociology, and law. Each time the former inmates had a chance to read to the larger community, they came away strengthened by the response, eager for more dialogue. It was as if our promise, that they could really move a “Stranger/Reader,” came true, so that they gradually saw their writing as true source of empowerment, as the drive to continue writing grew stronger. We made both issues available at a price that would be affordable for those students whose future careers would one day influence decisions about incarceration, re-entry, and parole, further discounted for classroom and prison use, with all proceeds going back to our prison project.⁵

TRANSFORMATIVE WITNESSING/A RESTORATIVE JUSTICE TOOL

“Why read these stories?” Linda Coleman wrote in her introduction to Volume Two of *Voices*. “They are not easy stories to read. They are each riddled with darkness, but also with light—the light of each woman’s resilience, her humanity, her intention to heal and resume her roles as mother, daughter, partner, and citizen in a productive way. We believe that each of us wants to be of use to others! But when life events land you in prison, the chances of resuming these roles, and of healing wrongs of commission or omission, become increasingly difficult. Statistics tell us that 70 percent of those incarcerated once will return to prison. Seventy percent equals a failed experiment in anyone’s book, and yet we continue to throw away the key on millions of parents and their children⁶ who are also ‘doing time’ in their absence.

“We are strange beings, we humans—powerfully creative, potentially wise, compassionate and loving, and then alternately capable of the darkest abuses inflicted upon ourselves or on others of our kind, even those we love the most dearly. Those of us who have not experienced physical violence, abuse, and attack often have an avid curiosity about how others survive it, what scars are left—physically, mentally, spiritually—we want to look, can’t help but look, unless it’s too gruesome, too disturbing, and then we have to turn away. We can’t take it. We’d rather not carry the knowledge that such events happen every minute somewhere on the planet, especially when we are powerless to stop them.

“While it’s true that we have no control over the many assaults that occur even as we read this—each of us in our own way has the power to effect change in both future occurrences and the healing of those perpetrators and victims after the fact. But no change will occur without awareness first. Not just awareness of statistics—those too easily become lost in the fog of numberless faces—but instead through the intimate communications of another, through the various paths that bring these experiences into our hearts and minds. That is the great offering of art in its many forms—to allow us to experience the ‘other’ and to see a part of ourselves in each author.”

In his groundbreaking book, *The Wounded Storyteller*,⁷ Arthur Frank writes: “One of our most difficult duties as human beings is to listen to the voices of those who

suffer. . . . Listening is hard, but it is also a fundamental moral act. . . . The moment of witness in the story crystallizes a mutuality of need, when each is for the other.”

Could guided memoir writing with the goal of empowering each inmate to create her own narrative truth be used more formally as a restorative justice tool? This was a question that Professor Natalie Byfield of St. John’s University began to explore when she engaged 100 students of sociology in three classes in studying the approach.⁸

“In his speech at the Vera Institute for Justice in July 2009, Attorney General Eric Holder implored everyone to ‘concede that [incarceration] is not the whole answer,’” Professor Byfield wrote. “Could this memoir-writing process, based on developing empathy in a stranger, hold part of the answer?”

We hope that these selections from both issues of *Voices* will give you a bird’s eye view, not of easy answers, but of possible ways to begin to search for them as we seek to build family where it has been ruptured, to build bridges, and to dare others to enter worlds they might otherwise have pushed away.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WOMEN FIGHT BACK!

When Linda and Lonnie began their work with the women incarcerated in Riverhead Correctional Facility, they were unaware of the extent to which violence of all kinds had shaped their lives—sexual abuse as children, beatings carried forth from childhood into their adult relationships with men (all too often confused with “proof of love”), and as victims of rape. While the statistics they collected are shocking—indicating that virtually all of the women had experienced more than one kind of violence—the stories that they helped the women to shape are vital in our understanding of why cycles of repetition are so common, regardless of whether the women are passive victims or more active perpetrators trying to fight back.

In the following piece, Melody Roker Sims has used the window of her first arrest to bear witness to what happens to women who fight back. Many women say, “But how can I write a book if I have never learned to spell?” I have chosen to reproduce this piece just as Melody gave it to us, to demonstrate that it is possible to work with narrative form regardless of whether the mechanics of spelling and paragraph placement have been mastered.⁹ Regardless of whether women have written before, they immediately take to the idea of planning how one story will act as a container and another as a springboard for the larger stories that they wish to tell. The desire for mastery of the finer writing techniques comes after one is able to create a moving story, not the other way about. As you read this story, I invite you to “listen” to the deeper structure that was very carefully crafted in several planning sessions before Melody even started to write.

Roll Up Melody Roker/Roker, Roker-Roll Up

by Melody Roker Sims

Bedford Hills has come for you excited but scared and disoriented as I begin to focus I look to see what it is on the clock outside the bars on the walkway 4:30 am. People I’ve gottn too know and became close with are waking up as the guards begin to wake up another female on the opposite housing unit that will be my partner going upstate, I guess. Bedford Hills wants her

too. As I begin to give away my clothes and a pair of sneakers with the exception of my outfit I put aside for this day I pray silently.

Dear Lord,

Thank you for waking me up and Dear Lord please do not let no harm or danger come to me in this unknown place. What I'll soon have to call my home and please Lord protect me don't let me get raped or beat up. Lord thank you for reliving me from myself. In Jesus Name Amen. . . .

Before starting on the ride to Betty's house (Bedford Hills) in a sheriff's car a woman and male deputy are my escorts. While holding my mug shot the female deputy asks me my name, date of birth, home address and social security number. After giving the information she requested of me, her partner handcuffs me and then he puts the front shackle on my ankles which makes it very hard for me to move so he helps me into the backseat of their squad car and while they do the same thing to my partner while listening I learn her name is Patricia. I wonder is she just as scared as me? Is she an addict like me? What's her charge? She looks like a baby. As the officer helps her in the car I notice that the tears are pouring down her face, instantly my heart goes out to her and I don't feel my fear. I can't help but to say too her it's going to be okay, don't cry. She says I'm trying not to while sobbing she asks me have I been upstate before. I tell her no but I hear it's better up there than here the air, the food and although you're locked up you're allowed more freedom. She says promise me that you won't leave me. Well I don't know if I can make that promise but I will promise to be with you for as long as I can but since this is our 1st time upstate maybe we will be sent to the same facility. She asks me what am I in for. I tell her for selling drugs to an undercover cop and for possession. She asks me how long do I got to be locked up for. I tell her 3 to 6 years but my lawyer got the Judge to give me the Shock program. I asked her how old was she. She replied 17. I asked her was those her sisters and brothers in the picture she held in her hand, she said no they are my 3 children. I thought to myself 17 with 3 children. UNBELIEVABLE. I asked her what she was in for. She said Manslaughter. I couldn't believe what she just said. She then explained to me that her children's father was 20 years her senior and used to beat her everyday, started when she was 4 months pregnant with their 1st born and when he started beating her kids which in the end she lost custody of them she made a vow that the next time he raises his hands to beat her she would kill him and she did just that. I wondered would or could I ever commit a crime like that. I asked her how much time did she get and she said 25 years to life. I almost fainted but instead I shedded tears for the innocence lost and stolen from this child and for the childhood she never had. I would learn later that she was 1 of thousands that I would meet on my journey to finding myself again, while at Betty's house. Patricia and I sat there silent, lost in our won worlds as the deputies were talking and driving. To break the silence I said Well Hi, I'm Melody the first smile I see when she says pleased to me you, Hi I'm Patricia. Somehow I knew I made of my 1st friend on this journey but I also knew life would never be the same again for either one of us.

Melody left Riverhead Correctional Facility in time to be a reader at Herstory's 10th Anniversary Celebration in 2007, where she expressed the wish to live as a writer and to train someday to be a facilitator, which led her to join our bridge workshops, where she worked for well over a year. I often wonder if it was the opportunity to write on level ground with powerful community movers and doers that allowed her to shift into the witnessing role. Although Melody disappeared shortly after she was awarded a special scholarship, we know that the writing experience was something that changed her forever. We will not be completely surprised if she shows up in one of our workshops again.

THE SPECTER OF REPETITION/WORKING TO BREAK THE CYCLE

One day, as I was teaching my Wednesday night workshop, a young woman came in and said she had started writing in jail. Now that she was out, she “needed a new Page One Moment” she said. Like Melody, she had written about other things when she was actually in prison, and only now was ready to look at a moment of witnessing, again through the moment of her first arrest.

The Lesson

by Sandy Beltran

“What precinct is this?”

“The 4th precinct.” The officer said.

“Oh.” I said with my head down in shame. I have been here before and I was twelve years old at the time. My aunt used to work here and she brought me here once. Her name was Beth and she was a police detention attendant. She was 5ft tall, if that, always kept a short hair cut, never wore makeup . . . let alone a smile, and she was big busted and that’s how you could tell she was a woman. She brought me here to this precinct when I was younger as a lesson in life to never wind up here. Right now I think it was a jinx.

I remember my visit here like it was yesterday. It was the midnight shift too. I walked in nervously holding Beth’s hand and we had to get buzzed in. I was so small I couldn’t even see who was over the counter. I got introduced to all of the officers and they were really nice. She gave me the grand tour; the cells, where they take the mug shots and I even got my fingerprints taken. Then we sat in her office. I looked up and saw the cameras that were videotaping the inmates. At that time nobody was there yet but soon enough a woman showed up. This woman was complaining from the minute she came in. She kept saying that she didn’t belong there. She had shabby hair, a very sad face and kept coughing a lot. Beth then had to search her and asked the inmate to remove her clothing. I turned my face in embarrassment but couldn’t help but listen to it all.

“Strip, Squat, and Cough.”

The lady was sobbing the whole time. After the strip search was over Beth locked her in the cell. She didn’t let her keep her shoes, jacket or belt for safety reasons. Beth sat down next to me in the office and started lecturing me on why most of the prisoners belong here and what crimes they have done, “Basically almost everything has to do with drugs. Drugs are the path of destruction . . .” a statement that I never forgot.

While we were talking I heard the lady in the background yelling that she was cold and she was begging for some warmth. Beth went to a closet and pulled out a plastic coated yellow foam thing. She kept crying though, to the point that auntie told her a few times to be quiet and she didn’t say it so nice. She told the woman, “Shut up or I’ll make you shut up” which didn’t surprise me because she spoke to me the same way.

I was concerned and scared but auntie reassured me. “They all act this way. They broke the law and this is where they belong. If you stay good you will never have to worry about coming here.”

The inmate kept crying though and she began to throw up too. I couldn’t take it anymore. I began crying and I begged Beth to get her help and to call the ambulance. Beth looked at me with a concerned look and said “Ok but I know the lady is fine and she will be back soon with nothing wrong.” She gave me a kiss on the cheek and told me to stop crying. About an hour later Beth got a call and it just so happens that the lady died on the way to the hospital. I wanted to leave immediately, this place was scary, I felt desperation to run out of there but Beth didn’t let me. She had to finish her shift. I was so mad that she made me come here. She told me to fall asleep on a cot she had up against the wall and I did.

That was a long time ago and now I'm 25 walking in here. Wow. Where's auntie when I need her now. I bet she wouldn't help me anyway.

The female officer came out and told me to go in the picture room. It was just the way I remembered it. As she took the picture I saw my reflection, it wasn't the reflection of a 12 year old that's for sure. I looked drained, my hair was unkempt. I couldn't even smile for the picture. I got my fingerprints taken. The next step was to go to the cell area. Before I walked in I glanced at the office hoping I would find auntie there but I knew damn well she was retired.

"Strip, Squat, and Cough," I obeyed, teary eyed, but I did it as fast as possible. Damn it's cold in here and I can't even keep my shoes or jacket. I'm supposed to be at work right now. This is ridiculous. Locked up in this little cell and I'm claustrophobic. All I can do now is pray. "Oh God I'm sorry. . . . Please just let me go home tomorrow and I'll be good and please don't let me die in here. . . ."

Oh my God, it's so cold in here I'm shivering. I hollered to the officer that I was cold but I didn't get a response. I kept hollering so loud that it turned to sobbing and I got a flashback of that lady sobbing and sobbing. It was like *déjà-vous*. . . . like I could hear her echo . . . like I felt her spirit. The officer finally came and threw me this plastic coated yellow foam thing and told me to shut up.

I shut up and lay down on the hard wooden bench and covered myself up. I was still shivering but I tried not to think about it.

And then a thought came to my head—If she only could see that this criminal was once a child.

"SO IT WON'T HAVE TO HAPPEN TO ANOTHER GIRL . . ."

Adeline Acevedo was one of the first students to participate in Herstory's prison project. The harrowing tale we reproduce here tells of another kind of witnessing, as under duress Addy allows the police to photograph her wounds, to protect other young girls from the predator who has nearly murdered her. Notice how this piece—written shortly after Addy began to work with us—transfers control of how the violence perpetrated against her will be witnessed, as she takes on the role of storyteller instead of the one who must passively stand before the camera. Was it this capacity—first to be witnessed for the good of others, and then to become a witness, still for the good of others—that led Addy to continue writing her story over a six-year period that included time with Herstory, time in two other correctional facilities, and finally, as of this time writing, over a year of writing with Herstory on the outside? Since her release she has become one of the main spokeswomen for Herstory's prison project, whether speaking to religious congregations, funders or students.

I often like to say that, while we all know our stories, it is not until we actively shape them that we begin to know our journeys. I will return to the more recent parts of Addy's journey at the end of this article.

Excerpt from a longer work

by Adeline Acevedo

The detective leads me to a small room with only a desk and one chair for me and one for him. My back is to the door and his is to the back wall. Directly above him is a tinted pane of glass. I guess that's what a two-way mirror looks like. There's a red flashing light in there.

The detective sees me looking up and says, "Okay Adeline, I'm Detective Johnson and this is going to be recorded on video for your safety and mine, okay?"

“Do I have any choice?”

“No, you don’t.”

“So why ask if it’s okay then?”

He didn’t respond to that. Detective Johnson had one of those push-to-the-side haircuts that most men his age wear, and glasses hanging on the tip of his nose. When he spoke to me he looked down through his glasses and down his nose. “Well, I know you don’t want to talk to me. I’m not here to judge you, okay? I have a daughter your age and I wouldn’t want this to happen to her. If you don’t talk to me, he’ll keep doing this to other girls too. These are all girls you go to school with, girls you know, and he’s going to continue to do this if no one talks. A friend of yours was raped by him yesterday. She doesn’t want to talk, but she told a friend that you both have in common—the same one and only person you told. And since neither one of you want to tell, she told. She doesn’t want this to happen to anyone else.”

“I don’t want it to either.”

“Did he threaten you?”

“Yes . . . he said he’d finish what he started.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’ll kill me. I can’t say anything.”

“Oh honey, what did he say to you?” he said gently, caringly. “We’ll put him in jail, he can’t hurt you there. Please tell me what he did to you so next time he can’t hurt one of your friends the way he wanted to hurt you.”

“Do you promise he’ll go to jail and never hurt me?”

“Yes I do.”

I stood up and lifted the back of my shirt, turned and showed him the still angry red scars from the knife jabs to my back.

“Oh honey, God, what did he do to you?” he said, a little choked up.

I turn back toward him, I see his eyes watery and his expression tender, hurt, and his skin a little paler. “And here,” I say softly as I lower my turtleneck collar and smudge the make-up from my throat where I still have white and pink lines. “I have more but I can’t show those places.”

He pulls a Polaroid camera from his desk, gets up, and opens the door. He yells to a woman detective. “Janis! Can you take this young lady to the head? She’s a vic. And she has scars she needs photographed. Adeline, please show her.” I nodded my head and followed her.

When I walk back into the small room he’s sitting there looking at the photos. He puts them down, I guess out of respect. “Is anyone else gonna talk? The other girls?” I say as I resume my seat.

“If you do, they will too—someone has to make the first step. So far he hasn’t hurt any of the others as bad as he’s hurt you, but sooner or later he will.

“Okay, what do you want to know?”

“You have to tell me everything that happened.”

“Okay.”

For the next two hours I told him everything I remembered. He wrote it down as I spoke slowly.



I slept with my mom that night.

“Mommy, you won’t let the boogie man get me, right?”

“Well, if he comes through the window,” she said giggling, “he’ll get you first!”

“Mom, he’s real!”

“No Christina, I won’t let him get you.” She drew me closer and held me. She’d never held me to sleep before. I lay as close as to her as possible. I may be fourteen, but yes, I was still scared of the dark and monsters under the bed. I lay there forever, before I slipped away into sleep.

MOTHERS AND CHILDREN

So many of the women with whom Linda and Lonnie were working had become un-mothered mothers when they were barely out of childhood themselves. Though daring to touch longings for their own mothers—as is so poignantly illustrated in Addy’s turning to her mother at the end of the piece you just read—they were able to begin to forgive themselves for looking for love and recognition in all of the wrong places, leading to new ways of being mothers and lovers themselves.

In *Voices, Volume 2*, Linda writes of how “a coffee-skinned, green-eyed, Muslim beauty, Renee enters a room with the grace and reserve of a queen. It is hard to imagine that she has lived her early years as a child making her own way on the streets by the age of eleven. When she first began to write with us and witnessed how powerfully her words affected others, she asked us one night after class, ‘Do you think I really could write my story?’ I’ve never thought, never believed I could do anything but sell crack for a living because that is all I’ve ever done.’ ”

“Renee never smoked crack, but she successfully built a life on that income and a home for her children until she lost it all. One night during Black History Month, while incarcerated in RCF, she watched other women inmates perform in a talent show. She saw how much intelligence and potential was locked up in the jail alongside her and realized that, as a crack dealer, she had helped to put them there. Later she came to us and said, ‘When I go home I don’t have to sell drugs for a living. . . . I’m going to go to college. I can write!’ ”

I, Me, Who Is Thee?

by Ricarda Renee Diamond

The weather was beautiful. The sunrays were shining upon my face, leaving school after a good day. The weather only added to the goodness of the day. After saying Hello to the bus driver, I headed to the back of the bus. The last seat was my regular. Looking out the window I began to think of how excited I was to be going to the doctor with my mom. I loved going places with Mommy, wherever it might be. I was just grateful for the time with her.

Heading off the bus saying goodbye to the driver, “Hey, Ma,” I greeted her with a hug. Mommy always walked me to and from the bus stop.

Looking at Mommy standing there with her pink pretty summer flower dress on, her sea blue eyes and her pale white skin, she was really pretty.

She placed a soft kiss on my forehead. “Hey Bambino,” her voice very low and sweet and motherly. She took my book bag and we headed home, or should I say to the house.

Before we headed to the doctor’s, Mommy called for Tia to come from her bedroom. “Tia, come in here for a minute, Baby.” Tia is my older and only sister. She had two babies of her own at this point already. Mommy started to speak: “Tia and Mommy’s Bambino, I love you two with all my heart. Mommy’s health isn’t good. So if something were to happen to me, promise to always stick together.” With that said, me and Mommy were off to the doctors . . . her not realizing the promise wasn’t ever really made.

Mommy checked in at the window. I headed for the magazines. All of the nurses knew me by name. They adored me. Mommy asked Nurse Mary to watch over me for a moment, as she proceeded to the examination room.

As I was reading the magazine my mind began to wander. I found no more interest in the magazine. I placed it back on the table. I entered a daze, my mind taking me back to what Mommy said. *If anything were to happen to me.* Starting to reflect on all the regular trips to the doctors, my stomach got an instant knot.

My daze was broken by Mommy reaching for my hand. In the car Mommy didn't look at me once or utter a single word. Silence along with worry filled the car. By the time we reached the driveway, Mommy's tears were nonstop and her pain very obvious. I began to cry along with Mommy, her pain instantly became mine.

We entered the house. I did as I was told. I went into my bedroom, even though I yearned to just be held by Mommy and fall asleep to the melody of her heartbeat. I turned my TV on as low as possible. I listened to Mommy telling Tia she is very sick . . . "Tia, the doctors have informed me that I have AIDS along with a form of cancer. Tia, I don't believe that I have much longer." At 11 years old I'm unaware of what cancer or AIDS is. But I'm aware that it is killing my Mom. This is the one condition in life I never grew an understanding of . . . for love to equal pain.

Their voices faded and recent good memories escaped my mental index, replaced with bad ones . . . rather heart aching horrible ones, my first flashback hitting me. My mental is taking me back to when I was about seven years old. That was the first time I found a dirty needle—my enemy. Myself along with the other children are jumping on the bed, playing around. I'd rather be eating dinner, along with getting attention from Carole (Mommy), but she and company are in the living room "doing what grown folks do" like always.

On the very last jump is when I saw this needle along with what appeared to be a huge rubber band. Looking back now I ask myself, Is this why Mommy was always napping? Is this the reason I was always in harm's way? Here was the answer to my many questions. My tears flowed and my physical was filled with rage. . . .



This year goes by so fast. It seems as quick as a blink of an eye. Mommy is in and out of the hospital, CPS is a regular. It's routine for me to enter various foster homes as she enters the hospital, me being put in harm's way again and again. Tired of being violated in the wee hours of the night by "foster dad," tired of being beat by "foster mom," I decide that I'm going to make do on my own. I won't hurt myself. Me is all I have. I have to take care of me; after all Child "Protective" Services isn't protecting me.

Now school is a faded memory. Smoking weed is a part of my everyday.

I have been watching Tia's kids' father along with other older cats. I was extremely observant of their actions in the drug game. Tired of being hungry, needing and wanting, I was ready to put thought into action, getting money that is. I recall walking in the kitchen, the smell smacking me in my face, smelling as if nail polish remover is cooking. All the other females in the house are in the living room speaking on hair, nails, men. That girly stuff is of no interest to me. My interest is in here in the kitchen with the older cats. I grabbed a mask and joined Poppy at the stove.

"What's this, coke?"

"Yeah, but it won't be in a minute. It'll be crack. It's money and power in this pot."

"Let me stir it. Show me how to do it." Poppy shows me what I think is magic. Whipping the coke around in the pot made me feel like a natural chef. I learned how to do so in minutes as if I was born to do it. Taking the pot off the stove, placing it under cold running water, zoning into the water. It felt as if it was only me and the crack in the room. Thinking of all the moves I needed to make to be on.

"Poppy, let me borrow a pack."

"Alright, but slow down, let me dry it and show you how to cut it."

"Good looking out, Poppy."

“Alright, be careful out there, Shorty.”
With that said I was on my bike headed to the “block.”



I’m moving like a grown woman but at the same time thinking like a wounded child. This silent killer called AIDS has attacked my mother. Mommy cannot speak now nor can she walk—she has gone into a stage of a baby mentally as well as physically.

In between shifts on the block I go tend to Mommy. I bathe her, change her diapers and brush what is left of her pretty blond hair. It makes me feel good to help her but helpless because I can’t cure her. My wishful thinking tells me that the more crack I sell the better chances are for me to heal her.

Mommy points to the wheelchair. She directs me to the kitchen. Mommy desires so badly to be my mother. She wants to cook a meal for her “bambino.” The heart wrenching truth is that she doesn’t remember how. She is not mentally or physically capable of doing so. She sits in front of the stove, her head hanging low in shame. Her pretty sea blue eyes crying an ocean. Her heart is shattered along with mine. I’m unable to think of any words of comfort. The pain in my heart seals my mouth. I lay Mommy down, tucking her in, I lie beside her as close as our two bodies can get. As sickly as Mommy is, she still smells the same . . . good and sweet. My body so tired from being up for days, my mind racing beyond the limits won’t allow me to sleep.



I am a child turned warrior all before my 12th birthday. There is a child captured and held prisoner inside this woman that wants to be free. This child wants to play with dolls, jump rope and go to school. This woman has to sell this pack out to survive.

I’m tired as hell, but have nowhere to go. I go to Ms. Lucy’s house to get a few hours of sleep. It’s a hot spot so of course I won’t be completely asleep . . . one eye must always be open.

Back outside to the block. The fiends are coming so the bread is flowing. The block is moving smooth today, no arguing over sells and no blue and whites patrolling. It was August 31, 1993. The day was going okay . . . sitting on the step with my glass of Remy with some cats on the block, Uncle Ricky walks up to us. No one from the family ever comes to look for me. Before Uncle Ricky could say it I knew it. The glass left my hand. It shattered everywhere.

“Damn, Renee! What’s up with you?”

I can see their mouths moving but I can’t hear a word. I asked Uncle Ricky not to say what I already know.

“Uncle Ricky, please, let’s just get in the car.”

By the time me, Tia and Uncle Ricky reached the hospital to view Mommy’s body we were told it was too late. Looking at this woman in her white nurse’s uniform, my blood boiled.

“What the fuck do you mean it’s too late to see my mother? It’s my mother!”

“It’s too late. It’s too late . . .” is all I keep hearing.

My vision is blurry, my chest is so tight, thought pattern cloudy, “Why? Why me . . .” is the question I’m asking this life that I’m in. . . . “Mommy please, I just want to be your ‘bambino’” is what I’m crying out. “Mommy please! I have something to tell you!”



The very next time I held my mother was in a white box that contained her beings. These last few days have been filled with unbearable pain, wounds to my soul that cannot be healed. The pain along with being lost causes me to self-destruct, to search for comfort, except it’s in all the wrong places . . . on the block selling crack and inside the arms of men old enough to be my

father, with end results being still no direction, and my physical being used for all the wrong reasons.

Talking to this dude by the name of God, figuring maybe he do exist, he just forgot that I exist, too. "God, why was I given life? I'm not living. Who are you? Where are you? Where were you when I was being raped, when my innocence was stolen, when I was hungry and cold? Where are you now that I have no one? I only want to simply be loved." I need a hug after crying out and still not receiving comfort from this dude that everyone glorifies. "Yeah I didn't think you were up there. I'm on the way to my Mommy's funeral. You could at least come with me."

While entering the funeral home I don't know if I'm depressed, angry, or both. As I approach the white box which contains Mommy's ashes, there is a picture of Mommy on top. She was in her mid-twenties and her beauty was flawless, breathtaking . . . looking into this picture my physical cried quietly while my inner beings screamed out loud.

The service was very short. Only about six chairs were filled. After all, no one wanted to arrange it.

As I'm leaving the service I receive a tap on my shoulder. It's Ms. Harris, the woman who's supposed to be my grandmother.

"Here she is." She's handing me my mother in a damn box.

I couldn't get "Grandma" to roll off my tongue. "Ms. Harris, I don't have anywhere to bring my mother."

"Well, if I take her now, I take her for good."

"Can you please just hold her until I get a respectable place to bring her?"

"No, I cannot. If you wasn't out there selling drugs, you would have somewhere to bring her."

I'm thinking to myself, the nerve of this bitch. She doesn't feed me. She won't be my grandmother. "You know what, lady? I don't have an argument in me. You're right. Keep her. She was never mine. Goodbye, Grandma."

From that moment on . . . there was no turning back. This is when I was forced to be an adult, forced to put the little scared child in me to rest. This was the very beginning of my addiction to this game . . . selling drugs, with a weight on my shoulders as heavy as a ton of bricks. I was headed from my mother's funeral to the hood. I needed comfort, whether it be from fiends, spending their money, or men twice my age. I was empty. Sitting on the stoop making sells, smoking a blunt and thinking on everything that had taken place in my 11 years on earth, I'm thinking, "Now what . . .?"

October 20, 1993, my 12th birthday. Nothing is happy about it. Another day in hell on earth. I'm a runaway from CPS, no mother, no father, no nobody. . . . Let me roll another blunt . . . wishing I could be home, playing with the neighborhood kids, singing "Happy Birthday," blowing out candles on my birthday cake. Instead it's only about 3 pm. I'm drunk and high as hell, posted on the block, selling crack. . . .

Something within me this morning wants to go see the house that I can't label home anymore. Riding up on the bike, I pause . . . the sight of the house made every hair on my body stand at attention. Once I work up the nerve, I enter the house, looking around at what was once a beautiful three bedroom home which was so beautifully kept by Mommy. Now it's deserted and filled with pain and agony. Entering Mommy's bedroom that was once fit for a queen made me drop to my knees. From the emptiness of the house I can hear my cries bouncing off the walls. Memories started to invade my mind. I hear the laughter and the cries that once shaped this place. I see the lights blinking from the Christmas tree. I hear Mommy singing as the aroma from her home-cooked meals filled the air. My chance has been taken away. I will never be able to tell Mommy those three very important words, "I love you."

“IF I LET YOU INTO MY STORY, WILL YOU NOT JUDGE . . .”

Over and over, we have seen in our Herstory workshops, both inside and outside the prison walls that when material is difficult, early drafts often come out in a detached or disturbingly skeletal form, creating a map to be gradually filled in as the writer dares to endow each moment and scene with her being. It is in filling out these moments that the deep humanity of the person who is undergoing situations that might alienate a reading stranger starts to glow through what would otherwise drive the reader away.

TyNeisha Johnson was only able to work with Linda and Lonnie for several months before she was sent upstate to do time. Although she was able to map out a remarkable confession, touching on areas of degradation with an honesty that is startling and sad, she had only just begun to take the Herstory process to the stage that would have allowed her to explore bit by bit and scene by scene what it really was like for the young girl who repeatedly left her child to follow the call of her addiction, as she bent in self-abdication both before the draw of her pipe and the needs of the men towering over her.

We know from other workshop experiences that had TyNeisha had time to take the process far enough to have lingered over the call of a bird or the memory of a song, or to insert the tale of the grandmother whose image comes to her so fast we can't catch it, to turn single sentences first into five pages and then ten, as others had the opportunity to do, she would have learned love and forgiveness for the girl she had been. This in turn would have allowed us to stay with her more completely, no matter how painful the places into which she would lead us.

For without this deep entry, none of us are protected, either from our own ghosts or the ghosts of another. This was a process TyNeisha had become increasingly willing to enter, as the goals of the workshop became clearer to her. We can see this in her words when she tells us, “I was told to get gully with this story,” as her confession shifts from the slavery to her abusers that marked her own childhood into slavery to an addiction whose demands overshadow those cries of her baby, so that often she cannot tell whether it is her child crying or herself.

“I really would love to avoid this part of my life. It won't hurt so much if it's untold. But to move on, I must do this,” she continues, as she shows one degradation after another, all coming so quickly that those who can't extrapolate from their own experiences aren't given a chance to “become” her but must watch her from without.

We return to the words with which we started this article, “If I let you into my story, do you promise not to judge?” Do we risk that people will judge TyNeisha, when we publish her story as it came out in her first powerful purge? This is the risk, I believe, of all unformed stories, which is why we started Herstory to help each teller to go deeper and deeper and deeper still, so that we would never have to look from the outside. And yet, TyNeisha here is doing something very particular, as she violates the most taboo subjects and breaks her own silence. She is giving us something in the making that we can only imagine will grow, as the tiny chinks of self reflection expand into paragraphs and pages. We know from TyNeisha that this writing helped her reach out to reconnect with her son and even with her mother.

As we read her last lines, that her punishment will end when she really feels what her son felt, we can see how the quest for these feelings will come into each new scene

and each new detail, if only her life grants her the opportunity to continue with this project. Meanwhile, we have decided that her bravery and courage to speak her hard truths will help others to speak theirs, for she speaks of the lives of so many of the incarcerated women! We cannot have Healing—whether personal or societal—without Knowing. So that for all that it leaves out—as it must—this piece seems to constitute a first step.

Excerpts from Untitled Piece

by TyNeisha Johnson

I can remember always wanting a woman to woman connection with my mother. I feel very lonely in the inside. My mother never said she loved me when I was younger but I know she do. I love her back too, but I choose to stay away from her because. . . . She say things like, “You just like him. I can’t stand you.” “You make me sick.” She doesn’t know how to say nothing nicely.

When my mother talked, I would never look at her. I was scared of her. And I was always thinking of a slap whenever she said something, because that’s all she do is scream and swing. And that’s when I would turn on automatic blockage of my mother. After a while when my mother talked, I didn’t hear nothing she said. But this morning, she wasn’t screaming. She was talking softly, and asked me to sit down. I wasn’t used to this. I felt very uncomfortable. In over twelve years my mother finally talked to me. I was so not used to looking her in the face. While she talked I kept my head down the whole time and actually listened to her. She just out of nowhere started telling me about her past. How out of five kids she was the only one my grandmother gave to her father. I’m not sure if she said her father died or not, but she ended up with her aunt, her father’s sister. She had a lot of kids. My mother had to raise and cook for all of them. All her aunt did was scream and beat her. After my mother fed all her cousins, there was no more food. My mother had to go to stores and open up groceries to eat, right there in the store.

When she finished her story I felt sad and sorry for her. I kissed her on the cheek, and that time I kissed her because I wanted to, not just because she was my mother.



Well, I was told to get gully with this story. I really would love to avoid this part of my life. It won’t hurt so much if it’s untold. But to move on, I must do this.

I can remember when Jaquan was just born. He was more my baby doll than my child. I was 16. A kid myself. I had no woman model around to lead me through this so I just did the best I could. All I did was change his bibs, pampers, and clothes a thousand times a day. He was mine. I enjoyed him but I didn’t love him the way a mother was supposed to love her child. But how would I know how to love him if my mother didn’t show me no love? So I just bared with what I knew by raising my brother and sister. Made sure they weren’t hungry. Gave them a bath. Did their hair and changed their clothes. And that’s all I did with Jaquan. No hugging, no kissing, no nurturing his soul with love. I felt I was doing the right thing because that’s all I knew.

Everytime something happen to Jaquan I would just cry. I didn’t know that if you didn’t give a baby no water when they had a fever and the runs that they’d dehydrate. I’m looking at his box of Pampers getting lower and lower. You know, I’m starting to wonder if he goes through these Pampers, how I’m going to get another bag of weed? I buy Jaquan’s stuff weekly. I know exactly how long everything is going to last, but this is becoming a problem now with his Pampers getting low. I’m not even really concerned about what is happening with my baby, I’m more worried about getting my high on.

Well, I’ve been gone three months now. Not out of town or anything. Just in the woods. I’m seventeen years old and strung out on crack. I’m not even thinking about my one year old baby I left at home. I always hear him crying whenever I take a hit. But I continue degrading myself for a hit.

All the men are happy to see me because they know what time it is and so do I. I feel real anxious. I'm getting my pipe ready first. I'm holding my pipe in my right hand, holding it up high while I'm starting to suck. I won't take my eyes off his hands, watching him break a piece of the crack off to put it in my pipe. Now he takes his hit. His hand is behind my head while he's looking all around, high as hell. I wait to make sure he's really high before I snatch my mouth off to take my hit.

I need another to get Jaquan off my mind. Every time I take a hit I think I hear my baby crying because I'm so guilty in the inside for leaving him by his self and he only one year of age.



I never experienced this before. I'm having such a hard time doing this time. I don't know where my son is. I feel lonely, abandoned, and lost. I never knew what my son felt like when I would relapse. Leaving him with the unknown feeling: is Mommy dead? Am I going to hear from her again? What does she look like now? I miss her. . . . I wish she would just call or write me.

Now I finally know how he feels because I feel like that right now. My spirits are so low. How can I keep scaring my baby like this? He didn't ask to come into this world.

I just keep beating myself up mentally. I feel like shit. But I keep saying everybody makes mistakes.

But not the same mistake over and over like me.

Then I try to make myself feel better. At least, (I think to myself), when I was out there smoking crack, I wasn't even thinking about Jaquan. Now I'm locked up, he's all I can think of, and I want everything to fall into place. . . . Yeah. . . . right.

Well I came to accept these feelings and put everything in God's hands. This process of getting things right is not going to happen when I want it to. It's when God feels I've been punished enough, when I really really feel how my son felt.

I apologize, Jaquan.

BEYOND THE MIRROR/ WHERE ACTIVISM STARTS TO TAKE SHAPE

Memoir is about the past and nowhere is the shadow of the past more present than in the prisons, where one pays for what cannot be rewritten. Normally I shy away from mirror pieces, for they are far too easy to evoke. They exist far too often outside of the context of what we in Herstory lingo call "Book Time," denoting the moment in which reflections are illuminated by what has actually happened on the page.

The following mirror piece by Adeline Acevedo was written six years after she wrote the piece about being photographed. Yet in "Book Time" it returns to that moment of being fourteen years old. Does the reflection come after the violation or before it? Addy doesn't tell us this in the piece. However, when we dare her to place it, she will have connected more dots.

Note the difference in tone and self-awareness as Addy, now free and now working with "Herstory Inside Out," returns to that moment when her life took the turn that left such a shadow. This is the first piece Addy read to me when she visited one of my workshops, although I had heard her read numerous times in prison before.

I stand looking in the mirror. To anyone other than myself, it would be thought that I was admiring my pretty face and beautiful fourteen-year-old body. I don't like to think of that girl in the mirror as myself. To the outside world she is beautiful, but to herself she is ugly. Her ugliness comes from being empty inside. And so, she stands in the mirror, not looking at herself, but through herself. She sees herself transparent like a ghost . . . the ghost of a person that should have been, but never was. She has never felt loved, and so, would not begin to know why or how to express it truthfully to any other. She is a loner, with no good reason to find a life bond with anyone. People, to her, are only good for the time they are needed or are

still fun to be around. She is weary of new people because she is unsure if they will accept her with all the darkness she is made of. She knows she contains no light inside of her and that nothing good will ever come to her in life. She despises the light she sees in others, because she knows they are destined to be happy in life and she is not.

And so, everyday is a constant struggle for her to prove that she is alive inside. She lives every day to what she considers the fullest; having fun in her own twisted way, taking chances because of the excitement value. She feels no remorse for what she does. She can't possibly exhibit any care for anyone, as she can't for herself. She laughs but there is no happiness in her laughter. Only knowing that she causes misery toward other is what makes her smile shine the brightest.

But now let us move away from the 14-year-old self Addy recreated on the page into where the process took the writer. "I started writing reflections on my own feelings sitting here," Addy wrote in a holiday letter to Linda and Lonnie, as she was completing her sentence upstate.

I want to write about my contemplations and epiphanies on what my past has been, my present, and on what I want to make of my future. I want my words to inspire someone else who has lost a child after loving them, to be able to move on without turning to negative influences. I want to touch young kids like late teens and children, so that they never touch heroine. I want to touch them into knowing that anything can go wrong in an instant in the hustling game, to know that a normal average every-day next door neighbor kid can lose themselves to the point of being far gone. And that they can always come back from the dead and stop dying on a daily basis. That is going to be my mission in life, and, of course, to live my dreams and write.

Everything I write sets me freer with every page. I want to be truly free, because this cross I carry is too heavy. I'm done dying everyday. I feel like I've died a million deaths already and haven't even truly lived. I want to take my disappointments and turn them into a success story. I felt very different growing up and want other young teens to know that they are not crazy for going through it, they're just sick. And that it's okay to feel all those emotions and learn to handle them instead of Dying inside. And to have self-esteem and know that they can grow up to be anything they can imagine in this world.

Well I am going to keep writing now until I run out of supplies. Supplies are low though because they took 5 marble notebooks from me, and all my story ideas. I really need those books—it's crucial to my writing. . . .

Could this all have happened, had Addy and the others in the project not found the tools to take them moment to moment and scene by scene into their pasts, with the goal ever present of daring a stranger to care? As she sat in her cell worrying about whether she would have enough paper on which to continue to write, little could Addy have known that in another couple of months she would be writing on level ground with women who were far from the prison world she knew, nor that she would become one of Herstory's most cherished public speakers.

It was on the way home from a standing room only reading at St. John's College, following by a Q & A period where the former inmates held their own with students and faculty from sociology, psychology, creative writing, criminology and law, that Addy and a few of the others who figure in this article said to Lonnie and Linda, "This is the first time in my life that I felt that something I was doing had meaning.

I close with the words of Jonathan Scherr, who runs the DWI trailer at Yaphank Correctional Facility.

At first I was uncomfortable to listen to these women share their lives, fears and needs. But I have come to understand that we all need to hear the words of these women, they are our

mothers, sisters, wives, and friends. The women who raised us, loved us and supported us, even now, deserve no less.

If they could change hearts and minds of their prison guards and the students who could one day be making the decisions that would impact the lives of those our society incarcerates, even as they changed themselves, then they could be quite sure that they wouldn't turn backward.

In the fall of 2010, *Voices*—the journal containing the writings of the women represented in this article—was purchased in quantity by the rehabilitation department of Riverhead Correctional Facility. In a groundbreaking decision, brought about by the officers who had witnessed such changes in their attitudes through hearing the women's stories in formation, it was included in the mandated syllabus for every incoming corrections officer in their training academy.

ENDNOTES

1. An elaboration of the terms and notions that mark the Herstory approach can be found in *Paper Stranger: Shaping Stories in Community* by Erika Duncan, Herstory Writers Workshop, Centereach, 2008.
2. Founded in 1996, Herstory Writers Workshop provides opportunities through guided memoir writing that empower women from all walks of life (regardless of age, race, religion, financial status or sexual orientation, whether incarcerated or free) to turn their intimate stories into works of art crafted so that others can hear. Herstory is committed to providing an environment of intensive instruction which, in addition to creating literary works, upholds our values of empathy, inclusiveness, self-guided healing, safety and the search for social change in the expression of voices that historically have been most profoundly silenced.
3. Duncan, "Lost Voices/Found Words" *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 3(3): 255–276 (2006). Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com) DOI: 10.1002/aps.104
4. "Getting Results" *New York Community Trust Newsletter*, October, 2009.
5. The complete prison journals, *Voices: Memoirs from Suffolk County's Correctional Facilities, Volumes One and Two* are available through Herstory's website at www.herstorywriters.org, with special discounts for classroom and prison use.
6. As of February 2008, 2.3 million adults were incarcerated in the United States, or 1 in 100 Americans. 1.2 million women are either incarcerated or on parole. Of this population, 70 percent are nonwhite. If recent incarceration rates remain unchanged, 1 in 15 persons will be incarcerated sometime in their lifetime. Sources: *New York Times* and Department of Justice statistics.
7. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* by Arthur W. Frank, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995.
8. Byfield, Natalie "The Relationship between the Discourse of Restorative Justice and the Carceral State in the U.S." A paper to be delivered in the summer of 2010 at the International Sociology Association Conference in Sweden. For more information contact Professor Natalie Byfield at byfieldn@stjohns.edu
9. The remaining memoir excerpts that appear in this article are reproduced exactly as they appear in *Voices Volumes One and Two*, only lightly edited for some mechanics such as spelling and punctuation. Our editors deliberately refrained from making major changes in syntax, vocabulary, and grammar, in order to preserve each writer's voice and rhythm.