missive noun
mis-sive | ˈmi-siv |
: a written communication:
LETTER

—Merriam-Webster's Dictionary
The tradition of workshop, where students come together to read and respond to one another’s writing, was lost in the pandemic. In spring and summer 2020, the creative writing course at NYU PEP continued through correspondence. The writing in *Missives*, including poetry, essays, memoirs, and fiction, is a record of that time in words sent outward, across and against the circumstances of separation.
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These eyes seen pain, these eyes seen joy
They’ve seen people build, and some destroy
These eyes seen life, these eyes witnessed death
They’ve seen stories untold, as quiet as kept
These eyes know love, these eyes know hate
These eyes seen light in the darkest place
These eyes seen failure, these eyes know glory
These eyes witnessed unlimited stories
They’ve seen the weak, and seen the strong
They’ve witnessed decisions both right and wrong
These eyes seen poor, these eyes seen wealth
They see the king in the glass, me seeing myself
These eyes seen the future, present, and past
Some things they’ve seen they wish could last
These eyes know bondage, the shackles and chains
These eyes seen history, much hasn’t changed
These eyes know truth, these eyes seen lies
These eyes seen through so many disguises
These eyes witnessed peace, they’ve also seen war
They see through façades, they peel to your core
They speak with no language, they celebrate, they mourn
They’ve pierced through the tempest, the eye of the storm
These eyes seen compassion, and the coldest of shoulders
These eyes they know beauty, for I’m the beholder.
I remember the Hot & Humid Summer Nights with clear skies stars shining bright & awaiting the loud Booms & Cracks of the red, blue, green, silver, orange, purple that would decorate the skies in an array of colors against the dark backdrop of the moon My favorite thing was the flickering of the lighter that signals the start of the amazing display of colors I remember St. Nicholas Park in Harlem, NY, packed with people cooking, laughing, playing games, sitting down in the grass, lying in the grass without a care in the world, just enjoying the Hot & Humid Night I love to watch the older kids & adults clear the basketball court & display all the fireworks that would shoot heavenward then burst with the loud boom and crack into multiple little colors that would light up the sky My eyes & all the other kids’ would be wide & bright Some of us clapping, jumping, & yelling enjoying this spectacular show I would yell to them Shoot the Moon The smells of burgers, chicken, hot dogs would be thick on the air but all I smelled was
the gunpowder & smoke
from where the rockets took flight
I look left
I look right
and everything seems to be at a standstill
with all eyes looking up into space
The booms, pops, & cracks
are one after another
Some kids duck, run, & hide
while me & the others appreciate this display
of trailing smoke
and booms
that sparkle in the calm, still skies
The colors seem never ending
but it’s real short-lived
when all is smoky & littered
Now it’s almost time to go
but before
I leave I get to stand in the center
where this magnificent show took place
under the supervision of my uncle
Hold a round tube in my hand
pointed toward the sky
and add my colors halfway toward the moon
I will never forget, at 8:00 p.m.
on July 4, in Harlem, NY, in St. Nicholas Park,
the display of colors in the sky
for all Kids Young & Old
I added my own colors halfway to the Moon
At the age of ten, Little Johnny lived with his family in an apartment nestled on the second floor of a ten-building housing tenement. He and his family lived in building number six. His building consisted of three floors and held six apartments on each floor.

At ten years old, Johnny’s life was normal to him. At that age, he had not yet realized that his environment, where he would have the best times of his young life, was centered in the ghetto. Little Johnny shared a bedroom with his brother, James, who was just eleven months older than himself. Johnny and his sibling were being raised by their single-parent mother. Because they were boys, she figured it would be okay to give them a certain amount of freedom to explore outside, as long as they didn’t venture too far off. She didn’t have the same worries and concerns she would have had if she had daughters.

Some of Little Johnny’s fondest snowy-day memories consist of him kneeling on his twin-sized bed, resting with his elbows on his windowsill. Little Johnny would gaze out at night, as if he was in a trance. The snowflakes that fell and floated down from the nighttime blue-hued sky energized him with anticipation of the fun he would be having the following morning.

At the dinner table, mouth full of food and all, Little Johnny bombarded his beautiful mother with questions. “Mom, how many inches of snow are we gonna get?” Little Johnny was fidgety and hyper as ever, his little chest rising and falling with every bite he chewed and breath he took. “Is school going to be canceled tomorrow?”

She responded, “Boy, if you don’t stop talking with your mouth full of food at my dinner table, the last thing you’re going to be worried about is school or the weather.” Little Johnny would close his mouth and smile at his mom. Like clockwork, he knew one of her religious quotes was coming. Right on cue, his mother followed up, “Let no man put asunder; I brought you into this world and I will take you out.” Little Johnny and his brother, James, would look at
each other like WHAT? They would look at their mom, and all three would break out in a fit of laughter. They would continue making jokes as they cleared the dinner table.

While Little Johnny’s mom was helping him get his pajamas out of his dresser drawer and rushing him into the bathroom for his nightly bath, she explained that two feet of snow had already fallen and that at least another foot and a half was expected to fall. From this information, Little Johnny was smart enough to figure out that school would definitely be canceled the next day.

That night, Little Johnny drifted off to sleep. He dreamed about his previous sleigh-riding adventures and that he was going to top them with his friends tomorrow. At 7:30 a.m., Little Johnny was awakened by the sound of his mother’s voice. He quickly sat up in his bed, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He slowly began to focus. He realized that his mother was talking to a few of his young friends. All were talking a mile a minute as they stood in the living room, cute as buttons dressed in their colorful snowsuits, different-styled space boots, and distinctively designed winter wool and knit caps. Little Johnny’s mom knew them all very well. The children were respectfully demanding that she hand over their fearless leader, Little Johnny. They whined to her as if she was holding up their natural birthright to attack the dangerously steep hills that rested on the private golf course that was ironically located across the street from the notoriously dangerous housing tenement known as The Bricks (the projects). For the most part, it was more of a danger for individuals who weren’t from there or not familiar with the terrain and the inhabitants.

Little Johnny burst into the living room fully dressed in his colorful snowsuit attire. He snatched open the living room closet, which held his fire-red sled that was his pride and joy. He raced past his mother and his friends. They were hot on his heels. Little Johnny could hear the faint echoes of his mother’s voice as she screamed something about him and his friends being careful. The only thing that made sense to Little Johnny and his friends was that they had lived to see another snowy day.

All five colorfully dressed minors stood on the slippery sidewalk in front
of The Bricks with their uniquely styled sleds. They impatiently waited for the last car to drive past them on the slushy road in front of The Bricks.

Little Johnny dashed into the road followed by Angela, Chucky, Eddie, and Wookey. It was as if when one moved, they all moved. They operated like a small teeny-bopper military unit, effortlessly.

As they stood in front of the wooded treeline, Wookey spoke up, “Aw, man! Guys, we can’t even see the path that leads to the hole in the fence; the snow is two and a half feet deep.”

Chucky wasn’t having it. “I know this path like the back of my hand. Everywhere I step, just walk in my boot prints.”

Eddie and Angela were way too smart to fall for that. They ignored Chucky completely. They all turned to face Little Johnny. He shrugged his little shoulders and said, “Plan B.” Little Johnny opted to make the trudge up the steep road and enter from the softball side. Deep down inside, he knew it was the safest route for his little daredevil unit. He pivoted on his heels, slightly disappointed that they would lose about twenty minutes because they had to take the long way.

The road surrounding the golf course with its many hills was massive. It sat next to a nice-sized lake with picnic tables and fishing docks on one side. On the other side of the golf course, there was an equally impressive softball field.

Finally arriving at the top of the hill, a little out of breath and on wobbly legs, the kids could see about a hundred others. Some were with their parents and others had made the journey without supervision, as they had done.

All the action and movement taking place before their inquisitive little eyes had reenergized the group of anxious youths. Little Johnny took off in the direction of the steepest hill! The gang knew the drill. They had a saying between them: “If it ain't ruff, it ain't right!” Little Johnny, Angela, Eddie, Chucky, and Wookey all stood at the top of the steepest hill. They were surrounded by teenagers, who were older than they were. The teens even knew that a slight miscalculation could result in broken bones. Nonsense. Little Johnny and his crew all hailed from The Bricks. That in itself was a hard life to deal with, facing all of its disadvantages. One
hundred plus onlookers stood in complete awe of the elite unit led by Little Johnny on his snowy day. All screamed at the top of their lungs, “If it ain't ruff, it ain't right!” All at the same time, they took off and dove on their sleds, attacking the steepest hill on the golf course.

These would be the greatest days remembered once the children reached adulthood and they taught their children and gave them courage and inspiration from their own personal life experiences. None would top Little Johnny's Snowy Day.

Baghdad, Iraq, 2005. It dawned on me that I had undergone a change. I reasoned that the transformation happened gradually, over time. With all of the work that I had been doing, I never took a moment to reflect. Perhaps it would not have been profitable for me to contemplate the nature of the job or how it affected me; it was only important to do it. By the day that I experienced a revelation concerning my emotions, or lack thereof, I speculate that the change had been underway since several months prior.

It started in 2004, in Taji, Iraq. I was a soldier in the United States Army, attached to the Third Infantry Division. My unit was sent to Taji from Baghdad to suppress an insurgency. We stayed several months and sustained a significant number of casualties. We were not facing an enemy
that we could engage in combat with. Most often, the enemy did not reveal himself. The enemy would deploy improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs, pronounced v-bids), missiles, mortars, and sometimes small-arms fire. The enemy’s method of warfare was very effective.

IEDs would be buried in the road, so that you would drive directly over them, or they would be along the side of the road, disguised, with the blast directed toward the road. They were in bags of trash, or dead animals, or anything else under the sun. IEDs were simplistic in construction; they were composed of mortar rounds wired together. The bombers only had to dial a number from a cell phone to detonate the devices. They did that from a safe distance away. So there was no way of predicting who was going to attack you, but you knew that an attack was imminent. If you observed people’s disposition toward you, then you knew who was not “friendly.” VBIEDs were also deployed, though not as frequently as the more common IEDs. A VBIED would simply speed directly to you and then detonate. Sometimes it was an automobile that you were approaching or driving alongside that exploded. Missiles and mortar rounds would rain right in on the camp from time to time. You could have been asleep, or in the bathroom, and mortar rounds would drop in on the camp at random. Sometimes, an IED attack, which was outside of the wire, was followed by a mortar attack. Sometimes, the enemy engaged in small-arms fire with soldiers. We were far superior in combat maneuvers. Small-arms fire was desirable to the infantryman because he had the chance to fight back. There were many variables to consider concerning the enemy’s weapons of choice. Soldiers train and train and train because there isn’t any room for error when it is time to perform. Errors cost lives.

Taji is a rural farming region. The roads are mostly dirt roads, which allowed for easy concealment of IEDs. Our first casualty was suffered in Taji. I remember the night that Staff Sergeant Irizarry was killed. I wasn’t in his squad, so I was not with him. I remember when the Platoon Sergeant broke the news to us. I can recall the account of those who were there. When the Platoon Sergeant broke the news, Specialist
Gilkes, a young soldier in our platoon, who would later sustain a permanent, non-fatal injury in an IED attack, broke down. He was especially broken because he had promised SSG Irizarry’s wife and kid that he would watch his back and make sure that he returned home safely. I was standing next to him when he made that promise. I remember it vividly. Izzy’s kid was around ten years old. He was proud of his father. Izzy’s wife was worried. I remember Sergeant Makish describing to us how he had policed as much of Izzy’s body as he could find. He put the sergeant’s fingers in a Ziploc bag. Izzy’s HMMWV had been hit by an IED that night while on patrol in Taji. The gunner suffered a broken back. The driver’s legs were crushed. He would never take another step without prosthetics.

A memorial service was held for Izzy. On television, many people have seen the makeshift memorials that soldiers constructed for their comrades killed in action. Desert boots, dog tags dangling from the rifle, and Kevlar on top. We became familiar with those services. Our platoon would be present. Those closest to the fallen soldiers would say a few words in their memory. The battalion commander was always present. Our company commander was present. There would be a few generals who flew in (on Black Hawks) for the occasion. They would pay their respects, place their coins on the memorials, and then fly out.

Work was work. However, there were bright moments. Children were always interested in and fascinated with soldiers. Whenever they saw us, they would light up. They would hurry to us, calling us “Ahm-rica!” “Ahm-rica!” I suppose that they had never seen Americans before our arrival. They had heard much talk of America, and were curious to find out about Americans. They would ask questions about America, showcase their skills in martial arts, take pictures with us, and genuinely wanted to be around us. We always had candy to give to them. I would usually give each of them one U.S. dollar.

Most of the Iraqis whom I encountered spoke English, with varying degrees of fluency. Communication without an interpreter was not difficult. This was especially true in Baghdad, the capital city, and a more urban region of Iraq. In Baghdad, IEDs were
discovered more readily before they could be used against us. The roads in Baghdad were paved. It was easier to recognize inconsistencies in the road on streets that were paved. The temperature averaged in the 120s during the summertime and reached 141 degrees Fahrenheit while I was there. I recall that the heat would change the tar in the asphalt from its solid state into a liquid state. The asphalt was hot to the touch. During extreme temperatures, Iraqis stayed indoors to escape the heat of the sun. People also stayed indoors during sandstorms. Combat operations temporarily ceased during sandstorms. There was a period of tranquility. Everything under the blanket of the sandstorm became tranquil. You could not see your hand in front of your face, only thick blankets of sand.

My platoon was still taking casualties at a steady rate by the time that we left Taji and returned to Baghdad. Some of them were killed. Some of them were wounded severely enough to prevent them from performing further effective service. For this reason, our company commander took us off of patrols and put us on QRF (Quick Reaction Force). Being on QRF removed the immediate danger of an IED attack, but it was more exhausting. I got less sleep on QRF than I had gotten on patrols. QRF was basically a team of first responders, as suggested in the name Quick Reaction Force. We would post on Camp Liberty/Victory, and we would make haste to aid our comrades whenever the call came in. There were military forces from other nations who served in the OIF (Operation Iraqi Freedom) campaign with us. Together, they numbered only a fraction of American forces. I never received calls of distress from foreign military forces, however, I did see them out there. Some were from places that I previously was unaware of, such as Macedonia. There were also security contractors. They were ambushed as well, and I did respond to calls from them.

One day, we received a call from some supply guys. They had been hit by a VBIED. They guys who were in the vehicle that was hit were okay, except for severe burns on their arms. Their vehicle was destroyed. They had been driving along the road to transport supplies when a vehicle in front of them suddenly reduced its
speed to a stop. When the distance between the two vehicles was closed, the vehicle in front of them exploded. The heat from the blast entered the passenger compartment from their vehicle’s ventilation system. When the car exploded in front of them, instinctively, they raised their arms to cover their faces. That is how they received the burns on their arms. This is the way that they described the incident to me. The incident was minor, but it was cemented in my mind for another reason.

By the time we arrived, spectators had gathered. When we secured the area, residents felt that it was safe to come outside. It was a scene of carnage. I saw Sergeant Blake with a stick in his hand, poking at something that was on the ground. He elevated the stick, and said, “Look, Haji’s toes.” On the end of the stick in Blake’s hand was a row of toes perfectly intact. There were women who were filing out of the house in front of which the vehicle had exploded. They were wailing quite audibly. The woman who was the most animated of the lot made eye contact with me. Still wailing, she started communicating with me in Arabic, which I didn’t understand. She was making an appeal to me. She pointed to the façade of her home. There was pink body matter that resembled ground meat, but not so finely ground, plastered all over the façade of the house. I understood that the woman was a civilian and had not become accustomed to carnage as I had.

As I said, the incident was a minor one, but it was memorable to me. The woman was hysterical, and I was calm. I could not help but notice the stark difference in our moods. I realized that an otherwise peaceful people who were used to having security were now vulnerable to the violence that the conflict had brought to their front door. I understood, but I was not sympathetic. I was stolid.
Bullets spit, students fall. Thesaurus, dictionary, school desk on the floor. Tragedies with our students and teachers, slain on our walls. And that gun was bought from a model in the mall.

911. Where’s the call? Shots ricochet off the wall. Broke his phone in half. Bullet lodged in his jaw. Students barricade the door, teacher dead on the floor. Go to school to get educated. Casualties of our war.

Protest all we want, but it’s happened before. Lawsuits leave you homeless, it won’t happen any more. Change the Bible, change our law, worship guns, don’t worship the Lord.

Go to school to go to the morgue. M-16 in the Honda Accord. Nothing to do, he was bored. Massacre again. Press “audio” and record.

Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, oh my Lord. Santa Fe, Virginia Tech, what’s next? Our school board?
One light has been turned out on a porch of four,
But as you can see, the porch still burns bright, and soon it will be one more.
A broken window pane lets in cold air,
but it could be fixed by loved ones who care.
Our love lives even when loved ones die,
But even though loved ones die, our love will always survive.
You inspire our dreams and hopes and all capacity,
And our strength and character you gave will get us through this tragedy.
So, know that even though you’re gone,
Within us, you will always live on.
So, if we stumble through this journey of life,
We will know that you watch over us, and everything will be all right.

This poem is part of
Lawrence Posey’s novel in progress,
Darkness through the Lights
My story is
one of ascension.

I was born
to a young foster child who could barely
speak English.

As a child
I often witnessed
her abuse.

This crippled me.

Sending me into the world
feeling powerless
which I
sought to compensate
through
conforming to the culture of the streets.

This led to prison.

It was there I espoused
my shadow.
vowing to accept
the beauty from my depths.

The first law of this new order
was the charge
to be the burning to the ground force of
my own story.

This attitude
like an all-harrowing flame
burns as it cleanses
wounds as it turns to ashes
devastates as it liberates

yet I am empowered
through my pain
my pleasure
through my failures
my triumphs
through my ugliness
my beauty
to flower

in my nadir in my zenith
in my prison in my liberation
from breath to breath depth to depth.
The picture I’m talking about is of me (an African American), my sixteen year old, my fourteen year old, and their mother, who is a white American. In the picture, if you’re looking at it, my youngest, who is five-foot-seven, is on the left, wearing a black shirt with a wide rectangle of white with red and black in the center, giving the illusion of shark teeth. His eyes have this questioning sadness as he looks into the camera with a smirk. To the right is my oldest, who is six-foot-two. He is wearing a white shirt with a red and black circle logo, which you can’t see because his mother is standing in front of it. He has a smile that lights up a room, and even though he’s wearing his glasses, you can see in his eyes the same look as my youngest. The beauty of their eyes is that they both get them from me. My arms are around both of my sons, and I am wearing an all-red polo shirt. Their mother stands in front of us on the side of my oldest (for he’s the tallest), wearing an all-pink sweater. Her eyes are also questioning, as if saying, Why am I in this picture?
In this picture I hold dear to my heart,
I look deep into the eyes of the three with me
and I can see my absence is tearing them apart.

I see the questioning in my boys’ eyes
after they visit; they know they have to leave without me.
You can tell they hate the situation, and they are asking themselves why.

Is it because of me you have done the things to be taken?
Is this a repeated cycle of you not being here in the making?

All we want is you home,
To talk with us
To walk with us
And, when we are feeling low,
You are there to lift our spirit up.

We have spent so many years of our childhood missing lessons
a father is supposed to teach.
Us finally at the age where we have girlfriends we want you to meet.

Our love for you, Dad, will never waver, this we promise.
Now that we are at the age to understand
that in life, it isn’t always easy being a man.
Let's go back a century and take a measure of time. They called them the Roaring Twenties, and roar they did, with an intensity that still commands our attention nearly a century later. Yearning to escape the shadows and gloom of World War I, people of all ages grabbed at unheard of freedoms. Businesses boomed and a consumer culture flourished. People bought cars and household appliances. A lucky few became wealthy, buying houses and taking vacations to exotic spots around the globe. Meanwhile, everyone liked to have fun, and they did it to the likes of jazz, ragtime, and the blues. White and Black audiences alike partied in nightclubs to shake and dance to the energy of the music. Radio and national media gave rise to celebrity athletes and movie stars, transforming them into household names. Then came the prohibition of liquor. Then came the Great Depression that would bring things to a crashing halt. But the world had changed; there was no going back.

Everywhere you looked, the world was becoming a different place. The face of America was changing. There was a group of people called the Ku Klux Klan. That they felt left out during the prosperity in the twenties created toxic conditions. The group expressed hatred for African Americans and other races of color, such as immigrants. This spawned a decidedly ugly brand of politics. They became a force in politics and emerged from this period with memberships reaching high numbers. Other nativist organizations flourished as well, and Congress passed unprecedented immigration laws. They didn’t want us here. But now they need us.

Let’s come back to the current time and take a look into 2020. I start the same way: They don’t want us here. Sometimes this is met with confusion or blank stares, but often it meets nods of recognition. What I’m articulating is something many men and women of color know to be true. This simple truth has probably rarely if ever been spoken aloud. I’m
not talking about all white men; I’m talking about They with a capital “T.”

Although America is a racist place, that is not why they don’t want you here. There are two reasons. The first reason is economics. If you, a Black male or a Black female, are directing or own your own business, it means that some white dude isn’t. The second reason is deeper. It has to do with white men wanting to see the world through a lens where they’re the heroes. What’s even harder than taking somebody’s job is asking him to give up that lens of the world.

For years, this has been my belief. I felt the landscape shifting after President Trump’s election, with “Make America Great Again.” He is, in my eyes, Ku Klux Klan; 100 percent Americanism; Close the borders, put a wall around it; hatred for African Americans and immigrants. But I have a feeling that the time that they may not want you here, but they need you here is now. Nineteen twenties America was booming; 2020 America has collapsed. Whose back will they build it on this time? Will it be ours again? With the killings and riots all over the country, the Black Lives Matter movement, #MeToo, the COVID-19 pandemic, where do we start? How do we rebuild the country with so much separation and tension from leaders at the top? This country is divided into good and evil. Who wins? We are all losing.
Every day, I sit in front of a screen in bewilderment at images shown by the media in reference to COVID-19 and the continuing brutality against Blacks by a system said to protect their communities. These images propel me to reread one book as if it’s the only book in my collection: A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History by Jeanne Theoharis. Out of all the books I’ve read, this particular book has a special meaning to me. It wasn’t at the genesis of dissecting this intellectual manifestation that I found love for the knowledge imprinted within its pages, nor at its thirst-quenching end, which made me feel proud to be an American. Cupid’s intellectual arrow hit its mark as I sat within a circle at NYU’s book club with the author of what is now a new addition to my favorite collection of books. Sitting in this circle, tunelessly shocked by Theoharis’s appearance due to the stupidity of assumption, I realized that the undeniable truth about Black and white history is that as much as some people would like each individual race to have its own historical meaning, one will never be able to be a part of American history without the other. Furthermore, Black and white history isn’t individual racial history; Black and white history is an interactional history between two racially empowering groups that together make up American history. Theoharis’s insight on Black leaders and the civil rights movement gave me reason to believe that African Americans aren’t alone in the struggle toward equality; and as much as unjust circumstances force us into negritude, African Americans must not allow the empowerment of being right to become a wall blocking our collective push toward equality or become a reason to forget foundational work that was done by great leaders of yesterday.

Theoharis writes in contradiction of concepts about leaders of the civil rights movement as passive and nonviolent. Theoharis argues that the media tries to use the nonviolent
approach of a civil rights leader like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., while painting a picture of Rosa Parks as being passive to contradict the work of activists of color today. Theoharis reminds us that we must not forget that civil disobedience was important during that time. And even though I wholeheartedly agree with Theoharis when it comes to the role of civil disobedience, I also believe that there is a difference between civil disobedience and community destruction.

Being a product of Harlem gave me firsthand experience on what it feels to be Black in America. I feel that being Black in America comes with a price that is too costly for a lifetime. I say this for the fact that many Black leaders of yesterday never had the chance to see their hopes, wishes, and dreams come to fruition, nor did they believe they would during their lifetime. However, knowing the work that needed to be done for improvement of self and betterment of their people in every aspect of life, they worked endlessly to fight against the inequalities and injustices that were affecting all. Furthermore, the work of the Black leaders of yesterday was internally constructive to both themselves and their people. Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and many other Black slaves didn’t just envision freedom for self; their vision was revolutionary, to the point of emancipation for all people of color. To imagine the show of selfishness taking place in the form of violence and destruction as an outcome of the work of our great leaders of yesterday, places me in thoughts of outcomes to my own work toward change.

I wish not to dwell much on the cowardice shown by law enforcement against people of color for the fact that my words will be wasted on a history of brutality suffered by my people. However, in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois,

*Nevertheless, out of the evil came something of good—the more careful adjustment of education to real life, the clearer perception of the Negroes’ social responsibilities, and the sobering realization of the meaning of progress.*

In these sad times for mankind, we must not forget the progress that America has made so far. The Negroes need to understand that our social responsibility isn’t in seeking
pity, and that every time we use an isolated situation between a Black and white person as an act of racism we are doing just that. I’m not trying to say that racism doesn’t exist or that people of color aren’t subjected to harsher social treatment than white Americans. What I’m saying is that harsh treatment isn’t in the context of racism as much as it is in the context of class, where people of color are disproportionately representing the poor.

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., ten days after speaking out against the Vietnam War, delivered a speech at Stanford University titled “The Other America.” Through this speech, King addressed the issues of race, poverty, and economic justice, or should I say injustice. It is here that I would like to expand on the racial division between Black and white in the context of class. King said,

*One America is beautiful for situation. And, in a sense, this America is overflowing with the milk of prosperity and the honey of opportunity. This America is the habitat of millions of people who have food and material necessities for their bodies; and culture and education for their minds; and freedom and human dignity for their spirits.*

This America that King is referring to is white America, where the opportunity for youth development and adult success is much greater than that of its so-called Black “counterpart.” In white America, crime, poverty and inadequate living conditions are close to nonexistent in comparison to that of Black America. As King states:

*In this America, millions of people experience every day the opportunity of having life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in all of their dimensions. And in this America, millions of young people grow up in the sunlight of opportunity.*

I must admit that there are more interracial communities in modern times in comparison to when King spoke these enlightened words. However, there is much work needing to be done, and without any sensitivity to the idea of human suffering from
which Black America has come, white America, with that strength in which it took to hold Africans in bondage, needs to openly admit to its actions of hate by producing one America bursting with love. Money has taken away the human affection of love and replaced it with a heart of capitalism, and there is no way that African Americans can start to bridge the gap within wealth without an economic restart.

White America has had a four-hundred-year economic head start that generated communities separated within a bubble of prosperity which has been unmatched by any other ethnic group. If America was to remain shut down as it has been since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, white America will be affected just as much as the air to a fart; the initial shock will be devastating, but once realization of economic wealth kicks in, white America will be laughing at the world. Effects of an economic shutdown will in no way hinder quality of life within white America in the context of present survival and human development. On the other hand, Black America, whose foundation has been built on broken promises of freedom and liberty, has suffered generation after generation from the suction of a socially vacuum-cleaning white society, to the point of mental inadequacy and self-defeating motivation. This other America, as King states, “has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair.” This fatigue of despair is what becomes actions of desperation. The crying out for a better quality of life, the hoping for equality in social treatment, youth development, housing and systematic relief falls on the deaf ears of a system that relies on a dehumanizing quality of treatment toward Black America to enhance images of purity behind the ideas of whiteness.

To enhance these ideas of whiteness, the media continues to paint pictures of deception that not only cover up systematic malpractices suffered by people of color but also showcase the way African American communities bleed. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was set to believe that this infectious disease was the outcome of Chinese scientists’ carelessness; then the statistics came. They showed that COVID-19 was disproportionately
infecting communities of color. As tension grew behind this ambiguous discovery, discourse takes place in the form of two white individuals who weren’t charged five months after the public killing of a Black man. As this story begins to gain momentum, Bam! Discourse comes in the form of social gatherings in noncompliance with COVID-19 restrictions. The non-compliance with government rules and regulations is highlighted within the media. Bam! Black America is hit with the reality of the continuance of police brutality. This reality sparked a movement for justice against the inhuman treatment of Black people by law enforcement. The force behind this movement is referred to as Black Lives Matter.

My feeling toward this Black Lives Matter movement places me on a list of cultural betrayal because I’m not a fan of this movement, for many reasons, and that feeling intensified at the show of disrespect toward our leaders of yesterday in the form of riots. Our leaders of yesterday and their nonviolent approach were the driving force behind many positive outcomes. King felt that a nonviolent approach was beneficial and a potent weapon for his people, and he states, “I’m absolutely convinced that a riot merely intensifies the fears of the white community while relieving the guilt. And I feel that we must always work with an effective, powerful weapon and method that brings about tangible results.” That effective and powerful weapon today comes in the form of African Americans who sit in office quietly as their coworkers strategically keep the chains on people of color.

We are living in times with an enriched and more educated Black America, but where has that wealth and education taken us? Over my youthful years of growing up in a neighborhood of poor-quality condition, I’ve seen many positive role models within my community succeed on an economic level and take that success to areas of whiteness; while sitting on a throne of transparency, they look back at the soil from which they came with eyes of pity instead of a revolutionary vision. Many children of the ghetto are subjected to idolize individuals to whom any notion of an American dream comes in the form of criminality. I speak for the child within when I say that
many successful Black individuals at one time could be seen on a weekly if not daily basis on the block I grew up on, 142nd Street between Seventh and Lenox Avenues, in Harlem. Now their presence is close to nonexistent. The only thing left for the children of the ghetto to look up to are gangs and drug dealers. Speaking for that child within, I wished that, in the time of hopelessness and confusion, I was able to talk to someone who was a member of the social-obedience club. To take all the resources and wealth attained through community love and respect out of the neighborhood only shows the lack of respect we have for each other as Black people; so why care when we are mistreated outside of our race or community?

It isn’t that I don’t stand by the side of my people when it comes to fighting against national discrimination of people of color, for I’d be a fool to not want to show the world the importance of our existence. However, Black Lives Matter is a slogan more suitable for the internal work that needs to be done within African American communities. While many African Americans are bravely fighting for equal treatment toward people of color, Black lives daily are being taken by Black lives. Not only are African Americans killing themselves presently in the physical, the mental damage of killing one another is hazardous to the development of our youth and dangerous to the safety of our children.

The problems that African Americans communities face today aren’t in the context of racism, for we are living in times when money removes all barriers of colors. As King states, “Probably the most critical problem in the other America is the economic problem.” So why do we continue to place our focus on racism and not look at the disproportion of wealth in America? If Breonna Taylor was Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and the police raided her house, would the outcome be the same? The funny part about the situation in my opinion is that I think they probably would have called first, whether at the home or the place of employment. We must not remain blinded to the fact of class, that African Americans are the highest representors of the poor and are subjected to poor quality of treatment by America as a whole.

We have seen tremendous growth
in the way white Americans treat people of color, so why are we singing the same tunes of yesterday? In *Black Reconstruction in America*, W.E.B. Du Bois talks about the underrepresentation of African Americans within the United States government: “In no other civilized and modern land has so great a group of people, most of whom were able to read and write, been allowed so small of a voice in their own government.” This small voice that Du Bois is referring to is that African Americans at the time had no leaders in government positions—no legislators, state officials, judges, or law enforcement. Presently, that is not an excuse for people of color. King spoke of the Black voice in a different context than Du Bois when King said “a riot is the language of the unheard.” The fact that activists today are supporting their pugnacious responses to injustice by quoting King is disrespectful in the representation of a very important icon in American history. The voices of yesterday spoke loud and clear for all to hear and their voices were so loud that it won people of color a seat in the White House. But what has that done? Wasn’t it during Obama’s presidency that Black Lives Matter found its genesis? African Americans are being heard by the ears of whiteness—and instead of directing their grievances to tackle the problem presented in class, we choose to agitate our unhealed wounds of yesterday.

Furthermore, the media whenever possible continues to add fuel to the idea of racism to shift discourse on the real problem in America presented in class. The disproportion of wealth in America is the driving force behind many of our social problems, yet we are too green as a people to buy into this notion. If we took a more educated look at how money has changed the way we love, we would see that we disvalue love by placing a dollar sign on it.
It’s been over twenty years we’ve known each other,
A bond that is strong as sister, brother; we been lovers.
What we are is bigger than any dispute,
To continue to be mad, there is no excuse.
Once lovers and even after, I always wanted to be friends,
And even if we have no one, we can be there for one another until the bitter end.
Can’t you see all we been through,
Here we are, me and you.
Why can’t you allow what we are to be?
That no matter what life throws at us, it’s you and me.
I care about you when you believe no one do,
Even though we are not together, you will always be my boo.
What other relationships of ours been over twenty years,
What friends do we call so we can go share some cheers?
This isn’t about the kids we have.
It’s about the time that has passed.
Can’t you see I’m fighting to hold on to this bond,
Knowing that you’ll never again be purely mine.
No matter what you in life stumble upon,
A friend in you, a friend in me, can be an everlasting bond.
As I toss and turn, sparrows chirp continuously, as though they are saying, “Hurry, hurry! Wake, wake! It’s time to greet Your Grace.” No matter my condition, hungover, unpleasant, or exhausted, I am up at 7:00 a.m. with one person on my mind. She is the last person I think of before I lie to rest, the first person on my mind as I rise and stretch, wondering, Did she wake in time to prepare for work? Instinctively, every morning, at or about 7:00 a.m., I gave her a call. Most mornings, she wouldn’t pick up at all. Phone pressed to my face, eager to say, “Good day, Your Grace,” was the most rectifying way to start my day, especially if her eyes were sore,
voice hoarse from displaying her discontent the night before. According to where her car was parked
I was seated at either one of my windows,
longing for her manifestation to enter my frame.
Nikkiya Burke is my angel’s name.
If we were on the phone with one another,
she would glance up at my window,
blow a kiss, wave hello.
I would do the same, as she smiles.
Mines is caught and placed upon her heart.
7:00 a.m. these days,
unknown birds chirp the same—repeatedly
but not as fiendishly.
Could it be that they’ve only heard of Nikki
and rarely see Nikki?
Or could it be this abnormal scenery?
Cement-block enclosure,
Through this window, bars obscure views of barbed-wire gates.
Thank God, on my heart, I etched your face.
Good day, Your Grace.
A glimpse through your paneless windows
I see you in your purest form
A sight to behold as if love tales told
My nervous shivers in the frostbitten cold
I hold you dear, your hopes and your dreams become my own
Possessed by a carpenter’s soul, I build you up
Demolishing the crumbing walls, your defenses fall
What a sight to find
Life’s mysteries drifting at sea
Sails of chance propelled by arbitrary winds
To witness the rainbow glisten with a canary’s song
No matter the age, it will never change
In her soulful windows
Behold the beauty’s eyes
Think of a sailor’s despair being lost at sea: the thirst, hunger, and the mental fatigue of not knowing when you will surely reach your salvation. Time becomes an ellipsis of its true meaning. The days become weeks, the weeks become months, and the months become years. The days drag perceptibly in the acuity of infinitude. The sailor finds himself in the pose of the dead man. The sun relentlessly beats down on him as his dried and cracked white frothy mouth is in a desperate, enervate search for water. He begins to lose hope, as he relentlessly prays for his salvation by land or death. Only when the sun sets does his faith set in, as he looks to the heavens. The constellations shine brilliantly down on him. Hope fills his spirits as he catches a glimpse of a flicker of light as it cast itself upon the sails. What was that? he thinks, perhaps a figment of his imagination. Again and again, the flicker of light radiates across the sails. Hope begins to fill his very being as he musters up every last bit of strength in his weathered, malnourished body. He grasps on to the rope hanging off the side of the ship and inches his way up, inch by inch, until he studsies himself upon his feet as he peers over the starboard. To witness that brilliant light as it flickers off in the distance blinding the stars above. Is it what he thinks it is? Tears begin to stream down his sun-bitten cheeks as realization sets in. His prayers have been answered by the prowess of a luciferin man whose sole purpose in life is to guide the misguid ed through the darkness, meanwhile finding the novelty in the salvation within the radiant light of its keeper.

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Throughout history, wisdom is a vague but sought-out symbol of growth, an inheritance which shall be passed down generation to generation through the fabled stories of old. The sanctity of an elder’s mind is the conduit: It is a subconscious and necessary trait to pass down their
morality to the new generation. They have lived an unimaginable life with adventure, excitement, and suffering through the trials of their timely development. They tell their stories, in which they are forever preserved, to promote their immortality through the nexus of the memories and stories they convey.

In youth, we tend to fail to take advantage of the tales and experiences they so desperately tell and pass down. We think we know it all; we claim we have heard their stories a hundred times, we don’t take the time to vigorously listen, inadequately decoding the teachings that they so artfully mystify in their narrations. Elders’ narrations are beautifully articulated, in such a way as they tell their stories with such a soulful fixation. As the story commences, we roll our eyes the moment they begin to open up their mouths. They are professed as foreigners and as if they speak in a riddled tongue. A poignant mistake to be blind and deafened to the historic inquiry of their vast experiences and wisdom, especially now that the world is changing.

In other times and cultures, our elders were immortal idols whom many would scale the peaks of mountains to seek out. We would speak of them as we conversed around stoked campfires roasting marshmallows in the blaze of pageantry. In modern days, the old and the wise are packed tightly in nursing homes to begin the process of being mortally forgotten. The context between right and wrong is disseminated through the narrations of commercials, politicians, and other marketing strategies that encourage the propulsion of our ideals and conception on how life works by the indulgence of the narrator’s agenda. This is sadly false and misguided. This contradicts the elders’ lessons, whose stories were never meant to control but to provoke thought and creativity to help guide the moral compasses in the perpetual trials of life. Elders have perfected the proverbial art of “show don’t tell.” The youth surely but slowly forget the wisdom of an elder’s past because it is always easier to be told something than it is to learn it. By doing this, we have slain our forebears, their immortality stripped by forgetting those who are gone.

I’ve have been told I am different, a vague but simplistic statement
withholding an explanation as to why. I used to hate that about me. In the years of my youth, I felt I needed to be like everyone else. *That’s what everyone is doing; Johnny up the block has one, I want one too.* An image and guiding perception of social status. Although I wanted to be like everyone else, my variance would always rise to the surface, and I would find myself in trouble because they didn’t like my credo on how the world should be. When you’re different, you learn to fight and survive, forever surrounded by violence and conflict. The scars on my body tell a story only I know. This is my reminder of who I am. Would I change anything about my past? Preferably not, only because I strongly believe through suffering, the world becomes illuminated, hence the variance I spoke of earlier. Once upon a time, I used to think it was a curse, but now I know it is a blessing in disguise, because there is nothing worse than to be monotonous and to misplace your character along the way. The point is, while everyone else ignores the wise, I embrace the knowledge and life lessons of the hoary.

Although I was a problematic child, one who found himself in trouble most of his childhood, I would find escape at my mother’s workplace, a nursing home. She has worked there for probably twenty years now. As a punishment for being kicked out of school, my mother would make me volunteer with the old folks. At first, I would coast down the halls riding a wheelie in one of the many wheelchairs to pass the time. I would find myself contemplating my hypothetical suicide by placing the imaginary finger-gun to my temple: *Just kill me now,* I thought. I don’t care who you are, even if you are being financially compensated, no one wants to wipe spit and throw up off old people’s faces. After a while, I would find myself getting tired of the fights and misguided moral compasses of everyone in my school. I would purposely get in trouble to just go hang out at the nursing home. The stories of the old fascinated me, because they contradicted everything modern society labeled as the norm, but not only that, the drama and suspense always had me hooked. One thing I noticed with the elderly is that there at a point in their lives where there is no need to sugarcoat anything. They speak of their adventures with all the women
The stories are told so beautifully. It makes you want to have it all, until the end, when you see their sad faces shift to the floor and gaze to the ceiling, as if in search of the North Star. Their eyes filled with regret and love lost. This is the most important part of the story, the lesson. He goes on to tell you about the one that got away because he fucked up, and it turns out to be that beautiful girl he spoke so highly of during the story of dogging women. But in that story, he speaks in such beautiful detailed descriptions about her, the elegance in the way she danced, the color of her hair and the way she would caress the hair from her face, the dress she wore that night, most of all, he speaks of the way she looked at him with her beautiful blue eyes with her very soul and passion gleaming through. The man who told this particular story would go on to tell you if you ever find someone who is willing to put up with your bullshit, never let her go. Let me remind you, I’m a kid, so I roll my eyes and say, "Well, I have to go help my mom," my excuse to bail out as I roll out of the man’s room in the wheelchair, popping a wheelie as I break the entrance into the hall. This is a memory I have almost forgotten, but the lesson is what provokes and preserves the immortality of his wisdom.

Now, to be truthful, I never took this man seriously. Sometimes, when someone says something is black you don’t believe them until someone slaps you square in the face with it. It took the wisdom of another man for me to truly understand the lesson the man from the nursing home was trying to teach me. Interestingly, I would meet this man in the most logical place to learn a lesson such as this one: a golden anniversary party. I was young, twelve or maybe even younger than that. Whatever the case may be, what is important is not my age but the moment I was slapped square in the face with a life lesson. It was truly amazing for me to think how someone could remain together for so long and never break up, remain faithful, just to remain together through the tribulations of life, through thick and thin. I remember seeing how happy
the couple was together; all the relationships I had seen in the past were toxic and would never last. After we all sat together to feast, they told stories of the first time they met and the cheesy pick up line he used to get her. The table laughed and drank the evening away until their faces were flushed red from the toxicity of red wine. Being the mischievous kid that I was, I managed to sneak a few glasses when the adults weren’t watching.

After a while, all the men gathered around telling war stories, jokes, and the peak moments of their youth. I listened open-eyed as my uncle asked the man who was married for fifty years what the secret to a good healthy marriage is. The man cleared his throat as he spoke. “I would say you need to love her mind, listen to her, build each other up—it’s a mutual partnership. Sure a pretty face, a nice ass, and a pair of tits is nice for a while, but I don’t care how hot or sexy someone is, if her mind isn’t right, someone, somewhere, is going to be sick of her shit.” The men roared with laughter, but after the laughter subsided, he continued on to say, “As we get older, we lose our youth and beauty. Now, let me ask you this: What is the one thing that never changes on a woman no matter how old she gets?” The men joked and said “her attitude,” with sly little cracks and chuckles. He responded with a half-smile and with a subtle shake of his head. “No, the one thing that never changes on a woman no matter how old she gets is her eyes. They are the windows to her mind. So, when I look her in the eyes, I see her, I truly see her.” He smiled at the mere thought of her alluring graces. The lesson is, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

The stories of old I shall hold dear; they are my souvenir of morality when drifting in the sea of darkness, as I am illuminated by the light cast from the immortal lighthouse.
Love is an expression of our feelings toward another reinforced by actions of concern that present themselves even in the most troubling times. Love is an emotion given freely that is mostly taken for granted. When thinking of love, we sometimes guard ourselves from the possibility of hurt it can cause. We unconsciously build a wall around love’s definition to freely be expressed in an attempt to guard our feelings. In search of love expressions (giving or receiving), one can sometimes break down this wall which allows them to encounter synthetic representations of love’s wonderful meanings. When encountering these moments which falsely demonstrate love’s meanings, imitation love consumes the energy that’s needed to love oneself. Synthetic love manifests into a mirrored ideology of what is being received to the point that its recipient imitates its practices in relations with others. One becomes so caught up in the expressions of this synthetic idea of love and the thought of its absence, whether it’s being taken away or given away, that one becomes overwhelmed with lustful desires to cause harm, mentally or physically. They say that there’s a thin line between love and hate, and what a thin line it can be. To go from completely being in love with someone in one breath and then hating the sight of them in the next is a form of lust, not love. Many people confuse the two words in an emotional sense for the fact that both words are strong in passion. However, there’s a big distinction between the two. Lust is a selfish act filled with one’s own personal desires. In this stage of passion, the line between perception and reality is so thin that dreamlike images of lustful actions can become misconstrued in reality. Love, on the other hand, is a selfless act. When you love someone, it’s unconditional. When you are in this state, you become consumed with the ideas of the things you can do for the person you love, not what that person can do for you.
A pair of piercing eyes looks down from a high mountain. It feels like ages. The weather at this altitude is much crisper and much cooler. The eyes gaze upon the weather-beaten hands. They flex, they are wrinkled. Worn from the many years of chopping wood and stacking cords along the side of the weather-beaten cabin. A quick glance toward its roof! A single smokestack billows a puffy plume of black smoke. The trees are many. They reach high upward at the comfort of the blue and white sky.

The eyes return to the hands. A single tear runs down the weather-beaten face. The right hand shields the eyes from the bright and blinding sun. It commands respect! It sustains. The eyes return their gaze from high above. They are drawn toward the bottom of the mountain. How long it has been is forgotten. The weather-beaten right hand places itself gently near the heart. It is magnetic! It is longing, a pulling. Loneliness seems as if it was so long ago.

The eyes’ mind is so foggy! She barely came up to his knees. Her fire-engine-red curly hair. Her piercing ice-blue eyes. Her constant giggles. Her toys strewn and scattered about the yard. The eyes gaze upon her tiny frame as she tosses the eyes the big red ball. He catches it as he has done so many times before. She is giddy, as if the eyes have done the most spectacular thing.

He tosses the big red ball back in the direction of the piercing ice-blue eyes. The big red ball has a path of its own. The sound of the horn is deafening! The eyes will forever be devastated.
The fluffy light gray squirrel was cozy in his hole in the tree. *It doesn’t get any better than this*, he thought. He had been busy, busy, busy. So comfy on his grass and straw bedding that he took so much time to prepare.

He had juicy nuts scattered all about his cozy little hole in the tree, as far as his little eyes could see. He felt as lazy as he could possibly be.

Outside his cozy little hole in the tree, running, hopping, jumping! Ever so busy as he could be, all summer long. One time, while outside of his tree, he was so busy foraging for nuts, he wasn’t paying attention to his surroundings.

It happened so fast! He hates to even think about it. He felt a sharp, piercing pain in his back. He began to float above the ground. He knew this was impossible. How could he float above the ground all on his own? He panicked! He wiggled and fought. He turned and flipped his body.

He found himself falling, falling, falling! He hit the ground running, desperately in pain and out of breath. He was still so young, but he made it back to his cozy little hole in the tree.

He was warm. It was winter outside and bitter cold. He drifted off to sleep! He wondered what next spring would bring.
It’s my life, but not my own
You follow me on my journey, learning about me
Caring for me
You share in all my ups and downs
Trying to understand me as my life goes around and round
You are given pieces of me through the essence of the characters
You are engulfed in the ideas of one world, causing you
to leave your own
Enjoying the creativity when you are alone
The rollercoaster of suspense is sometimes similar to your reality
So, you enjoy the twists and turns of its complexity
Guessing the direction of one’s journey as if you have it
figured out
Then you’re thrown for a loop, changing your idea of
what the story’s about
You smile
You frown
You cheer
You scare
Frustration sometimes comes
But you wonder why something was done
The hunger to know how it ends
But never wanting it to end
This is what I give to each and every one that picks up
  my world
My heart
My soul
To the depths of my imagination
From my mind to yours, I share a piece of me
So, for the time you’re turning the pages from your reality,
  you are free

I'M THE WRITER
ABOUT NYU PEP

The New York University Prison Education Program (NYU PEP) is a multi-partner, cross-university initiative that offers free college courses to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. Drawing from NYU’s world-class faculty and staff, our curriculum is a liberal arts education in its most powerful sense. We draw on NYU’s great range of academic experts to show how work in the humanities writ large contributes to our society’s capacity to contribute and succeed, and to teach the public about the role of prisons in America.

The NYU PEP office is situated in New York City, where the majority of New York State’s prison population returns to upon release. Given the unique position to continue work with our students, NYU PEP provides sustained guidance and support to students who want to continue their education after their release. In collaboration with our students, including families and community partners, we also provide a public platform and connective hub for academic and social events, curricular innovation, policy research, and media production aimed at constructively re-envisioning life after and beyond incarceration.

ABOUT NYU GALLATIN

The Gallatin School of Individualized Study provides a distinctive liberal arts education for a diverse student body. Our faculty foster passionate intellectual commitments from learners and prepare them for a world in which managing knowledge is key to success. Guided by the philosophy that self-directed learning is the key goal, the faculty seek to cultivate an environment conducive to intellectual exploration across traditional academic disciplines, and they insist on active student engagement in developing the direction of their own education. Our highly specialized and deeply engaged advisers guide students in their intellectual explorations toward an interdisciplinary approach to problem solving. A Gallatin education is designed to help students become life-long learners by developing their capacities for creative self-development, for self-reflection about their aspirations, practices, and the worlds they inhabit.