



WRITER'S BLOC

Spring 2011, Issue 3



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Writer's Bloc Literary Journal is an independent student publication produced by students in the Cornell Prison Education Program and Cornell University. *Writer's Bloc* is an independent student organization located at Cornell University who produced and is responsible for the content of this publication. This publication was not reviewed or approved by, nor does it necessarily express or reflect the policies or opinions of, Cornell University or its designated representatives.



One year ago, Writer's Bloc began as a grant-funded Cornell student initiative to let the voices of incarcerated students at Auburn Correctional Facility be heard. Through beautiful poetry and prose, the students of the Cornell Prison Education Program shared their experiences, memories, and feelings with their extended Cornell community. Since this beginning, Writer's Bloc has expanded beyond the confines of a literary journal and a mission of creative self-expression to a goal of widespread awareness on the incarceration system. Distribution of the journal is now accompanied with a bi-annual lecture series by Cornell professors and this past semester, Writer's Bloc held a co-sponsored exhibition of artwork from nation-wide correctional facilities with Prisoner Art Express.

Throughout the semester, we as Editors not only grappled with expanding our platform as an organization, but also with our fundamental roles in heading Writer's Bloc. While speaking with our current and former students, we realized how fortunate we are to be a part of this project—and how little we contribute in comparison to the hard work of our students. With this in mind, we have strived during the semester to make this edition of Writer's Bloc a true homage to and product of the incarcerated experience. Writer's Bloc is not about Cornell, or Cornell students—it is about our students at Auburn and their stories that are representative of the prison population at large. This journal is ours: Cornell students, Auburn students, and—in this issue—students elsewhere. For the first time in this issue, we were permitted to include artwork from incarcerated students in the Art Beyond Cornell program. We as editors are so excited about the new addition of these pieces that gorgeously adorn the pages of this journal.

While speaking with a former student of the Cornell Prison Education Program during the semester, we realized that we were leaving out a crucial and seldom examined part of the incarcerated experience: the emotional rollercoaster of re-entry. In this issue of Writer's Bloc, we are proud to include literary pieces by former students recounting their own exits from prison life.

As we further our growth as a publication and organization in size and platform, we hope that this project feels like more of a collaboration. In future issues we look forward to involving our students more in the editing and production process of Writer's Bloc, in hopes that this Editor's Letter will be written by a joint staff of Cornell and Auburn students. For now, we are so proud of this new issue and all of its additions, and we hope you enjoy.

Esther Kwan
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SPECIAL THANKS



Auburn Correctional Facility
Cayuga Correctional Facility
Cornell Prison Education Program Instructors and
Teaching Assistants

Writer's Bloc would also like to acknowledge Art Beyond Cornell, a student organization that provides weekly art lessons for the residents at Lansing Residential Center and MacCormick Secure Center. Lansing is a juvenile correction home for young women ages 12 to 18. MacCormick holds young men ages 16 to 21. Through a variety of projects, Art Beyond Cornell hopes to offer a means of expression and growth. In addition to giving weekly lessons, Art Beyond Cornell beautified the facilities, connected other Cornell clubs to the facilities, and held exhibits at Cornell showcasing the residents' artwork.

Untitled

Latasio A. Cendales

Shadows grow long
Birth without song
Fated to die
Unable to fly
With broken wings
Pain that stings
In the breast
Heartbreak's nest

A Reliquary for Ardor

Joshua J. Keppen

I gazed through the steel mesh of the van's window. Its dark tint only added to the gloom and despair of the haunting landscape. Barren fields and empty trees. Empty like my heart. It was the day before spring. Snow and ice clung in pockets along the side of the road, accented in the shade, like picture negatives. The dreary morning air poured through the window slit, whipping my face with its icy tendrils. I ignore it, just like the heater's warmth blasting my legs...penetrating my state issued boots and leg irons. Funny how my life is, how I exist between extremes. Like the music in the back of the van blasting loud enough to penetrate the plexiglass divider for the officers, I drown it all out in my solitude. I don't bother asking them to change any of it. Life has conditioned me to ignore the things I cannot control – a handy coping mechanism for my life in prison. What did it matter? I was alone. At the moment, my "existence" was in the memories of the past...

It was just a week ago. They called me down to the Chaplin's office to inform me of how valiantly she'd fought. How often she'd asked for me in the periods of lucidity, between the waves of painkillers. Then she'd slipped into the coma. The stomach aneurysm had drained her life away in ebbs, like the receding tide as it flows away from the lifeless sand. Her body was empty, sustained by machines just in case they'd let me attend her deathbed. Because she hadn't visited me in the last two years, they wouldn't let me. By implication, the Administration believed we didn't have a meaningful enough relationship to warrant this waste of taxpayers' dollars, just to coddle a lifer like me. Faced with this finality, I have them permission to remove life support and allow her broken and tired body to finally rest.

She was to be cremated, and I'd never see her again. Long forgotten memories of a life before this hell came flooding through my mind – intimate moments with her when I was just a child, held safe in my Grandmother's warm embrace. Nothing could stop the deluge of tears, or the spasms of my chest as I struggled through each breath. The Deacon did his best to console me. This man I'd never met, graced me with his most precious gift – compassion. In the week that followed, I'd write frantically, trying to persuade the Administration to allow me to attend her memorial service... but in the end, I believe to this day that it was the compassion of Deacon John that softened their calloused hearts.

After fourteen years, I relish any opportunity to see outside of my familiar walls. As the transport van sped slowly down the back roads, I looked upon the landscape. My saddened heart found no solace. Winter's deathly touch was everywhere.

As so often in life, perspective can change everything. Life was everywhere around me, as was hope, if I know how to see it. Those trees were not dead, just hiding what is vulnerable to the harmful frost. Only their leaves die in the fall as they draw life within until the conditions are right for regrowth – to bloom! How similar are we to those trees, those of us who've been hurt?

Wintry trees, devoid of life it seems.
 Tombstones... they stand with their roots unseen.
 Their leaves drop, forsaken – atrophied,
 When the Sun's loving warmth, cannot feed.
 Life drawn within, kept warm, safe and sound.
 Tender roots searching, deep underground.
 Life put on hold, till spring comes around,
 Ardor held deep, till love can be found.

Auburn Haiku

Shane Kalb et al

The succession is meant to be a sequence – either lightly, sharing one word – or directly, progressing the idea. Please use the traditional 6-7-6- syllable count.

Out where under lamps
Street moths flutter in high heels;
Solitary swarms (Lucas)

Such solitary
That lives in both light and dark
Is friend to no one (Dee)

Bats swoop to catch them,
Drop them, can't swallow high heels,
They have pointy friends (J.Russel)

Crows watch from the dark,
Perched on the black hangman's tree.
Pointy eyes 'pon foes. (Cyrus the Virus)

Avian malice
Itches for a caw to arms;
Dwarfed by bat's fervor. (Shane K.)

Unleash the fury
Viewed with Armageddon eyes
Bloodied fist, my arms (Christopher)

Swarms of armed fury
Vanish in the shadow of
Mastering love's fire (Michael Shane Hale)

Moth's anguished desire
For flickering-dancing fire
Cruel fate-no escape (E. Paris Whitfield)

Moth to flame, twirl'd path
Fool's journey, course is the same.
Moon's beams what it seems. (Joshua Keppen)

Dull eyes in nights skies
Wings with dust, pheromones path
Imagos in lust. (Joshua Keppen)

Beak and maw, sharp claw
Lights deceive, still I believe
In love, it's enough (Joshua Keppen)

Untitled

Anonymous

It's Obvious.

Going upstate with 15 to LIFE is some scary shit.

Anxiety. Degradation. Confusion. Loneliness.

Enter a world you cannot imagine, doesn't matter how many stories you've heard.

Or how many prison movies you've seen.

Will you make it home before your father dies?

Will you make it home at all?

Years go by.

It is amazing what you can grow accustomed to.

In a coffin with a glass top.

The machine with pigs for cogs says you can go.

Home.

Going home is some scary shit.

Anxiety. Expectations. Confusion. Self-Doubt.

You read a thousand books?

You did a million push-ups?

You ready?

Gate opens. Heart pounds. Walk out.

Go to sleep. Dream of prison. Wake up not knowing where you are. Walk outside.

Strange feeling.

Can people tell where you've been?

They can smell it on you.

The Slaughter of Innocents

Rob Cumberland

The framers of the United States Constitution once held the individual right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness so sacred, it was better for a guilty man to go free than for an innocent man to be condemned. The formation of the American criminal justice system set up a double fail-safe in protection of that sacred individual right: First, an accused is to be presumed innocent until proven guilty, and second, the accused must be found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

Analysis of the present day justice system will reveal a profound perversion of the ideals upon which it was founded. For instance, the constitutional right to a public trial. This does not translate into trial by public opinion. Oftentimes, the court of public opinion taints the adversarial process of a trial. Public opinion does not presume innocence and thus the details of many a heinous crimes are enough to brand the accused guilty. The accused then becomes the defendant who must now defend against the presumption of guilt and prove innocence. The prosecutorial burden of proof is therefore placed on the defense who must now try to unring a rung bell since the jury pool is made up of members of the public court.

Public outcries for swift and lasting justice prompts prosecutors to appease the public – least they lose votes or suffer budget cuts. The truth becomes obsolete and the sword of justice falls unmercifully upon the guilty and innocent alike. The innocent is condemned and Barabbas roams free. Crimes were no less heinous in the days of our founding fathers than they are today. It would have been heinous to them to deny a citizen life and liberty as a result of a rush to conclusion from hyperbole or fear and revulsion. Heinous is when we compromise our constitution protections by failing to hold its truths as evident for all to the letter.

Bedtime Story

Malik Sheppard

Lazy! Lazy! Lazy!
 you've been that way lately
 for days and days and days
 you lay in a daze
 reflecting the ways
 and actions of those lacking
 motivation
 and it's killing the creation
 of your creative thoughts
 before they're wrought.

Every time you recline I'm inclined
 to make you uncomfortable
 so you would get up and dig up
 the corpse of your poetic thoughts
 but you just twist and turn
 on my steel frame in pain
 feeling sorry for yourself
 but I refuse to feel the same.

Many a men have used me
 to lose thee,
 they lay and lay and lay
 until their minds began to play
 delusional tricks
 until I hear them say
 I quit
 and they surrender their sanity.

These walls and I
 have witnessed weaker men cry
 and felt their souls
 turn as cold as mine,
 but when you rest on me
 I listen to your breast beat,
 I feel the relentless pounding
 of a soul that won't give in,
 this tells me your fire
 still burns within,
 your heat seeps deep
 into my iron skin
 and I know you shan't be cast
 amongst the broken men
 but you will if you can't
 brake this state of laziness you're in.

Sturdy and firm
 my form often transforms
 into a pit of quicksand
 where mentals get stuck in the muck
 of deserted lands,
 deserts without oasis,
 blurred visions of deferred dreams
 reamed with inferred screams
 of dissipated passions
 leaves me asking questions
 that can't be answered
 by none other than the brother
 who has made me his lover
 not knowing I will smother
 all other emotions
 leaving breathing none other
 than depression when you're restin'
 day in and day out
 without contesting the drought of conceptions
 as if the inspirational spout is congested
 questions like
 why do you not do
 that which you used to do
 things you love to do
 things that make you you
 and brightened the hue
 when your days were blue?
 Do you lack within
 the discipline to ascend
 to the realm where
 destiny is determined by self,
 where wealth is not deemed
 by physical things
 but gleaned through spiritual means?

These questions I ask my bed friend,
 your worst enemy I am
 for the bed you laze in
 will be the bed you're engraved in.

Am I complaining too much?

David Bendezu

These bars are whooping my ass.
These walls are blocking my view.
This system is trying to break me.

The toilet in my cell is annoying the shit out of me.
The loud bell every morning is bursting my ears.
These guards have no regard for you or me.

This place some say reminds them of slavery's past.
These rehabilitators know how to read and write, but
realistically they have no idea.
One word to describe the parole board: redundancy.

The yards cold hard surface is hurting my feet.
These thoughts of me losing my mind are only
fuelling my fears. 19 when I came in, 15 to life
now wondering if I'm ever going to make it out of here.

These taxpaying citizens are paying 40 grand a year to keep me alive!
These politicians are politicking about poli-what!?
And here through Cornell I learn that slave laws were meant to keep white men space high, while
tagging the word indigenous to the rest of the population leaving everyone else to die.

Slavery, Jim Crow, then call it the Drug War?
Thanks, Michelle Alexander. You mean women
didn't have the right to vote
until the 1920s?

Was I really born to witness all of this? I know I'm complaining about how much all this sucks, but
please trust me,
I understand the world is suffering also, and there are people with
hardly any luck.

Sorry if you think I'm complaining too much. It's just that I'm tired, woozy, and
pissed. I don't want to quit, but this virus is
defeating my cells, and I feel unprotected so yes,
I'm getting sick.

Dedicated to the people who say they can't stand complainers.

People just don't know...

Michael Shane Hale

December 22, 2010 DADT repealed.

I whisper the news to you,
unconsciously aware that an inner fear gnaws on my bones,
that a straight man will rain on our parade.
The same way my tears rain at the news, the unbelievable, shocking news.

"Really?" you whisper back.
The glint of hope raises your brow fighting the clouds of a doubtful frown.

We embrace – with our eyes
No more lest we draw their fire.
We are changing our clothes in the locker room.
We don't know how to act.
Straight oppression has bent our backs,
We don't know how to stand.

I wonder, did some Irish, Italians, Jews begrudge the Blacks their day?
Like some straights begrudge us ours.
Our one moment of having our mouths unshackled so tightly.

We stand naked in stark contrast to one another,
White skin, black skin amidst other naked skin brown, yellow.

We move deliberately,
Mindful.
Right leg,
Left leg,
Right arm,
Left arm,
Pulling the laces tightly,
We draw out the act of dressing in new clothes,
Having no idea what will come after.

Is Innocence Irrelevant?

Danny Rincon

Many years ago, Judge Henry Friendly, a wise jurist, posed the question: Is innocence irrelevant? A question equally relevant in America's judicial system today. Every month I read about someone who has spent many years in prison for a crime he/she did not commit. Wrongful convictions of Actually Innocent men and women should not be the norm in a modern day society. In 2009, the New York State Bar Association studied 53 cases where men/women were wrongfully convicted, and spent many hard years in prison only to be vindicated later. The task force identified several factors that occurred in each case as the cause of the wrongful conviction. Amongst them were (i) misidentification of the accused; (ii) general errors by a government actor; to wit: prosecutors, police investigators or the presiding justice; and (iii) errors in the handling or preservation of key forensic evidence. The task force highlighted specific causes linked to the wrongful convictions to wit: (a) identification procedures; (b) government practices; (c) false confessions; (d) mishandling of forensic evidence; (e) unreliable jailhouse informants; and (f) defense practices.

A system that arrest, convict and imprison its citizens despite proof of innocence commits tyranny upon its people. What kind of society are we (America), when we allow innocent men/women to be thrown in prison, as we go on like nothing wrong has happened? Are we so conditioned with tyrannical behaviour by our government, that the courage to speak out has been lost? In American history it has always been the young men and women from college campuses and institutions of higher learning that have been the voice of the people. Where are they today? Perhaps a page should be taken from the Tunisian people or maybe the Egyptians, rise up and speak for the Derrick Hamilton's and the Shabkka Shakur's – two men in New York State Prison despite overwhelming evidence of their innocence.

In 1215, bold English barons brandished firearms against King John and forced him at gun point to sign the Magna Carta. This document gave all the citizens of England basic human rights, and provided the founding fathers in America a guide to base the American Constitution upon.

Today, a call to justice from the Wrongfully Convicted across this nation, to the bold American citizens is announced. For a movement that protects the liberty of innocent men and women. Or is Judge Friendly's question: Is Innocence Irrelevant now a normal reality in our 21st century?

V-8 Eulogy

Lucas Whaley

Dust blew across the windshield, scratching a thousand unseen fissures into the glass, to his mind each grain was an ember burning gray as it left its mark and then flitting away in the length of a heartbeat; the length of forever.

The barren desert landscape seemed to reflect the abyss of his soul, just as the low rumble of thunder that rolled across the predawn sky seemed to reflect the growl of his engine.

He gripped the wheel with claw-like hands, knuckles white, his shoulders slumped forward, his eyes narrowed. Behind him the horizon became a thin gold line pushing against the gloom of the night. His foot pressed down upon the accelerator.

Somewhere on that empty highway, a brick wall waited.

The world was a blur. The miles flew by him and still he went nowhere, an unwilling captive between yesterday and tomorrow. He barely noticed anymore, who could read the clock face with one hand missing and the other broken beyond repair? Everything counted in seconds, the measures of agony and ecstasy.

The thunder sounded closer now. Nothing had ever seemed so far away.

As his car continued to streak through the night, a fork of blue-white lightning danced across the sky before lancing down to strike the ground barely a foot from the highway. He didn't acknowledge it; it was as a dream to him and he already knew what it felt like to bask within the warmth of a dream. It's glorious, and fleeting, and ultimately it's painful as it burns you away to ash. Then there is only the cold, the cold and the echo. But if echoes were supposed to fade away, how did an echo become a voice? How did a mind become a cemetery?

Another peal of thunder broke across the heavens, but still it didn't rain. No one ever remembered the rain, the ghosts of the past became an endless succession of sunny days, but a sky is never so blue as when it contains a few clouds. Beauty is found between the contrasts and imperfections.

His eyes glanced down at the fuel gauge. He couldn't keep this up forever, the tank was almost empty. It had been that way for days.

Behind him the sun's brilliant crown broke over the horizon line. He didn't see it, before him the darkness grew more profound, he couldn't look away...

Confessions

Jermaine West

What is life without the ones you love, the ones whom you sworn to protect and comfort, whose hearts you torn.

Now in the midst of everything you realize that those same hearts you've torn, was it the lies of a life I secretly held, or was it the fact that our families wishes prevailed.

I know that I was to be your all, together through all storms we were to prove the nay sayers wrong. Somewhere in between our passions things went terribly wrong. The pressure to be what they wanted was too strong.

It weakened my manhood like an opera singer forgetting his song, the keys of life were all of beat, I just could no longer perform.

So I found my tune in the arms of a nameless soul, the sweat, the sounds, flashing lights, the moons. The pulling, the turning, the tuning I've found the right chord.

The emptiness in my soul, that gaping hole was filled with her essence, her all. And for that moment my confusion found peace and calm.

Can you blame me for wanting to feel whole again? What about me is what I would always shout within.

I had to feel complete, so in search of my manhood I found solace in others whose hearts were touched like me.

One, Two, Three, should I go on? How can I love for an hour than move on? I had to ration my love because you've damn near took it all.

The Fifth woman gave me her all, loved me, trusted me, held me, gave me moisten warmth, unlocked her treasures for me to enjoy. But like a woman who was abused you left me with those scars, I was scorned.

The Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth was all a blur, names of faces.

Scratches on my back, more moans and pleas for don't stop, beds moving, tears of joy, neighbours complaining on my door they would knock.

My honesty has yet to deplete...

Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh. The walks in the park. The bathroom at the job, the countless names and faces. I've tried to remember them all. My honesty has no limits I have to tell it all.

The rumors of my secrets and our just as secrete rendez-vous, like a homing pigeon come flinging back to you. The pregnancy and then the birth of a beautiful child.

Twelfth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth...I searched every inch of them but could not find me.

Did I hurt you in the process of trying to heal my pride? Fifteen, Sixteen, Seventeen....I'm in a park filled with a long ride. Candles, lotions, my name echoing off the walls.

Over the music Jermaine! Jermaine! Jermaine! My pride repaired itself. I once again remained. More knocks on my door, theirs no doubt that the neighbours know my name.

I've chosen to preserve myself over you, you stripped me of everything I had to recoup.

I had silver with you; now I found gold in eighteen, platinum in nineteen. I admit all this to you. For you to see what my soul went through due to you.

All the rumors were true, how do I say in Russian "I never meant to hurt you." It wasn't your fault you just couldn't complete me.

Lovepisode E. Paris Whitfield

Black
 White
Brown
 Tan
Pink
 Yellow
Women or Man
Bleed
One
Color
Red
Subconscious
Bigotries
rule.
Instead
of
a
master Race.
dichotomies de jour....
What
a
farce!
An
Utter Disgrace!
Brothers & Sisters
of
only
one
Race
human...
mortals
"Love thy neighbour"
Love
one
Another;
Doesn't anyone Remember the
Pepsi Cola Commercial?
Veritable
Love pi socle

It is never too late...
Choose
Love!
It's
much
greater
than
hate.

The Day Jan Wozelwick Saved the Planet Earth by Letting Her Hair Grow

Michael S. Boyd

"Oh shit," Jan said to herself as she woke up.

"Shit, shit, shit!" she said, climbing out of bed. "How could I have forgotten to set the damn alarm." Jan ran to the phone and dialed the number to the salon. "Hello, this is Jan Wozelwick. I had an appointment for 9:00am. I'm running a little late. Is there still an opening?" Jan asked. "Oh, thank God! I'll be there in 15 minutes. Okay. See you in a few," Jan said gratefully. She ran to the bathroom, brushed her teeth and washed her face quickly. As she ran back to her bedroom, she stubbed her toe on the doorway. "Ouch, damn it!" she hobbled to her closet, grabbed a pair of jeans and a buttoned-down pink shirt, and threw a pair of socks and her running shoes on. On the way out, she snatched her purse up off the end-table.

Unbeknownst to her, she was being scrutinized by angels and demons alike. "So what's so special about her?" Azreal said to Misery. "Be patient, young one, you'll see in a few minutes." He replied coolly, with a sinister smile that exposed his razor sharp teeth. They both were watching from a realm that could not be detected by human eyes. Yet, as they watched Jan make her way down Main Street, Misery glanced up into the sky and sneered as an audible hiss escaped his lips. There he saw the clouds lined with thousands of angels, all shining, or rather radiating, with what seemed like the energy of the sun. Azreal heard his demonic mentor's hiss and looked to what he was gazing at. "I still don't get it, why are they here? They hardly ever show up on earth. What's so special about this day?" Azreal said. "Okay, you see that little black boy walking down the street?" as Misery pointed with his vulture-like talon. "Which one?" Azreal said, looking around. "Right there, with the brown shorts and white t-shirt on" said Misery. "Oh yeah, right there," Azreal said pointing to the little boy walking on the opposite side of the street of Jan. "If that lady goes on to get her hair done and don't interfere, then that little boy will grow up to be a militant, revolutionist, a right wing extremist, who will eventually lead a group of his followers into causing the third and most disaster World War!" Azreal looked awestruck. "Are you serious?" he said. "When have you ever known me to play?" asked Misery. Just then, as if on cue, there was such a loud an heavenly sound, so beautiful it was utterly indescribable. Misery and Azreal both looked up, and what they saw left them speechless. All of the angels were singing synchronized. The sound was deafening as they parted. Azreal and Misery saw such a blinding light, radiating from a figure that approached through the columns that the angels made on each side. Azreal asked, "Who in the Hades is that?" "That is Michael," Misery said with disdain.

As Michael approached, the sword that was in his hand was alight with flames. "Michael is His number one," Misery said, "He is the finest of all the angels. He has never suffered a defeat!" Azreal looked up to Misery, eyes wide with astonishment. Misery continued, "I should have suspected he would be here. Nevertheless, He is as powerless as we are in this situation. He is only here for show." Azreal looked back at Jan as she was making her way at a hurried pace down the street to her hair appointment, muttering something beneath her breath. "Be silent. Little one, it is about to happen, or not!" Misery exclaimed.

Michael lifted his hand and as suddenly as the beautiful singing began, it ceased. The silence was deafening.

All the demons that were there with Misery, the hoards and hoards of them, were all silent and still, along with the angels.

Jan was walking with a slight awkward step because her toe was still throbbing from stubbing it on the doorway. "Damn it, I hope I ain't break it," she said to herself. She was looking at her foot when

she accidentally bumped into someone and lost her grip on her purse, spilling everything on the sidewalk. "Watch where you're going, lady," the man said as he kept on walking. "Sorry," Jan said, as she began to pick up her purse's contents. After gathering her belongings and stuffing them back into her purse, she happened to glance up and see a derelict staggering past a vendor that sold elaborately decorated cakes. Seeing that the vendor's back was turned, the derelict swiped some frosting off the cake and stuffed his fingers in his mouth. Jan grimaced as she saw this. As the derelict staggered away, she saw this young black boy walking from the other direction, passing the derelict, just as the vendor stood up and saw what had happened to his cake. Then, looking at the boy who was just passing by, Jan knew in her heart what was going through the vendor's mind as his features darkened. Then she thought about how late she already was to her appointment.

"Hey, you boy," the vendor said, as the boy was passing by. "Who me?" said the boy. "Yeah, come here," said the vendor. The boy saw the look on his face, and knew nothing good could come from stopping. He was about to bolt when the vendor grabbed his arm. "I saw you boy, you ruined my cake!" the vendor said, as he was wrenching around the young boy. Jan saw all this from across the street, and she was stuck, indecisive. She knew she could help the young boy, yet she knew she had to get her hair done. If she didn't get it done now, she'd not only have to wait for weeks to get another appointment, but she'd look like hell for her date tonight.

That's when the hoards of demons began screaming. "Get your stupid hair done!" "Your look bad enough already" another demon shouted. "Hurry up, lady, you're late already!" All the demons urged her to go on. The angels urged her to stay and help.

The vendor yelled at the boy, "Do you know how much you cost me?" The boy said, "But I didn't do anything," as tears started to flow from his eyes.

Jan made her decision. As she was crossing the street, she saw in horror, as the vendor picked up the ruined cake in his other hand and smashed it in the boy's face. The boy quit struggling, as a strange sense of calm seemed to overcome him. Jan ran across the street now. She went up to the vendor, with anger in her voice. "Unhand that boy now!" "I beg your pardon," said the vendor, "He ruined my cake!" "No he didn't. I saw that derelict over there do it!" as she pointed down the street. The vendor looked and saw the derelict still stumbling along licking his fingers clean. The vendor looked confused. "But, I...I..." he trailed off. "You, nothing," Jan said with authority, "Look what you've done to this poor boy, his clothes are ruined, he's a mess. What are his parents going to say?" The vendor looked down at the boy. He knew he had done wrong. The vendor said, "Look, kid, I am really sorry. I was mistaken. I shouldn't have done that. Here, take this cake to your mom, and take this money too." As the vendor handed him a 20 dollar bill, Jan just stood there watching. The boy accepted the money and looked at Jan. She nodded her head, as if he needed to be reaffirmed, that it was okay. "Tell your parents to come down here and I'd be happy to explain everything. Okay, kid?" the vendor said.

The boy, now a man recounting this story of how this one act of kindness by this woman that he never even got her name of, had helped him make the decisions that led him to this point in his life, as he made his inaugural address as the first black President of the United States of America.



SUBMISSIONS

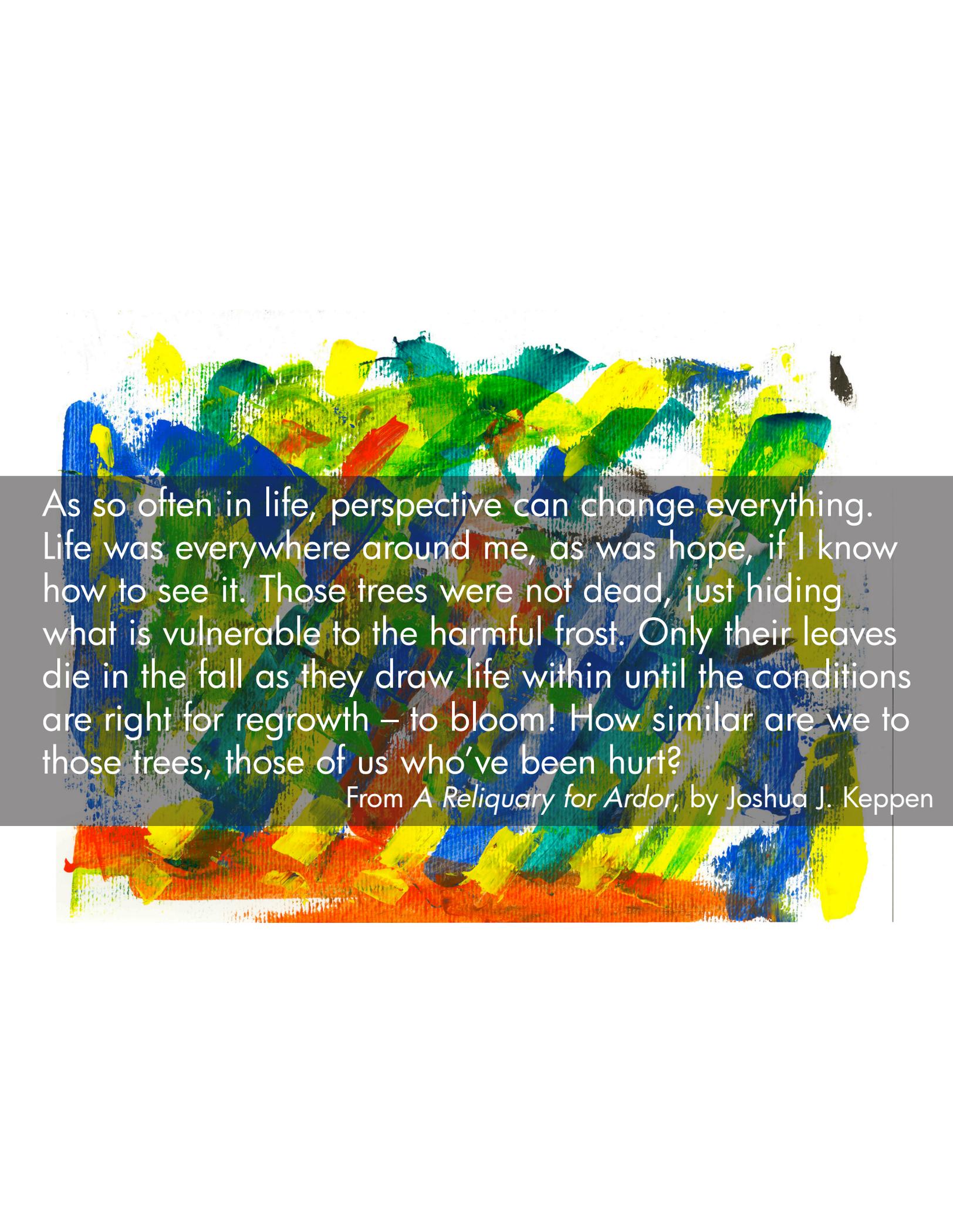
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An abstract painting featuring a vibrant palette of colors including blue, green, yellow, and red, applied in thick, expressive brushstrokes. The colors are layered and blended, creating a sense of depth and movement. A semi-transparent grey rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the painting, containing white text.

As so often in life, perspective can change everything. Life was everywhere around me, as was hope, if I know how to see it. Those trees were not dead, just hiding what is vulnerable to the harmful frost. Only their leaves die in the fall as they draw life within until the conditions are right for regrowth – to bloom! How similar are we to those trees, those of us who've been hurt?

From A Reliquary for Ardor, by Joshua J. Keppen