



• 2021 NAPOWRIMO PRISON WRITING
MENTOR PROGRAM ZINE •



INTRODUCING GREATER CONSTELLATIONS

Though they have been around since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, zines— short for “magazines”—became most commonly associated with the do-it-yourself and punk aesthetic sensibilities of the late 1970s and 1980s. Easy and affordable to make—often held together with tape, run off a photocopier and assembled by hand—zines have always been an accessible grassroots method for artists, musicians, and writers to share their work with peers and collaborators—without waiting for the fickle approval of gatekeepers.

Drawing on this rich history of community-oriented creative dissemination, our *Greater Constellations* zine springs from the inspired poetic work created by members of our PEN America Prison Writing community during National Poetry Writing Month (NaPoWriMo), an annual project in which participating poets attempt to write a poem a day for the month of April.

NaPoWriMo is a unique opportunity for established and aspiring poets alike to develop their daily writing practice. The goal is not to produce thirty perfect poems, but rather, to end the month with the reward of a healthy writing routine. Perhaps the most important and exciting aspect of participating in NaPoWriMo is the community it creates. Even though one might be unable to see the other poets participating or even read their poems, every writer who signs on knows they are not alone in this challenge.

For our first programmatic engagement with NaPoWriMo, we invited the poets in our Prison Writing Mentor Program to write separately-but-together with the guidance of [thirty poetry prompts](#) we culled from our mentor community. During a year when the divide between writers outside and inside was only intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, we sought to combat isolation by creating a shared poetic space in which our dispersed

community—writing from prisons and living rooms across the country—could locate inspiration in the same prompts.

Dedicated to fostering connection and literary community through the walls, the goal of the zine’s creation is not to highlight and publish the month’s “best” poems, but to live as a physical tribute to our shared commitment this past April. With that said, the talent and artistry demonstrated by each of the works included in the zine is undeniable. The title takes its name from a line at the end of P.M Dunne’s poem, “Ode to the Chinese Zodiac Placemats at King Buffet.” Dunne, a winner of multiple PEN Prison Writing Awards, is a newly announced 2021-2022 PEN America Writing For Justice Fellow.

A celebration of our talented and thriving community of writers inside-out, you’ll find that the poems in these pages—from our incarcerated mentees, our mentors and our core PEN team—are purposefully left without demarcation about roles. Here, we are all poets. Let this zine stand as witness to this potent truth.

Finally, on a personal note, I want to thank our contributors for taking the time and effort to offer a poem (or several) to this zine. When Mery Concepción and I were imagining this project we anticipated beauty, but let it be known, this zine has far exceeded all of my original expectations.

This is our community’s first project under the NaPoWriMo banner, but I doubt it will be our last.

In solidarity,

Alec Sandoval

Spring 2021 PEN America Prison and Justice Writing Intern

**This zine was made with the support of the PEN America
Prison and Justice Writing Team:**

Caits Meissner, Director

Robert Pollock, Manager

Mery Concepción, Volunteer Coordinator

Frances Keohane, 2020-2021 Fellow

For more than four decades, PEN America's Prison Writing Program has amplified the writing of thousands of imprisoned writers by providing free resources, skilled mentors, and audiences for their writing. To learn more about our offerings, write to us at prisonwriting@pen.org

or

PEN America - Prison Writing Program
588 Broadway Suite 303
New York, NY 10012

APRIL

CHARLES NORMAN

Just scant weeks ago
five oaks inside my prison
looked dead, scraggly limbs
and branches reaching
outward toward the chilly
clear March sky like scary fingers,
a hungry squirrel searched
vainly for an acorn,
eyeing skeptically the slow-moving
line of blue-clad prisoners,
bounding away without a backward
glance when no peanuts
or crusts of bread were forthcoming.

You see? It was March, the last days
of Winter, with Spring only a shy child
peeking its face from behind
the gnarled rough tree trunk,

wondering when it would be safe
to emerge, to dance, to laugh, to rush
into the sunlight, fresh and clean.

Days later I found myself tarrying
in another line, preoccupied
with worries, scarcely noticing
the mighty oak that shaded me,
suddenly realizing the light
was different, glowing, flickering,
filtered through countless tiny
green leaves, barren limbs cloaked
in new life, April stepping out
in Nature's center stage, proclaiming,
I live, look at me, there is hope
for you, too, spread your branches
toward the sky, it is April,
April, again.

#3

ELIZABETH HAWES

Moons ricochet
above pink sky as I
fret to fill nearly forty
minutes extra a day in
this stormy atmosphere

Bowie sang about this
red dust wind
no prints in rust
crimson space sand

we see notes left
on windows of our ship
“wash me”
“oxygen sucks”
“Damien farms in shit”

Our probe was TP’ed

Someone rings our
hatch door & runs

No Ziggy plays guitar
just martian teens

with no car on a slow
weekend in Mars

**WEEDS IN THE ROCK,
A REFLECTION ON WHERE WE ARE NOW**

JEFFREY JAMES KEYES

The world is burning,
And yet we're all out jogging,
Selecting our produce,
Social distance gathering,
Updating our profile picture,
Ordering espresso martinis from delivery apps,
Zooming with our bosses,
Neighbors, friends, old classmates,
And grandmothers, too, oh yes, they're there.

As each day passes,
Ice melts in Antarctica,
Children die of starvation,
Oil swirls in the ocean,
Elders gasp for air,
Police put guns to our temples,
Bombs go off in the "Holy Land",
And potassium chloride stops an innocent beating heart.

The frost has melted for the year,

So, we get our gardens ready for the season,
Tiny cedar beads annihilate pregnant ticks and fleas,
The truck with the mulch comes down the driveway,
Cicadas rattle in the breeze,
We reach down to feel the cold dirt and move it side to side,
Disrupting the surface,
Preparing the garden,
Pulling weed from weed so the flowers will grow.

Back on the Hill

Politicians flash their bleached Vermeer's,
Laughing about genocide in Palestine, Armenia, and here at home,
Minimizing insurrection,
Kicking their tiny feet up,
Sliding into the DM's of their whores,
Then asking their wives to order them dinner,
And back to filibustering until the next election.

I reach into the dirt and yank at a fistful of gnarled weeds,
They don't give way,
I pull and I pull and nothing,
The day is hot,

Sweat drips down my neck and glistens the weeds at my fingertips.

My shovel hits a rock and when I look deeper,

I see the weed grows out of *that* rock.

I try to dig around it, but the rock extends across the garden,

A concrete floor below the dirt.

How do you pull weeds when they're cemented into the Earth?

How do you change the world when it's covered in a concrete floor?

You can dig and dig but the rock will always be there,

We hit and hit and bleed and hit,

But the rocky floor will always be there.

And the weeds will continue to come up.

They're always coming up.

They'll always, always be there.

**ODE TO THE CHINESE ZODIAC
PLACEMATS AT KING BUFFET**

P.M. DUNNE

As a boy I enjoyed reading
them while my family ate
in silence, the waitress waiting
for the ideal break in conversation
to drop the check with a smile
& slip away unnoticed.

It comforted me to know
my fate was filled
with 'prosperity & luck,'
though I'd no idea
what the former meant.
But at the time it didn't matter;

it seemed true to my untuned ears
like a foreign tongue brocaded
with whispers. I was proud to be
a 'fire rabbit' & bursting
with a passion no adoption
agency could extinguish.

The other animals, I felt,
paled in comparison to me.
The monkey & the dog were
too needy, the rooster territorial.
The ox, the pig, the sheep were boring,
the horse too wild, the snake too

snaky. My birth mother was a rat.
Even the mighty tiger, 'great king
of the bamboo grove,' was my inferior,
since his luck, unlike mine, was finite.
Of all signs, the only one I envied

was the enigmatic dragon,
who seemed to possess

the power to manifest
from nothing & disappear into
the clouds. This clearly came
with its own benefits. I cursed
my fortune having been born
two days too early to be
an 'earth dragon,' one of the most

coveted years in the zodiac.
At school, I never quite fit in.
My classmates, all dragons,
were young & confident. Cool.
They always had the latest gear.
After winter break they'd flash
their spoils as I burrowed

into hand-me-downs, hoping
they'd forget I existed. But they didn't.
Dragons are ruthless. We fought
whenever they conjured my wrath-
mantras of 'bum,' 'loser,' 'reject,'
'garbage,' & 'crack baby' echoing
in my head. On bad days I bristled

in my hide, raw & combustible,
wishing I could be like them-
beloved & heartless. On good days,
though, I knew I never would.
My only friend, a military brat,
told me Chinese mothers
prolong their 'third trimester' & endure
'lethal contemplations' so they can

have dragon children. Unlike them,

however, his mother conceived by
zinfandel & loneliness. He was an ox.
Nevertheless, I couldn't help thinking
eleven years excessive, 'an eon,'
to have to wait for a baby's breath
to bless the air inside a maternity ward...
Fuck dragons, I said, cheeks full of brimstone.

& once, when no one was looking,
I carefully rolled that paper
up like an imperial scroll &
stashed it in my coat
pocket for future reference. Perhaps
I needed a reminder that I was
special, that I was worthy,
that I was more than a 'charity case,'
that even a scared little creature,
such as myself, could be
a star in a greater constellation.

THE LAND WITH NO NAME

LARRY NICHOLAS STROMBERG

Deep tranquility, breathing free

Where past trauma doesn't exist

Neither is the unknown

Forgiveness is a law, at least on the surface

Families stand together forever, never separating

Friends are true blue, united by love and respect

Everyday, Every night feels like Christmas

Animals run free, not devouring each other

Crystal clear ocean as far as the eye can see, you can breathe
underwater!

Mountain skylines

Everyone can fly on their own, unless, one choose to soar
Pegasus

Stars speak a language everyone understands
Riding a comet is better than a rollercoaster thrill

Rainbows glow in the darkness

Lightning bugs pay the electricity bill

Music teaches the soul

This location is better than home

The Land with no Name

I have no idea where this place is

It only lives in my dreams

PRISON VIOLENCE: ROCK IN A SOCK

SEAN J. WHITE

will staples and stitches
hold his head back
together

#

will the jokes I tell
to cover my witness trauma
always be too soon

#

drying blood pooled
does look like ketchup
let me tell you

###

5A21

Palimpsest

SEAN J. WHITE & ELIZABETH HAWES

the whole of my life packed
in cardboard boxes
checked & counted against
allowable limits

#

the half of my life left
written on yellow willow bark
floats on surface rippled
a promise to the river

#

is it churned up clay
or blood that turns
this river red & my life
away from tomorrow

#

above water wasp-nest gnats
hover, wait for starting gun
blue ribbon hopes
on runner up wings

#

& participation trophies sigh
honorable mention yet again
their corrugated homes
polluting the river

#

cold desecrated memory
laps against levee concussed
foam-scented terrible beauty
only seen in mourning

#

& morning sun bathes the river
formless shore foam
no beauty begotten
scrapes away nothing

residue cornered
the whole of my life

the half of my life left
to be rewritten
###

BACK TO OAKLAND

ALEC SANDOVAL

Fog rolling into
the capital of capital,
a blanket for this dreadful new world.

I went to the school with some of
the architects of this fever dream.
For the most part, they're not bad people,
they just don't want to be poets, and
I can't blame them for that.

Driving on the bridge we were surrounded
by the fog; it was beautiful, it was horrible
I mean you couldn't even see
the salesforce tower of power.

At night, digital images of birds in flight
are projected on the top of the superstructure.

The birds are flying away,
followed by the people and their aspirations, and
now Alcatraz is the city's only true bird sanctuary.

I think from the top you can see the prison
across the bay, I mean the open one not the closed one, I
mean you can see San Quentin across the bay. I heard at the
top, if you listen closely you can hear
Linda Martell's voice ringing out
"San Francisco is a Lonely Town."

WHAT MUSIC DOES

RAE FREUDENBERGER

There is a record player circling
something that sounds like mourning,
a sucker punch rhythm landing
right under your ribs.
That two-toned sound
born in the chest and
forcing its way out like
a bone pushing toward sunlight,
unseaming skin.
Behind the curling voice, I hear
what I think is the tink of ice and glass,
a pull of scotch in a squat cup.
I am shaking and I think it is for the voice,
throat open and thick,
but maybe it is for the girl in the river
tripping over the tight-lipped bottom
of her own apologies and
falling face down into a space
impractical for breathing.

GEORGE WILKERSON

would skitter
around in it like hunger.

DINNER IN THE HAWTHORNE DISTRICT

JASON CENTRONE

Galoshes.

Where to stamp a shimmering pair—
the place
smells absolutely gustable,
or whatever— the aroma's on a grand scale,
A relief to have arrived, but I
struggle with the buttons up and down
this rain gear.

Struggle and Portland earns its reputation,
but I'd rather,
when I can, walk anyway
“since I can”
or other quip as useless.
Portland vehicles start up fine
and sport
an extra sprocket for the weather—
this rain gear.

Struggle and like I told,
I'd rather walk with “what to bring?”
even slowing at the shops lurid in consumer lighting,
shelved in blushes,
deep-end reds, in
chilled desserts, and capstone to the aisles,
a bulk bar stretched—
along the Adriatic,
a swarthy fellow reclines in teak contriving
what morsel for the ages
will consummate the pitted olive—
a chap
so well-adjusted,
I warm to him, a puppy same as you.
Since he can, the gourmand walks as well—

cinches cloud-white linen and pocks the sand,
even slower through a city
stuck in its damp deportment—
this rain gear.

Struggle when I happen on the toddler's mom
downcast, checking out—
a belt-fed mound of canned provender
wrapped with holiday-brilliance

as if

making up for the missing nutriment.
Oh, just stroll past, then,
tra la la?

"Excuse,

which way to tiramisu?"

and doodle

at the frost while the same grim clerk
for a barcode turns and turns
your sleepy rose in baby's breath?
No.

Pardon, but

I'm better off congruous in the patter—
hooded to this hilt

in vinyl against whatever else this city drops—

for years,

I deemed my-*self* "the one

of us

you'd kiss the lightest," but I strug—
so help me do I struggle—buttons up,
the buttons down,
with the buttons criss and cross
this wicked gear,

so help me.

Decades friend,
let the pottage smolder,

hurry to the foyer's edge and hold
your knave in shining armor.

WHEN THINGS BREAK...

RAE FREUDENBERGER

a steady shifting right in front of me
and I am all at once steeped in
the certainty of uncertainty,
I think of whale songs.

Tons of flesh gliding like ballerinas
through a boundless blue universe,
adding constellations of song to
an otherwise profound quiet;
the way they seem to ache and
mourn and honor and proclaim
all at once.

A eulogy or a prayer
traveling vast distances.
Even when I am alone
I can sing.

WHAT'S BEAUTIFUL

NEVER B. FAMOUS

What's beautiful, the sun setting on the horizon bathing in a crimson sky.

What's beautiful, the first flowers to bloom in the garden I planted.

What's beautiful, the shot at the buzzer winning the game by one.

What's beautiful, the people that are happy & comfortable with all they are.

What's beautiful, the look on their face when you present the ring that symbolizes forever.

What's beautiful, the rain drops falling from the sky that nourishes the crops that sustain my family.

What's beautiful, the first steps my child took arms raised, smiling only seeking my paternal embrace.

What's beautiful, the chance to live another day to not only witness but experience life's infinite possibilities.

What's beautiful, the setting of a goal facing adverse circumstances & still reaching your desired objective.

What's beautiful, the things, moments, and places,

all I wish to share with you

Because you are,

What's beautiful to me.



• C H A R L E S N O R M A N •
• J A S O N C E N T R O N E •
• S E A N J . W H I T E •
• R A E F R E U D E N B E R G E R •
• J E F F R E Y J A M E S K E Y E S •
• G E O R G E W I L K E R S O N •
• L A R R Y S T R O M B E R G •
• E L I Z A B E T H H A W E S •
• N E V E R B . F A M O U S •
• A L E C S A N D O V A L •
• P . M . D U N N E •