



Prison and Justice Writing Program  
PEN America

### **2023 PEN America/L'Engle Rahman Prize for Mentorship Mentor Letter**

*Named for the 10-year written friendship of the late acclaimed author Madeleine L'Engle and scholar, writer, and former Black Party leader Ahmad Rahman, the PEN America/L'Engle Rahman Prize for Mentorship honors mentor/mentee pairs in PEN America's longstanding PEN Prison Writing Mentorship Program, which connects incarcerated writers with correspondence-based mentorship and other resources. Recipients of the award receive \$250.*

*The prize was generously endowed by L'Engle's family and memorializes L'Engle's participation as one of the program's very first mentors, along with Rahman's extraordinary journey from serving 21 years in prison—framed in an FBI sting of the Panthers—to a celebrated and beloved assistant professor of African and African-American History at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. The pair began writing in the early 1970s, establishing a rigorous working rapport that informed both of their works.*

---

December 12, 2023

Dear Steven,

I had been thinking about writing to you for several days wanting to say hello and catch up, and let you know that I was aware of the challenges with the mail that we were encountering. I'm so grateful you took the time to figure out how we can continue with our editing process. It felt a bit like we'd cracked the code when we figured out a system and it seemed a bit overwhelming to reinvent it. I'm glad we can instead continue to focus on the content.

Before I had a chance to write you, I got an email from PEN saying you had nominated me for an award. *That's so nice!* I thought. I went about my work and unloaded the dishwasher. I picked my daughter up from school. I chatted with my neighbor (a.k.a. seven dogs) and she told me that now that she is pregnant (yay!), she is a blubbering mess. I said, "I don't cry much anymore, I don't know when I became so stoic." I was thinking about my best friend from childhood whose mother had just died from Covid last week. My friend and her family were supposed to spend Thanksgiving with us when her mother was placed on a ventilator. I'd known her mother nearly my whole life. Why wasn't I crying? Maybe it all still felt too unreal? When I thought about it, the only time I could recall crying in the past several months was from a photograph in the *Times* of two daughters who had been kidnapped by Hamas being returned to their mother. They were the same ages as my girls.

Then I realized there was a letter from you attached as part of the nomination. I opened it, and oh my God, did I weep! I sat there on my couch with it all pouring out. I was so touched. Steven, I have won already. You have given me through these words the biggest award I could win. I sound sappy, but it is so true. I can't explain how much this meant to me, to hear our experience over the years reflected back and appreciated. I wept for all you endure and all you overcome. For your generosity and kindness amidst so much adversity. For your will and your faith. For your forgiveness when I am slow to respond, when I cannot fix your circumstance, when I live my life with freedom and luck that you have been

denied. I wept because despite the world around us feeling heavy and desperate, maybe, together, we are making something beautiful.

As you can imagine, with our years of letters and having read your 800-page memoir, I feel like I know you quite well—your present life and your past. Your incredible ability to describe people and places has brought me inside your cinderblock walls and razor wire fences. Your writing has placed me at your stainless-steel tables where I smelled the mop water and watched the mice scurry into pipes. I have met and spent time with difficult yet lovable cellmates, guards in aqua masks, iridescent great-tailed grackles and injured Momma Kingbirds. I have bemoaned with you another “syrupy peanut butter and jelly sandwich,” and marveled as you washed clothes in the sink with bars of soap the size of Bazooka gum. I have hoped for someone to come by and fill your BBQ sauce bottle with ice water or give you a relief shower when the heat is stifling. I have been to the commissary with you and the infirmary. I have listened in on phone call after phone call with your wonderful, resilient mother out there working her ass off, and felt the pain of your struggling daughter, and delighted in your little, night owl Bella with her squeaky voice and effusive love. I have seen your ex-wife in both her beauty and her negligence, and your father’s own journey within the prison system and his complicated dynamic in your family. I have wished the best for your cousin, David, as he returned to the free world and your Aunt Terry in her illness. I have felt grateful for Robert, your grandparents, friends, and teachers. I have seen you, and your brilliance as you do research for your own legal situation and your friends’ situations. I have seen you writing, at the table in the common room, while your peers draw portraits or argue over phone lines—all of us watching you fill pages with your life.

I have seen you pray, and pray. I have seen you lie down and get up again. I have seen you step outside into the sun.

Thank you for sharing all of this with me—your life. Thank you for your incredible vulnerability and bravery that has allowed me to see you as a young man growing up with crushes, style, and dreams, then getting married, having a child, running with a crowd that landed you with a murder charge when you never pulled a trigger. Thank you for reflecting on all of this with such humility and strength, with perseverance and hope even when it is too much to bear. Still, you bear it. You watch it, you unpack it. You grow.

It makes me sad that someone so smart, mature, and sensitive is stuck inside the prison system indefinitely. It’s a great loss not just to your family who I know you adore and wish to care for, but for society as a whole. Why are we keeping this brilliant, wise man from contributing in the free world? He has learned so much and has so much to offer. Despite it all, you keep on working and you keep on giving. Writing, reading, learning, taking life in like a breath and exhaling it onto the page.

I am so glad you have your faith to keep you grounded. The details of lockdowns, toilets overflowing with shit, dangerous heatwaves, and angry, broken peers is too much. It’s wrong and unfair. This punishment is not teaching the inmates much of anything, only reinforcing some deep belief that they do not matter, so why even try? And yet, for whatever reason, you keep trying, Steven. You just keep putting your head down, staying out of the bullshit, training your body, and enriching your mind. It’s freaking incredible.

Please know that I care deeply about you and your family. I see how unfair the world is, how the system is stacked against you and your family. That the hill is nearly insurmountable and even if you get to the top our society just laughs and says “false summit, there’s the real top.” It’s a terrible mess. But you are making the world a better place. I believe that will all my heart.

Thank you also for always being so respectful, and for reading and believing in my poetry, for

comforting me when I feel low over relationships, politics, or my writing abilities. You always make me feel seen and valued, like what I say and feel is important.

We will keep going with your memoir, word by word, letter by letter. For me, the process will be as meaningful as the product, but I very much hope you get what you want from it, and we have the opportunity to share your story with a broad audience. I will try my best. I know you will too.

You are light in darkness, Steven.

Sincerely,  
Alison