

The Thief On The Cross:

Western Illinois Creative Writing Project

Kevin Gardner

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The Thief On The Cross is a poetry book written by a participant in the creative writing program at Western Illinois Correctional Center. It's goal is to inspire other creative artists in the facility and prisons abroad. Also the author hopes to kindle more enthusiasm for the arts and other programs that can help in rehabilitating inmates and transform them into productive members of society. The poems in this book depict the experiences of prisoners and express their feelings in a way which connect with them through the powerful medium of the creative arts. Such an experience helps us realize the potential of greatness in us all and appreciate the creative genius wherever it may reside.

Western Illinois Creative Writing Program

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Dedicated to DR. Margaret T. Burroughs

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creative writing program at Western Illinois
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Thank you for being excellent teachers
and recognizing my need for a creative
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Introduction

The Bible gives an account of Jesus being crucified with two criminals. One of them reviles him, the other shows compassion towards Jesus and acknowledgement of his wrongdoing. While he is on the cross he has a change of heart and asks for Jesus to intercede for him in heaven to God. Jesus replies by telling him that today he would be in paradise.

The repentant thief crucified next to Jesus makes a brief appearance in the Bible but stands as a symbol of change and redemption. It reminds us that as long as we are still breathing it is never too late to have a change of heart. In the conversation between Jesus and the thief, the emphasis is on the word today. Today each one of us has the opportunity to make a change in how we live our lives. This begins with changing our hearts, and this can only happen when we genuinely evaluate our behavior that has caused harm to others and even ourselves.

The cross is a symbol of punishment, and in this case, it represents the prison system and the thief is the figure representing those convicted and sentenced for their crimes. As convicts we are all the thief on the cross. We can choose change and go through the process of redemption by demonstrating contrition according to how we live while we're paying our debt to society or we can be like the hostile thief who remained unrepentant and bitter to the very end. Such obstinance the latter thief showed kept him from redemption and keeps us in bondage. For it is our conscience which will bear witness against us and convict us of our offenses, even when society and the justice system may be oblivious to dishonorable acts we have committed.

This work is not just about change, but it is about experience, what the prisoner sees and feels during his crucible, his trial by fire while he passes through the stages of Realization, Repentance and Reformation. For while the many men incarcerated in the nation's prison system committed crimes against society, they are still human who experience pain, sorrow and loss just like everyone else. Furthermore, being human makes them capable of doing remarkable things even in a hostile and gloomy environment such as the penitentiary. As a society, it would serve us well to not forget or underestimate this capacity our fellow members

of the species in chains have to bring beauty and excellence into the world, and for prisoners, it would serve them well to aspire to make such a feat a reality.

The Thief On The Cross gives us a look into the human psyche as it experiences its darkest hours. Yet in the depths of that darkness lies a spark waiting to burst into a glorious flame. Hopefully these words written from within these dismal walls will light fires in the hearts of those on the inside and outside so that we can all share in a wonderful communion, of the heart and soul.

Penitentiary Blues

Penitentiary Blues.

I wear these on my sleeves-
literally.

Penitentiary Blues,

I say I wear these on my sleeves.

This attire I'm dressed in
is an expression
of this depression.

The color depicts the mood
of a spirit fractured and bruised.

These clothes that I wear
reflect the woes and the burden
I bear

from the utter hopelessness
filling the ambiance
oppressing my mind.

Stressing my mind,
for a life behind bars
is like a sentence of death
in my mind,

and see it "makes me wanna holler."

And howl like the wolf,
howl like the wind,
Howl like Ginsberg.

Penitentiary Blues.

The anguish, sorrow, and grief
that I speak upon
is not just a figure of speech.

See these Blues,
these speak volumes,
not clamorous
but a melancholic moan
like the sound of the trumpet
and saxophone
as my heartsong cries

tattoo tears
from the years
and dreams gone to waste,
longing for the joy
that's been lost
and left back at home.
And if home is where the heart is
then my heart knows no solace,
for my mind is held captive
inside this body imprisoned
in this criminal asylum.
Turning me cold like the iron
used to shackle up my limbs
in this Black Hole spiraling downward
and making my mind spin.
Somebody save me from these Muddy Waters
that I'm starting to drown in.

Call a timeout
because I spent too many days
doing time in.
If you could look through my eyes
and journey to where
my mind's been
to see that my mind bends
on the verge of breaking
from duress of continual confinement
amongst lost souls submersed
in chaos and violence,
branded like beasts
draped in fabrics designed to define them,
then you would see the depths of the pain.
The immensity of these wounds,
and trace the tracks of these tears
to a battered heart
below the surface injured and bruised.
Penitentiary Blues...

I wear these on my sleeves.

Thug Consequences

Retracing steps of my path,
regrets from the past
lingering in my mind
as I rewind the scenes
of the mental motion picture
playing out in the theatre of memory.
The pictures recorded are distorted
yet still poignant enough to evoke
sensations that cause me to shudder-
in dismay from the thought of a life
filled with potential wasted
in the gutter.
They say it's a terrible thing
to waste minds.
So then why did I waste mine
staying wasted filling my body
with liquor and smoke,
gun tucked under my shirt
at the waistline?
Not understanding that it takes time
and dedication to build a future
with success,
too obsessed with fulfilling
the prophecy of my death.
And although my demise didn't manifest
in the flesh,
I'm buried alive my development
under arrest.
Now this is the product of my labor,
perhaps I was possessed,
my wonder years my soul hungering
for glory and respect.
For Lord knows those streets
called me
like the voice of a whispering jinn,
or was I simply delusional,
mind clouded from all the chronic,

whiskey, and gin?
Father forgive me for sins
I can never atone for.
For I've seen murder, torture, misery
and sadly this heart of mine
firsthand has known war.
The days of my life
like the stations of the cross.
The burden of my choices
and the weight that comes
with the stunning realization
of their cost.

Thug Consequences.

APOLOGY

Each day
the memories of past transgressions
eat away at my conscience,
because deep in my soul I know,
I know
that the pain and ill feelings
you have were caused by me,
and the wounds are much deeper
than the eyes can see.

So I apologize
for all the times
when I knew damn well
I was wrong
yet still carried on
with my selfish behavior.
And even the times
when I rationalized
that my actions were justified
need to be atoned for,
maybe even more.

See,
I want you to understand
that I'm trying,
understand that I'm trying
to say what at one time
I couldn't,
I wouldn't
because of my pride.
But now that the truth
has unfolded itself to me
in such a way
that I cannot hide,
I am forced to face the reality
of the ugly truth
that's living inside.

But wait-

let me apologize
ahead of time
just in case
somewhere in my mind
this act of contrition
was deceiving, self-seeking,
meaning that it's possible
that somehow this appeal
for forgiveness is really
an egocentric act,
less about you
and more about me
trying to find a way
to get rid of these
guilty feelings.
And that in itself
is something that needs
deeper introspection.

I hope that's not the case,
and in light of that being
a possibility,
there are still steps
that I have to take
to make
things not perfect
or "Right"
but at least better,
because I don't want
either of us
to have to live within
this negative space
that my unwise choices
created forever.
But you and I know
that words mean both everything
and nothing.

So the bottom line
is I apologize

for all the times
I burdened you
with this painful feeling.
And I hope that you are willing
to open the door
to your heart
to wholeheartedly
trust me once more.

Etymology

Penance.

Penitent.

Penitentiary.

For years upon hearing
the word penitentiary
I never knew it was meant
to bring the perpetrator of an offense
to a state of repentance
and penitence.

Throughout history in this nation
the penitentiary's been associated
with retributive justice,
recompense for one's debt
for one's crime against society.

But as a society
so often we forget
that the concept for corrections
is to bring the prisoner
to a state of sorrow and regret-
to unlock the alchemical potential
of redemption through contrition.

Penitentiary.

Penitent.

Penance.

If Only I Were Dreaming

With the passing of years
comes the loss of loved ones
and friends,
faces to be seen no more,
voices never to be heard from again.
The realization of present circumstances
resulting from yesterday's choices made
casts a gloomy veil
over the soul and mind
as the effulgence of optimism
continually fades.
Tomorrow's arrival is looked upon
with indifference
as life casually diminishes
in meaning,
and the voice of the heart
secretly wishes in its long-suffering,
speaking unto itself,
"If only I were dreaming."

ONE LOVE

***Dedicated to D.B.'S Mother and all the mothers
Who passed away who suffered
seeing their children in bondage**

The priceless gift
is that which you gave unconditional
and wholeheartedly.

The wisdom that you used to
impart to me
shall always be a part of me.
And although your physical vessel
they will bury,
those jewels you bequeathed
unto me I shall carry
until my very own journey
on this earth has too met its end.

Ah, the memories,
where shall I begin?
From the innocence of my infancy
to the years of my pubescence,
your essence radiating
through your smile
was a heavenly blessing,
and the warmth from your love
cradled and nurtured me
even until the time
when my physical form
transitioned from the vulnerability
of boyhood
to the maturity of a man.
There are things inevitable
and certain
yet we still remain
unprepared for-
like the passing of
a loved one.

For in life you only have
ONE mother to love,
and no one can ever love

you like a mother does.
It's clichè but it's true
when they say
that you only have one.
And now in this very moment
I've come to understand,
not the meaning of life
or the purpose of death,
no, but the profoundness
in the saying ONE LOVE.
For when it comes to a mother
the indifferent law of nature
brings us all to the realization
that you only have one.
Therefore in my heart
that is where I will always
place you-
#1-
because no one can replace you
ONE LOVE.

The Hold Up

"Why are you doing this?" she asked
as she faced the two perpetrators
clad in dark attire,
their countenance concealed
by their masks.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

The moment was so surreal
as I stood beside my accomplice
silent without being able to explain,
to logically justify
why I

felt like I had the right
to take what someone had toiled
so hard to earn
by the sweat of her brow.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

she inquired repeatedly,
and the more I hear
the quiver in her voice,
the more the shame
tries to besiege and take hold
of my conscience.

But I've already come too far
to have a change of heart now.
plus my partner in crime
has been determined all week
to make this score
on this cornerstone.

Yet I can't help
sensing the fear
instilled in the helpless cashier
as the adolescent accompanying me
yells with ferocity,

"Give up the money
and no one'll get hurt."

But he was wrong
because inflict pain

is exactly what we did.
For this innocent woman
would have to live
with the traumatic memory
of the threat of having
her very existence vanquished
with just one slight movement
of a finger pulling the trigger.

In her vulnerability,
the awareness of the fragility
of human life,
coming face to face
with her mortality,
the images of precious loved ones
flashing in the mind's eye,
and the horrific thought
of losing them
and them losing her
for all eternity
permeating her entire being.
Shaking her to the core
as she stands transfixed,
paralyzed in her fear,
terrified and hopeless
in that cornerstore.

"Why are you doing this to me?"
is what the woman asked
as she looked into the eyes
glaring behind the masks.

"Why are you doing this to me?
I've done nothing to you,"
said the woman whose voice
trepidated with pain
as I returned her query
with silence that was eerie.
For words for my actions
could not suffice
to explain.

Righteous Condemnation

I was 18 years old
when I committed my crime,
19 when the authorities apprehended me,
20 when I was told that for the next
45 years of my life
I'd be sitting in someone's prison
Two thousand and what?
42?
2042?

Now really your Honor,
what am I supposed to do with
all of this time?
Once the sentence was handed to me
I didn't move.
I was numb,
Instantly, as though by instinct,
a mechanism for survival
you might call it,
a wall built up inside of me.
Not unlike the walls that were put up
to keep young agitators like me
from escaping beyond this catacomb
of barbed wire and stone.
And my heart became cold and hard,
yes very hard,
analogous to the metal bars
that will greet me
for the next four decades and a half
as I awaken from the long
and dreary nights of turbulent sleep
every morning
emblemizing the hard reality
of the conditions comprising my captivity.
I told myself when I was free
that I'd never bring another life
into this world.
Now the choice has been taken from me.

The matter's beyond my control.
But what right do I have to gripe?
Who am I to complain,
when I am the cause,
the reason for someone else's pain?
Guess one might say
that it's a righteous condemnation, huh?
A heartbeat was stilled
in an act of senseless violence.
so in return,
my hopes and aspirations were vanquished
into the abyss of broken
and unfulfilled dreams.

Analogy Pt. 1

The ghetto and prison.
Prison and the ghetto.
To some, the ghetto is just like a prison.

The residents are like inmates
locked in psycho-socioeconomic cells.
Bound by invisible shackles.
Doing time without being sentenced
by a judge.
Captive to a world rife with violence
prostitution and drugs
Continuously confined
within the 6x9
of their incarcerated minds.

The Wall.
The Box.
The Pit.
The Hole.

Prison is a complex built for
confinement of the flesh.
The ghetto is concomitant with
the imprisonment of the soul.

The ghetto and prison.
Prison and the ghetto.

Analogy Pt.2

Prison and the ghetto,
the ghetto and prison.

In many ways,
prison is just like the ghetto.

The same cast of characters
just a different setting.

Look, over there's the drug dealer
and self-proclaimed pimp,
and over there is the radical gangbanger
standing next to the turned up thug

And check this guy out,
the addict with the dope¹fiend tendencies
and mannerisms just without the accessibility
to his drugs.

Running the same con,
used to steal from his mom.
Now he exploits people's hopes
and naivetè

by eloquently quoting Psalms
or Surahs from the Quran.

And that guy
with that belligerent mask
upon his face,
with his pants hanging below his waist,
still trapped in his adolescence,
too immature to grasp the wisdom
bequeathed from life's adult lessons.

Judging by the way he acts
you would think he's still
on the block
and he is-

just not the neighborhood
but the prison CELLBLOCK.

And what about the Judas/
Stoolpigeon/Informant?

ever so vigilant providing intel
for the authorities.

Not because its the moral

or ethical thing to do
but so that he can be granted
special privileges and favors
that are advantageous
to carrying out his own
shady activities
without having himself under scrutiny.
He's no different than the dopedealer
who calls the police
to get other peddlers off the streets.
Handing over other inmates
for 30 pieces of silver.

But this is the condition,
mindstate
of those trapped behind gates-
the fences that keep men in
or those virtual barriers existing within.

Prison and the ghetto.
The ghetto and prison.
Oh yes, prison is just like the ghetto.

BLOOD AND INK

I want the ink that drips from my pen
to be like blood,
the blood of a martyr.
for martyrs spark revolution,
revolution means change.
I want to help change
the perception of the millions
of my brethren in chains.
Show the world the humanity
existing within us all.

If I could write
the story of my life in blood,
I'd write it in an old forgotten tongue
like Aramaic or Sanskrit,
not on papyrus
but inside blue lines
on white loose-leaf sheets.
All the words pass the margin.
All the words pass the margin.
ALL THE WORDS PASS THE MARGIN-
to symbolize the boundlessness
of the life force vibrating
at the core of the cosmos
which emanates into our hearts
as the fiery spark
impelling men towards the attainment
of spiritual liberty and truth
actualized in space-time
when the mind is a participant
in the creative act.

For there is life in the word,
just as there is life in the blood.
For the blood speaks volumes.
Yes, the blood speaks volumes-
like Abel's who was wrongfully slain
by his brother Cain
that it shook the throne in heaven

from the ground
it cried so aloud in pain.
And I want the words
transcribed from the ink of my pen
to do the same.

I want the ink that drips from my pen
to be like blood,
the blood of a martyr.
For martyrs spark revolution.
Revolution means change.
And Lord knows that change
is what these brothers need
locked up behind these walls,
shackled inside these chains.

My journey has been one of long suffering
and endurance, perilous and precarious,
having stones hurled at me by the vicious
hands of social injustice and tyranny.

Hands that smite my cheek with
iron fists of oppression and racial
discrimination, my only weapon of defense
being my fortitude and adamantine
volition along with the ambition to
dispel spurious definitions, depictions
and negative connotations associated
with my race, coarse jest and caricatures
exaggerating the characteristics
and features of my face and unjust
Jim Crow laws to keep me in my
so-called place. But I persist
keeping my eyes on the prize inspired
by my faith—a faith which ostensibly
is blind yet guides me with an inner
light of the mind that's divine
as I travel through the shadows
of the valley of racial inequality.
Ghosts of slavery's psychic trauma
have haunted me and loomed over
my footsteps like stratus clouds
of gloom ever since I exited my
mother's womb threatening to send
me prematurely to the tomb.
Nevertheless I move incessantly
breaking the manacles and chains
from my wrists and brain allaying
the psychological pain transmitted
through the dna that flows in
my veins from my ancestors who
were wrongfully slain and sacrificed
their lives in the name of emancipation

treading a path of righteousness,
marching from Selma, Alabama
through the red dirt of Georgia
all the way to the steps of the
Lincoln Memorial until I stand
resplendent with the luminous
rays of redemption at the peak
of Capitol Hill. Walking towards
the edge of freedom, standing at
the crossroads, seeing Martin
in the promised land-
where the bells of liberty
toll.

Loretta Velazquez

**The Woman in Battle
(Leading and serving our nation with pride and honor)**

**Kevin
Gardner**

**Essay
Oct.9
2013**

As we move towards developing a society where the tenets of liberty and equality for all becomes the reality for "We the people," at the beginning of this 21st century in this nation that was colonized by immigrants and subsequently founded by their progeny, in this New World where Spanish was the first European language to be spoken, we find the controversial topic of border control and illegal immigration becoming an issue that is gaining attention of Americans abroad as we ponder the destiny of our great republic. Thus celebration and education about the cultural diversity existing in this country becomes more imperative. At this time of paying homage to Hispanic heritage, I invoke and exhume the name of Loretta Velazquez from the sands of anonymity.

Being a descendant of slaves, it is only natural to be adverse to anyone sympathizing with the Confederate South. Yet my affinity for those who have the audacious fortitude to flout conventions and overcome discrimination gives the capacity to appreciate the intrepid force fomenting the heroic journey and passion of this inimitable figure in our nation's history.

Loretta Velazquez was an immigrant from Cuba whose family settled in New Orleans where she, although being a minority herself, sided with the Confederacy and married a white man (to the chagrin of her father) who served in the Confederate military to whom she gave birth to 3 children. The very rebellious spirit that impelled her to defy her father's was integral in her transformation after the crisis she underwent when her husband and then her children passed away.

Loretta decided to take on the fight of her deceased husband and beloved South. Cutting her hair and shedding the appearance

of her gender, she enlisted as Lieutenant Harry Buford and transcended both her ethnicity and gender by appearing as a white male in the military. She even acquired a black man (which was a symbol of status privy mostly to privileged white men) who assisted her in battle and kept her secret as she witnessed the atrocities of war. Eventually she was arrested and her identity was disclosed. After her life was threatened with imprisonment and death she was allowed to work as a spy dressed as a woman. Today the story of "The Woman in Battle" remains virtually obscure but her life is a testament of the revolutionary spirit that brought independence to our nation. Regardless of whether she fought for the right or wrong side she fought for what she believed in and refused to let the conventions of her time pertaining to race and gender obstruct her. Her life is exemplary of the self evident truth innate in humans. Freedom is an inalienable right and this is the legacy left by Loretta who served and led our nation with pride and honor in her own way.

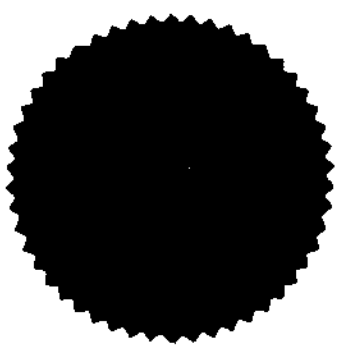
Kevin Gardner writes primarily using the pen name Orion Meadows. He's been publishing in online journals and has contributed poetry to books that are currently available on the internet. He has a Spoken Word recording "Live From The Hellmouth" and a book "Birthmark" that is forthcoming. If you are interested in his work or would like to comment on this project you may contact him through his Email address: **orionmeadows@hotmail.com**

FIRST PLACE POETRY AWARD

**IN HONOR OF
BLACK HISTORY MONTH
PRESENTED TO**

KEVIN GARDNER

**PRESENTED BY
THE BLACK HISTORY MONTH
COMMITTEE**



FEBRUARY 26, 2013

FIRST PLACE ESSAY AWARD

IN HONOR OF

HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

PRESENTED TO

KEVIN GARDNER

PRESENTED BY

HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

2013 COMMITTEE

OCTOBER 17, 2013

