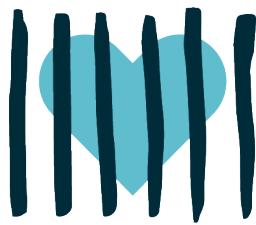


GRATERFRIENDS

The Creative Issue

Winter 2025





An Overview of the PENNSYLVANIA PRISON SOCIETY

Who We Are

Founded in 1787, The Pennsylvania Prison Society is the nation's oldest human rights organization. Our mission for 235 years has been to promote the health, safety, and dignity of people impacted by mass incarceration. In 1828, the Prison Society was granted access to all people in state or county custody in PA - we remain the only non-governmental organization in the United States with our level of statutory access to people in prison. Although some of our specific programs have evolved over time, we remain committed to responding to the needs of incarcerated people and their loved ones. Today, we use that access to monitor prison conditions, assist people in prison with individual issues they raise, build connections to family and community, and educate the public about the largely hidden world of prisons.

How do I contact the Prison Society?

You may write to us at 230 South Broad Street, Suite 605 Philadelphia, PA 19102. You can also have your loved ones call our family support helpline at anytime: 215-564-4775. Our team can assist to answer questions about specific facilities, policies, general issues, and concerns. Our team is small and we are not able to provide legal assistance, but we will do our best to help you get the information and resources you need. Unfortunately, at this time as an organization we are generally not able to use ConnectNetwork to correspond with people confined in SCIs.

What is Prison Monitoring?

The Prison Society is the only non-governmental organization in the country with a legal right to meet privately with any person incarcerated in their state. Each month, we receive hundreds of reports concerning access to healthcare, abuse, property, conditions of confinement, treatment, and other issues. Our trained volunteer Prison Monitors can meet with anyone incarcerated in Pennsylvania state or county prison to hear their concern in detail and engage in follow-up advocacy.

Out of respect for one's privacy and safety, we will never send a Prison Monitor without an explicit request for a visit from an incarcerated person or their loved one. During a visit, a prison monitor will meet with the person in custody one-on-one to discuss and document their situation. Following the visit, volunteers are empowered to speak with prison administration on their behalf to try to improve the situation. It is important to note that we are not lawyers and cannot assist with legal issues or casework.

What about re-entry services?

For individuals returning to the Philadelphia area, The Prison Society does have a mentoring program available designed to help ease the transition from incarceration back to communities by providing a strong social support network. We hope to expand this to other regions in the state in the future.

What happens when I share what's going on in prison?

We are grateful to the countless people in custody and their families who help promote prison transparency across the Commonwealth. Beyond working to address concerns on an individual and/or facility level, the information you provide drives our vital conversations with Pennsylvania legislators, allied organizations, and the public. As we work to educate others and engage in systemic advocacy, it is vital that this is led by the experiences and opinions of the people closest to the problem- you! Your voices directly informed our current advocacy to end the \$5 medical copay for incarcerated people, as well as our work to remove barriers to family visits.

What happens when I write to you?

We will always do our best to assist you. You can write to us to request resources, report conditions at a state or local facility, or request a prison monitor. The Prison Society is not a legal organization and can not provide specific legal advice or representation. However, our correspondence volunteers thoroughly respond to each and every letter we receive with information about other resources and organizations. We can also help you navigate different issues related to education, free books and other creative programs, reentry services, mental health resources, pen pal programs, and more.



About GRATERFRIENDS

Launched in 1981 by Joan Gauker and adopted by the Prison Society in 2002, Graterfriends is a critical outlet for incarcerated people to share their opinions and experiences. We are proud to have built a powerful community with you over these past two decades and encourage you to continue submitting to Graterfriends.

We reserve the right to edit submissions. Original submissions will not be returned. Allegations of misconduct must be documented and statistics should be supported by sources. All submissions should be no more than 500 words, or two double-spaced pages. Letters more than 200 words, or one double-spaced page, will not be published in their entirety and may be shortened for clarity and space. To protect Graterfriends from copyright infringement, please attach a note, on your submission, stating that you are the original author of the work and that you give us permission to edit and print; date and sign the declaration.

GRATERFRIENDS

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Larry Stromberg, Keith Deoohh

Tolbert

Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

In a time of much disconnect in the country, it has been refreshing to read some of the most beautiful pieces I've read in a long time, from all over the country. We have authors from not only Pennsylvania in this issue, but from Minnesota and Delaware. I hope that Graterfriends can continue to serve as a creative outlet for those behind bars. There may be distance between our authors, but many of the themes are similar.

One of my big goals for the year 2025 was to create a master archive list of all our Graterfriends articles and authors. The Prison Society only has copies of Graterfriends going back to 1998. One of the reasons I wanted to do this was to acknowledge some of our long-term authors and their contributions to the Graterfriends community over the years. In 2026, I hope to create different reports so that we can acknowledge all our contributors.

As a start, I did a quick look-over and would like to acknowledge those authors who have contributed creative entries to Graterfriends for over 5 years. I listed their first known poem name and what issue it was featured in:

- Kevin Brian Dowling, *A Fate Worse Than Death*, published in May 2004 Issue
- Gregory Dunbar, *Graterfriends Behind Prison Walls*, published in September 2004 Issue
- Patrick Middleton, *Lessons in Life: On Finding A Decent Cellmate*, published in December 2005 Issue
- Jeffrey Shockley, *A Child's Voice*, published in January 2008
- George Rahsaan Brooks-Bey, *Negativity*, published in December 2010
- Yassin Sin Raws Mohamad, *Whose Side You On?*, published in Winter 2020 Creative Issue
- Joseph A. Mander, *The Essence of My Dreams*, published in August 2019

This does not include all their non-creative pieces or any of our authors that prefer non-fiction writing. Thank you to Kevin, Gregory, Patrick, Jeffrey, George, Yassin and Joseph for all the beautiful writing you've given us over the years. You'll see some of their writing in the following pages, and we hope to see it for years to come.

Stay warm and well this winter.

— Noelle Gambale on behalf of the Graterfriends Team

American Prison Writing Archive

Gary Nelson of SCI Greene

The main reason I am writing now is to let everyone know the kind folks at Johns Hopkins University are looking for non-fiction essays and poems for their American Prison Writing Archive. Prisoners may write to them at the following address.

They do answer all inquiries.

Address:

American Prison Writing Archive
Johns Hopkins University
3400 North Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21218

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Cover Artwork by Antonio Hawley

Inmate Dictionary: Real World - Prison Definitions

Matthew Feeney of Minnesota Department of Corrections

Affiliated (v) *Real World*: Associated with a company, group or organization. Prison: A member of a STG. See also “Security Threat Group” and “Gang.”

Bars (n) *Real World*: Place for social gatherings, often including ingestion of intoxicating beverages and displays of obscure mating rituals. Prison: The physical pieces of steel that separate inmates from the Real World and hinders social gatherings, obscure mating rituals and ingestion of intoxicating beverages.

Canteen (n) *Real World*: A hollow utensil used to store liquid. Prison: Place where inmates order and receive snacks, clothing and hygiene items. Returning to your cell with a large canteen order guarantees a proliferation of new friends.

Cell (n) *Real World*: An ubiquitous mobile telephone device carried with one at all times. Prison: An inmate’s assigned sleeping quarters, often shared with multiple strangers. “Wet cell” means you have the added convenience of a fully-functional flushing toilet inches from your sleeping bunk.

Count (v) *Real World*: the ability to indicate an ascending sequence of numbers. Prison: the ritual by which inmates are accounted for throughout the day. “Stand-Up Verification Count” – making inmates stand-up to insure they are still alive. “Emergency Count” – often done when someone has failed to accurately add-up the numbers from an earlier count.

Formal (adj) *Real World*: a designation of a special or significant event requiring special attention. “Formal Attire” means Tuxedo and Evening Gown. See also “Formal Dance.” Prison: A designation of a special or significant rule break requiring special attention. “Forman Discipline” means doing time in Segregation. See also “The Hole.”

Good Time (n) *Real World*: An expression of happiness and joy, often surrounding enjoyment of a social event with friends and family. Prison: Time credited to an inmate’s sentence for staying out of trouble.

Kite (n) *Real World*: A lightweight device flown in the air and tethered with a string. Prison: A yellow piece of paper formatted for official written communication between inmates and prison staff.

Property (n) *Real World*: A tangible item owned by an individual. Prison 1: Tangible item owned by an inmate, as long as it is on the allowable items list, received from an approved vendor, not above the maximum allowable limits or altered in any way. Prison 2: The name of the Department where you pick up new under-wear once a year. See also “Yearlies.”

Yard (n) *Real World*: The grassy area of land surrounding one’s house where children often gather to play games. Prison: the rarely grassy area of land surrounded by razor-wire fences where inmates often gather to play games or try to kill each other. See also “Shank.”

Institutionalized

*J. Adam Herbert of
Delaware Department of Corrections*

How do some fellows adapt to prison life so freely?
A year or more it took me to find even a crumb of comfort
Anger and fear, one in the same, foiled my exposure
Too hasty, I might insinuate amongst the masses

A year or more it took me to find even a crumb of comfort
Derision the reward for a rash tactical measure
Too hasty, I might insinuate amongst the masses
Now humor cracks sudden relief of tension

Derision the reward for a rash tactical measure
The hostile and vengeful world of criminals
Now humor cracks sudden relief of tension
Played out as the petty cruelties of children

The hostile and vengeful world of criminals
Anger and fear, one in the same, foiled my exposure
Played out as the petty cruelties of children
How do some fellows adapt to prison life so freely?

Change

Khalil Hammond of SCI Phoenix

Can I change the direction in which I am going,

Or did I already seal my fate without even knowing?

Is it over for me?

Does it end here?

Sometimes life can be cruel and very unfair;

You are constantly being challenged and sometimes you will fail.

BUT..... with patience, will come victory;

SO..... through time you'll prevail.

This Box

Luis Fuentes of Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility

What is it like to be here?

Imagine yourself in a box

A closet, a room, a box

What is it like to be here?

Imagine your family outside of that box

Their voices, laughing, their memories

What is it like to be here?

Imagine that box is locked

And your a tree

You need light water nutrients

You need room to breath

But you have to imagine your in a box

Your in the box with vines

In the box theres caterpillars

Eating at your leaves

A little slit gives you light

And 3 times a day

You get enough just to survive

But, so is everything else

All inside this box

You try to grow

With nowhere to go

Praying that a day comes

And they open up the box

Innocent until proven guilty?

Then why all the locks

One Big Con to Me

Andrew Martin of SCI Forest

I sit here writing this with my Flex Pen
While on the other side of the door, they flexing
In the RHU again - I guess you can tell
No property yet, memories make it a living hell.

Got maced the other day - cop lied to do it
Said I swallowed something, right or wrong, I still look stupid.

I'm selfless, impulsive, I do shit without even thinking.
And for my dawgs - I do shit without even blinking.

In the jail sense, I'm a stand up dude.
How much Time can a man do before he comes unglued?

I'm at SCI Forest; they call it a blender/
No rules, but the ones they make up soon as you enter.

C-O's Steal your stuff, others they sexually harrass
It's like they draw straws to get a peek of your ass.

This is no joke, even if it may sound funny
They put a jail out here to make these hillbillies some money.

You know I'm all for stimulating the economy
But, the DOC seems like one big con to me.

The Question is...

Jeffrey Shockley of SCI Mercer

What do we strive for; what do men and women die for?
What our children hide for; our mothers cry for, the politicians lie for?
What do we reside inside for, so many doing time for? Hating our neighbor for, spoiling ourselves for? What do [our] victims die for?
A lonely child asks...
Mommy, what is my life for?
Why is daddy home no more?
Who am I in this impossibility of me?
Exposed by the nondisclosure while undisclosed for years from fears,
That someone might see what seems to be the best of the worst side of nothing hidden,
Behind these mirrors that cast back disjointed figures...
Staged perfectly.
Hoop rings in festival sprints flowing freely like exhaled smokeless fires that-
Yearn to embody lost souls wanting.
To return for another...
Second chance.
As life costs-
Tossed aside in the tide of love.

Funny when asking, What For?

Lonely Cell

Yassin Mohamad of SCI Phoenix

I sit in this lonely cell, just staring at the wall
Wondering how I let myself fall.

I thought hard to come to conclusion
Fogged mind, nothing but illusions.

Toss and turn with many what ifs and has beens
And I then awake in a puddle of sins.

Born guilty so I'm falsely accused
Of being hyperactive with a short fuse.

Let out cries that I only can hear
Dying in prison besides ALLAH is what I really fear.

Try my best not to lose my sanity
Or start despising the entire humanity.

A lost soul that's outta control
I must maintain and never fold.
My story is written and talked about
Look in to my eyes and you'll really scream and shout.

Wondering how I made it thus far
So I die with the words ALLAHU AKABAR!

Mirror

Andy R. Powell of SCI Phoenix

Looked in the mirror
disgusted at what I see,
an unhappy, betrayed, ugly person.

A leap of faith, hope, and trust in God
makes me happy
knowing God had picked me
when no one
loved or cared for me.

God softly whispered in my ear
“you are not an
ugly or disgusting person.”
he reminds me
that I am a
beautiful, loving, caring child.
I would not change a thing.

I had to go through
my ups and downs and all those ugly times
to learn how to use the weapons
that I did not know
that I had this whole time
to defeat
my temptation and addiction.

Prayer and meditation
is the way to have
one on one talk with God
that you need to have
a stronger relationship with him.

God is the one
who created me
with the problems that I have.
Knowing that he loves me
just the way I am.
makes me want to love
what I see in the mirror.

Now I look the mirror
happy with what I see.

I Survived to Live

Yassin Mohamad of SCI Phoenix

Do you really wanna know how I'm living in the penitentiary?

That's not far from a huge cemetery.

Being watched over by other souls that's lost -

So my only option is WAR against the workers of the boss.

A single cell angry black man -

That mentally formed like this after years in the can.

The C.Os jiggling keys became my alarm -

And their batons is only for harm.

I smell dry blood on their black boots -

And if you had an orange jumpsuit they'll have your blood too!

Sadistically and maliciously deny me exercise, food and shower -

Just to prove to me and other prisoners that they have the power.

In their psychological death chambers, I've been degraded many times

Believe when I say it's hard to think positive in a homicidal mind.

All the rehabilitation has been thrown out the window -

As D.O.C. created the RESTRICTED RELEASE LIST for me to die in the hole -

Or go crazy before I go home.

But Level five has no parole!

Want me to take psychotropic meds to calm down -

But it's really to receive federal grants for turning me into a D-code clown.

You're wondering why I'm so angry in my writing?

Take my place fighting thirteen men in full riot gear-

Get tasered, beat with batons, sprayed, strip ass naked,

And tied down in a restraint chair.

Now tell me how you like it?

HELL NO! I didn't bring this shit on myself-

I use to be athletically healthy,

Now I got questionable health.

I have more than blood in my eyes'

And if this my ending, alone I won't die!

I met brothers and sisters with no soul in their eyes and it was a shame
And if I never experienced this, I would have thought they were playing games.

Only the strong survive, but for how long?

I tried to follow the rules and cage my tongue.

How can I overlook a C.O. taking another prisoner's food?

All because his miserable power hungry ass in a bad mood!

So I had to teach to unify -

Because a whole is better than one and it'll make it hard for us to die.

I refuse to change into what they want -

I was standing up in society, so why in prison should I front?

Just like the University of Penn experiments in HOLMESBURG days -
These people wanna implant their diabolical ways.
Why don't they try it on their kids and lock them indefinitely in a room
Starve and beat them like animals with mops and brooms?
And if they die, fake it like it was a suicide they committed -
Then flash your prison guard ID and watch them forget it.

I abased this poem off my experiences and feelings -
Administration's psychological torture & C.O's conspired killings.
So what you're reading here is real -
God bless the dead and keep the living with a strong will -
Never would our internal and external scars heal-
And if I die now, know the C.O's read this before my next meal.

Gravity

This is a poem I wrote in appreciation of my big sister Breona.
Brandon Jackson (aka Ericka's Son)
of SCI Greene



I finally found someone
Someone to hold me down
When I start hearing voices
She always keeps me sound
She holds me when I stand
She helps me when I fall
And when I'm feeling small
She shows me that I'm tall
And when I need some space
She gives me that and more
I let her know I love her
And what I love her for
She always keeps me balanced
I never get too high
Unless I spread my wings
And then she helps me Fly!

- Gravity

Hospice Behind Bars

Larry N. Stromberg of SCI Phoenix

Hospice is one of my job's behind bars
as I sit with the dying, those condemned by society,
riddled with cancer, AIDS, Hep-C, heart disease etc.
Giving them a compassionate hand with sincere conversation.

Each day the sickness slowly fades them away
into a shell of the person they once were.
One by one, carried out in a body into the unknown.
A portrait of Death by Incarceration.

Their souls set free from governmental judgement, victim opposition
and agonizing remorse by an Angel of Mercy.
The heavy burden removed from their guilty hearts
by the gift of death.

I realize, that could be me one day, dying in prison.
Laying in an infirmary hospital bed motionless, defecating myself,
consumed by painful bed sores looking into the supernatural for relief.
That could be me. It could be any of us.

I journey on, helping the hurting, lost, innocent and guilty ones at Death's doorstep.
Becoming a family member, Good Samaritan, a listening ear and praying for them all.
Hoping for another shot of daylight for myself seeing this eradication.
A second chance back into society with my remorseful heart.

Hospice Behind Bars, my four hour shift is tonight.
11:00 p.m. -3:00 a.m.

That's where I'll be.

Confessions of an Unexpected Jailhouse Lawyer

Keith Deeohh Tolbert of SCI Forest

A prison is a mind that submits to being confined-
No more, No less.

Once your mind escapes either a self-imposed or involuntary confinement there is no limit as to what you can accomplish,
Even when your physical body is in bondage.

It is a fact that I mastered this reality during my 12-year incarceration,
And now I appear before the world as an unexpected Jailhouse Lawyer.

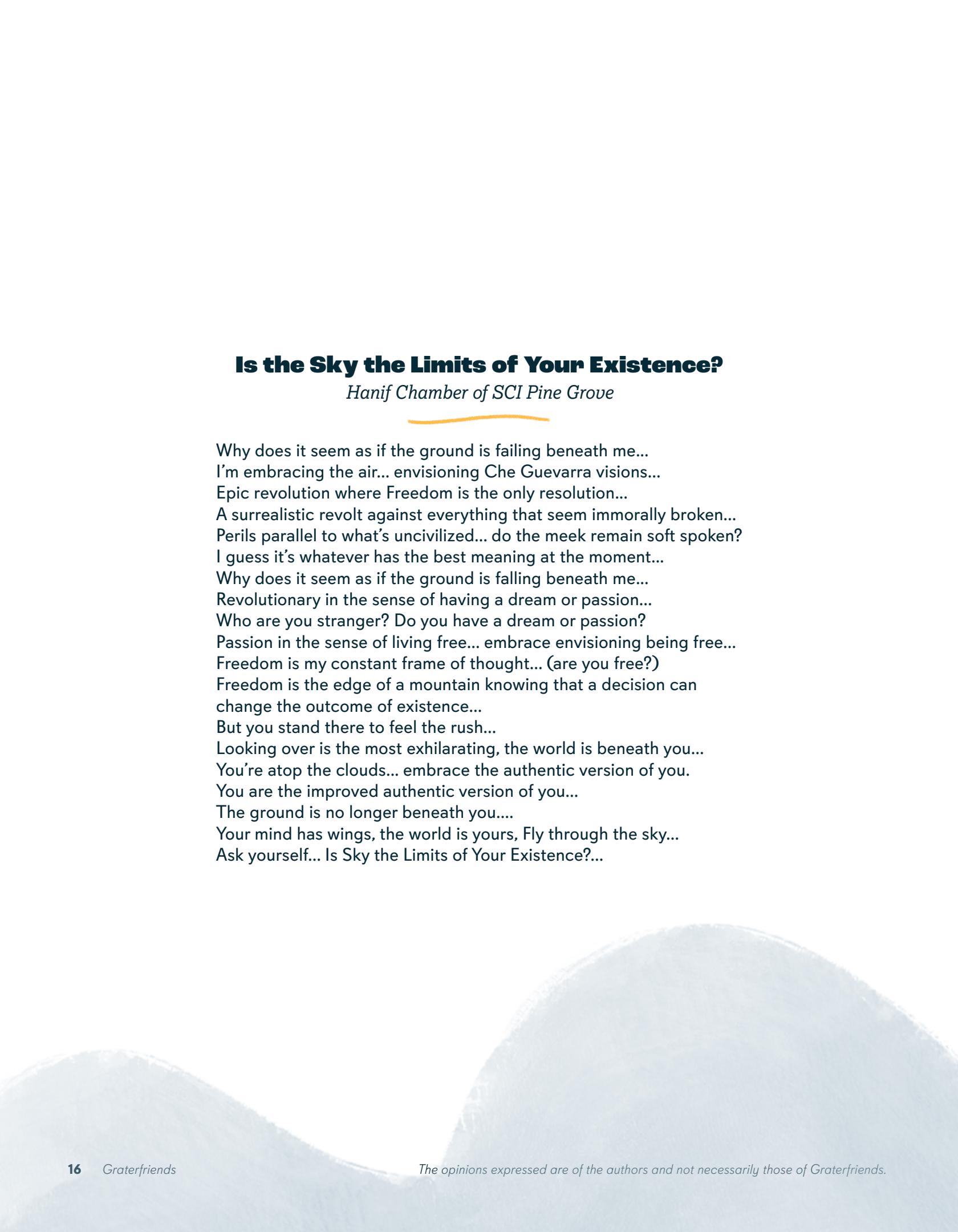
Perhaps, the Underdog of all Underdogs,
turning horror it to hope and tragedy,
cursed since birth.

For them I exist, For them I persevere;
But not through scheme nor plan, just the rawest sense of survival.

It is this picture of hope and possibility for which I stand for that makes Ojellé fear me so.
I do confess, I do confess, I do confess

Is the Sky the Limits of Your Existence?

Hanif Chamber of SCI Pine Grove



Why does it seem as if the ground is failing beneath me...
I'm embracing the air... envisioning Che Guevara visions...
Epic revolution where Freedom is the only resolution...
A surrealistic revolt against everything that seem immorally broken...
Perils parallel to what's uncivilized... do the meek remain soft spoken?
I guess it's whatever has the best meaning at the moment...
Why does it seem as if the ground is falling beneath me...
Revolutionary in the sense of having a dream or passion...
Who are you stranger? Do you have a dream or passion?
Passion in the sense of living free... embrace envisioning being free...
Freedom is my constant frame of thought... (are you free?)
Freedom is the edge of a mountain knowing that a decision can
change the outcome of existence...
But you stand there to feel the rush...
Looking over is the most exhilarating, the world is beneath you...
You're atop the clouds... embrace the authentic version of you.
You are the improved authentic version of you...
The ground is no longer beneath you....
Your mind has wings, the world is yours, Fly through the sky...
Ask yourself... Is Sky the Limits of Your Existence?...

Surviving The First Night

Stephen Burton of SCI Houtzdale

The bang of the gavel echoed in my ears and pierced my soul,
An uncomfortable ride from the courthouse was my spiritual death day.
Now, I have to face the delusional culture of incarceration.
The cell door slams shut. It's absolutely my worst day...the first night.

Pacing in a 8 by 12, separated from family is mentally destructive.
It's like a flashback from Kindergarten on the first day-
Everything is unfamiliar to me. Should I blame God for this?
No! My bad temper is the reason for this cursed day...the first night.

Head in my pillow, as I scream so no one can hear me.
Count time and I can't stand; my stomach is tied in a knot.
Being who I am, there's no way I'll let them fall; I blink them back.
I hear my father in my mind ... "Son, be strong, give it all you got" ... the first night.

Sleep escapes me, so I read my bible even though I am tired as hell.
Looking up at the ceiling, no doubt this nightmare is real
Sweet whispers from my mother ... "Son its alright, stay the course."
There's two options: have a pity party or begin to heal... the first night.

REQUESTS FOR RESOURCES

In lieu of a list, please request resources directly with this form. Please allow one month for a response.

Complete and mail to the Pennsylvania Prison Society:

Pennsylvania Prison Society

ATTN: Resources

230 South Broad Street, Suite 605

Philadelphia, PA, 19102

Name, ID Number, Facility

If Applicable: Returning County for Re-entry Resources

Resource Description

Note: The Prison Society does not offer financial assistance

Buses Are Back.



The Prison Society is providing low-cost rides for your loved ones from Philadelphia to four state correctional institutions: **SCI Benner, SCI Frackville, SCI Mahanoy, and SCI Muncy**.

Tell your loved ones to purchase tickets one of two ways:

- **Online:** Visit www.prisonsociety.org/services/transportation
- **In-person:** 230 S. Broad Street, Suite 605, Philadelphia, PA 19102
(Monday - Friday, 9 AM - 5 PM)
- **Call** our office at 215-564-4775.

READER SURVEY

We welcome comments and suggestions from all readers.
Please complete this form and mail it to the Pennsylvania
Prison Society.

Pennsylvania Prison Society
ATTN: Resources
230 South Broad Street, Suite 605
Philadelphia, PA, 19102

Name, ID Number, Facility

Comments and Suggestions

THE CREATIVE ISSUE: WINTER 2025

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(i.e. a \$10 check will be processed as a 3-year subscription and a \$1 donation).

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