

Poets of The Nancy Jefferson Alternative School

Cook County, IL Juvenile Temporary Detention Center

“Where I’m From” and Other Poems

When I speak with people about the juvenile justice system and the youth caught up in it, many of them remind me of tourists browsing a whitewater rafting brochure. Media mantras like “teenage superpredator” and “gangbanger” rely on the ignorance of the reader every bit as much as does “experience nature in a thrill ride that won’t be forgotten.” If you have experienced the power of whitewater or the sensitivity of an incarcerated teen, then you are less likely to buy prefabricated images of those experiences.

The following poems, written by youth incarcerated in the Cook County Illinois Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (CCJTDC), are, like the dangers of a rushing river, real. It has been my experience that these young people have neither the time nor the need to sensationalize their lives, especially if they’re putting the effort into writing about them. They want to express, as Luis Rodriguez outlines, where they have been, where they are now, and where they might be going. Rodriguez writes, “It is precisely where we have stumbled, in our personal despair, where we will find our answers.” These writers have the courage to reflect upon their strength and resiliency, as well as upon their vulnerability to social and economic currents born in high places and fed by rivulets of greed and fear.

The Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative School Literacy Project, funded by a grant given to National Louis University, is in its fourth year. Initially, it only supported one-on-one work with incarcerated youth in hopes of improving their literacy skills. In its second year the project expanded to include creative writing workshops conducted by professional writers and educators affiliated with Young Chicago Authors and the Guild Complex. Two anthologies of student writing, *But Not Yet Resting* and *Walk Like You Know*, have been published and distributed to all the Juvenile Detention Center classrooms and units and passed to judges, county administrators, probation officers, public defenders, and parents of youth detained at the CCJTDC. Inquiries about the project and requests for copies of the anthology can be made by emailing rdkees@mindspring.com or calling the Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative School at 312-433-7110.

-Ryan Keesling, literacy tutor/teacher consultant/project coordinator

Where I'm From

Where I'm from people are huddling in the small doorway to hide from the white racist police.

Where I'm from young negro kids stand on the freezing corner huddled up in many jackets trying to get their last boys off. Always hoping a dope fiend will walk by and say, "You cool?"

Where I'm from gangbangers are always driving by trying to shoot my building up to flames, the sounds of gunshots ring in my ears while I hide on my living room floor.

Where I live is in the Calumet building on 63rd and Calumet. There are rats running in the dirty stinky smelly hallways.

Where I'm from you cannot walk down the halls without someone saying, "Psst, psst, hey shorty, how much?"

Where I live nobody obeys the law because they say they need to make their money to buy some shoes. Nowadays always trying to keep in style.

Where I'm from the smell of marijuana seeps through the holes in our doors, from where the police kicked in my door looking for drugs.

Where I'm from if you're not in a certain gang you will get jumped, or even if you are not in any gang you will be pressured by the gang members to join.

Where I'm from, from 8:00am until whenever there are always people trying to sell drugs to young kids, even when it's 30 below.

Where I'm from all our doors look like termites ate through them and left a lot of holes.

Where I'm from the smell of dirty clothes and nasty hypes stays in the hallway, while you hear them crying for another rock.

Where I'm from nobody needs to live there.

-Kristana

Young Girls on Lockdown

Have you ever seen a lot of Black girls on lockdown? If not, let me inform you how it feels and how it is to be locked up. My name is Shanna and I'm a young girl on lockdown. I feel as though you don't have any freedom, like you're on punishment, which you are because you did something you didn't have any business doing. In the Juvenile, you have people telling you where you're going. People tell you when to eat, when to go to sleep and most of all our Black girls are locked up. Nowadays, more Blacks are locked up than any other races. Some girls come here during pregnancy and stress at the same time, and it's even more stressful because these people's mothers don't want them. Sometimes kids have their kids in here and it's real messed up and physically their whole soul is too fucked up to be able to deal with the real world.

-Shanna

Looking

I am looking for a man that's supposed to be there for me. He could be there for me when I go to prom, graduate, get married, have a baby. He could have black, brown, blond, or red hair, he could have green, blue, brown, or hazel eyes. He could be tall or short, he could be fat or skinny. He could be mean or nice. He could love me only on the weekends. He could be there for me. He could be handsome or ugly. He could look like me. He is a part of me I've never had. Who are you, and where are you, dad?

-Nastassaja

What's Happening?

I'm in a class filled with I don't know what?
I asked to be here, but should have kept my mouth shut.

Beating pens, opened mouths,
Teachers pissed and filled with shouts.

They can't control the room even if they armed themselves with brooms.

The youth keep committing crimes which
the government wants.
They don't want us to be smart,
can't wait to see us on street corners
pushing our homes in a shopping cart.

I plan to beat the system before it beats me like a drum

So I can be the one with knowledge
And say you—The System — are the one who is dumb.

-Anastasio

HE LIED, HE LIED

He told me he would always love me.
He told me he would never leave me.
He told me he would always save me.
He Lied,
He Lied

He told me he would come to see me.
He told me he would give me anything.
He told me anything that I'd believe.
He Lied,
He Lied

He told me that I would stay in his heart.
He told me that he would never put his hands on me.
But daddy you,
Lied and Lied...

-Sylvia

I Stand Inside

I stand inside a room with different faces
Where people look confused and lots of
Them act racist.

I stand inside a little room where children
Have been abused.

I stand inside a cold room where I see
Young kids not being able to move, shackled
Down on a bench and waiting to be removed.

I stand inside this world where white and black
Hate each other, instead of singing the blues together
They sing about killing each other.

But now in my mind I see things completely different
Because we all came a long way and we trying to
Love each other.

-Sherene

Conversation

Ashantanique:

Where is my mommy? I miss my mommy. I love my mommy. I cry every night because I miss my mommy. I hope that my mommy comes home soon to be with me all through the night and through the morning. I know my mommy misses me too, just like I miss her too. But when she comes home, I hope she hugs me so tight and gives me a big kiss on my head. I will be so happy to see my mommy again. God, please let my mommy come home soon. I hope you hear my prayer, God. Amen.

Loretta:

I pray that I will go home to my baby and my family. I miss my baby. I love her so much. I pray to God that I get out of jail and go home with her. I pray that she remembers me. I pray that I stay out of jail and get my life together. I love my sister and cousins. I love my grandma and aunt Robin. I love my daddy and Derrick, but I will keep on praying that I go home to Ashantanique because she misses me just like I miss her. God, I pray I come home to my baby soon. God, I hope you heard my prayer, God. Amen.

-Loretta

Washroom

Use me up don't hush me don't wash your hands go head touch the door you know you want to don't bring your nasty self back here no more. Here comes another. This time with a child go head let him aim his pee all over me. Fine. Then don't wipe me off. Leave the stain on the seat. I understand you don't like being neat. Drag the tissue all over the floor and then the next day I have to endure more.

-Rhonda

Real Deal

Nothing but time
Thinking about the crime
No way I'll last, thinking about the past

It's haunting me, scaring me, teasing me

Can't eat, can't drink, can't sleep, can't think
Nightmares day and night

Sending me into fright
I'm shaking, trembling, fidgeting
Can't keep control, can't clear my mind

It's a hell of a mess, I'm in a bind locked away
Thrown out the key
To my mind
To sanity
Feeling lazy, hazy, crazy.

Punching the walls, kicking the bars
Lost all feeling, floating on Mars
The nightmares finally ending
The steel bars are bending
I must be mistaking, pretending, hallucinating
It's all over now
My fate is sealed
On a steel cart I'll be wheeled
The needle in my arm,
No worry for infection
I got the "real deal"
Lethal injection
Gone.

My life
My crime
My past
My time

-Curtis