The first time my old man went to prison I wrote him letters. I wrote Darryl long rambling letters that went on for 10 or 11 pages.

I didn’t have a home and I had maybe one change of clothes. Our car got confiscated when he got popped, along with everything I owned in the world except for what I was carrying in my backpack when it happened. So I didn’t even have shoes at the beginning of that summer but I always had tablets of yellow paper and something to write with. I could fit that in my bag along with my hairbrush and bits and pieces of makeup and a prescription bottle fulla water and the leather cigarette case that held my syringes and cotton and twisted spoons.

I wrote him letters and them tablets of paper got to be as critical for survival as black tape and crazy glue and bolt-cutters. And I can’t think of anything much more suspicious in that community than a hooker who spent her spare time recording things on paper. I think I got away with it because it was the first thing I did after Darryl went away. I bought paper and wrote and folks who mighta otherwise found my behavior strange to the point of being problematic knew why I was writing. They knew I was Darryl Masters’ old lady and he’d just gotten busted and if what made me happy was to sit and scribble it didn’t disrupt anything critical in the life cycle. Sometimes people would watch me while I was writing with their eyes kinda narrowed studying me like I mighta been half-crazy and ask me why I was doing it. And I really didn’t have an answer because although I
wrote Darryl all them letters, I never mailed a single one.

The tablets would fill up with details about business and weather reports and stories about who was getting busted and who was getting sick. I remember sitting on the hood of a car in the parking lot at Marg’s bar in my cutoffs with my legs crossed and dangling over the hood of the car and catching dates with that tablet on my lap. And I remember more than a couple sheriffs stopping to see what I was doing and scratching their heads and kinda chuckling at me. And even that didn’t really seem to spook anybody. I suppose it should have occurred to me that sitting there with that tablet on my lap and a CoCo County Sheriff chatting me up wasn’t the brightest thing I coulda done.

But I never thought about what I was putting in them tablets as information. Never thought of it as secrets. That wasn’t the purpose in writing. Darryl had been a constant presence in my life—we’d been together as close to 24/7 as two people could be. We shared the same pillow and the same air and the same food and the same dope and the same syringes. In all the months and years we were together I probably never said as many words out loud as I poured into a single one of them 10-page letters. And as long as I kept writing them I could pretend he was still there.

For a while I saved the tablets as they filled up but after I had three or four of them in my pack it started getting crowded and uncomfortable. Stuff would shift around inside and the hard cardboard corners would jab me in the back. So I started another ritual. As a new one would fill up I’d take the oldest and tear all the pages into tiny pieces and throw them away. Until I started doing that, people actually thought I was mailing the letters but Billy Jay Meckles caught me sitting in the 24-hour laundromat one night tearing up them pages and asked me what the hell I was doing. I started to shove the tablet I had half torn up back in my pack but he snatched it outa my hand. He didn’t read anything on it—just held it there between us.

“They’re just letters,” I told him. Billy Jay was huge and probably had the potential to be one mean motherfucker after four years in the joint but he was one of the best-natured junkies I ever knew. He was always finding something to laugh at and the one or two girls work-

ing the streets who had kids always left their kids with Billy Jay when they worked. He kept himself fixed that way. The kids never lasted long. Social Services always ended up taking them away but while they were there, he was kinda like the community daycare. It was partly cause he already had a place to live—his mom had left him a small house that he managed to hang onto in between visits to the pen—but it had more to do with knowing kids were safe with Billy Jay. Their mothers could go to work and not have to worry about them and when they picked them up they always dropped off a piece of dope. Billy Jay probably had the cleanest hustle on the stroll.

His eyebrows arched over his round bright blue eyes and he tossed a long blonde curl off his shoulder. “Why aren’t ya mailing them?”

“I will. That was just a kinda practice letter. Didn’t really say what I wanted to say.” The zipper was open on my pack and you couldn’t help but see the other two tablets covered with ink and pages curling up at the corners.

“How long ya been trying to find the right thing to say?” he asked and pointed at my pack.

“I don’t know. What difference does it make?” I liked Billy Jay but he was getting into shit that he couldn’t possibly understand.

“It makes a difference if Darryl ain’t gettin any of them letters.”

“He does—he will.”

“Ya mean in all this time ya ain’t mailed a single one? Shit Mickey, he’s been gone almost three months.”

I cringed when he said it. I’d let people think we were in pretty close contact.

If anybody had actually thought beyond the words I said, they woulda realized how unlikely that was. Where could he write to me at? But people with habits don’t have time to waste analyzing shit like that so when I told folks he was doing good and I couldn’t wait to see him, they just accepted it. And maybe after a while I convinced myself that somehow we were still in contact. That just writing the letters kept us together.

But Billy Jay had done time and he knew what them letters meant and he wasn’t letting it go. “Why aren’t ya mailing them? He’s probably gone outta his mind, Mickey.”
I didn’t answer. Didn’t have an answer. At least not one I wanted to share with him. He’d think I was crazy and I wasn’t entirely sure he would be wrong in his assessment. As long as writing had a purpose—a reason—it made sense. Writing to communicate was logical. Just wandering around scribbling thoughts and observations down for no apparent reason pointed to one of two things. A rat or a nut. I knew it wasn’t the former and that left only the craziness as an option. And if I told Billy Jay the real reason I wasn’t mailing the letters, I knew he’d confirm my diagnosis.

He sat down beside me on the wood slat bench. “What’s up with ya, girl? Why ya writing all this shit down if ya don’t plan on sending it to him?”

“I do. I am gonna send them.” I paused and then latched onto what seemed like a reasonable excuse only because of the pressure I felt to come up with one. “I don’t got any stamps or envelopes.”

“Ya make two or three-hundred bucks a night—what’s a fuckin stamp cost?” It wasn’t how much they cost. It was acquiring them that was the real problem. You could buy postage stamps in some of the grocery stores, but I hadn’t been in a regular grocery store in over a couple years. I’d got so accustomed to getting thrown outa places of business in Bella Vista that I stopped going anywhere but Dave’s liquor store—and Dave didn’t sell stamps. And in the beginning when Darryl first went away, I’d intended to mail them letters and I’d even got as far as the parking lot of the Thrifty Foods intending to go in and buy stamps and an envelope. But I stood outside with the sun so hot on my shoulders I could smell the heat rising off my skin and changed my mind. Even if I’d had shoes I don’t think I coulda forced myself to go in there. We owned the streets in Bella Vista but the square folks owned the grocery stores and the restaurants and gas stations. When they had to go out on the streets, they drove with their windows rolled up and the doors locked and their eyes aimed anywhere but at the working girls and I knew if I went in that store the same thing would happen. I’d walk up to the cash register with a small box of envelopes and ask for a sheet of stamps and no one would respond. Their eyes would go over my head and they’d wait on the person ahead of me and behind me but they’d refuse to see me. And if I made them see me, they’d have me thrown out.

And the post office was absolutely outa the question—all them people in uniforms. So that day in fronta the store I told myself I’d come back at night. And when I went back at night I told myself the next time I had a little extra cash I’d get a pair of shoes and then go back to get my stamps. And after a while I stopped bothering to make excuses to myself. After a while I found that I liked writing the letters better because I knew I’d never mail them. But it was a long time until I understood why and saying something like that to Billy Jay without a good why to back it up wouldn’t fly.

“Girl I’m gonna buy some fuckin stamps and envelopes and we’re gonna mail some of them letters. Homeboy’s gonna be tweakin hard about this by now.” I hated hearing him talk about Darryl being in prison. I hated hearing anybody talk specifically about it. When people asked about him they didn’t say, So how’s Darryl doing in the joint? They just asked how he was and I could say fine like he was just waiting for me out in the car.

“Ya know what, Billy? You’re gonna think I’m fuckin spun—but it’s like—as long as I don’t mail them letters I don’t gotta think about him being gone.”

“Hub?”

“It’s like I’m just savin stuff up to tell him when he gets back at night. And then at night I know he’s not coming back—at least not for a long time—and I can’t stand thinkin about it so I just shove it all outa my mind. I tell myself he just went off to cop or take care of some business and he’ll be here when I wake up in the mornin.”

It was only half a lie. It was my habit more than anything else that kept me from mailing the letters. I learned in those first few months when Darryl was gone and I not only had to earn the money but had to take care of business too, that even something as minimal as mailing a letter required more energy units than I had to spare if I was gonna stay fixed and on topa my hustle. It’s hard to conceive that such a tiny task coulda been so entirely overwhelming but it was. And I knew within the first couple weeks that I’d probably never mail a single one. And on those rare occasions when I allowed myself to remember that Darryl was in prison and not waiting for me at the motel or in the car out by the river—I did know that we was sufferin for my inability to get it together. I did know that he’d be sitting
up in his cell late at night wondering if I'd stopped loving him. The girl before me did him like that.

He'd loved Bridget like a kid loves the first time, only he was almost 30 when he loved her. And when he went to the joint she hooked up with a heroin-dealer named Fernando and as hard as they were, the other guys in the joint are—shit like that rocks their world.

And he'd thought when he went in that I was gonna get clean and when he got out we gonna do the square thing and have a place to live with walls and rooms instead of back seats and front seats. That had been his insurance against losing me while he was down. Clean—he thought I'd wait for him. Hooked—he thought I'd pull a Bridget on him. Not having heard a single word from me since they transferred him to Vacaville from the county lock-up in Martinez—he must have spent endless empty hours working out scenarios of betrayal in his mind. But I hadn't done any time then and even my worst imaginings didn't come close to understanding such an experience.

II

I mailed him the letters I wrote the first time I went to jail. The first time I went and stayed. I didn't fill up tablets fulla letters but the ones I wrote did get mailed. The county gave us unlimited access to paper and pencils and envelopes. You could get five pages and an envelope mailed for a single stamp and they only gave us two free stamps a week. You didn't wanna go over the five page limit cause that would take both your stamps.

Years later he'd claim he never got the letters but I mailed them to his sister's house and they never got returned to me at the jail, so I know they went somewhere. They were very different letters. No long wandering descriptions of how the leaves on the tree branches hanging over the river made shadows that looked like lace in the moonlight. No convoluted explanations about what it was like to fall in love with someone else while he sat in the joint pumping iron and occasionally reading about my latest bust in the paper. No spiraling logic that attempted to claim it wasn't really the same thing as what Bridget did because I'd fallen in love with a girl and it didn't take anything away from him or mean that I loved him any less. There weren't any of them things to write about in jail And we'd been separated since he got outta the joint that last time so I couldn't even write to him about what it was like being separated from him because it was Charley I hurt for and reached for in the night. But writing was one of the few officially sanctioned ways to pass the time and Darryl was the only person I knew who had a place he could collect mail from so I wrote letters to him.

And because paper and pencils were the only things we had access to without having money on our books—writing was the most normal thing in the world to do. Reading and writing. The library cart came around once a week. The first few weeks I kicked too hard to care about living or dying much less communicating with the free world or tuning into the completely familiar paranoia in Robert Ludlum novels. And at first when I started to feel better all I wanted to do was sit in frontta the TV. I hadn't seen TV for months and I hadn't seen it through clear eyes for years. I missed the Reagan years almost in their entirety and watching the news fascinated me. Movies and MTV and soap operas were fun to watch but the news was the first real look I'd had at the straight world since getting strung out.

I mean—I'd seen the news and TV from time to time. The nights we had motels we always had the TV on—but them people on the news then had been them and we'd been us and it was very different tuning in when I'd been clean for a few weeks because I was no longer sure where the boundary was.

That's what I wrote to Darryl about while I was in jail and that's why I mailed them letters. I wrote to him about how it would be when I was back on the streets. I wrote to him in order to establish where my future would happen. I wrote to try to document that boundary line and my position relative to it. And my world would undoubtedly be a very different place today if he'd answered my letters. If he'd confirmed my vision. But he didn't. He never got the letters and what he might have done if he had is a question we prefer to leave unanswered between us. And after a month passed and I didn't get a single response, I stopped writing the letters with the intention of mailing them.
I lucked out when I did my time. I don’t know how county jails in other jurisdictions work but in the winter of ‘88 the powers that be at the CoCo County jail seemed to be of the opinion that rehabilitation did serve some purpose. I had access to psychologists and spiritual advisers and books and excellent public defense and people whose whole jobs were about helping people like me make some kinda life plan against the day when the door locked behind instead of in front of them. And I had access to an English teacher.

I had no idea how much time I was gonna do. It took almost 40 days to get all the charges straightened out. For the most part they were misdemeanors but there were a couple potential felonies that coulda pulled a couple years. One thing I did know for certain was that less was better than more and when I found out I could get time off my eventual sentence by attending classes I jumped on it.

They had art classes and English classes and I signed up for both. I had almost no interest in art but that was another one of them things you could do with the free paper and pencils so I was willing to give it a shot—along with everybody else. We had so many people doing art that they had to use the big visiting room to hold class and twice a week we earned a half-day off our sentences sitting down and listening to a short young blonde woman talk to us about art.

We had mostly men in the art class and it was kinda comical to watch the tiny and clearly uncomfortable young teacher trying to be the leader amongst that group of hard-core gangsters. She’d hold her books up and point to something and talk about DaVinci and her finger would be visibly shaking when she pointed at the text. I realize now that she was trying to teach theory but she didn’t have any kinda art-theory that spoke to them guys. They kept pointing to the tattoos on their arms as art. Smoking guns and reapers and leaping panthers with huge and clearly articulated musculation and it was obvious that nothing in her education had prepared her to theorize on that particular form. She kept insisting that it wasn’t art but she couldn’t explain why. And we knew enough about theorizing to be able to poke holes in everything she said after that.

Half the guys on the unit went to art class but there were only two of us who went to the English class and we were both female. The English teacher wasn’t particularly young or even remotely nervous. She woulda been far better prepared to handle the homeboys who were always cracking on the art teacher but art wasn’t her calling. Letters were her thing.

She was tall and had long cinnamon-colored hair with random strands of silver growing everywhere and she stood at least 5'9" in her flats. Because there were just the three of us we didn’t need a larger room. We didn’t use a room at all. We sat at one of the tables they used at chow time to serve up and on the first day the first thing she had us do was take a spelling test. Shelley was the other girl in the class. She had the cell next to me and we kinda chuckled when the teacher told us we were having a spelling test because we spent a bunch of our spare time playing Scrabble. “Maybe this will improve my game,” Shelley said.

That made it seem a little less childish and I raised my eyebrows and said, “Ya never know.”

I don’t remember any of the words on that test except the single one I missed. Dessert. The teacher used it in a sentence so I knew she was talking about cake and pie and shit like that but I spelled it “desert.” And she gave me one of them cheesy tips for remembering how to spell words like that—words that have two different meanings depending on how you spell them.

“When you’re trying to remember whether it’s one s or two, tell yourself that you like two helpings of dessert,” she said. If I’ve spelled that word wrong since then, it was a typo.

We sat there after the test and talked about English for a while. And it’s almost impossible to imagine now—but at the time I didn’t have enough knowledge about what English was to know that it was about writing and how to use words until the teacher explained it that way. Shelley got bored shortly after the spelling test when the teacher started talking about reasons for writing but I kept listening. It was much like the conversations I’d had with myself when I was carrying around them notebooks fulla words that weren’t ever gonna get read by anybody but me. And then when the two hours were over, I had an idea.

“Could I—like do some kinda homework and get time credit for it?”

She studied me for a second. “Maybe. What do you have in mind?”
I didn't quite know how to say I wanted to write. It felt embarrassing. When I didn't say anything she said, "I can't give you time-credit for just reading. Everybody in here reads. If I gave time-credit for everybody in here reading books, we could have everybody released by Easter."

"No," I told her. "I wasn't thinkin' about readin'. I was thinkin' about writin'. I been doin' a lot of writin'."

"What kind of writing?" She seemed honestly interested and it made me comfortable talking about it. For the most part I'd gotten used to people thinking I was strange for writing—strange for wanting to write. But this woman seemed to value the act.

"Well—they started out bein' letters—," I paused and she interrupted me.

"Everybody in here writes letters too," she said.

"Well they're not really letters. They started out bein' that way but I never mailed them and they kinda turned into—well I'm not sure what you'd call them. Stories maybe."

"Have you been doing that ever since you got here?"

"Shit—I been doin' it for a few years now."

"Really?" She said, like she really wasn't expecting an answer. She finished gathering up her books and materials and then stood there with it all piled up in her arms staring at me and I started being sorry I'd mentioned it. Suddenly it seemed like the quintessential arrogance to think I had anything to say that might qualify as a story. And she was looking at me like she couldn't decide whether or not to take me seriously—whether or not I wanted to write or just wanted to get outa jail faster.

"Tell you what I'll do. You bring something you've already written to the next class and I'll read it. Then we'll talk about time-credit. OK?"

I nodded and said, "OK," trying to think of what I had already written up in my room that I could show her.

Later that night in my cell I looked through the stack of papers on my little wooden writing table. I didn't know what she'd be expecting or what she'd be looking for. Mostly what I had in my cell didn't add up to more than a diary of the time I'd been there. Anecdotes and details about the people I shared that space with but not really stories and I told her I wrote stories.

The journals probably would have served my purpose but somewhere between thinking that I might be able to get time off my sentence in exchange for my scribbling and sitting at my desk trying to decide what to show her my purpose changed a tiny bit. I cared about what she thought for what it could gain me but I also started caring what she thought simply for the sake of the story.

I went back in my mind looking for stories and finally decided I'd write a few pages about Charley. I spent the next four days reconstructing a moment from our relationship and whatever the teacher had been looking for musta been there cause after she read it she agreed that for every two pages I wrote she'd give me credit for one class session. The first independent study project of my education.

And I spent hours sitting at that desk after that. During the day I still hung out on the unit and watched Madonna on MTV and played Scrabble with Shelley but I took to staying up half the night with pencil and paper. I wrote so much my pencils always went dull before I'd quit and go to sleep. The last thing I did before lock-down was sharpen all my pencils and by morning, the points were always all rubbed down to smooth black nubs.

Darryl never wrote but he came to see me twice. Charley ended up in the hospital with endocarditis that winter and so she couldn't come but Darryl did manage to show up two different times.

I'd been there almost two months when he finally showed up. I don't suppose I really had any right to expect anything more from him because we'd been separated for a while when I got popped—but I did. I'd taken care of him for years and I'd expected him—at least while I was at County—to do the same. To make sure I had money for cigarettes and candy bars from the canteen. To buy a bag of Taffy Creme cookies. Life's little luxuries.

By the time he showed up, I'd begun to think about options other than returning to the back seats and the spoon and the grasping hands on my body. I'd begun writing a different kinda letter. With my world on the streets completely cut off I turned—for the first time in years—towards the people I'd spent the first years of my life with. My family. Initially those letters were just to make contact—to re-estab-
lish connections that had been stretched and frayed and miswired and all but irreparably severed over the years. When my sentence and my charges were being negotiated, the court sent one of them people who specialize in rehabilitation plans to see me, and the first thing the man told me to do was try to make family contact. "One of the things they're going to consider when they look at your time is what your odds are for becoming a productive member of society. You're looking at some serious felonies but the courts have been known to reduce those to misdemeanors in those cases when the defendant has a workable plan for being mainstreamed," he told me.

"Mainstreamed?"

"Becoming a part of mainstream society. Things like having a home and learning how to find a job and take care of yourself."

In the back of our minds we all knew that was what kept us from getting straight. Being hooked on heroin didn't keep us in the spoon so much as our lack of knowledge about the world outside of it. We didn't know how to "mainstream" and in those opaque shadow no man was so blind when we allowed ourselves to think about what existed beyond our borders, we didn't know how they did it—people in the mainstream. When they needed a place to live we didn't know how they found one. Did they just walk up to apartment buildings and say, I need one of these? We knew that when they needed jobs they used their experience to get them—but we didn't have any experience. And we couldn't even get most businesses to let us in when we had money. How could we ever have gotten them to pay us to be there? But the county had them people who specialized in teaching people like me how to do just exactly that.

And the first part of that process had to do with what the man called "creating a community." He told me that sometimes religious organizations sponsored people like me but for the most part, our families were our last chance to avoid the pen. The words came strained and passive at first—but I wrote them letters and they were the first contact I had with the outside world in years. The doctors and the teachers and the advisors in jail all belonged to that outside world—but I was their job. We were their jobs. Those first tentative letters were an attempt to make contact with a world that had no obligation to acknowledge me. A peace treaty after living for years as one half of a them-against-us equation. And initially my plan was to make that contact and convince my parents to agree to participate in planning my rehabilitation. I didn't plan on going through with it but at the time I needed them involved to turn those felonies into misdemeanors. Like the English classes—the letters I wrote my parents had the potential to cut my time.

If Darryl had come to see me sooner that's probably the only purpose the letters ever woulda served. But somewhere in that second month—between the letters on the Scrabble board and the letters in the spelling tests and the letters to and from my parents—the words became the girders in the formation of a straight identity. I would write about a future absent of drugs and sleeping in cars and working in bars and living and loving on street corners in random moments stolen from the larger narrative of addiction. They were non-specific words because I didn't know any of those specifics. I could only think of the future in terms of the past. It held no meaning beyond what it was not. But as non-specific as the words were, they were the only familiar territory that existed in that limbo. Words were the same on either side of the equation. Later I would discover how many different things a single word could mean—but then I latched onto the idea that language was the same on both sides of the bars. They might not let me go in their restaurants or pay me money to do a job—but if I used the words right there was no way to tell that I was any different from any one of them. And initially I recognized words as tools to perpetuate a scam. I could use them to con people. And if Darryl hadn't waited so long to put in an appearance, I probably never woulda understood how much more letters and words could be than a means to an end.

But he waited and by the time he showed up the words I was writing had shifted in purpose. I was by no means sure that I wanted to change my life. To leave the only home and the only family I'd known for years—to go play at being normal. But I had stopped believing that I couldn't. I believed that in the language I'd found a way out—I just hadn't definitively decided to take it. And now in my letters and in my stories I was writing to discover. To come to the decision.
The second and last time Darryl came, I still hadn’t decided. I’d made all the plans. My parents had written letters agreeing to provide me with a home and supervision should the court choose to release me into their custody. I’d had lengthy discussions with counselors about rehabilitation—about AA and NA and CA and all the other alphabet groups. I’d gone to my classes and been a model prisoner and convinced my public defender that—oh yeah—I was that one in a thousand you could put your faith in. I convinced them all. Using words.

I just hadn’t convinced myself. It all sounded good in theory. But the theories had all been developed by people with big fancy degrees and I could tell by the way they talked that they didn’t have much grounding in practice. My visions of their world lacked the specifics to make it truly conceivable. And their theories had specifics but they were irrelevant enough to make the reality of my life almost inconceivable to them. Their specifics came from books and those books were written by people who got their information from books—ad infinitum. And when the man from the courthouse talked to me about things like finding jobs, I doubted if any of the words he knew could help me where I needed it most. He could talk to me about appearance and the kinda questions I’d get asked on applications. He could even—with the assistance of some tests—tell me what I’d probably be best at. But he couldn’t tell me how—after my almost 15 years of prostitution and all that accompanies that—to deal with men on any other level. He couldn’t tell me how to keep myself from flinching if a man moved quickly in my presence. Couldn’t tell me how to believe that they looked at me and saw anything but sex. I had some understanding of their side of the equation because I’d lived those first years of my life there. But they didn’t know anything concrete about the place they were trying to pull me away from and so as great as their theories sounded—I kept finding holes in them. As much as I found myself drawn to the future those theories promised—it was still a blind date and I wasn’t sure I wanted to go.

Until Darryl came to see me that last time. He sat on his side of the glass and I sat on mine and there wasn’t anything specific in his words or his appearance that made me decide to go. He’d been outa the pen for almost seven months on that run and it was starting to tell. He’d gotten thin and his normally deep-set brown eyes looked sunk almost into the back of his skull with the dark purple shadows beneath them. His hair had grown down to his shoulders and was dull where the street dust stuck to the grease because he had nowhere to wash it. And while seeing that after two months being clean mighta convinced some people that they never wanted to live that way again, it just reminded me that if I left I’d be leaving half my life behind. A lifetime of living dirty on the streets—but it was my lifetime and all I had.

Nothing he said or did made up my mind. There was never any one deciding factor. But sitting there looking at him through the glass I caught myself trying to memorize the details of his appearance. The way his eyebrows grew together and the front tooth that was broken. The tiny mole beside his mouth that disappeared in a wrinkle when he smiled. The smooth satin drawl of his voice when he tipped his head and said “Aw Mickey—don’t go” like he had a hundred times before. Only when he said it at the jail that day I snatched the words and ironed them into memory. Tone by tone. And then I realized I’d never see him again. Never hear him say them words again. I was going home.

I wrote one more story. Once I decided to leave, the hardest part became shoving away the thoughts of everything and everyone that would stay behind. And there were a thousand places and things and people I’d miss but they all massed in my mind as Darryl. He’d been the single longest presence in my life. In my mind he became the embodiment of the specifics of memory. When I cried for all things lost, the picture in my mind was of Darryl sleeping in the backseat of the Oldsmobile. Or Darryl standing at the payphone calling for dope. Or Darryl reminding me to wear shoes because it was getting to be cold again. And during the day with access to the support system I had developed, it seemed entirely doable. But at night I would tell myself I’d never be able to pull it off. Never be able to leave him and go on into that alien place where my parents lived almost a thousand miles away.

So I wrote that last story and attempted to envision a future without Darryl and all that he’d represented in the past. And I didn’t
Megan Fuss

start out planning to kill him off but that’s how it worked out. It took
30 handwritten pages and in the end I lived and he died and once I
put the last word on the last sheet of paper—it was over. He was dead
and so there was no longer anything to grieve about leaving. He was
already gone.

Of course I knew it wasn’t true. But just like never mailing him
the letters I wrote the first time he went away allowed me to pretend
he wasn’t gone until such time as my mind could handle the reality—
writing that story helped me to bury the past until it was safe to res-
urrect it.

III

I didn’t go to jail and read “Native Son” and suddenly come to
some blinding insight about how my own experience hooked up
with the larger narratives of society. Didn’t discover the power of
voice in the words of others. Years later I read Richard Wright and
found myself incredibly drawn to Bigger Thomas—to the many simi-
larities in our experience. But in jail I wouldn’t have had the know-
ledge base to appreciate them similarities. I didn’t know anything
about power structures or dominant classes and I wouldn’t have had
the ability to appreciate Bigger’s position relative to those things any-
more than I could have appreciated my own.

I went to jail and I wrote because the writing had value. It was a
commodity and I could trade it for freedom. It had a purpose I could
identify. In the process I discovered the myriad other purposes and
value inherent in the act and I ended up writing in jail for the same
reasons I wrote them letters I never mailed. I wrote to discover and I
wrote to heal and I wrote to decide. I wrote to make meaning in a
world that held none.

And the first thing I bought with the first paycheck I earned on
the outside was a typewriter. In those first few years when I under-
stood nothing—I wrote to make sense outa the things I observed
around me. Once I got to Washington and had them thousand miles
to cross if I really wanted to go back, I allowed myself to remember
that Darryl was alive and I started writing long rambling letters again.

I wrote long commentaries on what it felt like to come into the
straight world. I wrote about how nice it was to keep my body pri-
vate and untouched. What it was like to have a home of my own with
a door that I could lock. I wrote about how long it took me to stop
instinctively thinking I needed to run when I saw a cop and about
what it felt like to go shopping—to pay for things and carry them
out stores in bags instead of my pockets. About gaining the ability to
move amongst the public without being picked off—without looking
like an other. I wrote about what it felt like to pass. But I still didn’t
mail the letters. Not yet. I was still in a state of becoming and didn’t
yet know who or what I would become.

But one thing I learned early on was that people are judged by
their use of language—that how they spoke could define them as
trailer-park trash or it could define them as being potentially suitable
for admittance to the country club. I knew that my successful rein-
vention would depend on how facile I could become with words, I
read constantly—try to teach myself all the things I’d never had
instruction in. I learned how to imitate the precise conventional lan-
guage that marked people as educated so well that when I took
entrance exams at the local community college, I placed directly into
freshman English without any prep classes. And for the next two years
I was trained in formal academic prose until I could spit out papers on
anything from the development of the atomic bomb to Henry VIII’s
obsession with having a son.

But I missed my language. The ungrammatical non-standard
English that in its broken rhythms seemed to define the broken
rhythms of our lives on the streets. And for a while I prided myself on
speaking two languages. I told myself that I was socially bilingual—
that it was a gift because I could walk in two worlds. That’s what I
told myself but I couldn’t avoid knowing that the other language was
useless because nobody in my here and now spoke it. So I poured it
all into the letters that I kept writing to Darryl but even that was holl-
low because I had nowhere to mail them.

By the time I transferred to the university I was an English major
thoroughly indoctrinated in how to speak and compose according to
arbitrary conventions created by people who’d been dead for centu-
rries and whose lives bore no resemblance to my own. I had masked
and altered and realigned my voice until even I wasn’t sure that I’d ever spoken any other way—that there’d ever been a girl who called herself Mickey Masters who wrote down the lives she’d encountered selling her body on Willow Pass Road all those years ago.

And then I found Darryl. It amazed me—while I was on the phone with the California Department of Corrections and the Parole Board—how if I spoke with authority and big words, they’d give me the information I wanted. How language was the biggest con of all. I thought of the thousand ways I could exploit that knowledge if I’d only had it back then. You could tell virtually any lie and if you spoke properly, people didn’t pause to question. In the other language it didn’t matter what I said because nobody ever looked beyond what my voice said about my social circumstances to try to make out my words.

Darryl was at San Quentin doing a parole violation when I found him and finally—almost 10 years after I wrote the first one—I mailed him letters. The past had become so distant that the first one I mailed began “you might not remember me...” But once we started writing and reliving memories, the lazy cadence and the singular vocabulary of the streets took over my writing.

And some of it spilled over into my schoolwork. It seemed to me like the creative part of creative writing would allow me to use my own voice but I got told that using words like “hermeneutics” and “gonna” in the same sentence just wouldn’t fly. That no one would buy such a voice. The gentle elderly professor of my nonfiction class told me that he’d be more comfortable if I’d present my prose as fiction. Perhaps then such a voice would be acceptable. In real life no one would ever believe that a $20 hooker with an eighth-grade education would know what hermeneutics meant. And when I tried to tell him that he was wrong—that I had known what the word meant—he told me it didn’t matter. No one would believe it. I could never tell it true because the truth was somehow too disturbing. And it wasn’t the $20 blow jobs or the self-mutilation of my veins that disturbed him as much as it was the apparent conflict between language and experience. I think I understand what’s at the core of that discomfort. I think I understand that to accept that the drug-addicted hooker that I was could have possessed intelligence and critical think-

ing skills somehow speaks to a societal failure as well as my own. And so rather than forcing the world to question its own assumptions—rather than challenging the status quo—I was told to present my life as a lie—as a piece of fiction.

I probably would never have told the stories—never would have written them down anywhere except in the letters if it hadn’t been for the intervention of another professor. I did an independent study with Suzanne and she liked the stories I wrote—was intrigued by my memories of Charley and Darryl. But the voice was still a problem. She called me “Miss Passive Voice” and told me to write it the way I spoke it. To whittle away the academese and the moderated tone. And I couldn’t do it. I’d write the word “ain’t” and it would feel like I was crossing a bigger line than it felt the first time I told my body.

But some combination of her Bajan heritage and a childhood spent in New Jersey with a cemetery for a backyard allowed her to understand the strange nature of my experiences. We were the same age and sometimes when I looked at her I thought that I could be like her if I hadn’t stopped along the way to be Mickey—and I trusted her.

She kept encouraging me to talk—to say it the way it happened even if I couldn’t make myself write it that way. And I was sitting at my computer one night writing to Darryl and I realized staring at the words on the screen that I had maintained the other voice—the other language. I showed them letters to Suzanne and she said, “Yeah—that’s it. That’s a natural voice.”

I struggled with it at first. I’d use an expression like “spun” or “rig” and spend the next five sentences trying to define the word in the context of the streets. And Suzanne would tell me not to—that the meaning was embedded in the story itself. Language had been my disguise through every step of my education and it was easier to spell out the details of being raped by a trick than it was to deviate from standard English.

There was less at stake with the rape. That was in the past. That happened to Mickey—not to Megan.

But I found—as I worked through the combining of the voices—that I was healing. Losing my fear of the straight world because it wasn’t a con anymore. I wasn’t disguising my version of the truth in
words and structures designed to make it palatable to the rest of the world. As long as it had been a con, I had to live with the possibility that I might get found out. That someone might discover that although I could imitate the language of the masters I didn’t understand its substructures and component parts. That the theories behind it all seemed like nothing more than job security for the academic elite and that I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. It didn’t matter anymore if the whole world found out that I was trailer park trash because I’d discovered something. I can say “gonna” and “hermeneutics” in the same sentence and if it doesn’t sound authentic, the problem is with the way the world listens and not the way I speak.

During my second year of grad school I ran across a composition theorist who claimed while working with remedial readers and writers that, “Slowly something has been shifting in my perception: the errors—the weird commas and the missing letters, the fragments and irregular punctuation—they are ceasing to be slips of the hand and brain. They are becoming part of the stories themselves. They are the only fitting way, it seems, to render dislocation—shacks and field labor and children lost to the inner city ...” (Rose, 214). And I realized that it isn’t the broken language and the twisted syntax of the dispossessed that bothers the world. It is the stories they render. It is the fear that beneath the ain’ts and the sentence fragments are bright beautiful minds that would condemn the world for their alienation and exclusion if they ever got the chance to be heard.

Reclaiming my language—proving that being trailer park trash doesn’t preclude intelligence—has gone a long way towards bringing me comfort in my new world. I’ve been allowed to keep my memories whole and intact and the letters have made Mickey and Megan a single being.

And yet every quarter when I look out at the 24 new faces in the freshman composition class that I teach—I remember that I spent half my life as a heroin-addicted hooker and I wonder what their parents would say if they knew. I wonder how they’ve been educated and if they’ll notice that I talk differently than they do. That I pay no attention to speaking standard English. That my words run together and my sentences are punctuated by the kinds of slang their high school English teachers would rap their knuckles for using. And just for a moment I remembering standing on my corner negotiating to do blowjobs for men who coulda been their fathers and I ponder on the magic that could have delivered me from the one place to the other. The wordplay and the letters that saved us both—Mickey and Megan.

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