

I Am Beautiful

A Survival Resource
Created by and for Women

Volume 11

Life is a journey and a spiritual unfolding is its purpose.



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I Am Beautiful Logo

The rose is our logo and was inspired by the words of a woman who contributed to the first volume of the *I Am Beautiful* Project.

Life is a journey and a spiritual unfolding is its purpose.

Cover Art

A special thank you to Mary Kathleen Tyler for contributing your art. Your art is an inspiration and we are deeply grateful!

A Special Thank You

This volume of *I Am Beautiful* is created with deep gratitude to Kelly O’Keefe, Project Coordinator, and her poetry group, Read Me Awake, whose collective creativity, care, and dedication helped bring this book to life. From thoughtfully reviewing each submission to editing, preparing, and refining every layout, their commitment and attention to detail are felt on every page and truly shaped this volume. We are also grateful to Callie Ward for her assistance with Spanish translation, helping ensure these voices are honored and accessible.

Also, a special thank you to Kelly for introducing the “For the Reader” call-out boxes in last year’s edition. Due to the overwhelming positive response, this feature has been continued and expanded for all submissions in this volume. These thoughtful reflections invite readers into a deeper, more personal connection with each piece.

Thank you to Kelly and the Read Me Awake poetry group for your meaningful contributions and for helping these powerful voices be seen, heard, and honored.

The Work Continues

If you feel called to share your art or writing, we welcome it at any time of the year. There is no need to wait for a letter from us. Please spread the word to fellow artists and poets as well.

Receiving work throughout the year allows us to thoughtfully prepare future volumes.

Mail to Dismas Ministry, P.O. Box 2113, Milwaukee, WI 53201

Always Remember...you are beautiful!

We pause to honor the women in U.S. prisons who courageously shared their art and writing for *I Am Beautiful*, Volume 11.

Each of you has faced hardship, loss, and profound challenges, yet you continue to stand with strength and dignity. While we were not able to include every submission, we are deeply grateful to all who entrusted us with your words, images, and lived experiences. Your willingness to share is an act of courage, and your resilience is a powerful witness.

You are survivors.

By sharing your stories of perseverance and hope, you offer encouragement to others who may see themselves reflected in these pages. It is our hope that every reader comes away reminded of their own worth and invited to recognize the beauty that exists within them, even in the midst of struggle.

This project is not intended to promote or convert anyone to a particular religion or belief. Rather, it offers space for individuals who wish to express how faith, spirituality, or personal conviction has accompanied them through hardship and helped guide them toward healing, meaning, and renewed life.

The artwork and writings in this volume are the authentic expressions of the women who submitted them. Minor edits were made only for clarity, always with care and respect, and with the intention of preserving each person's unique voice and story.

Please know that you are seen, valued, and heard. Your strength and resilience do not go unnoticed, and we honor you for the honesty, creativity, and courage it takes to endure and persevere. We acknowledge the struggles and complexities of your journey, knowing that you are not defined by your circumstances. Your humanity shines through, and your story matters. You embody the dignity inherent in every human person and the right to be treated with respect. We stand with you, believing in your potential and in the possibility of change. Always remember, you are beautiful, inside and out.

With admiration and gratitude,
The Dismas Ministry Team

I Am Beautiful

Lahela Kiwi Brewer

Before incarceration, I was not religious, saved or even baptized. I believed in God but that was it. For years, I was mad at him and the trauma I went through. Now I have been baptized, I am a full believer and I have been saved.

God has shown me many things in this journey. I have learned so much about myself and am starting to truly love the person that God has made. Through many different Bible studies and the three mental health programs I have taken, I realized I was someone I didn't know. I was headed towards divorce. God spoke to me the day I was arrested, but I turned away from him and let my past control my thoughts and actions.

I truly believe he saved my life that day. This time God helped me see my flaws and helped guide me to be better and not take anything for granted. I have learned that he is the only way to be happy and successful. I was finally able to deal with my trauma, find a purpose and see that he was with me in my trauma and was the one that got me through it.

He has shown me my purpose in life. I have become a better person; I am someone I am proud of. I've never put myself first until now. I am using this time to build a stronger relationship with God, build my self-esteem, and be the confident, beautiful, and intelligent woman I was made to be.

While going through the darkest season, I have seen the light shine. No one wants to be in prison away from family and friends. I didn't either, but I am grateful for time to work on myself, my relationship with God, and the lessons and skills I will learn. I have so much to look forward to now, and knowing I have God with me, guiding me and loving me makes it easier. I plan on continuing my journey with God and hopefully I can use my journey to help others in many different ways.

I will continue to share my story in hope to let others know they are not alone but God is and will always be with you. Whatever you did to be incarcerated, just know it does not define you or your future. Your past is your strength to be more and to help others. Your life is not over. It has just begun.

For the reader:

The poet uses the imagery of darkness and light to explain her transformation. What beauty did she find in the darkness? How does her future reflect the light that now shines in her life?

Sinner's Prayer

Sharon Smith

As I bow my head and go to my knees, I pray to You, Father, to watch over my family, keeping them safe and well. I know I have sinned. Father, forgive me of my transgressions. I fall short in my faith, and yet I know You hear my cries. I fear no man, only You, Father, for I know You are who You are the Omega, my Father who forgives all.

As I humble myself before You, I ask for Your forgiveness. Father, take my pain and tears.

I shed my shame; I know You see all I have done. I ask and plead for forgiveness. I know that if we ask with true hearts, You will forgive us, and I believe in You. All my sins will be forgiven.

I thank You, Father God, for hearing this sinner's prayer. No one is greater than my Father God in Heaven. I praise You and thank You for Your love and understanding.

For the reader:

The poet offers us a prayer that flows like a poem. She writes with a confidence that God hears her requests and will grant her peace. If prayer is a part of your spiritual life, what do you pray for?



Watercolor
Artwork by Samantha Faith Bevans

Choices

Amber Kuta

God is the answer,
that is the key.
The road to forgiveness
will set you free,

free from the anger
and all the despair,
free from the hurt
which, in time, will repair.

The memories haunt me;
they tear me apart.
Little by little,
they eat at my heart.

I know God loves me,
and He will set me free,
but no matter how hard I try,
the memories remind me

of all the hurt and pain that I've caused,
all the lives I've damaged,
a life that was lost.
In the end, I question:
was it all worth the cost?

As life moves forward
and time passes by,
I'm stuck on pause,
and I cannot rewind.

This makes me feel lonely;
it makes me cry,
giving me reasons

to want to get high.
Self-medication—
that's what I resort to,
to try to escape
what I've put you all through.

It works for a moment,
but when I'm all through,
I'm back at square one—
so what do I do?

Do I put myself through torment,
feel sorry for myself?
Or do I call out to God
and ask Him for help?

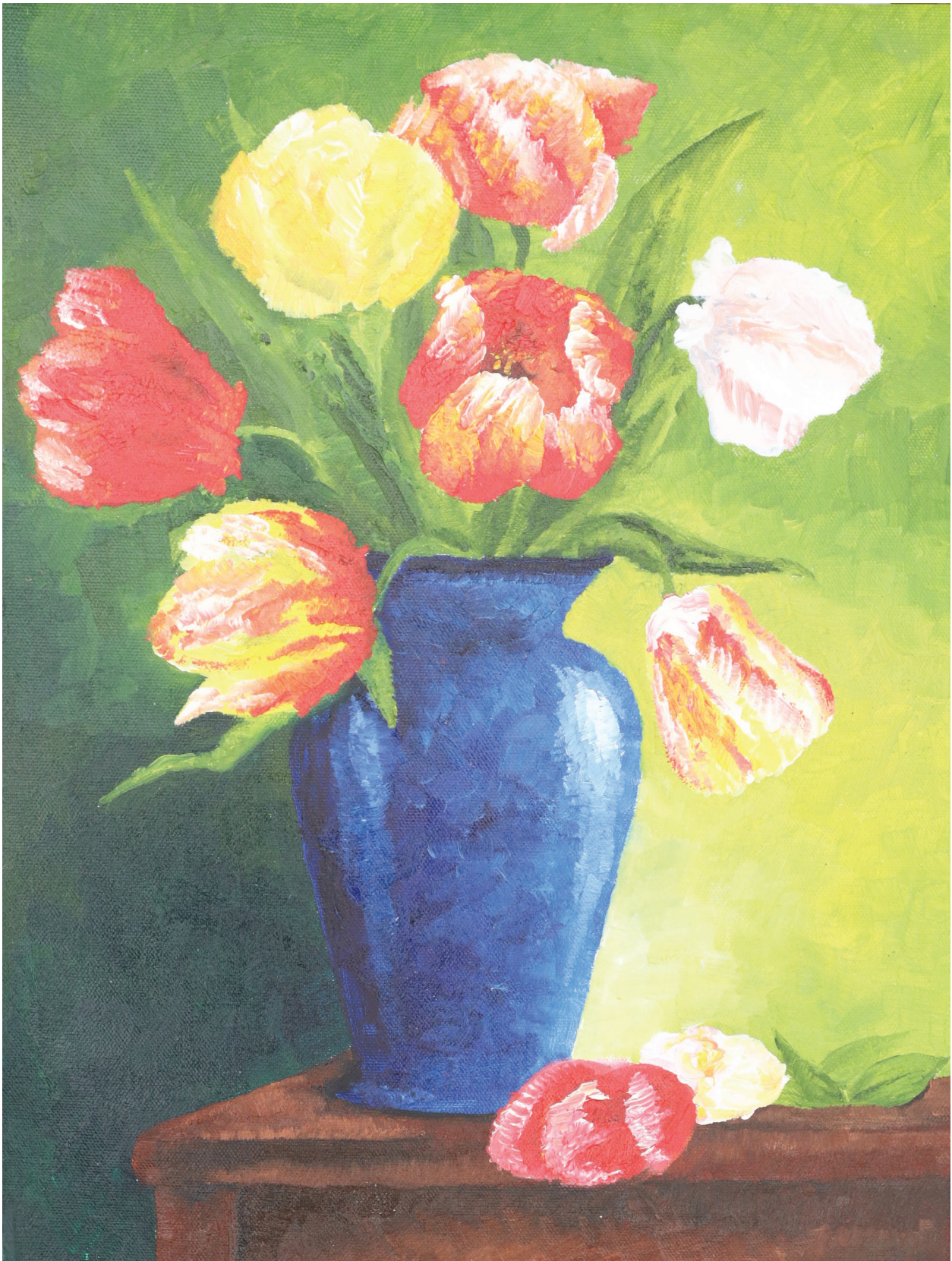
The choice is mine;
I must quickly choose.
Will I beg Him for mercy,
or just walk away,
knowing tomorrow
brings a new day?

So I drop to my knees
and begin to pray,
confessing to Him
that I am tired of living this way.

In His response, I hear Him say:
"Follow Me, my child,
and I'll show you the way."

For the reader:

The poet's title of this poem is Choices. What does the poet learn about choices and how does she finally choose another way of living?



Tulips

Artwork by Mary Kathleen Tyler

We Rise

Chiann Richardson

We're overcoming obstacles,
And everyday struggles
Addiction, loss,
Arguments,
And everything life throws our way.

It's hard by yourself,
But having people around you
Those who stay
When you cry,
When you hurt,
When home feels heavy,
Or wherever you are
That understanding
Means everything.

We lift each other up,
We comfort,
We give
Positive vibes and strength.

Because together,
We rise
Above the struggles,
The addictions,
The heartache.

We fall,
But we rise
Again.

For the reader:

The poet offers such a hopeful tone reminding us that we will fall, but we can also rise. Based on your reading of this poem, what makes the rising possible?

What Is Beauty Worth

Tabitha Angelica Mattison

What is beauty worth if no one sees me?
Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

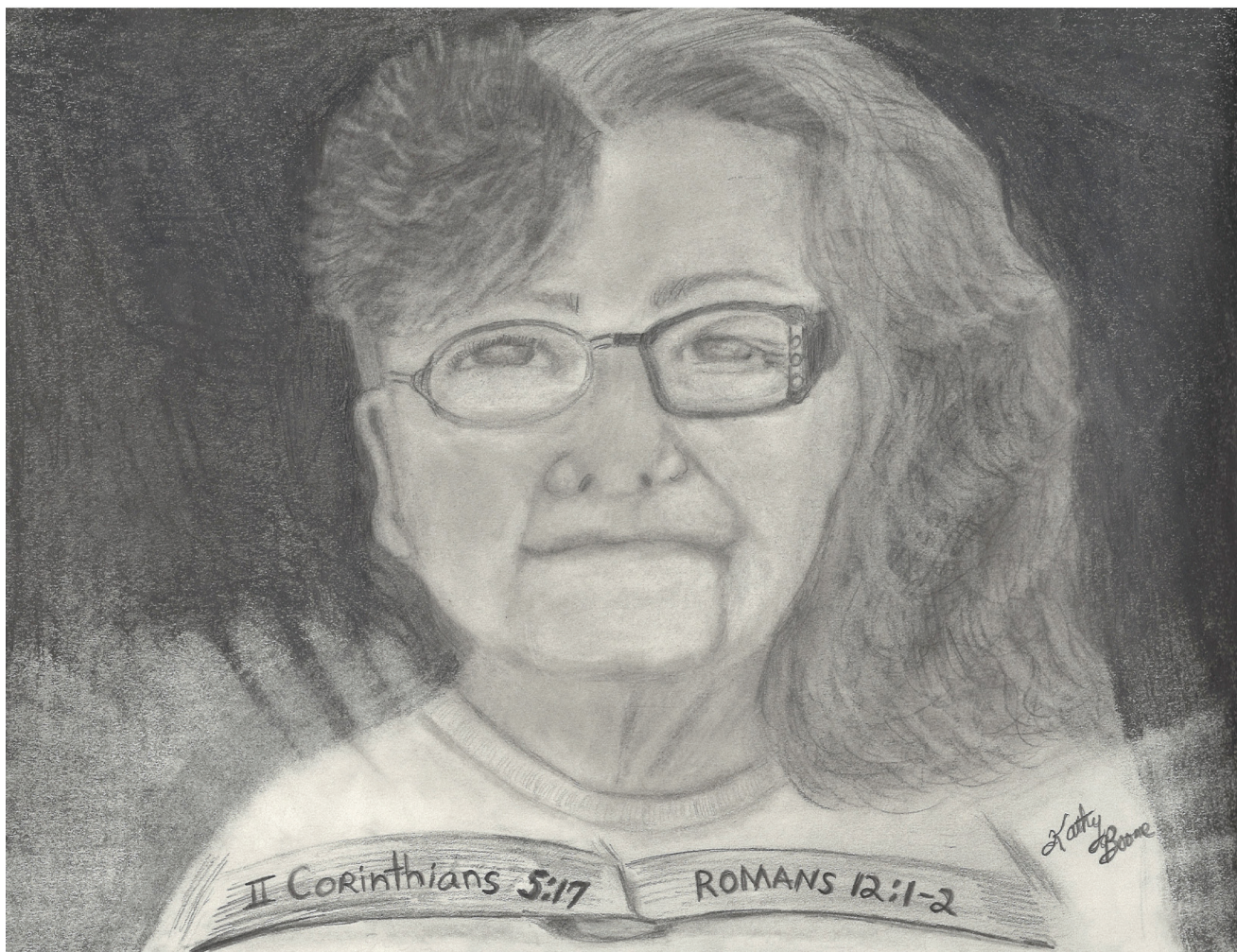
Lady Justice is blind.
Love is blind.

I'm doing time,
and love is hard to find
unless it's the kind that shines from inside.

Even when no one is watching,
I am beautiful.

For the reader:

The poet asks an important question. Does beauty need external validation? Can we only believe we're beautiful when someone else tells us we are beautiful? What if today, your beauty was all yours and no one else's opinion mattered?



A New Creature
Artwork by Kathy W. Boone

*“The body remembers
what the mouth cannot say.”*

~Angela Alaimo O'Donnell,
A powerful contemporary voice. Her poems often center on women,
the saints, suffering, and mercy.

She Who Holds The Ocean

Brenda Hickman

She is the ocean in disguise.

Not everyone sees it right away because the ocean doesn't boast.

It pulls quietly with tides that whisper ancient truths.

She was born with a storm in her chest and moonlight in her hands.

When others wade in the shallows, she lives in the deep where light bends and time forgets its name.

Her waves are wild not because she is broken but because she remembers what it means to be free.

Some days she doubts the beauty of her swells but she still paints them over and over because somewhere inside she knows. She is not painting oceans. She is painting herself. Others may see a crashing wave or a dark horizon but what lives in her strokes is the truth. The storm always calms, the tide always turns, and beneath it all she is vast, ancient and endlessly becoming.

You are not broken, beloved. You are blooming under pressure. Stone took crystal, salt turned to light. You were never just a woman. You were made from the hush between the waves and the fire that still sleeps beneath them. She doesn't need to believe in her power. The ocean doesn't ask the moon for permission; She already is the magic.



She Who Holds the Ocean
Artwork by Brenda Hickman

For the reader:

The poet uses words and paint to examine the power of beauty. What is it in her words and in her imagery that moves you? What do you know about depth and freedom?

Within

Toni McSweeney

Don't lose who you truly are.
You are beautiful within, so let your life begin.
Rebuild. It's all worth it in the end.
Don't let those walls close in.
Your mind is not a prisoner, set yourself free.
God has a plan for us all.
Rise above and stand ever so tall.

For the reader:

The poet has beautiful inspiration in her life. She rebuilds and embraces her beauty. What inspires you to believe and to keep moving forward?

Amanda Rose

Amanda Rose

My name is Amanda Rose. I am 42 years old, and I am serving a 50-year sentence for a drug charge, manufacturing and delivery with intent. Crazy, right? But the life I lived before I got here was equally chaotic, full of twists and turns. I'll share a small version of what brought me to this place.

I will say this up front: I have always believed in God, in Jesus Christ, and in His sacrifice on the cross for our sins. But I didn't always understand His ways, and I didn't always accept them. My story begins in 1982. I was born to a single mother who still had a husband at the time, which is where the last name Grinie came from. At a young age, I remember my mother not always taking care of me and my younger brother. She went out often, leaving us alone to fend for ourselves.

My earliest memory is being five years old. There was no food in the house. We were always hungry, surviving on raw bacon, canned corn, and cold canned food. My mother left us with whoever was available, and one of those people was a teenage boy. After he harmed me, my grandmother stepped in and took me away.

I was always a good child. I believed in God, and I did well in school. But over the next few years, I was moved around constantly—from an aunt's home, to an older sister's, and back again to my grandmother's. It was during this time that I started stealing cars, smoking pot, drinking, and staying out late. Even then, I would hear the Lord's voice telling me to stop and change my ways. But I didn't.

In high school, I got pregnant. Around that same time, I was introduced to meth. I wanted to change, so I enrolled in college and got a job at a meat plant. But life spiraled again. I ended up living on the streets and met a man who was dealing meth. I almost lost my life twice. But by the grace of God, I was saved.

There is so much more to say. This is only the tip of the iceberg. This is just how I ended up in the place where I'm now facing a life sentence. One day, I will tell the rest of my story.

For the reader:

The writer takes us through the many hurts and hopes of her life. Despite all of these disappointments, she gives thanks and honors the grace of her faith. Can you relate to this journey? Were there lessons you learned the hard way?

A Cross of Faith

Victoria Goodwin

I sing Your praises.
I worship Your gospel.
I was Your lamb;
the devil tried to slaughter me.

You gave me challenges,
some more difficult than others.
Why did You pick me, God,
and not stronger sisters and brothers?

I've come to You humbly.
My soul needs a resurrection.
I'll still be Your daughter,
though far from perfection.

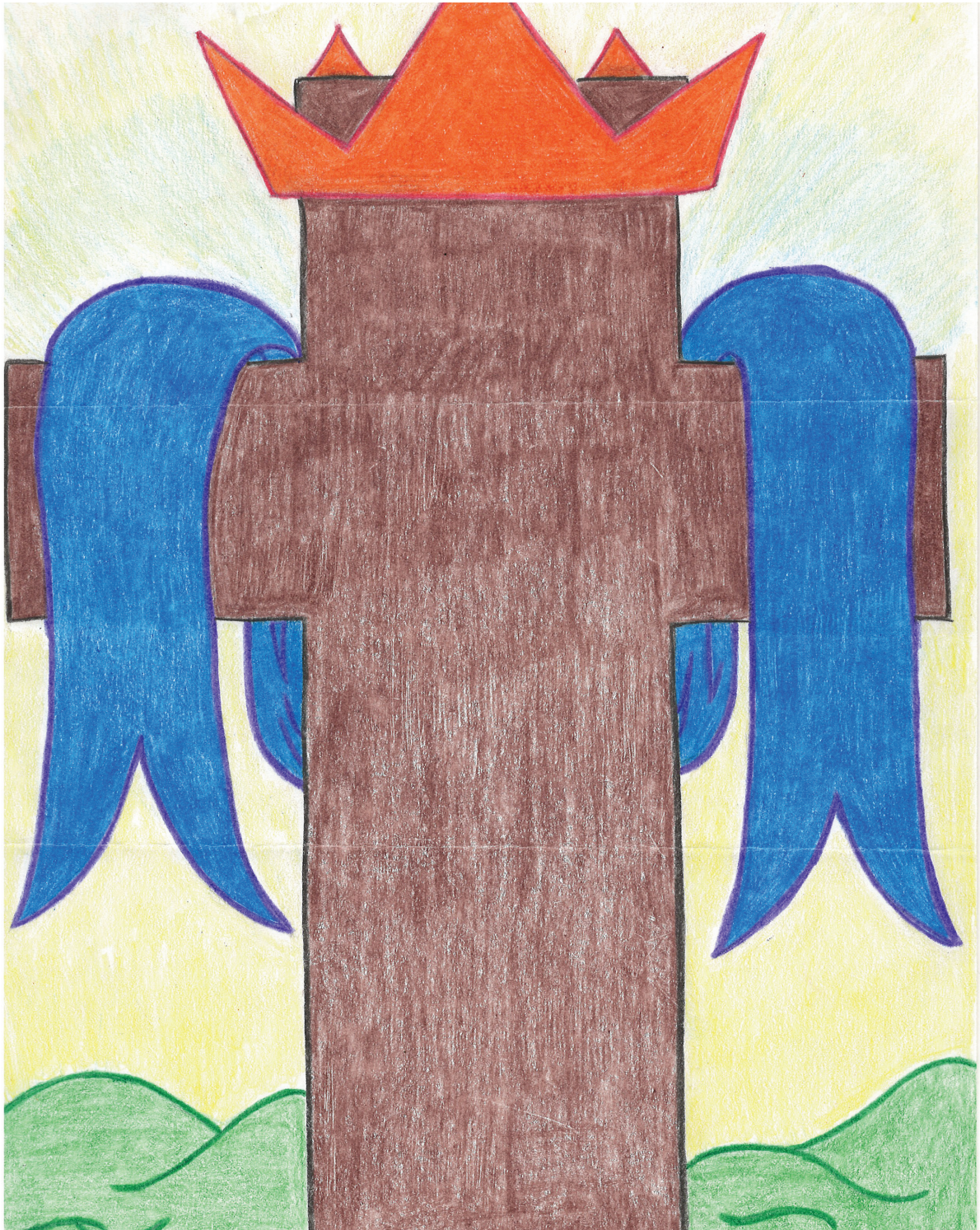
I'm weak and weary, oh Lord.
Your Word is a light to my path.
Lead me to a promised land.
I will be better, God.
I cast my eyes up and pray.

I'll trust in Your plan,
promised with better days.
His delays are not denials,
all praise be to He.

Fill your heart with love
and set your soul free.

For the reader:

The poet explains that she's been tested and she's wondered about her strength. What gives her the ability to keep moving forward? What do you think she means by "a promised land"?



Cross

Artwork by Victoria Goodwin

The Blessing

Wendi Lindstrom

I think the blessing
can be anything or anyone
that you want or need
to have in your life or in the future.

I think when you ask God for anything,
He will provide the blessing
that you need,
when you ask in His beautiful name.

I think blessings come
from doing things the right way,
in a Godly way.
The people are blessed
with everything they want in life.

For the reader:

The poet has claimed a blessing on her life. What does a blessing mean to you? How have you been a blessing in someone's life? Who or what has been a blessing for you?

Dear brothers and sisters of the faith,

Megan McClintock

I have been seeking God's guidance on which ministry to share because these words belong to God. They come from him and now boil over in my spirit. I have shared this with a few incarcerated women, chaplains, and I have sent it home to friends. I don't know who will end up seeing this version or if you would believe that God's spirit communes with mine. He speaks to me.

Yes, I am a convicted criminal, yet I can feel when God cries, mourns, longs, and when his heart is broken. When I am right with God and I put him first, I am not only empathetic to his spirit, but of those he feels for as well. God does not only care about your pain, but your past and future pain as well. With every hardship, he looks at you just as I look at my infant when he gets his shots or scrapes and knee, or when kids pick on him at school or he loses a friend.

Time is mostly looked at as a negative thing. It's our enemy that ages us. It can separate us by giving us a stopping point where we cannot go on like Moses to the promised land. We also get time. We do time. Yet time is also a gift. Time brings a healing of wounds too. Even if we feel defeated, time creates growth and gives us wisdom. Time can both create and break. Now when I hear the word break, I think of the chains that no longer hold me captive in my mind.

Creation was a gift from God to us, his children. We can create situations that keep us stuck inside, or that keep us from God. A lot of times when we find ourselves in a state of confusion, it is due to our focus on being stuck in the present moment or we are looking back from trauma that we have been through. There are things we can birth into this world.

Abba Father, I take this time right now to lift your spirit up as the one and only triumphant victorious worthy of glory. I appreciate the opportunity you gave me to be used by your holy spirit by putting paper to pen. I am grateful for the opportunity to fill these pages with scripturally based words. As I sit here in prison, barely able to breathe from the tears I have in my eyes right now, God I thank you for this cup you have given me to drink.

For the reader:

The poet finds beauty in her union with the holy spirit along with her commitment to sharing her journey. When were you able to help someone else by revealing a part of your story?

I Am Beautiful

Tabitha Rubison

When push comes to shove,
I believe you have inner and outer beauty.
It is what makes us beautiful.

Noticing the way people look at you,
or the expression on their face
times when you put makeup on yourself,
it feels like you're beautiful.

But what makes that right?
What if you don't wear makeup?
Are you still beautiful?

I search myself for that part.
Here, I feel ugly and wonder why.
The situation has me asking myself,
Am I beautiful?

I know I am beautiful.
The day I was born made me
Beautiful.

For the reader:

The poet writes, "Here, I feel ugly and wonder why." Is there a place where your beauty is immune to anyone's criticism? Is there a space where you feel beautiful regardless of the circumstances?

For the last time

Robyn Pina

For the last time you lied to me and you broke my fragile heart
For the last time you promised no more roller coasters
then took me for a ride
For the last time you convinced me that you loved and missed me
then acted like I don't exist
For the last time
Broken Heart
Broken Promises
Broken Dreams
Broken world, broken woman, broken me
Now I can start my journey
Now I can start to heal

For the reader:

The poet repeats the words, "for the last time" throughout the poem. Why do you think she does this? What impact does it create for you as a reader? While parts of the poem are sad, what feelings are you left with at the end?

Growth

Kiaira Johnson

Growth comes from high valleys
And low places.

When you feel limited,
God has the power to move
In the lowest moments
You have ever experienced.

He has given you the power
To uproot the seed of failure.
He can turn your damaged hands
Into the hands of a healer.

His words give you eyes
To see a little clearer,
To live the life you want,
To set your goals a little bigger.

You can't complain about life
If you're doing nothing about it.
You're so numb on the drugs,
Too high to figure it out.

You want to change your lifestyle,
But you just don't know how.
You've never seen
What a sober life is really about.

“How can God find me
When I feel forgotten?
When the devil attacks,
Does God love me enough to stop him?”

My growth comes from my battles—
In a crazy way,
I'm praying for my life,
And surrender is enough
To reach His gates.

I thank God for the trials
That let faith enable me.
I won't let anyone stand
Between my life and the healing
I'm meant to receive.

No one will stop me
From freeing the souls
I am called to set free.

I am praying my words
Help you someday
To be with Him
Eternally.

For the reader:

What does growth mean to the poet? What does it mean to you? Does pain and struggle always accompany growth? Is that why we call it “growing pains”?

Unlikely Warrior

Tiana McPerson Ryder

Don't congratulate me on the strength you see in my body;
see the strength of my mind.

This place creeps like withering, poisoned vines,
slowly, little by little, into the deepest parts of someone,
breaking in where we're weakest, like crumbling brick,
leaving only itself and destruction in its wake.

Two things sit next to one another among my meager possessions:
a cache of pills and a Bible
an end or a beginning.

The pills taunt, cajole, beckon.
They whisper,
You don't matter. You wouldn't be here if you did!
Look at the way you've been thrown away to rot.
Your life is forfeit,
merely a number among the masses,
barely a face, another mark on a count sheet, another mouth to feed.
Everything you have is nothing to them, an animal in a cage.
You're wasting away. Just end it.

My hand reaches out, the destination all but certain, thud.
Fingertips mere inches away, my textbook falls,
snapping me from my reverie,
drawing my attention to it and to the folder
containing countless letters,
two cheap green photo albums
with pictures of life outside this hell.

It does exist. I do matter.

Like a lifeline, I grab hold of the vines that sought my destruction
and use them to climb back up.

I have a number, but that's not who I am.
I am a face; one my children pray to see home soon.
I represent a mark on a count sheet proving I am alive,
because God's not done yet.

I am a warrior because I can face my demons
and know I am stronger for overcoming them.
I love harder because I've been denied.
I listen closer for the times my cries were ignored.
I reach out, not in, for the lost and the caged
in body, mind, and soul.

This is not a prison for me;
it is a training ground.

You made me strong.
I'll keep mine safe.

For the reader:

The poet has a determination that helps her defy doubt and self destruction. She describes her time in prison as a "training ground." This would seem impossible to people outside. How would you help someone understand this relationship to prison? What would you say to someone who wants to know how women survive inside?