

END CASH BAIL

A ZINE



END CASH BAIL!

Texas' money bail system keeps thousands of legally innocent people in jail simply because they cannot afford to pay their way out. This two-tiered justice system favors the wealthy and punishes everyone else — harming families, communities, and our entire state.

To draw attention to the human impact of this unjust system, the works in this zine were curated by ACLU of Texas Artist-in-Residence KB Brookins. These works were also part of the 2026 poetry and visual art exhibit, "End Cash Bail," in Houston, Texas.

Let's work toward making our state safer and fairer for all Texans, no matter the color of our skin or the money we have.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ACLU OF TEXAS:

[AcluTx.org](https://aclutx.org)

LEARN MORE ABOUT KB BROOKINS:

[EarthToKB.com](https://earthtokb.com)

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END CASH BAIL: A CENTO

by KB Brookins

Corresponding Visual Art by Alberto "Albert" Sanchez

Where are you? Nowhere to be found, it seems;
we wail into the night about peace & justice.
Top it with a roof, so not even the rain can touch
the mess they make inside. We, as in the organizers,
ripping behind bars where the rich get richer

& the poor go to jail. The cells are giant concrete
holding tanks, an activist's torture doled out
as a warning. This system plays a game
with no shot clock, the monopoly game
we never asked to play. They get Sunday mornings
with home cooked meals and fresh air

while I sit here in despair. Texans pay
over a billion a year for ". . . punishment,
with its racist and sexist dimensions . . ."
Sweating, shaking, coughing, becoming their next victim
Who needs devils when humans in a tax-funded building
will ignore your pleas for mercy just as efficiently?

We, as in the kids learning jiu jitsu
in 3rd ward, festering in the Houston sun.
We are done playing their game.
Deep in the heart of Texas, we stand
in formation. Who told you these bricks can't be

broken into? We bloom in the sullen colors
from the grand spectrum of grief. We are worth
all charges are dropped, worth the word
for everyone: dignity. Before the trial
deems us unfit for freedom, remember
that there are thousands of others. I call on you

to stand with us, while we still can.
Come see the vision we had. This life is
still a place where we can dream.

KB BROOKINS ARTIST STATEMENT

This poem is a cento (AKA a poem based on lines and phrases from other poems) based on five poems that were created by students in my ACLU of Texas workshops: “to my white trans sisters who aren't in jail” and “to all my trans sisters in harris county lockup” by Solidad Decosta, “we will save ourselves” by Aris Kian, “Limbo” by Daizy J, “Texas Bail: The Monopoly Game We Never Asked to Play” by Lauren Oertel, “APOCALYPSES: SCENARIO #057 – 123” by Reyes Ramirez, and “Why “Decarceration” Is Essential, October 12, 2011” by Stalina Villareal. I want to shout out to these amazing poets and thank each of my students for their contributions to END CASH BAIL.

ALBERTO “ALBERT” SANCHEZ ARTIST STATEMENT

I built this altar during a period of suspension, when my movement was limited. It is devotional in practice and carries deep personal symbolism. The altar holds cyanotypes I was making in daily meditation that pushed my personal limitations. Each piece records time, attention, repetition and freedom. I used materials already around me, choosing objects for their use, wear, and presence. Light and shadow actively shape the work, not as metaphor but as process. It is a site of daily return, where making became a way to stay oriented, accountable, and grounded.

RECIPE FOR A JAILHOUSE

by Aris Kian

Corresponding Visual Art by John Shockley

- Slather a ground's worth of whipped concrete over unceded land.
- Ensure that land has been stripped of its memory - the Black of it, the beating heart of it, the names that were peeled from out of native mouths like rind scalped from a fruit we can't taste anymore.
- Warm the steel until it hardens, hollow: like the words of your leaders, until it hammers into walls where human screams can echo.
- Salt the brick, stack it high, use the spines of county judges, let so, little light climb its way through.
- Top it with a roof, so not even the rain can touch the mess you'll make inside.
- Hide how, with the right hands, these ingredients can make houses too.
- For the filling, you'll need the bodies battered into breaking. You must marinate for generations before.
- Flatten the neighborhoods that held them. Cut new streets until they're unrecognizable. Gut the schools. Strain the teachers. Smoke the water. Pepper the clouds until the breathing becomes a staggered limp, an unholy hymn.
- Pit the people against each other. Scoop out the strangled hearts they've tried to hold onto. Bleed them dry.
- Drain their pockets. Ask them what it costs to live, then split it by half.

- Breadcrumb poverty beneath the family tree until it only bears rotting fruit.
- Raise the heat through freeway exhaust and fossil fuels.
- Fold in a few disasters until the people are washed empty.
- Line the highways with cops itching for a crowded cell block.
- Then book them. Set the bail. Dangle a price tag until the body is too weak to jump.
- Let cool for weeks, months, years on end, even if there's no conviction. Their innocence is the seasoning. Is what blurs the line between guilty and gluttony, what keeps people constantly coming back is being told they belong here. Knowing you built this for them.
- And here is where you get your hands dirty. Where the warmth from your fingertips floods the rush of a beating heart back into a body.
- Sharpen the mind; there is no tool that cannot be turned against you. Take your time with this step. Listen to the hum of your people behind those walls, can you hear them? Baking within a system that wants to swallow them whole?
- Here, you let the anger simmering in your stomach acid the walls of the jailhouse. Beat until it breaks. Make it porous.
- Bring that heartache to a boil until you've made a doorway. Don't ignore the bubbling of revolt when you realize you've been lied to. That the only difference between a jailhouse and a home is who they believe is worth protecting.
- Pull your people out. Surround them with clean streets, good food and even better policy. And what is policy if

not a principle to standby? If not a plan to keep your people safe? If not the product of your homemaking hands?

- Good God, your hands. What worlds can you build? Who taught you to follow the instructions of your oppressors? To choke down a recipe that will not feed you? That starves you until you're left to eat each other?
- Who told you these bricks can't be broken into? That everything is as it stands? That we can't make something of this steel? Of hardened hearts? Of our own dollars?
- There is no recipe that cannot be changed. That cannot be made sweet with the backhand of principled people. A people worth keeping full.

WE WILL SAVE OURSELVES

by Aris Kian

we, as in the kids learning jiu jitsu
in 3rd ward, learning new ways
to wield the hellraiser in their hands,
we will save ourselves

we, as in the organizers, ripping
county budgets or protesting
outside the consulate,
we will save ourselves

we, as in the farmers, weighing carrots and
greens, teaching one another what you put
into the earth will either feed you or eat
you, we will save ourselves

to Houston
they will starve this city
until it is feral enough to swallow us whole

but we know the best ways to ease
the ache of the hungry
to keep each other full
to plant just as much as we plow
to praise the daylight in us
that dared to shine even when
we couldn't see the sun past I-45

we find messiahs in mirrors
say amen when we walk in our streets
don't need pulpits when porches are
sanctuaries, we will save ourselves

and no, it's not all holy water
and ring shout steps, sometimes
there is no ceremony or soft hymn
sometimes, its raising hell, or ripping budgets,
protesting or planting

to my people,
they want us to forget
we are worth saving

but when we say we will save ourselves
it means we saw into the future
and we are still here
still ripe off the reckless ruckus we started
our jewel-teeth and iron tongues
stem strong and mustard seed mountainous

we've made a home here
we were born in these streets
and will live in these stress
we have and will always save ourselves

ARIS KIAN ARTIST STATEMENT

I aim for my poetry to engage critically with movement work and cultural memory in Houston; my current artistic practice explores its socio-mythological landscape—the social/economic factors many Houstonians face and the story-making through our own cultural expertise, histories, and experiences across neighborhoods. I'm interested in asking the question "what is our relationship to this city and how do we participate in it?" I want my poems to feel like Houston, its streets, its topography, its edges and to create work that centers this city, our struggle, and our commitment to building a city that is worth keeping.

JOHN SHOCKLEY ARTIST STATEMENT

The poem inspired the piece by defining the resilience of all oppressed peoples throughout time. The artwork displays strength in the face of darkness. Prisons are much more than concrete and steel. They are places designed to further compound issues instead of resolving them.

I painted that piece as a testament inspired by the poem and it reflects the overcoming fluidity of the human spirit when immersed in extreme hardship.

I use predominantly acrylic paint. Also some oil pastels and graphite. I will begin to use gel mediums for texturing/impasto effects in future paintings.

My canvas is a 10 ounce cotton fine weave. and my frames are yellow pine 2 x 4 and 1 x 6 studs. In the future, I will be covering my frames with 1/4 inch plywood in which allows a very durable backing to stretch canvas over and work on. Also, ensuring long lasting durable frames of the highest quality.

LIMBO

by Daizy J

Corresponding Visual Art by Crystal Coulter

"Wait to be release"

As they say on the other side,
they get Sunday mornings with
home cooked meals and fresh air
while I sit here in despair
starving for more than sketchy bologna,
Thinking, do they really care about my testimony?

"Wait to be release"

Been doing so for six months
unable to make bail
awaiting the day I'm no longer in this cell

"Wait to be Release"

Trying not to submit to defeat
I change the negative thoughts
of where my mind always tend to meet

"Wait to BE Release"

I've been treated so unfair
just trying to collect the positive effects,
searching for a more generous approach to project
I'm not trying to take it out on the free, but cant yall see

I'VE BEEN WAITING TO BE RELEASE

and it seems no matter how hard I plead
they think im trying to deceive

Holding on to a sane mind

Is not easy when all you have
are these four walls and a loss of time

"Wait to be release"

How quickly things may take a turn
voices in here still going unheard
encountering an outrage inside,
and no I don't think i'm alright

Spent Two and half months being charged with innocent symptoms
Sweating, shaking, coughing- im becoming there next victim Is
this really the jus-tice system?
Medical care denied....
but you're right, I should just...
"Wait to be release"

DAIZY J ARTIST STATEMENT

I Daizhaun Jordan, known as Daizy, an emerging poet confronting the intersections of activism & human dignity. Through poetry, I give voice to the shadows; The unheard, disregarded souls trapped in systems that prioritize profit over people, punishment over justice, & silence over truth.

My poem "Limbo" emerges from deep empathy for those ensnared in cash bail, waiting indefinitely for release while the world moves on without them. I seek to illuminate the human cost of a broken justice system. Lines like "Wait to be released" echo the endless limbo of the incarcerated, while questioning a system that dismisses pleas as deception.

CRYSTAL COULTER ARTIST STATEMENT

This piece is inspired by the poem *Limbo* by Daizy J, an exclamation of the anguish of waiting for the day they get released from incarceration. Through unfair conditions and time continuing to fade away, the only option they have is to wait. That sentiment is one I am reflecting. My piece "these four walls and a loss of time", represents the feeling of waiting for something that seems like it is out of reach. Though the figure is sitting in a room that is bleak, there's still something that they can hope for: to be free.

TWO TALES, TWO JAILS, TWO LOCKUPS

by *Solidad Decosta*

Corresponding Visual Art by Anastasia "Stacy" Kirages

I: TO MY WHITE TRANS SISTERS WHO AREN'T IN JAIL

Where are you? Nowhere to be found, it seems or possibly, putting people such as myself on the outside of community, which is just another kind of capture—

Listen. What I need you to know is that there are shapes and forms that contour our lives—some of us were detained, some of us were innocent, others, not—

but what is either in a system that is trying with all its breath and bone to incarcerate us all, slowly, like water or the most toxic of positivities

shining like a Beacon's Hill from afar, while we all choke slowly?

Do we fester in the Houston sun or drown, precipitously, from floods and hurricanes, sequestered by pandemics new and old, to heat turned to domes trapping the west, east, north and south alike?

I call on you to stand with us, while we still can, before Ophelia's waters engulf us all.

2. TO ALL MY TRANS SISTERS IN HARRIS COUNTY LOCKUP

Let me tell you a story.

While we were being arrested in 2004,
one of the cops twisted my arm back to the
point of near dislocation—a friend said later
that he didn't know that bodies could
be bent like that.

In detention, the "good" cop—
small framed, blonde, emanating
a kind of false sympathy,
a divine right of lesser kings—
accompanied me to the elevator.

He pressed the button for the basement,
and said to me, feigning concern,
"Are you OK? Did the pain holds
hurt? Is there anything I can do
to help you?"

But that was a lie. He touched me
without my consent, my joints
starting to ache again on the long,
slow elevator to hell, which made
me think of the pain—in my shoulder,
and from the unnecessary compliance hold, my
right hand—then the nauseating comfort of his
gentle touch, then the cognitive dissonance of
experiencing both at once.

So. Here we were, in the basement of the San Francisco Sheriff's office—two single lines on opposite sides of the room, like a scene from a Harold Pinter play, one of us yelling, "You're breaking my arm!" while we stand in formation—and then, thankfully, we were released. As was custom back then, and sometimes even still, all charges were dropped.

(Sometimes, county jail can be like that— and sometimes, it definitely is not.)

Later, I run into one of you on the street— I joked, "Hey! The last time we saw each other, we were being tortured!" and you, as a Black man in the struggles, laughed with the joy of someone who has survived much worse.

(As have I.)

The thing about this—this "temporary detainee" song and dance—is that the conditions may be temporary, not unlike a bad motel room gone rogue, but they keep their own truths hidden away, then and now, here and far, San Francisco and Harris county alike.

Activist torture, when it's doled out as a warning? It's survivable, fair enough, but that was the intent: raise the specter of fear to cause

comment, alarm, or possibly even poetry, two decades later—
but not so much that active resistance is enabled, permanently or otherwise.

SOLIDAD DECOSTA ARTIST STATEMENT

In "Two tales, two jails, two lockups," I'm exploring the dialectic tensions between two different jail systems, located in two different cities. I'm speaking not so much to people in our community who are reticent to put themselves at risk via protesting, as much as a consistent apathy that sometimes manifests itself among middle class white people in general. May we all find our own ways to resist and dismantle systems of oppression in all their forms, and in all walks of life.

ANASTASIA "STACY" KIRAGES ARTIST STATEMENT

This collage interprets a poem by Solidad Decosta structured around two parallel experiences of confinement: life outside incarceration and life within it. The divided composition reflects how carceral systems extend beyond physical detention into social exclusion, environmental crisis, and institutional power. Repeated imagery of water, heat, architectural lines, and artificial light symbolize slow, systemic forms of control. Muted color palettes and fragmented space emphasize continuity rather than contrast, suggesting that freedom and captivity are interconnected conditions. By foregrounding unease and repetition, the work frames witnessing as a political act and emphasizes the urgency of solidarity before harm becomes normalized or inescapable.

IF I MUST BE

by Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton

Corresponding Visual Art by Sebastien Boncy

If I must be captive
Let it be for a guilt proven in a righteous court
For only harden hearts make men
Into animals
And call it justice
Only monsters trap precious moments
Of the uncontested
Behind bars
And call it justified
Only those who hate their own lives
Can steal it from the innocent others
And still find a night worth sleeping

I have never heard of rest
On metal bedding
Never known rehabilitation
To come at the midnight clashing of fists
Or lock downs
Or high security
Especially when waiting is the executioner
When money holds the guillotines handle
There is no way to reattach limbs by a simple verdict
Or dismissal
After the fact
But we keep selling tickets
To a rigged appearance

This system plays a game with no shot clock
Announces a winner before ever stepping foot in court
Cheers loudly for itself
That the work is being done
But forgets to examine its own rules

What a two tiered trap
Left to keep the poor running suicides and laps
Until they're willing to fall on the sword of their own
innocence.

And yet here, in Harris County
the pretrial becomes the all-deciding God.
swear on a Bible to uphold truth
And keep your fingers crossed behind your backs
make the path easy and the burden light
For those who can pay for the express pass to climb an
uneven scale
And when the 53000 a day
Lose their voices
Screaming of their innocence
Play deep in the heart of Texas louder
Pledge allegiance and promise security
Remember everything can be bigger in Texas
Even hypocrisy

And when it is your loved one
Tangled in a system that only knows them by number
When you are selling all that you have
Or borrowing what you don't
To bring them home
Remember that there are thousands others
That you may call neighbor and friend
With no proof stacked against them
Caught in a system unwilling
To give them the due process they were promised
Holding on to their innocence
To get them through the night
Until reform finally can

DEBORAH D.E.E.P. MOUTON

I fight the erasure of Black people in literature, theater, and the arts by telling their multifaceted stories. My work has ranged from authoring books about the nuance issues of Black folks to performing poems for tens of thousands of people to writing multiple operas chronicling the lives of unsung heroes.

SEBASTIEN BONCY ARTIST STATEMENT

If I Must Be is an installation of photographs taken from the streets of Harris County as part of my larger visual archives of the greater Houston area. These images were selected as a response to the poem "If I must be" by Deborah D.E.E.P Mouton the refrain of which is the cruelty of being held captive and imprisoned imposed by our cash bail system. Small prints arranged on a strict geometric grid similar to cell blocks or cell bars document the endless privacy and chain link fences, barbed wire, keep out signs, boarded up windows, and deadbolted gates encountered on our pedestrian hostile streets that those with less means must navigate. They are the constant reminders of our systemic exclusion, that we are being watched, our movements controlled. And yet like a dim light in the darkness, human expression is still found. Each tag on a sign, sticker, or scrawled message is a reclamation of our autonomy and documentation of our struggle because a lie can't live forever.

TEXAS BAIL: THE MONOPOLY GAME WE NEVER ASKED TO PLAY

by Lauren Oertel

Corresponding Visual Art by Julie DeVries

Charles Darrow invented the game
in the time of dust storms
and newspapers turned Hoover blankets
when the messages inked on them
provided no comfort. The clatter of dice
on a board offered distraction.

Fast forward to skyscrapers and robot cars.
The game is still a place where we can dream.
Buying property, collecting \$200 just for passing GO.
We can even be the banker.

For an hour or two, sometimes five,
we arrange stacks of pink, blue, orange money
take a ride in that tiny race car
we could otherwise never afford.

How does this connect to bail?
Well, let's talk about crime.

Darrow didn't invent the game—he stole it.

Elizabeth Magie created The Landlord's Game in 1903
to show how land should belong to the people. We
should never own it. But her anti-monopolistic intentions
were smashed by visions of a fist full of cash.
Just \$500 for her patent, Darrow grabbed the idea,
changed the name, made millions.

Too many bought into the scheme
where the rich get richer, the poor go to jail.

We kept our heads down, kept rolling the dice
waiting on winning, ignoring the odds.
We accepted the lie that cages create safety.

And now, those fat cats in top hats swim in the rewards.
Profiteers with their battleship pieces stack houses, hotels,
razor wire-topped compounds. The sellers
of those faded thick-striped uniforms,
plastic terracotta-colored shower shoes.
The phone calls, the tablets, and commissary charges.
Need more socks? Show them the money.
The rest of us, especially for the ones
with skin darker than mine,
who never had the same access to cash,
we're on little square streets,
we move our pieces, take a chance and few get lucky.
Try to buy property, but often jump to paying rent
and praying we don't land on "go to jail."
The only ones with the get-out-free cards
can already afford that bail,
or they never needed it—legislators,
landowners, corner office hawks
perched in their glass towers
they're the ones with the pens,
and they're changing the rules.

Texans pay over a billion a year
to keep hundreds of thousands
friends, families, and neighbors behind bars.
Most have not been found guilty of a crime,
they've been found guilty of being unable to pay.

Too many years and lives stolen through this scam.
Missed birthdays and funerals, jobs lost, kids handed off
to other homes. Too many are still inside those walls.
The rest of us pass them by, running in square circles.

On the board, as in life, only the richest players win.

It's time we throw down our irons, our thimbles, and boots
—the ones that never came with straps.

It's time to flip the board over.

We're done playing their game.

LAUREN OERTEL ARTIST STATEMENT

This poem emerged from years of criminal justice organizing in Austin, and my current frustration with how quickly those efforts were erased. Through a coalition of various community members and organizations led by formerly incarcerated activists across Texas, we achieved numerous legislative changes reducing investments in (and improving the lives of those impacted by) carceral systems. That was an honor, but many of us are shifting our approach as we're questioning this game we can't win. As we've learned from Audre Lorde and INCITE!, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," and "the revolution will not be funded."

JULIE DEVRIES ARTIST STATEMENT

This painting, *Monopoly Fields*, was made as a visual response to the poem, "Cash Bail: The Game We Never Wanted to Play" by Lauren Oertel, which uses the ubiquitous board game Monopoly, infamous for bringing out players darker natures, as a framework for exploring the oppressive historical forces that have led to our current cash bail system. In this work I used the design elements of this iconic game as repeated visual motifs throughout the composition including the tracks players move across which bend and warp creating sidewalks turned roller coasters while the bars that divide the spaces morph into jail bars. The iconic symbols of the game are repeated and turned upside down in overlapping layers creating such a chaotic, confusing, and oppressive jumble where it's hard to discern any focal point or a visual resolution.

WHY “DECARCERATION”* IS ESSENTIAL

OCTOBER 12, 2011

by Stalina Emmanuelle Villareal

Corresponding Visual Art by Sebastian Gomez de la Torre

Mom, you were (arrested)
at the SEIU protest pressuring
Kay Hutchison to (vote)

for the American Jobs Act.
You and seven protesters sat
down at the Mickey Leland

Federal Building. After the police’s
third (plea) for you to get up, you
all were (handcuffed) and taken

to both city and county jails.
The shift between the two
systems circumvented the

legal requirement to feed
jailed people after so many
hours, and you were both

hungry and diabetic.
When the jailers (pricked)
you for your blood, (said) you

were fine because your sugar

*Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Seven Stories Press, 2003.

level was 90, you picked up
a nasty cookie wrapped
in cellophane from the floor,
tasted gross, but it prevented
hypoglycemia. It was freezing

inside the cells—giant concrete
holding tanks—you wore pants;
Houston's October heat meant

you had short sleeves. The sex
workers and shoplifters were
sweet. Angela Davis wrote,

this was “. . . punishment, with
its racist and sexist dimensions . . .”
Even though the guards were

women, they (yelled) at a pregnant
sex worker: “I bet your mom is
proud of you!” At every hour

the guards (screamed) the names
to call roll. They (blurped) out
JIM-e-NEZ in English, though

your name was Jiménez. At least
Maria and María are closer. So
many incarcerated women cried.

A sex worker, Hope, and you
were called in to speak to a judge
on a screen, only to (blab)

and (send) you back. The mean
district attorney and judge (set
bail) for each political

prisoner at \$110,000, so you
spent 26 hours locked up
behind bars. In *Are Prisons*

Obsolete? Davis details
the historic and present-day
horrors of the “punishment

industry,” and how an “antiprison
movement” is “antiracist,
anticapitalist, antisexist,

and antihomophobic,” also
antitransphobic—all values you
instilled in me, and the vision

we had. I love, you usually
ended your speeches with
the word for everyone: *dignity*.

STALINA EMMANUELLE VILLAREAL ARTIST STATEMENT

My poem is based on the concept of an op-ed in the sense that I begin with my mom's experience being a political prisoner after her act of civil disobedience—and then I delve into Angela Davis's abolition expertise to conceptualize what happened to my mom. I am also inspired by Audre Lorde's notion the personal is political, especially from an intersectional perspective. What my mom went through can be seen through multiple lenses (gender, class, disability, age, race), but ultimately, her journey is very human in the fight for justice.

SEBASTIAN GOMEZ DE LA TORRE ARTIST STATEMENT

The woman is not meant to be anyone specific; the repeated elements in the drawing are a callback to the design of the poem but also the multitudes of women represented in the poem, as well as a visual representation of the long wait incarcerated people can have while they wait for their trials because they can't post bail and the multiple phone calls they might make during their stay.

IFAPOCAPLYPSES: SCENARIO #057 - I23

by Reyes Ramirez

Corresponding Visual Art by Kenneth West

They awake me from my dream through screams
and drag me by my joints into an obsidian car
that wails into the night about peace & justice.
The night weeps for the sun. They drag me
by my joints into a room with no present
or future framed by iron & absence. Halogen
lights above groan with a bioluminescent sick.
People slouch about this morose space
like grackles perched upon a power line with no power.
They bloom in the sullen colors from the grand spectrum
of grief. When I ask for what reason this altar
to enshrine permanent liminality was erected,
a sentinel in a state-sanctioned uniform points
to the Two Commandments written in serified ink
upon a concrete wall forever reeking of chlorine:
1. Those with power do what they will without worry.
2. The dispossessed do what they must at their own risk.
Who needs hell when devils can write the laws.
Who needs devils when humans in a tax-funded building
will ignore your pleas for mercy just as efficiently.
I wait so long, the world has already changed. I wait
so long, I lose everything I have. I wait so long, I already
have less than nothing. I cannot know which is worse:
1. Being imposed upon with indefinite waiting;
2. Indefinite waiting being imposed upon at someone's cost.
Who needs democracy when the trial before the trial
deems you unfit for freedom. I wait so long, I might as well
be guilty for whatever can be spoken. I wait so long,
I cannot recall sleep or wake. I wait so long, I find the guard
stationed at the end of the imagination & beg to sink
to the bottom of the pale sea of waiting. That way, I'll have
accomplished something. By the time I am dragged
before the Magistrate of Imaginative Pricing to hear the charges
being brought against me, I already cannot afford to respond.

KENNETH WEST ARTIST STATEMENT

I based it off Apocalypse Scenario #057. Particularly these three verses, "They drag me by my joints into a room with no present or future. People slouch about this Morse space. And also the line Those with power do what they will without worry.

In my painting the doorway on the horizon represents a destination, desire, goal, dream etc. But even though it's desirable its distance and abstract. The two signs pointing in opposite directions is about all the advice or directions we get in life some right and wrong, but ultimately we have to chose our own path. When we fail to do so we are like the footsteps going all around but nowhere at the same time. However the curving road represents state/institutional power and the path that the state, class, economics etc have set for us, but because it doesn't go all the way to the destination, it speaks of both peril and promise. And reminds us of our own agency and the part we play in our individual success or failure, irregardless of larger more powerful forces either for or against us.

LEROY, PHONE HOME

by Ebony Stewart

It's funny how collect calls make us jump quick.

And once the phone clicks you say,

"It's the dawg."

To pin point where you are.

Like how you're treated.

Like the world already forgot your name.

Like a man with a record is a criminal, is an
animal, is dangerous.

And you're still waiting for someone to see the heart or the
human behind the cages.

My uncle,

barks too loud and bites too quick.

Been on America's leash since Vietnam.

Went from paratrooper to pressing palms to glass,

handwritten letters, the yard, and still being in love with the
sky.

Between the clouds he once lived and died.

Like dawgs dream of running, my uncle remembers flying.

The man who once took flight and jumped 1500 ft. is now
forced

to make peace and find quiet behind walls made up of
concrete.

Once boots are on the ground.

Once a man – now a dawg.

Call it justice for one and training for all.

The chain a gang.

The family a unit.

A link a line.

And we all do the time together.

There's static between our words.
Steel in the waiting. A breakthrough in laughter.
Seconds feel like seconds. 1-min will cost us hours.
Every holiday a maybe. But every dog has his day.
And freedom is a luxury. So thank God, for
Sunday visits and commissary.

But what to make of veterans
that choose this nation
and deploy into inmates/
or enemies of the state.

When I'd ask my uncle about prison –
he'd only ever remind me about loyalty,
protecting his family, and what it means to be free.
Which is to say, without saying,

"And I'd do that shxt again."

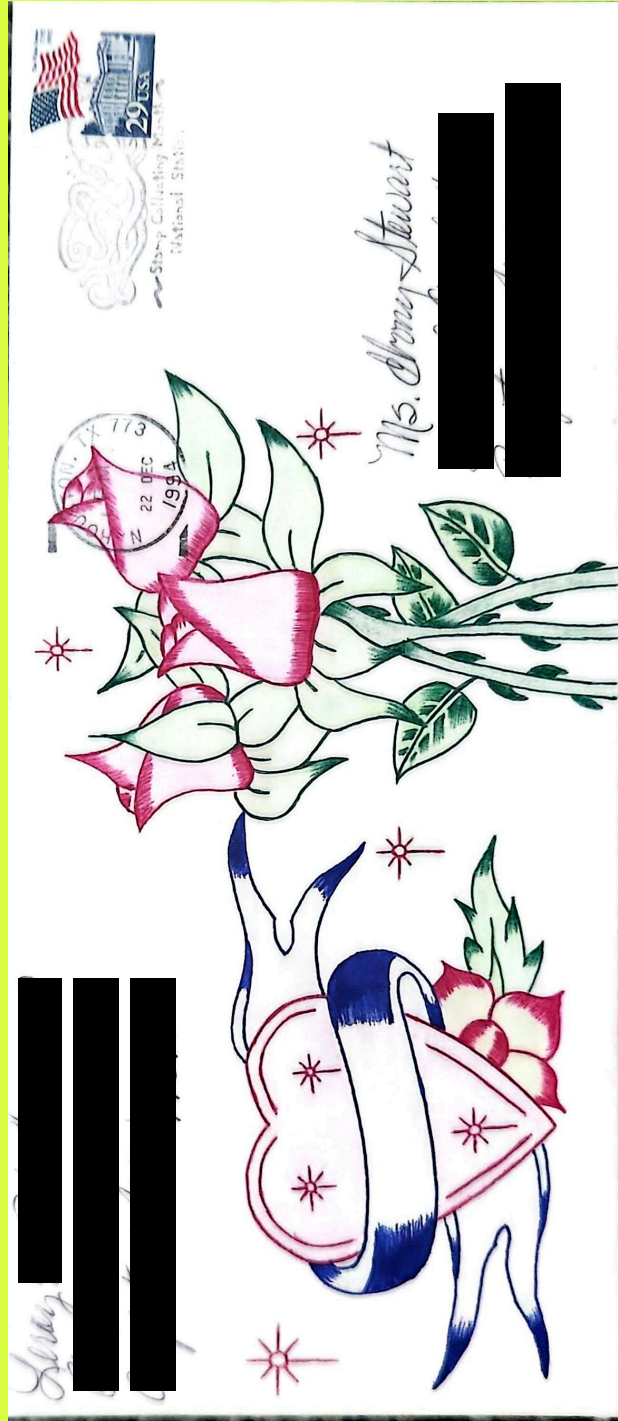
You can lockup the body,
clip the wings,
muzzle the mouth,
but the spirit still growls the truth.

And here, I turn the poem into a key.
Fold the paper into a plane.
Break every chain.

See my uncle as the man, the legend, and the felon.

But all dawgs get to go to heaven.

LETTER
Uncle Leroy



Dec. 21, 1994

[REDACTED] Texas

Dear Ebony

I must say that it took you long enough to write! Whats up with that G? I know, don't tell me, you have been real busy, right? I know that since you are in the bank, and all these little boys jokin' you, you really don't have the time, its all good! Well, the next time you go to the store, go on the side where they have business, and try and see if you can purchase you a can. (smile) So whats really going on with you G? I know you are breaking them off something, right? I know that when I get out, I am going to have a lot of them little chicken heads ~~that~~ jokin' me, and you know that I am going to have to break them something off. (smile) Real proper,

You know it! I hate that I missed your concert, but I am sure that it won't be your last one right? So chill out, I'll won't miss to mami. I don't know exactly when I'll be getting out of here, hopefully, it'll be soon, because you know that I'm got a lot of business to attend to! No, not no sleepin' business, but serious business. I have got to find me a job, and try and come me a little money so that I can get my daughter! You see G, its just me and her. Well I guess that I'll bring my letter to a class, but send my love, so until next time later G! I am out of here!

Love ya
Daddy

DO YOU KNOW WHY I PULLED YOU OVER

by Randall J. Tyrone

"And what would the kind Vladimir Ilychi (Lenin) have done in this situation? The kind Vladimir Ilychi would've sh##" -A Man in a bedroom, under a dead Savior's banner, searching.

Your rights are read to you
with a spell's intent. An officer thinks
their words, graced by a slave
catching symbol, give a credible credence
to what you know can be taken or given.
The pigment in your skin
has told you how flimsy "unalienable" is
in a de facto sense; in a law of might is right land.

Yes Kenny,
the judge makes time.
No Randy,
they won't see your corpse
in their dreams. You are designated a creature.
Nobody remembers a carcass.
Try to remember the holiday turkey
from your 8th living year, what happened
to it when it when the wishbone pulling ended.
What did what remains look like,
when is the last time
you recalled that scene. It belongs to the mouth,
a meat grinder. And you, and me,
the nickel a day 'Big House' niggas.

"Do the job,
you don't wanna be in a Max.
Less security, more heat."

I can only remember anger.
I can only respond in anger.
I can only.

A lifetime between detainment,
arrest,
and bail hearing.

The lie about temperature in three hots,
and comfort in cot. Smithing toilet or bedframe breakoffs
into an infirmary or body bag gift. Thick book duct taping
into a right of refusal, a chance to not know
how quickly blood goes from warm to cold on the skin.

Gladiator Mandingo Inmate;

the fight to make it to freedom.

RANDALL J. TYRONE ARTIST STATEMENT

This poem is written in response to the inherently unjust Texas' Money Bail system and its direct ties to a continued system of slavery and class oppression. The poem is reaching towards, if not already inhabiting, a maximalist desire to encompass various intersecting histories, such as racial discrimination and the strangling of the impoverished. But I feel the poem maintains a cohesiveness despite its wide-reaching threads through enjambments and a fluctuating address pattern by the speaker. Ultimately, I hope the poem's varied subjects present themselves individually and then harmonize together like Jazz.

PRISON BARS

by Brittney "Lady 380" Alexander

You have a collect call from... baby daddy

How you holding your head?
I know that heavy is the crown
That's been misled

I wish you would have went to trial instead
Cuz that plea, wasn't a bargain
I know I'm no lawyer
And I ain't too familiar with trial jargon
But I do know

You could've had a chance to show the jury
Your true nature
Instead you're being judged based on
what your mistakes look like on paper

Young, dumb, and inconsiderate
Is equivalent
to a menace
They say that kind of a threat to society
needs to be diminished
And they said it with conviction

You get 15 years
But all of ya baby mothers and kids
Are serving a life sentence

They said... Fuck your witness
Matter of fact
Let's give THEM some restrictions
Even If you can prove these kids are yours
Some of them still can't even visit.

You have a collect call from... the system

We have a new set for you to bang
These are our colors
Keep your uniform on
They help us distinguish
What side of the bars you belong on

Get in line
I'll tell you when it's chow time
When to wash your ass
When to go to sleep
When you can go outside
And when you can talk to me

Damn
It sounds like our son
Already following in your footsteps
When he runs off to school
Throws that uniform on
to show which one he belongs to
They tell him to get in line
Raise your hand before you speak
Yes the food is disgusting
But if you're hungry enough
you're going to eat
No you may not be excused
And if you decide to break the rules
I got a warden
for you to meet too

Cuz it ain't always about what you did
But more about the principal (principle).

You have a collect call from... Frustration

While you're studying the crowd

Our son is studying his books
It's taking away from his tuition
Every time I put money on your books
Didn't you just go to store
You mean to tell me out of all the noodles and snacks
I just bought you
You ain't got none of that no more
No I can't do a 3 way
How you doing favors for them niggas in there anyway
On my dime
I know you're the one on the inside
But we're still on the outside doing time

Yea I'm on my grind
But you left us out of pocket
When you left us alone (a loan)
Forced to pay
For your mistakes
Another broken (broke in) home

Robbed from our protection
Who can I run to
To escape this mental prison
That trapping left us trapped
Can't speak freely cuz the phone's tapped
The government fucking the whole family
But you're more concerned with
Exactly who is fucking me.

You have a collect call from.. privacy

The last time I came to visit you
Them people treated me so badly
Made me change clothes 3 times
Because apparently
inmates get too riled up
Whenever they see a baddie

And obviously the guards to too
I could tell by the way
They pulled me off into that room
And made me strip

Rubbed their hands across
My ass and tits
Kept petting me on my hip
As if I was a hookah
All I was missing was a tip
(Like just let me stick the tip in)

You have 1 minute left

Who knew that being cuffed by you
Would leave me guilty by association
Justification for how they be killing us
Like how they did Breonna Taylor
The next time you make a move
Consider the fact that it doesn't only affect you
We gotta break the chains
And I hear you saying you've changed
But that's like rapping to a poet
I can't hear you over that track
I guess that's how we get railroaded

Your son said he loves you
And you know I love you too
I keep forgetting to send them pics
But he damn near tall as you
No, I haven't talked to your Dad yet
But I'll try reaching out again
Ain't nobody hit me back
After I hit up ya so called friends
Call me back Friday after next
I'll have some money for the phone
And one last thing before it hangs up

When are you coming...

Thank you for using century link
Goodbye

BRITTNEY “LADY 380” ALEXANDER ARTIST STATEMENT

Prison Bars is a reflection of how incarceration stretches far beyond concrete walls. I wrote it to expose the emotional sentence families serve when a loved one is locked away. The unseen time, the financial strain, and the inherited trauma. Through layered wordplay and conversation-style delivery, this piece challenges the idea of who's truly imprisoned. It's not just about a man behind bars, but a system that cages whole communities. My goal was to give voice to the women and children doing time on the outside, one collect call at a time.

VOICE PRINT

by Anthony Sutton

Meanwhile in New York,
and Texas, and Florida,
and probably here,
prisons are building

databases of inmates
saying phrases like *cat*
or *I am a citizen*
of the United States of America

(often these inmates are threatened
with having their phone
privileges revoked if they don't
say these things into the machine).

In Aristotle, the difference
between voice and speech
separates humans
from animals. Speech

means one has agency. Today,
it's the county sheriff
justifying surveillance
with cases of fraud

some inmates committed
by stealing each other's PIN numbers.

In this century, no one
plucks your voice and places it

in a jar. No scalpel cuts
around the voice box. You
are asked to speak
into this box, provided

by Securius, where your voice
echoes for a while
until it bends
into something you

never said at all.

ANTHONY SUTTON ARTIST STATEMENT

This poem is in response to reporting in 2018 that the company Securius was partnering with prisons to record inmate's voices by having them conduct a phone conversation with an automated machine. If inmates did not agree to this, they would lose their phone privileges altogether. These calls were to develop voice recognition technology by identifying the incarcerated's "voice prints." As reported in The Intercept, "the DOD needed to identify terrorist calls out of the millions of calls made to and from the United States every day."

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES:

POETS

KB BROOKINS

KB Brookins is a Black queer and trans writer, educator, and cultural worker from Texas. KB's poetry collection *Freedom House* (2023) won the American Library Association Barbara Gittings Literature Award and the Texas Institute of Letters Award for Best First Book of Poetry. KB's memoir *Pretty* (2024) won the Lambda Literary Award in Transgender Nonfiction, the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award, and the Dorothy Allison/Felice Picano Emerging Writer Award. They are currently the ACLU of Texas Artist-in-Residence and a Black Mountain Institute Shearing Fellow at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Follow KB online at @earthtokb.

ARIS KIAN

Aris Kian (she/her) is a Houston enthusiast and student of abolition. Her poems are published with Button Poetry, West Branch, Obsidian Lit, and elsewhere. As an Inprint C. Glenn Cambor Fellow, she received her MFA from the University of Houston. Her team Smoke Slam coached by Ebony Stewart ranked #1 at the 2025 Bigfoot Regional Poetry Slam and #1 at the 2024 Southern Fried Poetry Slam. She previously served as the 2023-2025 Houston Poet Laureate and was chosen as a 2025 Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Fellow.

DAIZY J

Daizhaun Jordan (Daizy) is an emerging poet whose work explores themes of activism, spiritual truths & theological insights drawing inspiration from everyday experiences

and the power of empathy. Their poetry seeks to amplify voices, spark reflection on social issues and sow seeds of Hope. Daizy resides in the Houston area, where outside of writing they enjoy the visual arts, creating music, & nurturing their relationship with the Lord. This is their debut published piece. Connect with them @eyeofdaii via Instagram.

SOLIDAD DECOSTA

solidad decosta is a multiracial interdisciplinary writer and performance artist working with text, video and sound. Her most recent works include the video "Orlandoish", the album "Improvisations: One" and the poetry collection "Motherfloods". She has read at numerous locations throughout the US, including Lawndale Art Center, Aurora Chapel, St. Marks, Da' Poetry Lounge, Antioch University, Naropa University, Pitzer College, City Lights Bookstore, Bumpershoot, The Green Mill, SF LGBT Pride Mainstage, SomARTS and Brava Center for the Arts. She spends her time these days between Houston and the SF Bay Area.

DEBORAH D.E.E.P. MOUTON

Deborah D.E.E.P Mouton is an award-winning literary artist, director, performer, and the first Black Poet Laureate of Houston, TX. She authored Newsworthy (Bloomsday Literary, 2019) and Black Chameleon (Henry Holt & Co., 2023), which won the Carr P. Collins award for Best Nonfiction through the Texas Institute of Letters (2024). Mouton has contributed to Glamour, Texas Monthly, and ESPN's Andscape.

A former Resident Artist with American Lyric Theater, Rice University, and the Houston Museum of African American Culture, her recent works include a children's book (Hush Hush Hurricane, Kokila) and an opera at Chicago Opera Theater.

LAUREN OERTEL

Lauren Oertel is a writer, editor, and community organizer based in Austin, Texas. She is a writing workshop facilitator certified in the Amherst Writers & Artists method. Her work has been published in *The Ravens Perch*, *Steam Ticket*, *The Bluebird Word*, *The Sun Magazine*, and more. She has been a winner and finalist in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction contests with *The Letter Review*, *Writer's Digest*, *Prime Number Magazine*, and others. Lauren is a coauthor of the book, *Inside Out: A Texas Prisons Poetry Story*, and her debut full-length poetry collection, *Scars & Other Luxuries*, is forthcoming in 2026.

STALINA EMMANUELLE VILLAREAL

Stalina Emmanuelle Villarreal (she/they) is a poet, an essayist, an artist, an improviser, a translator, and an assistant professor of English. Their bilingualism stems from her 1.5-generation experience being both Mexican and Xicanx. Her debut collection of poetry called *Watcha* is out now from Deep Vellum Publishing. Their poetry can be found in the *Rio Grande Review*, *Texas Review*, *The Acentos Review*, *Defunkt Magazine*, and elsewhere. She has published translations of poetry. They are the recipient of the Inprint Donald Barthelme Prize in Poetry and the BIPOC Arts Network and Fund 2025 Artist Award.

REYES RAMIREZ

Reyes Ramirez (he/him) is the 2025 - 2027 Houston Poet Laureate, as well as a writer, educator, curator, translator, and organizer of Mexican and Salvadoran descent. He authored the short story collection *The Book of Wanderers* (2022), the poetry collection *El Rey of Gold Teeth* (2023), and *Cerveza Songs* (2024), a collection of craft beer poetry reviews and photography.

EBONY STEWART

Ebony Stewart is an author, internationally touring interdisciplinary artist, and one of the most powerful voices in contemporary performance. As a Black womxn writer and performance artist, she uses creativity as both compass and catalyst, exploring identity, and navigating the layered intersectionality of her lived experiences. With a spellbinding blend of storytelling, verbal athleticism, and raw emotional truth, Ebony invites audiences into a space where vulnerability becomes liberation and authenticity is a revolutionary act.

RANDALL J. TYRONE

Randall J. Tyrone holds an MFA from the University of Wyoming. His poems have appeared in *Electric Literature's Okey-Panky*, *Oversound Poetry*, *Indiana Review*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Nomadic Press* and *Gulf Coast*. He has been anthologized in the *Bodies Built For A Game Anthology* by *Prairie Schooner*. He has received a scholarship to attend the *Tin House Summer Workshop* and was awarded the *Bentley-Buckman Poetry Fellowship* to attend the *Writers Week* at the *Idyllwild Arts Foundation*. His collection *City of Dis* was released in Fall 2025 by *Texas Review Press*. He's very excited for you.

BRITTNEY "LADY 380" ALEXANDER

Brittney "Lady 380" Alexander is a Houston-based spoken word artist, playwright, and producer known for her raw, unapologetic delivery and thought-provoking storytelling. She's the founder of *Lady 380 Poetry LLC* and *LITbyBritt Candles*, creative director for *No Smoke Productions*, and Vice President of *Sol Poetry*. Her work has graced stages like the *Houston Improv* and *The Black Academy of Arts and Letters*. Nationally ranked poet, *Lady 380*, uses her art to unpack trauma, love, and truth, blending poetry

and performance with fearless authenticity.

ANTHONY SUTTON

Anthony Sutton resides on former Akokisas, Atakapa, Karankawa, and Sana land (currently named Houston, TX), as an Inprint C. Glenn Cambor fellow at the University of Houston's Creative Writing and Literature PhD program and is Managing Editor of *Gulf Coast: A Magazine of Literature and Fine Art*. A winner of the 2024 Inprint Marion Barthelme Prize in Creative Writing, the author of the poetry collection *Particles of a Stranger Light* (Veliz Books, 2023), and co-editor of *Tom Postell: On the Life and Work of an American Master* (Unsung Masters, 2024), Anthony's poetry has appeared in *Passages North*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Texas Review*, *Zone 3* and elsewhere.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES:

VISUAL ARTISTS

ALBERTO “ALBERT” SANCHEZ

Alberto “Albert” Sanchez is a Tejano interdisciplinary artist working primarily in cyanotype. His practice is shaped by rasquachismo, a resourceful and improvisational way of making rooted in ancestral memory, and by Zapatista teachings around autonomy, tenderness, and collective presence. Sanchez often makes his own tools, allowing process to function as ritual rather than preparation. His current work considers how tenderness operates as a survival strategy, and how the unseen parts of ourselves begin to take form through repetition, pigment, and return.

JOHN SHOCKLEY

John Shockley’s aims to offer a unique existence of contrasting color and form that require personal interpretation. A basic flowing line or contrasting form will always be the genesis. He wants his artwork to resonate within a home, office or renovated warehouse with old hardwoods.

He is driven and somewhat tortured by the quantum downloading of the work onto canvas. He is humbled by the gift, believing we all are vessels capable of creating abstract artwork. He believes in equality, respect and love for all humans. His work will oftentimes standup for the past oppressions of women of color that have endured horrendous oppression and atrocities throughout American history. Therefore, the resilience and beauty of black women needs to be respected and celebrated.

His painting techniques entail many colors and textures

that are literally layered and sanded or scrubbed away to offer a weathered contrast. He wants his paintings to appear to be painted on an old wizened slab of rusty concrete or sandstone.

CRYSTAL COULTER

Crystal Coulter is a Houston-based oil painter whose self-portraiture examines mental health, memory, and control. Informed by psychology and an MFA in Painting, she uses humor and absurdity to explore institutional, self, and interpersonal transformation. Her art has been exhibited nationally, including at the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, Illinois, and the Houston Museum of African American Culture in Houston, Texas, and was distinguished as a Juror's Pick in New American Paintings (Issue 174). Through her work, she not only invites viewers to challenge their own personal narratives but to also reflect on collective experiences and community

ANASTASIA "STACY" KIRAGES

Anastasia "Stacy" Kirages is a Houston-based collage artist, zinester, and community organizer for Zine Fest Houston (ZFH) and Uncle Bob's Photo Market. She explores themes of memory, history, nostalgia, and preservation in her work utilizing found ephemera through collage, zine-making, and photography to reflect on her own family history and relationships, and to create fictionalized memories in new contexts. The artist earned a M.Ed in Literacy Education from Texas Woman's University and a BA in Art History from the University of Texas at Austin. Her work has shown nationally and internationally, which you can check out online at <https://kllages.com/home.html> or on Instagram: @k.llages.

SEBASTIEN BONCY

Born and raised in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Sebastien Boncy has called Houston home since the late nineties. He received a BFA from the University of Houston then an MFA in photography from the University of North Texas. His writing has been published in Glasstire, Not That But This, and more. His photographs and videos have been exhibited at Art League Houston, Visible Records, and many other venues.

Sebastien Boncy's practice is anchored by the continual production of a photographic archive of greater Houston: Purple Time Space Swamp. Twelve years in, the archive is approximately 6000 images, 12 publications, and a handful of videos.

JULIE DEVRIES

www.juliedevries.com

Working in painting, and digital media, artist Julie DeVries's images are locally rooted, focusing on images of poignant memories of the landscapes in and around Harris County which highlight our impact on the natural world and the positive effects of green spaces on our emotional well-being. She was born and raised in Houston, TX and still currently lives and works there with her husband, photographer Sebastien Boncy, and their daughter Louise. She currently serves as a Visual Arts faculty member at Lone Star College North Harris.

SEBASTIAN GOMEZ DE LA TORRE

Sebastian Gomez de la Torre was born and raised in Lima, Peru. In 2001, he moved to Miami, Florida; and then to Conroe in 2007. After finishing his Bachelor's in Illustration from the College for Creative Studies in

Detroit, Michigan, he moved back to Houston, and he's been trying to live his best life since.

KENNETH WEST

Kenneth West is a visual artist who works in primarily painting and sculpture. His paintings are mixes of abstract, cubism, neo-expressionism, and portraiture. His sculptures are contemporary modernistic abstract forms that are often fused with African symbology. Much of his work has pop culture and political themes; both are expressions of his being. For him, art is about building bridges between people, cultures, classes, religions and ideologies. The act of creation is the act of connection, while simultaneously being an act of defiance. Not speaking but screaming to the powers that be, "here I am and here I remain." See more of his work and learn more about his journey at artistkennethwest.com

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EarthToKB.com

Created with the ACLU of Texas
AcluTx.org

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