CHAPTER FOUR

The Workshops

I
“In the yard, I am like this!”
Hollis-El shows a clenched fist.
“In here like this . . .” he opens a tiny space between forefinger and thumb.
“Then I return to the yard,” and he clenches again.

II
“In California I loved to walk the beaches and redwood forests.” Native American lifer, adopted and beaten by his Polish family, runaway, now forever resident in a Michigan prison.
“The theater workshop is like that.”

III
At the university
a circle of stiff classroom chairs which we unbend with our minds
“The men at Ryan and I come to the workshop,” Chris says, “for the same reason: something is missing in our lives, and we come there to find it.”

—FROM “FOR MIKE, BECAUSE YOU ASKED,” BY BUZZ ALEXANDER

I don’t need to cater to any of you, I don’t need to cater to you. My brother is in the hospital paralyzed from the neck down, my niece was in a coma, and my wife was buried today, my daughter is out there with no parent, and I need this workshop, I need its focus, I need to keep my mind off these other things.

—WILSON-BEY AFTER LEAVING AND THEN RETURNING TO A THEATER WORKSHOP AT SOUTHERN MICHIGAN CORRECTIONAL FACILITY
Children and youth, incarcerated youth, and prisoners, working with English 310 and 319 students, with Art and Design 310 students, and with PCAP members, have presented their plays, poetry, art, and other work in primary schools, in rural high schools, in urban day and night high schools, in girls' and boys' juvenile facilities, and in men's and women's prisons. The youth have been in special education and standard classrooms, in sex offender halls or pods, in cottages or halls of severely damaged youth, in geographically organized units or units organized according to crime or problem. The adults come from the general population in low- and medium-to-high security prisons, from the prison mental hospital, from residential treatment units, and from prisons or parts of prisons assigned to youth sentenced as adults.

Sometimes their audiences have been limited to peers, with no outsiders allowed. Now and then, the audiences have been limited to outsiders, which defeats one of our principal purposes, of having the performers become models for their peers. The audiences are usually open to both peers and outsiders. In some prisons, the prisoners and outsiders are segregated from each other; in others we can freely mingle and converse. Family members are invited to the youth performances, as they were in the early days in the prisons. For a while we could videotape performances and readings and make copies at cost for family members, but this was outlawed in the late 1990s. Our audiences have been as small as four members and as large as 270, perched on bleacher seats in a prison gymnasium.

The performers have presented in classrooms so crowded with desks they could hardly move, on high school stages much too vast for their ability to project, and in a variety of smaller high school spaces, in juvenile facility and prison chapels and recreation rooms, on stages with and stages without curtains, in rooms full of echoes, in gymnasiums where their voices sank at their feet, in gymnasiums using fifteen microphones, in a tiny space just off the living quarters in the women's prison mental health unit, in the patio of a women's prison as the sun went down and our voices carried to the actress who had provoked a fight in the yard the night before and ended up in segregation. At the Western Wayne Correctional Facility, the men built a five-piece stage that was stored in a corner of East Recreation. When the men left, the women who replaced them added a green carpet to the stage and our voices stopped rebounding. We have brought urban and incarcerated youth to the University of Michigan for second performances and presented in small and large classrooms, in auditoriums, in theaters.
Our shortest play was five minutes. It was created in desperation in the hour before the performance: the youth talked about the source of a ring, earring, necklace or bracelet they wore, and they imagined a story about a stolen ring. Our longest plays, rehearsed for months, last an hour and three-quarters, or until the facility closes down for the night and sends us home.

Some of the plays are silly, some poorly done, some rich in character and meaning, complicated, sophisticated. All of the plays are successes.

Only 5 of 506 plays have been scripted. Before we decided against scripted plays, the Sisters Within Theater Troupe performed *Junkie* by Martha Boesing (1992) and *17* by Fritz Hale (1995). The other three, *Y2K and the Wicked Stepmother* (2000), *Street Life* (2002), and *To Kill the Mockingbirds; a monologue play* (2002) were strategic responses to efforts by prison administrators to prevent the plays.³

Process and product are equally crucial. PCAP workshops always lead to a reading or performance. When 310 and 319 students object—“We have great rapport, great communication and community, it makes no sense to shift everything into a deadline and product”—I remind them what it has meant to them to stand before an audience and ask them to imagine what it will mean to someone who has never been celebrated or applauded even once in his life. Our performances are celebrations, with programs, with refreshments and flowers in the youth facilities. Sometimes performers and audience testify. The performers gain reputations among their peers as actors, poets, dancers.

In this chapter I am going to talk largely about the theater workshops.

The first two meetings of a new workshop we play and talk. The goal is to have fun, loosen up, get comfortable, learn what brought each of us there, test out the waters, play games, do exercises, learn light improvisations. In the third meeting, we are likely to introduce some kind of conflict exercise. We number off into pairs, and each pair has five minutes to come up with a one-minute conflict that will not be resolved and that is based on observation or direct experience. The first time we used this exercise, an English 319 student and a Maxey boy became two men clearing their lawns of leaves, one with a rake, the other with a blower that kept sending leaves onto the lawn of the first. Participants learn that stories can come from their everyday lives and personal histories (we discourage borrowing from television or the movies), that two people with conflict makes for drama, and that conflict is not easily resolved. If we have time, we choose one of the conflicts and either (i) have the two actors create new scenes, one pre-
ceeding and one following the original scene, choosing others to join them if the new scenes require other characters, (2) replace the actors with two others who take the scene in new directions, or (3) have other actors enter the scene and add complications as they see fit. The participants see their plots thicken and stories deepen and learn how they will eventually create their play, mounting scene upon scene, adding and developing characters as we go, always working through improvisation. At the end of this session, we ask them to come next time with ideas for a play.

In the fourth meeting, after some exercises, we go around the circle and listen to ideas. If no one has ideas, we ask everyone to be silent an entire five minutes and think of stories from their experience they would like to see performed. We choose first the two or three most thoughtful and developed ideas and ask those who have proposed them to choose as many actors as they need, then go into a corner and come up with the scene they have in mind, which need not be the opening scene of a play. After five or so minutes, they show the scenes, we all discuss and decide upon one or more. Often several ideas merge into a single plot or into plot and subplots, since characters can live in the same building or neighborhood, go to the same school, or be confined in the same prison.

Ongoing workshops need not follow the same process. Often members already have ideas for the next play. In a single brainstorming session, the men at Western Wayne decided upon a play that would warn youth away from the paths that had taken the men to prison. Shar Wabindato and Jackie Wilson of the Sisters Within had enjoyed playing the owners of a clothes cleaning establishment in a brief scene in *Dream Stage* (1995) and requested to play similar roles three plays later. We immediately put them up front and sent in a series of improvised characters who disrupted their cleaning operation. This became the first scene of *Puddin's Place* (1997), an hour-and-forty-five-minute play full of rich complications. More recently, Naomi Fitchett announced that she wished to play a young person dying of cancer in order to explore the death experience of her twenty-one-year-old brother. This became *What's in the Water Cooler? The Lost Room . . . What!!!?* (2007). A play can develop also from something less direct. *Inside and Personal* (1994) rose from two sources: an improvisation in which mothers in prison phoned their daughters at home and the intense discussion that followed; and a discussion that took up an entire workshop, about what the Florence Crane Women's Facility water was doing to prisoners’ skin and prison health conditions in general. Pilar Anadon and I listened without interruption except
to ask questions. At the end I asked what the discussion had to do with our next play. The women responded that the next play needed to be serious and be drawn from some of the harsh realities of their lives.

Once the workshop group makes its choice, the rest is a matter of patient week-by-week exploration of plot, character, story, and meaning. English 310 and 319 groups must have a play in ten weeks of hour-and-a-half sessions, sometimes with extra rehearsals if permitted. PCAP groups generally have unlimited time.

It is seldom easy—and I can't emphasize this enough—because we work in constantly disrupted environments. Attendance is often spotty in the high schools, especially in early morning classes. Holidays, teacher conferences, school closings because of inclement weather, crowded classrooms, a week of standardized testing, fifty-minute sessions rather than the hour and a half at our other sites, and normal adolescent inattention and chaos wreak havoc. The last two factors are compounded in the juvenile facilities by painfully unresolved experiences and issues of individual youth and frequent tensions in groups that are together twenty-four hours a day. Sometimes a session is canceled, and sometimes we lose half an hour when the youth circle up with a counselor to address an immediate problem. Youth act out, youth close down. While the counseling staff is usually very helpful, some counselors or night staff carry on loud conversations with each other, make phone calls, or divert individual youth with conversations or random critiques of their behavior. Sometimes at the two girls' facilities, the staff has forgotten we are coming, and the girls have been sent off to some other activity; at best, it takes extra time to gather them and get started. An emergency count, a monthly simulated mobilization that closes the prison down, heavy fog or other extreme weather that makes yard movement hazardous for prisoners and officers, disciplinary measures like segregation, top lock (confinement to one's cell), and loss of privileges, or a prisoner sent back because of an unbuttoned shirt or for arriving a minute late, one of us forgetting our driver's license, corrections officers randomly sitting in on a session, participants transferred to other prisons, family visits, illness, and general environmental stress are constant challenges to continuity in the prisons. Participants in any youth or adult workshop may decide two weeks before a performance that they don't want to do the play anymore or decide they need major revisions. Individual participants might choose to fade back into the prison, where we have no opportunity to talk with them, find out what is happening, and encourage them to return.
I admire prison theater based on texts, including the remarkable work facilitated and directed by my colleagues Jonathan Shailor, Kurt Tofteland, Jean Trounstine, and Agnes Wilcox. We have chosen another route, building plays by improvisation. We value actors’ inventiveness, imagination, and personal histories, stories, and issues, and we love the process of figuring out the plot, characters, and meanings together. Each improvised scene is rehearsed again and again. We avoid memorization: usually we have only a short time to create a play, our workshops are open to all levels of ability and literacy, and attempted memorization could cause onstage agony. Also, especially at the prisons, frequent transfers and disciplinary sanctions may bring last-minute losses that give no time for new actors to memorize the text. With improvisation, we can scramble at the last moment. Actors—who know what is to happen in each scene—can take on second roles.

Each participant chooses or invents a character when ready to do so. Some choices are obvious at the outset, and some actors are eager to jump in. Others wait to see how the land lies. I could not figure out who I wished to be in the Sisters Within’s Reflections (1998), a play about four generations of a family. I gradually realized that each major second-generation character had suffered a significant death: a medic in Vietnam had watched a buddy die; one, watching television, had seen her husband, a prominent civil rights activist, assassinated while making a speech; another had aborted her fetus; and a fourth was attempting to kill off her blackness and become white. Their mother, an old woman now, was an impervious matriarch seemingly without flaws, who had lived her life out in a successful lesbian relationship. I decided to play a dead baby boy, the result of an abortion the mother had kept secret throughout her life. When she appeared, a black sheet in the corner of the room would stir slightly when she spoke, and as she revealed her secret on her deathbed, the sheet rose and exited through the door at the rear of the stage.

A key moment is the character interview. The character stands before the other characters/actors and tells what she knows of herself, then answers questions that probe her history, her memories, her darkest or happiest moments, her faith, her relationships with other characters or with others in her past or present, her needs, her feelings about issues in the play, and so on. Her answers give other characters material for their scenes with her, reveal new dimensions to and suggest new characters for the plot, a father, a missing sister, a doctor who has moved to a small town to escape the corruption of the big city and who refuses to help someone with a sex change. The
characters rise not only from our imaginations, but also from our own experiences and needs. Bernard Arnold, a new member of the Western Wayne Players, was interviewed during the formation of *Brothers* (1999). Someone asked his character to talk about his relation to his father. Bernard began to answer, then paused, stunned, and declared, “This is real!” The others laughed and said, “Welcome to the Western Wayne Players!” When an actor becomes aware of this dimension, the play takes on increased urgency.

After several weeks, we begin to bring a list of the scenes developed so far. We describe each scene, sometimes with a few pieces of dialogue we wish to remember. This is as much text as we have, and the scenes continue to be improvised as we rehearse them. The actors review the scene before they go on stage and are generally true to it, but improvisation continues into the performance itself, sometimes bringing new comedy, new emotion and power. 

And the plays, at their best, lead, like most plays, from disrupted communities and individual conflicts to adjustments, resolutions, and a sophisticated reestablishment of balance. The plot of *The Genie and the Hood* (June 1999) has the thousand-year-old Dr. Krasenknopf and his somewhat younger genie, Hasan, opening a ghetto pawnshop. Their even younger accomplice is fine as long as she is kept in alcohol. When three men see the magic lamp in the window, they enter and touch the lamp. A gong sounds and Hasan appears (speaking in rhyme) and offers them three wishes. He and Dr. Krasenknopf then use their wishes to divide and destroy the ghetto. Eventually some women, including the accomplice (the evil pair have mistakenly let the community go dry), figure out what is happening and they realize that they can defeat Dr. Krasenknopf and Hasan with the power of women’s laughter. They teach it to others and march on the pawnshop. Krasenknopf and Hasan, defiant and nearly victorious at first, melt to nothing. The community has resisted, come together, learned and asserted new values. However, while this is at least a temporary victory for the community, the final scene shows Krasenknopf and Hasan standing in their new pawnshop in Kansas City, Missouri, as townspeople peer in at the lamp. The struggle continues elsewhere and always.

**THE ROLES OF THE UNIVERSITY FACILITATORS**

Although we usually come from some degree of affluence and academic success, although most of us are white and female, although at the end of every
session we return to the comfort of our Ann Arbor apartments and homes, and although it is because of us that these creative spaces have opened, in a very crucial sense we are no different than the other workshop participants: we are there to play games, take risks, be vulnerable, brainstorm, discover, co-create, act, and co-direct. We bring our backgrounds, personalities, talents, and skills and throw them into the mix. This cannot be sufficiently emphasized: we all get down to the task. It is not about talk, not about theory, not about instructing, it is about collaboration and praxis. In a way, it is magic. The differences remain and evaporate.

In the courses we insist that the play (or poetry or art or dance) is “theirs”—we don’t bring in texts or lesson plans—and that the product will rise from the workshop dynamic. Some students understand this to mean we are passive: “they” will make it all happen. These students do not recognize that the participants have not done this before, that they are uncertain and likely to flounder in the open-ended discovery process of the workshops, that they may think of us as “teachers” even though we refuse the role, and that they need the kind of guidance we, with our training in the courses, can provide. We must be willing to call the group to focus (a great challenge in the youth facilities), provide games, exercises, and improvisations, move the process along, make sure the character interviews are challenging, engage the whole group in feedback on the scenes, and contribute our own ideas and feelings about both story and process. In most workshops either immediately or very quickly, others join us in all these roles.

When students or PCAP members feel younger and inexperienced or white or lacking in street experience or in experiences of abuse and pain and hold back, they fail the members of their workshop. A moment everyone in the fall 200 6 310 will remember is when Grace Pan, suddenly in tears, urged her classmates to make demands on the youth they were working with: that would offer them the respect they deserve. When PCAP members Emi Kaneko and Katie Craig, feeling their experience to be elite and their poetry amateur, did not take risks and step forth boldly as writers, they were disrespecting the men at the Parnall Correctional Facility and holding back the workshop. When we identified this in a group meeting, everything changed.

Because we have access the others do not, we have certain responsibilities. We bring in notepads, pens, and paper, costumes and props, scene lists, programs, flowers for the high school and youth facility curtain calls, refreshments when the facility lacks the budget to provide them. We stay in
touch with the liaison, we phone ahead to make sure everything is in order, we enter the facility with positive spirit and respect, we adhere to the facility rules and regulations. We do all we can, from our vantage point as volunteers from the university, to make everything go smoothly and to protect the workshop.

Protecting the workshop can mean struggling for significant meaning. Although the plays move toward resolution, the resolution can be problematic. In a Maxey play, a boy about to hit another boy is taken into the future and shown two outcomes: to end up in a mental institution or to live in a luxurious house with his wife and children enjoying his success as a corporate giant. He chooses the latter and does not strike the other boy. But the boys did not imagine other ideals—becoming a social worker, a teacher, a public health worker, a member of Doctors Without Borders. The team did not offer such possibilities for discussion. Whatever the boys decided, the discussion would have been valuable. If they chose the same outcome, they might have added new dimensions.

A member of the Western Wayne Players proposed a play in which former students arrive at their high school reunion, discover the community has deteriorated, and fix it up with their wealth. It felt unreal and magical to me, and so when we put up the reunion scene to start things off, I leaned over to Romando Valeroso and another actor and said, “Go on in and mug them.” They rushed the stage, forced everyone up against the wall, took their wallets, and left. Suddenly things became more challenging. The high school principal (a member of the reunion class) recognized the two “thugs” as students and thought they could be persuaded to change. However, when he called them in and when the alumni offered jobs and an elite academy for the neighborhood, the youth rebuffed them. Increasingly frustrated, the actors playing the rich characters decided the two should be arrested and incarcerated (one wounded and in a wheelchair). At this point, Pilar Anadon, Maria Stewart, and I objected. We wondered why they would advocate as the solution for urban youth the incarceration they themselves had suffered. When we suggested that the alumni listen to the boys, the same actors were aghast: what could the thugs possibly say? Other actors supported our suggestion. So Froggy, the classmate who had stayed in town and become an auto repair mechanic, who was still snubbed by his classmates, and who knew the youth, arranged a meeting. Valeroso and the actor now playing the second “thug” stunned the alumni with their detailed analysis and criticism of the high school and community environment. They
argued that they could organize the community. The alumni acquiesced and offered backing. The play ended with a community celebration of a successful fund-raiser organized by the boys. The prison band contributed an original song.

Protecting the workshop can also mean struggling together for its very existence. Toward the end of the Sisters Within Theater Troupe’s residence at the Florence Crane Women’s Facility, the women, Pilar, and I were faced with increasing hostility from the warden and the regional prison administrator. Perhaps they had come to identify us with Mary Glover and Tracy Neal, lead litigants against the Michigan Department of Corrections and former Sisters members, though we had always known better than to discuss the lawsuits or to get involved in any way. In the fall of 1999, the warden notified us that our next play would have to be from a written text. She gave us half an hour in the muster room to discuss this with the women. There we quickly recalled a title we used to joke about, *Y2K and the Wicked Stepmother*, and immediately imagined a basic plot and characters. The next day the women met in the yard, elaborated the plot and sent us what they had. We developed it into a full-length story, submitted it to the warden and regional prison administrator, who then told us it had to be a line-by-line text. Instead of quitting, we agreed that we would submit such a text. Then each week we created the play in our usual improvisational manner, but with Pilar writing down the lines we came up with. The text was approved. Although the hostility continued—we were denied outside guests, limited in terms of props and costumes, received glares from prison officers, were told after the performance that the promised refreshments were locked up and couldn’t be accessed, and were harassed on the way out—we gave two spirited performances of that wonderful play. Our celebration after the second performance had the solidarity and depth of having fought for the play and refusing to yield in the face of so much opposition.

**INSIDE THE WALLS**

An exercise we frequently use is “Magician.” Someone stands on a chair and hollers, “I am a magician, and I turn you all into angry red rabbits” (or “into your father” or “into bees on my left and people afraid of bees on my right” or “dancing mummies”). When that person has finished several transformations of the group, he or she cries out, “I am a magician, and I turn Pedro into a magician.” Pedro then ascends to the chair. In a variation on
this exercise, each boy in Lauren Rubinfeld and Mryna Vaca’s workshop at Maxey (2001) would shout, “I am the magician and I give my power to ____.” Terry gave the power to De’Aries, then De’Aries gave it to Ricardo. When Ricardo was ready, he shouted, “I am the magician and I give my power to these walls.” Lauren was “speechless.” She wrote about it in her final paper:

Ricardo recognizes that his power is being replaced by the power of the walls and the fences that surround him. When I drive away from Maxey, I can’t just snap right back into the outside world. After hearing the voices of my boys, their screams, their ideas, their cartwheels, their imaginations yelling, it is so difficult to drive out of the gates of Maxey, where even with my windows rolled down, I cannot hear even one sound escape from the fences. They are being silenced. And their silence screams to me louder than the loudest shriek Ronnie has placed in my eardrum. They are my shriek. They are the shriek that sustains my anger—my anger that propels me. My anger at the neighborhood (that we are all a part of) that surrounds Maxey and is comforted by the silence of boys’ voices. They are comforted by the silence of my boys’ futures.15

THE WALLS

The incarcerating walls are constructed from many materials. Tormented, alienated, overcrowded homes, dangerous streets, ragged rotting schools and overworked, demoralized teachers, lack of medical access, hunger, illiteracy, physical and sexual assault, environmental pollution, the helpless rage of those around one. Low expectations, degradations, accumulated insults to the spirit. Everyday violence. The rat in the corner, the rat in the crib. Gangs, the color of one’s skin, the color of one’s class. Guns and drugs. In one’s head the moment that led toward the police car, the jail garb, the shackles, the voices of others in the courtroom. Rotating poorly paid counselors, inadequate psychiatric attention, haunted minds, chaos, cuttings, suicide attempts, screams, running, state uniforms. The humiliations of count time, of arbitrary orders, of lost control in almost every aspect of one’s life, of health care that neglects and kills, of food that bloats, of constant noise, constant boredom, of stabbings and rape, of having to watch one’s back, of having no choice as to one’s company, of parole board denials, of knowing the public hates you, of being imagined as a person without loved ones or aspirations or creativity, of attending funerals under guard, of
missing a child’s graduation, a child’s marriage, a chance to care for a dying parent.

The walls close in on one’s soul. Jimmy Santiago Baca talks about crossing the invisible line into numbness and never coming back, about the light inside that is extinguished. It happens when the insults accumulate, when one is silenced, when one is given a disciplinary ticket for singing or bursting into dance, when one is treated like trash. Tait Sye reports in his journal:

Denise also told us about one youth in particular. When he first came to Green Oak Center, everyone thought he was hopeless. But he turned out to be an exceptional person. He did everything that was asked of him, received his GED and now everyone thought that he would be released last June. The judge denied his release, and told him he would review his case in 6 months. Just last week he went back to the judge expecting to be released, but to the surprise of everyone, he was sent back to Maxey. We were later introduced to him, but he was very quiet. Denise asked a group leader how he was doing, and the group leader responded that he could cope better if the judge had said why. If there was a reason, something he had to work on. But there was not. . . . The judge essentially took one year from his life without offering a reason.16

Why?

THE WALLS

In The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home, Jonathan Kozol demonstrates how the high schools most of us attend train us to be “good citizens,” smart, imaginative, intelligent, well-intentioned adults who, while we may volunteer and donate to charity, are ethically indifferent to the sufferings and struggles of others, unconscious of the everyday violence that surrounds us, or, if conscious, not inclined to do much or anything about it. Through fragmentation of our learning, through group recitations of the Pledge to the Flag, through elimination of “I” from our essays, through emasculation and taming of major rebellious figures we study, through obscuring the fact that great figures were once children like us, through softening, diminishing, and managing our inclinations to righteous anger or action, through celebrating individual achievements, the schools divert our force into safe channels.17 In fifth grade, my son brought to show-and-tell a story of human
rights abuses in Chile. His teacher was moved and asked the children to write “world wishes.” They all wished for a better world, and it was taken care of. In seventh grade his art teacher asked the students to draw a picture of freedom. My son had lived with us in the mountains of Peru and visited peasant communities, he had listened to our talk. He drew a man with a black beret at a podium, speaking, and below him were men with their rifles raised in response. Che Guevara. His art teacher refused the drawing—he had, according to my son, accepted a drawing of a man in a white sheet—and asked my son to think of something in America he liked to do. Totally unsure now, my son said he liked to camp, and that was approved. He drew a picture of a tent in a campground.

This is all natural enough. It is the role of the schools to reproduce the social order. Some do so in a way that allows for individuality, self-criticism, intelligence, imagination, creativity, and other characteristics that allow some of us to be vital citizens who can advance science, develop markets, cure patients, write important books, and so on. At the same time we learn language—“it has always been this way; there have always been rich and poor; one person can’t change the world”—to consent to the absence of such schooling for others or to be compassionate and activist in limited ways. My students, so many of them lively, deeply intelligent, wonderfully creative individuals, are at risk of crossing an invisible line into numbness, of having the light of passion for justice that is taught in some American history texts, some churches and synagogues, some families, go out. When I was growing up on the North Shore of Chicago, no one in my family, no one in my schools, no one in the Sunday school at the Wilmette Methodist Church even hinted that there was anything problematic about the world as it was, and no one needed to tell the kids from Chicago that they weren’t welcome on our beach. I was endangered, being primed for numbness.

**THE WORKSHOPS**

Chris says something is missing for all of us and we come to the workshops to find it. Hollis-El opens a tiny space between thumb and forefinger, Dell Konieczko remembers the beaches in California, Wilson-Bey needs the workshop, Robin’s daughter is killed and she needs the workshop, Susan is reliving her abuse, her crime, she needs the workshop, Romando vowed he would never become close to someone again after Vietnam and after he watched his buddy blow his brains out in the VA hospital, and he becomes
close to Pilar, Maria, Janie and me, Nate says he found his first real friend through the workshop, Samarrah writes that if they close her workshop they’ll take away the only place in the prison where one of the men says he feels human. In the Poet’s Corner in 2001, Mike Modeste challenges me to write a poem about what the workshops mean to me. In “For Mike, Because you Asked,” I begin with the first epigraph to this chapter, then add,

IV

Antonio comes to extend what he knows of love
and anger
Gucci comes seeking new families through finding
his old,
Chi comes to find the stories and voice that will let him
pass wisdom on
Co-Pilot comes to tame his whirling thoughts into
powerful renderings of his time
Mike, you come to find rhymes for your hard past
and for the discipline and insight that motivate you now
Sarah comes for the composite person and comes to delight and surprise us
with her lyrical twists, her quick laugh
Phil comes out of a commitment to us and to himself

And I come, like you all, to find justice

V

I find it in our unusual laughter
I find it in our challenges and risks
I find it in the gasps I hear when someone reads a powerful poem
or finds a right line
I find it in the safety of our space and in our liking for each other
I find it in our generosity
in our forgiveness for what we have not done well
in the voices we discover as they lift up out of us,
like smoke and fire,
singing
I find it in our attempts to understand why we are here,
in our anger when it rises
I find it in Co-Pilot’s desire to write poetry like cutting quick right
for a jump-shot and passing off, spontaneous,
I find it in Chi’s assignment not to revise
  in Gucci’s photographs
  in Phil’s mantra
  in Sarah’s many names
  in Antonio’s family and Co-Pilot’s cohesiveness
  in the insistence of the podium
And Mike, I find it in your direct, penetrating questions
  and in our answers

VI
Prisons are about no, the workshops are yes
Prisons are limits, blocks, barriers,
  workshops
  are openings, doors, dances, breakings through

Prisons are about poverty and poor opportunity,
  boarded houses and rotting schools,
  a system that leaves so many children out,
Workshops are a piece of the reply,
  they are about the strength of our stories,
  about our voices, our songs, our laughter, our resistance,
  about our families,
    our neighborhoods,
    our communities,
    ourselves,
  about what might and may be.

I think this is it. Most of us entering the workshops, youth, prisoners, students, are having fun, are happy, or not necessarily happy, to be there, are scrambling to write a poem or create a character or draw something that isn’t in the room, and one of us will have a beef with the person across the table or at the podium, or we’ll feel chaotic and like we are getting nowhere, and we may feel that what is being created—and we are often right—is shallow, undeveloped, not fully formed or articulated, and many of us are preoccupied with other facets of our lives. And yet I think for most of us, underneath, there is always a sense of the potential for something being found between us, among us.
In an English 310 exercise, I number my students off into groups of three, then have them decide which two will play incarcerated youth and who will be the new earnest student facilitator from English 310 who comes to work with them. I send the facilitators from the room and tell the incarcerated youth to make everything extremely difficult for the facilitator. What happens is sometimes even agonizing to watch: the facilitator faces inattention, chaos, individual acting out or closing down, youth storming out, and hard hard challenges and questions. Afterward we debrief. One year, Jessica Anthony, who had played a Maxey youth, told us she had kept pushing the facilitator because she so much needed him to be the right person, to say the right things, to be the person she, from an abusive, negligent background, needed more than anything. And he hadn’t been able to give her what she wanted, he wasn’t ready, attuned, authentic. He couldn’t focus on her; his words were nice, conventional. I’m sure he also desperately wanted her to understand who he was, what brought him there, his needs, his wishes for the relation, what was authentic in him.

What I am missing when I seek the workshop may be different from what Chris seeks or Shar or Wilson-Bey or Ricardo. But all of us have been cut off from each other. All of us have been malnourished. All of us are full of experience, talent, and history and are rich, problematic personalities, but we have all been deprived by the walls which have been built between us. At some inarticulate or not well articulated level we want connection between us, and community. What is so exciting about the workshops is that this is in the air, in our process. What is so exciting is that the creative tasks challenge us to find within ourselves what we have to give to ourselves and others and that something happens in the room when we succeed. Whether we know it or not, the workshops are charged with this possibility. Most of the time we probably fail—none of us get the words right—but it is in the air, and when it flares, for a moment or completely, we find what we are seeking. That it has been in the air is evidenced in the frequent refrain among us when a workshop ends, that “we have been a family.”

Often as a workshop ends—especially in the juvenile facilities where we are not allowed to have contact afterward—my students are upset that they will not see their workshop members again, and the workshop members are aware, we’re all aware, that the walls are still there, that mostly—not always—our lives will continue on separate tracks. Yet those for whom the experience has been profound will seek each other in other people. Once someone has been respected, one seeks respect. Once someone has broken
through to connect, one will know how to do that and seek it. Once someone has engaged across the social chasm in a task-oriented, democratic way, one will seek to do that again, and to find circumstances and careers where it might be sustained, deepen, and be effective.

Our plays move toward reestablishment of community because plays do. But in incarceration places, it is more. So much has been broken. So much has been denied. So much, in a nation of mass incarceration, is clearly wrong. And many in the room have been terribly wronged and many may have done terrible wrong. The deep, hurting, painful need to fix it all is profound. The aura of understanding, generosity, and forgiveness and the spirited reaching across the room and across boundaries is such a gift here, as it is whenever it happens in any of the hard places on this earth.

**BUTTERFLIES**

When I visit workshops in the youth facilities, I am exhilarated by the energy, eagerness, excitement, and imagination of so many of the youth. But I always come away deeply saddened by the hurt reflected in their eyes, their bodies, their allusions, their relations with each other, their stories, their poems.

Sometimes when I see the unnecessary cruelty of their lives and of the incarceration places where they and adult prisoners are confined—the constant “no,” the gratuitous restraints and limits that have nothing to do with security or safety, the deliberate humiliations and targeting by those staff and officers who have burned out or are wrong for the job—a large boot grinding a beautifully colored butterfly into the ground rises in me. Snoop sings loudly in the shower, Sheila sings on her way to her unit: each gets three days of top lock. Cathy may not take with her to a new prison the silk flower we presented at the end of *Junkie*. When Nate Jones enters the cell of an old prisoner who has become physically helpless, in order to assist him, he is given two days top lock. Our workshops are places of growth and connection. They are blossoms. For our thirtieth and final play at the Western Wayne Correctional Facility, built long ago on a toxic waste site and now shutting down, Assistant Deputy Warden Pat Rodger arbitrarily decides we may not have costumes and props—even though we have had them for a hundred plays before that—and makes us remove them all before we perform. Why would she do that? Another assistant deputy warden hates programs, lies to me on the phone, offers obscure time slots for the workshop,
limits the number of women who can participate, limits the number of women who can attend the performances, limits the outside audience. At one facility, a special activities director formed a prisoner arts committee and wrote a proposal to the Michigan Department of Corrections for an arts program at the facility, a collaboration with the Prison Creative Arts Project. They turned him down.

CRISIS

From 1990 to 1999 PCAP worked prison by prison. We offered workshops or were invited to offer them and then provided the best-quality work we could. If anything needed to go higher in the Department of Corrections—and almost nothing did—we relied on the special activities staff or assistant deputy wardens for programs to recognize that and take care of it. We didn't call attention to ourselves. Although by 1999 we had held three annual exhibitions of art by Michigan prisoners, the workshops were generally under the radar. I knew that a moment would come when that would change.

In January 1999 MDOC deputy director Dan Bolden summoned me to Lansing. In the past, two friendly wardens and a department insider had helped me understand him and his decisions and on a few occasions they had spoken with him on our behalf, so I knew him to be a peremptory man with great power and not friendly toward programs. As I drove north on January 25, I knew the workshops were at risk.

Bolden is a tall, imposing man with a slight limp from an old basketball injury. He had started his career many years earlier as an officer at Jackson prison, a very tough place. After initial pleasantries, he told me, “I like the art exhibition; I've even gone to the legislature to defend it. But I don't think I like these theater workshops.” I leaned forward: “I'd like to tell you about the theater workshops.” I warmed to my explanation of our working with prisoners’ stories, the improvisation, the respect we bring to everyone at the prisons, our careful, adamant training of our volunteers, the communal themes of the plays in which families and neighborhoods reunite and pull together, the skills gained, the way the workshops helped with prison security.

“What about the gun at Lakeland?” he asked. An actor at the Lakeland Correctional Facility two years earlier had fashioned a gun as a prop without the collusion or knowledge of our team, and a fake gun is of course a potential danger in the prison. The play was canceled. I answered that we had
not known, that now no props are made without our permission, that any questions about props go to prison staff, and that there had been no such incident since that time.

“What about those women who wrote to the prisoners?” Charity, one of our most committed members, a School of Social Work student, had sent postcards to the men in the theater workshop at the Saginaw Correctional Facility during her 1998 summer trip. She signed them with a heart, as she does all her correspondence. Cathy had worked on a documentary about the group’s last play, then wrote a letter to one of the men and talked about personal matters. It wasn’t a love letter. Someone tipped someone off, and officers searched the prisoner rooms and turned the evidence over to the warden. Volunteers are forbidden to correspond with prisoners at the prison where they volunteer, and Warden Burke, a great supporter of our programs, had no choice but to ban the two women from the prison. At the time I wrote to both Warden Burke and Dan Bolden and now repeated what I said then: that we were in the wrong. I told him that our strict training had become stricter and that no such incident had happened since. We learn and we tighten up.

My responses were disarming and acceptable, but he wanted changes: we must send him our scripts for approval, and he needed a mission statement. Knowing that this meant potential censorship and also knowing that if I disagreed, our work in the prisons was over, I assented and promised him the mission statement within a week. We shook hands and parted on friendly terms.

Early the next week, English 319 teams about to start their theater workshops were turned away at the door. Over the next ten days one by one they and PCAP theater teams fell, with a few exceptions. At one facility the special activities director kept things going until finally receiving an order to “cease and desist.” On the other hand, the Florence Crane warden decided that all workshops should be closed down, not only the Sisters Within Theater Troupe, but also our dance workshop, our creative writing workshop, and a debate club that we had helped another University of Michigan campus get started.

I immediately completed the mission statement and sent it off, then phoned Bolden’s office. I was told he would get back to me when he was ready. I phoned again. No response. No communication. I was cut off. Although he and I were both well-paid public servants, he treated me as he would treat a prisoner. I was owed no explanation.
I gradually pieced together what had happened. Sara Falls and Matt Schmitt, two dedicated veteran PCAP members, were working on a play in the Residential Treatment Program Unit at Western Wayne. In the play, a man planning to quit the drug trade agrees to one final street deal; during the deal, he wounds a policeman. Neither the Department of Mental Health counselor nor the officer who sat in had objected to the plot, and Sara and Matt hadn’t seen the problem. The warden for some reason had requested a copy of the scenario, and when she saw it she erupted: corrections officers are referred to as “police” by prisoners, and the wounding of a policeman might be suggestive. It was clearly a mistake on our part. She called at least one other warden and told him we were killing police in our plays. I assume she called Bolden and told him the same. I believe this was his excuse to close us down.19

My students were puzzled, angry, and hurt, and wished to fight back. On February 12, Samarrah Fine wrote,

I just got back from a reading of prisoners’ poetry. It was beautiful, and moving, and real. Just like the first time I saw prisoners’ artwork I was surprised by the talent. I imagine that most of these artists entered prison without realizing the talent inside of them, never having the opportunity to express it. Again I am reminded of the importance of our work, helping people express their inner voice, allowing them an outlet, respect that they are not given in their daily situation. Life inside a prison must be hell, a hell that is too painful to imagine. One of the prisoners explained, in his poem, how it is only through workshops (like the creative writing, art, and theater ones) that he is treated as a human. When I heard these words I had to bite my lip and hold back the tears. My normally calm hands became clenched and the muscles in my back stiffened. If these workshops are the only way that prisoners can feel human, why are they being canceled? Obviously, rehabilitation is not the goal of the correctional system and neither is justice. I am not quite sure what the goal of the system is. Right now it seems like the correctional system is simply a pawn in a complex game of political chess. I hate chess and I hate it even more to know that what seems like a harmless game is hurting real people. It is killing real people.20

On the fourteenth, another student, whose team had actually gotten in once before this all broke and had a great, lively beginning, reported on what happened next:
We drove up to Parnall and went to the front desk. The guard at the desk was an unfamiliar face. It took him a while to make the phone calls to tell them that we were here. For some reason, I had this feeling that we, our group, was going to go through with the workshop. I had confidence that Parnall was going to choose to ignore the memo. Silly, I know. But I was hopeful. Then we got the news. News that really pissed me off. The moment the guard told us that the workshop was cancelled until further notice, my heart sank. I soon felt the frustration and anger that everyone else (in our class) has been experiencing. Last week at our group meeting, when Shira and Colleen’s workshop was officially closed, I couldn’t really understand how they were feeling. Now I do. Sure I’m pissed off that we can’t continue this great work with the men at Parnall, but I also wonder what exactly these men were told. Did the guards tell them that there was a memo going around to many of the prisons that put a hold on all of the theater workshops? For some reason, I doubt they did. Maybe this is unfair, but I imagine that some guards (or anyone) believe that the prisoners do not need to know the truth—they’re only prisoners. My worry is that the men in our workshop were told that we (Zach, Steve, and myself) decided to stop the workshop. They wouldn’t be told that, right? . . . I felt like I was actually making a difference, however small, when Jimmy told us that we were helping the people from staying away from the invisible line. And now that our workshops are all cancelled, I hope to do my best in keeping people across that invisible line. I really don’t understand why we are being held from doing our workshops. How can one person have so much power? Can’t they see that the workshops mean something to us and the prisoners? I guess I’m being naive—there’s so much more that I just don’t know.

On the twentieth, Brian Goodman tried to puzzle it out:

I guess on the bright side, all of these problems really go to show what powerful, important work is being done in these programs. If the prisons are so cautious and people are so vehemently against these programs, then they must have a fairly profound effect. It’s just that where I, and I’m suspecting the rest in this class, would see this effect as very positive, others see it as very negative. I can see the point of trying to control the power a prisoner has in prison. But I think that is being confused with the power a prisoner finds within him or herself. Let me in!
Also on the twentieth, Liz Grubb, writing about her PCAP workshop at Southern Michigan Correctional Facility, talked about the first workshop session after their first play. The men, aware of the threat, had spoken about the need for everyone to be responsible in every way and had spoken about what the workshop meant to them.

They know that there are HIGH STAKES on this workshop, that we could all lose it with the drop of a hat, and they gave Co-Pilot a hard time for getting in trouble, with guards, drugs, “drinking”—we talked about avoiding problems for the sake of the workshop and out of respect for group members. Obviously, it wasn’t Liz, Josh, or I who brought ANY of this up, it was Michael, Potsel, Jones-El, Co-Pilot . . . they set up ground rules of attendance, respect, focus, commitment because they know it’s vital for them and vital for the outside, my dad, etc. It’s workshops like last night that remind me of what I’m doing here, I talk about what this all means to me, to them, but the men told me why they do this—and I will die if this ends, too. We have to fight for this.

Lee Shainis had already written about fighting: “I would still like to know what the true driving force behind the shut down was. I think we should start writing letters to whoever was responsible for the shut down.” In the middle of Liz’s journal writing, I phoned her about the “cease and desist” at the one prison.

It wasn’t a surprise to me at all. But I’m racking my brain to think of what we can DO now, we aren’t powerless, we have to be creative and organize and pull together now ESPECIALLY. We need letters and testimonies from prisoners, their families, our friends, those who have seen the work, those who have heard it, people who don’t want to release more damaged human beings out onto the streets, people who want to hear from the millions behind bars. It has to be massive, creative, complete. Not because we have built much of our lives on this work, but because a very vital and sacred part of these men and women’s lives is being violated, and because the rest of the world should be able to communicate with All people.

I had to scramble. I transferred prison teams to juvenile facilities. I transformed theater workshops into poetry workshops. I asked Phil Klintworth if he would like a poetry workshop, then sent Shawn Durrett and
Melissa Spengler, who had been assigned to Huron Valley Men’s, to Southern Michigan Correctional Facility. This was the beginning of the Poet’s Corner, which I would join in 2001. At another facility, we shifted to poetry, but at the insistence of the prisoners we placed those wishing to do theater in the next room. They were actually able to perform in April. Three prisoners didn't read, or ignored, Bolden's directive, and so we continued. I had received no communication from Bolden or anyone else, and so it wasn't up to me to tell the staff what to do.

In the meantime, total silence. I had nightmares. In one, a solid heavy black blob grew larger and larger until it obscured everything: I was looking at the boot from the butterfly's point of view. Over the years I had achieved nearly complete autonomy in my academic life; I was respected, had been awarded, could teach the courses I wished. Now, I realized, I had very little autonomy: I could be disregarded or cut off at any moment. I recalled how hurt and permanently affected I had been the two times my generally very loving father had responded to my behavior with the silent treatment. Dan Bolden was tapping that hurt and tapping it more deeply, because what PCAP had created had become beautiful to so many people.

And I was figuring out what to do. I knew how to organize in the way Lee, Liz, and others were advocating—and as a last resort would have done so—but I also knew that such an effort would alienate not only Bolden, but others in the system, and would most likely fail. I had waited nearly a month to hear from him, so on February 19, Laurie Hess, Jesse Jannetta, and I drove to Lansing to share our situation with state senator Alma Wheeler Smith and her administrative assistant Simone Strong. I also met with Cynthia Wilbanks, University of Michigan vice president for government relations. Smith and Wilbanks conferred, then on February 23 sent Bolden memos requesting a meeting. That day he wrote me a letter reinstating the workshops. Regional prison administrators were to review and approve the plays before they could be performed. And performances and readings were forbidden to “use controversial topics. This includes those that may incite prisoners that could lead to their acting out, topics which are immoral, sexually explicit, exploit women, or have overt racial tones.” While “controversial topics” was open to interpretation and could lead to censorship, we clearly knew better than to “incite” prisoners and of course had no interest in plays that were exploitative or racist or that advocated violence.

Our regional prison administrator, Denise Quarles, in a March 12 letter asked us to submit the scenario to a prison staff person, who would
ensure “that the content of the script is appropriate for a prisoner audience.” It would then come through the warden to her, and she would make the final decision. The first play we submitted, later that month, *Choices in Life,* came from a PCAP team at the Ryan Correctional Facility. The plot included three separate endings—in two a man is wounded and in the other killed. The result in the first was incarceration, in the second his accomplice checked into drug rehabilitation, and in the third, where the man dies, community members met to seek solutions to community violence. It was against violence. RPA Quarles told us to eliminate the three violent scenes. I wrote an elaborate letter describing the antiviolence purpose and requested that she revise her decision. A brief return memo indicated she had the backing of Bolden and would not reconsider. The team was discouraged and decided not to revise, although I pointed out that they could take the violence offstage but refer to it and still present the three outcomes. As it turned out on later occasions, RPA Quarles accepted such revisions, and no other play was stopped. By June 8, seven workshops had submitted scenarios that had been approved, and the plays had been performed. We were back in business and the plays were as honest as ever.

In 1998 we had added a dance workshop at the Florence Crane Women's Facility, and the women had performed twice, on April 28 (no title) and on September 6 (*Ineffable Women*). Under the guidance of School of Dance student and then BFA graduate Amy Martin and her partners Emily Konzen and Karen Goodyke, the women improvised and choreographed original pieces and utilized the Evergreen Gymnasium floor and stage spaces for their performances. It was as beautiful and important as anything we have ever done. Bolden's February 23 letter to me announced, “Dance Workshops—After review of this program, we have decided to discontinue it completely.”

Again we gathered forces. Amy wrote to Bolden, explaining the workshop and telling him that “it is done tastefully, with no physical contact, and no sexual connotations.” Judy Rice, assistant professor and director of ballet at the School of Dance, also wrote, praising Amy as “consistent, responsible, reliable, and trustworthy . . . one of the top students in her class . . . so competent that I often asked her to substitute teach for me.” Bolden's administrative assistant Julie Southwick had informed me in a phone conversation that his “decision was based on the assumption and understandable fear that dance would include physical contact of the kind that is not permitted in the prisons.” In my cover letter to Bolden, I explained
that Amy’s work did not involve that kind of contact, told him Assistant Deputy Warden Dan Hawkins, who had attended rehearsals, was willing to characterize the workshop for him, and asked to continue the dance workshops with “a guarantee that the dances will not include physical contact of the kind forbidden by Department regulations, understanding that if we do not follow the guarantee the workshops will be ended.”

The response from Bolden, through Julie Southwick, did not engage with our letters. She wrote that Bolden would allow us to teach a dance theory class: “however, the dance workshops, as explained in your letter of March 23, 1999, is [sic] not authorized by Deputy Director Bolden.” In other words, “I told you no!”

I thought about this. Since we had guaranteed no touch and were still denied, I took the liberty of assuming the issue wasn’t touch. So why would dance be denied and art, poetry, and theater allowed? We had already had dance workshops in the boys’ and girls’ juvenile facilities. In Florida Leslie Neal was in the early stages of developing a dance program in the prisons that would become fully supported. What troubled someone like Bolden? Any of the arts can appear dangerous to someone intent on oppressing growth and the human spirit. So why dance in particular?

It may be what the antagonist sees. Writers and artists sit quietly at tables, and when they stand and share their work, they seldom engage in movement. Theater involves movement, and mostly more than one person before an audience at any moment, and because of theater we had been closed down and now were under the threat of censure. Prison dancers move through space in a place of human confinement. Because dancers usually do not speak, the body is accented, the body evokes sensuality, and the accompanying music is often emotional. And more than the other arts, dance reminds warders of the humanity of those they keep. Many, perhaps most, warders are not afraid of that humanity and support its expression and growth. Others are afraid. Or it may be they understand that in order to circumscribe and confine human beings, they need to suppress all that might touch and move them.

Another 319 student had been taking a course on Primo Levi from my colleague Ralph Williams. She had learned “how when every liberty is taken away the need to feel human is overwhelming. I think these drama workshops allow prisoners, juveniles and students to regain their humanity. Auschwitz was a very extreme form of imprisonment in which innocent people were denied basic human rights. But I think some of the same issues might come into mind when someone lives in prison.”
Sometime in 1991, Sharleen Wabindato walks into the TV Production Room, where the Sisters Within Theater Troupe rehearses. She has long straight dark hair, sharp alert glowering features, personal force. She is a lifer in her fourteenth year in prison. She gives only what she wishes to give. She watches. She decides what she will trust, and she trusts very little. But she is there. But that, she tells us, is all. We’ll get no risks from her, nothing of what is buried within. I ask if she’ll do a brief improvisation with one other person whom she can choose, an improvisation in which she makes exactly the same point. Sitting near the door, she agrees, and remains in her chair as Dora does the scene with her. She makes her point fiercely, closed, sure. And we thank her. She has acted, and on her terms. She has her reasons and we trust that, trust that she is there.

In *Junkie* Sharleen has entered fully into the role of a whimsical light-headed addict. Worried about her lines, she has me sit in the front row so she can see me and be encouraged. When we begin to work on *Inside and Personal*, she says, “We have to dance.” And she doesn’t take a role. She dances. Prison overcrowding has eliminated our recreation room performance space, but on May 21, 1994, on a beautiful warm evening, we perform outside on a patio that Mary Glover, no longer in the troupe, rose early in the morning to sweep out for us. Drusila Blackman, Jackie Wilson, and others act out Drusila’s story of a prisoner with AIDS. Dru alone on stage announces that her baby has died, another statistic in the onslaught of AIDS. The music comes up, and Shar and Sunny Nienhuis dance to “Gone Too Soon,” moving apart and together, something in the evening light that haunts us forever with its beauty and haunts everyone to whom I ever show the video. Shar dances in every play thereafter and becomes one of our most powerful, risk-taking, vital actors. After dance is forbidden, we perform *Open Arms*, a play in which many of the women risk stories about themselves and their children. Shar joins Susie Boyd, Suzie Dewitt, Kalah Gunn, and Sunny Nienhuis in shaping a series of shifting sculptures as Shree Murrell Ford sings the title song to open the play. It is as moving as anything we have done.

In the workshops we seek what is missing, we undertake the task of collaborative creation and find each other, we resist the walls built into us and built between us. We are sloppy and chaotic and contentious and sometimes superficial and unconnected and slow. We become vulnerable and we blossom. We dance. It is what we have come to do, and we will do it.