

Creators of Justice Awards 2020

ESSAY

Honorable Mention

Caitlin Furio (USA: NY): *Loving While White*

Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto (Nigeria): *Gifts are Memories*

Ana Cordeiro (Brazil): *Citizen*

Christina Hoag (New Zealand): *Moments: Bonding with Lifers*

LOVING WHILE WHITE

By Caitlin Furio

I was two years into my relationship with the love of my life and I couldn't stand the sight of him. We hadn't seen each other for months. Shortly after our first anniversary I took a temporary job with a conservation agency in Belize, finally acting on my long-time dream of living abroad. To our mutual surprise, we found that what began as "casual dating" was too serious to cut and run. We agreed to try long distance. Before I finished processing what that meant, eight months had passed and we were reuniting in Guatemala to travel together.

Every day of my Central American immersion was a new challenge to my U.S. middle-class white girl worldview. I was fresh out of the Belizean rainforest, where I spent six months trudging behind Mayan rangers with a GPS unit dangling lamely at my waist. I was starting to recognize my privilege and the white saviorism veiled as "expertise" that brought me there. And then he appeared in the Guatemala City airport with high-tech hiking pants, a man bun, and god-awful white Nike slip-on shower sandals he bought in a moment of panic in the Philadelphia airport.

I'd missed him acutely the entire time we were apart but I was immediately irritated by his presence. He wanted to be as close to me as possible at all times, to kiss my neck or whisper inside jokes in my ear. I wanted to scorn him for his bourgeoisie childhood, for his fear of communal showers and his overpriced airport sandals and the unacknowledged assumption that he couldn't get shower shoes in Guatemala. Looking back, it's not surprising that we only made it a few days traveling together before we had one of our Worst Fights Ever.

I was showering one morning when I caught sight of something on the wall in front of me: a ball of chestnut colored human hair, carefully twirled into a piece of grotesque wall art. I recognized his work. When we met, he was a clean-shaven business man, but within months he tossed off the shackles of the corporate world and grew out his hair and beard. By the time we reunited in Guatemala he had thick shoulder-length hair that he had no idea how to handle. He pulled out strands every time he shampooed and then gathered it all together and stuck it to the wall.

It was weird and disgusting and I cracked. I addressed him with such spite and hatred in my voice that I'm surprised he didn't shrivel away on the spot. The words flowed out of my mouth before I heard them, unreasonable and petty and mean. He was wounded. I thought about how he'd traveled down here to join me on a trip that was my dream, not his. It somehow made me even angrier.

A few days later I snapped back to reality as we hitchhiked up the side of a volcano on our way to a remote hot spring. Sitting in the bed of a local man's pickup truck, I watched his long hair whipping around his face in the wind and my heart overflowed with affection for him. This man was raised frequenting no-less-than-4-star-hotels and was willing to help me hail a truck despite barely sharing a language with the driver. I knew he felt the wild, cathartic joy of this moment in the same way I did.

Our relationship repaired quickly as I reacclimated to being with him. We finished traveling, returned to the States, and moved to Brooklyn. He got an undercut and I dyed my pixie cut blonde. We grew more self-aware and progressive together.

With time (and therapy), I began to unpack the hang-ups that caused the hairball fight. I came to see how my parents' messy divorce impacted my ability to trust love; how my repressed queerness had twisted my relationship to sex; how my childhood insecurities played out in our interactions. With each breakthrough I was flooded with appreciation for how strong and beautiful our relationship had become.

And yet, a dissonance remained. Two years after that fight in Guatemala, I was still experiencing sudden unprompted bouts of hatred towards him that made me want to run away to the woods and learn to forage wild mushrooms.

And then, a few months after our fourth anniversary, I attended a two-day antiracist training with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. It was not going to be my first time thinking critically about race. I'd been obsessed with the topic since I became a gentrifier, reading and consuming nothing but antiracist thinkers. I had started to recognize and interrupt some of my own racist thoughts and impulses, to rewrite the American history in my mind as a story of theft, rape, and murder. I was prepared for the discomfort and unresolved questions the training would raise for me.

I was not, however, prepared for one particular new concept: internalized racial oppression. I listened with horror and dread as the trainers explained the psychological impacts of *internalized racial inferiority*, how being raised to believe they are inferior based on their race leads people of color to develop patterns of self-defeating thoughts and behaviors. And then, before I could brace myself, we moved on to the psychological impacts of *internalized racial superiority*. The traits we white people have developed over generations as a result of being socialized to believe we are superior based on our race.

The list of thought patterns that accompany internalized racial superiority felt like a personal attack, like my therapist coming out on stage and calmly reading her notes from my case file. Guilt. Perfectionism. Anxiety. Feelings of superiority. Dissociation. Depression. Self-hatred. Black and white thinking. Shame. Individualism.

At first, I recoiled with shock. But as we discussed further I started to connect the dots. American history, our political and social realities, made this list of white pathologies all but unavoidable.

It starts with the obvious and oft-critiqued contradiction between America's stated ideals ("all men are created equal") and the slavery, genocide, and theft that built this country. To justify this morally, White American Culture has performed all kinds of internal backflips and emotional contortions. We defend the myths of the American Dream and the meritocracy to this end, to be able to say that we earned what we have, that we worked hard and thus deserve our privilege. We distance ourselves from the broader culture of racial oppression: well I'm not racist, or I'm from the north, or my family never owned slaves, or I have black friends, or I was born poor/disabled/Jewish/queer/female and so I am not the problem. The result is that now, 400 hundred years after we started these tortured self-justifications, we idolize the individual and despise any affiliation with our group identity, our whiteness.

I was raised in a good, kind liberal household that taught me of the great human rights abuses of the USA. I was taught to identify as a good person *and* to know that white supremacy was evil and oppressive. I was born to be an individual above and exempt from whiteness.

In fact, there was nothing more important to me than my individuality. What was I otherwise – Taylor Swift and the KKK and Panera Bread? No! I was Caitlin. I had the uniquely white privilege of being defined by my individual personality rather than my racial group identity.

My partner had always threatened this in me. My ability to be self-sufficient and independent, to thrive on my own merit, was endangered by a close partnership. He wanted to share references and traditions and *culture*, but I was an individual whose self could not be defined by my cultural context.

Of course he enraged me in Central America. I had just spent eight months as the ultimate individual, as the odd one out in most spaces. I was thriving in the world as an independent young woman. Who was he to come by with his inside jokes and affection, with his blatant whiteness, with his socialized superiority and arrogance? He was reflecting my privilege back at me, and I was ashamed of it. I was ashamed of myself. The shock of intense self-loathing paired with the threat he posed to my individuality was too much for me to bear.

But in reality, he had never once tried to claim me as his. He'd always seen my individualism as the force it was inside me and accommodated me accordingly. He let me take up as much space as I needed, sending me off to Belize with a smile and a wave. All he asked for in return was my partnership and my tolerance of his own pathologies. We were just a pair of white kids struggling to see through our distorted socialization to appreciate each other as whole human beings.

All along, the cause of my cognitive dissonance around our relationship had been my whiteness. And somehow, with the patience and generosity of an angel, he'd been able to hold on to me through four years of identity crisis.

I left the training that day on cloud nine, considering how 48 hours before I had hated myself, my whiteness, my complicity. And now, a few hours further into my anti-racist journey, I was freed to feel human for the first time ever, to feel connected to my community and my family and my partner in a way that once threatened me. I had broken through the invisible barrier of my whiteness to see myself and my relationship clearly for the first time.

I was four years into my relationship with the love of my life, and I was in love.

Caitlin Furio is a writer, fundraiser, and community organizer living in Brooklyn, NY. Her work currently focuses on supporting Black-led movements for police and prison abolition.

GIFTS ARE MEMORIES

By Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto

Memories are perhaps the best gifts of all- Gloria Gaither

I hold a picture in my hand. I am looking at me, my sister and my mother. In it, I held a teddy: white with black dots all over. The teddy was a gift from a German woman. My sister sat on my mother's right thigh; I was on the left. My mother sat on the big television settled at a corner in our apartment, holding us well so that the picture would look perfect. We were all smiling, except the teddy. It was not supposed to anyway. I held the teddy so dearly because it was my favourite. The picture was taken by my father before we left for a WWF (World Wrestling Federation) show that was scheduled in Berlin. I remember I bathed, slept, ate and did everything with the teddy. I take a long look at the teddy— another memory comes floating and I smile. I'm not smiling because it was my favourite teddy. I'm smiling because of the event that took place before it was given to me. I met the German woman who gifted it to me on a beach. She became a family friend after she caught and stopped me from pouring sand on her daughter's hair. Her daughter thereafter turned my closest playmate. I smile again; this time, for the childhood I have left

behind. I tuck the picture back into my family's album and glance at a corner on my writing desk, the teddy sits there— old and tired.

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Gifts are memories. They remind you of certain things you have forgotten; only if you are good at keeping them.

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A palm-sized battery and power operated Cassio television sits on my desk. I allow it there because I treasure it. It was a gift from my father before he died. I wanted to be an inventor of great things like Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein and others, so I could be studied in classrooms. I was in primary five when I wanted to invent a wristwatch one could use as a television. I kept and nurtured this idea until I saw in a movie, where a thief was monitored with a palm-sized device. This made me furious because I imagined if someone could invent something smaller than a television, then surely a wrist-watch device would have been invented already. I pressured my father into buying me a palm-sized device on those of his trips to Germany. He promised to get me one. When he returned six months later and gifted me a Cassio product, my dream of becoming an inventor got shattered. It became evident that my idea had already been invented. Each time I look at the Cassio device, I'm not only reminded of my shattered dream, I'm reminded of my dead father I miss every single day. I live with this memory because I want to be drawn closer to everything I know and have shared with him. I want to be drawn to him in my dreams, I want to be reminded of his stories and laughter and jokes.

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Gift are memories. They can be sad sometimes, but what we don't know about sad memories is that they make us stronger. Stronger to have better reasons to live on. They give us hope and it is in this milieu, that I agree that it's part of who we are as humans.

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There's a box in my wardrobe, I kept a necklace in it. Gold coloured with a small sculptured wood in the shape of a hexagon, as its pendant. It was given to me by Chiamaka after the New Year day. Chiamaka was not my girlfriend, though at the back of our minds, we sort of agreed we were together. We were both freshers in a university in the east of Nigeria. We sat together during lectures, ate together at the canteen and studied together as well. Most of our course mates expressed the certainty of us ending up together. My house was not far from the university; Chiamaka often came over so we could study together. On one of such days, a Saturday afternoon, my mother walked into my room, right at that moment my lips were on Chiamaka's. The kiss was an expression for our shared closeness, for the things we were yet to understand about ourselves, for the feelings I had haboured and couldn't express. That day was the last time she came over because she was afraid of my mother. The following day, my mother called me into her room and chastised that take my books seriously than girls.

Each time I look at the necklace, I'm reminded of Chiamaka's smiles because they were beautiful as clean spring.

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Gifts are memories; the happy ones, therapeutic in certain forms, are vivid and heart- warming.

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CITIZEN

By Ana Paula Coredeiro

alter. of citizen, for cite + -ien, -ian

1a. An inhabitant of a city or town;

esp: one that is entitled to the civic rights and privileges of a freeman.

I had been "visiting" with New York City for sixteen months when the events of September 11th, 2001 caught me, much as a vast net catches everything inside. By then, I had just achieved enough fluency in English to make friends and figure my way around. The next evening, I rode my bike to Ground Zero alongside my then ex-husband-to-be. We stood on the smoldering ruins and took B&W photographs. I will never forget the smell. As stupefied as anybody, I didn't realize that night how I wouldn't be able to think of myself as a visitor anymore, how from that point on I would be turning into part of the city, just as the city was turning into part of me. I had, in fact, so little clue as to what a hold this place had on me that a year later I packed up and moved back to the Brazilian coastal city I come from, feeling exhausted by the hopelessness of the immigration channels and running away from a miserable marriage. I lasted just under a year; came back, left again for a few months, and —once again—came back.

I have been here now for sixteen years. I hardly ever set foot outside beyond this island; living the life of the undocumented means I don't usually go places. I didn't plan on any of this. When I last returned from Brazil in 2004, besides being in love with the city I was also in love with a man. I knew we were not ready for marriage, but just getting to know each other was not an option under a tourist visa. It was either marry or separate. Sure enough, once again I couldn't stand the growing hypocrisy of a commitment held together mainly by the promise of a green card. I suppose I should have known better.

The other thing I wasn't fully aware of was how, in the post-9/11 world, there would be no other viable option to stay legally. In the process of figuring this out I was harassed for hours behind closed doors by Customs and Borders Patrol, a rude awakening to the vulnerability of coming back under a tourist visa. Later, when it became necessary to leave my fiancé, my life here was already too precious to give up. And yet, had I known from the beginning that the price would be separation from my family for years on end, I would have chosen to go back to Brazil for good, probably to seek solace in English literature.

During my first trip back, feeling homesick for New York and disoriented in my actual hometown, I took comfort in reading books written in my brand-new second language. The most impressive novel to me was Dickens' *A*

Tale of Two Cities, set during the French Revolution. Its famous opening lines: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period (...)"

In the present period, as I consider the word "citizen," I feel as powerless as Dickens' protagonist, Charles Darnay, an aristocrat who returns to France during the Reign of Terror, is held by uber-patriots and offered "escort to Paris"—which is to say, he was arrested. When the functionary says, "Emigrant, I am going to send you to Paris, under an escort," Darnay replies, "Citizen, I desire nothing more than going to Paris, but I could dispense with the escort."

In February 1794, Robespierre said, "Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice (...) it is less a principle in itself, than a consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing needs of the patrie [homeland, fatherland]." Or, as Dickens had it, "the period was so far like the present period." Indeed, as in *A Tale of Two Cities*, when fortune intervened to prevent Charles' head from being chopped off, I feel as if my own head has also been the recipient of extraordinary protection: as recently as a year before the rise of Donald Trump, I lay unconscious beside my bicycle on an un-

derlit street of Northern Manhattan, suffering a concussion of which I have no memory whatsoever. I had no I.D. on me. It had been a very long day and I was five minutes from home. Next thing I knew I was coming back to my (blurred) senses in the emergency room. When it was established, several days later, that the only damage I suffered was a 2-inch- long scar on my scalp, I was sent home without anyone setting eyes on a document.

As we say in Brazil, "se tivessem me sacudido de cabeça prá baixo não caia um centavo": should they have shaken me upside down, not a penny would have fallen out. Nonetheless, all my interactions with both the hospital staff and NYPD were positive experiences. People believed what I said and did everything they could to help me. The State of New York absorbed the main bill, and the hospital enrolled me in its charity fund for all else.

Often friends tell me that I am like a character out of a novel. Sometimes a funny one, I would say. Like the day a plastic bag got caught inside the gear shaft of my bicycle. By the time I managed to extricate it I had grime up to my elbows. A homeless man who had been observing me from a nearby bench came closer and asked where I was from. Informed of my Brazilitude, the man promptly said, "I am American, you know, we could get married."

I use this story to humor my mother, reminding her that this undocumented status of mine is not for lack of eligible bridegrooms; although, as she is quick to point out, getting married is the easiest part. That alone puts a high bar on romance. Fine by me. Being an artist keeps me busy, and being fortunate keeps me whole. For this year, while marriage is the only viable way for a person such as myself—a New-Yorker-born-abroad—to change status and legitimately belong, all the uber-patriots will get from me is: "Citizen, I desire nothing more than going to Paris, though I could dispense with the escort."

Ana Paula Cordeiro makes books by hand, photographs with film, prints from lead type, and writes either sparingly or profusely on unbound folios, which she then proceeds to bind into volumes. In 2018 she co-organized the multi-media installation [Introspective Collective](#), in 2019 she contributed a chapter to a book about bookmaking called [Bookforms](#), and in 2020 she was awarded a grant from the [Pollock-Krasner Foundation](#). Originally from Brazil, she lives in Inwood (Manhattan) and does all her work at [The Center for Book Arts](#) communal shop. Her artist books are collected privately and institutionally.

MOMENTS: BONDING WITH LIFERS

By Christina Hoag

The students start lining up at the fence when they see me walking down to the block of classrooms that lies just outside the prison yard. They have to be on a list to leave the maximum-security cellblocks and yard, where they're confined day in and day out, and then patted down by an officer. Once they're through the gate, they rush to the classroom for my writer's workshop class. The first thing they do is shake my hand. They don't get a lot of physical contact with people.

They are lifers at California State Prison-Los Angeles County. Most are LWOPs, sentenced for murder to life without possibility of parole. As many of the lifers note, there's a "P" missing in the LWOP acronym, the P of possibility. Others are sentenced to such heavy time--fifty, sixty, seventy years--that it's equivalent to LWOP. It's not officially the death penalty but it has the same outcome. They will die in prison.

The men call their fate simply "life without," or more wryly, "toe-tag parole," referring to the practice in morgues of placing identification tags on the big toes of cadavers.

"The only way I'm leaving here is in a box," one man says in a matter-of-fact tone.

They always thank me for making the ninety-mile trek from Los Angeles into Southern California's wind-whipped high desert. As I drive up the freeway, the housing tracts and big-box stores give way to a

jagged, dun-colored landscape of rocks and mountains. It seems to symbolize the harsh and barren isolation in which prisoners live.

For the majority of them, I am one of few people from the outside they see regularly other than prison staff. Most men have been incarcerated since adolescence or young adulthood, the high-risk age for committing crimes. The criminal justice system offers little redemption for the terrible mistakes of youth. Many, if not most, of the guys have matured into adulthood in prison but they will have no second chance to demonstrate their maturity to anyone but themselves.

Most have little in the way of contact with their families, some none at all. Their perpetual sentences mean loved ones gradually turn two-dimensional, frozen into the folds of fading memory and old photos. Families find keeping in touch over decades a burden. Collect phone calls and care packages are expensive. The remote location of prisons makes visits few and far between. Writing old-fashioned letters, a lifeline for prisoners, are an extra chore. Some families simply cut off contact out of shame of their incarcerated relative.

In this warehouse of shipwrecked souls, all I can do is encourage the men to write. Writing offers them a chance to build self-esteem and a sense of achievement, to make lives crashed by disastrous choices worthy, to redefine their existence as men not inmate numbers. It provides an outlet for introspection and reflection on how they ended up surrounded by coils of razor wire, and a release of the shame and guilt they carry. I remind them they need only a pencil and a piece of paper to escape the fences and the prison of judgment, both their own and society's. They drink the words. Motivation is a rare commodity in this place of small hope and purposeless existence.

After a year, I've bonded with the class. Before the lesson begins, we chitchat about what we've all been doing. I'm always struck how they have made their lives in prison. It's their home. One guy shows me a gap in his mouth where he had a tooth out. Another tells me he's become a grandfather. I ask about a back problem, progress on an appeal. They relish the interest in their lives. Then one man sticks his hand up and asks what I have learned from "a bunch of convicts." The class is quiet, waiting to hear my answer. Their eyes trained on me, I grope for something eloquent to say. I don't want to say anything trite or something that would hurt their feelings, then much to my relief, I find the words.

Life is not about the accomplishments and material success that we so fervently chase. It's about slivers of interaction with others that reveal we share the same precarious journey underneath the superficial characteristics of gender, race, background and circumstance. It's about the impact that we can make on others' lives through connection. There is no price to be placed on uplifting one another by offering hope, friendship, compassion even in fleeting snatches.

Moments are all we have in the prison. A litany of picayune, infantilizing rules circumscribes time and movement so tightly that personal exchanges are necessarily compressed. Precisely because of the limitations, they are all the more cherished. A mutual laugh or a flash of a smile, the arch of an eyebrow or an eye-roll, any of which may last merely a split-second, becomes a tiny treasure of connection.

There are also monumental moments where the truth that each of us is an interwoven thread in this tapestry called the human condition is laid bare.

After class one day, one of the men pulls me aside in the hallway. In a low rumbling drawl, he tells me he's afraid I'll think badly of him when I read his writing about his past. I am so moved that he's worried about my approval, I feel a pang in my chest. I realize that even though he has done awful things, he wants to be seen as more than the worst deed he's ever done. We all want approval from others, to be seen in a clement light, to not be judged, him no less than me.

Another day before class, I'm chatting to a sculptor in the art room, a couple doors down from my classroom. Full of paintings, drawings and sculptures, the art room is an oasis of color in the prison, which is full of drab institutional greys and beiges. Except for the artists' uniform clothing – prison blue pants and shirts, it feels like it could be an art room in any school. For some reason, I mention that my apartment was burglarized years ago when I was a college student. To my surprise, the sculptor slaps his palm to his

heart. “That really hurts me right here. I used to break into houses when I was a kid. I’m really sorry that happened to you.”

Another artist is sitting nearby. “Dude, you’re exercising empathy,” he informs him.

The sculptor’s face shines like a baby fresh out of a bath. “Yeah, man, I’m exercising empathy!”

I can’t help but laugh at his sheer delight at being able to show empathy, something that he’s had to learn through classes in prison. It is a moment of success for him.

Writers use words to express our deepest selves, and I share many moving moments with the men when I am alone with their pages, handwritten in pen or pencil. A man soon to be paroled after nearly three decades of incarceration writes of his fear of foundering in the outside world. Incarcerated since the age of nineteen, he knows little about navigating life beyond the razor wire. The outside world seems big, fast-paced and full of things he’s never done before, from holding a baby to holding a job. He’s especially anxious about relating to women after living in a hypermasculine world for decades. Who has lived a life free of failure or the fear of being unable to find love? We’ve all been there.

I unfold another sheaf of papers. One of the men has decided to confront the painful legacy of a boyhood sexual assault he endured more than thirty years ago. Printed at the top of the page, he writes, “Please don’t tell anyone about this.” I choke up. I’m honored that he has trusted me to reveal this secret to and proud of his courage. We all keep painful secrets.

As a class, we share many moments. The men read aloud essays about their long-ago lives. Some relate the circumstances that steered them into this bastion of banishment. Their stories have a lot of common threads, obstacles from early ages that would have made it hard for them not to land in prison. Many grew up without fathers, some never even met them. One was abandoned as a newborn in a hospital. Another was raised by a crack-addicted mother. One was a runaway living on the streets at age twelve, but he writes of a fond memory, of when he was a little boy, riding in a car with his father pumping the brakes in time to James Brown on the radio. He smiles as he reads his piece and we all feel happy with him. A Vietnam combat veteran relates how he would find his dad, a violent alcoholic, at the curb and call his Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor in futile attempts to save him from himself. “I don’t know why I loved my father, but I did,” he wrote.

“All children desperately want to love their parents even when they don’t love us back,” I tell the class. Heads nod. We all carry that innocent desire within us forever.

I am beckoned outside one day by one of the men. His eyes glisten, and I wonder what’s coming. “I know I’ve said that I’m innocent, but I decided I have to tell the truth,” he says quietly. “I killed my wife. I just wanted you to know.”

His sudden confession takes me aback, although I’m not surprised. I’ve never really believed his story. Still, what on earth do you say to someone who confesses to murdering a wife with whom he had a baby? I certainly can’t condone the act, nor lying about it for more than thirty years, but then the answer comes to me. I thank him for trusting me enough to tell me, for his bravery in voicing the truth. Reassured, he thanks me for accepting him. Everyone has done things they’re ashamed of, has told lies in an effort to avoid blame or generate sympathy. We share a moment of acknowledgment in the frailty and imperfection of being human.

As I drive home after the class, I am always overwhelmed with the sense of “there but for the grace of God go I,” of the total random nature of the accident of birth that sets the foundation for our personal choices and our life outcomes. What have I learned from a bunch of convicts? That no matter who we are all human beings.

Christina Hoag, a former journalist and Latin America foreign correspondent, is the author of novels “Girl on the Brink,” and “Skin of Tattoos”, and co-authored “Peace in the Hood: Working with Gang Members to End the Violence.” Her short stories and essays have been widely published in literary reviews. For more information, see www.christinahoag.com.