

Prisoner Express

Summer 2015

Greetings and welcome to the Summer 15 edition of Prisoner Express [PE]. Our mission is to provide you with information, education and opportunities for creative self-expression. In life, one of the only certainties is that everything is changing. Our hope is that the mental stimulus we supply not only lets you know that folks care about your well being, but also that the experience gained by participating in our programs helps you develop improved communication and coping skills. Every six months we publish this newsletter. In it we review and update you on some of our recent past programming as well as offer a listing of opportunities you may wish to join this cycle. At the end of the newsletter there is a sign up sheet, and you'll see at a glance the programs you can join this cycle. Many new people join each cycle and I use the newsletter to help orient you to the overall PE program. This program has evolved over the years based on many factors such as availability of funds and volunteers, and what we did a year ago might not be the same as what we offer now. Many of you hear about this program from friends, family or resource guides, and I can tell from your letters that what we do might not actually match up with what you think we do. By reading this newsletter, no matter if you are a new participant or a long time member, we will all be on the same page on what PE is up to this cycle.

We get so much mail, and it is impossible due to time and expense to answer individuals to let them know we heard from them. The newsletter, which is created every 6 months, is what we send in response to any new inquiry for joining our programs. If you wrote me last week you would think, wow they answer fast, and if you wrote 5 months ago you are probably wondering who we are and why we are sending this to you. Time can be fickle. Either way sometime in the last 6 months you or someone on your behalf wrote to PE asking for something, and now we are finally responding. Most all of our correspondence is done by bulk mail using the USPS. They have a much lower postage rate when we use the bulk rate, but it specifies that we send at least 200 identical pieces in the mail to get that rate. Please note that when you sign up for one of our programs we will wait until we have a couple of hundred signups and then we mail the program out. It is a good idea to send in your requests for joining sooner than later. If you send in a request to join a program and the bulk mailing has already been sent out then you will probably miss that program this cycle. It all boils down to us being as efficient as possible so the funds I can raise are adequate to keep the programming going. As the number of folks participating increases the amount we have to spend keeps being divided smaller and smaller. I don't want to turn anyone down and am constantly trying to create more effective, high quality, low cost programs.

My name is Gary and I began the PE program about 12 years ago. It has evolved from responding to one man's letter to a much larger entity that has sent mailings to over 14,000 prisoners.

Currently there are 3000 active participants around the country. To be active we must have heard from you within the last 6 months. At first we were a free book program, but soon had over 1000 people on our book mailing wait list. I could not come close to raising the funds for the postage costs of mailing the books. We started developing writing, art and other educational programs. We could stretch our \$'s a lot further and serve more people that way. We still have the book-mailing component as well, but it has changed. Later in the newsletter I will describe in a little more detail each new or ongoing program. Read the descriptions carefully and sign up for the programs you wish to join. Keep in mind that every mailing has a cost to us for postage and photocopying so only join the programs you will do. The more selective you can be, the more we can apply our resources to each program. My role at PE is to think of interesting programs and to find volunteers to help create them. I supervise folks entering all the data and creating all the mailings. I also have the responsibility of raising the funds that lets us keep going. It is the hardest part of the project. If any of you know any benefactors who can help, please point them in our direction.

PE is a project of the Durland Alternatives Library, where I work. As a library we are able to send lessons and books into many of the prisons in the US. I appreciate that privilege and utilize it to provide you with some stimulating material and also to let you know that you are not forgotten and that we at the library recognize your humanity and want to help you continue to develop and nurture your inner and outer lives. As there are many ways to grow, we try to offer a wide variety of programs hoping at least a few will catch your fancy.

The library is located on the campus of Cornell University and we manage the program with the help of students and community volunteers. It is amazing how much people are willing to do to help keep this program going. While the volunteer and work crew at the library is always changing, the right person and resources seem to show up as needed to allow us to continue to operate. I include all of you in the "right people showing up" by your participation in this project.

So many of you write and share your stories and thoughts with me. As I mentioned I am unable to reply to you as individuals so I use the newsletter to share a few thoughts about myself and my life. As longtime readers know I am a serious gardener. I have huge gardens; mostly focused on growing the vegetables my family will eat throughout the year. I freeze, dry, and root cellar most of what I grow. As I write this in early June I am immersed in the growing season. I have much of the gardens planted already, though I still have much to plant. I garden both at my home in town, and on some remote country land where I lived for 25 years prior to moving in to town. I have just started harvesting lettuce and all sorts of greens for cooking. I can be quite content puttering around the gardens for days at a time. A partial list of what I have planted include potatoes,

leeks, onions, garlic, shallots, kale, collards, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, basil, parsley, chard, spinach, tomatoes, peppers, beans, carrots, beets, turnips and rutabagas. Rutabagas and shallots are new to me. I always try to find new plants to try. I also have a variety of Asian greens planted, bok choy, senposai, yakima savoy, (new to me as well) Chinese cabbage, etc.

I am sure I am leaving out bunches of things but you get the idea of how enthusiastic I am. If I could figure out how, I'd like to make my living growing plants.

When I am not gardening I take on the responsibility of family. I have 3 children, one daughter in her 20's living in Hawaii, and 2 teenagers at home. They are a handful and parenting is a tremendous challenge. I had very poor role modeling from my parents [mom died when I was 3, and dad couldn't care less about us children] so I am never quite sure what normal should look like in a family. I do what I can and we get by. I enjoy cooking, especially when I can run out to the garden and gather food right before a meal. The kids are looking forward to school finishing and summer vacation starting. This summer we hope to go to an area of NY called Thousand Islands to camp for a week. I also hope to go to NYC with my 13-year-old son and show him the sights. I am fortunate to have a great job in the library that lets me have fun

with all of you creating Prisoner Express.

Before we go into the new programs I would like to review some of the programs from the previous cycle. I want those of you who participated to have an idea of what progress we are making.

Last cycle we had some of our best programming yet. **I thought Monica did an excellent packet on Social Psychology, and since Alyssa's Creative Writing Instruction packet was mailed I have seen a marked improvement in the writing many of you submit.** Practice makes perfect. Regarding the Creative Writing, Alyssa graduated in May and I was so sorry to see her leave town. **Alyssa** also created a follow up creative writing instruction packet, which will be sent to all of you who sent the flash fiction story assignment from the last packet. That will be mailed later in the summer. So many of you wrote to let us know how helpful the Creative Writing packet was. Your feedback is helpful for providing us with direction when thinking about creating new projects.

The final assignment of the creative writing packet was to create a piece of short fiction. As many of you know it is hard to tell a story in just 500 words. The exercise made every word count, and focused on creating a short tight story. I know many of you had trouble staying within the limited word count. Alyssa plans to send a feedback sheet to everyone who submitted an essay that was at least close to not going over the 500 word limit. Also everyone who responded will get the next writing instruction packet. **Here are a few of the selections chosen from the hundred plus submissions.** Please note we received so many interesting pieces and we only have room here to reprint a few.

Nameless by Alex Valentine

Who knew there were blue skies in hell? Army PFC Marcus Avery thought as he watched a column of smoke drift upwards from what had been a noisy marketplace in the town of Sata-el-Fayed in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. The blast sirens was still noisy, though the wails from those who could not run, and the terrified cries of those who could were a far different sound from the jubilant haggling that had filled the air only moments earlier.

Avery's comm cracked. "Seven, check?!" it demanded for the second time, and he snapped away from thoughts of distant blue skies.

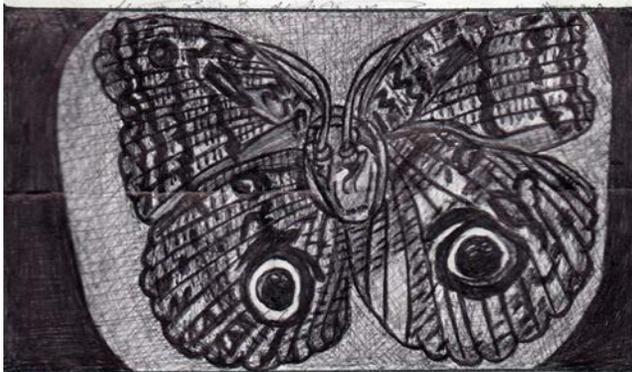
Rifle shouldered, he scanned the buildings and fleeing throngs who broke around him like a swift current about a boulder jutting from a riverbed. All but one. A teenager—if that – had his eyes locked onto the PFC, and was running straight for him. Avery swallowed, but did not hesitate; flicking the burst selector to single shot, he put two rounds in the boy's head. The child spun as his skull burst apart, and the body tumbled to the dust. The shrieking of terrified people picked up all around Avery.

"Seven! Check!" his comm barked for a third time.

Avery swung his rifle around, causing many to dive for cover, or flee him directly. The twenty-two year old PFC from Everett, Washington was near panic. He slapped at his comm.

"This is Seven. I just—" Adrenaline thrumming, his world focused suddenly on a single aspect.

A girl obscured but for the eye-slit of her back abaya, gazed



By Jerome Washington

ferocious green daggers at him as she knelt, clasping the hand of the dead boy. She uttered something in Pashtun, and then squeezed the boy's hand. The PFC did not fully realize what was happening until the shockwave from the detonation took him off of his feet and flung him back against a cracked wall on the far side of the plaza. Blue skies were blotted out by fire, and then new screams that he could not hear filled the air. PFC Marcus Avery lay among those nameless many who could no longer scream.

Oh Dear by D.J. Forbes

The afternoon day sun illuminated the woodland meadow with golden light. Patches of wildflowers and tall grass gently swayed in the wake of a light, southerly breeze. The sound of running water emanated from the stream winding along the southern border of the meadow.

A deer stood upon the bank of the stream, head bent to drink from the cool waters.

On the North side of the meadow, a man stood motionless just inside the ring of trees. Narrowing his eyes, he concentrated on his target, judging windage and distance. His target was further than any other attempt he had ever made.

Slowly, he raised the bow in his left hand. Just as slowly, he reached over his right shoulder and drew an arrow from his quiver. Without taking his eyes off his target, he knocked the arrow to the bowstring. In one slow, fluid motion he drew back the bowstring until his right hand rested gently against his cheek.

The deer continued drinking, oblivious to its surroundings. Between running back and forth across the meadow and the heat of the day, it had developed a mighty strong thirst.

Sighting down the length of the arrow, the man took careful aim at his target, he stood there motionless, slowing down his breathing until a zen-like calmness came upon him. When he felt the time was right, he took one final breath, let it half way out, and let fly the arrow.

The bowstrings twang caught the deer's attention. Whipping its head around, it looked toward the source of the sound.

The man grinned, gauging the arrow's trajectory. His grin turned into a wide smile as the arrow found its mark. A perfect bulls eye!

The deer lowered its head, releasing an almost human-like sigh of resignation... then taking one final drink, it bounded over to where the man had set up his hay bale target. Taking the still quivering arrow in its mouth, it gently wrenched the arrow back and forth until it came free.

Bounding to the north side of the meadow, it dropped the arrow at the man's feet, earning itself a hearty scratch under its chin.

Kenneth W. McKelvey

Faced with the choice, Austin chose to begin working the steps suggested by the fellowship as a program of recovery. He didn't want to find his way back to the life he remembered while using. And in all honesty, he had found something within the walls of the meeting he had been attending.

He remembers his first meeting. His fear and anxiety were loudly

thumping in his ear, along with his heart. He thought it was strange that there was a person standing at the door. This "greeter" shook his hand and even introduced himself as an addict. Austin wasn't sure what to think of that, but he went in anyways.

The meeting started and the room fell silent. Austin didn't pay too much attention to the beginning and didn't identify himself as a newcomer when it was asked. He did however start to listen as the speaker began his lead.

Austin couldn't believe his ears. He was hearing all of the emotions that helped trap him in his addiction in this man's story. He heard about all of his own fears, his own hurts, his own guilt, and even his own shame. He stared at this man as he spoke, amazed that he was telling Austin his own story.

When the man began talking about what his life was like now, Austin began to cry. He was having trouble believing the man's story. When his guy said things like successful job, great relationship, and his family back, Austin's mind balked. He could not believe that a guy who had his past could have the present he described.

The longer he spoke the more Austin started to believe. The people in the room were laughing with the speaker. Genuine laughter. They nodded as he was talking about finding happiness, being joyful and feeling free.

After the meeting he hung around listening to the conversations that were taking place. Amazingly, none of them were about using, except in that they were about ways to not use. The guy who gave the lead came up to Austin and handed him a meeting schedule.

He quietly told him about a couple of other meetings. He told Austin that he could do it, one day at a time. He showed Austin the numbers that were written on it, telling him that if he felt like using to call them. That someone would answer, and the urge would pass.

Austin couldn't believe that this guy cared enough to do this. But the next thing he told Austin was the clincher. He told Austin about the fire in his blood. How it had drew him back over and over. Then he told Austin that he had found a way to put that out when it flared up. It was the steps of this fellowship. Austin found belief and in belief: hope. That if these steps worked for others they could work for him. There was hope. He came to believe that day.

A Mother's Day Gift by Jason Mears

A card? Flowers? Perfume? None of these things will work said Pete to himself. All day Pete had been thinking of what to get his mom for Mother's day. The past year his mom had done so much for him. She had bailed him out of jail, found him a job, and had even allowed him to move in with her. He just had to find that something special for her. He didn't want her to feel that he was ungrateful. I guess you could say his biggest concern was that he would be outdone by his sister Amy. Amy always had a way of impressing mom that he could just not live up to. She was a doctor with an expensive lifestyle. She had a big house, nice car, and two children who attended private school. What couldn't she buy mom that wouldn't out do him, he said silently.

Around 6 pm, Amy arrived at Relando's restaurant just as they had agreed. Pete came in about ten minutes late smelling like rotten food. He had just finished his shift at the nearby Taco Bell. As usual Amy greeted him with a reproachful comment regarding his lifestyle. One moment he just couldn't take it anymore. As they were eating their meal and bickering over their usual disagreements, Pete stood up and exclaimed, "I'm not this horrible criminal you think I am." At that moment Pete started choking on the chicken he had ordered. When Amy saw his face, she became so scared. She tried and tried to give him the Heimlich maneuver, but just couldn't accomplish it. Finally, the nearby waiter came over and easily performed the task. Soon Pete was back to breathing regularly.

As they resumed their dinner, Amy's demeanor changed. What had she done wrong? She was a certified Doctor for Pete's sake. As she thought about the situation, she began to cry. Pete looked at her with curious bewilderment. "What's wrong," he asked? After wiping her nose she told him the most selfless thing he ever heard her say. "If I could not even do the simplest task; what else have I been wrong about? You could have died? From grief at seeing her sister's sorrow, he did a thing he never expected to see himself doing. He went over to her and gave her a big hug. "I love you Amy," he smiled. "I never knew you cared about me so much. I'm sorry I've been such a screw up in the family."

From that moment forward, Pete and Amy had a new understanding. They no longer bickered over stupid senseless things. They still argued, but they came to terms and acceptance of their different lifestyles. When mother's day came up the following Sunday, Pete did not have to worry about beating Amy with a superior mother's day gift. This time they both agreed to take mom out to dinner together. It was the best mother's day she could have ever asked for.

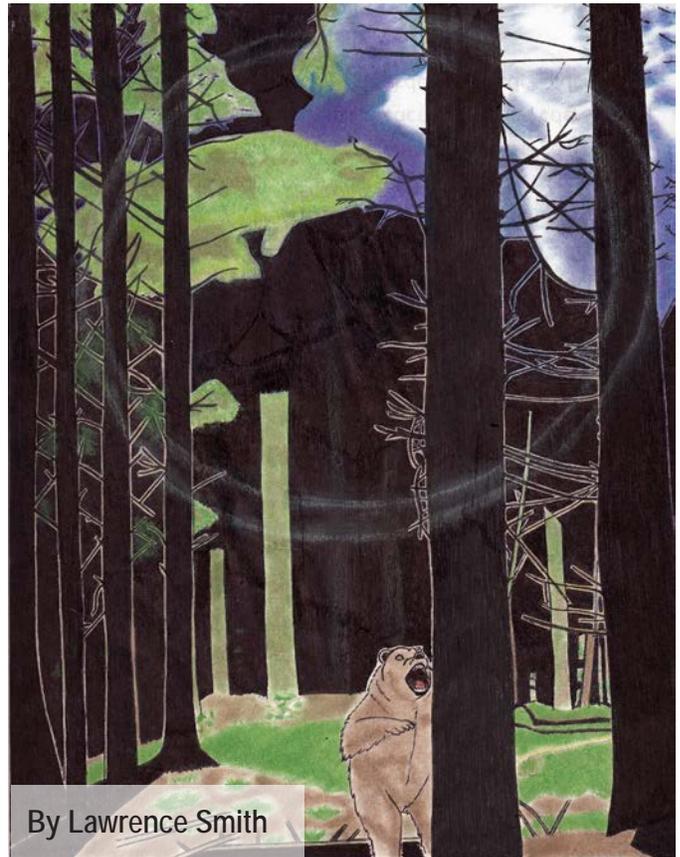
Damien Zeroves

When I awoke, I was in a house unfamiliar to me. It was then I realized I blacked out again. I thought I had been drinking again, but I didn't taste any alcohol on my breath, nor did I feel any hangover. I sat up in the darkness and felt my weapon next to me on the floor. I slowly got up and checked the magazine. After I slightly pulled the bolt open within the chamber, I saw a round was already chambered. Then I slapped the magazine back into the receiver, and flashed the light mounted on my rifle upon my surroundings. To the front of me was a room with the door shut. To my left, was a huge gaping hole, surrounded by brick debris. It looks like a blast from an RPG round or perhaps an IED. To my right was the front door to the abandoned house. Behind me were stairs that led to an upper level.

Then I heard several vehicles pull up from beyond the front door. I became very nervous, because I did not know whether they were enemy or friendly. I decided to go through the huge hole in the wall, which led to the back of the house, so I quickly turned and quickly stepped, rifle aimed at the house's exit wound. When I got to the opening, I could hear footsteps approaching the front of the house as the intruders chambered rounds within

their weapons.

Although it was nighttime, there was a fair amount of light out from the moon. I spied the left corner of the opening and saw it was clear. Then I looked right and saw it was clear as well. As soon as I exited right, the intruders had kicked in the front door. I walked up to the corner end of the building and leaned my back flat against the brick wall. I knew they were going to come through the opening I came from soon, so I slightly poked my head out to the right to see if there was another place to hide. But there was no other house, nor any place for cover. I heard the intruders approaching the opening, so I decided to creep along the side of the house, away from the opening. As I crept along the sidewall of the house, a light flashed on me in front of me. Then I heard gunfire erupt and rounds hit in all directions around me and some whizzed past my ears. I returned fire, but got knocked back to the ground as an intense burning sensation hit my chest. As I fell onto the ground, blood immediately began to fill my mouth as I tried to gasp for air, but only a gargling sound came out with a hard cough. And before I permanently blacked out, a group of men stood over me and spoke in English, "Oh shit man, he's fuckin friendly!"



By Lawrence Smith

James Kelliher

The way the bright halogen lights slice through the night's darkness causes the black man to pause. The lights and looming concrete structure conjures up memories of the military compound near Al-Ubayyid, the place where too many went into, but never returned from.

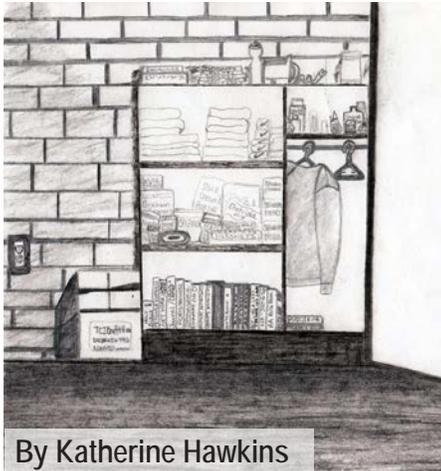
A clanging cart steered by an old man loosens the memory's grip. This shopping place, quiet and clean, dwarfs the man's village

bazaar. No bleeding or squawking animals, the merchandise lies dormant without a champion exalting its virtues. The rows run endlessly with shelves bordering each turn. The prices are readily visible, no haggling allowed.

A trip to the market or bazaar is an all-day event in Sudan; the man fondly recalls interacting with others there. Here, everyone acts as if they're too busy to speak beside the old woman saying "Welcome to Wal-Mart."

Though Sudan is deadly, the man feels more alone than ever before.

EYE by Gabriel Roberson



By Katherine Hawkins

Creaking, the door bent slightly. Renewed effort brought more of a bend. Suddenly the door crashed open. The girl nearly fell as she stumbled into the room. Catching her balance she looked around the smoke blackened room. Disappointingly everything seemed to be reduced to soggy ash. Convinced she'd find

nothing of value a perfunctory search was conducted. Dragging her feet through the smooth gray ash piles near the metal bed frame nudged something. Bending down she picked up a large marble? No, wiping off some of the soot she realized: it's a glass eye. Holding it up some light from the window caught it; the iris sparkled into the blue flame.

"Did you find anything?" a boy's voice called.

"No," she lied, and quickly slipped the eye into the pocket.

Sometimes they found valuable objects in burned out houses like jewelry, coins, things that didn't give into the heat so easily. Most times they didn't. This odd hobby started spur of the moment. A decision made to look inside while passing a neighbor's fire gutted home. They'd found a cheap watch that still worked and shared it, wearing it in turns. From then on any burned out building they passed or heard of was searched. Everything they found was shared like that first watch. Truthfully most of it was exchanged with their connection for some weed. But, anything they kept, they shared. The eye she found was the exception. Making their way out to the sidewalk the boy asked, "What do you want to do?"

"I'm just gonna go home. I feel really dirty and I think I inhaled some ash," she lied.

After quickly making her way home, the girl went straight to her room, locking the door before removing the eye from her pocket. Flicking on the nightstand lamp she studied her glass eye. It was really smooth, powder white, electric blue iris, and pitch-black pupil. She rolled it in her hand, in both hands. That wasn't enough. She popped the eye into her mouth. It tasted of ash, under that it was like

a coke bottle. It was heavy on her tongue. She rolled it against her teeth, stuffed in her cheek like a jawbreaker. While she held it there in her mouth she considered swallowing her new eye, then it would really be hers. She thought better of it though, as she might choke. Then she'd have to Heimlich herself and her eye could break when it was violently expelled from her esophagus. No, she thought best not to take a chance like that. So, she spit her saliva-coated eyeball into her hand. It made her a little sad to know the taste of the fire-consumed house would be gone soon. However, she knew she'd found what she'd been looking through all those desolate shells for. Her third eye made everything clear.

The Persistence of Folly by Christopher Long

A mange covered dog stands along the curb intensely focused on consuming its own vomit. Adam shakes his head in disgust as he passes by, muttering the words "Filthy Mutt".

Adam is on a walk to clear his head, but so far clarity has eluded him. The dog's vicarious appetite for whatever had previously made it sick has been Adam's only respite from his racing thoughts.

His cell phone rings and he answers "Hello."

"Hello! This is Claire from Mr. Emmanuelle's law office. I would like to speak to..."

"This is Adam."

"Mr. Emmanuelle wanted to call and remind you that the custody hearing is at 8:30 tomorrow morning and to make sure..."

"I got it 8:30. I will be there and ready to go."

"Okay then, thank you."

"Thank you, bye." He hangs up.

As Adam continues to wander the streets aimlessly his thoughts race on. "Why wouldn't the court grant custody to an alcoholic, single father with a violent criminal history? Of course, I have been sober for about 3 years now, out of prison for a little less than 2, and steadily employed a little over a year now. This is the most stability I've had all my life." His thoughts turn to what his daughter, Irene, has been through in her 7 years on earth, including her father in prison, her mother dying, and then being put in foster care. "I'm the reason she has gone through all this." Adams past failures play in his mind. Voices of condemnation rattle on. His father yells "Dumb bastard, look what you did this time!" His parole officer says "How long before you screw up again and I get to send you back where you belong?" His fifth grade teacher chimes in "You'll always be nothing but trouble!"

And on and on they go.

The sound of music ahead distracts him from the voices of the accusers in his mind. The music comes from one of Adam's old drinking spots. As he nears the bar he can feel his heart beat quicken with every step. "A few drinks would calm my nerves about now. But honestly, that is the last thing that will really help my situation. Just for today I will..."

"Hey, Adam!" shouts a woman wearing too much makeup and too little clothing to be thought of as properly presentable in anywhere but a strip club. "It's me Tonya, How ya been?"

Adam starts "Actually I..." She grabs Adam by the arm leading him towards the entrance of the bar as she says

"It's been so long. We used to have so much fun together."

"Sorry, I really can't..."

"No need to be sorry. We'll catch up over a few drinks."

Adam wakes up the next morning reeking of liquor and stale cigarette smoke. He looks at his cell phone: 9:46 A.M. Five missed calls. His mind goes back to the sight of the dog he had seen the day before.

Desert Dream by Romualdo Guerrero

At a time when all hope seemed lost he held on tighter. Dangling by the threads of his dreams, he clutched his daughter close and scurried through the desert. A pale waning moon shone above, casting faint shards of light as he maneuvered between cacti and rocks. The icy wind caused his daughter to shiver. Her cries muffled as she buried her face in his shirt.

The blaring of sirens, machine gun fire, and dogs barking and giving chase had long ago faded. Still he refused to stop or rest for too long. With his legs burning and lungs gasping for air he rose to his feet and headed back into the darkness.

He knew the risks of this journey but never believed it would happen, at least not to his daughter. After her mother passed away, he decided to not put it off any longer. Calling his cousin on the other side they had set up the arrangement. With his life's savings in hand, a bag, and the clothes on their back, they were herded into trucks that drove them to the desert. Making their way on foot from one man-dug well to the next he had never expected the border patrol to spot them, but they did. And in the melee he had grabbed his daughter and headed for the cliffs. They were on their own now.

As the hours passed he slowed down and took longer breaks. With the sun rising, he let his daughter walk and felt at ease as she pointed ahead and flashed him a smile. The landscape was barren and they walked till the sun became too much. Finding some shade between cliffs they settled down and rested. He handed her what was left of their supplies, half a loaf, a few gulps of water, and a few crackers. She offered him one to eat for her.

They lay there for the duration for the day; resting, taking naps, and finding ways to entertain each other creating games in the sand. He enjoyed making her laugh and look of puzzlement as he made quarters appear and disappear with his fingers. Her laughter and clapping echoed as they watched the sun set.

As the night took hold they took turns pointing out stars and making up their own constellations. They walked for almost the whole night when they spotted a flickering light on the horizon. As they continued to walk they spotted more lights moving and vanishing but the first one never moved. With a sense of hope, he picked her up and sprinted towards the source, arriving at a gas station. Seeing the pay phone he picked it up and called his cousin. They had made it, and his wife's dream had come true.

The Lake House by C. Dias

"Ms. Winter, if you could just sign here. We could finalize the

purchase of your new lake house." The bank representative assured her. Shay knew he was speaking figuratively when he said new. The property was three bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms, a spacious single story foreclosure in need of repairs. However, the property was newly hers, and she was pleased with its purchase nonetheless.

Shay intended to move in as soon as she changed the locks on the doors. However, it took longer than she'd expected to get her affairs in order. Once everything was squared away, she loaded up her Prius, and hit the road. Although she'd never been to Lake Shasta. She was looking forward to starting fresh in some place new.

The lake house was rustic, tucked off in the woods, with no neighbors to speak of for at least a mile. Shay welcomed the solitude. In fact she was looking forward to the peace and quiet. After unpacking the few belongings she'd brought with her. Shay found a nearby grocery store and bought a few essentials to last her for the week.

That night while brushing her teeth before bed, Shay thought she heard noises coming from the kitchen. As she listened more intently, it sounded like someone was opening and closing the cabinets. As Shay quietly crept down the hallway - armed with her electric toothbrush and the knowledge gained from the four self defense classes she'd taken at the YMCA last month - she tried to steady herself in preparation for a confrontation.

As Shay moved closer toward the entryway of the kitchen, she could make out the silhouettes of what appeared to be two very large intruders cast from the light of the open refrigerator door. And for a split second Shay began to reconsider this intended confrontation. However before she knew it, she was jumping into the entryway wielding her toothbrush like some menacing weapon. And with as much authority as she could muster up, yelled, "Hey!" Obviously startling both intruders who froze at the second of her outburst. Shay was just as surprised as they were.

Both masked bandits peered in Shay's direction. One was perched up on the counter paws and snout covered in Cheeto residue. While the other was standing in front of the open refrigerator door holding a jug of orange juice amongst various food products of which he'd removed from the refrigerator drawers haphazardly. Shay couldn't believe her eyes. Staring back at her were two large raccoons. Giving little consideration to where they came from, Shay charged into the kitchen clapping her hands. Taking the hint, both raccoons made a beeline for an open cabinet door which unbeknownst to Shay led out into the woods. Shay closed the door behind them as they fled out into the wilderness.

The next morning Shay called a handyman to patch the holes.

"Solution" by David Van Houten

The detective finished his three-hour explanation identifying the murderer, how he did it, and how he got away with it. He gave a detailed account of every clue, every deduction, and every conclusion that his highly trained brain revealed.

With that, he threw on his trench coat, put on his inspector's cap, and hurried out the door to catch up with his suspect.

The maid and the butler listened to the inspector's engine fade as he drove off toward his resolution of the case. They fidgeted in silence on the coach until quiet reigned in their employer's house,

the site of his murder.

They gave each other a knowing look, let out a sigh they'd held in since the beginning of the inspector's marathon solution, stood up, and removed the couch cushions, revealing the dead body of their employer stuffed roughly within the frame of the couch.

Shaking his head, the butler said, "I thought he'd never leave."



Pennies by George Trepal

Growing up cost me about a dollar's worth of pennies. It happened when I was 12 years old, in 1960, in my small Southern hometown. In this mostly pre-electronic time, there was no locking yourself away with a box for entertainment. Instead, we kids followed fads, devoting ourselves to them for a month and then dropping them for the next fad.

When the penny collecting fad hit, we bought many penny albums, cardboard folders with labeled cutouts for our pennies. To fill them, we checked our piggy banks and our parents' change, traded with our friends, set up swap meets and made countless trips to the town's bank to get rolls of 50 pennies, always looking for "good pennies" with the least wear, fewest scratches and an even, dark brown patina.

Most of our parents helped us, and my father, who worked in the big hardware store, searched its pennies daily. Dad did this for me. He had no interest in pennies, nor could he tell well from bad, but pennies made me happy so finding them for me made him happy. Every evening he'd give me the pennies he found

whose dates matched my must-have list, then happily watched me evaluate them and put the good ones in my album.

I filled and finished my album before the other kids, and it became a treasure, a thing of pride and wonderment to make everyone else jealous. Bliss!

Dad worked every day except Sundays and Wednesdays. One Wednesday when I came home from school, he had a surprise for me. Smiling, he showed me how he'd improved my pennies with a motor-driven steel brush. No longer dull brown, the mirror-bright soft copper was worn and scratched into worthlessness. He thought he'd done something nice for me. Shiny is always better, isn't it?

I stood; looking with my mouth hanging open, then—and I don't know where it came from—I said, "Looks great! Thank You!" His smile became ten feet tall.

I went off to think. I hadn't acted like a kid. Instead, I saw this wasn't about pennies but my relationship with Dad. I saw telling him what he'd done would hurt him, and I put his feelings ahead of mine. What was wrong with me?

Then I realized that somehow, while I wasn't watching, I'd become an adult, and learning this cost only about a dollar. What a bargain!

I hope you all enjoyed seeing how much story some folks could pack into 500 words. You will find a number of writing programs you can participate in this newsletter and I hope you will take the time to write and share your thoughts.

PE, through the efforts of Tara, has an **ongoing Buddhist Study group**. She is willing to accept new members to this group. If you are interested in joining her ongoing study group **please write to her**. Be sure to put Tara's name on the outside of your envelope. She is hoping to mail new study guides every couple of months.

Three hundred of you read the book club selection, "**A Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio**" and many sent in responses to the critical thinking questions we included in the book. Most of you really enjoyed the book. We read through all of your responses and created a short compilation document highlighting some of your responses.

Monica, who created the **Social Psychology Program**, also graduated, but I hope she will stay involved through the summer by reading your responses to the packet. We are brainstorming a format to share with you, some of the interesting responses we received relating to the questions that accompanied the packet. We plan to send follow up information based on your submitted work. Part of our growing pains is figuring how we respond to your work on a packet. When we had 50 or 100 people send in a response it took awhile but we read everything carefully and created compilation documents. With 600 folks participating in the Social Psychology program it will take much longer to read through all the responses we receive and for us to respond in a meaningful way. Please be patient with us as we will be both finishing up these units while also busy creating and managing our newest projects.

Poetry Anthology Vol14 is still being created. It should be in the mail before the end of June. I will discuss it in greater length when

writing about Poetry Anthology Vol15 later in this issue.

Treacy created a magnificent art show earlier this spring that was on display at Cornell for over a month. She has big plans for art programming for the new cycle and you can read about her new program ideas.

We depend on a lot of volunteers to manage this program. Some are very careful and others can make mistakes when entering your information into our system. If you can take the time to write your name and number clearly, it makes it that much easier to get your information correct. If we enter an address or a number incorrectly often you won't get our mail and we have no way of knowing that you are not getting it. Also as we expand into many more states and prisons, the rules for what we can mail you regarding books and educational packets changes. Later in the newsletter on the sign up sheet, I will be asking for more specific information on the rules and regulations for what you can receive.

The key to all of our programs is to be patient. We are a small group of people with very little funding carrying on a big [and we think important] enterprise. We fall behind constantly but always manage to catch up. My goal is to offer as much as possible, but no more than we effectively manage. Often what seems manageable can grow into huge tasks. When 600 people join the Social Psychology Project it doubled the number I expected and it has consequences on our funding and timetables for projects. I am glad to reach so many of you and am working to build our capacity as an organization so we respond in a timely way.

Now that some nationally distributed resource guides list PE, the new requests are pouring in. The sheer number of participants can slow down our response time, especially as the students leave town for the summer.

Please understand that our volunteer pool waxes and wanes. When students are not around, like now in the summer, it takes a lot of effort to keep this moving along. We have adjusted these past 12 years and will continue to modify and adjust as needed.

On that sobering note I am ready to start describing the new offerings we have for this cycle. I trust you will find some of the projects interesting.

Summer/Fall 2015 Projects

Expedited Books- The expedited book program evolved out of our free books program. We have a room full of donated books, hard and soft cover, on a variety of subjects. We can get the books for free but we do not have the funds for postage. Check on the rules at your prison for what is allowed. Some prisons allow individuals to send stamps to us and some do not. Find out what you can do. You can also send us a check or money order for \$4.00 or 8 stamps and we will put together a package of books for you. A typical package has 4 to 6 books and we must know the rules of your prison so we do not send materials that will not be allowed. Try to give us broad categories of books rather than specific authors and titles. Of course you can be specific, but the odds of us having a particular book is not usually high. The more choices you give us the better we are able to match the books to you to your interests. Sometimes we just don't have what you

ask for and we make the best match we can. Other times we are spot on and enjoy finding just what you ask for. If you are not patient and you have to have exactly what you list, this program is not for you. If you like the idea of getting 5 or so books in the mail chosen just for you, then by gosh this is a perfect choice. You decide. On the signup sheet we ask for more particulars about the rules regarding books at your particular prison. If you sign up for expedited books please fill it out.

Poetry-We have made the selections for Poetry Vol 14 and it will be at the printers and in the mail hopefully before you are even reading this. Everyone who sent in a poem after the selections for Vol. 14 were made are immediately entered into the Poetry Vol. 15 file. We will collect poems for another few months and then begin the work of selecting the poems for our Winter edition. If you send in a poem for consideration, you automatically get a copy of the anthology when it is printed. Every poem sent is read and considered, but not everyone is included in the anthology. A new volunteer edits each anthology and I never can predict which poems they will select. Their selection process does not reflect on the merit of your poem. Our student editors are not professionals, and they choose the poems that speak to them. Last edition had 300+ poets send in 1 or more poems for consideration. If you enjoy writing poetry, please consider sending us some poems for consideration. We print the anthology and mail it to you, and we put it online so folks in the "free world" can read it as well. You must submit a poem to get you free copy of the anthology.

Below is a some poetry that was submitted. If you want a whole booklet of verse, put pen to paper and share some of your creativity with us.

Tree

I have an imaginary tree.
I know it isn't real; I'm okay with that.

My tree provides imaginary shade
On imaginary hot summer days,
And a ladder to the sky for my mind.

My neighbor must think I'm crazy
When I take pruning shears and snip the air,
Or when I pick apples from one branch, friendship from another.

When strangers come around,
I pretend it's not there
To keep it from becoming a mere curiosity.

We take great care of one another;
My mind gives it life,
And it keeps my mind alive.

--- --- ---

My neighbor has an imaginary tree.
It seems to bring him real contentment;
Sometimes I almost think I can see it.

-T. Williams

Judges

Open your eyes, tell me what it is you see
Do you know me truly or am I just who you want me to be?

You judge me for my husbands skin is shades darker than mine
You judge me for my sons skin is our two skins combined

Am I unworthy of respect based on the size of my hips
do I deserve your ridicule for lacking perfection behind my lips.

Am I out of my depth, not wading but drowning?
Am I just a head not worthy of crowning?

Do I not warrant the same courtesy you show others.
Aren't we created identical to live as sisters and brothers.

To you I am nothing – not a sound – not a word
When in reality I am a voice straining to be heard

Well forgive me if I fail to bow unto your exceptional feet.
Instead I choose to rise before you so our eyes can meet.

I am much more than you've determined me to be
For in the eyes of the Lord we walk in equality.
-Heather Coffey



By Christopehr Brito

A Daw's Day Dawns

During Dawn the Day does just begin.
To greet my iridescent fowl feathered friend.
All afresh, all anew Night's long winter is through.
as was once in Darkness, the Vacant then all we knew.
Nature's call beckons, now here beckons us all.
Rise up from our sleep, stand up from our Fall.
Ghastly Sentinel poised athwart Pitch's crest.
Sun's sure ray summons leaf upon Life's breast.
Day shatters aloft, awakening above the fray.
Crimson beams, beacons of warmth across the by.
True! Sanguine morning, Sailor best beware,
Promised, warning not meant to dare.
Still boreal tangerine blaze, bids your flight from fright,
Just as Dusks carmine assures Navigator's delight.
The pendulum sways, the Sands of Time are evanescent,
Also you witness well Evening's every descent.
-Robert McHale

Lighthouse

Into each life some pain must fall,
Yet more so for a pair
In payment for the rite of passage,
A token for the fare
And though the cost may heavy weigh,
To force our bended knee,
In humble pose we bare our souls,
And hence make known our plea

When sunny days at times may fade,
And evening falls to night
Our eyes we'll turn to heaven's face,
To await rebirth of light
We gaze into the darkened sky,
A diamond field of wonder
Until the deeper dark arrives,
To serenade with thunder

And when at times we fearful tremble,
Lost in this smothering dark
It may just be this very moment,
Our love ignites a spark
This ember of life through winter's night,
Shall fan into a flame
To join two souls in harmony,
Two souls on and the same

And though the years of toil and tears,
Our hearts may ever mourn
What time has lost shall be repaid,
As will each burden borne
So as we wait for dawn's first light,

Let blessed love abound
Our hope, a beacon, lights the way,
'Til perfect love is found
-Tom Williams



Humor Anyone?- Recently I was on top of a mountain staring into the abyss. I was thinking about humor and how odd it is that slipping on a banana peel is considered the apex of humor. Life can certainly take us on a slippery slope down! I figure that if slipping on a banana peel is funny then being locked up must have its share of funny moments. Let's take a moment and share some laughs. It's time for the Joke Issue. Send us your best jokes. It doesn't have to be about incarcerated life, but that will be the focus of the packet we create from your shared jokes and anecdotes. Who knows better the funny side of prison life than you? We will compile the best funny stories and jokes you share with us into a packet and send it out to all of you. Let's get each other laughing if we can. [Disclaimer-forgive me if I **seem callous in asking you to find the humor in life when you live under oppressive circumstances**]. I know many battle depression and isolation while incarcerated, yet laughing at my own misery can sometimes help me through a dark time. Let's the laughs begin....*Drawings* and *cartoons* are encouraged. **Send in your submissions by 10/1/15.**

A prisoner in jail receives a letter from his wife: "Dear husband, I have decided to plant some lettuce in the back garden. When is the best time to plant them?" The prisoner, knowing that the prison guards read all mail, replies in a letter: "Dear wife, whatever you do, do not touch the back garden. That is where I hid all the money." A week or so later, he receives another letter from his wife. "Dear husband, you wouldn't believe what happened. Some men came with shovels to the house and dug up the back garden." The prisoner writes back: "Dear wife, now is the best time to plant the lettuce."

History Unit: Viet Nam- Jaffre, a young man who worked here last summer, has come back to volunteer with the PE program. In true fashion he is stepping up from a volunteer who helps manage data and work on bulk mailings to someone interested in creating innovative and interesting programming for you. He has offered to create a section on Viet Nam. Most likely he will be covering the period of the US war in South East Asia. I would imagine besides describing the historical aspect of the war, he will

also talk about the domestic protests and strife within the US during that time. In hindsight it seems like Viet Nam was a war chosen by the ruling class in this country for political and economic gain. Often the whole country is influenced to rally around certain causes and patriotism is invoked, but underneath the ra ra, go America patriotism and rhetoric, there is a class of people and businesses who make money through munitions, and the taking over and control of natural resources in other lands. As my lifetime unfolds I have seen the influences of money become more pervasive in war. When I was younger people accused of war profiteering were looked down upon, but the Iraq war was all about privatizing war and the giant profits that were made by the military industrial complex including private mercenaries. How the times do change. I don't know exactly how Jaffre will approach this complex subject, but I will be working with him to create something interesting for you to consider.



On Dogs in the Universe- *Greetings all! My name is Camille, and I am an undergraduate student studying human development at Cornell University. Even though I study human development, I'm equally passionate about pups (sometimes I like them a little more than people!). This past year, I received an unexpected and surprising birthday gift: a Shiba Inu puppy! As a first time dog owner, I've spent undue amounts of time learning about dog training, behavior, psychology, and sharing and receiving stories about dogs from other enthusiasts. Most importantly, being a dog owner has changed me as a person and brightened my life in a remarkable way. I know that other dog enthusiasts (or dog parents as I call them) can appreciate the importance of (wo)man's best friend! This program will introduce facts and information about the history and domestication of dogs, training, the amazing capabilities of different breeds, personal anecdotes, games, pictures and more! If you love*

dogs, then you will love this program.

Journal project- This ongoing project invites you to keep a journal of your thoughts, hopes and memories. There are many therapeutic and life enriching reasons to regularly communicate with oneself through keeping a journal. All who sign up for the program will get a small packet of suggestions on how to keep a journal and instructions for sharing it with us. Volunteers read your journals, and select entries to be included on our Prisoner Express tumblr web page. Many of you are already participating and I know some volunteers write directly to the participants and comment on your journals. Keeping a journal for yourself is a great way to increase your self awareness. If you choose to share it with us, it can become more public and a great way to inform free world folks of the reality of incarcerated life. Your words can have power, and this is one way to practice developing your written voice.

Chess Club- For those of you who like to play chess, we send out a newsletter with chess puzzles, strategies, and interesting facts about the game and the masters who play it. Sign up if you'd like to get the next edition of the newsletter. The last newsletter had a game board and pieces photocopied on paper. It turns out that for some of you those newsletters, or at least the pieces of paper with a photocopied chess board and pieces, were considered contraband in some prisons. Oops!

Math Puzzles and Problems- I have asked Prof. Dani, the PE math wizard to put together a booklet with interesting math and number puzzles. He may even include an interesting lesson or two. Let us know if you'd like a chance to stretch your mind through some logical puzzlers. [For you math phobic folks these are more like games than they are traditional school work.]

Art News: Treacy's Corner- PE has been blessed with Treacy's taking on the role of coordinating our art programs. She is an accomplished artist who focuses on providing you with opportunities to develop your creative power through art. Below she shares some thoughts on art and describes the PE art programs for this upcoming cycle.

What She Doesn't Know – An Art Essay

I'm in the deputy warden's office for an interview; I want to volunteer as an art teacher in a maximum-security men's prison. I sit facing the warden's desk while she reads my resumé

As with many artists' resumé's, mine begins with a list of the solo exhibitions. After 20 years as an artist, my resumé lists about 35 solo exhibitions in various galleries in various cities. These are followed by group shows; probably more than is listed, but after a while, I think, "Who cares?" and eliminate most of them.

My resumé then lists various awards and grants I have received as well as exhibition catalogs, reviews, papers, essays, and art collections in which I am represented.

When the warden finishes reading, she says to me, quite

seriously, "So, basically, you've never worked a day in your life!"

One can only wonder, "If it isn't work, then what is it?"

What the warden doesn't know is that art is a conversation. She also doesn't know that after 20 years, the conversation in the commercial art world has become redundant, and I search for another audience.

Initially, I had not been thinking in terms of prisoners as my new audience. The audience I had in mind — whoever they were — did not have the two main variables that so often describe an art audience: money and power. In removing these two factors, I think of prisoners.

I wrote letters to wardens and superintendents randomly picked throughout the United States, asking each if I might exhibit my art in their prison. My request would have been better received, perhaps, if I talked about art in terms of therapy or rehabilitation. But I didn't. I merely wanted to have an exhibition in their prison.

As an artist, I don't want to institutionalize art as therapy. When I mention I want to exhibit in prisons, a common response is, "Oh, that is so therapeutic!" "Therapeutic?" I think. "Does that describe my exhibitions for gallery audiences — 'Come to my exhibition. I'm doing therapy on you'?"

My intention is to exhibit with the same approach as with any venue: Put up my work without the expectation that it will be a "good thing" for the viewer. Instead, let my art be judged as it will be judged.

Mostly, my random letter evoked rejections—the "what-do-you-think-this-place-is?" reaction. However, I got favorable responses from others who were intrigued with my offer.

In the process of exhibiting my art in prisons, I realize things.

In prison, where relationships are based upon hierarchy of power, two roles are permitted for the non-prisoner: The non-prisoner can be part of the group that disciplines and punishes, or the non-prisoner can be part of the group that helps. In relationship to either group, no matter how benevolent the helper may be, the prisoner is never equal. Art conversations demand openness between people of equal power. This is not permitted between prisoner and non-prisoner, regardless of whether the non-prisoner is a helper or punisher.

Guards are particularly sensitive to maintaining this hierarchy between non-prisoners and prisoners. They experience the presence of my art as a threat to that hierarchy. The guards more readily accept prisoners' art exhibitions; these support the hierarchical legacy of patronization.

Maybe the guards intuit that in making art accessible to everyone there is danger of democracy. In exhibiting non-prisoner art in prison, all viewers become equal in relationship to the art. Everyone becomes a judge: The prisoner can hate my art, like my art, or choose to be indifferent

In exhibiting my art to be judged by prisoners without the defensive cloak of "doing therapy and being their helper," I break two fundamental rules of prison: never become vulnerable to and never trust an inmate. As an artist I must be vulnerable to engage in an honest conversation, and I trust the prisoners with my art — to do with as they wish.

I am also reminded of the very physicality of art. Visual art takes up space: It is spatially living and yearns for a home. In this yearning to

find a home, art reveals desire.

As a volunteer in prison, it is forbidden to leave anything personal behind, lest it undermine the political structure of the prison. However, when I leave a prison, I do not leave without a trace. In the physicality of art, I leave behind my personal baggage, which contains loneliness, disappointment, fear, insecurity, or whatever else might be found in my art.

And yet I have no defense. I am not acting in the concern of rehab. I am only concerned about this conversation of art. It is a conversation in which I become whole only through another equal person; the viewer, the audience, the listener, the prisoner.

Furthermore, art is a contradiction. Its physicality knows no boundaries. When I do become a volunteer art teacher in the warden's maximum-security prison, she eventually takes disciplinary action against me. Apparently, she informs me, I have been speaking out of bounds — speaking to prisoners about things not related to my subject of art.

But, of course, the warden doesn't know.

I tell her, "That's impossible. Outside of art, there is nothing to say."

Old art projects: Thanks for the response from the Dear Self and Dear Other project, and the Drawing From History. Even though I did specify a deadline for these curriculums, don't worry—if it takes longer, there are no real deadlines, just prompting times.....

New art projects: For this newsletter I decided to do things differently. I am offering one project for which you will receive a curriculum. The other two projects will be based upon work that you send in.

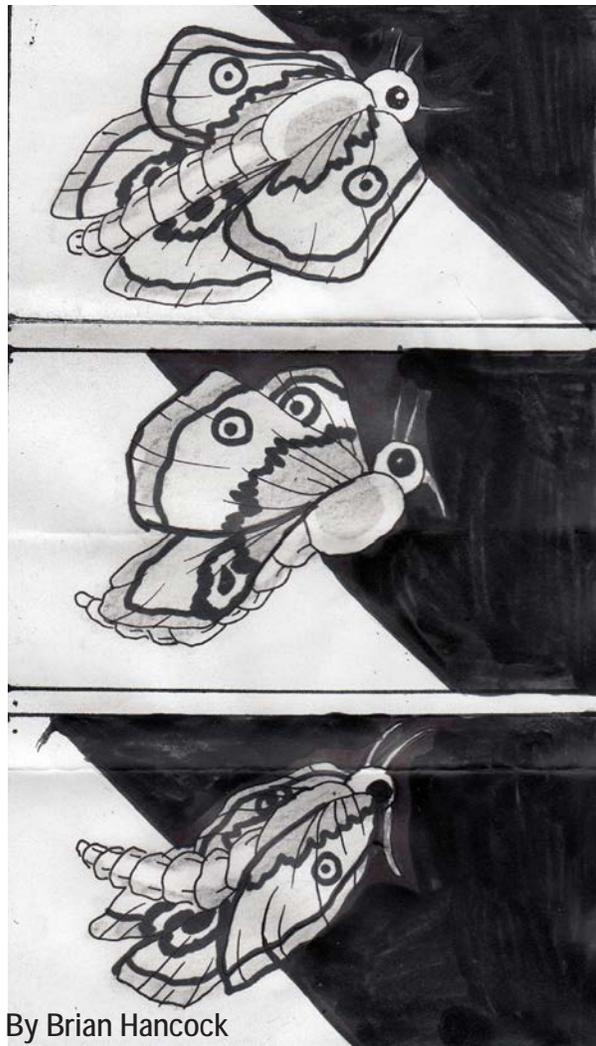
Animation project: This project is familiar to some of you. It is a project in which I initially invited 100 participants, chosen because of their artwork sent on a regular basis. I received many responses; the art is beautiful and impressive. I've shown your drawings to people working on the film and they were really impressed...so thank you for the drawings you already sent in. It was a challenge, and despite some of your doubts about whether the drawings were done correctly – the drawings are perfect!

The only problem - I didn't receive the work from everyone - so there are major gaps in the animation. Therefore I am opening the project up to the entire newsletter audience.

It takes approximately 2000 drawings to create 5 minutes of animation. I have an animator from South America who does great work and will compile the drawings into a film. The film will be submitted to various animation festivals and everyone (that means you) who participates in drawing will be given credit in those "white letters at the end of the film."

If you sign up for the animation, you will receive a packet of 8 frames (individual drawings designating different moments of the moth's flight). One hundred drawings are required between each frame to make the moth fly. Of course, no one can do 100 drawings. You will be asked to draw 15 drawings between two frames that will be assigned to you. For instance, Team One is asked to draw 15 drawings from a very close image of the moth

(where only the eyes are seen) to the next frame where more of the face of the moth is shown.



You will be randomly placed in a team, you will be given additional pictures of moths to work from and you will also receive paper on which to draw these drawings. The paper has both a grid and words for those concerned about receiving blank paper - it's not blank.

If you have already created a series of drawings and would like to do another series, you are welcomed to participate again.

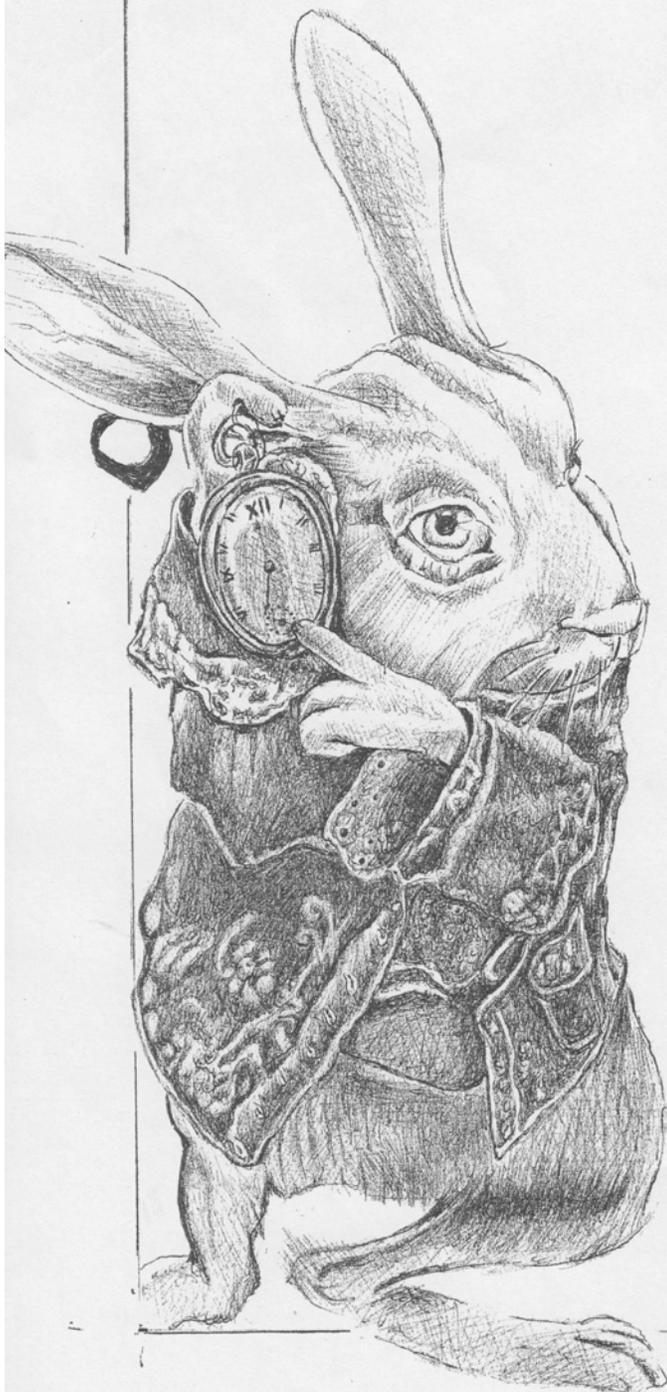
In this newsletter there are examples of the moth drawings from the different teams: Jerome Washington, Raymond Palmore, Brian Hancock, Daniel Peterson. Sign up for this project to get a more detailed description of the assignment.

Open-art Exhibition: This art show will be different than the one that we typically have at Cornell in the spring. Instead of a physical place to show the work, the exhibition will be a "through-the-mail" exhibition. In this way, everyone who sent something in will be able to view the work – not just the Cornell community.

You are invited to send in artwork. From the work sent in, 40 pieces will be chosen. A booklet will be printed of the works with artist statements. The booklet will be sent to everyone participating, regardless of whether their art was chosen for the booklet or not. We will put the booklet online so anyone with Internet access can see the show. **All** art regardless of whether it is selected for the booklet

will be exhibited at the annual Cornell exhibition in the spring. **Be sure to designate your art Open Art Expo when you send it in** so we know you want it considered for the booklet. Please make sure your name is on the back if possible.

There are no criteria for the artwork sent, but remember that a variety of images will make the exhibition more interesting. Think and see outside



the box you are finding yourself living in.

We will announce the artists selected for the booklet to the entire PE membership in the next newsletter.

You do not need to sign up for this project and there is no box at the end of the newsletter; just send in your artwork. Artwork for this project is due 10/1/15. At our last Cornell Art Exhibit I asked an independent group to select 5 artists to receive \$25 art scholarships. There was some great art work and their task was challenging. They chose Jeff Harnden, Jimmy Coleman, Jerome Washington, Raymond Palmore and Catherine Lafleur for the awards. Congratulations to them and thank you to all who sent in artwork for the show.

Stationary contest: I received a lovely packet of three stationary pages from Joe Jacinto (shown in the newsletter). This gave me the idea for another art project:

In this project you are invited to create a page of stationary. The page should include a drawing that is either light enough to write upon, or small enough not to interfere with the body of the letter (the drawing can either be at the top of the page or the bottom.) Write or print your name at the bottom of the page for credit. We will pick a selection (number to be determined by how many we receive). Each selected stationary will be copied and used for correspondence for three months – allowing your artwork to be seen by a wider audience. We will send a letter to everyone who sent stationary in as to whose stationary pages are selected. We will announce the selection in the next newsletter.

Create your stationary on paper that is used for typical correspondence and easy for us to copy. You may use color, but remember that at present we are only able to afford large quantities of photocopying copying in black and white.

You do not need to sign up for this project – just send in your submissions. **Stationary due by 10/15/15**

As much as we would love to be able to send back your artwork, we don't have the money or the volunteers to do so. So, please send work that you want to be part of the PE archives - not returned.

I am hoping that we can develop a system of sending everyone a postcard of thanks for submitting artwork.

I sent out many postcards this past year, but I am afraid that some of the postcards were thrown out at

By Joe Jacinto

the border. I often use my exhibition postcards covering up the printed words with stickers. Unfortunately, I forgot that stickers are sometimes considered contraband and I received a couple postcards back – one that I sent to Steve Fegan, and a few others with a “undeliverable” message sticker (!) on it. So, if you sent some art and didn't hear from me, there may be a postcard lying somewhere out in that space between me and you.

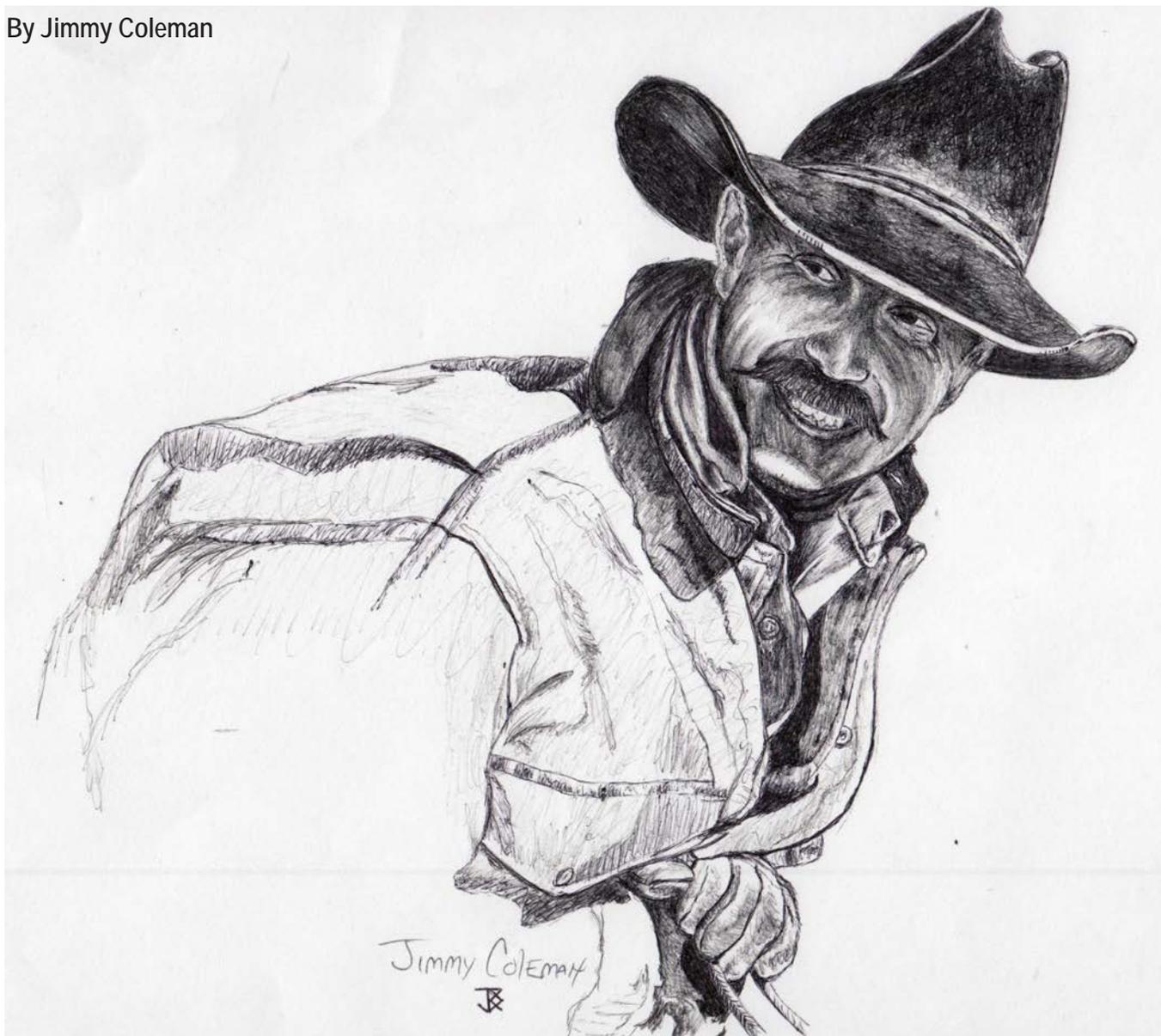
Jean is a new volunteer who will also be mailing out postcards thanking you. We hope to use your artwork on these postcards. All of which to say—if you haven't heard from us—give us another holler!

Finally—I realize that I have confused some people by referring to my husband as “Gary.” Gary Fine director of PE—as wonderful as he is—is **not** my husband. My husband is a different Gary. But as Gary Fine says—if you meet one Gary, you met them all...

Theme writing- Do you like to read, and do you like to get mail? Participate in the theme-writing project and receive a packet of interesting essays written by you and your fellow prisoners.

The theme-writing program is at the core of what Prisoner Express offers. It is a chance to share your creative thinking and writing in a public forum. So many people have written about how hard it is to be real in expressing their emotions while in prison. Any sign of feeling can be used against you at a later date. Everyone is posturing so as to not look vulnerable. That is actually a sad and narrow way to live. Humans are emotional beings and our emotions are real and teach us about what we value and how we feel. That you feel forced to shut down your emotional being is at its core wrong and contributes to illness and emotional distress. That so many of you write to me about this phenomenon led to the creation of the theme-writing program. Every month I list a theme topic and also a picture cue. You can write a story about either prompt or both. If you submit a story based on the word or picture cue, I will send you a copy of all the writing that is done that month on the topics. It is a great way to get mail and also it normalizes the experience you are undergoing in prison. Many folks think they are going crazy as they sit in their cells, and when they read about others experience they realize that they aren't going crazy but just like everyone else in prison, they are going through a

By Jimmy Coleman



hard time in difficult circumstances. This change in perspective helps strengthen one resolve to do the best then can. When you are going crazy you have no control. When you are in a tough situation, you do have some control. You can marshal your will and intent and rise to the occasion, and you can find strength you did not know you had. Prison would be a little better if folks supported one another rather than tried to take advantage of every little sign of emotion. While I don't know how to change current prison culture on a large scale, I believe those of you who write and submit theme essays and share some real thoughts about yourself make a difference in the lives of the folks who read your stories. The point isn't that every essay is about your vulnerability or the hardship that you face, but instead that in your writings that you to be real and write your truth in that moment, whatever it is. Writing yourself to wellness is a very real concept and offers you a chance to escape the circular reasoning that can lead you down some dark paths. I hope you will consider submitting some theme essays this cycle. There are a few rules. Please keep your themes to under 1000 words. When responding to the word cues please write about true events. When responding to the picture themes you can write fact or fiction. Please write clearly and be sure always to include your name on your submissions. We will type up all selections on a topic and everyone who sends in an entry will receive a complete packet of writings.

Upcoming Word Themes

Due 8/1 2015--Road Trips

Due 9/1/2015---Breakfast

Due 10/1/15--Holidays

Due 11/1/2015---Family Reunion

Due 11/1/2015---Reading

Due 12/1/15—Practical Jokes

Due 1/1/16--Laughter

Due 2/1/16- Haircuts

I would like to share many of the writings sent in during our last cycle but room does not permit. I have chosen a representative theme essay or two from previous word and picture themes and included them here. If you would like to receive the full packet on each topic, consider joining this project by submitting your own writings.

Previous themes:

Theme: Getting Even

Richard Gross

We live in a world where everyone wants to get even. Individuals nurse their grudges, nations pursue their historical claims and grievances and many people seek redress for the crimes of history. The result is a world of endless conflicts. Our culture teaches revenge. From the biblical "eye for an eye", to modern movies like *Rambo*, revenge is closely associated with bravery while forgiveness is for the timid or cowardly. A person is considered less of a man if they do not "get even" when they

are wronged. I think our justice system is more about retribution than reform. It's about the state seeking revenge on behalf of the victim. An execution is about getting even. Taking a life to compensate for the one that was taken. Does killing a killer make any more sense than raping a rapist? What about robbing a thief? Should drug dealers be forced into some kind of addiction? Should drunk drivers be hit by cars?

Neighborhoods are often plagued by gang violence as two gangs war on one another. A life is taken from one and then the other, as they try to even the score, as if human lives are just numbers on a scorecard. When the state intervenes, their answer is the death penalty or life in prison. Either way, a family is missing a father, a brother or a son. Getting even often involves the reduction of human lives to a poker chip or game token. Just something that can be won or lost to even the score. Too often people want a little more than to get even. This creates a cycle of escalation between two enemies that usually ends poorly for one or both.

The main problem with revenge is that it doesn't give the person the closure that they had hoped for; revenge does not heal wounds, it only inflicts new ones. I myself sought revenge on the parents that did so much damage to me growing up. I thought I would get closure. I thought the flashbacks would stop. I hoped it would be a huge step towards recovery. I was wrong. The memories are still there and now I deal with them locked in a prison cell. I will be here for the rest of my life. Any steps toward recovery must be done in a bad place with little help. I am confined in a place where the culture of "getting even" is alive and well. It is seen as the only path to respect. In a place where all want forgiveness and a second chance in society, few want to give it. Forgiveness is the only way to find closure. It is harder to do and takes much more courage than getting even. Only if you can forgive those who wronged you can you move past it. I am not there yet and it may take a long time. It is not something I've been taught to do.

Confucius said that "he who opts for revenge should dig two graves," one for his victim and one for himself. Martin Luther King said, "the old law of an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind". My actions left my family blind. All are now dead, or in jail, or in mental hospitals. No one gained anything, but I guess we will all be even once we're dead.

Theme: High School

***Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Felipe McMillian**

I lay here thinking about my tree. Wondering if it is still there.

I was born and raised where life was a threat to life itself. Under clouds of dark statistics, prophesying how I may not live to see the world turn twenty one, let alone accomplish the feat myself.

I hated when it rained. My grandma didn't like me walking to school, being that the bus stopped a few houses up from our own and the walk was 45 minutes. She absolutely forbade me to do it in the rain.

I hated when it rained.

I was suspended from the bus for a week once because one day I couldn't take the usual ridicule and let it be known, when normally I

endured it in silence. I can't imagine harsher critics than children, and from the consensus back then, there was much about me to be critical of. Grandma cared about a lot, but not that. My punishment was walking those five days. I liked it so much that afterwards I tried to foot it everyday.

I always left home an hour before the bus arrived; nearly an hour and forty-five minutes before the first bell. The stars would still fill the sky on cloudless mornings. There was a tree in our rented yard. I called it my tree and I always ran my fingers across its bark before I set off. My good luck gesture.

I spent many hours in that tree, and many of my tears had fallen like rain to land on the branches below.

One winter, my cousin shot himself and his girlfriend in the shadow of my tree. He died and then years later she did too, from drug overdose. I heard that the guy using with her, innocent but afraid of implication, set the house on fire after she overdosed. They IDed her using her dental records. She had a pretty smile.

A cold night many years later, after a long day of rain and after many sips and even more inhalations, I went to see my tree. The house was long gone. I poured what remained of a bottle where my cousin stood last and jumped up to grab a hold of the lowest branch, weighing at least a hundred pounds more than the last time I did it, and the branch snapped. I fell where my cousin fell last. The rain that had clung to the limbs let go and came down in a rush, making it rain cats and dogs, if only for a moment. The unexpected cold and wet took my breath, where my cousin took his last.

I can't say why, but I cried with that broken piece of my tree still in my hand. It had always been true. I guess, like grandma, it no longer recognized me.

On the way to school, I knew to walk facing traffic because my neighborhood didn't have much lighting, nor the safety of much sidewalk. I remember the small adrenaline rushes I got as the headlights grew larger, and I would fantasize diving safely out of the path of danger.

When I was feeling conflicted about life, I walked on the other side.

If a friend from school ever asked me where I lived, I could have said, "where the sidewalk ends".

I wasn't afraid of walking in that ominous darkness; a place that I would one day lurk. It wasn't uncommon in rough neighborhoods to see crowds of people out late (early). I got use to seeing them, and them me. I imagine they sized me up as non-profitable. Lucky for me, there wasn't a market for used, out of date textbooks.

The place I grew up in could be described as seedy. My school was in an affluent area. It was surreal how the colors came into the world the closer I got to school. With every step I took, the sun slowly woke and the drabness of my world gradually turned into the brilliance of a better one. I bet with every block I came nearer, the crime rate dropped a fraction.

At the halfway point is where I witnessed both sides of the economic divide collide. The bird's song became sweeter and the amount of trash dwindled to rare. There was always garbage on the ground in my world. Sometimes minimum custody prisoners

wearing bright orange vests would be picking up some of the trash they had once thrown down. Grandma said that whenever they were around our way, there must not have been a single piece of paper on the ground in town.

One time, in town, I counted all the trash I saw. By comparison, our neighbor's yard had more.

The number of businesses increased on the way, where as there were plenty of skeletons of businesses nearer home, alluding to a better day, past and future, considering gentrification was on the horizon. There also was a couple places where there were only foundations; reminders of the 92 riots, when a promising 18 year old died after being maced, cuffed and thrown into the back of a lonely car. He was a good kid with asthma. I don't recall seeing any tee shirts with poignantly sad yet trendy slogans on them about breathing...

While grandma and I were laying flowers on my aunt's grave, we went to see the kids much talked about gravestone. It was a huge slab of black and gold marble laid flat on top of the soil. She had said it cost a fortune and without the settlement, they couldn't have afforded it. I knelt down and traced my finger along the many silhouettes of football players and before she could object, I laid down, spread eagle, on top of it and said I wanted one just like it. With a melancholy look, she replied that she hoped she wasn't around to see it.

As the school appeared, the sun would have already risen at my back, throwing my shadow out in front of me. For the last few blocks, this shadow stayed between the school and I, for many years to come. The dark shadow of myself would stay in between me and success.

Sometimes I raced my shadow to the last hundred yards, trying to beat it, like only a kid would do. I never did of course, but on the other hand, I'm now running along the dark shadow by myself. Maybe even a step ahead.

Standing in the shadow of that old gothic looking building with 'Concord High School' sculpted high up on its face - although it was a middle school and had been as long as I could remember - I felt that familiar elation of oncoming learning. I was invincible and it wouldn't return until I was nearly broken.

Resting out front on its steps whenever I was a bit early, the school looked like joy in living color. Looking back towards home however, I could only see the pain in living colored.

I liked calling that tree 'my tree' because my friends didn't have one in their yards, but my tree lost something when I had no choice but to look down on the memory of tragedy. In a way, my cousin took a big part of that tree with him. The part that made it mine.

The day I'm freed, I will plant a tree for my unborn. I will call it 'their tree', and if that old tree is still there, I'll use its seeds (which would be poetic) and there will be a sidewalk at the foot of theirs. It won't be its end; it'll be its beginning.

Theme: Tough Decision

A Tough Decision by Benjamin Rivera

One of the toughest decisions I had to make was confessing to

a crime I did not commit. I am far from being an angel and I have done my share of crimes which I did time for... But this decision was tough because I knew the time I was facing. Being a three time felon with two state bids already, I was looking at a life sentence for being a persistent career criminal for burglaries. So one can only imagine how hard it was for me to make the decision of accepting the blame and confessing to another burglary that could put me away for the rest of my life. What you are about to read is a story about a choice that I made to protect someone I love and hold dear to my heart.

The first time that I met my nephew Nicholas, I was 19 years old and he was just 18 months old. I had left New York City to go live with my sister in Pennsylvania. When I walked in the front door to my sister's apartment, the first person I saw was Nicholas. He was sitting in the middle of the living room floor in his diaper holding his baby bottle. He became instantly silent the second he saw me, a complete stranger in his little baby world. I put my bags down and I reached out my arms toward him to see if he would do the same for me. Like a father who held his son for the first time after he was born. That moment was the beginning of a beautiful and wonderful bond between Nicholas and I.

Throughout the next five years my nephew and I were inseparable. I took him everywhere with me. I taught him everything he needed to know. I was always honest with him about everything except my shady behavior, which I kept hidden from him, I didn't want him to pick up any bad habits from uncle Ben. The time came when I caught got caught for some burglaries and I had to go to prison for five years. I broke his little heart. He didn't understand why I couldn't be at home with him and my family.

When I came home from my first bid he was 11 years old and he was so excited that uncle Ben was home. It was like I never left. I pretty much raised him like he was my son. I was home for 2 years when I caught my second bid. I had to do 3 years. But this time around he knew what I did and he understood that I had to pay the consequences for my actions. During this period of my incarceration he was having a hard time adjusting at home.

Nicholas ended up in a group home for truancy. But he was able to behave and make it back home. I seen him headed in the same direction as me. I did not want that for him. So when I would call home from prison I would tell him all the war stories of the bad stuff that went on in prison to deter him from misbehaving.

I made it home once again. But upon my return home I found out he had picked up a few bad habits, like drinking and smoking weed. I

told him he needed to get his act together and stop drinking and smoking. That's when he dropped the bomb on me and said "you smoke and drink." At that time he was 15 years old. And what he said hit me straight in the heart. So I decided not to engage in those behaviors when he was around. It worked for a little while.

One day I was watching the news and I saw that there was a rash of burglaries in the area. I didn't think much of it until I got a call from my sister. She explained to me that she believed that my nephew had something to do with them. I felt so responsible for his actions. I later found out that he learned that behavior from my older brother who had a serious addiction to crack. So he stole, broke into cars and houses.

I had a serious conversation with my Nephew Nicholas and to my surprise he admitted to me that he had done some of those burglaries. I let him know how disappointed I was

with him. I also let him know that he had a wonderful girlfriend and that he would lose her if he ever went to prison. I thought that he accepted what I told him, because he was behaving for a while and



By Ricardo Dominguez

he went back to school. Meanwhile I was almost done with my parole. I had about 5 months left when I got a call from my sister. She was crying when she told me that my nephew Nicholas was trapped in a house that he was burglarizing. I asked her how did she know this. She simply stated that he had texted her from where he was hiding. He was under the bed. While he was stealing from the house the people that lived there had come back before he could get out. So he hid under the bed. My sister was hysterical. I had to do something. So, I texted him and asked him for the address to his location. I went to the house and waited for about an hour before he was able to sneak out the back door. We drove home in silence. He knew I was ready to lose my damn mind. So he chose to stay quiet. Meanwhile, I am looking at the duffle bag he has on his lap. In it were a flat screen TV and a play station 3. (I found out later) I dropped him off at my sisters and left without saying a word.

A week had passed by when I got a call from my sister who was crying hysterically. She informed me that my nephew/son Nicholas had been arrested for a burglary, and was now sitting in the county jail. My nephew had decided to sell the TV and the PlayStation to the local pawnshop. You can pretty much guess what happened from there. The following day my sister and I went to see my parole officer to get permission to go visit my nephew. He granted me permission and we went to see him that weekend. He was an emotional wreck. He was crying and he looked like he lost some weight. He apologized a million times and he promised me and my sister that if he got a slap on the wrist he would get his act together. He promised to finish school and get a job.

That night at home I thought about what he promised my sister and I did a lot of thinking that night. I called my sister the next morning and I told her that I had a plan to help my nephew get out of his bad situation. We went to visit him again. I told him to listen to what I had to say. And that if he promised to keep the promises he made to his mother and myself that I would help him out of his current situation. I told Nicholas " Do Not Make Me Regret My Decision That I am About to Make For You." He didn't understand what I was talking about. My sister figured it out and was totally against what I was about to do. But at that point she realized how much I loved my nephew/son, and even though she was against my plan I could see her appreciation and newfound respect for me. She had bared witness to the depths of my love and loyalty to my family. The decision I chose to make was truly hard. But I felt that Nicholas deserved a second chance at life. I didn't want to see him ruin his life by having a criminal record like his uncle Ben. He was only 18 years old and he had a good head on his shoulder. I wished that someone would have done for me what I was about to do for my Nephew when I was 18 years old maybe I wouldn't have such a bad criminal record. The following morning on my way to the police station I was hoping that I wouldn't regret the decision I was about to make. I was going to save one life by accepting and confessing to a crime my nephew had done. You're probably wondering how I was going to do this. Here it goes. After I gave the officer my confession I told him that all he

had to do to verify my confession was to call my parole officer and ask him to check out the location of my ankle monitor and that he would see that I was in that area the day of the burglary.

I was arrested at the parole office the next day. My parole officer had told me to come in that he had to talk to me. I knew exactly what was going to happen. So I wasn't surprised to see two detectives in his office waiting to escort me to the county jail.

My nephew was released at his next court date and I was offered 8 years with 5 years of parole upon my completion of the 8 years. I've been in prison for 3 years now and I don't regret the decision I made for my nephew's release.

I am proud to say that Nicholas has finished school and has been working at the same job for 3 years. He has kept his promise and has stayed out of trouble. He is planning to get married to his girlfriend of 4 years and he is about to be a daddy soon. He is also planning on going to college. He is doing very well. He writes to me once a month due to his busy schedule. But even if he didn't write me at all it wouldn't bother me because he kept his promise to me. I do not regret the decision I made and I would do it all over again for him if I had to. I gave a young man a second chance at life and I feel good about it. I know a lot of people who wouldn't approve of what I did but I see it like this: I have done a lot of bad things the least I could do is something to help a child get a second chance to make something of himself. Nicholas is the son I never had and if I had to do another 8 years to make sure he has a fighting chance at succeeding in life then so be it. Every child deserves a second chance at life. I made a tough decision, and I have no regrets.

Row or Wade by Felipe McMillian

The waiting room was as quiet as the moment before time was. Everyone sat solemn, like they were waiting for the doctor to bring news of death, instead of themselves being the bringer.

No phones rang from the receptionist area. No P.A. system called for doctors or nurses to come stat. There were no children underfoot, or mothers having to apologize for infants crying on their laps, which was a plus for the clinic's sake. Surely, the opposite would negatively affect their bottom line.

Kate sat next to me staring at the argyle patterned carpet or at the walls, painted holding cell brown, but looked nowhere in between. The other women looked everywhere, except at the eyes of one another. My left hand was in her lap. She was absentmindedly fiddling with my ring, spinning it up and down my finger, occasionally pulling it to my knuckle, each time with a little more tug, as if to pull it off. I hated the subconscious symbolism, so I gracefully took back my hand, put it on the back of her chair and gave her my right. She looked at it like she was wondering who it belonged to.

Suddenly, the silence was broken, from the back came an older woman, holding on to a young girl, as she sobbed into her ample chest. The girl was sixteen at best. The older woman was whispering encouragements or maybe even reprimands, I couldn't tell over the sobs, which had the contagion of a yawn in a crowded place. Kate wasn't immune. She put her face in my chest, and finally grabbed hold of my right hand, like it was a raft in this room of tears. This building of ghosts.

"Uh... um 'scuse me ma'am," the elder woman, still holding the girl, said to the receptionist. "Is there a back way me and my grandbaby can leave from? Them folks prob'ly still out there and she's mighty upset enough. Ain't no car out there ours no how. We rode the bus." The receptionist nodded without a word, and led the pair back towards the back, where they could escape the barbs of the waiting mob.

Kate and I drove, so we would have to brave the gauntlet again, when the deed was done. The fanatical protesters, with their wittily wicked picket signs, appeared on the very edge of peaceful, and there was a woman with a bullhorn whipping them into more of a frenzy, calling us murderers and killers, and the rest took up her chant. She was like Pilate offering up Jesus or Barabbas, and they were the crowd yelling for a crucifixion.

I wanted to counter the righteous indignation, at the top of my lungs, with the fact that God chose the world over His son, but I didn't. I didn't even meet their eyes. I just shielded the one thing that means the world to me in my arms that are far too short to box with God. Before leaving the car, we watched others make their way through. I asked Kate if she wanted to go through it all. With just a little crack in her voice and no hesitation, she said yes, then opened her door. But I wasn't talking about the crowd.

A couple weeks ago, when we had "the discussion," I said I wanted whatever she did, although I didn't. Way before we said our vows, in front of God and family, I knew her position, but I thought time would change it. I thought I could change her. I didn't want to lose her because of a principle, so even though she said my choice would be hers, I replied with what she wanted to hear.

Till death do you part. Will this death suffice? This union that no man was supposed to rend asunder? Will my fear of losing her doom us anyway? Like we are dooming a life today?

I look up and realize I'm the lone man in the room. Kate squeezes my hand tight and I pull her closer with equal tightness and for an instance, I feel a murderous rage towards the armrest between us, and towards whoever decided these chairs for this room were a good idea. The inconsiderate son of a bitch...

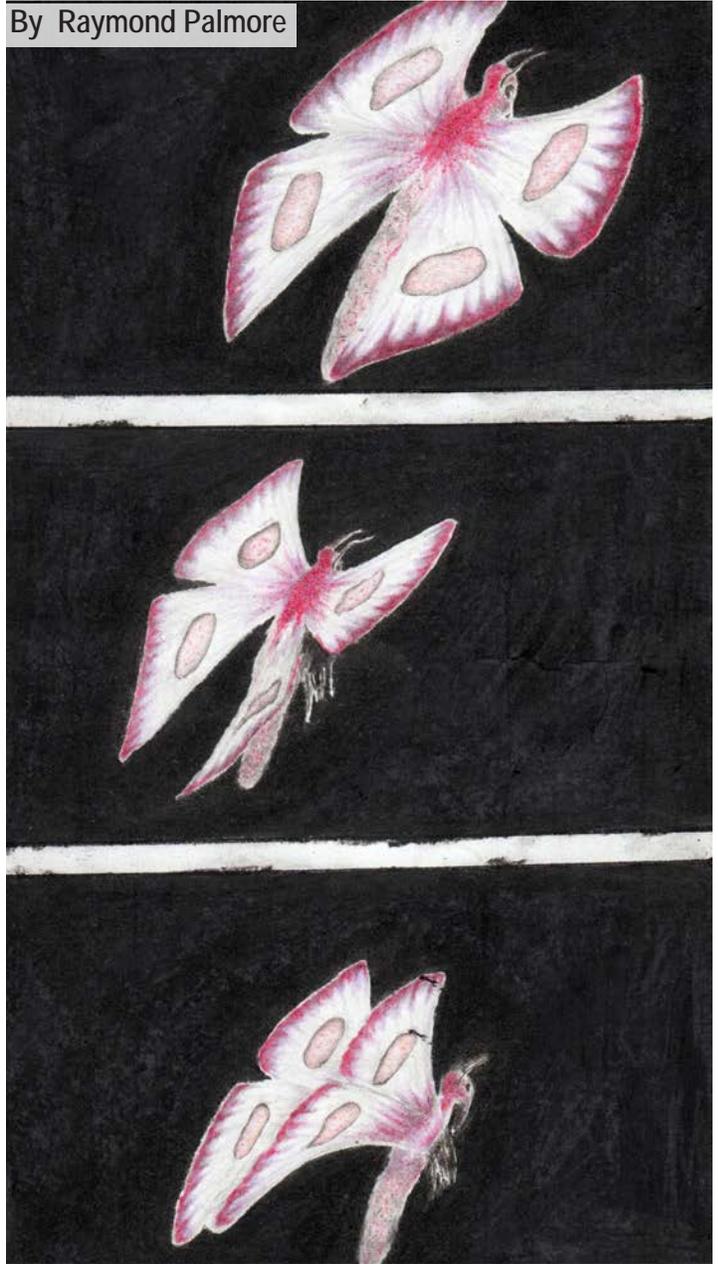
My wife's doctor stepped out and silently gestured for us to come. She stood and saw I was slow to stand. When I did reach my feet, I was light headed, even saw stars. The butterflies that had nested in my stomach, right before the ride here, turned into a murder of crows. My feet were lost to me. She tried pulling me along and the world swayed. My hand fell from hers, like a disobedient angel. The doctor looked at her. She looked at me. I looked at the future, then out the door.

When I turned back to her, I could see the goodbye that had been hidden in her eyes for the last two weeks. I don't know if I can stick around till she says it first. Either choice spells the end, in all caps, but only one will be the end of just us and us alone. But if I tell her what I want, and have always wanted, I will always have a part of her that will be far more than just a fading memory in my mind; a dying synopsis. No, the part would be us and it would grow into a better us, if God is good.

And if I don't tell her, the woman with the bullhorn may be right.

I reach for her hand—with my left—look her in the eyes, then open my mouth to be brave, but not for her or for me. For that little something in between. In her, growing between us.

By Raymond Palmore



Theme: Sharing

Catherine LaFleur

In order to survive in prison, sharing is a skill I had to learn. There have been so many times when I did not get the free weekly supplies: toilet paper, toothpaste, soap, toothbrush, sanitary napkins. Or I did not get enough of the free supplies. This is a very uncomfortable position to be in, gentle readers. Especially when you are pinned down in the foxhole in the midst of the unmentionable act

and realize that you have not brought enough paper products to handle the hazardous waste clean-up. Someone will have to rescue you. In my experience this someone is rarely a person I am friends with.

That is why, in my dorm with one hundred women, we always try to pay it forward. I make it a policy that if I am the person detecting the distress call, I will respond even if the person is my worst enemy. If I can't help, I'm willing to find the friends of the distressed. In truth, this attitude prevails at Camp Prisonery Land when a woman is truly ill or suffering the other women in her dormitory generally attempt to help.

Betsy is a good example, she is nuts, orbiting the outer limits of the universe nuts. She can't take care of herself and has been this way for more than a decade. Thanks to Good Samaritans, Betsy's hair is always clean and braided. Another ensures Betsy's clothes and underwear get washed. Betsy is a messy eater. Whenever I happen to sit at her table, I make sure she has a napkin to wipe her mouth and face with. Sometimes, I wipe it for her. One day I might end up like Betsy. I'd like to think other women would perform these acts of kindness for me.

I also try and share with my roommate. The things I am most eager to share are the aforementioned hygiene supplies, but I will also buy extras like dental floss, shampoo, deodorant, and laundry detergent. Frankly, this is a bit self-serving since I also benefit when my roommate use these products. The sharing includes treats, although I inform said roommate I am not the Queen of Sheba. I usually can't eat a whole package of tuna or beans' so sharing is the obvious answer.

The hardest thing for me to do is share myself. But in order to have friends and be in relationships I have to do this. Who wants to be vulnerable? Prison punishes vulnerability. If you are inside for a long time, solitude is not the answer. My feelings get hurt sometimes. I want to pull back into my shell and be Catherine, Queen Bitch Goddess of the Universe. But this is very lonely and I don't like being lonely any more than I like being hurt. I have to keep taking chances and letting people in. I have managed to build and sustain a few friendships. After about five years, if a friend of yours has not betrayed you, emotionally abused you, etc., it's a good bet they won't. I have found that the fear of the pain of being hurt, shamed, or vulnerable is worse than actually getting my emotions trampled on.

However, no relationship is without problems conflicts and misunderstandings. That is why it is important to really share yourself. And talk. Even my best friendships have had rough patches. Women know how to wound with words. This is not always the fault of the other person; I'm only perfect 98% of the time. My Great Aunt Mamie used to say if all of your relationships are smooth and without problems then it's likely that you are the problem because people are afraid of upsetting you. In other words, don't be such a drama queen or unforgiving.

This brings me to the last part of sharing, forgiveness. I need lots of it because I screw up frequently. I've hurt people's feelings with my facile and glib tongue. I go too far. One of my superpowers is making people feel like crap. If there were

insensitivity trophies, I'd have a large display case. I have to let people off the hook when they apologize. I have to give people an opportunity to change. Even when people I am not friendly with apologize I pay it forward because I want people to let me off the hook and give me an opportunity to change too.

***A Long Time from Home* by Michael A. Johnson**

I joined the Army in November 1968. I was a seventeen-year-old senior at John Marshall High School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. I went to Ft. Polk, Louisiana for basic training. Since I hadn't graduated from high school, I studied and passed the GED while in basic. When I completed basic training, I went to Ft. Rucker, Alabama, for training as a crew chief/mechanic on both fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft.

I enlisted because I felt it was my duty to serve in Vietnam. It wasn't that I had friends over there. In fact, all of my friends were getting deferments by going to college. For me it was a sense of duty. My mom says it's a southern thing.

When I entered basic I became friends with a guy from Long Island, New York. Everyone thought it was strange that a good ole boy from the south and a Yankee could be such good friends. I think it was his death over there that caused me to alter my beliefs and thinking. The war changed for me on that day. It became very personal, and I was going to make them pay. I didn't care if I lived or died, I just knew I was going to take a whole lot with me to hell.

After Vietnam, it seemed that everything had changed back home. Hell, I'd been gone for over two years fighting a war everyone hated. How could I even begin to expect to fit in? My friends from school had married, got divorced and were going around in circles. I couldn't understand their world and they damn sure couldn't understand the one in my head.

About May of 1972 (I came home from 'Nam in August 1971) my father had me committed to a nut house. Nobody could understand my restlessness, migraine headaches or seeking solitude over companionship. Now that was an experience to say the least. Can't say the doctor or I gained any insight into my problems though.

It wasn't 'til 1985 that I was officially diagnosed with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). The severity comes and goes, but I'm currently dealing with it without the use of medication.

Over the years, a number of people have asked me about my time in Vietnam and my response has usually been silence and a hard stare. It wasn't until Veterans' Day 2010 that anyone ever said "thank you." I guess what was most important to me while I served in Vietnam, and still is today, is my pride in this country and in those who serve. It doesn't matter what uniform or branch of service, male or female. It's about service. There's honor, a code and a love of country.

I served three tours in Vietnam for a total of two years, two months and nine days. About the same amount of time I've got left on this prison sentence here in Oregon. Anyway, I was one of those individuals who kept going back. I'd seen my best friend killed and to me that was unfinished business.

As it does with so many Vietnam vets, listening to music can recall a whole host of memories and emotions, both good and bad, especially songs by The Doors and Cream for Me. I couldn't begin to

tell you the thoughts and memories that course through my brain if "Crystal Ships" by the Cream starts playing.

Can't say that my whole time in the 'Nam was bad. There are a lot of good memories and some funny ones, too. One guy, his name isn't there now, said he was the president of the 3 Stooges fan club. He had the certificate, autographed photos of him with Larry, Moe and Shep. This guy was serious about his position, too. How can you take a guy like that seriously?

The country itself is beautiful. I've told myself that one of these days I was going back to visit. I know several guys who have and they're glad they did.

Since our main company area was right next door to the USO at Chu Lai, I tried to learn to water ski. The key word being "try," you understand. Leave it to one of the swift boat drivers to not tell me to let go of the rope if you fall. Never learned to water ski but I did see a lot of the South China Sea bottom.

Sometimes we'd buy a bunch of seafood from one of the local fishermen and have a blowout. We drank what we called "flight line punch." You take a very large ten gallon stainless steel chow hall pot, two bottles of vodka, two bottles gin, two bottles rum, twelve bottles Matus wine, twenty-four cans of 7-Up, twenty-four cans of ginger ale, one package grape pre-sweetened Kool-Aid for color, and a half-pound of sugar. Do not use paper cups! Needless to say, we got quite drunk. My best friend used to tell everyone that we partied hard and fought harder. He was right too.

There are moments and days when I wish that I would have made the military a career. If I had re-enlisted when I came back from 'Nam in 1971, I would have gotten a \$10,000 re-enlistment bonus, plus my choice of duty station for the next two years. If I had accepted my commanding officer's recommendation in May 1970, I could have gone to West Point.

During my tours I didn't write home much and I guess it really bugged my mom because she wrote my CO asking why I wasn't writing home as often as I should. Hell, I wasn't even writing my fiancé all that much. My CO ended up calling me in and reading me the riot act and then wrote my mom about getting me an appointment to the Academy. She's still got that darn letter, believe it or not and used to tell everyone who would listen about it. All I wanted to do was to make it home in one piece, get married and settle down, have a couple of kids and live the American Dream.

So much for all that. When I got home I learned my fiancée had an abortion and I'd paid for it with some of the money I'd sent home. I thought I was paying car payments and rent. Talk about feeling like an idiot. So much for love.

After my last tour I came home through Sea-Tac International Airport and got called everything under the sun. Not sure if I actually killed babies but I was accused of it. Didn't make any sense then and it still doesn't now.

I flew from Vietnam to McCord A.F.B. on Flying Tiger Airlines and out-processed at Ft. Lewis. It wasn't 'til I got to Sea-Tac that I noticed everyone was looking at me as if I had murdered their

family.

When I got home I was welcomed and doted over but that didn't last for long. The moment I stepped outside the family circle I got those stares again. I've had tomatoes thrown at me, been cussed at, and spit at, but I'd go back over in a heartbeat. Its unfinished business and way too many guys are still missing. Everyone needs to be brought home!!!

A long time ago when I was seeing one of the VA psychs, he told me, "There is something on your mind which is a great and terrible secret. I cannot see it, but I can see its shadow and feel its presence in everything you say."

He told me that he wouldn't begin to speculate what it was, but that I should feel assured that in war everything is the norm. That war is hell, which I already knew, but that I should always remember that when a soldier goes to war everything is pre-forgiven. I've never forgotten that statement. But forgiven by whom? How? When was it pre-forgiven and why wasn't I told before?

Every combat vet has secrets and sometimes we tell them to each other because we understand one another. But we usually don't tell these things to other people. We are embarrassed by some of the things we did and appalled by most of the rest. But among ourselves we can speak without explanations or apologies. We share a common time and place in our lives, one that cost us our innocence.

I think the only thing that bugged me really bad when I came home was a question my best friend from high school asked me. "How many gooks did you kill?" At the time I thought "how dare he ask me that question?" What gave him the right? Did I answer? No! I just turned and walked away from him. Sadly, I'm still a long way from home.

Forty-three years ago this month I made my final departure from South Vietnam. Looking back it seems as if it was just yesterday that I boarded the "Freedom Bird" for the last time. Sometimes it feels as if I never left.

Theme: Outside Looking In

Robert G. Davis

When I first saw "Outside Looking In" as a theme to write about, I admit, I was a little shy to this one. Because this one really hit home. For me this is how I feel twenty-four seven—even now. Well, let me start at the beginning. It's the day that one of the older guys in my hood asked me that one question that most little kids can't wait to be asked. *Do you want to sell drugs for me?* When I was asked this question, I said no. But I said no, not for me, because there were other people around us. All I was doing was showing off. Now that I think about it, I was only showing off for my friends because I was the oldest out of all of us. Then there's my family. Now I don't think that too many people felt this way inside their own family. I thought that people would like the fact that I said no to selling drugs—but they didn't. My family was half and half. Some were happy and proud. Others were more like, *why?* They looked at me with a crazy look in their eye. I lost a lot of family and friends that day and I didn't even know it.

My family would push me to try and make money if I didn't want to sell drugs. They kept on pushing and pushing and pushing and pushing. I mean I was only about 13 or 14 years old. I tried everything a little kid could do to make money. I started going up to the supermarket and helping to bag up people's stuff. Sometimes I would help them to their car. But then I was told by the store that I couldn't do that. So I had to find another way and I started cutting grass. But that didn't last long because in the city, there's not that many people with lawns or backyards with grass to cut. If they do have grass around their home, they have their own kids cut it or they cut it themselves. Then, there was my car washing business. But the mayor put a cap on how much water you could use. People weren't able to use water in a wasteful manner so that killed that one. Now by this time, I was all out of ideas. I was trying all kinds of stuff to make money, but ways that I tried were being shut down. Now, my dad has taught me one thing in life and that was to take what you know at that moment and use it the best way you know how. So I sat for a while and thought about what I have that I can use to make money.

It didn't take me long to come up with it. I learned from my dad, not long before all this started, how to start a car and get in it without a key—just a flathead and screwdriver. Yes! I became a car thief. I started off by stealing cars to impress my so-called friends and selling them. Then, one of my friends said that he knows where I can sell each car I got. So, I told him to show me and he did. That's the day I started to make money. I've learned early on in life not to let everyone know what you are doing. I started to be by myself a lot. I would get my money, but for some reason I still felt like an outsider. I was always on the outside. So, what I did was that I stayed on the outside. People didn't want to let me into their groups. So, I made my own group with just me. I cut a lot of people out of my life, all the way down to one or two friends. I cut my family down to the people that live in my house.

I started to stay in my room a lot more. I would just smoke weed and play video games. When it was time for school, I would wake up and go to school; staying by myself the whole time.

Then, I would come home and get on my computer to check my emails, smoke weed and play video games. Then when it was time to work, I would get ready for the night. I don't think people even saw me leave the house. No one asked me, so I told no one. But, as I look back at it now, I see that nothing really changed from then. The things that changed from then are that I don't smoke weed anymore and I don't steal cars no more. But from the outside looking in, I'm still there. I still stay by myself. I'm 35 years now. I've been by myself all my life. At least this way I have no one to blame but myself when stuff goes wrong. I thank you for reading my story. I'll write again soon.

My Own Odyssey by Bobby Bunderson

Had this theme been "Inside looking out" I could have easily knocked out a decent eight-hundred word essay about my views of being in prison. I have after all spent over three decades behind these walls. However, "outside looking in" was much more challenging. After over a week of serious contemplation I decided

to write about my life in prison after all. Confused? Well hopefully I can sort it all out for you in the following paragraphs.

For as far back as I can remember my life has been in one state of turmoil or another. It all began when my father would spend months away from home; leaving my young twenty-two year old mother alone with her two sons, Travis, three, and yours truly, five. In all fairness to my father, he was away on business. But his absence left a huge hole in our lives that would linger for years to come.

By the time I was ten years old my parents had divorced. Travis and I bounced back and forth between them for the next five years. It was during this period when the seeds of my dysfunctions were planted. A storm was brewing. I ended up developing serious abandonment issues followed closely by unhealthy control issues. Throw in a little low self-esteem coupled with a fair amount of manipulation and I was well on my way to "Failures-Ville."

Both of my parents have had four failed marriages and each have been married five times. I grew up with absolutely no relationship role models. Both parents were alcoholics. My dad beat me while my mother ignored me. I did everything under the sun to get a little of their attention drawn my way. I excelled in school receiving mostly A's. I also excelled in sports, namely football, basketball, and baseball. I kept our front and rear lawns groomed well enough to be in Home and Garden magazine. I practically raised my brother and three stepbrothers for four years. Yet nothing I did seemed to be good enough.

As I entered junior high school I had become ashamed of my parents, step-parents and of myself. I learned how to have friends but only on a superficial level. All anyone got from me was frosting, no cake. In my relationships I had unwittingly become pervasive and co-dependent.

Adulthood brought its own set of baggage. Once all the ingredients of a warped belief system were properly mixed together I had become angry and hurt about how my life had ended up. I was afraid that my father had been right all along. I really was worthless! I made the subconscious decision to strike back. I began my life of crime. I wasn't a thief, nor was I a drug dealer. Not good enough. In order to strike a blow at my oppressors it had to be grand. I began hurting people. Not strangers, chosen randomly, no. I hurt people who dared to get close to me. I wasn't trying to hurt them; I was trying to hurt my father. I wanted to embarrass him by my actions, publically humiliate him. It worked.

For most of my life my inner rage was hidden from me. I didn't know where it had come from, I had no insight. Hell, I didn't even know what insight was! I had lived the first thirty seven years of my life outside of myself, never looking in. That all changed on September 11th as the world looked on as the World Trade Center collapsed. This was when I began this trip of self-realization and discovery. I looked back on my life through the eyes of all of those I had hurt and disappointed. I began to look inward. Do you know what I discovered? I have a lot to offer the world. I have a lot of self-worth.

I am by no means the broken man that I once was. Today I am a lifer. But had I not been given this opportunity to attend these groups and to learn about cognitive distortions and anger management and coping skills, where would I be, dead? This prison

term has been a blessing in disguise. Today I can express all of my pent up pain without shame. Prisoner Express gives us all a voice, a venue to vent all of our past poisons. I have spent way too much of life outside of myself. I wasted decades being on the inside of dysfunction looking out. Today, I am healing and I am now outside of those dysfunctions looking in. Today I smile.

Theme: Keeping the peace



By Daniel Petterson

Desiderata by Tom Orton

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible, without surrender be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant.

They too have their story. Avoid loud and aggressive persons—they are a vexation to the soul.

If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interest in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery and deceit. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is—many persons strive for high ideals and everywhere life is full of heroism. Be yourself. Do not feign affection or be cynical about misfortune, but do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loveliness.

Take kindly the counsel of years, gratefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden grief. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and stars—you have a right to be here, and whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive him to be, and whatever your labor and aspirations in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul.

With all its sham and drudgery, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

Sandra Sysyn

I'd always been a peacekeeper, a tiny sheriff in a grown-up town. Innocence was my side iron and I waved it recklessly as I stood at the top of the stairs. From that height, I must have been an imposing sight to the only two people I had to teach me how to love. I ordered them to stop fighting. Sometimes that was enough, but more often it was not, and my frustration with wanting to make people behave mounted. A person of peace doesn't need to know the why of things, just the what. I reckon it never occurred to me then and I don't recollect it now either. I just knew I had to bring some order to the chaos in my world.

My ma, she was emotional stranger to me and an outlaw. She'd be holed up in her room doing a lot doing things I didn't know. Sometimes, her band of renegades came no matter where the sun was in the sky. With no warrant to enter, I'd keep an eye on the comings and goings. I didn't pay it any mind as long as there was peace, or so there seemed to be. But unbeknownst to me unlawful things were going on.

When her and my pa would fight, she'd threaten to leave us. I knew she eventually would, but I had no cause to hold her prisoner and she was too wild for Pa to tame. He had tried a few times, but somehow it only made things worse. She didn't fancy being tied up much and she blamed him for everything and found fault in whatever he did. But he was the Good Guy in my eyes. I watched hum broken and wounded. He would mount up his white steed of steel and ride off in search of something to make her happy. She never was. I was the only one happy to see him ride back in, it didn't matter to me even if he came back empty handed. The scent of Old Spice and Lucky Strikes, the way I fit in his arms, these things were all I cared about.

Once he brought back Indian spears from the Apaches. My

brother and I waged war upon each other many times with those spears. I always had to find a way to cut him off at the pass, stay one step ahead because he was bigger and stronger than me. All the same he wasn't much of a deputy in my vigil to keep the peace. He didn't seem to care much about Pa, either. He was like a drunken Indian selling secrets to the outlaw. Just like her, my brother was secluded within himself. He spent a lot of time alone on the range. I'd awaken at the crack of dawn to find him silently playing with our toys.

I had to sleep in, having spent the whole night trying to keep the peace. I didn't know he didn't belong to Pa then. My Pa and I, we were the same you know. We had each other's backs. Me being the Peace Keeper, I'd watch over him when he was down. I wasn't gon' to let no harm befall him whilst he was broken. We'd hole up at the camp and I'd make beef over a fire and feed it to him till he was strong enough to travel again. Then we'd be on our way. After Ma left, I swore to myself I'd always take care of him, but somewhere on the trail of some bank robbers, I got injured and fell off. We drifted apart for years. I never did forget how much it hurt to see someone you love get hurt though. It's what drove me. A fire burned inside me to keep the peace at all cost. Even though I wasn't much for the right side of the law anymore. Still to me right was right and wrong was wrong.

One day I happened upon three hombres trying to kill someone I cared for. I shot first and planned to ask questions later. Even though the one that fell was the worst, the other two lied to save themselves when the law stepped in. They didn't care that I faced a hangin', my innocence didn't seem to work for me this time. Pa, he came for me and tried to cut me loose, but the strong arm of the law was too much for him. I didn't end up hangin' but to this day I sit in my cell wishin' I hadn't drifted so far from Pa, and keeping the peace wasn't all it's cracked up to be.

Picture themes-

A picture is worth 1000 words, so they say. For those of you whose imagination can get stimulated by a picture please share your thoughts or stories regarding these images. As with the word themes we encourage you to open up to the story you see in each picture. Write your stories and send them to us. You will receive a packet of all the submitted entries.



Due 8/1/15



Due 9/1/15



Due 10/1/15



Due 11/1/15



Due 12/1/15



Due 1/1/16



Due 2/1/16

Previous Picture themes- As with the word themes I only have the space to share one or two themes that were submitted on the previous cycles pictures. To receive a copy of them all you must submit your own entry. Please don't worry about it **being good enough. The first step is to write. I have seen such improvement in the writing skills from those that participate regularly, especially those who participated in Alyssa's Creative Writing program.**



John Naylor

Sometimes simple things will bring about more complex thoughts. We normally don't realize it at first glance though. My Mama would often take us out to eat. Eating fast food was nearly an event. Even if my Mom couldn't come along my brother would still be right there with me. Because a couple country boys aren't gonna miss out on some French fries. We'd park the 1983 Buick LeSabre outside of McDonald's. If mama had to go through the drive through again to get the sparrows more French fries she would. They'd often get at least one small fry. My brother, Andy, is four years older than me. He seemed sure of the appropriate size of French fry to throw to

the birds and when it was prudent to tear the larger French fries into smaller pieces. Sometimes I'd just watch him throw them. It was like something inside him brought him to a point of scientific analysis. He'd look at which sparrows were more aggressive and which underdog deserves a piece of fry because theirs was taken like so many children at a piñata.

Sometimes I felt that's how God looked at us. At every turn there's so much rivalry and dissention. But not one sparrow falls to the ground without god knowing it. And we're worth many sparrows. Just looking at the scene in a trance was like seeing humanity. In a way it was like I saw God in the innocence of a boy, only wanting the world to be fair, a boy wishing to bring order despite the frantic greed. It was such a simple thing. Such a humble experience. Nothing for the news. Just the observation of a young man seeing the heart of his brother. It was a reflection of how he treated the world around him. Sure the birds are just sparrows but in our eyes they're God's creatures. And our actions mattered, because it was an act of stewardship. Should our actions toward humanity be any different?

Flash by Curtis Colvin

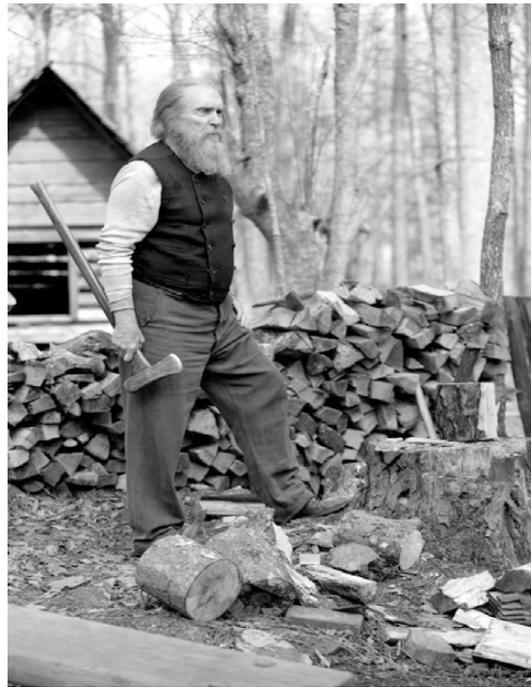
She was "Flash". She was a beaut! She was the fastest racing pigeon in all of Maine. I loved her just as much as I loved my dad, but not mom. I loved her most.

We found her in Jeff's backyard with a hurt wing. Frank caught her, and George somehow healed her. She ended up in an old rabbit cage in my backyard. One day, after about two months, we decided to let her go. She flew off so fast, it took a few minutes, but we all started to cry and have the sniffles. Before we took two steps, she landed back on my shoulder. It kina scared me for a moment.

Mom came out and took a picture of us. That's Jeff on the left, me George, then Brian. Look at her, ain't she something? We didn't know what to do with her. Then Brian told us about pigeon races they have down at the park on Saturdays. So we went. You know what? She won the very first day. It surprised all of us. We got this ribbon, and an old man offered to buy Flash. I was tempted, but the gang said no.

We had kept flash for about 6 months before she got sick. Her feathers started falling out, and she started losing races a lot. Mom said we need to let her go, and we did try, but she would not leave us.

Finally on a cold morning in October, I went out back to feed her, and she was gone. The latch was still on and there was no way for her to get out. My buds and I wondered what happened to her years until one day my dad let it slip out. Come to find out, mom told him to get rid of the "featherless wonder" and he killed her and put her in the trash. Well, there went us thinking Flash escaped and went to heaven. We won't forget you Flash!



Luis Ortiz

I wrote a letter to a lumberjack, apologizing for the changing times. I explained how technology is replacing the retro forms of communication so we will no longer need to cut down trees for paper. Paper will be obsolete, emails will be sent, phones are now mobile and writing tablets are electronic.

Plastic will replace paper plates and cups, metallic tables and chairs will take the place of wooden ones, most doors will be made out of glass, homes will be constructed out of brick stones and steel. There will be no need to cut down a defenseless tree, a home to many, shade to all.

The oxygen level will improve, the roots will dig deep for support, and the carbon will reduce which will finally expose the sky. Leaves will turn to dirt, fertile and clean, branches can be clipped, and hawks will hang.

I wrote a letter to a lumberjack apologizing for the changing times, but when I went to send it, I realized he had no email and lived in a log cabin heated by fire wood that can only be accessed by a tiny wooden row boat that's tied to a wooden dock fenced off by wooden beams with wooden posts dug in the ground.

It's weird how Mother Earth needs us just as much or even more that we need her. After all we are also her children that choose to walk all over the one that bears us, like a mother expecting a child. Sure she cries with a thunderous sound, she shakes in pain and even erupts in anger. Sometimes she yells with a breath that blows us away but she's our mother, true and dear. She never lets us down even though we mistreat her – isn't it time for us to grow up and start taking care of God's natural beauty? Her heavenly body aches and spins but soon she'll spin out of control and we may never get her back.

Just as Mother's day is every day so should Earth day, because if we don't start recognizing this now, we'll all turn into dust.

I wrote a letter to a lumberjack, apologizing for the changing

times – instead I reminded him to wish our mother a happy one because she's divine.

Solitude by Chris Hannigan

The morning started off cold. Cold enough to cause Isaiah's breath to hang around his shoulders, his own personal clouds. The mornings had been getting colder the past few days. Winter was moving in with a vengeance, but that was to be expected. The summer had been extremely hot and longer than ever before. Winter wasn't happy about being kept away. Like a little kid who had his favorite toy taken away, winter was putting on a full-blown tantrum.

The water had been frozen in the spigot, and Isaiah knew he didn't have any time left to prepare. The day before, he managed to pick the last of the late vegetables from the fields, but he still had firewood to split. The trees he cut down the year before were finally dry enough for him to burn. The unusually hot summer had sucked up every drop of moisture, and even the creek had dried up. The cut logs had dried out rapidly, as if they had been left in a kiln all summer. He knew he was going to need all the wood he could get to make it through the winter, and these extra logs would make all the difference.

As the sun crept over the hill and shone through the bare trees, the cold morning air quickly warmed, causing the clouds that hovered above Isaiah's shoulders to disperse. The pile of logs loomed before him as he readied his axe. He took a whetstone from the pocket of his jacket and began sharpening the blade. Using his thumb, he tested the edge. Finding it satisfactory, he slid the stone back into his pocket. Grasping the worn handle of the axe, he swung it above his head, then let the blade drop down onto the first piece. It didn't take long for him to build up a rhythm, and soon the crisp sound of the axe head attacking the aged wood and the distinctive sound of the logs splitting created a profane symphony that echoed through his private skeletal audience. The wood chips and split pieces of logs rapidly built up around the old stump, forcing Isaiah to take a break and stack the pieces on the wood pile closer to the house.

The silence that settled on the forest with the axe stilled reminded him of solitude. The birds had fled south, the squirrels were already curled up in their holes, and even the insects had quieted down for the winter. He alone stirred in the secluded forest, but he was finally at peace. No noise from the crowds to bother him or the never-ending demands of people. He was free from it all in his little cabin in the woods.

The sun continued its daily climb in the sky, and as it crowned the trees, the temperature had risen enough that Isaiah had to remove his jacket and pull up his sleeves. The earthy smell of the fresh cut wood grew stronger as the air warmed and clung to him like a cologne. Taking a break, he looked at the woodpile. It had diminished significantly, and the stack alongside the house had grown considerably. Picking the weighty axe up, Isaiah was ready to go back to work. Just as his hand closed around the neck, he heard the snap of a breaking branch.

Startled, he quickly rose up with the axe firmly in his grasp and looked around for what had caused the sound. Off in the distance, he spotted the sleek brown coats of a doe and a young fawn weaving their way around the barren trees. Maybe he wasn't so alone.



The Return by David Joseph Kiluk

And so I was floating. Soaring, swooping into the vast expanse of space. The light was shining brilliantly amongst the silence. One instant I was hovering in the hazy vacuum and the next moment I was swept to wherever my thoughts took me. As soon as a destination crossed my mind I would instantly arrive there. Time didn't seem to pass. And I never needed to take a breath.

Stretched before me appeared countless stars, ethereal nebulas, blazing meteors, craggy asteroids. I saw a spiral galaxy above me. Then I was inside it. Not just inside it, I was one with it. I could feel it at its core, at its essence. I knew what it was. I was a part of what it was. I drifted upward, rising higher, freer, more liberated. I transcended time, space; I was apart of it all. Spreading my arms like an inquisitive young hawk I ascended lightening quickly. Looking down I saw my palms I reached outward, feeling my existence. I stared at the astral outline of my upper torso and kicked my feet as if treading water.

I closed my eyes and saw faces flashing before me. Faces from my past. They beamed and their lips parted, repeating my name over and over with pure bliss; bliss that originated the celebrations, birthdays, graduations. The faces were joyful that I was who I was; because I simply existed. And I felt the same towards them. Then I started to fall. Eyes downward, I whipped through the darkness, through the blurry light pouring from distant stars. I noticed a small orb beneath me, floating in serene silence. Royal blue seas spanned under wispy clouds and green fields abounded, teeming with life.

As I focused I was there, descending down through the atmosphere, the air heavier, thicker, and redolent with freshness. I landed in a plush, verdant valley. Radiation from a yellow star energizes the abundant vegetation. Light bent by the arc of the sky invoked the planet's spectrum in wide, solid colors. Almost as vivid as the colors I've seen elsewhere. Behind iron gates sat small

stone markers. Children's laughter echoed in from neighboring playgrounds. Sunlight illuminated a pink granite tower. It read, "Son, brother, friends, beloved..." It was marked with my birthday.

Suddenly I was underwater, breathing fluid, gasping. I stopped, feeling content in a warm, comfortable place. My tranquility was upset when I felt a squeezing sensation, a force propelling me forward. I broke through a barrier, entering a new hazy reality. I coughed, gasping for air, crying out with all my might, missing the safety and comfort of the chamber. I was quickly cradled in the tender arms of a young woman. Her face was joyful that I was who I was; because I simple existed. And I felt the same toward her.



The Ascending Stairway by Reginald McFadden

Late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said: "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

Every culture and religion has a concept of the Ascending Stairways, called Jacob's Ladder, showing the ascending, evolutionary and step by step progress of humanity. We all are ascending a path from which we are coming back to our potential beginning, when all things had their origin.

"Returning to the source is
serenity;
It is to realize one's destiny.
To realize one's destiny is to
Know the eternal.
To know the eternal is to be
Enlightened"

- Tao Te Ching

Each step, birth, boyhood, adulthood; each step, we move from learning our first word. Babe, saying our first word momma, from touching, feeling, tasting. Our first step by step, we step into the unknown mysteries and step out into the light of discovery, step by step, we fall, get up, stop, slowly stop.

Once we lived in deep caves, drawing images on the walls of the caves, to give lessons to our future. We hunted,

following our hunt into new lands, to discover new things, to relate stories to our clans, tribes. Step by step, we found strength in numbers, more idea. Each step we go forward - by sea, land and by air - we travel to the moon, send self-operated machines to Mars, to come back and relate stories to our nation, to our world. Step by step, we found humanity in collective actions. Though we enter this world as babes alone, we leave this world alone, ready, worthless body that serve the needs of the earth. We are here as one soul... ascending as a species of *Homo sapiens*.

Whether you believe in biblical creation story or other evidence of human beings evolved on this planet, it is clear from D.N.A., we are 99.99% the same. Step by step...

Whether you accept religion, philosophy or culture each are tools in advancing human civilization...step by step...

Someone asked: if humanity has the potential to write, why can't we see it in his or her violent history?

I tell them: anyone grows, they grow out of old shoes, old clothing and eventually into a new person, every seven years we are charging even our bone system. The Earth changes every season, every thing in a step-by-step progression, regression, etc.

Ourselves follow the course of ease...but our true self is to be:

To those who are good to me. I am good
To those who are not good to me. I am also good.
To those who are sincere with me,
I am sincere, to those who are not
Sincere to me, I am also sincere.

The equisetec person would find these words to be nonsense because there is no need to understand the step ahead of them, with each step. The higher you climb the less the other steps are as they once were. The higher we climb up these steps, the more compassion we grow into, more virtues we acquire and the more selfless we become from growing from I to we, we to us – unity.

"Empty yourself of everything.
Maintain a steady serenity.
All things take shape and become active
But I see them return to their source
Like vegetation that grows and flourished
But returns to the root form which it soars."

Step by step.
Fall get up fall get up
Step by step
Bearing and nurturing
Creating but not owning
Giving without demanding
This is harmony.



Truth or Consequences by Lorraine Bennett-Kenick

As a teenager, one of my most obvious flaws was to run off; to anywhere, at anytime, by any means of transport.

On one particular excursion to Texas, I caught a ride with a most unusual man in a Datsun B-210.

The time of this adventure was the late seventies, but even then, a Datsun B-210 was considered a beater. In spite of their relative newness, compact cars of the day were a joke and this one was no different.

I had been hitch hiking along I-10 and just left Cabazon, California. The truck stop, with the big dinosaurs out in the middle of desert nowhere, was a favorite spot of mine.

A man with dark hair and beard picked me up and we rode on into Arizona. He was driving a blue Datsun B-210.

Somewhere in Arizona we picked up a hippy couple on their way to Missouri and drove on to New Mexico.

Having four people in a Datsun B-210 is one thing. Especially in the hot desert but the air conditioner was working and the driver was putting miles behind us very quickly.

While in New Mexico the driver picked up two more hitch hikers. Now there were two couples, and me with this guy, crammed into the Datsun B-210.

It was a sight to see.

When we came upon a Border Patrol Station, I could only guess what the border guard might be thinking when he saw us.

It was then that we discovered that our driver was a fugitive from justice, from California, and that the car was stolen. The border guard wanted him to pull over to the side of the turn out lane.

The driver told us to bail 'cuz he wasn't going down easy.

It was like a scene from Barnum and Bailey's Circus clowns, with the five of us bailing out of that little car and the border guard flailing her arms at us. She was yelling at us to "Stay in the car! Stay in the car!"

We all yelled back, "No way!"

The driver took off and we were ordered to sit on the sidewalk across from the border patrol's guard shack.

The five of us just sat there, cross-legged, in a row and in the hot sun, waiting for what was next.

From where we were sitting we could hear the police radio. The driver of the Datsun B-210 was fleeing on the interstate by heading west on the eastbound lane. Then he'd cross the median and go east on the westbound lane.

He just kept going back and forth, until they finally nailed him.

The five of us were piled up into the back of a city police department vehicle.

If you thought five hitch hikers in a Datsun B-210 was funny, try seeing five in the back seat of a cop car.

The reason for this being that there are only two police cars in this town, called Truth or Consequences.

Ha-Ha. That's the way it was, at least in 1978.

Once we were down town and had everything sorted out, we discovered that our driver was also armed. He had stolen the car from an old lady in California that he had robbed. He was probably picking up hitch hikers as cover or even possible hostages.

We were told how lucky we all were and let go.

I dunno—if we were lucky or not.

I do know that as the policeman told us we were free to go, that it was illegal to hitch hike in Truth or Consequences.

The five of us walked down the interstate, split up to get a ride easier. I stayed with the Missouri couple until we got there—

But that's another story.



The Jetty by Damion Jackson

As a youngster I basically lived on the beach. We would always be running up and down the shore playing catch and five minute games of football or out in the water boogie boarding and bodysurfing. Sometimes I would pretend to be a flying superhero as the waves carried me onward – through a make-believe sky in my mind. I would laugh and yell in random triumph as the white wash tumbled me to the shore. Wet sand in my hair and eyebrows.

We used to run, still barefooted, to the corner store and buy snacks. Our shorts still wet with salt water. My go-to was a Yoo-Hoo and king-sized Butterfinger ... I would sit on my towel and chew a bite of chocolate and wash it down with chocolate water while I watched the ocean do its thing ... move and pull, reflect and roar. The sounds and motion were sort of hypnotic. The beach was my favorite place.

I remember one afternoon my friend Adrian and I were practicing our summer ritual of eating snacks while dripping dry and I noticed a

small procession move its way across the jetty. It was a woman and two young girls as well as a small, curly haired dog. It was strange how purposefully they moved across those rocks – the girls didn't hop playfully from boulder to boulder, as is the standard protocol for kids on the jetty. The dog didn't even struggle behind being as small as it was. That puppy was moving in lock-step with the three as they drifted out to the end of the rock wall. They glided as if they were on a conveyer belt, not even noticing the pure blue sky that was their backdrop or the golden sun that warmed my skin ... our skin.

I don't know how long I watched them for – it could've been five minutes or an hour but the day vanished beyond them. What were they doing? More importantly – why weren't

they happy? I could sense something was wrong by the way they moved – they came to the beach that day for reasons other than fun.

I watched as they finally reached the end of the jetty and formed a crescent moon around an object that was gripped by the woman. It looked like a cookie jar and both girls reached up and put their hands on it. Their little hands lingered and they lowered their heads ... and after a moment the woman lifted the lid off of the container and poured what looked like dirt into the green and white froth of the sea. In that instant I realized what was going on. This day that we used as a mental canvas of fun and games was something totally different for that woman, her daughters, and their dog. This day at the beach was, for them, a day of pain and mourning.

I blatantly stared as they made their way back to the shore with their arms around each other. They stepped down the rocks and their bare feet penetrated the sand. The youngest girl raised her head and we caught each other's eyes. I managed the smallest of smiles to try to comfort her, if only for a moment in time. The smile returned was morose and infinitely wiser than anything I knew at that point in my life. I noticed the sun glint off the still-drying tears running down her angel face. It reminded me of the sunsets I'd seen reflect and shimmer so many times before on the waves that crashed in front of me. She looked away and they left.

As they dissolved behind me the day reanimated around me with a crash of a wave. I turned to my buddy Adrian who had witnessed everything I just did. We didn't need to say anything to know that the beach changed for us that day. It transformed from our favorite place into a sacred place. Without a word we got up, dusted the sand from our hands, and walked home with our towels around our necks and our boogie boards underneath our arms.

We never played at the beach again.

Final notes-I pack as much info into these newsletters as I can. I keep adding material until my 32 page limit has been reached. There is much to say and share. Living, whether incarcerated or free, presents challenges. I am one to believe that challenges are easier shouldered when shared. I invite you to take some ownership in the PE program and share in its evolution. I create

P.E. as I go along and there is no reason you should not co-create as well, so send your ideas on how we can make this an even better project. Our mission is to provide materials that are engaging and thoughtful, and to solicit your thoughts on a variety of subjects. We are all trying to figure out why we are on this earth, and being in prison doesn't stop that process. Be good to one another. If we were all able to do that imagine the world we could make.

My timetable has this newsletter mailed out by late June. The registration period should go to about Sept 1, 2015 for most programs and then I will begin sending out lessons. Please note there are a number of projects that you are being asked to send in material for if you want to participate. If you want to enter Treacy's Stationary Creation or Art Show project please send the submissions to her care of PE. If you want the humor booklet please be sure to send in a joke, funny story or cartoon. I will accept jokes until 10/1 for inclusion. There is no sign up for the theme and picture essays. Just send in your submission before the deadline listed in the paper. Here at PE we cannot be all things to all folks who write but we will try hard to complete all the projects we are offering in this newsletter. I look forward to hearing from you and wish you the best,

Gary

P.S. I have had notice from the Association for Research and Enlightenment that they will send free books to prison libraries. It is a group that promotes the work of Edgar Cayce [AKA The Sleeping Prophet] From everything I have read he was the real deal. He went into trances and was able to see deeper into the nature of things than a typical man is able. His sessions were recorded and studied at A.R.E. They share this info with the world. They will only send books to your unit's library or chaplain. If there is one, have them write to

A.R.E. Attn: Prison Outreach
215 67th St
Virginia Beach, Va 23451



Cornell University Clock Tower

REGISTRATION FORM -This form or a letter should be returned in a timely manner to make sure we receive it before this cycle's packets are sent—If you don't want to cut up your newsletter, you can write a list of programs you wish to join and send it to us at

PRISONER EXPRESS
Anabel Taylor Hall Ithaca
NY 14853-1001

For those of you who can you can email us at: alt-lib@cornell.edu. Our website is: www.prisonersexpress.org

Programs – Please check the box of each program in which you wish to participate. Carefully read the requirements of each program before signing up.

Expedited Book Mailings –to be eligible to be part of the expedited book program, please check with the administration at the prison you are housed, to learn if you are allowed to send 8 stamps or a check for \$4.00 to cover postage. Books are free, but the mailing cost is not, so we unfortunately won't be able to send you books without stamps or a check. We have a good selection of donated used books. List types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection of books. Please check correct boxes regarding expedited books.

Soft cover only

Hard and soft cover

Receipt needed

_____ Maximum number of books allowed at your facility

Poetry Project – Please send me the next Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 15. I understand that to receive the anthology I have to submit a poem for consideration in the anthology.

Humor Project- I could use a good laugh. Send me the good humor issue. I will send in a joke, a funny story, or a cartoon

History Project- Yes, send me Jaffre's lesson on Viet Nam

Dogs- I want to enter Camille's World of Dogs. Please send me this packet.

Journal Project – I will keep a Journal for a year, and share my entries with PE. Please send me a Journal Starter packet

Chess Club – Yes, I want to receive mailings on how to improve my chess game.

Math Puzzles- sign up for this mailing if you want a brain challenge.

Animation Project- Treacy please send me the art packet that focuses on drawing for an animated film project

You do not need to sign up for the Theme and Picture Writing programs. By submitting your writings and art, you are automatically included on all future mailings regarding those individual projects.

NAME: (PLEASE PRINT) _____

ADDRESS and ID # _____

I give the Alternatives Library permission to post my writings and artwork on the web Sign below

SIGNATURE: _____

DATE: _____

CTA/Durland Alternatives Library
127 Anabel Taylor Hall
Ithaca, New York 14853-1001
www.prisonerexpresss.org
Change Service Requested

Non- Profit Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Permit 448
Ithaca, NY 14850

Prisoner Express Newsletter

Summer 2015

Prisoner Express promotes rehabilitation by providing information, education and opportunities for creative self-expression to incarcerated individuals throughout the United States. Subscriptions are free to prisoners. All others, please contact Prisoner Express for rates.

The Durland Alternatives Library, which funds Prisoner Express, is a project partner of the Center for Transformative Action. Additional Support Comes from the Cornell Public Service Center and the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives.



Taughannock Falls, Just North of Ithaca, NY