

# Prisoner Express News

## Winter 2023

Welcome to Prisoner Express! This newsletter is designed to offer meaning and connectivity to all who read it. The intent is to serve incarcerated men and women, to provide hope and meet your need for self-improvement and knowledge. If you're curious about the world and yourself, I think you will appreciate what Prisoner Express can offer you.

My name is Gary, and I began PE from a single letter from Danni Harris asking for books. Danni certainly had a way with words and explained how the simple but powerful tools of reading and writing helped one survive the deprivation that many face. This program did begin as a free book program, but the volume of mail and requests for free books drowned out our ability to meet that need for everyone at any time. I think we had a backlog of 1000+ requests when we finally realized we needed to adjust how we as an organization could best serve the needs that were articulated in all the mail we received from all of you. Many of you shared your stories, your needs, wants and aspirations. We here at PE are listening and creating programming as best we can to meet those needs.

The programs of today are a blending of what this organization can do, combined with the thoughts and ideas you all have shared with us. While it was originally Danni who got this going, now we have thousands of participants from around the country writing to let us know what programs we currently offer they like, and what they'd like to see us doing in the future.

Quite a while back it became evident that prisoners are not a monolithic group, and your interests were wide and varied. For that reason, we started creating a diverse group of programs to offer you. This newsletter will serve a couple of purposes: it introduces you to Prisoner Express; it will share some creative writing and art created by participants from our most recent program cycle; and it will describe to you the next series of programs we offer and give you a chance to sign up for them. It will also explain some of the complications we face getting mail to you. We are a national program, and many states are adopting new rules about mail delivery. Some states don't seem to account for the types of mailings we do and until it gets figured out our mail may get rejected. Many of you, we know, have access to tablets. We are still trying to figure a way to get our mailings to you through the tablets, but again every

state and tablet company seem to have a different set of rules. If we were just writing to one or two people, we could figure it out, but we have men and women in 48 states writing us, and that adds a degree of difficulty for a project that depends on USPS mail service to deliver our lessons.

Let me tell you a little about the organization of PE. Knowing how we are set up will make it easier for you to understand how to get the most out of our programming. Many of you write for the first time because you have seen a listing in a resource guide. As much as I appreciate these guides, sometimes they do not accurately represent the services we offer, so people write expecting us to be something we are not. This newsletter will clarify that for you.

Many of you receiving this are getting it for the first time. Please understand we have been doing this for 20 years and some of the people participating have been with us that long so we are all in different stages of an ongoing conversation. If you are new to the program, I welcome you to this group and I want you to know we are listening and we at PE care. Prisoner Express is a project of the Durland Alternatives Library at Cornell University. I, Gary work at the Alternatives Library and began PE as a result of that single letter from Danni. As the volume of mail increased from 1 to thousands, I have slowly been developing a network of students who either volunteer or get paid through the university financial aid system to help me with the program. Along the way various members of the free world community have also stepped in to volunteer. Till now I have been the one consistent presence at PE but there can be hundreds of folks over the course of a year who come by to keep this program moving forward. Keep in mind that some are one-time volunteers and others are a regular presence.

While I started the program with the intent of providing incarcerated men and women with information, education, and opportunities for creative self-expression in a public forum, I have realized that the volunteers who participate are also getting great benefits just from realizing the humanity of all of you who are locked away. Your words touch them, and I see by all the letters they exchange with you, that their letters to you matter as well. Please understand we do not have an ongoing pen pal program. We do offer various publications that

educate and inform. Often those lessons come with critical thinking questions or assignments. When you participate in the programs the volunteers who are organizing the projects often stop and write letters to various PE participants about their writings and art. Sometimes the exchange of letters goes on for a time, but please understand these students are not coming here to find a pen pal. They are here writing you, because they read something you wrote -- a poem, a theme essay, a journal, a response to a philosophy packet, a question about a meditation exercise, a piece of artwork you submit -- and they chose to write you to acknowledge your work and how it touched them. Not everything you send us will get a response. We have thousands of you writing and some write often. We do not have the resources, people power wise and moneywise, to do all things for all people.

So now that you know what we are not, I can tell you what we are and what we have to offer. Every 6 months we send out this newsletter. Read through it, and enjoy the writings and thoughts of other confined individuals. By reading others' writings on their experiences, it helps you realize you are not alone in your thoughts. Sharing how you really feel rather than posturing with others is a path to well-being. Given the hardships you face every day, any small or big things you can do to balance your mind, body and spirit will pay big dividends. Certainly, as Danni told me, reading and writing are some of the best tools available to you to help make this time productive, rather than simply oppressive.

PE steps in to provide you with creative activities and we have a pool of people interested in what you have to say. Because there are so many of you, about 4000 active members and so few of us, we have to do most of our work through the bulk mail system. This means we send out this newsletter and ask you to register for the classes listed. Two or so months after sending the newsletter we tally up all the registrations for each project, and we mail out the lessons through the USPS bulk mail system. It means we can send a 28-page packet for 20 cents postage rather than the 1.20 first class rate. Imagine that we send out many thousands of these packets through each 6-month cycle and you can see the great increase in cost just for postage. Because we welcome everyone to join, we have to be as frugal as we can so we can keep sending these lessons.

**If you are reading this Winter 23 newsletter for the first time, say after May 15th 2023, you can assume the lessons you are reading about have been mailed. Do not despair. Just send us a note and ask. Perhaps we are late in our mailing and we still have the lesson, but even more**

**important is that we will add you to our mailing list and the next time the newsletter comes out (in this case Summer 23) you will get a copy and you can sign up then for the next batch of courses.** Also, many of you move around a lot. Please send us your updated addresses as soon as possible because prisons don't seem to forward mail and I hate getting mail returned. We are on a tight budget, and everything wasted irks me.

So many of you write and share with me the details of your life, and I feel like I should respond to your letters, but I don't have the time to write to individuals, and my life is not too exciting so after one letter I am done. So I use this newsletter to say hi and stay personal with those of you who care. I do appreciate how much you share with me about your lives so here goes mine.

This August I moved back to the country after living in the small city of Ithaca since 2011. I moved to Ithaca so my children could attend school in a better school district. Now all of my children are done with public school, so I am able to return to my preferred rural existence. I have woods and waterfalls, streams, and gardens to play in and I prefer the rhythm of nature to the wonders of town life. Certainly, I am in my car a lot more, but I prefer country living. When I moved from the house in 2011, I had a wife and 3 children living with me. I moved back as a bachelor. It's a big house so I am renting a few rooms to some folks, and we are experimenting with loose collective living. Hopefully if each of the 4 of us cook one night a week than I come home to a prepared meal 3 times a week. We are figuring it out as we go along. One interesting thing is my housemates are much younger than I as I am 70 and they are 25 to 35. You in prison also live in multi-generational environments so you probably understand how interesting and challenging it is to watch and adapt to the changes in attitudes and beliefs that go with each generation.

As I said before, all humans are looking for belonging and connectedness, and we try to create it in any ways we can. Sometimes we are fortunate, and it comes to us through our birth families and other times we meet people in the world that we resonate with, and we create new family groups based on things other than shared blood.

Winter has been mild in upstate NY. I burn wood to keep the house warm and we are going through the wood at a slower rate than normal. As many of you know, I love to garden and grow food. Even though the ground is covered in snow I am looking at seed catalogs and hope to start some onions under

lights at the end of this month. I have a small greenhouse on the property, and it provides me with endless opportunities for growing fun. I guess that's it, except to say turning 70 this year, really brings home my own mortality. I celebrate life and am most grateful for getting to experience living. I hope my health continues to be good!

A few of you have written to thank me and ask me why I do this program. It was a no brainer for me. When I read Danni's first letter asking for books, it took me back to my own childhood, when I lived with mentally ill people who kept me locked away from the rest of the people in the household. Books and reading kept me sane and connected to the human race outside of my small room. Reading took me away from the world I was forced into and offered visions of other possibilities. We send books and our various packets to remind you of other possibilities, and to keep you connected to fellow humans who care about you and how you are doing and being.

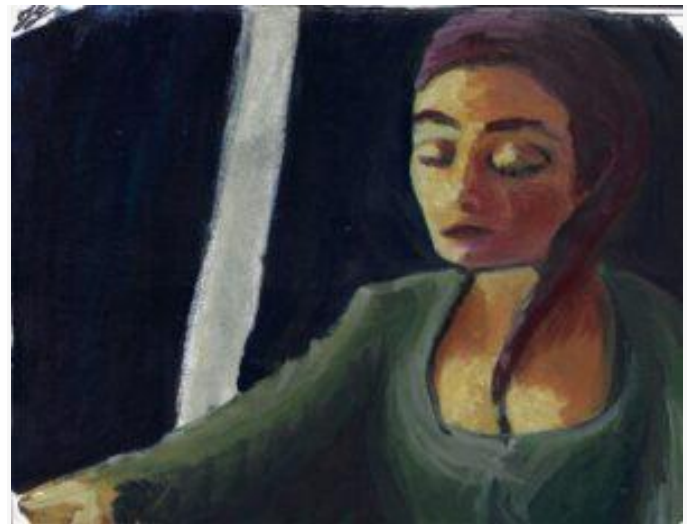
I'd like to update those of you who participated in programs offered in the Summer 22 News. We are still processing your responses, so if you intend to respond to a particular program, it is not too late.

First, it is clear that many of you appreciated the Pema Chodron book "Taking the Leap." We mailed the book to 400+ participants. The mailing included a study guide. Many of you have already returned your responses to us. Kayla and other volunteers will read through your answers and create a compilation document of the most interesting answers. If you haven't sent in your response, do so now if you'd like to receive the compilation we are creating. We will do something similar with the other book we mailed last cycle, "The Sentences that Define Us." There were a number of writing exercises in the packet that accompanied the book. Anyone who submits a writing based on that book will also receive a compilation of the most interesting stories we receive. In the past few cycles, we have had Philosophy lessons. I can see that many of you find these packets refreshing and you have a lot to say on the subject. If you sent in answers for the previous "Battle Ground Philosophy Packet," your responses are being sent to the packet creator, Ethan. He is in London this winter but still wants to stay engaged with all you through philosophy. The Battle Ground packet offered conflicting opinions on a subject by two prominent philosophers and you, the reader, voiced in on whose opinion you agreed. You can see from the disagreement among philosophers that there are many different ways to explain life and meaning. How does one determine truth? Stay with our Philosophy program [We have

two offerings this upcoming cycle] and find out the answer to this and other pressing questions on the meaning of life.

Every cycle we have an art program. We have taken art we received this last cycle and included some poetry and journals and created a large collage that is 28 feet by 4 feet. It is mounted double sided on 4ft-by-4ft panels. If your art or writing is part of the display, we will send you an 11 by 17 poster of the panel section of the collage that has your work on it. These will be mailed hopefully by April. The show will be displayed for a month each in 5 different libraries in upstate New York. We are asking visitors to the show to write comments on your work. We will collect the comments and forward them on to you. So, if you get some mail from us full of comments about a piece of art or a writing you created you will understand the source. Here is the press release we sent out about the show:

***"Behind the Wall" Provides a Peek into the Lives and Hearts of People in Prison***



*Painting by James Allen Gregg, Minneapolis, MN*

*The artists and writers of Prisoner Express are on display at the Tompkins County Public Library throughout February. Come explore the creativity and humanity of incarcerated men and women participating in the PE program.*

*Nearly 2 million Americans live in jails, prisons, and detention centers, all but invisible to the rest of the world. A new exhibit at Tompkins County Public Library provides a glimpse into some of their lives, hearts, minds, and imaginations.*

***Organized by Story House Ithaca, "Behind the Wall" is a traveling exhibition of drawings, paintings, letters, stories, and poems produced by people in prison. It includes 140***

works by 90 incarcerated individuals from detention facilities in 22 states. There is a letter-writing station where visitors can send feedback directly to the participating artists.

The artworks will be on display in TCPL's Avenue of the Friends for the entire month of February. There will be an informal opening reception at the library on **Friday, February 3, from 4 to 5 p.m.** No registration is required.

The exhibit will travel to Seymour Public Library in Auburn in March, Seneca Falls Library in April, Coburn Free Library in Owego in May, and Cortland Free Library in June.

The artworks and writings in "Behind the Wall" have been collected by Prisoner Express, a project of Durland Alternatives Library at Cornell, and curated by Newfield-based artist Treacy Ziegler. Both Story House Ithaca and Prisoner Express are projects of the Ithaca-based nonprofit Center for Transformative Action.

"Behind the Wall" is presented in collaboration with the Finger Lakes Library System and the five participating libraries. It is supported by an action grant from Humanities NY.

The show was organized by a group PE partnered with called Story House Ithaca. The founders of Story House build community through shared stories. I am glad they have reached out to PE and it is my hope that your stories, shared with the general public, can help expand and build community. I am hoping Story House will work with us in the future to help us develop a storytelling program we can share with all of you.

In our last cycle we sent out 500 copies of the Rattle Poetry magazine that featured work by PE writers. Many of you submitted poems based on an assignment included in the mailing. I am speaking with Tim Green, Rattle editor and will forward your submissions to him. We will offer another edition of Rattle for your reading pleasure. We also put out our own Poetry Anthology, and Volume 27 should be in the mail this spring. Please continue to share your original poems with us. We will begin collecting poetry for Vol 28 as soon as #27 is finished. Many of you wrote to thank Sara for her scholarly work on the Endocrine Glands and Mental Health. I am forwarding all of your responses to her. She offers another mental health unit this cycle. She is passionate about the issue of mental health, especially in regard to incarceration -- and her interest was created by the letters you all shared with us through the PE program. Your thoughts and words have power

and Prisoner Express provides you with a platform to share your concerns with us, as well as with interested people through our online archives, art exhibits like "Behind The Wall", and our library-based in person events. Those of us involved with Prisoner Express can be grateful for the volunteers that keep on showing up and creating these excellent programs. The volunteers gain insights and understandings about life while participating in the program. I like that this program mostly provides a win-win outcome for all participants in prison, at the university, and in this wide and growing PE community.

I would think your institutions would love this program as it gives you something meaningful to do, offers ways to stay engaged, and is of no cost to the facility in which you live. In many states the mail travels very easily and I don't get lots of mail returned. In other states new rules make it harder for us to get our mail to you. These rules are created state by state. Being a national program means that we need to find systems that work for all states, no matter way an individual state insists must be followed for mail to be delivered. It is very challenging. I don't want to drop residents of any state, so I struggle with finding workarounds for all the new regulations. Believe it or not, this is the most stressful aspect of directing PE.



Art by Corey Lambing

Well, I hope catching up on the past cycle's programs has not left all you new participants bored and wondering what you have gotten involved with, but now we are ready to move on to the present and describe the offerings for this cycle. The good news is there are more selections than usual, and they are in a variety of subjects. I like to have science and ancient history packets in the mix, and I see that they are lacking from this cycle's offerings. I will start recruiting people to create science and history packets for next fall.

---

## Spring 23 Programs

**Expedited Books** - This program is the root of the PE Program. Volunteers read your book requests and create a package of books especially for you. We need info like the types of books you like to read and the regulations in your prison. When we first started this program, we paid the full cost of each package. As mentioned, we eventually had 1000+ people waiting for books with more requests coming daily. About 10 years ago we changed this program and now we request you send us a \$4 donation through an institution check or other methods allowed by your facility to help cover the cost of postage. It is our only program that has a fee. The sign-up sheet at the end of the newsletter gives you the opportunity to tell us the rules governing book mailings at your facility. Please fill it out or pass the info to us when writing for books. Danika has been managing the book room this year. Below she shares with you the instructions for getting a book package.

*Hi Friends! For those of you who don't know me yet, I'm Danika, and I am the book room coordinator. I am very excited to continue selecting books for you to receive. This program is designed for you to receive a customized book package chosen specifically for you, based on your interests. We do ask that you send us a donation for your participation in the form of a check or stamps. Packages cost \$5-\$8 to mail, but the books are free as they are all donated. Postage costs can get very expensive, so we ask that you send at least \$4 to help cover the cost of the program (this can be in the form of a check made out to "Prisoner's Express/CTA" or in stamps sent by friends or family). To get a book package follow these simple steps:*

*Write me (Danika/Prisoner Express) a letter or return the sign-up form at end of newsletter. Be sure I know*

*Which genres or types of books you would like to receive*

*How many books you are allowed to receive*

*Soft/Hard Cover Books*

*Voila! I receive the letter and process your request for books!*

*An example of a book package request that would be most easily accommodated is one like this:*

*"Hi, I'm Danika, and I love to read fantasy, mystery, and self-help books. Would you be willing to send me some books in these genres? If you don't have any of those available, I love reading all fiction. I have included stamps in this mailing package."*

*Every prison has different rules on what is allowed, so please check with your institution to be sure you are allowed to receive used books from a library. I wish we could offer this for free, but we do not have the financial resources to do so.*

*All books are donated— so asking for very specific requests can make it hard for me to match you with a good book. Please give us many options and topics! (ex: science fiction, fantasy, self-help, biography, etc.). If you request only 1 kind of book, I will probably disappoint you with what I can provide. I have been receiving a lot of requests for "Manga," chess books, and some specific witchcraft books which are difficult for me to fulfill, based on the books that are donated to us. Of course, if you want these kinds of books, feel free to request them, but just make sure to include a range of other options as well!*

*Additionally, the more options you provide to me, the faster I can fill your request and send the books to you. The titles and subjects we have available are always in flux. There is no way to send a list of what we have because books are always being mailed and new donations arrive.*

*I am currently working on this month's requests for expedited books, and I hope to stay on top of it so that you all may receive reading materials as fast as possible. With that said, I still ask that you be patient and have some flexibility about what you receive, as we never know how many requests we may receive in a given month.*

*I am hoping that I am making good matches for most of the book requests I received. We do not expect you to send the books back and encourage you to donate them to your prison library. If it has been 6 months or more and you haven't received your package let us know and resend your request giving us multiple choices (in genres/interests).*

*Please use the signup sheet at the back of the newsletter to give us information about your book request.  
Happy Reading! -- Danika*

**Poetry Project Vol 28 - Here's an easy way to get some good reading material.** Every cycle we invite you to send in your poetry for possible inclusion in our ongoing Poetry Anthology series. The poems you send in from reading this invite will be considered for Volume 28 in our poetry series. Everyone who submits at least one poem will receive a copy of the anthology once it is finished. It will take at least 6 months to collect entries and type them for the anthology. Over that time period volunteers from PE come in weekly to read your poems and they often take the time to write a friendly letter to some of the poets contributing to the project. We also scan many of the poems we receive into an online database, making them available to anyone with internet access. We cannot scan every poem, and don't try to. If we have trouble reading it, you can guess it probably won't be scanned. We scan a few hundred poems to our archives every six months. We would love to archive all the work submitted but we do not have the resources to do so. We have 393 poets who submitted one or more poems for volume 27 which is being compiled by Elinor, who has taken on the role of coordinating volume 27 and 28 of the anthology series. Here is her message to you.

*In the following pages, you will find eight pieces written by poets who are currently incarcerated across the country. I'm eternally grateful to have read these works, along with so many others, over the past few months I've worked here at Prisoner Express. Poetry takes incredible vulnerability and can make such a lasting impact.*

*If you have submitted writing in the past, I hope you will continue to share your poems. If you've never submitted before and are interested in trying your hand, I urge you to take the jump and send in a piece of writing. Please print as legibly as you can, so that we may type up and distribute your poetry. I encourage you to experiment with language and line structure in your work as well, as many of the poets featured in this newsletter have done beautifully. If you have any suggestions for how to improve the poetry program, please feel free to reach out to me. I hope you enjoy this newsletter and I wish you all the best.  
- Elinor*

### **phone time by Randy Carter**

dear love  
so many days in this abyss  
are brightened by the sunbeams of  
your spirit. 15 minutes are never enough.  
I'm left wondering when next we'll speak & missing  
the bells of your laughter. I forever dread the "you have one  
minute left"  
on a march through a torrent, your voice guides me to  
the eye of the storm where I can see clear.  
I wish I could shield you from the wind  
yet it's you who comforts me &  
at times awakens  
a poet.

### **Galveston by Leroy Sodorff**

She ushered me right in  
and in I rolled  
"After reading your chart  
I took your breath away  
and found a pin-sized hole  
after I gave your heart a start.

With robotic arms, I filled the hole  
without a knife  
and sewed it shut for you  
Now no more bleeding heart.  
For I gave you a lease on life  
and an opportunity to start anew."

She sent me to the infirmary  
to get my heart right  
for 120 days  
I languished in bed  
without her insight  
and a heedless gaze.

Now I've started over  
After realizing my fears  
of being alone  
at the tender age of 69  
perhaps I'll see another 60 years  
when I turn eligible for parole.

### **The Walnut Tree by Gary Farlow**

There was a black walnut tree  
in our backyard long ago  
The snow's always seemed  
to lay deep around its base  
She offered up her gifts  
every Autumn to us  
Grandma's black walnut  
pound cake,  
while others were churned  
into homemade ice cream  
on a sweltering July day

A storm arose one summer  
and lightning struck our tree  
A gash opened her trunk  
Pop sealed it with a stain  
but her days of bountiful gifts  
were lost to us  
So we hung a rope swing  
from the branches  
As we mourned her passing  
from the bearer to walnuts  
to become the bearer  
of giggling, swinging children

### **Razor Cakes by Brian Stevens 2245605**

The latest government food ration  
has brought Razorcakes into fashion  
They're sweet and they'll make you bleed  
More blood sugar is what you need  
Bite down and pierce your tongue  
the pain makes it much more fun  
That red meat's good for your diet  
even vegans gotta try it  
They're guaranteed to be healthy  
like everything force-fed by the wealthy  
You won't be able to eat anything else  
cuz it's the only thing left on the shelf  
Find 'em at your local discount store  
Where they specialize in feeding the poor  
These seem to be rather cutthroat days  
they keep putting Razorcakes on our trays

### **Yesterday's Tomorrow by Kareem Carter**

Mistakes are meant to be made.  
Granted, some are more detrimental than others.  
If it weren't for heartache and pain,  
How, if ever, could we recover?  
We learn from our mishaps,  
They enable us to grow.  
Experience brings understanding,  
Which puts us in the know.  
The act of proper perspective  
Equates to one being wise.  
As I look into the mirror,  
I stare my demise square in his eyes.  
Tears are afraid of my face,  
So my tears stream inside.  
To cause one's own grief,  
Is to never gain relief.  
Spewing my struggles on paper  
Is my only form of release.  
I can only forgive myself  
If the one I've hurt forgives me first.  
I vowed to protect something I broke,  
And that's what makes it worse.  
I was one your king...  
Now forever, I'll live in sorrow.  
I'll never get over hurting you,

As if yesterday's tomorrow.

### **No Talking by Taj Alexander Mahon-Haft**

When I relax my jaw  
the words flow freely  
and metaphors pour meltwater  
between culturally distinct synapses  
like love and so many lesser drugs  
and the profit can be poetry  
but that means no talking

the closest thing to floating in space  
is blackwater diving  
two hundred deep  
beneath mercury midnight swells  
where every species is a stranger  
and every direction may be true  
I can take photo proof  
and still not know what I see  
but that means no talking

### **Hope vs. Hopelessness by Jason Conley**

The night I was arrested  
I wanted to put a bullet in my chest.  
Five days alone with my thoughts  
Left me dead inside and out.  
My thoughts of family  
Is all that brought me through.  
Everyday is a struggle not to  
Break down and lose my mind.  
I miss the Love that filled  
Every room of my house.  
Now it is down to one day  
A week for my mom to try to fill.  
In a place where the bland walls  
And boredom match my thoughts.  
Some music each day is the  
Only relief for the pain and boredom.  
The only problem is the music is  
Also a reminder of the outside.  
It's a connection to the wife  
And kids I no longer see.  
I know love is still there but  
Will it ever be expressed again?  
God, my mom, sister, and a new friend  
Are all that help me make it another day.  
The fight between  
Hope and Hopelessness.

### **Schizophrenia: She Lives In My Head by Hannah Bazzi**

I have thoughts  
That flutter frantically  
Away  
From a schizophrenic  
With a butterfly net  
Since these things:  
The thoughts

And the schizophrenic  
 Both live in my head  
 The house is often  
 In need  
 Of being cleaned  
 It's a wonder  
 That anything Real  
 Is ever suspected  
 The thoughts do well  
 To keep clear  
 Because one caught  
 In the net  
 Of a schizophrenic  
 Would surely no longer belong  
 To the mind that thought it  
 And what is one to do  
 With something in mind  
 That doesn't belong?



Art by Omar Recalde

**Journal Project** - So many of you have reported how valuable writing in a journal has been for you. Grace has been leading the journal project for the past 2 years and created a starter packet for those of you wanting to get some tips on journaling. If you are motivated you can start as soon as you want simply by sharing your, hopes, dreams and memories, reflections on life and any other thoughts that rattle around your mind and would like a chance to be expressed. We ask that you date your entries. You can send in 1 page at a time or weeks or months of writing. It is your decision. Here's Grace with a fuller description of the program.

*My name is Grace, and I am the Coordinator for the Journal Program here at Prisoner Express. It is my third year at Cornell University studying global and public health sciences. The journal program was one of the first programs at PE, and we have members who have been with us anywhere from a couple of weeks to*

*several years. There is room for all types of writers, and likewise, there is no wrong way to write. Writing can be empowering, and a source of hope and clarity. Many people who write regularly observe mental health benefits and experience powerful breakthroughs. By joining this program, you can also share your writing with fellow members and volunteers. Volunteers at PE read the material that you send in and often write a friendly letter back to share their own thoughts with you. I love hearing your ideas and stories, and the program is a great opportunity to share your thoughts and experiences with others. I highly encourage you to register! I will send an introduction packet with plenty of inspiration to get started, and if you write to me about questions or ideas about the program I will do my absolute best to respond. PE may also upload submissions to an online archive where anyone in the United States can read and respond to your work: <https://prisonerexpress.org/read-prisoner-writing/>. We are here to support you in any capacity we can, and I hope you will join us on this journey.*

**Meditation/Eastern Philosophy** - Kylie, who started our philosophy series is back volunteering at PE. Kylie graduated a few years ago and remembered the value of her PE volunteer experience. She contacted me and asked if she could create a new Eastern Philosophy packet. I was overjoyed. The plan is to include a copy of Pema Chodron's book "When Things Fall Apart" along with a study guide that will make the teachings in the book even more accessible to you. Many of you comment how beneficial it was to receive the Pema Chodron book "Taking the Leap" last cycle and asked us for more programs like this. Well, we heard you and **the Pema Chodron Foundation is donating 500 copies of "When Things Fall Apart" for us to distribute to interested readers.** Combining the book and study guide with Kylie's Meditation and Eastern Philosophy materials makes this a powerful life affirming and life changing packet.

*Hello my fellow philosophers!*

*After taking a hiatus for two semesters, I am so thrilled to be back. What a pleasure it is to be able to read, write, and bond over philosophy with you all. For the next semester, I hope to take you across the globe and explore some of the greatest thinkers of the Eastern hemisphere. What is suffering? What is the nature of reality? How do we define "self"? Eastern philosophy provides radically different answers to these questions than the Western worldview.*

*This course will be an introductory survey of philosophies in India, China, and Japan. Specifically,*



*we will dive into the different perspectives from Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Some topics we will cover include:*

*The role of virtue in the ethical systems of Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism*

*The idea of 'nothingness' and its relationship with self*

*The notion of death and the afterlife*

*I hope you will join us for this one and looking forward to reading and thinking with you all!----Cheers, Kylie*

**Moral Philosophy** - Ethan has returned to lead another lesson on western philosophy. His packets have been very popular among the participants and his packets elicit thoughtful and deep responses from many of you. That your responses are so detailed and passionate lets me know his information about philosophy and the ideas of most recognized world thinkers are stimulating and resonating with you. Please read Ethan's description off the next packet.

*Dear fellow students of philosophy,*

*I am very grateful to you all for your thoughtful and compelling responses to my past two philosophy packets, A Brief Introduction to the Western Philosophical Tradition and Battleground: Philosophy. In your responses, many of you expressed interest in the moral questions raised by philosophers like Aristotle, Kant, and Nietzsche. In light of this, Gary has given me the wonderful opportunity to write a third packet for you: Moral Philosophy in the Western Tradition.*

*This new packet will be similar in structure to my first, but rather than providing a general overview of the history of Western philosophy, this packet will focus specifically on the history of Western moral philosophy. Starting with Socrates and Plato, and moving forward in time to the present day, this packet will discuss the many ways in which some of history's greatest philosophers have tried to answer one of the simplest questions: "What is right, and what is wrong?" This packet is not a direct continuation of either of my previous packets, so you will not need to have read either of them to understand this one. However, I do recommend that you review the material from A Brief Introduction to the Western Philosophical Tradition, since that will help you to organize the material you will read in the new packet, and give you a sense of where these ideas fit into the broader history of Western philosophy.*

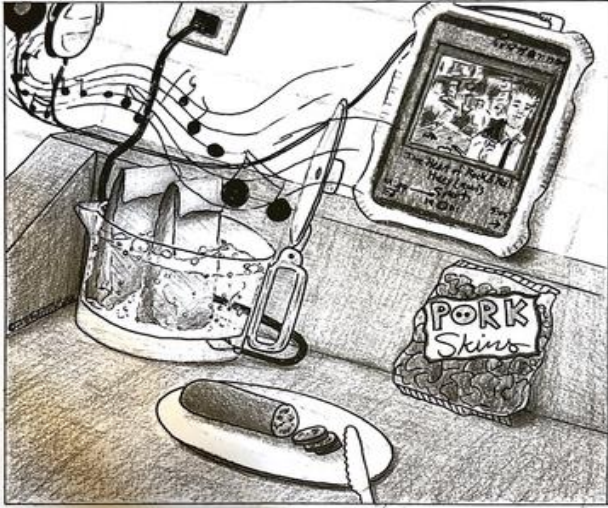
*In Moral Philosophy in the Western Tradition, I will not preach to you, nor will I try to tell you to do certain things. I will not try to tell you that some things are right or that some other things are wrong. I will not try to tell you how to live your life. What I will do is discuss how philosophers have tried to explain our feelings about why things are good or bad. We will address questions about where morality comes from, how anyone can know what is or is not moral, and what we even mean when we use the word "morality" in the first place. These are some of the core issues in moral philosophy, and I am looking forward to exploring them with you all. Happy searching!--Ethan*

**Ending Mass Incarceration** - Well here's a course where you may know more than the project leaders. I have been in conversation with Andy, who is teaching an "Ending Mass Incarceration" course at Binghamton University [BU]. It is about 54 miles southeast of Ithaca and Cornell where PE is located. I graduated from BU myself in 1974 so it is nice to reconnect with folks there. Andy and 5 of the students in this class of 40 want to create a packet that can help all of us understand the forces that have created the modern day system for penalizing "criminal behavior". I asked them to write a brief description of what their packet will cover. It looks like a sociology and history lesson about the system you reside within. I know there will be lots of places in the packet asking for you to share your thoughts with the students. These students will be some of tomorrow's leaders and it is good for them to understand things as you see them.

*How did the United States, one of the world's leading democracies, end up incarcerating more of its people than any other country in the world? How does the criminal legal system reinforce systems of domination and control? This packet explores the connection between the growth of mass incarceration, slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the War on Drugs. Since the 1980s, mass incarceration has wrought havoc on poor communities through the US, as other social programs have been cut. We'll examine the recent scholarship on the communal consequences of high incarceration rates and other issues within mass incarceration studies such as the relationship between crime and incarceration rates, racial disparities, and recent efforts at reform.*  
- Andy

#3  
37 - *Convincing Chronicles: Cooking* Story board x 3 screens

SCENE - 1: Food Prep/Cell w/ photos



We set up a letter writing station for those library patrons who wish to write letters. These letters will be collected by PE and forwarded to you. After Ithaca Public Library, the exhibition will travel onto four additional libraries throughout the spring.

I hope those who signed up for the winter Artknows newsletter on food and art – “You art what you eat” – have received that newsletter. I plan to have the next newsletter completed by June. I haven’t totally settled on what the focus will be for that newsletter but I am considering focusing on Medieval art. I know that many of you are interested in Medieval art. I was also struck by how many images from the Medieval time reminded me of outsider art (if you remember that Artknows on outsider art from two years ago). While most art history books on Medieval art has been centered on European art, I wondered about Medieval art from other parts of the world. After all, Africa was in existence at the same time. What art was created in the years 5th century through 15th century in African; or South America; or Asia; and so on?

Some of you will remember the art exhibition that was hosted by a church in Denver, Colorado three years ago. Patra, the contact person from the church, again contacted me. The congregation loved the previous exhibition and hope to have another exhibition in the fall. For this exhibition, we will include (like the Story House exhibition at the libraries) poetry, journal entries, and interesting letters we received from you along with art work.

Please send in art and short writings that you would like included in this exhibition. I will write more about this exhibition in the next ARTknows that will come out in June.

This means that there will be two exhibitions in the fall; one at the Big Red Barn on the Cornell Campus and one in Denver. Like the Story House exhibition, we hope that the exhibitions will generate letters from the audience to you.

As always, I enjoy hearing from you and seeing your art! -- Treacy

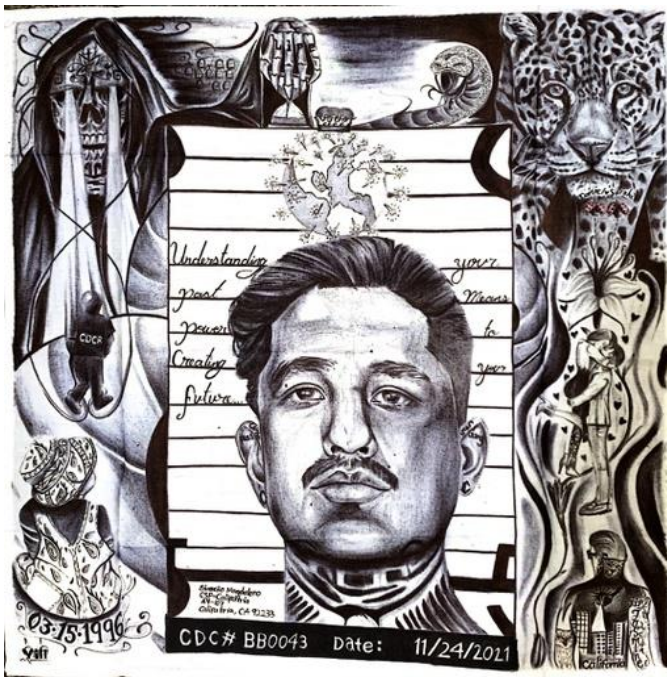
We also plan to highlight the use of unconventional materials in the art making process. Think toilet paper, soap, interesting scraps of wood, popsicle sticks, coffee, bread, M&M’s and so on—anything that is not typically used to make art. It could even be a “conventional” art making supply that is used in an unexpected way. If you need any inspiration, look for the short piece on unconventional art that will be included in the ArtKnows newsletter later this year!

**Artknows - Art Corner** - Treacy has been coordinating the PE art programs for more than 10 years and continues to create interesting art programs for all who are interested. She curated the art show mentioned earlier in the newsletter. She describes it below [and you will see it mentioned in other parts of the newsletter.] You don’t have to be a master artist to benefit from Treacy’s packets. She is as interested in how you see things, as she is on instruction. Our program’s focus is not about finding the best, most talented artist, but rather to encourage you to explore art from wherever you are. Just like continued practice of yoga develops increased flexibility, practicing art wherever you are develops your innate creativity. That creativity may come back to help you when facing any of life’s challenges. Besides that, playing with art can be fun

Greetings!

I hope you are all faring well this winter. Ithaca had a quick arctic freeze this past weekend but now the weather has returned to a balmy 40’s (for a couple of days at least)!

This past Friday (February 7), despite the very cold temperatures, PE had an active opening of your artwork and writings at the Ithaca Public Library. The art and writings generated much interest, and the opening was well attended. The library is a large library and has much traffic use – so I suspect throughout the month there will be much more interest.



Art by Eduardo Magdaleno

## Storytelling: Writing Dialogue in Narration

I look forward to seeing this packet. It is being put together by Anna who has created two previous packets. As she is graduating this spring it may be our last chance to share her creativity with all of you. For those of you who have been part of PE for a while, Anna designed the Introduction to Computer Science Packet and well as the packet focused on Design and Creativity. If you participated in either of those packets you know that Anna has a way of taking difficult subjects and making them understandable. I look forward to seeing the packet she creates on storytelling and how it is received by all of you. Creative Writing is a way to liberate thoughts and feelings that may be rattling around inside your being, Those same stories read by others can be illuminating and life changing.

This program depends on the writers and readers of PE. I appreciate that we all continue to grow together in understanding and compassion as your stories that live within you, and then thru PE share them with others dealing with similar experiences. Below Anna describes the packet she envisions.

*Narration means the art of storytelling, and narrative writing is telling these stories. In narration, dialogue can be a great way to immerse your readers into the scene and add a richness to the characters. Whether a novel, short story, personal essay, or some other form of storytelling, writing effective or good dialogue can be a challenge. This packet will go over standard practices in writing dialogue in narration. These will not act as*

*guidelines to strictly follow, but as background information to inform writers and inspire them on their creations. The packet will also discuss some advice, tips, a little grammar, and finish up with some dialogue exercises.*

## Yoga for Every Body - We are most fortunate to have

Professor Yoga in the house. The professor approached me and told me of the remarkable experiences she had teaching Yoga in a local state correctional facility and offered to share yoga poses and philosophy with all of you. While the professor is a long time teacher, this is a first foray into teaching yoga through a PE offering. Many of us feel too tight to do many of the yoga poses we see demonstrated to us, but the professor will offer modifications so everyone can find their appropriate starting place. Maintaining flexibility as we age is a great way to reduce injury and pain.

*Greetings PE members! Professor Yoga here. Since the fall of 2021, I've been teaching yoga and meditation classes in correction facilities near Ithaca NY. These classes fulfill the physical education requirement for the Associates Degree program offered to inmates through the Cornell Prison Education Program. That means my students have to show up for my class if they want to graduate—and boy are they glad they did! Here's what some of them have written in their class essays:*

*It turns out that my yoga journey has been quite therapeutic, amazingly I can throw a baseball again. No surgery, no meds, yoga, go figure.--E. S. Cayuga Correctional Facility*

*At first it was just the idea of fulfilling an obligation, like math....However, and quite to my surprise, my introduction to yoga and meditation has been something close to life changing....the more I do, the more I like it....Contrary to what I once believed, the stretches and poses are adaptable to even someone with my limited ability. Because of that, I don't feel intimidated and keep going with it. It's more than just exercise, it's like a philosophy. Sometimes I think about all the people that have done this and passed it along so that it could eventually be introduced to me, in prison, of all places--E. O. Cayuga Correctional Facility*

*I have come to firmly believe that yoga is a sort of challenge crusher. In addition to the yoga exercises, there is the meditation. Whoa! Meditation literally creates the conditions for me to set aside stress—and all other anguish and suffering—provoking thoughts—simply and gently setting those thoughts aside, pushing them out of my mental process, and replacing them*

*with the hear and now.--M. L. Elmira Correctional Facility*

*So...the Yoga Project. Would you like to receive a packet that would include pictures of yoga poses together with step-by-step instruction, yoga sequences that focus on a variety of topics including balance, tight hamstrings, shoulder injuries, high blood pressure, etc, and suggestions for how to use your cell, dorm, gym or day room as your "yoga studio"? This packet could also include some basic reading about the "eight limbs" (i.e. the eight aspects) of yoga and how yoga philosophy might relate to everyday life right where you are.*

*Yoga is for every body! Do sign up -Prof. Yoga*

### **Rhythms of Life/Drumming Packet -**

Here's an original program offering. I for sure will be doing it along with everyone else who signs up. I have always found myself drawn to tapping rhythms with my hands and feet. Have some musical fun where you are!

*Hi everyone, my name is Cassy and I'm a new volunteer with PE. While writing letters to members around the country, I noticed how often the topic of music came up.*

*As a pastime, a long-lost friend, and a form of communication that transcends all language barriers, music is a uniquely empowering endeavor. I've read your journals and poetry, seen your artwork, and engaged in those myself. Although written and visual work can be mailed and transcribed and uploaded more easily, I think it's the limitations that make music such a personal and restorative experience. My hope is that you'll find comfort and healing in learning and/or practicing music purely for yourself. Be it a form of diversion or a catalyst for mental breakthroughs, I hope you find meaning and purpose in bringing the music on the page to life.*

*Whether you've never touched an instrument in your life or were practically raised on notes and beats, this packet will provide a gentle yet engaging introduction to the world of rhythm! As a percussionist, I've encountered classical orchestral percussion, jazz drum set, and world percussion through the lenses of steel drums, samba, djembe, kendhang, and taiko. Many of these don't involve formal notation and have only recently adopted written verses. To make the exercises especially interesting, I'll be pulling the rhythms from all your (hopefully) favorite artists like U2, Journey, Sting, and many more! I expect you'll find some of them easier and others harder, but all will be playable with*

*body percussion (hands and feet) or items resembling drumsticks like spoons/pans, pencils, or real sticks. This will be a real experiment for both you and me--conveying and interpreting rhythm without sound--but I anticipate a fun time!*

**Mental Health** - Sara has produced three mental health [MH] units over the past cycles. The units explored how MH is affected by: 1. the immune system, 2. the brain and 3. the endocrine system. These were heavy science-based explorations of the topics. Now she is ready to create another packet sharing aspects of maintaining good mental health utilizing responses you all sent in from previous packets as well as guidance from mental health practitioners. If the idea of understanding and improving your mental health is appealing to you, check out this offering.

*Hi everyone, Sara here. The next issue in the series on mental health will focus on responses to previous newsletters in the series, and on a caseworker's perspective working with those who have been incarcerated and who have faced mental health challenges. This is a little different from the other newsletters in the series for those of you who have been following along. Rather than a knowledge-heavy newsletter that delves into a lot of scientific content, this will give you a chance to hear from others about their perspectives and experiences and hopefully make mental health a more comfortable topic of discussion.*



**Art by Bobby Thompson**

**Rattle Magazine** - The folks who put out Rattle continue to donate 500 copies of their poetry magazine to us for distribution. Tim Green, the editor of Rattle, has taken the time in the past to share insights into what he thinks makes great poetry. This is an opportunity to explore poetry that has been

selected for publication and gain insight as to why it was selected. For those of you new to PE, in the summer of 2022 issue, Rattle featured something like 15 poems created by PE members in their national distributed periodical. If you're interested in poetry meant for people to read and enjoy, then Rattle makes great reading. Only the first 500 people signing up can participate so don't put it off.

**Chess Strategy** - We learned from our book mailing program that many of you love to play and learn about chess. We have had a hard time getting enough chess books to meet the high volume of requests so many years ago we started a PE chess club. Every 6 months we mail out a packet, all about chess. The chess packets usually cover strategy, history, puzzles, and the recounting of great chess games of the past. The packets usually cover a piece on chess notation so you can learn to follow the great games and play them out yourself. Robert has been creating the chess packets for the past few years and he welcomes your feedback on what you'd like to see in the packet. He will be creating this next chess packet soon, so if you have any questions or suggestions send them Attn: Robert Chess.

**Theme Writing** - Caroline has taken on coordination of our theme writing program. Her charge is to supervise the typing of your theme submissions for the month and to assemble them into a packet that gets mailed to everyone who sends in a theme. We have both word and picture theme cues every month. If you submit a word or picture theme you will receive a copy of what everyone else wrote on the topic. What a great way to get mail. The good news is that many people reading the themes published in this newsletter get inspired to join the cohort of people who regularly write. This makes me very happy, but it also gives us many more pieces to type. Due to this we will be making some changes to this program. You can submit more than one submission for each cue, but we will only select one writing per author for republishing in the monthly packet. If you submit multiple submissions, you can indicate which one you'd like to see published. If your piece is longer than the 800 word limit we will do our best to edit it down. If we can't read it we can't type it. Put your name on the theme submission and let us know what month it is meant for. PE work is often done by volunteers and if they make a mistake in sorting the mail, the essays having your name on the work makes it possible to correct errors.

I understand that people write about what they know. It is telling that the December 2022 word cue of "Loneliness" has the most submissions for any topic ever offered. [We are still typing them up.] I imagine you all have some degree of

expertise on the topic. Of course all humans do to an extent, but I recognize the special place loneliness plays in your life. I hope these writing programs and the connection we establish with you through PE can help remediate that loneliness or at least help turn it to a form of creative self-expression. Life is challenging for all whether incarcerated or not, and connection and creativity help us meet that challenge. Caroline has taken on a big job creating the theme packets each month. These packets are not meant for you to write whatever you want about anything. There are guidelines, which she reviews below:

*Hello all!--I have had the pleasure to be in communication with a few of you over the last six months, but I would love to formally introduce myself. My name is Caroline, and I am new to the Prisoner Express community. I am a current sophomore here at Cornell University majoring in Industrial and Labor Relations. I have almost completed my minor in Inequality Studies and look forward to completing a minor in Crime, Prisons, Education and Justice. I am interested in going to law school and being involved in public policy, specifically in the criminal justice and/or human rights sphere. My personal interests include reading, journaling, crossword puzzles and being a part of Prisoner Express!! 😊😊*

*In my time at PE, I have read dozens of essays that have made me laugh, cry, reflect, question, and enter each day with a new perspective. There is honestly no job I would rather do than read all of your amazing work and spread it through the monthly newsletter. Additionally, I appreciate your patience with PE. We have a small but mighty group that is committed to making sure your essays are accurately input. It can take a little longer than expected so your graciousness is important to us. We have new volunteers each week (including some of my pre-law buddies!) who I hope will continue to improve our efficiency.*

*Since 2004, the newsletter program has created a cohort of creative writers within our community. Whether it be your first essay or your 40th, this cohort will be both accepting and empowering for all those who participate. It is truly amazing to see the growth many of you authors undergo by simply submitting your work each month to us. For those who are unsure if you want to submit a piece, I encourage you to try it out and I can promise that someone who reads it will feel a little less alone.*

*I would like to reestablish some of the rules we have about the newsletter program to ensure that you all have a strong understanding of them:*

### **Theme Writing Rules**

- 1. Write legibly and keep the entry to 800 words. We can be a little flexible but please be mindful of the limit.*
- 2. All pages of your writing should have YOUR FIRST AND LAST NAME. Please indicate when you are using a pen name. If we do not know who the piece belongs to, we cannot publish the piece under your name, and we won't know how to mail you a packet of everyone else's writing on the topic. You can go under a pen name, but KEEP IN MIND volunteers will not be able to reach to you if they come across your piece on our website, as they will not be able to look up your address using your given name. Page numbers are also very helpful in trying to piece together your writing after it goes through our processing system.*
- 3. Your writing should be semi-cohesive and clearly relate to the theme CONSISTENTLY throughout the essay. We have to generate a connection between your essay and the themes at hand. We will not include essays that use word cues to simply be published.*
- 4. WORD themes must be TRUE stories or your beliefs (non-fiction). PICTURE themes can be whatever you want (fantasy or reality).*

### **Upcoming Word Theme Cues:**

<b>Teachers</b>	Due 3/1/23
<b>Challenged</b>	Due 4/1/23
<b>The Circus</b>	Due 5/1/23
<b>Rescued</b>	Due 6/1/23
<b>Space</b>	Due 7/1/23
<b>Rules</b>	Due 8/1/23
<b>Stranger</b>	Due 9/1/23
<b>Home</b>	Due 10/1/23

Following is some samples of word themes from previous months. To get the entire packet send in a writing on the theme. Remember word themes are to be true stories.

## **Growing Older**

*by Davon Blackstone Sr.*

I miss my hair. I try and pretend I don't, and judging by peoples' reactions to me I'm still good looking without it, but

still I miss it. I'm beginning to see the lines in my forehead when I furrow my brow. Staying in shape has become more work than it used to be. I have to stretch now before I work out, and if I overdo it, I feel it the next day. Dunking a basketball is now a fearful adventure where it used to be an exhilarating way to display my athletic prowess. I hear my knees complaining when I prostrate in my Salah. My kids clown me when I try to use current slang or protest their assertions that I am indeed getting old. Decrying current music, balking at fashion trends, longing for bygone eras; all positive proof that I am indeed getting older. But I embrace it; I love it. Getting old is not a curse or a punishment. It is a gift and privilege that not everyone receives. I like that I care less what my peers think of me. I like that I act less impulsive than I previously did. I like that I have a wealth of knowledge derived from experience that I can call on in a dilemma. I like that younger people see me as someone who can give quality advice. I like that my resolve is stronger and grows stronger daily. I like that I can now see the interconnectedness of all people and things. Growing older has some downsides to be sure, but I am grateful for the 33 years Allah has seen fit to give me, and inshallah I have many more years to come.

*by Nathan Gray*

Not long ago, I was talking with a friend of mine about how neither of us have a good understanding of how old we are. I told him a story about the time when another prisoner came up to me and asked how old I am. I told the man I am twenty. I told my friend my real age is actually twenty-four. He and I laughed about the momentary lapse of memory and continued our conversation. About a minute later, I stopped the point I was making and said, "Jesus Christ, man. I'm not twenty-four, I'm twenty-five." That's how bad this is." I laughed in the moment, but later the incident worried me. I realized I just had another episode of ageing amnesia.

Ageing amnesia is a disease of the mind where you are not able to remember you have aged or that you are not able to pull up the information quickly or correctly. I noticed it developing in me shortly after my arrest. Having just turned twenty-three, I was telling the people I met in jail that I was anywhere between nineteen and my true age. The amnesia became exacerbated after I failed to celebrate my twenty-fifth birthday. I was already sentenced by that point, and was waiting to be moved from my jail to a prison. Just a few days before my birthday, the move finally happened. I was not able to call my family on the date. So I allowed it to slip by without so much as a comment from me. I had missed the yearly celebration ritual that always ticked up my age clicker in my subconscious. Now it is a year or more behind.

Being behind these walls distorts my sense of growing older, as well as my understanding that others are aging as well. I still see my little brother as he was just turning the legal age to drink, though now he is the same age I was when I was first arrested. I still see my grandma as a gentle lady in her mid-eighties, not as someone quickly approaching ninety. Perhaps if I just don't think about it, everyone will stay the same age as when I was arrested. This time distortion has really thrown me for a loop. I will be nearing thirty when I get out. But will I believe I am still a fresh college graduate at twenty-three, ready to make my way in the world? Will I see my brother as a boy on the cusp of manhood, rather than a man in his own right? Perhaps now my sense of growing older is permanently stunted. Maybe I will continue to age, believing I am in my twenties. Then the shock of aging will hit me every time I look in the mirror and see a man of thirty, forty, and fifty.

### ***Day by Day by Pedro Zamora***

Growing older comes with its own advantages and disadvantages. Every day that passes is another day we grow older and so I present to you a list of the advantages and disadvantages as they pertain to me. Your experience will surely vary.

#### ADVANTAGES

1. I'm one day closer to death. This doesn't sound like an advantage, but if you take into account that I woke up in the morning then that means that I did not die and that today I defied death one more time. So screw you, death. I'm not giving up that easily.
2. Another day to learn. Such an underestimated word, learn. Most minds tend to gravitate toward the act of acquiring knowledge from books and/or educational institutions, and - while those are part of it - there is so much more to it. You can learn a new sense, a new smell, a new taste, a new sound, a new texture, or a new sight. All five senses could facilitate their own books. But one of the most rewarding experiences is learning about a new person. Why, you might ask? Because if I met someone the same age as me, thirty nine, then that means I have access to an alternative thirty-nine years of life experience from which to glean information. A treasure trove of information, and that's just from one person. So never underestimate the power of the word learn.
3. Another day of self improvement. I wish to be better than the day before. Even if it's just a little bit. If I don't progress, that only leaves me with two choices: stagnation or regression. Stagnation equals boredom

and I get enough of that in prison - so that's out. And regression would mean reverting back to my old habits that led me to prison in the first place, so that's definitely out because I never want to come back here again. So, that leaves me with progression and self improvement. And God knows I have enough time on my hands to find ways to better myself, if only even a little bit.

4. Another day closer to the door. I can't ask for any more than that right now.
5. Another day to forget. This applies especially to those of us in prison. Because who the hell wants to remember this kind of experience? Sadly, no matter how I try, no matter how hard I may wish to, I'll never be able to forget the ungodly amount of ridiculousness and piles of stupidity that revolves around being a captive of the B.O.P.. But every day that passes ups the probability that I'll forget another chunk of this nightmare.

#### DISADVANTAGES

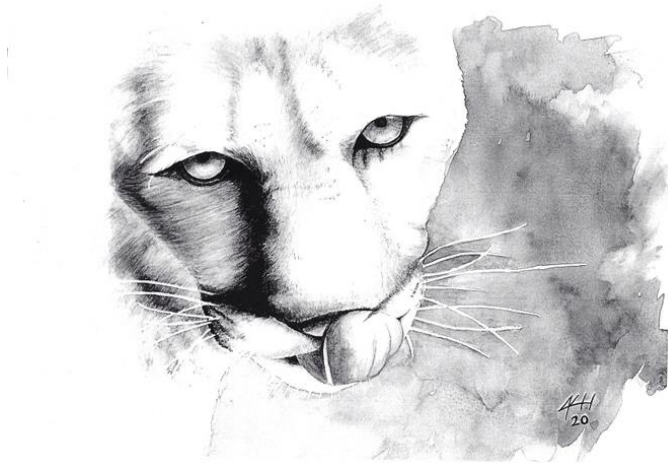
1. I'm one day closer to death...yep.
2. Honestly, the first disadvantage is the only real bad one. The rest are just things people perceive as being disadvantages. Things like hair loss, muscle/body aches, wrinkling skin, waning vision, etc.. All these things are just precursors that are leading up to #1. I've tried and tried but try as I might. I just can't seem to find another detrimental disadvantage.
3. You'll never have all the answers.

#### ***by Michael Oakleaf***

"The man who views the world at fifty the same as he did at twenty has wasted thirty years of his life -Muhammad Ali

When I was a teenager in high school, I could not wait to turn eighteen years old and become "an adult." I am not sure what I expected to happen to me, but I was certain that like a caterpillar entering its cocoon and emerging a butterfly, I was going to wake up one morning and to be something different, something more, something beautiful and grand. I imagined myself becoming someone who was more confident and assertive, who understood how the world worked and had all the answers. When nothing biologically or magically happened, I was disappointed. I assumed the lack of transformation affirmed my self-view that I was different from other people, damaged and unworthy. Out of fear of rejection, the rejection I felt towards myself and those like me, I chose to turn inward and to hide and mask the real me. I stopped caring

for and, therefore, growing the person I wanted to be with dreams, interests, relationships, and real experiences. I focused on becoming, or at least projecting, the person I believed everyone expected me to become, the person I believed others could accept. I stopped growing emotionally and socially. But pretending to be someone you are not is exhausting, so I isolated more and more. I avoided letting people get too close in fear they would see all my flaws, weaknesses, and insecurities, and they would reject the "real me." I embraced fantasies to keep the loneliness at bay. And when that failed, my loneliness gave way to selfishness and pettiness, jealousy, indifference, entitlement, a lack of respect and empathy for others, and, finally, my cruel and hurtful choices for which there are no excuses. When I was arrested for my choices and crimes, and my life came crashing down around me, the masks I wore were broken into pieces; I did not know who I was. I had nothing and no one to catch me, or to help me find my way forward. I had wasted nearly thirty years of my life; during which time, I had not grown, but had just gotten older.



Art by Jason Hawkins

## Showers

by Nick Raines

Shower times are a time of bliss. I wake up in the morning and at 8:01 AM I'm pushing that button in my room cell to connect to the bubble officer to ask permission to have water sent to my cell. Although I hate my atmosphere with almost everything in me, shower time is one of my favorite times of the day or even the week. It wakes me up and prepares me for a day locked up and away from my loved ones. It gives me 15 minutes to myself. So as I'm under that hot water thinking about my life before prison I'm honestly glad I'm even able to take this shower. Due to choices in my life there were times I'd go a week or two or even three without a shower. Just running

the streets, sleeping on park benches or parking garages. Or even being in medically induced comas from overdosing and waking up smelling like a caveman. It's those memories that cross my mind when I finally come back to reality and look out across the dayroom and see my fellow inmates on the phones with their loved ones or cleaning the block. As I rinse off, I think about the time when I'll be free again, but living a whole new kind of life and having my own shower, so I can day dream about having to shower in prison instead of not being able to shower. And I'll dry off and never forget the places I've been and where I came from!



Art by Jermeaka Gorham

Initiation by Vicki Hicks

The day was August 31, 2017. I rolled up to the reception center in Ocala Florida in what we call a dog box. The deputy explained everything I showed expect and to be respectful oh yeah and to follow the last order given and I would do just fine. That was the beginning of my sentence. I go up to the window and give my social security number, date of birth, and full "government" name. I am assigned an inmate ID number. Next you go sit in a cage to wait your turn to be called. For photo, shower, nurse, urine test, and clothes. The one thing that stood out to me was my first prison swinging doors did not close. The sergeant wearing a skirt had a deep voice and ordered me into the shower stall. I was to strip, grab both cheeks and cough. Then she squirted a cocktail of shampoos (aka device) into my dry waist-length thick hair. Ordered me to work into my scalp and then a squirt for my body. Now to rinse off! The water was ice cold and no way could I run around quickly; I had to get the shampoo out of my hair. This shower did not come with any conditioner. Needless to say my hair was a mess. I was able to use the threadbare towel to dry off with and dry my hair the best I could. I must add that my hair drips for a couple of hours after I towel dry it. I was ordered to dispose of the towel in the laundry bin upon exiting the shower. I was issued a navy blue dress, panties, a bra, and a pair of



crocs. Upon finishing with that I had to go back and sit in the cage to wait for the rest of in-processing. We were told not to drip water on the floor. Well I had a river on the bench behind me from my hair. I scooted back and used my dress to soak up the water then tucked my soaking wet hair into my dress so that would not happen again. Needless to say my dress was soaked all the way from top to bottom. These are the things you are not told about when coming to prison.

### by Christopher Negrete

Seventy-five days. It may as well have been seventy-five weeks. When one's senses are assailed with an unpleasantness that can be described as almost violent, time has a way of stretching out – the future inching its way toward you rather than racing. Also, it is true that when a person has a deficiency in one sensory area (blindness, for example) that the body compensates by enhancing sensory recognition elsewhere. It so happens that I am hearing-impaired: and at a much earlier age than the majority of people who suffer hearing loss over time. As a result, my sense of smell is off the charts. This is a blessing and a curse: I can detect your halitosis from ten feet away, but I can also warn you that you've left the gas on without being anywhere near the kitchen. It's like having the world's lamest superpower. Enter stankman. This knuckle-dragging troglodyte has been on our tier since November of last year. In the seven months (as of this writing) between, he has not taken a single shower. To put that in perspective, whenever he did last wash himself, Betty White was still alive and you had no idea what Ukraine's flag looked like. To say the man befouls the air around him is like saying a typhoon is "damp." There is no hyperbole involved when I say I've encountered homeless individuals on the streets of Chicago whose odor was less offensive than the miasma emanating from stankman. Try as I might, I am unable to put in words how incomparably rancid he smells. Ergo, it should not be difficult to fathom my horror when a few months ago my cell door was opened and this disaster piece was ushered in. My previous cellie (the best one I've had) had left a few days prior, so I knew to expect a replacement. But I had not imagined it would be him. It was as if I had become Winston Smith of 1984 and he was the cage teeming with rats. It became imperative that I not only wear a mask in the cell, but two or three at the same time. Because not only does he not wash himself (or brush his teeth for that matter), he never leaves the cell. Thus, it is never afforded an opportunity to air out. The resulting accumulation of this pollution is so virulent as to practically have a texture. Nauseating only scratches the surface. His putrid aroma is so powerful that it would frequently jolt me out of my sleep in the middle of the night. At one point another inmate jokingly asked me if it was like being housed with a dead body. To which I replied that it was probably worse: a corpse would not move around and stir up the fetid air. Naturally it follows that he eschews all other forms of hygiene as well. In case you haven't already thrown up in your mouth while reading this, I'll also mention that some of this toenails are nearly as long as my thumbs– that is, they were straightened flat: they in fact curl back under his toes. When he

walks barefoot his feet click like a dog walking on linoleum. Suffice it to say I employed every method possible to evict this ogre from the cell. I lodged complaints citing mental health issues, physical illness, sanitation (or lack thereof), inhumane living conditions – people from outside even made attempts to intercede on my behalf. And none of it made any difference whatsoever. Having been locked up in excess of three years and been generally treated and spoken to like a petulant second-grader during that span, I thought I had a decent idea what it felt like to not matter. But it turns out that was just the training-wheels version of "you don't count as a human being anymore." Being housed with a human garbage dump is of no cause for concern here. At least not to those with the power to do anything about it. After seventy-five days, and owing mostly to a bit of luck, I finally succeeded in being moved to another cell, away from stankman. I slept like a baby that night. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go take a shower.

### by Harry Carillo

I sock him square in the eye. It lands with a loud, wet smack. We exchange punches in front of the chapel before a small crowd. The guards see us and hit the alarm. "Hey," somebody shouts "That's my homeboy!" The next thing I know I'm boxing a total stranger. The first guy is on all fours trying to catch his breath. "GET DOWN!" I hear the clamoring of boots and keys. "GET DOWN, NOW!" As a rule, one never wants to lay down in the middle of a fistfight. Especially with multiple opponents. I swing wildly. The guy in front of me takes a step back. Peering over my shoulder. I follow his gaze right into a stream of pepper spray. "GET DOWN!" I back off and watch my opponents lie face down before I comply. The spray is everywhere. It runs down my face. I try to blink it away. It scorches my eyes. I can't see. A guard pins me down with a knee in my back while his partner puts me in cuffs. They hoist me to my feet and lead me to holding cells. I'm placed into a decontamination shower and uncuffed through the tray slot. I strip down to my boxers as the pepper spray seeps into my pores. I can't breathe. The air is sucked from my lungs by an invisible feature. I'm heaving, coughing, hocking up long strings of snot like I'm melting into a primordial ooze. I feel around blindly for the shower head and turn on the cold water. The spray begins to rinse and burns my balls and in between my toes. Goddamn it. The anger dies down and the pain kicks in. Not the pain of a black eye or pepper spray but that of failure. The water runs, soothing the burning welts that will last for the next few days. 160 words. If only it could do more: to wash away the shame of being a middle-aged man who still engages in petty squabbles like a teenager. To ride the pain of getting stuck another year in a max. security prison because of my own childish impulsivity. I let the water run with the silent prayer that it wash away the stain of insecurity that won't allow me to just grow up and be a man.

### by Brandon Rushing

When I was a child, no more than six or seven years old, I can remember bathing in a tub full of cold water. We were poor. Our water was pumped from a well just outside and carried in with buckets. And it just didn't matter if it was winter or summer, that well water was always cold. I grew to hate these baths. I resented the time spent with jaws locked tight, shivering, as I tried to build a lather to wash with. To me it was a nightly torture. Although, to be fair, in summer it was a welcome blessing. Though by no means did the summer alleviate my frozen burden. Not until my mother and step father bought a mobile home and cleared the land, and moved us across the street did I enjoy hot water. We dug a long narrow ditch about three feet deep from the trailer, all the way out to the country road about four hundred yards away. We put a water line in for a hook into the public water supply, and then buried it. The first night in that home was special. Us boys had a small room, Granny had a room, Mom and Dad had their rooms, and there was a hot shower and I just let the water cascade over my body and knew that I'd never have to be cold again.

### by Tisha Morley

The shower in prison is the only place where you're by yourself. This is only if you ignore the yelling from the section, slamming doors, the blaring TV, and the clanking of guard boots going up and down the stairs. But yeah, sure, you're by yourself. Of course, that's if you don't count the cameras you can see, praying they can't see you. You also get to deal with people asking if you're almost done or telling you they're next in line. But yeah, sure, you're by yourself. The shower is the place to cry without nosey onlookers asking, "what's wrong?" Not because they care but so they can use it behind your back. So, no, you're not really by yourself anywhere in prison. Just alone.

### Love the Big One by Sheila LaBaree

I love to be clean. This is when I feel the best. After trial and error I have convinced myself that the best times for me to shower are either at 1:30pm or 2:00pm. My favorite shower is the BIG ONE. So, every day I walk to this shower, holding my towel to hang on the shower door as proof that I am soon to be using it. More often than not, I see wads of hair in both drains. Various hair decorates the stainless steel shower walls. Fingerprints of hair conditioner on lotion dot the walls. Some can simply shower in this mess. I cannot! Too much disarray and DNA makes me nervous. Now I'm mad. Where's my warbonnet?! I exit the shower and enter the mop closet. There I arm myself with an arsenal of cleaning rags, disinfectant spray, and the shower scrub brush with the long handle. Back inside the shower I begin my cleaning routine. Scrub. Rub. Rinse. This takes about 15 minutes. I quietly curse the filthy culprits! Once the icky hair has been deposited in the trash and my shower sparkles I go to my cell and collect my items and clean clothes. Dove soap, Bic razor, Menen deodorant (which

is better than the kind for women), cocoa butter lotion, and Pantene products if I am washing my hair, plus an extra towel. Sometimes I add scented shower gel to kick it up a notch. Then I get busy. After letting the water run until it is hot I enter the two streams quietly flowing from two faucets. Upper and lower. At first the hot water is shocking. Then it feels so good. I begin washing off my make-up, cleaning my ears, neck, and body. I repeat this several times. I shave my underarms and legs. I soap up again and rinse. I walk to a dry area in the shower and dry thoroughly. After deodorant, lotion head to toe, bright, white, clean underwear and clean clothes, I am very relaxed. I gather everything up and exit the BIG ONE. So spacious and left cleaner than before. In closing, I apply a mixture of prayer oils to my neck because scent is secret communication and a feeling of the familiar. I don't overdo it. Please tell me I smell good. Prison showers do not compare to free world showers. But they are the closest thing to luxury I will ever feel again. As I serve two life sentences in New Hampshire, I'm very thankful for the spacious, modern shower known as the BIG ONE.

---

## Partners

### Incarcerated Man of Mystery by Catherine LaFleur

Here in Camp Prisonery Land, humor is greatly appreciated. I like to imagine people find me amusing. My wit and deadpan delivery keep the women on their toes. When someone says, "Catherine, you are so funny", I don't know how to interpret that. What do they mean? Catherine, you are so funny, you're the life of the party, or Catherine you're so funny, but please don't sit next to me on public transportation. In any event, my dry sense of humor must bow in the presence of greatness. And by bow, I don't mean a curtsy, I mean all the way down, forehead to the ground.

Leo, I am not worthy to touch the hem of your garment. The crown and scepter must be ceded to you. Clearly, in the throes of nominative determination, your parents named you appropriately. No question, you are the King of Comedy. I'll just play the wacky gal pal sidekick.

I must invite you to have a seat in my magic bean bag chair. First, you have to discard all your weapons, now strip off your armor. Boxers optional but encouraged. Climb in and get comfortable. Okay, I'm going to slip in next to you. Don't squirm, this chair can accommodate two celibate asexual friends. Now let's each roll slightly to the center so we can talk face to face and touch hands. Relax, your virtue is safe, at least from me. Feel the magic beans supporting you. Perfect!

Hi friend! I'm being chased. All the girls want to read your pieces, "New York " and "Shitty Story." Sure they've been interested in PE stories here and there. I've only had the November issue for a few days. Already, it's crinkled, well-traveled and full of smudgy fingerprints. Prisonery Land has

hosted Russian models for human trafficking and drugs, a University of Florida cheerleader/gymnast who walked on her hands convicted for drugs and check fraud, and at least two sets of sexy twins, one set in for exploitation of the elderly and the other for armed robbery. There are also variegated strippers, call girls and a Palm Beach madame. Prisonery Land contains any woman you could dream up in the naughtiest chained heat fantasies.

We use PE here to encourage women to read something other than People magazine and trashy urban sex novels. I clip the great pieces so they can be studied in the education department to guide students in how to write an essay or tell a story. For all writers of Prisoner Express, you guys are partners in teaching and encouraging others far beyond the sheets of this publication. The best results are when a new partner writer decides to join our PE club.

Leo, these girls think I know you personally. I'm used to women approaching me to ask legal questions about programs. These past few days, it's all what does he look like? Do you have a picture? Is he cute? Is he sexy? Is he single? I have to wade through them to get to my office where they can't enter. Yesterday, I was in the communal bathroom when two girls in the stalls to the left and right of me pinned me down with more questions. I'm afraid to tell anyone I have a collection of back issues of PE with some of your work. They might stampede me.

You are limiting yourself with ménage, you should be thinking harem. All teasing aside, thanks for such funny stories, partner. There is an African proverb which says "Until the lions learn to tell their story, the truth will not be known." Thanks for telling your stories, Leo! I remain your faithful correspondent and wacky gal pal.

### **Partners...who are they? by John Michael Loomis**

So, many people have different definitions as to what "partners" are. Buddies, pals, friends, acquaintances, family, blood...on and on, the list could go. For me, my "partners" are my friends that I consider family, loyal and dependable, despite the horrible environment we live in. They are people who share similar goals, values and beliefs, who strive to better themselves and be a positive influence on the world around them. This place is such a toxic wasteland, the dregs of society all thrown together, so it can be hard, not only to find your place and "fit in," but also to cope with the negative energy that constantly flows around these cages. Humans are not created to live in cages, period. I wouldn't wish this life on my worst enemy.

But back to my first point, my partners are my friends and family who help me focus on positive things and help me make it through this life, one day at a time, as we say in the

program. So, who are your partners? What purpose do they serve in your life? And are they an influence for good or bad? Reflecting on that could be an important factor in your life, if you wish to grow and mature. I look forward to reading what the rest of you write in this theme.

In closing, I'd like to say hello to Catherine LaFleur and Vicki Hicks, who are doing time in my home state of Florida. I always especially enjoy y'all's essays, most recently Catherine's essay about the witch and the horrible "juju bag," gag! And the abandonment of the Dewey Decimal System, outrageous! Thank you both for all you write, and helping me feel reconnected in a small way to the Sunshine State. Keep your heads up and if you ever feel like writing, I'd love to hear from you both. I'm in Missouri DOC. Anywho, to the rest of you fellow writers and artists, I hope to add some of you to my circle of partners. Thanks for sharing your creativity.

### **Prison Transferring 750 by Matthew Wiseman**

I don't know the staffing situations in other prisons or states, but news flash - London is transferring 750 inmates out for "remodeling." This after they have shut down 4 blocks and transferred 450 out since August. Right now, we don't know who all is going but the fun and festivities of 2.4ing out starts tomorrow. Since I don't know about other states, I'll explain what 2.4ing means. In Ohio, when you transfer from one prison to another they give you a box to pack all your belongings in. It's 2.4 cubic feet of space. For a long-term offender, 2.4ing out is a bad experience because we tend to accumulate a lot of shit. Thankfully, I don't have to worry about it because I'm minimum security and mostly medium security guys are going.

If you have made it this far, you are probably wondering what the hell does this have to do with partners. It's simple, really. The old school dudes call their homies, dudes etc. their partners. And I stand to lose a lot of partners.

Very few people know who I really am. You guys reading my writings know more than the guys I live around. But for those few who do, it's painful to lose them. When I rode in in '19, I had two partners I knew since '12 and one since '11, and made a friend for life who went home last December. Well now, it's down to me and one partner.

The good thing is that we easily adapt to any situation. I think that that's what made me a good convict and has kept me sane.

Shoutout to Leo Cardez for saying one of the truest things about prison friendships I have ever read: "It has turn my heart out and I have mourned more friendships than I care to remember, but, my only solace, I always keep the memories." (Dec. Word Theme 2021)

Just sitting here thinking about homies that have been transferred out, those released only to wind up dead, those possibly leaving hurts. I'm sure we have all seen the plaque, "live, laugh, love." It's enduring these situations that allows me to do so. But when I think of love, I think of it in the aspect of respect, loyalty, and camaraderie.

Life here at London is about to change drastically over the next few months. 8 blocks closed and only 6 left open. They say it's so they can remodel. But the truth is that they are 98 cops short. It's hard to get cops for \$18 an hour when the Target Warehouse pays \$27 and Stanley Electric \$23. And yes, this discounts and uproots a bunch of shit. But us convicts adapt. We'll stay sane and carry on. Only 54 months left...

---

## Sticky Business

by Leo Cardez

Hard questions require even harder solutions.

Recently I was watching a Chicago political debate on TV, the issue was community violence and criminal justice (a hot topic in America's murder capital). The moderator prompted the candidates by spewing recent statistics about the rise of crime in Chicago. She then asked, how has violence affected you personally and what would you do to fix it?

As always, I was disappointed with the political double talk offering new whines in old bottles. The candidates, God bless them, went on and on about their voting history increasing penalties for violent offenders. That's all they know. They sincerely believe that is the solution. It is clear, it has not worked. Prisons are overcrowded, crime continues to rise, the tide is not being stemmed by harsher punishment.

One of the older candidates actually started his spiel with, Ohh, Criminal Justice is a sticky business and then went on to talk about soccer practices and science fairs.

I wish someone would ask someone who is a victim of street culture what they have experienced and what they would do to fix it. If I was asked, this is what I might say:

I am not going to tell anyone anything they don't already know (at least on some level). In many ways, it is common sense. A collection of studies finds that youth who witness or are direct victims of violence (at home or community), are raised without the full support of both a mother and father, and do not have access to quality education and mentorship are at a high risk for later offending and justice system involvement. And the opposite is also true: children who are raised in a safe supportive household and community/school with both parents at home, receiving access to a quality education and mentorship greatly reduces the odds of future delinquency. Is

anyone surprised by these findings? I can assure you no one in prison is.

My prompt asked, How has the violence in your community affected you personally? (First part)

My story is no different than anyone else who was raised on the fringes of society – in a neighborhood most people avoid. When I was six I was awoken to a shotgun blast as my father caught a burglar in our house. Two years later I would be walking home with my mother and sister from a local Walgreens when we would be violently assaulted and robbed at knifepoint. I can still remember my mother's high-pitched scream and how tightly she held my hand. At ten, walking home from school with my best friend, a car pulled up and threw up a gang sign. We didn't know how to react and simply ran as they shot over our heads...I was constantly getting into fights for not joining the "pee-wee league" of our local gang. As a young teen, I would see my cousin's head shot off in a car-jacking gone wrong. And frankly, I had it pretty good. But who doesn't think that type of trauma doesn't stay and affect a young child's mind?

It's science. Throughout human evolution we are ingrained to remember the bad stuff as a protective mechanism to keep us alive. Our early ancestors had to learn hard lessons about their safety and survival on the savannah and those instincts are still deeply embedded in our evolved brains. It is why I remember every experience I mentioned earlier with great detail and yet, not one of my birthdays. It is also why so many children who experience continuous exposure to trauma exhibit a lack of emotion or learn how to emotionally detach as a method of self-protection from trauma. Is it why me and so many others are in prison today? In short: probably.

Prison is a den of men raised by their mothers. Inmates (generally speaking, but to a great degree) were raised fatherless. Their mother, a single parent, forced to leave them alone to make a living, relied on hope and the streets to watch over their children. Study after study shows a direct relationship between high-quality strong relationships with a mother AND father figure as a protective effect against the likelihood of violent offense. One caveat, the parents had to also be supportive and focused on serving their child's needs. (They couldn't be like Frank from Shameless.) Do all single parents create future delinquents? Of course not, but far too many do. And the worst part, the inevitable irony, prison perpetuates more children growing up without a father. Education is a game changer. We've known this for a long time. There is a direct correlation between the level of education attained and the risk of offending behavior and recidivism. In prison it is even more pronounced. A recent federal study showed that recidivism rates and level of

education obtained while incarcerated had an inverse relationship. The more education someone received the less likely they were to recidivate. The longitudinal study demonstrated the deep decrease in recidivism for every new level of education attained until it was at zero percent at the Master's degree level. It is even more important to focus on quality education in a young person's life. Researchers identified academic progress as a key influencer in weakening the strength of the relationship between exposure to violence and court involvement. It was also a factor in developing safe healthy psychological habits. It is a type of early CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy) for children. It has been shown to drastically improve the odds of youth who have been witness or subject to violence and raised in a broken home to avoid future criminal justice involvement. (Maybe the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air was onto something.)

The second part of the prompt asked, What would you do to fix it? Who am I the genie from Aladdin? I don't have a magic wand that will erase centuries of American cultural and social development. There is no one easy answer. If there was, I would like to believe we would already be doing it. But, if I must provide one possible avenue to explore I would AGAIN go with the science: Mentorship.

According to a recent slew of studies mentoring programs are a prominent strategy in the United States for preventing negative outcomes and promoting resilience among at-risk youth. Programs vary from those that offer support from adult volunteers, paid staff, or students at higher grade levels and in what their aim and/or focus may be – some promote mental health while others, academic achievement. But regardless of the program efficacy, all of them have shown positive results as a viable strategy for both preventing and reducing delinquent behavior and the potential to contribute to positive outcomes for all youth across races, gender, and age.

For example, Reading for Life, a group mentoring program that uses works of literature to facilitate moral development and character education, has found a statistical significant decline in negative outcomes for the participants. (The program was offered at high-risk neighborhoods.) Another program, Quantum Opportunities of the Eisenhower Foundation, is an intensive year-round, multicomponent intervention for high-risk minority high school students from inner-city neighborhoods. Youth receive both individual and group mentoring from paid staff. Participants had significantly higher GPAs, high school graduation rates, and college acceptable rates. For example, 76% of program youth graduated from high school compared with 40% of the control youth. The experts believe the success of the program is due, in part, to the deep mentoring aspect—that part that goes beyond just the focus on education. The

mentors are trained to serve as advocates for the youth visiting their homes to discuss problems and find solutions, attending parent-teacher comes conferences, and standing in for parents when needed. On the whole, the findings provide intriguing preliminary evidence that mentoring received through a program during childhood or adolescence can indeed foster improved functioning into and through adulthood. Similar programs have seen success in prison settings.

America is broken and we are at a critical junction where we can either push towards creating a better, humane, system or lower our sights and continue to compromise our humanity and fall deeper into the darkness. For all of our faults I do not believe we as a nation should ever compromise or settle for anything less than our full potential. Investing in these types of large scale mentorship programs may not be the most expected path, nor will it be the easiest. But not all pain is bad. Freedom can be found through pain.

### **How to Make a Battle Hardened Military Vet Giggle Like a Girl by Catherine LaFleur**

Here in Camp Prisonery Land there is intense focus on re-entry programs. The Ladies Empowerment and Apprenticeship Program (LEAP) trains women in entrepreneurial skills and small business management. As my second job, I tend the non-fiction section of the library. The Leap ladies come often to check out our small business books. I'm happy to help. Sometimes they want me to brainstorm ideas with them for product lines. I helped Marjorie name a sandwich "Tune a Fish." Selma got "Bed of Roses" for her quilt sewing business. It's fun. So I wasn't too surprised when Cayluh flagged me down one morning as I was be-bopping to the library. She asked if I would look over some product names for her candle making business. I assured her nothing would delight me more and I took the list with me.

One of the things I love about my job is I have an actual desk. On that desk I keep a Thesaurus and my most treasured possession, an Oxford English Dictionary. It's truly monstrous and unabridged. I caress and use it every day. No one can touch it without my express permission. I totally understand Gollum...yessss my precious.

I perused Cayluh's list. The names of the candles were cute. So you say it's your Birthday for a confetti candle, Hearts on Fire for a double twist red beauty. I came to the last name at the bottom of the page.

First my jaw dropped. I read it again and slapped my hand over my mouth. I tittered. Next I giggled. Oh, surely I must have an incorrect understanding of the definition of this word!

With tears in my eyes, I opened the Tome of Tomes and stroked my finger down to the appropriate entry under the

letter “S”. Yes, one of the definitions is a slang term, quite naughty. Nay even filthy!

I got my trusty thesaurus and looked for a better word. Sparkle and Spark were the best choices.

I wouldn't see Cayluh until the next day. After work, I started to doubt myself. Perhaps I wasn't up with the way the hep cats talk. A call to Hero seemed to be in order.

Whenever I have a man related question, there are three sources: Uncle Dirk, who handles all my business, Michel, my brother the scientist, and Hero, my earliest friend. I was three, he was five when we met.

After being blown up in Iraq and Afghanistan repeatedly, he's reclusive with a barking case of PTSD. But he did get a cell phone for me to call him whenever I want. Friends are also precious.

I dialed his Virginia number. Truly, I only intended to ask the question straight. Instead, I embarked on a story, as I so often do. I told him Cayluh's idea, named some of the products. Hero murmured in agreement, yes, yes, very cute. And now for the best name ever...I troweled the dirt directly in his ear. A long paused ensued, I could practically feel him sitting up straighter. At first I thought it was a whimper. No it was a titter, morphing into a giggle. Hero dropped the phone as he shouted with laughter. It was a sound I don't hear often enough from him.

Hero dropped the phone into a port and put me on speaker. Catherine, you have to convince her to change. I relayed I would be seeing her the next morning and had a letter already written.

I could not get Cayluh to change the unfortunate word. I even invited her to look in the sacred text. She seemed intent on sticking to the definition from her Webster's.

I do wish her all wealth and prosperity. I love hearing success after prison stories.

And the name you've been waiting to read. Surely, the best selling candle will be “I love your spunk!”

A note to Rolf Rathmann. Your elegant and sophisticated use of language gets me every time I read one of your stories.

Love your little twists at the end.

### **Cooking with Nana by Vicki Hicks**

My two girls loved to cook and bake. Of course with that comes a big mess. As parents we clean up so many messes that we come up with any excuse as to why now is not a good time to use the kitchen. Nana would pick the girls up and take them to her house at least two or three times a week. She called it her quality time; mind you Nana is their great-grandmother. Nana always had cake, brownie, or cookie mix at her house and if not, they are made from scratch. When Nana

would bring them home there was always a cake with lots of icing dripping off of it. The girls would be bathed and had new clothes on. When I asked what happened to their clothes they simply said the mixer thing exploded and attacked us so we had to clean up our sticky mess that was all over the place. When I went over for a once a week deep cleaning of Nana's house I would find a sticky mess under the cabinets, on the side of the refrigerator, on the ceiling, in the oven, on the floor, in the rug. They truly had an explosion of the mixer thing. Those days are gone, but will never be forgotten. Now I have a grand-daughter to bake and make a sticky mess everywhere with. I thank Nana for taking the time out of her life to teach my girls how to bake and enjoy life and not to worry about the sticky mess left behind.

### **by Alejandro Hernandez**

Your reputation is the culmination of your previous choice and actions. A thousand good decisions can (and will!) be undermined by a single selfish bad one. Usually, an ignorant choice can be overlooked. Some decisions made in haste can be overcome. But, a choice made completely for selfish reasons will bring utter destruction to a good reputation and replace it with its own. Whether good or bad, your reputation sticks with you wherever you land.

I started my incarceration in a shell-shocked and distraught state. Even amongst the haze of my coping brain, one thing was clear. I couldn't operate the same in captivity as I did as a free individual. I needed to learn; needed to grow as a man. Little did I realize at the time that this process will never be completed in mortality. I grow older each day, but my tolerance does as well, and my anger is slower to rise. Even these nine years later, my reputation with those no longer around me daily has a way of sticking around. For example, my Nana's phone calls will commonly end with her loving advice, “I love you. Keep your temper.” I return my love and smile, because around her it is a different story.

My gated community houses 1700 individuals of the greatest character ever known to man...

It is larger than some, smaller than others, but the perfect size for your report to precede you into any block you walk into. The longer I reside here, the more information can be relayed through whispered conversation. I have never cared much about the childish manner of gossip, but with age and experiences comes an important realization. It may not matter what others think, but life is easier when people know you will conduct yourself properly. This includes both my peers and our babysitters.

Those who only knew the child I was—and cling only to that reputation—may not recognize the man awaiting the end

of this mandatory minimum 25 years of incarceration. I will not blame them for that reputation sticking with them, but I refuse to allow those choices to define my present—let alone my future!

### **Sticky Business by Anthony Kenley**

I've got two stories I like to mention so my kids don't think I'm playing favorites. I'd like to tell you about two instances of sticky business.

The first involves my daughter and... duct tape. I'm not sure if she'd seen one too many kidnapping movies or what, but for some reason she inexplicably duct taped her own mouth shut. Hey, I'm so cool with that. The bad part was the tenderness of lip tissue and the stickiness of duck tape it's known for. That's not a good combination. When she had to remove the tape the sticky business also removed a large part of her lip skin. Ouch! That was a one time only experience.

My son's story and sticky business experience happened at my workplace. I hear a scream and my five year old is running towards me holding his thumb up like he's chopped it off. When he reaches me I see there's an industrial staple buried in his thumb pad. I end up removing that piece of sticky business and doctoring his thumb.

I then ask how in the world he had managed to staple his thumb. He quickly picks up the staple again and says "I pushed right here like this." And... shoots another staple into his thumb. The second time was a learning experience. My son decided it was best to avoid such sticky business in the future.

### **by John Michael Loomis**

Dammit! The jelly bottle leaked all over the desk again, so now everything is sticky. I am kind of OCD about how things in the cell are organized, etc. Like the shelves in the desk are covered in newspaper, for easy clean-up. I am so OCD, my celly sometimes moves things around just to see if I notice. "K9" and I have been cellies since May of 2018, and we get along like brothers, brothers who like to play pranks and tease one another. I can't stand sticky situations, at all. Sometimes something gets spilled in the Wing, like soda, and then my shoes are all sticky, and when I walk there's that annoying schlepping sound, ugh! No bueno! I HATE that sound, and the crawling on my spine tingle that it causes, ugh! But hey, that's prison life, ain't it?

### **by Leo Lozano**

Being a father means getting bubble gum out of your child's hair. And when they get a stuffy nose, removing boogers. Then there are times when all the syrup gets used up for breakfast.

Also they always went to help with baking cookies. But the best times are when they latch themselves to you for a big hug.



**Art by David Lee Wilson**

### **Awakening**

**by Mark A. Peirano**

Awakening is only hard for the first few minutes. Resolve yourself to get up for a half-hour, and be active. Once you've been active for a half-hour, the hardest part of your day is over. Live happily ever after for the rest of the day.

### **The Story of Coffee by Rolf Rathmann**

I'm addicted—ahh, duh. No s--it Sherlock. To caffeine. This story really starts in the hills of Mexico, Columbia, or perhaps Brazil. Who knows; do we ever think about the origination of that which we love? Now I'm curious—I should check the yellow packaging of *Keefe*, the blue of *Maxwell* or the red of *Folgers*. What brand do I even purchase? It gets placed in my commissary order by an unseen fellow in khaki like me (the second-to-last pair of hands that touch my coffee; hands in a long line of underpaid hands.) So, back to where this all

stems—a sun baked country (or do coffee beans grow in damp shadowed valleys at high elevations?). A wealthy land owner chooses the plants, inspects the soil, hires the workers—and watches them grow.

Migrants, (are they called migrants if they're native to their own land?) I guess, shamefully, I don't really think about the broken-skinned, roughened hands that earn barely cents on the dollar to provide me with a cup 'o joe each morning, any more than I think of a laborer in Thailand who might make the towels I dry off with, or the hands in China which assemble my MP3 player I listen to. And, do people even pick coffee beans anymore, or have corporate land barons replaced us with machines? Hmm, this is turning into less of a story on all those who help sort, package and ship; sitting idle at sea for a couple of months (hence recent inflation). They are then unloaded and driven somewhere else (according to the packaging I just inspected it's done in St. Louis, no mention of anywhere south of the border). Finally it's shipped by land-or maybe the Mighty Mississippi-(?)- stocked, inventoried and finally touched one last time as it's sold to me-in prison. Each morning I awake, back stiff from a combination of age and a hard metal bunk that even my double-stuffed mattress cannot relieve, I open my locker, dump two generous scoops of finely ground powdery goodness into my plastic tumbler, add a scoop of cocoa, a crushed peppermint candy and a pink packet of generic sweetener, along with two-percent milk I've pocketed from the chow hall. Add scalding hot water—ahh, that first tentative sip. At that point, I know that my day is going to be all right. I actually hate the taste of coffee, thus explaining all the ingredients I add. I'm the guy who goes to *Starbucks* paying \$5.00 a cup for coffee to taste anything BUT coffee. Today, I'm down to my last scoop, so I may have to beg until store day. More than anything, I hate asking for help. Interesting insight, if you don't know me. If you do, hardly insightful. I've known this, for years now, to be one of my greatest defects of character. My ability to ask for help. I made a recent discovery about coffee. I was working on a recent *Prisoner Express/Rattle* poetry project—writing about something present—in the here and now that I could see right before my eyes. I chose my coffee mug at work. I started writing about its shape, color, size, texture; this morphed into a poem of hopefulness—dreaming of owning a coffee house- my way of honoring my mom, who loves her coffee. It would also be a way to always hold her close. Finally, my words revealed its true magic: coffee is the one thing I do for me. Alone. I'm not helping someone, fulfilling their needs, people pleasing, paying someone back, assisting, working for and so on and so forth. Coffee is my treat, alone time, which is why I do not like being

interrupted just as I'm about to sit down with that one cup of java. It's my shield that says, politely, leave me the f- -k alone.

So that's my story of coffee. My coffee. I could have written about awakening to a new life, better choice, sobriety, blah blah blah, and I truly DO look forward to reading the cornucopia of entries addressing healthier living having led to an awakening. As I draw to a close- and really, having nothing to do with coffee, I give you this commercial plug. I discovered an amazing book: "Writing to Awaken—A Journey of Truth, Transformation and Self Discovery" by Mark Matousek. For any writer, it's a must have; for anyone who wants to grow emotionally, I say-get your hands on this book! It's both a great way to sharpen your writing cleaver while digging deep. Okay, I'm done. Anyone have a shot of coffee I can bum 'til store day?

### ***The Awakening Has Been Delayed by Jesse Mocha Scroggins***

The awakening has been delayed...

because the angel men are snorting and slamming.

Their angelic light cannot be seen yet

they are keeping their ability to connect the worlds  
to themselves.

adoring and worshiping the spirit in each other

but forgetting everyone else.

They keep so much light to themselves that it makes  
them sick.

### ***by Jack Simpson***

My body had been shutting down for a few years. I had the look of a corpse over a period of over ten years since I really had needed medical attention.

The month of May, year two thousand and nine, helped prove I was close to death. That is when I found out that two major arteries were blocked 100%. I was not in any pain. Felt tired all the time.

The day at the hospital right before the operation. I had read a booklet on the procedure they were going to perform. There is a slim chance that a person who has this done will not make it.



“Good morning,” I said as the doctor entered the room with his right hand extended. I told him I was ready when he was. “I have one question for you, Mr. Rodgar,” he said. “How do you feel about what we are about to do?” This is what I told him: “I will see you once we are through.” His response, “That is what I wanted to hear.” A positive response goes a long way.

The one thing that got me the most after all of this was: waking up and trying to hold my head upright. I remember it moved side to side like a drunken sailor. To be honest, I was not in pain, but I did have one hell of an appetite. My first meal was fried chicken. Could you believe I got that after having double bypass surgery? I did eat the vegetable and creamed potatoes. No fried chicken for me.

Awakening not only gave me a new purpose in life. It has been thirteen years now. My hands are still pink from blood flow.

**by Michele Lochridge**

Monsters are real. I know because I am that terrible thing that goes bump in the night. Nobody ever really sees it coming. I'm not exactly the hideous creature that parents whisper about in fairytale bedtime stories. The things that dance around inside my brain are pleasantly disguised behind the innocence in my gray eyes.

I wasn't born a monster, I was created. It was not instantaneous or even in the biblical sense of a seven-day event. It's taken a lifetime to perfect. I am a direct product of my environment. Don't get me wrong, I know that at some point, I can no longer blame the parents who have long been dead, for what stares back at me in the mirror.

Life hurts. It consists of a series of events that is meant to shape who and what I am, and who and what I will become. My conscience, however, has this amazing ability to carelessly disregard any joy that's been stored in my brain and instead harvest the most painful, horrifying moments. It gets buried deep inside my delicate soul while it bides its time like a ticking time bomb. These things fester and wait until the opportunity comes to shatter. The shrapnel pierces the broken edges of my soul and blows what's left of my human into nothingness. On February 23, 2016, I took my last blow. My ten-year-old daughter had been murdered. On March 13 of that same year I took my own life in the medical stairwell. Before I was taken down I felt the bones in my neck break. The blinding pain sent me into the death that I begged for. I saw no

bright light, I felt no angelic presence. I felt the dark and the nothing but I knew something terrible waited. I felt a fear that shook me. “Do you believe in G-d?” I heard in the deep, gentle voice of the man standing over me. While I tried to focus my eyes, the man repeated his question. When I didn't answer he continued. “You should believe in G-d because by all rights you should be dead.” I can feel the chain on my foot. “In fact, there isn't even one bone broken. You have some bruises, congratulations.” Laying in the cold hospital bed, helpless and confused, I know I don't feel like me. I am aware that the lunatic inside my head is no longer available. The solitude in myself is suddenly at peace. I've been trying to breathe after the suffocation of maternal failure. It's flooded my veins, it's pierced my darkness with surgical precision. I died. There is no question about that. In an instant of devastation and grief I jumped from the proverbial ledge, and killed the monster. The gray eyes inside my mirror are clear.

---

## Triggers

### **MacGyver by George Hesse**

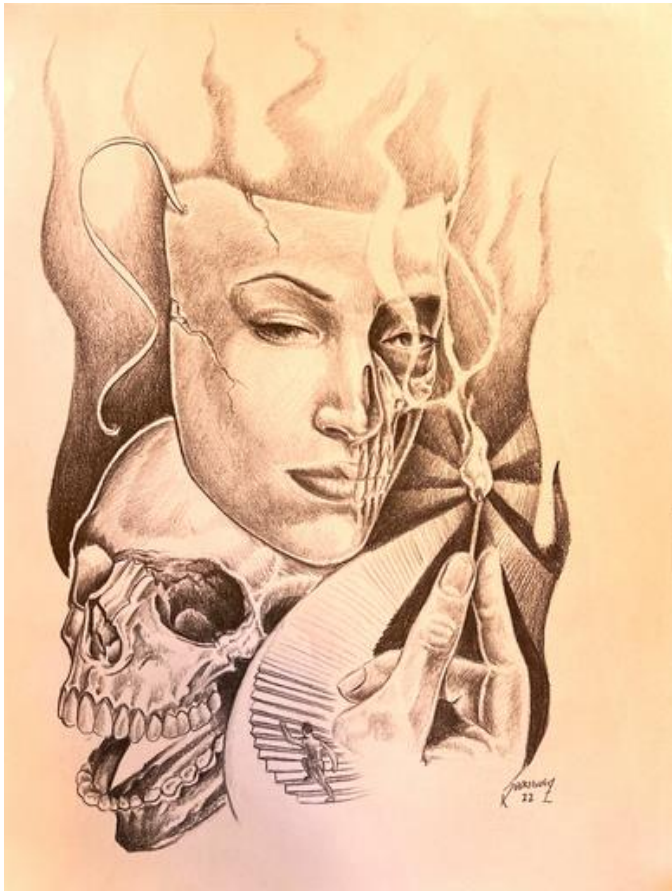
One of my favorite shows as a kid. My mom even cut my hair like his once, yeah, I know. Elementary days, learning and solving problems, MacGyver was always solving problems. He NEVER used a gun. He would get creative and create something useful out of nothing before he picked up the trigger. He used his wits, his mind. A trigger was never even a last option to him. There was always a choice, something, anything before a trigger. It wasn't in his equations anywhere. I used his morals and values throughout my life. That's one of my all-time heroes, MacGyver. A trigger is never an option to pull, always stuck in my head. I wonder if it's okay to call him “Dad.”

*“I believe race is too heavy a burden to carry into the 21st century. It's time to lay it down. We all came here in different ships, but now we're all in the same boat.”*

*—John Lewis*

*“I'm tired of this discussion of capitalism and socialism; we live in the 21st century, we need an economic system that has democracy as its underpinnings and an ethical code.”*

*-- Michael Moore*



**Art by Edward Rodriguez**

**by John Wilson**

I used to write quite often for Prisoner Express and for myself. I stopped, mainly because PE's word limits got too tight. There's more than 800 words worth of ink in my pens. Then I stopped writing for myself. I haven't written a short story in over a year, despite several very good ideas. I don't know what I'm waiting for. Maybe I'm just looking for the right trigger; something that will launch me into action.

The prompts and pictures still trigger thoughts. I get lots of triggers from the articles I read, especially those by Ms. LaFleur and Mr. Bauhaus. But no actions result. I still write in my daily journal (and no, Gary, you're not getting that for the Journal Project). I still write letters. I still write legal briefs. But creative It's also true that I haven't made time for it lately. I let other stuff get in the way. I'm finishing up a paralegal course (2 lessons and 5 homework assignments remain, with a 98% average, baby!). I'm about to start my first semester for an associates in business management, though I really wanted to take a creative writing class in hope that it would trigger a few new stories. I make sure to do my daily rituals at least three times a week (for those in the know: supreme banishing ritual of the pentagram, lesser banishing ritual of the hexagram, rose cross ritual, activating chakras, middle pillar ritual, raising kundalini, and

circulating the light). I'm doing another course, as well. I want to talk about some recent positive triggers in my life.

Receiving the stimulus checks was a big trigger that set off a big boom in my life. That money enabled me to take the paralegal course. I'd wanted to do so for a long time, but could never afford to. I was able to buy a number of books that have been on my wish list for a while. I was able to send some money home to save for my (eventual) release. I'll be eternally grateful to Congress for enacting that plan.

Another trigger was reading *The Master Plan* by Chris Wilson in December '21. I'd just received a parole set-off in October and that book triggered my plan to write the parole board a letter every month. I tell them what programs I've enrolled in, report my progress, and send a copy of my completion certificate. I tell them how I've handled difficult and stressful situations that came up that month. I tell them my plans for the future, both until parole and after my release. I hope it works. I've been down since I was 15, and by my next hearing in October '22 will have done 22 on a 25. It's time for me to go home, and I hope my plan triggers my release. I'll keep y'all updated.

I hope each of us that are reading this will find something that triggers their freedom, whether spiritual, emotional, mental, and eventually physical.

My third trigger was finding out about the Hustle 2.0 program and being allowed to participate on a scholarship. It's a great program that covers everything from in-prison topics like anger management, victim awareness, criminal thinking, and addiction on to post-release topics like re-entry, character development, healthy relationships, job search and employment, and perseverance and further on to five-star success like leadership and entrepreneurship. It's full-contact and comprehensive. Scholarships are paid by free-world sponsors who read our application and decide to take a chance on an inmate. Each book requires an exceptional grade in order to qualify for a scholarship to the next book, and there are 13 books in total. I've loved the first two books and everything they taught me. I made a 98% on *The Preseason* and I'm waiting for my grade on *Book One*, as well as seeing if I qualified and will receive a scholarship to *Book Two*. I could write several more 800-word essays on the impact this program's had on me (and the few kicks in the ass it's given me, too). [Update: 99.7% on *Book One*.]

I hope we all find the things that trigger positive, powerful, and enduring changes in our lives. I hope our life can serve as a trigger that causes change and helps others.

Our life, its "rites and symbols, allow every person to become themselves: to discover that they are all makers of meaning; to recognize themselves and others as sources of light adding to the general light, while accepting that no one of these single flames can shed light everywhere. Someday, perhaps the inner light will shine forth from us, and then we shall need no other light. Give light, and the darkness will disappear of itself.

**by Leo Lozano**

Always know that there are many triggers, let us learn which ones are the good ones.

### **Going With The Flow by Tim Strickland**

I used to not think much of astrology and one's birth signs, but that was before I discovered I was a true Pisces, born February 29th (leap year), a water sign, a romantic, sensitive, and emotional. I agree with the Pisces saying, there is a goldfish and a shark in here, and they are always chasing each other, you never know which one you might get.

Prison life has taught me to go with the flow. Yes, I know easier said than done. "No, Tim, you can't always have it your way, so just relax and accept the moment as it is," is what I often have to tell myself. Especially when one of my negative triggers has been hit.

I can be having a perfectly good day, the sun is shining, all is well in my world, I feel like a million bucks and then the wrong person, at the wrong time can say the wrong thing and my mind starts to race, my blood pressure goes up, my smile turns to a frown, and you would think the world is coming to an end.

It's during these times, I must pay attention to my triggers, the ones that get me to not respond in my typical fashion.

I believe it is truly a gift and a miracle to control one's emotions. I desire this and have a long way to go. I can't control and always change my triggers, but I am responsible to love.

### **Triggers by William Swiderski**

When most people think of triggers they think of guns. But to me, I can see or hear something and it "triggers" a memory.

For me and my religion, "Asatru," ancestral memory is very important. It is a gift from the past that is given here in the present. Many times it will enable us to do better or be better prepared for what is to come.

As we live our lives we are building ancestral memories for our future descendants. So I strive in word and deed to do things that will be a benefit to those in the future. If I can somehow make their life a bit easier or better, then I have given them a great gift.

All people want their kids/grandkids to have a better life than they had and if we can somehow leave a memory that has meaning, then we live on in that memory. So strive to leave good positive memories behind. This way you will never be forgotten.

---

## **Picture Themes**

Picture themes as well as word themes are offered monthly. With the pictures you are invited to open your minds and imaginations and write whatever story the picture triggers. True or false, memoir or fantasy. Here's a few stories from the past year.



**by Lance Porter**

Global Warming's next species rise

A planet of tortoises

Vegetarians with No

Housing Shortages

### **I'm Lost by Jack Simpson**

If you haven't guessed it, I am a desert tortoise, slowly moving along to find shade and a moist flower or two. The hot desert sun could cook me from the inside out.

There is a pattern that I travel each day. Looking and in search of a mate. That is what we do. So far I am not having any luck.

I felt the ground shake and saw an object coming toward me. Then all of a sudden shade covered me. I stopped and listened for danger. It was too late to run. Something grabbed me. My feet moved touching nothing. "Look Bill, isn't it the most wonderful thing you ever seen." "Yes, I agree it is wonderful," Bill said.

"Let's take it home. I do believe it would love our backyard."

"Lilly, I believe it would do better here in the desert."

"I'm putting it in the Jeep anyway. I found it and will take care of it. I will make sure it has water and something to eat."

"Alright that is your choice. Just watch out it don't bite you."

A few days went by and Lilly placed the tortoise in the backyard. Lush green grass filled their yard. Lilly chased after it and turned it around.

There was a crack in the fence that Lilly or Bill had not seen. One thing in its favor. The Desert Tortoise found it and was gone in a flash. The desert was its home and it had longed for open space.

The further it traveled, the more the area looked like nothing it had seen before. There were rocks and cactus that had no similar markings he could make out. No seat trail or worn paths. He stopped lowered his head in defeat, for once he thought I am lost.

### **Turtle in Desert by Vicki Hicks**

Ever wonder why people stop dead in the middle of the walkway to have a chat? Or when people meander around instead of getting from point A to point B in a timely manner?

Sometimes I feel like the world around me is moving in slow motion or maybe I am just zooming around trying to get where I need to go. When my children were little, I wanted time to slow down so they would stay tiny and cuddly. Now I want time to speed up so I can go home. If only we had a switch to speed up or slow down time. If you could choose a speed what would it be?

### **Tortoise by Todd Broxmeyer**

We've walked this land for many bright and many dark. I have heard the upright ones call them day and night. It always amazes me how freely they speak when near us. Some sit for hours and just stare calling up majestic and regal. They comment on how some of us have probably been alive for 125 years. They say our breathing and heart rate are so much slower than their own. Then they never explain what exactly a year, heart rate and breathing are. This is when I want them to talk more but this is usually when they stare again.

We have walked this land when it is plentiful and when it has been stark. It seems to be more barren with every passing bright, sorry day. Sometimes the uprights that pass leave things. Most do not taste good. After getting ill we pass by now. Some of the leavings have been there many brim days and nights.

So we patrol this land happy in each moment. Knowing we cannot change what just happened and cannot know what the next moment will bring. So with each step we find peace and perfection.

### **Desert Turtle Meet by James Bauhaus**

"Hey! Are you small, or just far away? Slow down! Don't come any closer! You're about to T-bone me!"

"It's just me, Big Ed. I found a patch of grass like you asked, but I had to go hundreds of yards to find it. I am very thirsty and tired. Move over and let me have a bit of that cactus beside you."

"Who are you? You kind of look like Flash, but he disappeared years ago..."

"Yeah it's me, Ed! Remember! Think! And let me at the prickly pear! Ah! Damn it, Ed! You were supposed to have taken the stickers off of it while I was gone! I can't eat that! What have you been doing all this time?"

"I guarded it good!" replied Big Ed, in his slow, 150 year old way. He tore the entire cactus out of the ground and munched it absent-mindedly, his heavily calloused tongue taking no notice of the spines. A small bird flapped noisily away, shrieking as its nest dangled from Big Ed's beak. Long after it was gone, Big Ed nearly jumped out of his shell, yelling, "Wow-ee! What the hell was that? It came out of nowhere, I tell you!"

"It was just another blur, Ed, same as the rest of them," Flash moaned dejectedly. "Let's go get that patch of grass I was telling you about."

"Grass?" Ed repeated dully. "Grass good!"

"Yes, Ed" Flash confirmed. "Grass is good. Follow me, Ed; I know the shortcut now. We'll be eating tall grass by the middle of next week."

"Grass real good," his old, old friend elaborated as he pulled in behind Flash. It was going to be another long, arduous journey urging his old pal to keep limping along. Worse, it was always up to Flash to keep the conversation going. With only the limited imagination, Flash reverted to an old, favorite gambit, stating, "Big Ed, don't you just hate it when the tourists call us 'turtles?'"

"Hate it!" agreed Big Ed passionately. "Don't care how much lettuce they bring; call me a turtle, I'm biting a finger!"

"Yeah," Flash confirmed. "Me too," he added a few steps further along.



### **Seen Through My Eyes by Aaryana Malcolm**

In 2017 here at Waseca in Waseca Minnesota, I looked out the window and saw something dark coming from the Dark Clouds above. I had never seen anything so dark and yet so beautiful Then in the next Second sirens started going off. AS everyone was sent to the hallway To sit or kiss our butt good-bye. LOL This was my first encounter with this kind of national disaster. I've been in Earthquakes throughout California, Oregon and Washington. I've been 10 miles from Mt. St. Helens when it flew in May of 1980. As the wind blew and trees shook and rain stormed the compound and the tornado hit the recreation Yard beauty still was seen through My eyes. As hail hit the windows and thunder shook the walls and lightning hit 2 trees and a fence

I still saw beauty through my eyes. Wonder, Excitement And one strength of this. It's Beautiful

### **by James Collins**

A cloud brings the rain,  
The rain brings the sun, and  
The sun brings the rainbow  
And the rainbow brings a smile.  
So the next time you're  
sitting there on a cloudy  
Day looking at the blurs  
Of your cell and see a cloud  
Just remember that that  
Cloud will bring a smile  
To someone.  
The days can be long and  
Boring and bleak. But you can  
Always be thankful for life.  
We only get one and it's a  
Short ride, so we have to  
Make the most of it even  
While we're inside.

### **by Gary Farlow**

Looking at the picture of a gathering storm reminded of an old song called "Letters Home", I have reworked it to apply to me and prison:

Dear Mama, I hope that you're alright  
I can hear the thunder rolling  
across the Carolina sky tonight  
The cellblock's asleep and my radio is on  
and I'm sitting here alone  
so I just thought I'd write a letter home  
I was the one you were counting on  
Your baby boy star  
But I went crazy back in '89  
and I know it broke your heart  
I didn't take nobody's advice  
I was 21 and grown  
and I never wrote a single letter home  
Letters home  
I wrote them in my dreams  
asking if I knew then what I know now  
would it even have changed a thing  
The hardest part about growing up  
is the mistakes are all your own  
But it's so hard to say that  
In a letter home

### **Will Work for Umbrella by Jonathan McCord**

I can't do anything right, not even get rained on. The water cycle is billions of years old and I am the only one to never win at it. I was homeless for two years and lived in the woods. I tried reaching Stephan Hawking when holding my cardboard sign by the side of the road but it was the mid nineties and the wireless vagrant boom was still years away. My painstaking research had uncovered that the ominous storm clouds hanging over my campsite were the ass end of a massive blackhole. The science showed that the matter and light which was rendered unable to escape the blackhole transmuted into what the news people describe as "a thirty percent change of light drizzle" but was in fact a cosmic deluge constantly aimed at my cigarette. Perhaps this anomaly contributes to the formation of my massive run on sentences as well. Smoking was cheaper back then especially when shopping at the strip malls ashtrays. Only the rain believed in washing my face and I often gathered much lipstick on it courtesy of the many Virginia slims I plucked from the sands of nic-fit beach. When people would question the many hues on my mouth I would proudly square my shoulders, look them in the eye and in stately timbre declare, "I've been huffing paint for medicinal purposes Mr. Starscream sir." I have no friggin clue where to place my commas. Too bad it never rained cats and dogs and English classes. Anyway, Shakespeare said that the enjoyment of a ladies' discarded cancer stick is like making out from afar. Attention Kmart shopper ladies—was it good for you? All jokes aside even normal people get rained on. I wouldn't curse my fate or get all weird. I simply did what humanity has done through the ages when caught in the innumerable storms of our existence. I simply visualized being given a golden shower by mother nature. Ironically, my ninth grade yearbook has my picture with a caption below it which reads "most likely to die homeless and masturbating in a whirlwind". If I make it out of prison I am going to tornado alley to fulfill my destiny.

### **by Todd Broxmeyer**

This will be the last time I relay this story. I am tired of the condescending looks, the laughter, and the chatter behind my back. I do want to get a few things straight.

1. I am no conspiracy theorist
2. This is the only picture that survived and I have no idea why.
3. I never wanted any of this.

It was a beautiful day so I went for a hike. About two hours in, I stopped near an abandoned home. When I go this route I always stop here to meditate. For me this has always been a peaceful palace. That has forever changed.

As I relaxed I noticed cloud cover coming in. The issue was it was moving in like I had never seen before. It was not oncoming from North, South, East, or West but from straight above. It was both beautiful and terrifying. I reached into my day pack for my old school camera, as I love working with film, and my windbreaker. I put on the extra layer and braced for the bad weather. I raised my camera to start snapping pictures.

The first picture I took is the one you see. As I started to take the next one the brightest light came through. It was so bright I became temporarily blinded. I remember thinking "Man that sun is bright I won't need my windbreaker." This is when I noticed the temperature had not changed and I thought "how strange." Then my vision came back. What I saw ruined my life.

Not wanting to believe my eyes I could do nothing but stand with my mouth agape. Even with no one within miles I spoke out loud, "This can't be real." Snapping out of my awe I dove behind the rocks I was meditating on... I peeked over with my camera to take more pictures, little did I know nothing was getting to the film.

My heart was racing, my breath was labored like I just broke the record for a mile and I was scared to death.

What I can only describe as a spaceship was hovering where the clouds had just been. It was sucking up dirt, a tree, some foods, even some glass and shingles from the abandoned house. Then it stopped and everything became eerily silent. I thought they knew I was there, now my heart was in my throat. Then much quicker than they came down they rose up and were gone.

I sat thinking I might be crazy but remember I had evidence, I had pictures. As quickly as I could, even running at times, I headed home. I went straight to my dark room to process my film.

In the end this picture is all that came out. That and my story of course. I imagine you are having the same reaction as so many others, but I assure you I am quite sane. All I can say is think what you like but when they come back you will know the truth. I just hope they are friendly.

### **An Eye is Upon You by Hunter Widner**

Spinning complacently in the sky, a storm is brewing. Soon as it would be, the air will be blanketed with shards of glass and spears of tree branches like knives ready to strike. Unaware to the impending disaster above, a small family is experiencing a different storm.

The mother who is in labor with her second child screams in agony at the pain like the fury of the wind building outside.

The father feels guilty as he looks into his wife's eyes with a new light.

The old town doctor asks the question that softly cannot be answered with a yes or a no. The question is: are you ready to go?

As both the woman nods and the storm forms an eye.

Moments pass as each work towards their respective goal.

When the newborn arrives onto the earth, the eye above his home blinks.



**by Lance Porter**

Facing our ignorance  
Of environment  
Held in the gaze  
Of those who show  
Respect and concern  
For the earth  
How do we answer?

**Indigenous by Chrome**

What does the word indigenous mean to a society? It is synonymous with words like native and natural. Yet, things that are “native,” “natural”, or “indigenous” are not always despised in societies like the United States. “Join our society or be thrown out” is what America said to its own indigenous peoples.

“Follow our rules, or pay the consequences.” This is a threat many indigenous peoples have heard around the world. However, we are more likely to attribute this phrase to prison populations. The idea that a society can treat its indigenous peoples like criminals has existed for as long as these groups

have had contact. The idea had even morphed to label these indigenous groups as not just criminals, but as lesser creatures. Thus, words like “savage” and “barbarian” sprang up; and some today will still consider these words as additional synonyms to the word “indigenous.” Looking at the group pictured here, some people today might be more likely to describe them as “criminals” or “savages” than “natives” or “indigenous.”

This meddling of words works both ways. The term used to describe a prisoner who is more accustomed to prison than the outside world is “institutionalized.” It would be hardly surprising to hear certain people describe an institutional inmate as someone “indigenous” to the land of prison. With mass incarceration and rising arrests of children, you may even find prisoners who honestly describe themselves as indigenous to prison. This transfer of outsider groups from one to the other is a truly horrendous atrocity that societies like the United States are guilty of.

We need to stop treating prison as a storage space for anyone who doesn't fit our notion of a member of society. Prisons should not be the last reservation on the Trail of Tears. Prisons should not be considered a land anyone is indigenous to. Prisons are not meant to be a homeland of “savages”. Yet, if societies do not change how they view these groups, it will continue to be dangerous for someone to be called “indigenous.”

**by Cesar Hernandez**

Throughout the course of our human existence there have been milestones we needed to accomplish to keep making progress. Our ancestors migrated out of Africa as the ice age eased its grip on continents. We farmed so we didn't need to hunt. We created civilizations based on learning. We stopped having kings, assuring ourselves that governments serve the people. Myths were ended with science. We built machines that control eerie aspects of our environment. Humans have conquered the earth. There is no place we haven't seen: the bottom of the deepest ocean, farthest reaches of north and south, highest mountains, the eyes of hurricanes and blinding deserts. We have killed every wild beast that ever roamed. Endured world wars and survived. After conquering the world, we have nearly exhausted its natural resources. We are running out of resources to grow food. The planet is beginning to turn on us. We have altered our environment in ways that we are only starting to understand, we are changing the ocean and the sky. We need to learn to live together in the world we have conquered. There are no physical frontiers on our planet since we have discovered them all. We do not need to save

the planet, we must save ourselves as a vanquished earth starts to turn against us. The planet will be fine in the end. We might not.



### **Across the Pond by Jack Simpson**

The land my family owns is next to a school student. We ride the bus to and from Great Falls High School. This is my final year. Bob and I have been friends since junior high. Working a farm isn't easy. There are always things that have to be done. My parents have set the time and what we are to take care of. I had a couple of free hours after I finished. What a wonderful day for a walk around the pond. I love nature; there are always animals and insects to see. "Mom, I will be back in an hour or so. I'm going to the pond," I told her. "Be careful and don't be too late." "OK," I said in return. Closing the storm door, I proceeded to the direction of the pond. Bob and I had talked at school about meeting at the pond around 1 PM. I couldn't be late. I wanted so much to spend hours talking with him. I grabbed a couple of fresh apples in case Bob would want one. It seemed like hours before I stood within ten feet of him. My heart sank and I felt weak at the knees. Slowly, I held out the apple as he moved closer. The way he stood there looking at me with his blue eyes, blond hair, and tight fitting jeans, when he smiled I thought I was seeing stars. His teeth were perfect in every way. My mother had warned me of him. "Reminds me too much of your father when we were your age," she said. That was the last thing I remembered. "Hello," he said. Why did he have to say that? My knees got weaker. Slowly, he came toward me. Frozen like a block of ice, I couldn't move. He touched my hand and I felt his warmth. "Amy, Amy," I heard a voice call out. It was my mother. I knew if I didn't come running I would be in trouble. Before I could turn to run, he kissed me. Torn between his kiss and my own mother, my feet or some sure will had made my mind up for me. I was halfway across the field when I saw my mother standing at the fence. Turning, I saw Bob walking around the bank heading home. Over the months we met as often, we both finished school and two years later we got married. We have two children whom our parents love more than we do. Fred and Mary help out

around the farm. They gather eggs and help feed the animals. Of course our parents love them more than they love us. It is true what your mother says: you have to watch out for the boy next door. He is so much like my father. He deeply loves his family and is a hard worker.

### **What do you see? by Adrian R. Montoya**

Wait! Before you judge me, let me ask: what do you see?... Did you notice my frayed hair or did my dark bags under my almost lifeless eyes draw your attention first? I can't help what you see but maybe my story will cause you to understand. I no longer do the drugs that led me here. Where is here... I'm not sure, in fact I believe I am somewhere in my dreams, or worst yet I'm somewhere in my mixed up thoughts. I feel that I should know these trees and fields but the blurriness confuses me also. I like this clean white dress but a part of me understands that it doesn't fit... strange that I can't change it. Enough; so what do you see? Do I look angry, lost, lifeless? I'm all these but I could add so much more. Though you may not believe me I was once so full of life, I radiated love and oh so much joy. It's still a part of me, you know, yes, I vaguely sense these traits alive in me. So what happened to me, you ask? It's not like I woke up one day and I was like this. Sure, you look at me and judge, but in truth isn't this the way of society... judge by what you see while not spending the energy to know me. I wonder, is this to protect you from the supposed corruption and disease in me, or is this to justify your elitist view of, "This only happens to the weak and impure." I remember my early days in college, studying and learning to fit into society's norms and ways. Yes, I know it well, the elitist view of "bad things happen to bad people." Such a naive understanding of life... I've done countless things I'm not proud of, some by choice and some by ruthless force. Oh, you don't want to hear the ugly, I'm sure, because then you'd be forced to understand and maybe even care... Then, if you begin to understand and care, maybe then you'd see that our society is not built to care. You must do this to get that, you must be ruthless to climb to the top, you must rely on your own strength to reach your full potential... Scary isn't when you see... I am now working my way back but I'm changed. I can now understand the pain of failure and lost dreams. I now see the pitfalls of life so I can at least make the effort to help the fallen. It would be easier to ignore the past, the broken society, the careless masses, but then I'd be forced again to be and do things against my humanity. This, my viewers, would be my greatest failure. I am not hopeless.

### **That Look by George Hesse**

When she can't stand yo ass no more  
When she realizes life is better without you bro  
That look like Damn, I wasted All this time  
The days, months, and years she can't get back that life  
That look  
She found out you a player huh? Nah not close a faker  
Who is alone now and who moved on to better?



That look  
It said it all "I'm Done"  
Our love songs change to hate music so move on  
That look  
I miss boo and I finally woke up  
Too late, I'm cut off and her anger turned to new love  
For somebody else

### **Lady of the Lake by Brandon Rushing**

They tell me that I'm crazy, that I must have been hallucinating. They say that the lack of food and water drove my mind over some imaginary cliff and there must have been some other explanation for what I saw. Everyone agreed with them. In the end I would accept their version simply to avoid the trouble that would arise if I didn't. But the truth is that I did see her. Or at least her spirit. It all began on a calm spring Saturday. Some friends and I were out camping in the east Texas woods. We were all eighteen, and this was our first week of freedom after high school. It was also our last week together before college, and so we intended to celebrate like never before. We each had a tent, a cooler of beer on ice, and no phones. That first night was wild. We built a small fire to roast hot dogs and sat around it passing a bottle of homemade shine that Bobby had cooked a few weeks back. We slowly slipped away from our impending adulthood as the whiskey and beer took hold. I'm pretty sure this is how it began. Somewhere around midnight somebody decided to go take a leak. I convinced Bobby that we should sneak off and hide so that when they came back we'd all just be gone! It would be hilarious. We could torment the poor bastard all night. And so, off into the woods I capered. An hour later I realized that I had lost track of time and purpose, but not the bottle of shine. With nothing better to do I sipped the shine and kept wandering about. To this day I still can't remember how I got there, but I ended up at a secluded lake. The moon was sparkling off of the small ripples that winked at me. And as I watched, a dark-haired beauty in a white dress simply walked up to the bank from the depths. As she emerged, the moon beams flowed through her and caused her pale skin to glow. But up she came, and straight to me she walked with her tiny bare feet. Without a word this specter of a woman reached forward and lifted an open palm, exposing a golden earring with a tiny dolphin pendant dangling. Then she turned and pointed at the lake from which she emerged. My eyes flickered away from her the tiniest moment to look out into the water and when I turned back she was gone. I remember how sad her eyes were, as if she had been broken by some betrayal. And then I turned up the bottle of shine and finished it off. Slowly, cautiously, I stepped over to the lake and sat down right where the lady had stepped on land. And I was still there when they found me with a sheriff's helicopter. They said I had been missing for three days. I told them it had only been one night. And then I told them there was a woman in the lake and described her. The sheriff dutifully took down notes until I gave him a description of the earring with the dolphin. That really got him going. A diver came out and found her, and her earring.

She had been missing longer than I had been alive. Her name was Annebelle. She was a beauty queen that had vanished amid a scandal. Her discovery created an even bigger scandal. And as for me, well... I keep this story close to my heart. They tell me I'll forget in time, but I doubt it. I can still see the ripples of moonlight on the water, and the sadness of the lady's eyes haunts me.

### **Mrs. Trouble by Marcus W. Compton**

She has a stare that if looks could kill,  
One glance in her direction will leave you still.  
She plays the victim, in so many roles,  
Landing innocent people, in dark, deep holes.

She walks to and fro, with nothing to lose.  
Her only mission is to give you the blues.  
As she surrounds you, like the air you breathe,  
Until her work is done, she will not leave.

Around every corner, she rest her gaze,  
Searching for some poor soul, lost in its ways.  
Never has she smiled, one day on earth,  
She hates happy endings, and loves to be first.

When she appears, all hope tends to fade,  
One glance in her eyes, worst mistake ever made.  
When the sun is shining, she make snow the new weather,  
My best advice to you, avoid Mrs. Trouble altogether.

### **Depression by Jimmie Locke**

She came to me in the night resting her head next to mine.  
She whispered love and warmth into my ear and I reach for her cold embrace. I don't know how she found her way inside of my house, but I don't know how to tell her to leave. She stretches her arms around me and covers me like a blanket. She reminds me that she'll never leave my side. I say to her, "Who are you?" As always, she replies, "You know who I am." I try with all of me to push her away and out of my life, but when I turn around thinking she's gone, she's in front of my face smiling her unnaturally big smile with eyes that are a little too big to be human. She holds my hand and it gives me goosebumps. Why oh why did I call her? She's everywhere I go, she's there in my room, she's there in my kitchen, she's there when I go to the store, she's there in my body, in my head and I don't even know her name, always smiling, always staring, never blinking. But hey, at least I'm not the only one, she's right behind you with that smile, you just don't know it.



### **Six feet apart by Paul Bero**

When my daughter was nine years old we had a discussion – “Would you want to be in karate?” Pam was eager to join a taekwondo class. I’d sit in the back watching the class do things that did not seem like things Bruce Lee did. The class just did stretches and push-ups; just exercised for a few weeks. But the day came they learned moves, moves that looked like a ballet class at times, I never saw Bruce Lee do things like that when he whooped ass! But the movements went on for weeks anyway. One day black belt Joe and his black belt wife, Debbie, had an advanced student stand in front of Pam and throw a punch and a kick at her. Pam was told to do the moves she had learned for weeks. Whoa! Pam’s quick, learned moves blocked the punch and the kick! Hey, Pam, that was cool! I finally “got it” and every week I’d sit and watch Pam as she advanced and got new belts awarded to her.

One day Pam talked me into joining her class. I liked watching her so much I agreed. I was not in class to become a black belt, I was in class to have fun doing a fun thing with my daughter. But, she was advanced. I stayed “six feet apart” at class time!

### **Step up time by George Hesse**

Katy was sick and tired of school violence and of waiting for change and help. She started an after-school training group to bring awareness to the violence spreading across schools lately. “Don’t follow or wait when you have choices to lead, all of you!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. “We are ALL heroes, my friends. We each have unique gifts and talents. Every one of us is different. The darkness will always come but we can fight back by becoming a light. Each of you have the POWER to shine and TOGETHER, we are a

beacon. Others will see the light and come. Others are lost but can be found. OK, let’s pray and begin with some stretches. Pray for the lost and the ones who need help. Everyone has a voice, my friends. Let’s begin. Arm raise stretch!”



### **Art by Jonathan Holeman**

### **Keeping Distance by Jonathan C. Holeman**

As children, most people learn a sense of caring and compassion shown through hugs, or walking alongside their parents while holding hands. As we grow, the hugs, the gentle embrace of Mother’s loving arms, it all becomes more distant.

On the school yards, during physical education instruction, we are taught to stretch our arms out from our sides, so that no one’s hands are touching.

It’s the moments when keeping distance from others is more of a way to avoid pain, that we learn the opposite sides of compassion and caring. There’s many ways to learn about how people can hurt you. Bullies with physical actions, manipulators who abuse with words. People can hurt us, and sometimes we forget about the times as a child when our parents or family would hold us, keeping us safe and letting us know that things will be alright.

When I was in grade school, in the Valley of Enchantment, we had this school song. I recall, in first grade, being happy as we all sat in the cafeteria, cross-legged on the

floor. We clapped along with smiles singing our school song, showing spirit, but spirit and smiles only last so long.

There was a brief moment when the older kids pointed and laughed at me, making gestures, sticking out their teeth, clapping like a seal. Making fun of me. Assembly after assembly, I withdrew more and more.

Children can be cruel. The older kids, chasing me after school. Being beaten up in the restroom. Being beaten up for being white, having a mole on my face, being short, small. Even the year I gained weight, eating to find comfort, I was picked on for being overweight, and my hair color.

They named that part of Crestline after the school. Valley of Enchantment. The only time it ever felt enchanted was when I was alone. I would withdraw from others so much that I couldn't interact with kids without being odd or different. Whenever people would try to be nice, I would turn away, or run, thinking it was another setup.

Eventually, instead of keeping my distance, I became a bully, finding that others would laugh if I made fun of or hit someone else. Although I was still withdrawn, I wasn't bullied as much. I still kept my distance though.

Some nights, I would sneak out of my house after everyone was asleep. A blanket of stars above, I crept down the streets, a shadow in the dark. Wind whispered through the trees as I found my hidden places. A berry patch. Lonesome dogs barking in the distance. It was so quiet as I drifted between my little silent secret spots. A nature trail. A path out into the national forest. Heart Rock. Riding my bicycle at 1 am alone at night. No one to see me, no one to hurt me. Keeping my respectful distance.

Years later, the only time my chaotic criminal life would find peace was while keeping my distance. Alone on benches around Lake Gregory, drinking myself to sleep under moonlight.

Now alone, in my cell, twenty years into a lifetime behind stone walls, that began when I was just twenty-two years old, peace only comes, silent in the night. Dayroom lights off. Darkness settles in. Missing my forest, while staring out my window at the sky. That same moon above, it's the same moon that sang me to sleep so many times. My regrets, not keeping distance, but thinking so insanely, that in hurting others I could find peace, all I had to do was keep the distance I am still trying to find.

### ***Follow the Leader by Chrome***

Children tend to copy what those around them do. They even have games like "Follow the Leader" and "Simon Says". In many Asian countries, societies emphasize unity over individuality; games like these stick around past childhood. Maybe that's a good thing, at least sometimes.

In the United States, "individuality" is like a sacred chant. A rising trend in the US is to police children when they attend school. The police are not trained to deal with children, so they tend to treat them like they do adults.

As a result, many children—especially children of color—are arrested, and sent to juvenile detention centers. This tends to kick off a life of crime for them, but can you really blame them for it? Experts call this the "Prison Pipeline".

Maybe we could use a bit more unity in our society. We definitely don't need more division. The worst part about this situation might not even be the children kicked down the pipeline. I'm also worried about the ones left on the other side. Children tend to copy what those around them do. When schools teach kids to arrest those who cause problems, instead of counseling them, it doesn't feel like a game anymore. Next thing you know, children will follow the leader.



### ***Keeping It Together by Tim Strickland***

I sit here looking at this picture of a man and child. I want to say father and son. I have so many story ideas yet sit

surrounded by at least ten crumpled sheets of paper. What I want to express, I just can't seem to get out. A simple picture but it triggers so many emotions for me, bitter-sweet memories of days gone by and events that will never come.

This picture for me reflects on my own relationship with my dad and stepfather and, while we are close, there has also been so much that is missing, left unsaid, undone.

The hardest part about being in prison is being away from my children, all the events I have missed from their lives. And while I enjoy and look forward to our weekly phone chats, that does little to fill the void in my own heart and theirs. So many regrets, things that should have been done, things I didn't say, or things I don't know.

This embrace, so gentle, so sweet, also makes me think of the love I have for the Church, the grace of God, how I used to feel so cradled by his embrace, and yet all I feel is condemnation. And yet I still believe I am 100% accepted and loved by the universe.

So in this picture I see comfort, acceptance, but also confusion and conflict.

While I won't write a nice little fiction story, I must admit I see myself both as the child needing a gentle touch and as a father who so misses his children.

### ***Daddy's Hug by Paul Bero***

My daughter went into heart failure at 4 years of age. I rushed her to an Ann Arbor hospital for a 16-hour surgery. That was the longest, hardest, worst 16 hours of my life! The doctor told my wife and I that every 20 minutes a nurse would come tell us how surgery is going – not once did that happen – no one ever came! I'm not sure if any readers can relate to this but the only way I can express it is to say "I went nuts" worrying about my daughter those 16 hours.

Sixteen plus hours later the surgeon himself came to us. "Pam is OK" were his first words to us. He apologized and told us for some reason staff was short and no one could leave the operating room to tell us how things were going.

As soon as it was possible, we got to see Pam, wires and hoses hooked up to her as she was still under anesthesia. Some hours later we got to be with Pam. Next to her, I moved the wires and hoses and gave her the biggest "Daddy's Hug" known to mankind!

Yup, 48 years later, I still love her and hug her whenever I can!

### ***Even When I Struggle; I'll Embrace You! by Devante Thomas***

We can be Homeless, bag full of clothes,  
Walking down highways and roads,  
Hand and hand past houses,  
As the Well-Off people turn their gaze,  
People driving past, not paying attention to the front windshield,  
Cafes and restaurants can lock the doors; close the shades,  
I pick you up and continue the flow of undecided footsteps towards opportunity,  
"Daddy, I'm hungry!"  
I chew over the fact that I only have three dollars and change in my pocket,  
"Hotdogs, burgers, fries and shakes!" yells a food truck vendor,  
"Can I get a hamburger?" It was the cheapest, \$2.89,  
"Would you like some fries and shakes?" says the vendor trying to hustle more money,  
"No! Just the burger and a cup of water" I said painfully as my son playfully pinched my ear  
and the cup was \$0.50...  
I took a bite of the burger as we sat at a park bench and gave the rest to my son,  
I sipped the water and handed it to him as he passed the half-eaten burger back,  
I stole another bite as someone's dog ran up and barked at my son,  
The cup hit the grass,  
I dropped the burger as I scooped him up for his safety...  
The dog ate the burger; my son cried,  
I shed a tear,  
The owner of the dog subdued the dog and walked off...  
"Hey, keep it moving. No loitering!" says an observing park ranger,  
We walk off down the street,  
"Daddy, I'm wet!" he peed his pants and I noticed I left the bag by the bench,  
We were two blocks from the park...  
I look at him and just bend down and hug him,  
"Even when I struggle, I'll embrace you!" I tell him as I shed more tears...

### ***I Love You Son by Mr. Nkrumah Lumumba Valier***

My vision is blurry right now  
as I write you this, son.  
Because the tears are drowning my eyes.  
Tear drops stain my glasses  
making it harder for me to see what I am writing to you.  
Those spots you see on the paper  
are my tears dripping off my face.  
Looking at that picture of me and you  
has brought back so many memories  
of that day.

Hugging you, son.  
Telling you how proud I am of you.  
And how much I love you.  
I remember that day  
as if it was just yesterday.  
Excuse me.  
I had to blow my nose.  
Then wipe the tears from my eyes  
so I can see.  
It's tearing me apart inside  
it hurts so much.  
Knowing it's been 17 years  
the day that picture was taken.  
And the last time I seen you, son.  
I held you in my arms.  
I love you so much, son  
and I am hoping that you can read every word written.  
So you understand what I feel inside now.  
Living in prison innocent for so long  
without my best friend in my life.  
The person I love the most...  
Has broken my heart beyond repair.

**by Lance Ellis Porter**

To keep going  
and focus on the  
importance of  
Those you love  
and cherish most  
A man kept from  
His son  
This happens every day  
for the many who  
are locked away  
Embrace persistence  
And find a way  
To reach this moment  
this beautiful day.

**by James Cloutman**

This month's photo left me dealing with a lot of really tough and strong emotions. Let's start first with how I wish that my father and I had a photo such as this. However, it is very unlikely anyone could find one, first there were not many picture-perfect moments in my childhood. Second, most of the pictures of my childhood were lost to carelessness, disasters, and many other sad and painful situations. Such as homelessness, evictions, and parents who had other cares other than family photo albums. Lastly, until 8th grade, I did not have many memories of my father showing up. Next, my heart is heavy with pain for the stepson I did embrace and last I knew the picture still hung in my ex-wife's grandparent's

house. I was in uniform about to board a plane to head to mobilize for my first overseas tour in Afghanistan.

However, my young wife and our very young relationship would not withstand the one year I must stand boots in the sand. Then there is the thought of my own child, my sweet daughter who with her I have many pictures such as this. I once vowed my daughter would never know my pain from childhood and my ex's pain from her own childhood of an absentee parent of two. So from the day she was first born and she and I took her home, my daughter and I spent almost every moment together. One look at her sent a crashing wave of undiluted love, our bond was stronger than any I had ever had before. Did you know that you could love someone so strong, that them not being around made you physically ill? I do now!

In a moment of misplaced trust and stupid choice, I lost that which kept me alive, not just what mattered most, my very life source. The vow I made would be broken. I did not have a choice. I no longer had control, that was diverted to the Florida "Justice" System. I would soon find out that Florida had mixed up the definitions for such words as justice with corrupt and extreme punishment. It would not be as bad if the price was mine to bear alone, but it's not. Many take a piece of that cost, but no more than our children.

Every month, I read every theme essay (slowly I might add) so I know many of you have children and understand, even feel the same pain I do. So, as I look at this picture again, I feel a feeling I did not expect (tiny as it may be). I am glad and proud that in many ways I have tried to make a positive change. I have tackled and fought ruthlessly to come face to face with many of my fears and demons. Though I am still working on overcoming many I am already face to face with, it I have made great progress in many hindrances I had in the field of education. To many, the things I have overcome would be no big deal, but for someone with multiple learning disabilities and has been told most their lives that it will always be a problem, it was major for me.

I hope and pray that one day soon, I and all of you will be able to make new, powerful photos with your children and loved ones. For those of you who are doing time in a state that still has natural life sentences and are currently serving one of these inhumane sentences, I hope and pray for a change in the laws. For those of us serving time in Florida, although I may not be here to benefit from law changes, they are coming and I know it, I feel it. Florida DOC has too many issues to fix and not enough staff, money/resources, time, and facilities to

continue on the way they are or to even fix the issues enough to maintain.

So all of you who look to become a better self, do positive things, think positive things, will change to happen, not only within yourself but in the world as well. I know God hears our cries. There's no way not to, they are deafening. Thank you God, bless you all, I cannot wait to read your stories.

### ***The Stories We Tell Ourselves by Leo Cardez***

I was a loser. Growing up I was a below-average kid, unremarkable in every way, much to my parents' dismay – especially my father. I lived fearing I could do nothing right and always carried the idea that I wasn't doing enough by my dad's standards. That I wasn't enough.

My father was a hard man. Five feet six inches of old-school Latino machismo with a Napoleon complex, like a mean Chihuahua. He criticized everything I did or tried to do. I learned to avoid him and the first chance I got I left. The day after my seventeenth birthday I joined the Army. Although, looking back today, I am not certain I was aware of what and why I was doing it.

We all have stories in our past we're holding onto, tragic plot lines that seem to run through everything we do. The more we believe them the stronger and more real they become. Like the story I told myself: that I was inherently bad or inferior; that nothing I did was right. These types of feelings fester and slowly infect every aspect of our lives and worse, no amount of success can help you heal. Trust me, I tried.

I became a decorated veteran, college grad, and successful business executive. I thought rising to the highest ranks would prove to everyone – especially my dad – that I was worthy and had value. Unfortunately, no matter what I did, what I accomplished, I felt a deep emptiness. I tried everything to fill it, even drugs. I soon found there is not enough cocaine in the world to fix an old story that says you're not enough. To make matters worse my new reckless lifestyle was catching up to me.

DEFCON 1. I was arrested and looking at six to fifteen years in prison. My father came to the county jail to bail me out. When I saw the disappointment in his eyes it tore my guts out. We spoke for hours on the drive home. I told him I knew I had let him down yet again. He was angry, but quickly shifted to speak about his love and admiration. I felt thirty years of pain and shame well up in my chest. As I sat next to him, still unable to make eye contact, I felt the tears start

streaming down my face. I begged for his forgiveness. He simply took my hand in his and whispered, I love you son.

This began the kind of father-son relationship I had always dreamed of. He shared in my highs and consoled me in my lows. We spoke often and with every conversation I realized I had wasted so much time being scared and angry at him that it had clouded my perception. Now, I could finally see him. He wasn't a mean Chihuahua. In fact, every day I saw more of his love and kindness. He was a nice Chihuahua.

It strikes me that behind every trauma we endure there's a core story we tell ourselves. Things like, I'm not good enough; I don't deserve love. As long as these stories exist we find ways to perpetuate them. There's a funny thing about these stories though, they tend to crumble under examination.

I painted my dad as the enemy, but thanks to that car ride home I found the story I'd been carrying around for all those years was proven untrue. My father did love me and if that's true, maybe I'm not so terrible. Now he's my best friend. He has demonstrated his love in every conceivable way. He lifted me up after my conviction, undoubtedly saving my life.

I became less angry and started treating myself better. That critical voice in my head that I had always identified with my father was replaced by a kinder voice telling me I was okay. Now, here of all places, I have become the kind of man he could be proud of. I've worked as a G.E.D. tutor, volunteered to teach yoga to special needs inmates, and am writing a book that I hope can help others endure what I have survived.

Last Father's Day I wrote him a card sharing my feelings of deep appreciation and love. The next evening I had a dream of us from my childhood. We were washing the car and he was playfully chasing me around with the garden hose. It had been buried deep in a secret chamber of my subconscious and I knew that it meant I was free to let go of the old story.

I have rewritten my story and although I am still stuck in prison, I am living a life better than I could have ever imagined. Letting go of the old internal narratives of who I thought I was has allowed me to see and live my life with newfound hope and purpose... and that's the best ending anyone could ask from their story.

**Upcoming Picture Cues** - Please try to send your contribution in by the date under the picture. To get a complete packet off all the writing submitted in a given month, simply send in a submission of your own. Limit each submission to 800 words please. Remember the picture cue writing can be fiction or nonfiction. Tell whatever story the picture conjures up in your mind.



Due 3/23



Due 5/23



Due 4/23



Due 6/23



Due 7/23



Due 8/23



Due 9/23



Due 10/23

**Final Notes** - It is a privilege for me to present samples of the art and writing we receive to the community at large. At our recent art show there were 140 pieces by 90 creators. Your writing and art all presented together impressed the visitors with the collective energy and humanity that your work conveys. It moves people in a way that is direct and compelling. As I mentioned, I will forward any letters written by visitors to individual artists represented in the show. Here are two emails sent to the Story House Project right after the show opened.

***I brought a friend to see "Behind the Wall" last Friday (before the reception) and we spent some time reading the letters and gazing at the artwork. The exhibit is stunning, both in content and in the metamessage about the talented, sensitive human beings who are incarcerated.***

***Your exhibit spurred me to participate in the SURJ meeting last night and we focused on a portion of the Justice Roadmap that is designed***



**to increase the dignity of incarcerated New Yorkers. You've done a piece of that with your work.**

**Thanks for making a difference. --Carrie**

Here's another comment.

**Just a word to say that that "Behind the Wall" exhibit is amazing-- sorry I was a bit on the run the other day (off to a Latin class with Eloise) and didn't get a moment to say hello! But I took it in yesterday and found it to be intense and beautiful in the best of ways. Thanks for doing the good work! Jay**

While many of you write to tell me of the positive effects participating in PE programs has for you as individuals, you can also take some satisfaction that your writing and art are touching the lives and minds of the folks in free society who find your creations through our program. There are many ways to make a difference and many ways to give back and make up for our mistakes. Writing and art used to express our feelings is one such way. The Behind the Wall art show moves to a new city, Auburn, NY, on March 1<sup>st</sup>. Auburn is home to a large state penitentiary, and it will be interesting to see the public response to the show.



Art by Patricia Olsen

It's ironic that doing good for others is one of the best ways to help ourselves feel good. It reminds me of a conversation I had last summer where I was discussing finding love with a friend and he said quite wisely that "the way of 'finding love' was 'being love' rather than needing love." I think that holds true for many of the basic emotional necessities of life. Please use your creativity and any knowledge gained through PE to support others in prison who need some encouragement. Just like finding love, "being encouragement" to those around you will attract more positive energy into your life. I know it is harder than I make it sound, but this could be a time for you to be a hero in your own life, by standing up and helping others despite the fact that there is so much pressure on you. Retreating emotionally is not a viable option. Going forward, doing your best, is always a choice you can make. Whatever happened in the past is important to consider, but as adult individuals we must stand up and take responsibility for ourselves, and make strong and useful choices from whatever options we have. I hope you can find some folks to talk to in your current housing situation and look at all the ways you can support one another. I know it sounds simpleminded and can see many of you shaking your head at my naivete, yet what other way to stay balanced and whole than find support and connection. If you can't find that with your neighbors than please know we are also here, to hear your truths and your feelings. Please know you are most welcome in the PE family.

In this "final notes" section I want to address all who write to say they did not receive something they expected. Typically, we do mail what you ask for and am not sure what happens to the mail. That said, we do make mistakes as well, and if we haven't mailed you something you expected, I hope you will accept our apology: we'll try again in the next cycle. Of course, we want to hear of the troubles you may have encountered with our mail to you, but often we are not often able to figure out what happened. There aren't that many of us and it is difficult to create the space to make these things right -- I am sorry. We also don't keep a back stock of programs that we can mail. I understand that it is disappointing to you, and yes do write and let us know, but have faith, we will correct any mistakes in your mailing address and try again in the next cycle and see if it makes it.

We are looking at electronically conveying our lessons through your tablets, but my ignorance of these systems, plus what seems like the additional cost associated with using these for-profit distributed tablets, makes it difficult. In some states sending material through a tablet makes our programs more expensive than printing and mailing paper copies. Go figure! I

also prefer the paper copy, as an electronic copy can only be used when you have power for your tablet.

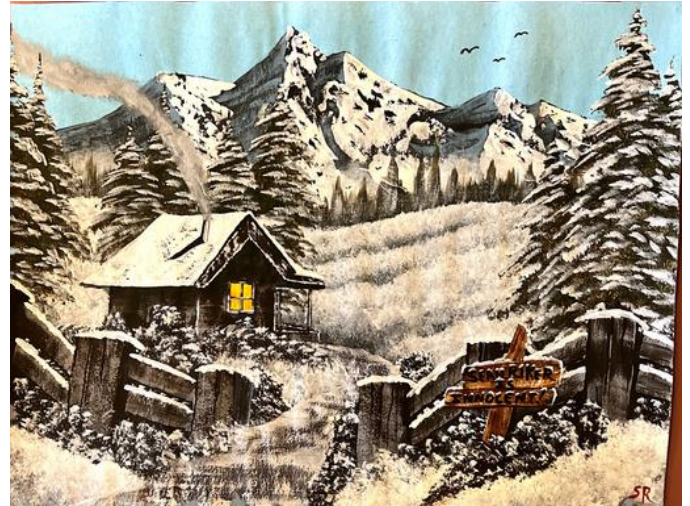
I also want to write to those who are waiting for a personal response to a query you may have sent about a submission of writing or art piece you submitted. I try to find someone to respond but sometimes we just don't have the people power. Please understand that it can take us months to get all the writing themes typed and mailed after the due date, or that we may have so many expedited book requests that we fall behind, or that school is not in session, and we lose many of our volunteers for up to 2 months in December and January, due to school break. You will be waiting longer for your book and theme mailings during these periods. There are a number of reasons for delays. I write so you can understand we have not forgotten you or your request, but that indeed we are a grassroots organization with limited capacity taking on a large endeavor. Please bear with us. We are not trying to profit off of you or make promises we cannot keep. I hope to mail all the packets we are offering this cycle sometime in May or early June at the latest. I like to give time for this newsletter to be delivered to as many of you as possible and give you as much time to respond as I can. Consider responding sooner than later as some packets are limited in how many copies we are able to create and afford. Don't just check a box for every packet, but please do sign up for any programs you find interesting and intend to do.

I know it must be frustrating to hear all these excuses about our difficulties with the mail, but if we didn't operate this way I think the organization would collapse under the weight of trying to be all things to everyone. We are shaping what we can do effectively by staying within the limits of what we can realistically accomplish. I do understand the tremendous need for services you all face and I know we are just providing a small bit of respite to all of you, but we can probably all agree, it is better than nothing.

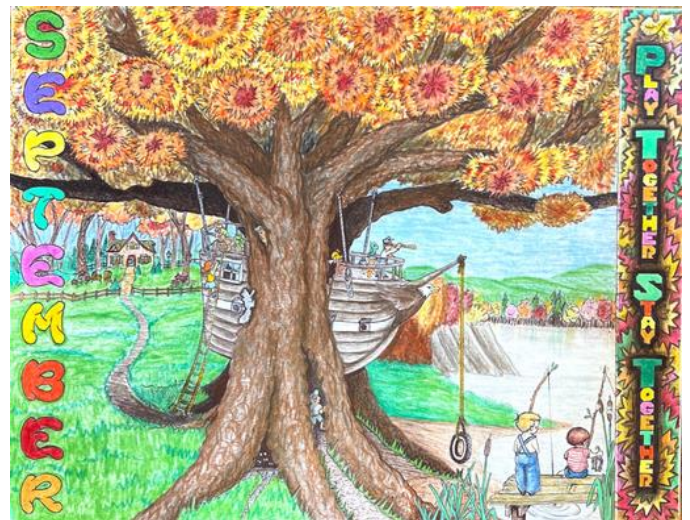
I believe the students who participate really get to see you all as real people not very different from themselves, and that your humanity is on display for the world to see when they look at the art or read the writings you all submit. We are not focused on any single person's voice, writing, or art, but rather we present you all as a group and ask folks to consider how you should be treated humanely and with respect. Our current art show displaying a collage of your work on large panels highlights each individual piece, but the power of the show lies in the viewing of the total output and different styles and attributes of each artist, all reflecting our common humanity. By

participating in these programs, you not only get to share your thoughts with us and read about other prisoner's experiences, but you get to be part of a unified projection of incarcerated beings expressing their humanity and their hope for growth, opportunity, and redemption. We are all in this together and we are here to provide you a path to communicate and learn. Join with us at Prisoner Express by changing the world one relationship at a time.

You are not forgotten, and your path is right in front of you.  
Gary



Art by Sean Rilker



Art by Tim Verguson

***"Today, my heart and soul lives peacefully for the hope that the 21st century will have to face a great challenge, a peaceful struggle for the enlightenment of humanity." - Marcel Marceau***

**Spring 2023 Registration Sheet** – 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** – Check with the administration of your facility to be sure you are allowed to participate. If yes, please send a check for \$4.00 or some other means that is allowed at your prison to cover postage. Books are free, but the mailing cost is not. List types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection of books. Warning, the Pandemic makes everything a little iffy.

Please fill in this if you order expedited books

\_\_\_\_\_ Number of books allowed  
\_\_\_\_\_ Soft cover only  
\_\_\_\_\_ Hardcover and soft covered both allowed

**Prisoner Express Permissions Form**

I grant Prisoner Express the right to publish, in its newsletters and website, any work including essays, artwork and journal entries.

Please check boxes if you wish us to display your work in public]

that I have sent to Prisoner Express in the past  
 that I will ever send to Prisoner Express in the future, unless I clearly indicate on the work that I do not want it published.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Print name/number \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Poetry Project** – Please send me the next Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 26. I understand that to receive the anthology I am required to submit a poem for consideration in the anthology.

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

**Meditation/Eastern Philosophy**- Yes I want to join Kylie’s project and also receive a copy of Pema Chodron’s “When Things Fall Apart”

**Moral Philosophy**--Join Ethan and explore what learned philosophers have to say about what is right and what is wrong. Seems simple, but also quite deep.

**Ending Mass Incarceration**- Come join Prof Andy and his class as they identify the roots of the present day system of confinement in the US. See what you already know and gain a deeper understanding of the history of the systems you live within..

**Art Knows**: Come explore the world of art with Treacy. This packet will include instructions for our next art projects.

**Storytelling**--Improve your skills at writing your stories by studying standard practices in writing dialogue in narration

**Yoga for Ever Body**--Come work with Prof Yoga to create a set of stretches and exercises you can do most anywhere

**Rhythms of Life**--Join with Sassy to earn some rhythm patterns and have yourself some fun drumming and making music.

**Mental Health**- Learn about perspective and experiences of other prisoners who have been participating in the PE mental health project.

**Rattle Mag**-Yes send me a new issue of Rattle magazine [limited to first 500 responses]

**Chess Club** – Yes, I want to receive a packet on how to improve my chess game, including strategies and challenging chess puzzles.

CTA/Durland Alternatives Library  
PO Box 6556  
Ithaca, New York 14851  
[www.prisonerexpress.org](http://www.prisonerexpress.org)

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

Change Service Requested

# Prisoner Express News

## Winter 2023

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.*

Prisoner Express is funded by the Durland Alternatives Library, 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. A grant from the Sonya Staff Foundation has enabled Prisoner Express to expand the size of this newsletter.

Publication

Direct from Publisher

