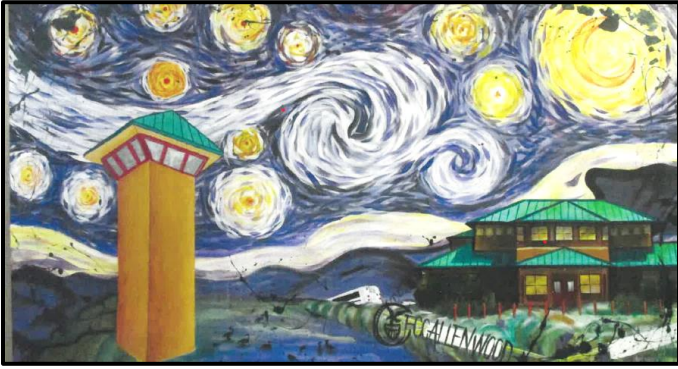


# Prisoner Express News

## Winter 2024



Art by Michael Vandergriff

Dear Friends,

It is with much pleasure that I welcome you to the 20th anniversary issue of PE News. Prisoner Express began as a book mailing program in 2001, and by 2004 we had evolved to the point where we felt we had to share with you some of the fine writing that was being sent to us by the program participants. My name is Gary and I direct the Alternatives Library. I began PE in response to a single letter from Danni in TX and it has grown to be a sprawling program offering incarcerated men and women information, education, and opportunities for creative self-expression in a public forum. The library is the physical home to the Prisoner Express project, and we have patrons coming by throughout the day to read your poems, journals, and essays. They particularly enjoy seeing your artwork. We are located on the Cornell University campus and our volunteers are mostly students and community members who live in the area. There are many of you and few of us, so please be understanding when there are delays or mistakes. Later in the newsletter I will recount some of the mail issues we face so you understand that even if we do what we say, our mail may not get to you.

Our aim is to step through the fog of incarceration and provide you with some clarity and connection. One part of the clarity that we hope to provide is that understanding that you are a human being who has worth and value. We aim to give you a chance to share your thoughts with free-world people. Often folks write about how alone they feel while incarcerated and how that leads

to depression and self-degradation. Those feelings are real and we have found if you have a platform outside of prison to share your thoughts and emotions, it can help short-circuit all the negative feelings generated by incarceration, and can often lead to participants feeling more hopeful about their future. We also use this newsletter and our projects to help you all get a glimpse of how other people are dealing with the incarceration experience through writing and art. Understanding you are not alone in this chapter of your life can be useful in maintaining perspective and not sinking into self-pity. We do this in a number of ways, including sending you this newsletter so you can read the stories and poetry written by fellow captives. If you can find meaningful things to do with your time, feel engaged in the process, and get feedback from others, you may be able to bypass or at least lessen the chronic depression incarceration often brings. Realizing that others are feeling the same as you can help relieve you of the feeling that there is something wrong with you or that the way you feel has to do with your inadequacy. Reading other prisoner writings helps you realize that the feelings you are quietly trying to avoid are the same ones everybody else is battling too. In one way you could say that misery loves company, but our intent is the opposite. We don't want you to sit in misery feeling better because everyone feels that way. Rather, our hope is to say you are in a place that promotes stress and anxiety, and that it requires extra strength from you to stay balanced, whole, productive and positive. We at PE want to lend a hand to help you along the path of rehabilitation and positive self-regard. These are lofty ambitions, but we have a number of resources we can apply to help you achieve this goal.

In this newsletter you will find a listing of programs that you can join. Each of these programs are created by PE student staff and volunteers who want to offer you a project or activity that provides you with skills that foster growth, creativity, or knowledge. I am a firm believer that meaningful activity is the balm for the whirling and often destructive thoughts that can occur when a being is under pressure. The programming we offer gives you a chance to remove your mind and energy from the carceral environment that surrounds you and offers you a

chance to refresh your being by engaging the creative/ hungry-for-knowledge aspect of yourself.

When you participate in our various programs it is not uncommon to receive personal letters from the volunteers who help us manage this sprawling program. I know how important mail is when you are locked away. By signing up for our programs you will get mail [our programs]. If you follow up with the assignments of a particular program by sending in poetry, artwork, essays etc., you often receive responses to your submissions from program volunteers. We will not only show your submissions to the in-person volunteers who come to the library, but we post many submissions online so people all over the country/world have access to your writing. Some of them may respond to you as well. Please note we encourage our volunteers to share their PE volunteer number with you. If you want your mail to get back to the specific volunteer you are writing, please put their number on the outside of the envelope. This way we can sort the letter, so it can go directly to the intended recipient rather than mix with the hundreds of letters coming in that must be processed by library staff.

Before I describe the next set of programs, I'd like to catch you up a little about happenings at PE over the past few months as well as updates on my own life. So many of you generously share your story with me in your letters and I am unable to write individual responses to the 1000's of people participating. I use this newsletter just to check in and let those of you who have been writing us know what I'm up to and dealing with. Since the last newsletter I had an adventure in Ireland and Spain. In Ireland, I was mostly in Dublin visiting museums, gardens, and historical sites. Most impressive was a pre-historic site about 5500 years old called New Grange. It was a masterpiece of stone-age construction used as a burial chamber built even before the pyramids. Like at the pyramids, we are all left scratching our heads at how people moved these giant stones many miles to the top of a hill to build these gigantic burial mounds that also served as solar calendars. At the solstice a beam of light would go through a small opening in the giant stone structure and illuminate a small burial chamber in the center.

After Ireland we went to Southern Spain to tour the old cities where the Islamic Moors ruled the land, from 800 ad until 1492 when southern Spain was reconquered by the Catholic rulers Ferdinand and Isabela [the same folks who sponsored Columbus]. Once conquered they began the Spanish inquisition, killing the Jews and exiling the Moors from the land. Before the conquest when the Moors ruled the area, the cities were the largest and most advanced in Europe. Most of what

we know about ancient Greece and Rome was kept alive by the Jews and Moors of Spain. Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, and all the ancient Greeks and Roman philosophers were considered heathens by the Catholic church and all their work was destroyed in Catholic Europe during what we sometimes call the Dark Ages. Only in Spain was that work kept alive. It is impossible for me to describe the fabulous buildings left behind in Spain by the Moors, but hundreds of thousands of people go there every year to be awed by the fabulous construction. We were in Mosques that had room for 40000 people. Some of them were built on top of ancient Roman cities and they reused the marble pillars from the Romans. Unlike America, these lands have human history that has been recorded for thousands of years. The Mediterranean Sea was the known world for many of these people and the country is dotted with interesting archeological sites from the Romans and Visigoths after them and then later the Moors. At one point in Grenada, we left the old city to visit the new city. What they call the "new city" was built in the 1500's! Europe was fun and not as expensive as I thought it would be. Trains could take us all over and I hope to return.



*Collage by Gary Farlow*

A week after I returned to the states I fell while playing pickleball with my 75-year-old sister. I wasn't going to let her get a point on me. I crashed into the ground running full speed, reaching for a very low shot. Ugh. Next time I say good shot and let it go! This time though while sort of diving to hit the ball instead I smashed my head and hand into the ground leaving me concussed and needing surgery on my wrist... It is still hurting a lot and my hand doesn't work very well yet. I get therapy for it 1x a week and I can see improvement and I remain hopeful for a better recovery. It has been 12 weeks since the surgery. I have to work on not getting discouraged by my slow rate of repair.

Needless to say, the PE work I had hoped to do after Europe was delayed 10 or so weeks while I recovered from the fall. Most of the mailing I intended to do has now been sent. I hope you have gotten them. Two mailings were not sent out and I'd like to explain what happened. We had intended to do a Philosophy packet last cycle, but the volunteer, Ethan, who was going to create it, got overwhelmed with personal and school issues. I loved the packets Ethan produced and I know many of you enjoyed them and I could see from your responses how thought-provoking the packets were. Hopefully we will find a new person to develop Philosophy packets in the near future. I had also intended to mail 170 copies of the short novel Heart of Darkness. When I went to get the books, I saw that they had already been sent out by the students managing the expedited book program [more on that coming up]. They were sent out in individual book packages over the past 6 months. It is my fault for leaving them in the bookroom. I will find other books for our next PE book club.

The only other thing I can think of to mention is that we have had a warm winter here in upstate NY and my thoughts are turning to gardening. I will start my first seeds indoors under lights this week and by the end of March I hope to have onions, tomatoes and peppers germinated and growing. Gardening and getting my hands into the earth is my best way of finding balance and satisfaction. I like to watch plants grow!

One last issue I want to cover before I unveil the next cycles of programs is my ongoing dance with the mail regulations. As you may know, each state has its own set of rules. In some states it is clear and easy to meet the regulations and other states have rules that make it very difficult for us to get mail in. I am always looking for the mail procedure that meets the least resistance from the authorities and leads to the most mail being delivered. Unfortunately, all my experimenting with different systems has not yet produced a clear path forward. I will spare you all the details but be prepared for changes in the format of PE mailings. In my first draft of this newsletter, I wrote exhaustively about all the mailroom problems I face. I then came to my senses and realized you all know this mess even better than I do. The important takeaway is that we are not going anywhere in the near future, so please, if you are having trouble receiving our mail, let us know. Of course, this info doesn't help the people who don't receive this newsletter. In most facilities it is no problem getting mail to you, but those squeaky wheels of no delivery ring loud in my ears.

I realize prison is a very transitory place and many of you are moved. When we receive notice of a move, we update your address. Please keep us informed of this. I made myself sad

thinking about those PE members who may have died last year, and I would not know. Occasionally mail is returned with deceased marked on it, but my guess is that is the exception not the rule. I have been reading some of your letters for 20 years and feel I know some of you through your writing, just as I realize many of the theme writers feel they know one another through their writing. It saddens me to not have a way to commemorate the lives of PE members who pass on, but I do want you to know that we think about you and wish the best for you.

In the Spring of 24 we have a number of programs to offer you. I would love to know if this newsletter and the upcoming programs reach you, so please let me know by responding. In our last mailing many hundreds of newsletters did not get delivered. Hopefully it won't happen again. As each state sets up their unique mailing rules, I continually run into problems I didn't know existed. With all the scan centers now being set up for personal mail, it becomes confusing to the mailroom staff as to what material comes directly to the prison and what goes to the scan center. It is not unusual for mail I send you to be rejected by both the scan center and the prison mailroom. I continue to look for answers and take satisfaction in what good we can do rather than get caught up in frustration. While acknowledging the frustration of prison life is important, even more powerful is to create meaning and connection despite the hardships. Let us focus on creating meaning for the rest of this newsletter, while not forgetting the work has to be done in order to present these activities to you through PE

On that note, let's look at the projects we are offering this cycle. Some are ongoing and are offered every cycle and others are one of a kind offers. We try to have diverse choices so that there is something for everyone. We have limited resources so please only sign up for the programs you will do. All our programming is free except for the "Expedited Book Project."



Art by Jerome Washington



## Fall 24 Programs

### Expedited Books

This is our original program, but it has been modified through the years. This is your chance to receive a customized book package chosen especially for you, based on your interests. This is the only project we offer where we have to ask for a donation for your participation. Each package costs \$5 to \$10 to mail. The books are free, as they are all donated, but the postage costs can get very expensive. We ask you to send at least \$4 to help defray the cost of this program. 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. In the past, prisoners have used institutional checks or have friends and family on the outside send us stamps to cover the costs.

#### **For us to cash the check it must be made out to CTA/PE.**

I wish we could offer this for free, but we do not have the financial resources. Please note all the books are donated and if you request very specific titles/subjects it can be hard to make a good match. Please give us as many topics as you can, so we can make the best matches. For those of you who only want 1 kind of book (say only chess or manga and comics, or something more obscure), please note you will often be disappointed. Those books often go out as soon as we get a donation. If you are certain of the exact books you want then this might not be the program for you. Of course, ask for just what you want, but give us 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> choices please. It can make volunteers bonkers when they can't make a good match and often your letter sits around while we hope to receive something close to what you want. That is a dangerous situation as we are inundated with mail and things that sit around get lost!! We have lots of books donated that we can send, but 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. Only participate in this program if you can be patient and have some flexibility about what you receive. I believe we make excellent matches for most of the book requests we receive. We do not expect you to send the books back to us and encourage you to donate them to your prison library. If it has been 4 months or more since you sent in your request, and you haven't received your package, let us know. When you do resend your request, please repeat the subjects/titles you are interested in receiving.

## Journal Project

So many of you have been participating in the journal project over the years and it is clear that taking the time to write about your daily life can be therapeutic for the writer. Your writing offers us on the outside a glimpse into prison life and humanizes prisoners to all the folks who read your journals. We scan many of your journal entries into our digital database, but it must be legible to us before we consider scanning it.

For the past couple of years, the program has been coordinated by Grace, who has recently graduated. Just before she left Grace passed the knowledge on how to maintain this program to Kamili and AJ. They are organizing and scanning your journal entries to our archive, helping volunteers respond to your letters, and taking the time to write individual letters to many of you. They have some thoughts to share with you all. Please consider keeping a journal!

*Hello everyone, My name is Kamili and I co-direct the Journal Program at Prisoner Express. Currently, I am studying animal science in hopes of being a large animal veterinarian. I joined PE in the fall and during my short time here, I have seen the impact of this program. While I still have some growing to do, I am always looking for ways to put my own touch on this program and I hope you will too.*

*Hi! My name is AJ and I'm co-running the Journal Program with Kamili as of this semester. I'm a Government and Africana Studies double major and an American studies minor, but unlike Kamili I don't really know what I want to do with my degree yet. I also joined PE in the fall and I'm so excited to continue working with y'all going forward! If you have any journal related questions/suggestions feel free to send me a letter!*

*The Journal Program is designed to give you complete freedom in how you choose to document your thoughts and experiences. With no specific guidelines or limitations, you have the flexibility to write as much or as little and as frequently or infrequently as you prefer. Whether you prefer to write in a traditional journal format or explore more creative options, the Journal Program provides a space for you to express yourself in a way that feels most comfortable and authentic. We encourage you to send in entries as often as you would like. When they are received, we add them to your journal file and also post select entries to our online database at [prisonerexpress.org](http://prisonerexpress.org) where friends, family, etc., can connect with you through your work. However, if you do not wish for your journals to be published or shared with anyone, then please mark them as private or send us a letter and we will not publish them to our website. While this program*

is meant to be for you, we do have some guidelines we kindly ask you to abide by and understand. Please ensure that your handwriting is clear and legible, as we need to be able to scan, upload, and read your writing. You are welcome to write about any topic of your choice. We encourage everyone curious about this program to join and send in entries! **More information will be provided in a separate packet. If you are interested, please sign up for the Journal Intro packet.**



Art by Gary Farlow

## Poetry Project

Every 6 months we produce an anthology of poems. The anthology is created by our team of students who read through thousands of submitted poems and choose some to be featured in the anthology. Yazmin has taken over as lead editor of Anthology 29. I have asked her to address any issues she is aware of with all of you, as well as to share a few poems she has recently received. Please consider sending in a poem[s] for consideration for the anthology. Even if not chosen for the anthology, many of the poems we receive are scanned into our online archive. People from all over the internet will have access to your work, and some may write you a letter regarding your work. Your poems help get the voices of prisoners into the free world.

*My name is Yazmin and I'm the current director of the PP29 Poetry Anthology! I'm in charge of reading the amazingly crafted poetry submitted by incarcerated people across the country. The poems I read, select, and publish give insight into all walks of life and are not limited to the good or bad—but a culmination of experiences. Prisoners submit poems detailing their life in the prison system, their goals upon release, and even their passion for tomatoes—yes tomatoes. With this said, I encourage you to take a short look at some of the many great poems that I've read below. A look into the craft of others might inspire some of you to consider submitting for the current PP29 Poetry Anthology. But don't actually consider it though....do it! We want some of*

*those crazy poetry skills you have to offer. If there are any further questions regarding PP29 please consult some of the questions and answers section below.*

*Looking forward to reading your work!*

*Best, Yazmin*

## Poetry Program Q&A

*Q: Do I have to write in any particular way? Like a certain style, length, theme, etc.?*

*A: Nope! We encourage creativity with poetry and love to see people's differing perspectives, styles, and approaches to their work. Please do keep in mind that longer poems that exceed two pages, with consideration for handwriting and format, may be shortened into an excerpt. This is done for both logistical and artistic purposes as we want to maximize space and allow room for other amazing poems in the anthology.*

*Q: Do you accept poems in other languages? I think I can express myself better that way.*

*A: Of course! We encourage poems written in languages besides English. As the primary reader, I encourage poems written in Spanish and Portuguese as I can understand them. For any other languages, Prisoner Express is composed of multi-lingual volunteers and workers who work to translate those poems so send those our way!*

*Q: How can I get a copy of the PP29 Poetry Anthology?*

*A: To receive a copy of PP29 you must submit poetry to Prisoner Express making sure to explicitly state that it is a submission for PP29 alongside the poems you are submitting. After we've received your poetry, we'll mail out the anthology once it's completed.*

*Q: Will I be published automatically in PP29 if I send in poetry?*

*A: All poetry submitted to PP29 is considered but not guaranteed to be published. Despite all the amazing poems we receive, there is limited space in the anthology packet. This restriction limits our ability to include many of the poems we receive, prompting us to publish ones we want to share with everyone. If you are not published, chances are your poems ended up on our online archive filled with both published and unpublished poetry! Many volunteers come to the library and write letters of appreciation for certain letters that appear in the archive.*

*Here are some recently received poems.*

### GOLD

By Robert Viveiros Jr.

Gold is the color that is the color of all,  
Gold is the color of my will to be free,  
the fabulous, brilliant light of the sun at its highest peak,  
the one that is the unshakeable spirit and nobleness of my heart,  
Gold is the glowing light of hope in the moments of darkness,  
It captivates the power to mold the future with understanding,  
Gold is the serenity of peace,  
the stability to remain tolerant in oppressive situations,  
I see it as an opportunity for change,  
and to grow and move forward,  
it's about planting seeds of forgiveness,  
healing, love...  
Gold is the color of dreams,  
it is my second color,  
the only other color they'll use to tell my story

### In a Day Dream

By Liam Foster

Stuck lost in a day dream,  
I wonder what it all means.  
When thoughts flutter in,  
And memories splinter apart.  
Yet what I feel—is it real?  
I know now what will be,  
For the past returns at last.  
Is life but a mistake,  
That haunts us like a nightmare  
For nothing's truly fair,  
When fate rules without a care,  
The moment is even fleeting,  
Leaving us ever wanting;  
Wishing upon a future,  
That's so elusive and distant.  
Thus it's hope—  
That clever demon,  
Lurking in my chest,  
Never giving me any rest.  
Endless thoughts plague me anon  
Till I awake from these dreams,  
I wonder,  
Can they even hear me scream

### Emotions In Motion

By Jarred Blauser

Within my mind,  
Stranded in darkness,  
My thoughts are bombarded  
By denizens of chaos  
Each struggling for their own voice.

Within paper,  
The pen brings forth light,  
The pain and turmoil of  
The chaos structured into  
Words of clarity and feeling.

With each dotted "l" and each crossed "t"  
The storm in my brain begins to cease.  
Now I can see  
The clarity.

### Mother

By Lance Porter

Autumn leaves  
sing their pleas  
as winters tips  
threaten to grip  
the last vestiges  
of warmth from  
falls ends  
he sits with his  
longings beneath  
the dwindling leaves  
Comparing the now and  
thens  
She is in the nature  
All around him  
embracing her child  
once again  
Though the body of  
her has changed  
since she has left  
the physical plain  
he knows she's here  
listening intently  
as a mother and friend.

## Forgiveness

By Darren Butler

Bitter is the pill you don't swallow  
acidic, vile on your tongue  
It's remorse that leaves you hollow  
screaming through the ashes in your lungs.  
It's crosses on your heart  
and its needles in your eyes  
It's promises when you were young  
that always turned to lies.  
It's in each shovel as you watch the dirt fall.  
your heart turned to rubble as time forgets us all.  
It is the fading of your pain  
when you finally lie down to die.  
Forgiveness is the fragrance carried with you  
when you crush the flower  
as you carelessly walk by.

## **Building Trades Primer**

Often I am frustrated by the number of requests we receive for books about the building trade. We have many more requests on this subject than we can supply in our expedited book program. In a great stroke of good fortune a former PE volunteer, Sriya, contacted me and asked if they could create a packet. When I asked what type of work they did, I found out that Sriya is a construction engineer. I am hoping this is just the first of many packets to focus on the building/construction industry. I know many of you wonder what type of work will be available to you when you are free. While you have many choices, I imagine working in the building trades might make a good living for some of you. Come see what Sriya has to say as she shares her experiences as a construction engineer.

*Hey guys! I'm Sriya and I'm the DC/Maryland/Virginia chapter Director for Prisoner Express. I've enjoyed reading and writing to you guys over the last few years, and I am so glad I can still be a part of this organization even after graduating from Cornell.*

*Construction is an industry I've always felt passionate about. There's something humbling yet gratifying about knowing that this industry is one of the only few out there in this day and age that requires you to actually get physical work done with your own hands. You get to see mere material transform and grow into a beautiful, finished product everyone can view in awe of and utilize for decades.*

*I coordinate with tradesmen, manage the construction site, and liaise with owners and architects on behalf of the contracting company in my role as an engineer. Now that I get to be a part of construction full time, I've learnt so much and would love to share the knowledge with you all by introducing a construction education packet I am making for Prisoner Express. It will include descriptions of several construction trades, information on general and most commonly used tools and equipment, construction field and safety rules, the importance of teamwork in construction, dos and don'ts from experienced members in the industry, and a few critical thinking questions to help you start your construction education journey.*

*If you have any suggestions about what else you'd like to see in the construction packet, please feel free to share them with me. If you would like to receive this education packet, make sure to sign up at the end of the newsletter. I look forward to sharing this with all of you!*

## **Climate Change**

Many of you know Elinor, as last year she led the poetry anthology project. She came to me after reading the first climate change packet we created last summer and asked if she could create something with even more depth, exploring the effects of our heating earth. Climate change is a big issue of our time. As the earth warms, many changes will begin taking place. For me living up north, it means a diminished winter with warmer temps and little snow. In one way it seems great until the fruit trees blossom in April and all the flowers are destroyed on a cold night. Then trees don't bear any fruit and we go without. On my land there were never ticks, but as the winters diminished ticks began thriving on this land. Now Lyme disease has become a great threat to all who live in the area. It is a horrible disease and I have seen people's lives destroyed by it. Things are always changing around the world whether humans are around or not, but science can show us how human activity is directly creating new climate patterns in the world, and that the blowback from these patterns are causing all sorts of climate catastrophes. I invite you to join Elinor, stretch your thinking a bit, and gain a greater understanding of the climate crisis. It is a gift to understand how nature works. The same laws that govern the natural world affect us. Here is what Elinor has to say on the subject.

*Advanced Climate Change Packet: Our Heating Planet*

*Hey all, my name is Elinor and I'm a student staff member here at Prisoner Express. I've had the privilege of working at PE for*

*the past year and a half, but this will be my first time putting together a packet. I'm excited to invite you to join me.*

*Even though I study climate science in several of my classes at Cornell, I sometimes find that climate change is so big and daunting that it's hard to wrap my head around it. Scientists currently project that within the next two decades, the earth will be 1.5 degrees Celsius warmer than it was before the industrial revolution. While this number is striking, 1.5 degrees Celsius is difficult for me to visualize. What would 1.5 degrees of warming actually look like? And how would this heat affect how people live day to day?*

*Over the past few years, we've already begun to experience the effects of climate change. 2023 was the hottest year on record, and 2024 is likely to be even warmer. Last summer, I saw wildfire smoke for the first time when smog from wildfires in Canada diffused into New York state. The smoke formed a thick, orange haze over Ithaca – something I never thought I would see living this far North. Many communities have begun to experience much more severe effects of climate change, from more extreme heat waves and storms to the sinking of land into the ocean for island nations.*

*In this packet, we will investigate the science of climate change as well as its human impacts. We'll delve into how carbon emissions heat up the earth system and we'll share perspectives on how people are working to beat the heat in their own communities. When there is so much that is outside of our control, the stories of people who are confronting climate change within their own communities can be encouraging. Regardless of whether you signed up for the intro to climate change packet that Ace and Chloe crafted over the summer, I encourage you to sign up for this one. It will offer new information, but it won't require any prior reading to understand. There'll also be an opportunity to respond and to share experiences once the packet is produced. Take care and I wish you all the best.*

## **Bodyweight Fitness**

Michelle is interning at Prisoner Express. She is an athlete who performs at a high level. She is volunteering to create a fitness packet for all of you. I will be interested in your feedback about how effective her packet is in helping you find creative ways to stay fit. Here is what she has to say about the packet she is designing.

*Are you interested in staying fit using your own body weight? Have no or limited access to weights or equipment? Well then*

*this packet is for you! My name is Michelle and I am a Division I basketball player, so I know a thing or two about staying fit. While traveling or during breaks, I have used these body weight workouts to keep myself in shape and conditioned to excel on the court. Included in my packet is a 6 week program designed to keep you fit with nothing but your own body weight. I have also included images of each exercise in case it is unfamiliar to you. I hope you enjoy the workouts I wrote and can use them to get a good sweat in!*

## **Human Development**

Sofya is also interning at PE this semester. She is approaching health and fitness by exploring human development. We are all experts in ourselves. Sometimes having more information about how OUR biological development intertwines with the development created through our environments can provide great insight into the being we are today. Only you know what has happened to you individually, while science and psychology have been studying all humans. Come explore yourself and your makeup by learning more about your common humanity and about what researchers have figured out about human development.

*Hi! My name is Sofya and I am about to graduate from college with a degree in Human Development. Looking back at the classes I have taken in my subject area, I have been fascinated by topics within Human Development and Psychology that can provide us with insight into our everyday lives. In this packet, I have put together some of my favorite psychological concepts that explain phenomena and behaviors that most of us experience in our day to day. I hope you will join me in exploring this realm.*

## **Chess**

Raheem is working on his final chess packet as he graduates Cornell this spring. I am recruiting students hoping to find a chess lover/master among the next group of student volunteers and student employees. A typical chess packet provides strategies, puzzles, history, and great games of the past. If you'd like to raise your chess IQ this packet is for you.

*Chess is a beautiful sport that I believe goes beyond technical ability. Chess is about you, your opponent, and the intimate relationship carved from the game. Through this program, I get to share my love for chess and manifest it in different ways that I never would have thought possible otherwise. In my home country, the Ivory Coast, chess is a popular sport used for*



mental stimulation, but more importantly, for connecting with one another. People often play chess while engaging in difficult conversations, after not seeing each other for a long time, or just lounging around in the boredom of the afternoon. I wanted to transmit these feelings into the pages of this newsletter when I first began creating the chess packet, but it's grown into so much more. Join me in our journey of exploring all that we have come to love about the game of chess! -Raheem

## ARTknows

Treacy is a longtime volunteer at PE, and has been at the heart of creating a vibrant PE art experience for all of you who care to join her. Each cycle she creates a new packet all about art. I am thinking of creating a booklet of all her art packets over the past 10 years. Let me know if you think this would be of interest to you.

*Hi! I'm Treacy. Many of you know me and some may not. I've been working with Prisoner Express since 2011 as the volunteer art director.*

*I have been an artist for the past 35 years having graduated from Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. I have been teaching art in prisons since 2010 and am currently a visiting faculty at the Lyme Academy in Lyme, Connecticut. Unlike the direction of many art schools that are moving towards conceptual and social justice art, the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts is focused upon the traditional skills of drawing, painting and sculpture. Personally, having been part of the commercial art world for many decades, I do not see the art world as the go-to place for seeking justice.*

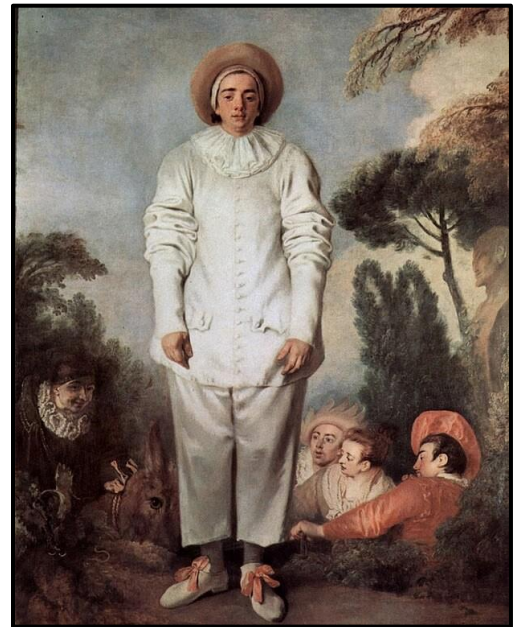
*My interest in teaching art skills in prison has nothing to do with rehab or reform or justice. Instead, I want to share my skills with you. I compare teaching art skills to teaching another how to ride a bike. Once you learn to ride the bike, you get to ride wherever you want.*

*My first art projects with Prisoner Express directed the reader to self-reflection, but self-reflection didn't fit with my above thinking of how I see art – art transcends what we understand and is not the workhorse of reform or rehab. Therefore, I changed my direction by creating newsletters that give you a wider view of art from a historical and contemporary standpoint. One of the best ways for learning how to make art is to look at art history and to how artists have created art in the past. For instance, if you are interested in learning how to draw in the classical style of realism (making the drawing look like the world) then the artists from the Renaissance are your teachers. These artists*

*really knew how to draw. Since then, there has been a lessening of drawing skills. However, if you are interested in learning about color, then Fauvists become your teachers; these artists are strong in making colors sing.*

*My experience of teaching in prisons showed me that many prison libraries do not have a large selection of art books – either monographs of particular artists or art history books. Therefore, these art newsletters (ARTknows) focus on a survey of artists centered on a particular theme. Last edition of ARTknows was focused on art couples. You know, like Frida and Diego. My husband and myself. (How do couples work together and get over the competition thing to be harmonious? It is a journey!) This coming ARTknows will explore the art that is influenced by the circus and carnivals. There are several interesting artists throughout history that were inspired by the big tent. One of my most favorite paintings is one by the 1700 artist Jeanne-Antoine Watteau.*

*The painting below is in the Louvre, the art museum in Paris. It is a large painting – I think almost 6 feet high. What makes this painting strong is the stance of the main figure. He is a clown of the court, but there is something portrayed that is so vulnerable; making him a character of sorrow – not only in his facial expression, but how he is standing with his shoulders pushed forward with his hands dangling at his sides. He has given himself over to a force for which he has no control.*



*If you are interested in learning, you are welcome to sign up for ARTknows!*

## Puzzles/Brain Teasers

Caroline has been looking for all sorts of word and logic puzzles to create a packet that will have a little something for everyone. If you enjoy activating your brain and are not afraid of a challenge you will enjoy these puzzles.

*Dear P.E. Friends, I hope this message finds you well! This is Caroline A. from Prisoner Express. I am reaching out about an exciting new packet. Do you enjoy logic games like Sudoku or brain teasers like riddles? How about crossword puzzles and mazes? If you said yes to any of these, consider signing up for the Game Packet! This packet will include an array of fun challenges across every difficulty level. Whether you're a beginner at Sudoku or a long-time lover of logic games, there is something for everyone in this packet. Plus, this is a great way to stay sharp and keep your brain active.*

## Rattle Poetry Magazine

Tim Green, the editor of Rattle magazine, has been donating copies of the publication to PE ever since he read and was impressed by the poems written by PE members. Along with a copy of Rattle, the mailing a packet on improving your poetry writing skills by Caitlyn. One way to improve as a poet is to read the writing of others. You can read Kaitlyn's note to you below.

Would you like to learn how to improve your poetry writing? Embark on a journey to refine your poetic craft with Kaitlyn's guidance. Explore the depths of poetic mastery by analyzing the works of celebrated poets and uncovering the secrets to their enduring appeal. This workshop is tailored to enhance your command of poetic elements such as imagery, rhythm, symbolism, and tone. The packet also offers structured "homework" assignments designed to cultivate your poetic sensibility. Crafting a memorable poem involves a delicate balance of various components: the nuances of language, the rhythm of lines, the depth of meaning, and more. Unraveling the methods employed by iconic poets to craft their timeless pieces can be daunting. However, with the practical advice and exercises provided in this packet, you can start to dissect poetry as a complex puzzle, gaining familiarity with its building blocks and learning to integrate them seamlessly into your own verses.

## Meditation

For the past 3 cycles we have had the pleasure of being able to distribute an assortment of Pema Chodron books. Pema is prolific author and a Buddhist nun. Her foundation has

generously agreed to supply us with another Pema book this cycle. The book *How to Meditate* will be sent along with another packet created by Tara, the long-term coordinator of the PE meditation program. Prison is not an easy place, and creating a place of calm, conscious centering can be a useful tool in managing some of the circumstances that life throws our way. I most sincerely invite you to join us in this age-old tradition. Learn new skills that can help relieve suffering.

Here is some info about "How to Meditate."

*"When something is bothering you – a person is bugging you, a situation is irritating you, or physical pain is bothering you – you must work with your mind, and that is done through meditation. Working with our mind is the only means through which we'll actually begin to feel happy and contented with the world that we live in." — Pema Chodron*

*Pema Chodron is treasured around the world for her unique ability to transmit teachings and practices that bring peace, understanding, and compassion into our lives. With *How to Meditate*, the American-born Tibetan Buddhist nun presents her first book exploring in-depth what she considers the essentials for a lifelong practice.*

*More and more people are beginning to recognize a profound inner longing for authenticity, connection, and aliveness. Meditation, Pema explains, gives us a golden key to address this yearning. This step-by-step guide shows readers how to honestly meet and openly relate with the mind, embrace the fullness of our experience, and live in a wholehearted way as we discover:*

*The basics of meditation, from getting settled and the six points of posture to working with your breath and cultivating an attitude of unconditional friendliness.*

*The Seven Delights-how moments of difficulty can become doorways to awakening and love.*

*Shamatha (or calm abiding), the art of stabilizing the mind to remain present with whatever arises.*

*Thoughts and emotions as "sheer delight"-instead of obstacles-in meditation.*

*"I think ultimately why we practice is so that we can become completely loving people, and this is what the world needs," writes Pema Chodron. *How to Meditate* is a long-overdue book from this wise teacher to assist each one of us in this virtuous goal.*

Below Tara extends an invitation to you all.

*My dear friends,*

*A heart-felt hello to you all!*

*I'm so happy to hear that another Pema Chodron book is being sent to you! She's such a wonderful being, so full of great compassion and wisdom. The depth of her awakening is a precious transmission and a great gift for those of us who are fortunate enough to read her words. I remember, many years ago, when I was reading a book by Sri Ramakrishna, a Hindu sadhu (spiritual practitioner/teacher) who was said to be enlightened and was considered by many Hindus to be a saint. I felt so much beautiful energy from reading his words; it was a remarkable experience. I still remember the feeling. It was the first time that had ever happened to me. I took the little book and put it under my pillow, thinking, hoping maybe the transmission would continue in my sleep. I have no idea if it did!*

*And I'd like to share another experience with you. I teach meditation every week. Some groups I've been doing for years. And almost always, I end with offerings, that we hold different intentions. One is: May we rejoice in the joy of others.*

*This is a profound practice. I'd been saying that for months, saying it because I read it in one of my Buddhist books, and thought it was a wonderful intention. We all need more joy. This thought is said to be a great antidote for envy and jealousy. Instead of being resentful or jealous about another person's good experience, good luck, feeling, or whatever; instead of our feeling the very painful feeling of jealousy, if we can rejoice in their joy, we'd feel happiness instead of pain. I had read about this and never felt it, but kept saying it after meditations, offering that we have this intention. And one day, it happened. My sister said she was going to Europe with her daughter. I'd been living with my mom and taking care of her, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day on call, and had no freedom to go anywhere at all. But I found that instead of resenting her freedom, her ability to go to Europe and have a vacation, I was rejoicing for her and her daughter. I was truly happy for them.*

*My joy felt boundless and radiant. It felt like the purest happiness I'd ever know. There wasn't a trace of selfishness in it. It was pure joy for another being.*

*For months I'd been saying this without feeling it, like it was a prayer yet to be answered. And suddenly, these words were embodied in my experience. May we rejoice in the joy of others - which turns out, brings boundless joy to us.*

*And so, I write this as I rejoice in the joy of all of you who are receiving this book by Pema Chodron.*

*And if you're feeling envy or jealousy at any time, I invite you to try it on. Relax with it and try it again and again and again. And see if you can awaken this remedy for a little - or lot - more freedom from suffering. I rejoice in the happiness of others.*

*If you're interested in exploring meditation, I welcome you to sign up for our Meditation Packet. I include teachings of great masters who are Buddhist, Hindu and /or Christian, with a hope that the practices of cultivating mindfulness, awareness, and kindness will help all of us find more peace and patience, more compassion and kindness, more centeredness and inner strength that is not about aggression or misuse of our inner personal power. I love the teachings of the Buddhist teachers, the Christian mystics, and the Hindu masters. We have newsletters twice a year, and if you're interested in taking Refuge from Afar with Garchen Rinpoche, my teacher, the information will be available in our next newsletter.*

*May all beings awaken to the true radiance of their inner being,  
May all beings live in peace and patience.*

*May all beings rejoice in the happiness of others.*

*May all beings want all beings to be happy and free of suffering.  
With peaceful prayers and wishing you kindness always,*

Tara

## Origami

Kai is a high school student who worked at PE two summers ago. After his summer job ended, he stayed active in the program, and has been regularly writing to many of you. He wanted to get more involved and offered to create a packet on creative paper folding. Learn how to make a variety of paper sculptures using special folds and patterns. We offered a similar project a few years ago and I know the participants were pleased with the paper art they were able to create.

*Hi everyone! I'm Kai, a high school student volunteering for Prisoner Express, and I'm excited to share with you the Japanese art of paperfolding! There is something innately beautiful about how an ordinary square of paper can be transformed into an amazing variety of shapes and structures. I find origami to be engaging, therapeutic, and thoroughly rewarding, and I hope you will have a similar experience. Whether you've never done more than fold a piece of paper in half or you're already folding cranes and*

*dragons, I hope this packet will expand your artistic horizons.*

*Origami is an incredibly broad art with a fascinating history. No one knows exactly when it was invented, but it was likely practiced in Japan before the 15th century, and it became popular in the West in the late 19th century after Japan ended its isolationist foreign policy. In the last century, the scope of origami has expanded tremendously as new designs, techniques, and even entirely new approaches to the art have been developed. Today, the cultural and recreational value of origami is internationally recognized, and it is even finding applications in modern science.*

*I intend to walk you through the entire process of becoming an origami aficionado, beginning with an introduction to basic folds, diagram interpretation, and how to turn any piece of paper into a square—so don't worry if you only have letter paper! Next, I will show you how to fold some introductory models, such as boxes and flowers. From there, you will learn new techniques and begin folding intermediate models, including the world-famous paper crane. Finally, I will introduce you to the world of advanced origami and the process of designing your own models. Throughout the packet, we will explore the culture and practical applications of origami and take a look at some of the most stunning masterpieces ever folded by professionals. Come take a dive into the beautiful and inspiring world of origami!*

## **Miscellaneous Essay**

This last fall we began the Miscellaneous Essay project. We receive so much good writing from all of you. Most of it is in response to one of our many writing projects. At times people submit writing that is not related to any of the prompts or programs we are running. I would save the writing, but never knew what to do with it. In a flash of inspiration, we decided to create this packet. Dayanara who put together the first Misc. Essay packet is doing it one more time. She reads through all the essays that our other PE letters readers come across and don't know where they fit into our program. She selects certain writings that appeal to her, or that she thinks you will enjoy, and assembles them into this packet. Of course, the material can veer off in many different directions, just as you can expect when

1000 different people are sending in writing to us. Come sign up and give us feedback on this project. Should we continue it?

## **Theme Essay Project**

We are most fortunate that Carl has taken over management of the theme essay project, and you will find a note from him at the end of this paragraph. He explains much about the program. **If you respond to the word theme cue please make it a true story, not fiction. For picture themes you can write a fiction or non-fiction piece.** Please try to restrict entries to 800 or so words. Many people submit essays, and we want to publish them all in our monthly packets. If they get too long they cannot be published. To receive a packet, you must submit an essay. I am so amazed at the creativity of the writers who participate. Even more I am impressed by the effect your writing has on one another. So many people write to me to comment on something they have read in these packets. Realizing you are not alone in your feelings and that the prison environment is taking its toll on others, not just you, provides a key to finding balance. This program, at its heart, is really about how to stay sane while incarcerated. Knowing you are not alone in your thoughts adds a deeper perspective to how you might adjust and cope with your current situation. So many of the theme writing contributors talk about the bonds they feel with the other writers in the program. They are feeling connected and that is worth a lot in an environment that primarily focuses on separation. Please let me know how reading these essays affects you. Do you enjoy reading what our team of PE authors has written? Remember these are samples from 6 months' worth of packets. If you want to see the whole packet you must send in your own submission. As in all PE projects, it is not about being the best or without mistakes, it is about stepping up and being creative and sharing a piece of yourself. We are building community through this program, and you are a part of it. Here is Carl!

*Hi Prisoner Express Community,*

*I hope all of you who receive this newsletter are doing well and enjoyed a nice winter! My name is Carl and I'm one of the creative writing coordinators working at Prisoner Express. I wanted to quickly bring attention to the theme writing program we have here at Prisoner Express. For those of you who don't know, at the bottom of this newsletter you will be able to view upcoming monthly picture and word themes. For each month, you submit an entry to the theme essay program for either the picture or word theme, or both. In return, you will receive a printed-out version of all the submissions for that month in our theme essay packet.*



For everyone who has submitted an entry to the theme essay program in the year of 2023, I want to reaffirm my gratitude for your amazing writing and self-expression. It certainly is not easy writing about a lot of the given prompts—they challenge us to be reflective, vulnerable, and brave—but you all have risen up and exceeded my expectations. Whether it be about leadership, scars, America, or youth, within your writing I see our shared humanity and the values and compassion that are instilled in this beautiful Prisoner Express community.

For all of you who are new to Prisoner Express, I encourage you to share your own writing. I'm sure everyone who is already part of the program can attest to how amazing of a creative outlet it is. Not only will other members of the Prisoner Express community have access to your writing, but you will also find you have a lot in common with the rest of your Prisoner Express members, and some of their writing will challenge you to new reflections, questions, and guidance in life. Finally, all your writing is displayed on our website in the digital archives for your friends and family to access as well.

It truly is an amazing opportunity, and I would love to see some new names in our upcoming theme essay packets -Carl

## Upcoming Word Themes

Gratitude	...	due 4/1/24
Imagination	...	due 5/1/24
Hunger	...	due 6/1/24
Satisfaction	...	due 7/1/24
Yearning	...	due 8/1/24
Rewards	...	due 9/1/24
Standing up	...	due 10/1/24
Moonlight	...	due 11/1/24

Here are some selections from previous theme topics:

## Word Themes

### The Circus

by Thomas Black

1976, the bicentennial of our nation's founding. To celebrate the year the U.S.A. was emblazoned in red, white, and blue from sea to shining sea, the Ringling Brothers circus was no exception.

What a spectacular sight for my first time to see a circus in person. It was a red, white, and blue explosion. The decorations,

the costumes, both the people and the animals. It was a real sight to behold.

So much to see. The trapeze artists, the tightrope walkers, jugglers, horses, tigers, elephants, lion tamers. My memory is a little fuzzy, but I seem to think there were also some camels, goats, and llamas. I honestly can't recall it all. One of the most memorable for me was the clowns. The fire brigade of clowns, and the clown car, which seemed like it would never empty. I laughed so hard at their hijinks.

I remember a stilt walker dressed as Uncle Sam on a dangerously high pair of stilts. I still remember the tiger act. A fellow named Gunther Williams was the tiger guy. His act was really impressive, and the elephants were so cool.

But the circus is more than just what you see, it's also the sounds. The trumpet of the elephants, the roar of the lions, the sound of the horses, the band music, and the calliope. To this day I'll still stop to listen to calliope music whether it's the circus or on a steamboat, just love that sound. The show was constantly on the move. The sights, sounds, action. They packed a lot into the show. They put in a lot of effort to entertain the crowd and entertain they did. They didn't call it "The Greatest Show on Earth" without a reason.



Art by George Reeder

by Terry Lytle

Screaming, hollering. Chaotic-noise. Too loud to even hear my voice over the GTL tablet phone in my cell.

"Sounds like a damn circus in there!" Amy said. If she only knew...

See, I'm in prison. Locked down 23 ½ hours a day - in regular population! With not a disciplinary infraction in 2 years, come July!

Yeah. She's right. This is said to be, "Hillbilly Hell" because the staff just do whatever the hell they feel like. But I like her label better: "The Circus"

**by Bryan Noonan**

I've never been to a circus before. As a kid, I often saw the Barnum and Bailey signs and longed to go to the big top and watch the performers: tightrope walkers, acrobats, clown cars filled with clowns, and elephants. It always came back down to the elephants for me. Perhaps it was because I was born into the era of Disney's Dumbo, or maybe it was simply because I loved and admired the massive, intelligent beasts.

I'd once heard that elephants have the smallest brain-to-body size ratio, yet they are highly intelligent. For some reason that fascinated me. I wanted to see these intelligent creatures at work.

But as I grew up, I began to hear about the horrible abuses the circus pachyderms suffered, the undignified treatment they received. Suddenly, the circus didn't look so appealing to me. I watched documentaries that showed elephants experiencing horrible pain and neglect, and my heart ached for them. Soon, I found myself cheering for their eventual release and longing, instead, to see elephants protected in their natural habitat.

Elephants are magnificent creatures, and not just because of their size or their ivory. They offer humans a beautiful example of community if we can stop our frenetic pursuit of individualism long enough to watch and learn. We might just learn how to care for each other as they do.

I'm grateful elephants no longer provide entertainment in the circus for millions of children. Our children ought to learn about the true nature of elephants, not the sideshow antics of circus acts. I'm also grateful for all the people who worked tirelessly to free elephants from the abusive circus life.

Today, as I look around at the circus, I live in called Prison, I see clowns galore, people walking a tightrope between light and darkness, and a plethora of performers. But I see nothing as beautiful or graceful as the lumbering circus pachyderms who now live free of their past lives. I envy their freedom from the circus and from those who abused them.

Elephants taught me more than the prison system ever has about how to love and protect those who are vulnerable in this world.

**by DeAuntee "Av3nue" Poe**

Years ago, at the beginning of my bid, I remember reading a pamphlet given to me by one of the knowledgeable old heads called "Circus." It was basically a metaphorical comparison of prisoners to circus animals. It was a trilogy packet, that actually made perfect sense. 11-12 years later, I still see the concepts.

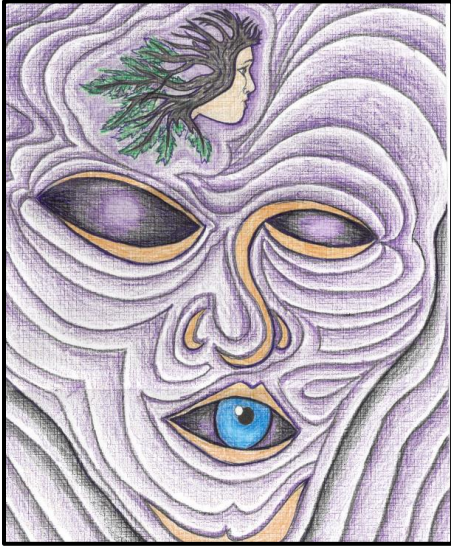
In reality, I've never been to a real circus (Although I've always wanted to go to one). But being incarcerated for 16yrs and counting these concentration camps they label Correctional Centers are just as entertaining to the conscious being.

They lock us in cages and treat us like animals. Brainwash and train us like some elephants and lions, got us jumping through fiery hoops and riding our backs for the entertainment of their own for peanuts (incentives) that can and will be taken away at their will. And for the ones that wish to rebel against their indoctrinated rules and regulations, we are locked up in isolation for months and years on end in hopes to break our spirits in order to cooperate with their program to keep the show going.

At times, I've seen their tactics work, mentally breaking the animals who refused to play by their rules. Now they're playing with their feces and throwing shit at the window like monkeys. Openly masturbating in the window for all to see like apes. Or so tranquilized on psychotropic meds that they actually are human and began living like an animal. But what throws me for a loop are the ringmasters. The COs, Case Managers, etc. I get how someone who's held captive will compromise his integrity to get a lil extra. But the staff choose to be clowns. Prancing around like they really are somebody with their big red nose, red shoes, and red wig on. Their little plastic badge is as if they are better than us because they come to oversee the ones who are being held, prisoner. Little do they know, they are just as much of entertainment as the ones locked in the cages, forced to work and do tricks for incentives.

See me, I'm that Black Panther like the one who was in that pamphlet who kept pacing back and forth in the cage. No matter how long they lock me in isolation or offer me incentives, I'll NEVER forget who I am. A HUMAN. I refuse to entertain their crowd by submitting to their oppressive desires, wants, and demands.

However, once released from this cage, this is a circus I never wanna see again.



Art by Tim Vergason

### The Sounds of Silence by Jason McCrickard

Silence..... Well for the most part at least. The sound of forced air being piped through the industrial H.V.A.C system, and what I can only describe as.....crickets

With walls of concrete about a foot thick, and a solid four-inch by thirty-six-inch window with no means of opening, I know that this place was designed to keep the outside out as well as the inside in. But what the hell is that sound? The sound that I hear is not crickets. No matter where you are, when it is dead quiet there is still that background sound that I call "The Sounds of Silence."

I take full advantage of this time. Enjoying the stillness, the peace, and the moments of clarity. Utilizing every second honing, brainstorming, and became the best version of my potential.

It is only at this time that I am exclusively solo, while awake.

The other sixteen-plus hours of the day are impossible to find a moment of solitude. Without fail, when I am on a roll, in a great groove, and getting a lot done the rest of the inhabitants begin to stir. "The Sounds of Silence" are broken in the distance as I start to hear the first sounds of life gather momentum with every flatulent urination and industrial flush.

I know that it won't be long before that fluorescent hum illuminates every shadow and dark corner.

Shortly following will come the crude shrill of that gym whistle and a barrage of "count time" shouts from the ringmasters. The other 85 characters will rustle awake in their cubicles. Once "headcount" clears the cages will open and the circus will begin once again.

Euphemistically we are all part of one colossal circus, and I hope that you find the time to discover "The Sounds of Silence."

### The Circus: An Experience in Teen Travels by J. Logan Diez

It was the summer of 1972 -- I had just turned 16 years of age, received my High School Equivalency Diploma, passed the ACT College Entrance exam with a 99.987 percentile, and gloriously lost my virginity to a beautiful and beloved classmate (whose name I shall, as a gentleman, must keep to myself). I had also been granted "minor emancipation," which legally afforded me most rights as an adult (I still couldn't legally buy beer), secured my own kitchenette efficiency apartment, and had a decent smaller motorcycle I drove to my part-time job at the Charcoal House in my hometown of San Angelo, Texas (best barbecue steak fingers in Texas -- Order # 95). It was practically my hybrid "Country-Rock-N-Roll-Heaven". What more could a 16-year-old Texan boy want, right? Then the circus came to town and posted THE flyers -- 'Help Wanted.'

Yep -- I went to apply. Clyde Beatty & Cole Bros. Circus wasn't Ringling Brothers & Barnum-Bailey -- but it was a Big Top tent with a 3-ring main performance and a sideshow tent. The pay was squat. After deductions, I made \$5 - 20.00 a week (as compared to the \$123.50 a week I had earned at the Charcoal House). But they fed well; I could buy a beer at "the blue room" (a blue tent), the circus performers in their teens were really cool kids from all over; and, my particular job was the best!

See, while I had "general duties", like helping set up the Big Top tent and prepare the grounds for the shows -- my employer was actually "Captain" Dave Logan (as soon as I heard the last name, I had taken it as an omen I would get the job). See, Captain Logan *owned* the elephants and big cats. My job was to "assist" with the three elephants: Maude, Kate, and Helen, the "old girls", and to help reload Captain Logan's pistol blanks. On setup and takedown, I hitched Maude to a harness and lead her to pull the hoist to lift thousands of square yards of canvas up the tent poles and take them down. Better still, Captain Logan let me use Maude for a "tow elephant". For \$20.00, Maude would pull vehicles out of the muddy circus parking lots on rainy days, and then Captain and I would split 50-50. Better still, I could give elephant rides to ladies who captured my fancy. If you think a ride on a powerful horse or Harley turns a gal on, try

having her ride an elephant. Yep, easy to get a “date” after the show when it starts with an elephant ride.

Now, loading blanks for Captain Logan’s .357 show pistol may sound boring, but remember, my boss owned the big cats. Captain Logan had raised 2 of his Big Cats from kittens: Goldie and Baby. Goldie was an African golden mane lion that weighed just over 500 lbs. The baby was a Royal Bengal white tiger weighing just over 684 lbs. They stayed in Captain Logan’s trailer between shows -- almost never in cages -- and the first time I “met” them was my first day loading blanks. I reported to the trailer and was let in by Captain Logan, seated at the reloader in the living room, and he said “I’m just running over to the Blue room to pick up a six-pack- don’t mind Goldie and Baby, they won’t bother you” then he was gone. I thought Goldie and Baby were his daughters! I sat there reloading. The trailer had a sort of musty smell, but I didn’t recognize it-after about ten minutes, I felt warm breath on my neck and a cool moist softness against my neck (I honestly thought the Boss’s daughter had licked me) then something like wet sandpaper licked up the nape of my neck across the back of my scalp! I turned to my right and was staring into the beautiful eyes of the baby- She yawned-fangs longer than my finger glistened inches from my face- I pissed my pants and basically started a skid mark in my tighty whities. (Okay, all you macho males out there snickering-let’s see you stay seated facing a 684 lb, meat-eating predator less than a foot from your face with a mouth wide enough to engulf your entire head!) Baby grinned at me and sauntered over to the sofa making a kind of chuffing sound- pretty sure she was laughing at my stinky britches.

About that time captain, Logan walks in-Sniffs the air-looks at Baby, and says, “TikTok, baby” Then says to me “Go clean up then come back- this happens all the time, but you’re the first one I’ve had didn’t break a door running out.” So, I became his regular reloader. (For the record-Goldie and Baby were regular pussycats. Once Baby had her moment of sadistic humor from me, she and Goldie would often nap with their massive heads across my legs purring! Oh- and if you think an Elephant ride got me “dates” ’ imagine what letting a lady pet lion and tiger get...)

I don’t want readers under the impression circus animals can’t be dangerous- they can be very, very dangerous! Captain Logan hired a 24 yr old guy named David when we passed through Midland, Texas, headed for Dobbs. There was a 13-year-old elephant in the herd of 12 named Frieda; and like any 13 yr old entering puberty, she got moody. Only four people could safely get near her; Captain Logan; his assistant Ron, an African American handler called “Youngblood” and myself (all the elephants loved me for some reason). David was very

clearly warned not to get near Frieda, but in Dobbs, as he walked past her eating popcorn, she stretched her trunk straight as a board. David thought she wanted popcorn, so he put out his arm and pressed against the “do not cross” rope, in less than 5 seconds, Frieda jerked him up and stomped him to death! (Lesson: Elephants can move very fast when they want to and Elephants wanting a snack hold their trunk out in a limber, relaxed manner and do some snuffing; a rigidly straight trunk is an aggressive reaching out to harm.) We, also, had a black panther in the sideshow tent that a very gorgeous, ivory-skinned, green-eyed blonde of 28 years of age would climb in the cage, wearing next to nothing and playing the “wild girl raised by panthers.” A half-drunk guy figured it was a domesticated panther, so he stuck his arm through the cage bars holding a drumstick of turkey. He was carried away in an ambulance with the arm pretty much shredded off the bone, and Sheila had her stomach and buttocks clawed when she threw herself between the man and her panther. (She was literally the only person who could safely enter the cage.)

I (somewhat reluctantly) departed the circus, returning to Texas to start college, when it headed to Sarasota, FL to lay out for winter. Even though I worked only for a one-season circuit -it’s an experience I’ll never forget! (still have a crush on Yvette, the French trapeze artist who was 15 years when I was 16 yrs with the circus...) The people I met, both circus people and customers, were all amazing and I feel blessed and richer for having met a lion and tiger ... and riding elephants and having a lion and tiger sleep on your legs-cmon, who wouldn’t like THAT!

### by Hannah Bazzi

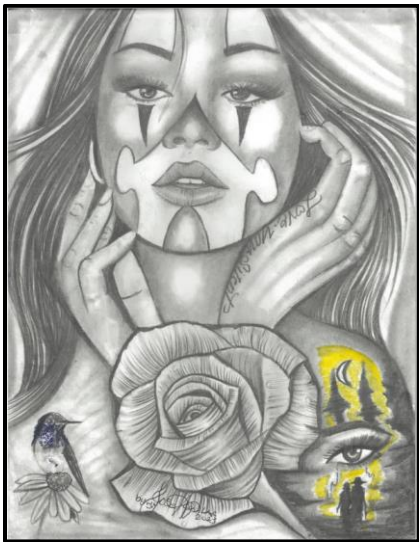
When I remember to look out, I can see the circus of this place I’m living in. When I remember to look outside of myself. I get caught up in the voices and angst inside my mind and body. The parade of thoughts and desires left inside. The circus I’m in is second-rate.

Nothing runs on time and our laughs are cynical like we get a kick out of the freaks. It’s dark to laugh at people who were born disfigured. At least I didn’t pay to get in. I’m better than that. Honestly, I thought about it and realized that I’m a part of the circus too. An abused beast, coaxed into submission, waiting for the next moment I can perform since it gets me out of my cage. I’ve learned a few tricks over the years; like when it’s better to smile or to snarl. The crowd still loves a little bravado once in a while. Even the ringmasters, with all their power, like a challenge, keeps things interesting enough for the audience to want more of you. Even though we all know I’m well-trained, I



could still bite. I love chaos mixed with orders. Each unplanned moment unfolds in the confines of radio traffic and schedules. This happens before that and that before this, every day, the order to father time.

The circus is aloof to the time I spend locked in my cage. It goes on and on, each performance taking center stage, the drama in the spotlight, whether I bite or I smile, play my tricks, or get wild like I used to be. I'm in control. I play my part. I roar and I purr within the invisible lines of my training within the walls of the home that someone else chose for me, dreaming of the jungle, where they found me.



Art by Jose "Silent" Aguilar

### Circus of Life by Jeremy Lowery

In the 1990s, Disney released the animated motion picture "Lion King." It was an instant classic, drawing crowds at the box office. The soundtrack was equally successful. I will never forget when my girlfriend at the time and I took her two young sisters, twins, to see the movie. As we drove home after, the youngsters were singing songs from the film, butchering lyrics along the way. When they burst into chorus singing about the "circus of life," their sister and I shared a good laugh. I'm not quite sure those were the words Elton John had in mind when he penned the lyrics to his iconic song "The Circle of Life." Now, as I look back around thirty years later, it's becoming evident to me that those girls had it right all along.

My life has been nothing short of a circus. In fact, I'd wager that every single one of us is living our own version of a circus, trying to put on the greatest show on Earth while managing the three rings of our life - our professional life, our family life, and our inner more personal life. All the while we are working to keep everyone entertained and focused on the show and

simultaneously hoping to hide just how hard it is to manage behind the scenes. It's no easy task. We don't want the chaos behind the curtain out in plain sight. We hope everyone rushes to the big top to see our successes. Watch how we perform on the trapeze but pay no attention to the safety net or how many times we fell while learning the performance. Ignore the scars brought on by working in our trade with the tigers and getting a little too close to the claws. Please enjoy the animals but pay no attention to the people following them around trying to clean up all of the little messes. Inevitably, just when it looks like we are going to close the show on a high note, juggling our professional, our family, and our personal needs and wants perfectly, working to succeed... a car full of clowns show up intent on throwing a pie in your face.

I can't even count how many times in the past I thought I was living the greatest show on Earth, only to step in a big pile of elephant dung. We are our own pooper scooper. We have to clean up our own messes. There's nothing like stepping into it to bring you back to reality and remind you of your own self-responsibility. No matter how hard I worked I couldn't keep my success on top forever. Just like the circus only being in town for a limited time, so too it seems were my accomplishments. My career, my marriage, my relationships with my kids - everything I hold important - was destined to be a "limited time only" event.

When the circus leaves a town, it leaves behind a mess to clean up. The same can be said of life events that come crashing down. That's where I found myself just a short time ago. The trapeze act that was my marriage flew no more. Family relationships that I thought unbreakable were suddenly nonexistent. Life's big top, with all of its main attractions, had been packed away and all I could see were the clowns as they gathered to administer the proverbial "pie-ing" one more time.

So what's next? Now that all is lost, is that it? Do I just give up, pack it all in and resign myself to living out my last years alone and in isolation? Is my circus over? I'm reminded of something uttered in a movie a few years back. Paraphrasing, "The circus never dies, it just transforms". With that in mind, I realize that those little girls were on point so many years ago as they belted out their own lyrics to "The Circle of Life". Life is a circus... or as so eloquently described so many years ago, "the circus of life". More importantly, the show must go on. In keeping with the theme, we can't forget what Disney taught us in another animated classic. Any circus can succeed if they find the right flying elephant. So we can't give up. I can't give up. It's time I find my own Dumbo. It's time to succeed once more.

# Rescued

by Brian Maiese

When you hear the word rescued, the first thing that comes to mind is the dramatic scenes of being rescued from a fire, accident, natural disaster, or even hostage situations. One wouldn't normally think of being rescued from addictions or other vices, and you most definitely wouldn't acknowledge incarceration as the rescue tool. Personally, I never thought incarceration could be a rescue tool, but I found that it is.

For an abundance of years, I was running foot loose and fancy free. I was involved in numerous illegal activities; a drug addict; alcoholic; full of anger and hate; a menace to society, so to speak. One thing that's certain is, I was my own worst enemy.

In 2003 my world came crashing down as I was charged and convicted of one of the world's most heinous crimes. I desperately fought to prove my innocence but failed. I asked myself why? I came to believe it was so I could be rescued from the serious disease of addiction to drug and alcohol and to overcome my anger and hate issues; it most certainly rescued me from the consequences of illegal activities.

Drugs in prison cost a hell of a lot more than in the "free world" and I cannot nor will ever pay those highway robbery prices, so I quit cold turkey. I was rescued from a drug addiction. I eventually had gotten my spirit in tune with God, and it has helped with staying drug free. It has also helped in rescuing me from my anger and hatred. After fifteen years of incarceration, in 2018 I was rescued from alcohol.

With being incarcerated; self-determination; God; volunteers; and like-minded men around me, I have been rescued from all my addictions and from self-destruction. If it wasn't for incarceration, there's a really good chance I wouldn't be writing today, a positive arises from a negative falsehood. I just thank God that I've been Rescued!!!

## Who Rescued Who? By Leo Cardez

"Men don't cry," he scolded me, "you look ridiculous."

I was six.

Over the years, I forgot how to cry or maybe my tear ducts were simply sealed from lack of use, now I'm not even sure I'm capable.

Congenital. Nothing to be done. The sooner the better.

"Two weeks max," tuna breath explains as if he's ordering lunch, "what are some of his favorite things?"

"Beach, chasing squirrels, hot dogs, and sleeping on my bed," I tell him as I rub Buddy's head.

"Everything but the squirrels." tuna breath explains as he hustles out of the room, "Make an appointment for two weeks with the receptionist."

*Well, fuck you very much,* I think to myself as I scoop Buddy up in my arms and place him gently back on the floor. I feel my eyes burn, and I fight against it, the same way I have since my father pulled me by the ear when I was six.

I rescued Buddy, (Short for Budweiser) half Benji/half Lassie when I got my first off-campus college apartment. As a pup, he was all paws and eyelashes and hopped like a bunny when he got excited. He refused to be left alone and often followed me into the shower, shivering but with a watchful eye from the corner of the tub. Walks were a full-body workout. Clearly born with strong run-in-open-pastures DNA— I once found him 4 miles from our house after chasing a car halfway across town.

Then.

Then he stopped running, He was winded quickly, even while merely walking. The day I had to carry him home from the park I made an appointment with the vet.

Now, I regret everything. See, I know I am a bad dog owner. I am selfish—skimping five-minute walks after being gone all day soon. I am inconsiderate—too cheap to buy anything but the bulk generic dry dog food. Buddy holds nothing against me. He sees something in me I simply don't believe exists. I often wish I could be the man he thinks I am. It feels like something is stuck in my throat as I tell myself, no, I promise myself, *I WILL be that man for him in his final couple of weeks.*

That night.

He's resting at the foot of my bed— watching I don't disappear. His breathing becomes choppy and labored. The look on his face scares me enough that I rush him to another white sterile room while wearing two different shoes.

Dr. Pretty Face doesn't smell as if she had tuna for breakfast, lunch, and dinner this whole week. She assures me Buddy won't suffer, but that the time is upon us. She hand-feeds Buddy peanut butter snacks from her pocket. Buddy, even on his

deathbed, ravages them as if protecting them against foreign invaders.

Two needles, one clear and another with a blue cap.

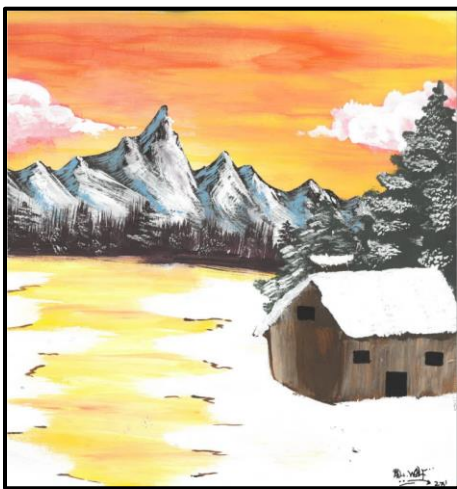
Pretty Face tells me the first is for the pain. Into the catheter. Buddy's whole body unclenches. Peace swims over his face. *Does he know?* I wonder. Pretty Face is a clairvoyant, "He understands. Say your goodbyes, I'll be back in a minute" She gently squeezes my shoulder as she walks past.

I bend to kiss his dry nose. His bushy eyebrows twitch as he nuzzles into my shoulder. He is free of suffering; the only pain left is my guilt. I whisper that he is a good dog, the best goddammit, and he will be chasing squirrels in heaven soon. I think I see his tail trying to wag, but I can't be sure of anything anymore.

"This one will stop his heart." The vet explains. I nod as I fight back the ancient tears that have welled up inside of me for over a decade. "Stay still, Buddy." I whimper, and for once, he obeys.

I close my eyes as the needle goes in— three years young, in his chasing prime, strong and brave; the food stealer, the midnight silent farter, the howler in the storm— that's how I will remember him.

I step into the dark empty parking lot and stuff his dog tags deep into my pocket. I toss his leash and collar into the large, green trash bin by the door. I sit in my car, something primitive breaks, and the dam bursts. My body remembers everything.



Art by A..L. Wolf

by Andy Ortiz

I'm sitting down listening to my tablet. While minding my own business as I should be. Then, I go to the R.H.U Restricted

housing unit. Where people go for dirty urine, fighting, or getting caught with contraband, or any bad misconduct.

Day #1 was like nothing I expected. I'm sitting in my cell wondering why I am back here. Officers come to my door and tell me, "You want to go to your misconduct hearing?" I say "yes, but I don't know what I did wrong." I get found guilty of Class #1 being in an unauthorized area. 30 days in segregation status. Well, others call it DC status.

I come back on the block. I hear multiple guards shouting at an inmate while using abusive language against an inmate I did not know at all. Which, guards repeatedly call this transexual a "f\*ggot", "child molester", "rapist", and "land shark", tell her she gets DSL meaning "Dick Sucking Lips."

While I am next door to this person. As a man that is not gay don't have a problem talking to gay people. I go to my vent that night above the sink and ask, "why do they keep going at you like that." I wait to see if I get a response and I do. Which, was because the guards at SCI-Somerset state prison most dislike transsexuals and gay people." "Also, they will expose people's cases that are convicted of rape or any sexual offense." I said, "That's totally wrong what they are doing to you." "They are violating your right as a gay transexual male and discriminating against you because you are gay and violating your rights by exposing your charges that you are convicted for. Which violates the Department of Corrections Policy." "You have to report this issue to the superintendent." She says, "I don't know how to go about that." I asked, "What's your name by the way, my name is YOGI. That's a nickname everyone calls me in the jail— well prison to be exact." She then tells me her name is Brandon, but the people that know her call her Gigi.

I tell Gigi in the event I am going to contact the central office of the Department of Corrections to report what's happening to her. She thanks me. Days pass, and I still hear the guards fucking with Gigi. I went to the door cause I got sick and tired of listening to the bullshit, I then started to bang them out every time they did it. They come to my door and ask, "What's the matter with you?" I say, "You guys are my problem to leave her alone." They laugh and tell me, "That's not a girl that's a grown-ass man in that cell." I said, "Okay, whatever, just leave her alone before I call the central office and make a report to them by mail.

They leave and go away for a couple of days then start to mess with me. Which led me to get more misconduct. Now I have like 100 and something days in the Restrictive Housing Unit. While being called the same things they were calling Gigi.

As for Gigi, they stopped messing with her, and she noticed they were on to me. So, she wrote a letter to the central office on my behalf. That's when the higher-ups came to talk to us. After, they completely stopped messing with Gigi and then Gigi was released from the Restrictive Housing Unit to go back to the general population.

Before she left, somehow, she was able to slide a note into my cell. In other words, we call a note a "kite." The kite/note said, "Thank you for rescuing me from the madness." "I know you are not gay hopefully we can be friends." I closed the letter, and I sat back and lay on my mattress and smiled to myself because Gigi was actually thankful and said, one thing I ever heard was that I rescued her from evil and madness.

As a Muslim man I highly respect my religion but, being friends with a gay or transsexual as long as I don't commit to a sexually gay act does not violate my religion. So yes me and Gigi remain friends, we talk here and there and she respects boundaries because I'm not gay.

Does it feel good rescuing somebody? To me, I give a shout-out to everyone in Prisoner Express!

### **Rescued by Incarceration by Marlon Olivera**

There are times I consider my long-term incarceration as a curse. However, there are times when it's hard to not in some ways see it as a blessing. I think to myself, is it really possible that the only reason I'm alive at the age of 35, soon to be 36, is because I was incarcerated at the young age of 20? Is it possible I was rescued from many horrible situations only because I got incarcerated? Is it possible that my getting railroaded by the courts and unfairly and harshly sentenced was in some strange way the universe rescuing me from people, places, and things? As much as I hate to admit it, I have to be honest and say that there may be some truth in that. As much as I hate to admit it, I have to be honest and say that incarceration rescued me in many ways, from many things, and most importantly it rescued me from myself.

When I reflect, I see that there are so many things that have occurred during my 16 years of incarceration that had I not been in here I would have been caught up in it. For example, back in 2009 two of my friends were murdered in a shooting that stemmed from a fistfight in an after-hours spot and there's no doubt in my mind had I not been in here I would have been there and could have possibly gotten killed as well. Another example is that although I never had a driver's license, on countless occasions I drove under the influence of alcohol and drugs. The

most memorable incident was when I almost hit a light pole head-on after falling asleep behind the wheel after a long Thanksgiving night full of drugs and alcohol had it not been for the wild jerking of the car from me climbing up on the sidewalk waking me up in time to serve back onto the street, I would've ran straight into that pole surely injuring myself or even killing myself. Ironically, I got incarcerated a week later. There are many other instances like these that I know incarceration rescued me from. I hate that I'm here, I hate that I've been away from my loved ones all these years. I really hate this place, but I know it rescued me from many destructions.

I have a few years left until my release and my mind is totally different from when I came in. Maturity comes with time, but a different type of maturity comes from doing time. In here you have the time to put your life under a microscope and if you're smart, you'll make the proper adjustments to live a better life when you get out. I can painfully admit and I'm pretty sure many of the inmate population will agree that in some form or fashion, we all were rescued by incarceration, rescued so that when we get out, we can live.



*Art by Michael Vandergriff*

### **by John James Obiols**

The word for me brings up the image of drowning in the ocean. I can see someone panic and be about to be swallowed up by the sea forever. Not everyone can be rescued and even some can bring you down to the bottom with them if you're not careful. In these situations, one can only throw out to them a life preserver and hope for the best.

Being alone, cold, and weak, trying to keep my head above water in panic mode, knowing there is no hope for me in sight



and the only thing I can do for myself is to learn how to swim long enough to be able to drift myself to shore.

Some of us don't need to be rescued at all, we need to learn how to survive and stop panicking. Once we stop fighting to stay afloat and just drift above the water, allow the waves to push us to the shore, to let go. Let nature, or your environment work with you and not against you, go with the flow man, fate is not the same for all.

I don't ever want to be in a situation where I need to be rescued, nor to be put in a spot where someone needs rescuing. I have been brought down too many times trying to play hero and I am sure I did the same to many others on my part. If you can't swim with me, you'll sink without me.

Even more important than being free is living free. Living free is about taking chances and risking everything you gained to earn a different fate because I'd rather be faced with different fates than be trapped by one.

Even if I decided to plunge into the ocean alone risking a new outcome, even just a remote chance of getting a better fate, that's living free.

Don't try to jump in after me to pull me back; Remember, fate is not the same for all. Yet swim with me and put your hope with mine into the hands of the primal forces of nature. The cosmos rewards those who are bold.

"Each man has his day, and the time of life is brief for all, and never comes again. But to lengthen out one's fame with action, that's the work of courage." - Aeneid.

### **Waiting For, To Be by Marino K. Leyba**

I started off like everyone in life does.

I had all the potential to succeed, to be successful.

I listened to the advice that was given to me, that was passed down by the elders.

It was so amazing to watch as I achieved just by doing what they told me to, and what not to do.

I rose to the heights.

I was excelling at a rapid rate.

I had the world in the palm of my hands, I was so close to having all my dreams come true. I almost had my cake and was able to eat it too!

"Sometimes life does not play out the way we plan it."

I planned life well, yet it's like I said.

I had big dreams, I felt like I would have achieved

them, I probably would have, but then I fell.

I like that saying, that, "we can fly too close to the sun."

I feel like I was flying higher than ever just before I was shot down.

I wish I could tell you I had a fairy tale ending.

The family, kids, and wife, yet it's just the opposite.

I am in a cage, trapped, waiting, lonely, longing.

You see, I spend my time locked in a box, inside of another box.

How do I feel?

How I really feel is, it's kinda like being a damsel in distress, except I am a man and I don't wear a dress.

I feel hopeless at times.

I feel like I'm locked away in a castle waiting, hoping, wanting for some lady, for some woman to come and save me, rescue me!

I'm waiting to be rescued, but I'm afraid I won't be, I guess it's just a good dream to have at night, an escape from my sad reality.

I am a good person with a good heart,

Yet I'm painted as everything I hate in life.

I don't know if I'll ever be rescued or saved?

I just know time is ticking and it's wicked.

I'm in the land of the lost and forgotten.

I'm just waiting to be saved, rescued.

All my hopes, dreams, and ambitions piled up with the years and my tears.

I feel like I would do whatever for whoever rescues me, saves me!

In the end, I know we are all just lost souls and we all just want to be rescued.

### **We Are All Rescuing Each Other, and Thus Ourselves by Nate A. Lindell**

In one of Ms. LaFleur's recent essays, she wrote. "[b]ad boy lifers are sexy as hell." First, why, thank you; but no one's sex appeal is appealing when it's concealed by walls within walls, behind a fatally electric fence. Even sexy bad-boy lifers need to be rescued when concealed in America's concrete coffins.

As I write this, I'm watching *Otto*, starring Tom Hanks. It's a movie about a guy who appears to have Asperger's and, when he loses his engineering job he loses his remaining purpose for living and is intent on killing himself; but his neighbors keep insisting he helps them. He's hilariously frustrated, but helps them, and eventually decides to keep living. In rescuing others, *Otto* rescued himself.

I suspect that this is what kept me alive during the 15 years that I spent in solitary confinement. I saw others being severely mistreated, helped them with lawsuits by providing details about their abuse to journalists, and wrote my own internet articles about what was being done to us. Killing myself would have been an easy way out, like for Otto but, helping others became my purpose to keep on living.

I've been peculiarly lucky too, in that someone always pops up to rescue me when I have needed it. And while I've often lost friends and pen-pals whom I've hoped to maintain (again, Ms. LaFleur, being a bad-boy lifer doesn't attract substance.), someone always steps in to replace them. Once, out of nowhere, a guy in Poland bought me a TV, headphones, and some other supplies that I had no way to purchase myself-- I went to college with him 25 years ago; he said that he didn't want me to give up on humanity, then went his own way, never to be heard from again.

Like Otto, didn't plan on rescuing others, and certainly didn't plan on it becoming a habit. Nor did I do it expecting any reward or recognition. But, I have received both rewards and recognition (after much work)-- recently I settled two suits about harassing strip searches that were being done on me (done because I filed grievances & helped others file grievances about severe abuse) for \$15,000; my reputation for helping others with lawsuits (usually with far more successful results) is established.

Not only do we rescue ourselves by rescuing others, but we thereby contribute to making a ... "better" community, a community that will then be primed to rescue us when we are in need.

## Space

### Spaced Out by Rolf Rathmann

I want some fuck'n space of my own! Is that too much to ask?

I've used some of this space in the past to relate that I was transferred to the Oklahoma City Transfer Center work cadre, instead of being transferred to my choice - Colorado's Englewood. It took me four requests, and this is where I landed. Imagine County Jail with elevators and you have this space I currently call home.

The one-hundred fifty of us support an operation of 1700 inmates, the women and men each week who shuffle through this - the O'Hare of the Feds. Every inch of space - the recreation deck (if you could call it that: a 20' x 30' patch of cement), dining hall, television area, library, gym, classrooms -

you name it, are a miniaturized version of the 1500 person yard I just came from, only a short seven months ago - as of this writing. Unbelievable how suddenly my time has become a tremendous slog. A grinding trek.

I'm attempting to be more positive, really I am. There have been plusses: I've realized that my A.A. sponsor lives just outside the city limits and for the first time ever, we met on a visit - my first in six years!; any additional FSA programming that at a larger compound may take months for me to get into due to my release date, I get into daily quickly without a wait; and in a few weeks I will be teaching a yoga class for the recreation department. (I used to do that informally a couple summers ago for some twelve guys back at Forrest city.)

Ahhhh, outdoors, barefoot on Spring's soft carpet of grass, swatting fire and dragon flies while doing the Warrior Pose, try-to maintain a Zen state while eyeing the hot shirtless men traversing the track, sporting their latest tats while we twisted and contorted in Sun Salutations. Thank God for darkened wrap-around sunglasses. The open space became our canvas, eventually joined by Tyler, a more adept and practiced yoga instructor who'd introduce us to conscious breathing. One evening, our eyes peacefully closed, a light rain began to fall. We weren't detracted. It was just such a "present" moment. As we opened our eyes, shards of sun rays, nearly set for the evening, broke through the parting clouds. We had the whole yard to ourselves, everyone else having ducked the wet onslaught. Talk about creating our own reality!

I miss silence. It's hard to find it here. There's one place where I find it the most- working as a paid volunteer in the hospital as a Companion to those under suicide watch. While I love the service work opportunity to listen to these men in distress, it's those late night moments of utter stillness which I've come to love.

Other times, I leave this space by falling into the pages of a good book. I will ramble a bit here while I provide you with some quick recommendations: "The German Girl" by Armando Lucas Correa is a historical fiction centered around a Jewish German girl and her family fleeing 1939 Germany for Cuba; concurrently a New York city girl and her family in 2015 receive a mysterious package from Cuba, setting on course some seven decades of relationship to one another. It's set against the real life horror of the St. Louis Holland Amerika set adrift by several countries denying disembarking privileges. It's a deftly and movingly written story.

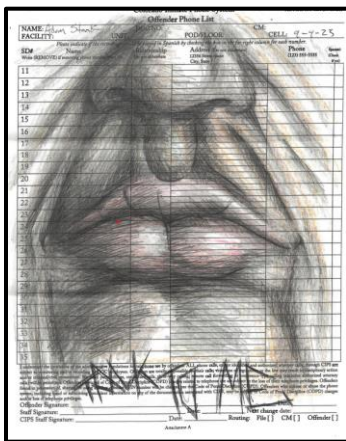
The other book was "Fly Girl" by Ann Hood, a memoir of the golden era of being a flight attendant on the cusp of deregulation. It's the perfect summer beach read, if you have the imagination enough to transport yourself to a beach amidst the wire fencing. It's a humorous and captivating book that brought back a lot of memories from my own flying career. She was (sort of) a co-worker of mine, but that's a subject for a different word prompt. Hers was the perfect vehicle for leaving this "county jail" space, soaring in the clouds of nostalgia.

I use writing (duh) to escape the space of monotony as well. I was utterly thrilled when the Education Director here decided to jump on board with the suggestion from when I first got here that she partner with PEN America for their "Sentences That Create Us" writing project, and I've immersed myself in that scary task of facing my demons by putting pen to paper in an attempt my own memoir.

As I close my typically meandering ramblings, I make the following suggestion for those close to the door of going home: download the meditation app headspace upon release. Or, if not close to departure, and you still have access to a -----, ahhh, oh. Um. Well, never mind. Yeah, right, nobody here would own a - um —

(awkward silent space)

Thanks for letting me occupy a bit of your space over these last few years, dear readers!



Art by Adam Stark

### by Frederick Mason

The "Final Frontier" as mentioned in Star Trek movies and television shows is meant to say, "Outer Space." But to the incarcerated, the "Final Frontier" is a cell in a prison. For many it is where they may spend the rest of their lives. For many, it's more than a "Five Year Mission," it's much longer.

Yet what's interesting, we may know more about Outer Space than we do the prisons in our country. It is actually fascinating, in a disturbed way, that for the most part, society really does not know about what goes on in prisons. Yes, some write about it, but when you consider the fact that millions of people are incarcerated in the United States at this very second, only a tiny amount of intel has been shared regarding our "space."

I've written, to date, about 400 essays on my experiences in my "space" called USP Tucson. Many have been published, but it pales in comparison to what people ought to know. From a small two-man cell, about 6x12, I've written well over 2000 pages on my "space".

We know so much about the moon, yet know so little about depression in prisoners. We know so much about our neighboring planets, but almost nothing about how prisons are severely lacking in rehabilitating prisoners.

We have almost unlimited data about our sun, yet clueless on how to help a prisoner find hope to change.

We spend billions to explore the furthest reaches of our galaxy, yet ignore the human being cramped up two (sometimes three) to a cell.

We know the light travels about 186,000 miles a second, but ignore the number of grievances illegally destroyed by staff when prisoners complain about abuse. (probably 186,000 a second)

As a writer in prison, (and a science fiction fan), I understand both realms. Like everyone else, I have seen numerous programs about outer space, and the vastness of it. But unlike most people, I also know the lack of space, being locked in a cell, with your movement severely limited. But let me introduce you to a third realm, one that may very well be even more enormous than space itself... a writer's imagination.

A writer, even a prison writer, retains the same ability to create as any other human being in this world. He or she is restricted in many ways, by resources, but never restricted in creativity. We are often limited when prison staff don't give us writing paper, envelopes or pencils, but unlimited in what we can write about, once we get them.

I have written a series on the score 7c tablets sold in federal prisons (and the lack of education content). I have written a journal of 1000 days of COVID here at USP Tucson. I have written about the 40 days I was retaliated on for trying to send letters to the NAACP, I have written essays of prisoners who

were physically abused, and swept under the rug. I have written testimonies of how God answered my prayers, and I've written the beginning of a fantasy fiction story.

And I've yet to really start writing.

Like my current cell, I am severely limited on what I need to write; this prison has created new "policies" to simply not give us paper and envelopes unless someone threatens a lawsuit. But like Outer Space, I have an almost limitless choice of topics to write about. One of my favorite phrases I tell guys when I talk about writing is, "I can't write fast enough."

Even now, my dorm (and entire prison) is on an Institutional Lockdown, after two violent (and separate) assaults left one prisoner dead. Yet this terrible situation never made the local news. If this tragic event is covered up, the public will never know what happens in the prison frontier. This is why I write; that, and to share with others my experiences, to give hope to those reading that you can never give up on yourself.

So, I'll continue this "mission" in space - from a prison cell, my personal space. And while in this space, I'll continue to tap into the endless space of a writer's imagination, where the possibilities are as vast as Outer Space itself.

No cell can prevent me from that, lack of space or not.

### **by Tisha Morley**

Outer space is so vast. There is a lot of room out there & the idea of never ending limits is difficult to comprehend.

I'd settle for having my own space. Something to call my own that isn't subject to search at any hour of the day. Space to spread out that isn't shared with others. Space to take a shower where there isn't three other people in the bathroom. Space to have a private conversation on the phone without being overheard or monitored.

I recognize that through my choices & poor decisions that this is the space I have created for myself. It's not my style to live in shame, guilt & regret, so now I do my best to not make those choices. Maybe when I do get released I can have my own space & keep it that way.

### **by Bryan Noonan**

I have an introverted personality that enjoys solitude, even needs it, to rejuvenate my energy. I need my space. I do enjoy being around other people, but in small doses. Keep the crowds

small, the noise down, and give me a space where I can retreat from it all.

I don't need much. My current space is a 6' x 10' cell with open bars on either end of concrete walls separating my cell from the ones on either side. My cell is what we refer to as a "single man cell," meaning I am blessed to have no bunkie. My space contains a steel framed bed with a 4" mat, a stand up locker, a schoolroom sized desk, a steel toilet, and a sink. That leaves about 20 inches between the bed and the desk. Just enough space for a chair.

The open bars make it difficult to tune out the noise in the housing unity, but I make do with a selection of music that replaces the cacophony of voices. What I listen to depends on what I'm doing. Right now, classical music tunes out the drone of slamming dominoes, shouts of "check!", raucous laughter, and constant complaining and cursing about one thing or another.

For me, having my own space is healing. It's a respite from the drama of prison life. For others, though, a single-man cell is too isolating. Some extroverts thrive on the chaos. They need someone around to talk to, to listen to them, and to provide a source of energy and distraction from their depressive thoughts. I'd prefer to journal mine in solitude.

Too much space can be isolating though, even for me. I dearly miss people in my past who have chosen to "give me space." I'd rather they were still in my life. And, when the prison system locks me into my own space, it can feel confining. I'd rather have the freedom to move about. Even for an introvert, space needs to be kept in proper balance.

The planets, too, operate on the principle of balance. If the planets were closer together (less space) or farther apart (more space), our entire planetary system would be thrown off. Each has just the right amount of space, distance from the others, for a healthy existence.

I know just the right amount of space I need to maintain my mental health. I know that isolation is not good for me. But neither are crowded places. And when I am isolated, reaching out to someone I love reduces the space of isolation. It grounds me, balances me. Likewise, when I am overwhelmed by the press of people, if I can't get away, I can retreat to a quiet space in my head. I can tune out the noise with music, or focus on one person letting the busyness around me fade into the background.

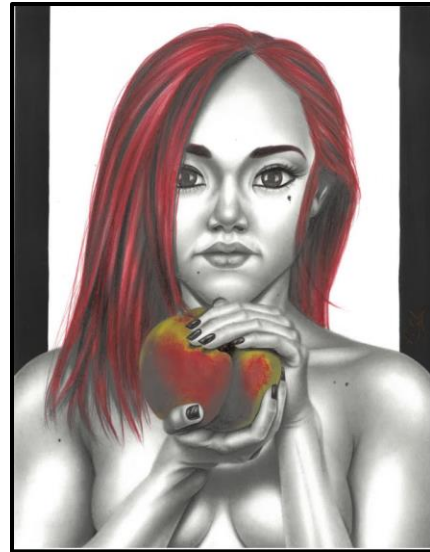
It's taken me years to learn the right balance for my life (and honestly, I'm still learning). I imagine people with autism have to learn this skill early on just to survive. Coming to prison has certainly forced me to learn this skill well and to apply it in ways that have helped me to not only survive but also thrive in prison.

Ultimately, that's the goal right? We're all looking for the right space that provides safety and the right conditions for us to thrive. It's why some people move into quiet neighborhoods, or out to the country. It's why others move into the hustle and bustle of a busy city.

Whether it's a quiet neighborhood, a patch of raw country, or busy city living, ultimately, as Voltaire concluded in Candide, we must all find and tend to our own garden spaces.

### Going the Distance by George Hesse

A detox nurse once asked me why I come in so much? I inform her my violent criminal history prevents treatment centers from accepting me. She said "Let me know if you ever find a solution or cure to addiction." While searching for alternate cures, I failed, bad. Then, when I went to prison I found one possible solution that had been working for me... Space, my distance from alcohol has helped, space away from cheap and easy access. I convinced myself at first to avoid pruno so I can get off parole quicker and get to the good booze. But the longer I stayed away from it, the more emotions came back to me. I needed space away from my addict cycle. Space away from my ex who was also an alcoholic. With the space from her nagging I got my natural humor back. Space to think helps to create a POSITIVE structured schedule which consists of goals and I analyze everything in my life to rate the pros and cons, the ups and downs. I must weigh everything out. I have space to write my music, space to think and come to a mutual agreement with the voices in my head to survive, to navigate this prison storm as best I could, I don't fight the waves, I do avoid the sharp rocks and debris. I stay on my chartered course. Space gave me the time to read my bible and connect with God instead of blaming him, my once empty space now has light, colors, hope, ambition, and success. The space between me and freedom, from me and parole is CLOSING, will I be ready to face life?? Am I ready to face death?? Like THOR, fully charged up..... Hell ya I'm ready! Gonna find other Avengers and save some people is on my list. PEACE.



*Art by Leonard Kyle*

### by Jose Torres

When thinking about space, a lot of things pop up in our minds. Things like: the final frontier, or simply give me 50 feet. Recently the whole world had to become strangely accustomed "to social distancing" for a while in fear of contracting Covid-19.

We in prison are not accustomed or even acquainted to having any type of space, unless you want to see how far we are from any type of civilizations, then we are not in short supply of space, think about the distance between the earth and Pluto. That's the space we are from our: friends, family and spouses.

When I think of space, I am quickly diverted to the lack of space in this prison system. I sleep, my cellie is within reach, when we cross the cell, one must turn sideways or sit down to let the other pass. As we come out to chow, we are like a herd of cows trying to fit through a small gate. When we walk down the hallways, single file line closer than elbow reach, same as when we stand in line for our trays.

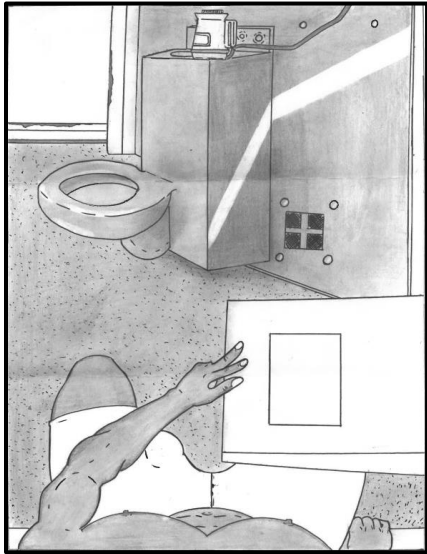
To be as decent as can be, while in the shower let's just say we are very very close. It should be a crime how close we are. In the world, while in traffic you use the term "bumper to bumper." Heaven forbid an accident happen in here. Six feet "social distancing" anyone!

That's just it, "space" is something that can be used in various ways, some good, some bad.

The space that I am thinking about is the "space", between me and my 15 year-old daughter, I live about 200 plus miles from her. So far to be exact that I rarely get to see her, if ever. How can I ever get used to it, I am hurting, she is hurting. I suppose



we cannot get rid of space altogether, because we see how needed it is in certain areas in life. When it comes to your loved ones, even your teenagers, that demand space. Give it sparingly, you never know when that same space, will become your enemy.



*Art by Herman Moore*

### **Finding Space For Prayer By Leo Cardez**

I grew up with a Bible in one hand and a soccer ball in the other. Every wall of our house depicted some gruesome scene pulled from the pages of our faith tome, just like the thousands of others in my Hispanic community. Sundays required getting dressed in my best clothes and spending the whole morning at our local Catholic Church. Fighting was futile, so I spent the first eighteen years of my life in this routine. At eighteen, I joined the Army and left that life behind.

Years passed.

I found myself trying to fill a space in my heart with women, alcohol, and drugs. Nothing worked. I would walk past churches hoping to hear the familiar hymns and songs I still knew by heart. Finally, in desperation, I attended a mass hoping it would fill the void I felt, but could not explain, in my life. But still, something was missing.

See, attending church and connecting with my Higher Power filled the empty spaces temporarily, but not enough to last the week. By Wednesday, I was dulling the pain and looking for answers at the bottom of bottles.

Fast forward. The inevitable: prison.

Prison rips one from reality and deposits them in the upside down world of Stranger Things. Prison strips one of every worldly possession and forces one to see themselves for the monsters they truly are. When faced with that grim reality, I fell back on the only thing I had left: God. I prayed long and hard for the miracles that never came, but in that prayer I found something better: a relationship with God.

I thought I needed church, but what I needed was to make space for God. Simple, quiet, dedicated time to get to know Him, allow Him to get to know me, translation: prayer.

The power of prayer cannot be overstated in saving a life. It has helped sustain me during the long dark night when even the most extreme solutions seemed viable. Now, I pray at least three times a day... always on my knees.

First thing in the morning, I offer a prayer for the deceased, including all my friends' relatives whom were suddenly lost or too soon. I also include all inmates as we are all dead just unburied in human warehouses. I pray that we all find peace with God.

After lunch, I pray for the living. One by one I run through my loved ones' faces in my mind asking God to help those going through something difficult. I include a prayer for all those I have hurt and ask God to heal them and soften their hearts.

Before bed, I pray for my personal needs. I thank God for all my blessings and ask him to help guide me in my own life-Then. Then I sit quietly and listen.

Do I consider myself religious? I don't know, not really, but in a way that's besides the point. What IS important is that I have filled that empty space in my heart with a comfortable meaningful relationship with God that keeps me focused on what's important.

I pray that God might help you discover yours.

### **by J. Bauhaus**

Space? I'll take all you got, because it is getting all smelly in here again, due to the crisis. I can't tell you exactly what the particular crisis is this time, because the censors either here or there might not let this essay pass, but experienced captives will know from the following details. Last week, we all started accumulating lots of oil on our skin, and dirt. Then we got a little thirsty, not drinking quite the amount of fluids we normally would. The laundry stopped going out. They make us eat out of styrofoam go-trays now, instead of the mess hall. Our hands are

all sticky, our teeth are getting slimy, and our breath stinks along with our pits. There has been a sudden spike in our need for paper to spread out on the floor, large plastic tortilla chip bags and the privacy to use them. One good thing about the crisis is that the ammonia smell seems to confuse the mosquitoes. The flies love it. The cops are getting nervous, and some are not hitting that time clock as often. But who cares? Just the young punks who have no future sense to plan ahead. I'll make it through this crisis. I am more concerned about the space missing from the "mama tried" theme newsletter. Some joker seems to have also misplaced or lost her picture theme essay too! This is unacceptable! But also unlikely, since she is our most admired and adored, (perhaps even stalked?) author. Let me think...

Nope! I just panicked a little bit, but now I'm better, because the only possible explanation for these two missing essays is obvious now. The clue that tipped me off is the picture theme for that month of the lady bidding her friends adieu as she goes to rendezvous with one of those weed-skimmers at about dusk. That noisy thing meets the Budweiser hydrofoil which follows a carefully calculated map of fueling stations all the way past Gibraltar to the famous Riviera. I hope I'm at the top of the list to get a postcard or a selfie from the flower in a place much more civilized than here.

## Rules

by Charley Lopez

As far back as I can remember there have been rules. "You can't go there," "Boys don't hit girls," "It's bedtime, time to go to sleep." I've been following rules since the day I understood obedience and authority. With obedience came permission "Mom, can I go please?", "Mom, what if she hits me? Can I hit her back?", "Mom, can I stay up late?" With denial came rebellion, innocent at first, but thereafter ever more complex, methodical, sinister. At the end we must all serve a master. Was my rebellion a contradiction? Am I a living example of hypocrisy?

Sure I broke rules as a kid, waiting for my parents to fall asleep so I may turn the T.V. on, telling them I didn't have homework when I did, I would even throw a tantrum to get what I wanted - breaking rules of behavior. All had a common denominator: follow through to receive my reward; in other words, follow these new rules to obtain my reward. As a boy I learned that sometimes I needed to disobey to get what I wanted.

Consequences came in the form of a leather belt wielded by my father, other times from a wooden rod swung by my mother. I

can still feel the sharp stinging sensations that left burning marks on my skin, danger and pain always lurked behind my decisions. Yet my lawlessness progressed. I began stealing, fighting, and deceiving. By my teenage years drugs and gangs began to mould my reality.

It's okay to hurt men, but never when they're with kids or their mother, it's forbidden to force females into sexual submission, it's forbidden to talk to law enforcement, it's forbidden to show weakness. Principles of criminality were adopted by me. In this distorted reality, having noble criminal virtues somehow made me better than the next man. Yeah I was a killer, robber, gang-member, womanizer, but I was one of the good ones. In this criminal lifestyle, rules of conduct were followed by every Mexican in Southern California. Then, I came to prison.

The prison culture is full of rules, the ones established by society and the ones established by the criminal underworld. "Don't do this," "You have to do that", damned if I do and damned if I don't. Why did I choose to be a rebel, outlaw, gangster, and not listen to Uncle Sam? To follow two sets of rules at the cost of my freedom? Now, there's an abundance of rules. It seems new ones pop up all the time. At the end I must decide who I'm going to serve, I can't have two masters. At 28 years old, after wasting ten years of my life, I finally get it.

I'm ready to listen to Uncle Sam and obey, but the thing is now I'm in a trap. I have to follow these rules for there will always be consequences for breaking rules. I cringe when I think about it. All I see is my father's belt and my mother's stick and I remember the pain that followed, everytime I broke the rules....

by Brian Byrnes

In 2007 I started a new job. It came as a surprise because I was less than a week out of solitary confinement when the officer called me to the desk. (The Pa.D.O.C. doesn't allow one to be hired until sixty days after release from solitary) "Laundry just called," he told me. "Do you want to go for a job interview?" I notified him that I did, returned to the cell and got "properly dressed." On my walk to the highest paying job in the compound many folks greeted me. I told each of them where I was going, and they all expressed their support with happiness in their tones and on their faces. I received the job and started on second shift. It didn't take long for the first crew to find out that I had started at the laundry. The next day, during their shift, they advocated for my placement on their crew. On the first day at work a supervisor asked if I wanted to switch to first shift. She informed me that I would have to move to f-block if I did. I informed her that I did. It took about a week to switch shifts and

move, on f-block I was introduced to D&D (dungeons and dragons). It wasn't D&D exactly as the crew did not have any of the core manuals but any role-player knows that a quest can be set-up without any books. I was not aware of any books until someone looking through a role-playing catalog that they wished they had such-and-such titles. (I believe the catalog was Hit Points) The adventure stopped as the crew notified me as to why the Oa.D.O.C did not allow the books in the institutions. They claimed they were security concerns. Violence, domination and a game that required a group gathering that was not approved by the activities department. AND THE BIG ONE: SATANIC! (A concern of the chaplaincy department) I asked to see the catalog scanning the prices. They were reasonable for my personal cause. I then asked which book was key to D&D. They all agreed that it was the player's handbook. I found it listed and looked at the price. Yowlzer! The cost was higher than most listed. "I'll be right back" I informed the gamers. I notified the guards desk and retrieved two cash-slips (they are forms to have funds deducted off of our accounts). The catalog was still sitting at the table where I sat. I quickly fished out an order for a player's manual (it was either 3.0 or 3.5 edition). They all said I was wasting my time and money. Less than a month later I was notified by the publication review committee (PRC) that the player's manual was rejected. I appealed. In the appeal I stipulated that hockey is a game, has a rule, and is not approved by the Pa.D.O.C I asked if a book on hockey and its rules would be denied. The appeal was denied which resulted in another appeal to final review. The morning after dropping the final review appeal in the mailbox I stopped by the head of PRC asking if I planned on appealing. I informed her that it was already in the box. She informed me that after speaking with the superintendent they decided to allow the publication but since the appeal was filed, they would want to follow the directives of final review. In the end, I won the appeal and D&D core manuals (as well as other off-shoots) flooded the mailrooms of the PA.D.O.C. As most prisoners know, prison authorities create rules, bend them, and break them. In doing so, they create an atmosphere that is imbalanced and keep us on our P's and Q's. But the RULE of COMMON SENSE always wins! USE IT!

### **By Cesar Hernandez**

Our wing has 180 people on five floors. I guess 150 mostly follows the rules.

The other thirty seem to make it their mission to break all the rules.

Some people for some reason get sent to lockup multiple time and come back to our building or wing.

Some people get one disciplinary case, and they get sent off to another prison.

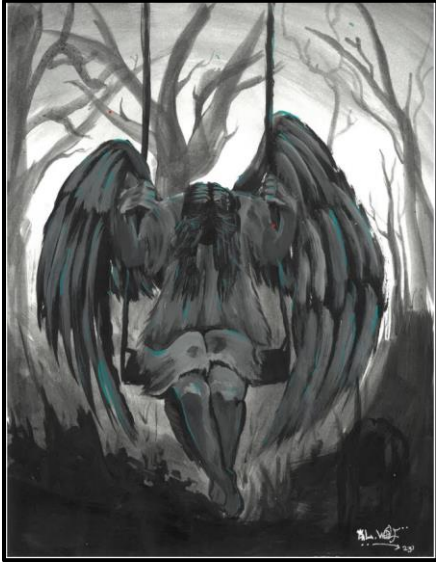
The guards don't seem to follow any rules. They don't seem to do much work. There are plenty of inmates who work ten times harder in one day than how much work the typical guard does.

I follow the rules, so I stay case free. My last case was in 2014. My cellmate gets case after case. He's constantly mad that he's on restriction so he can't go to the store or to rec.

### **Adventures in Camp Prisoney Land: A Field Trip By Catherine LaFleur**

(Soundtrack Cars That Go Boom, By L'trimm) Here in Camp Prisoney Land I've had the pleasure of medical trips to outside providers. My favorite officers for these forays are Bunny and Tigre. They are willing to turn on the air-conditioning in the back of the van and I get to listen to tunes from Hot 105 or 99 Jams Miami on the ride. By listening, I mean the volume is jacked up so the panels on the van are vibrating and we are all doing the head bob. As we pull into the underground parking garage at Larkin Hospital everyone knows Camp Prisoney Land is in the house. My entourage helps me out of the van. Due to my high custody status a third officer trails me carrying a shotgun. We take a service elevator to the mezzanine. From here I have to stumble through a crowd of citizens. Anyone could be just steps away from me. I'm an easy target shackled hand and foot, helpless. I have nightmares of being chased and beaten by an angry mob. Finally, my keepers commandeered a public elevator. The sniper enters first, then me, with Bunny and Tigre. It's an FDOC sandwich. Just as the door closes, a tiny woman darts inside. It's a roomy elevator but Bunny and Tigre hit the stop button. Ms. Interloper refuses to back out. A torrent of Spanish flows out. Bunny flinches, then responds making a shooping motion with her hands. Tigre turns to me and draws her taser. Zap! Zap! The electricity flicks alarmingly close to my arm. I am clearly not the problem, the space inside the elevator shrinks. Interloper finally notices I am wearing chains and shrieks as she leaps out backwards. Bunny hits the button and we ascend. Larkin has HBO in the holding section. Officer Shotgun has wandered off perhaps to bond with other gunmen. The hours fly past as I enjoy Independence Day and Get Out. Finally, Bunny and Tigre grab my leash and I'm off to see the wizard, really he's an Ophthalmologist. Sort of the same thing, right. It's against the rules for me to know what I am going out of the prison for, but my extreme myopia is my only pressing problem. That is why I put on my face and red lipstick but not my eye make-up. Social rules still apply. Can a lady leave the house without looking her best? I think not! I am kept separate from the public by rules and

also separated from my fellow inmates. Rounding the corner into the waiting room I stopped short. Tigre bumped into my back. Four inmates were sitting in the chairs. Men! I gawked at them and they me. Like they've never seen a girl in a long dress and a short jacket. Or maybe they've never seen a woman prisoner up close. Three had their jaws dropped just sitting there. A more mature gentleman touched the side of his kufi and rose as if to offer me his seat. " Thanks, brother! I don't think we are allowed to sit together." I smiled brilliantly with all my teeth and sashayed back between Bunny and Tigre. The door slammed and my keepers yanked me into another room.



Art by A.L. Wolf

## Stranger

### Stranger in a Strange Land by Nate Lindell

Most of the time I feel like a stranger. I am strangely sensitive, or so I feel, to the rampant disregard and despising of other humans that is rampant in Wisconsin (most U.S.) prisons.

As I write this the reek of built-up urine residue is wafting from my seg toilet and burning my sinuses. I can't clean the toilet; staff don't trust those of us in Columbia correctional institution's R.H unit 1 with either a toilet brush or toilet cleaner. I'm the only one whom I've heard object to this.

Everyone else accepts living in filth. So far I've been in C.C.I.'s R.H.U. Both had a variety of body fluids and O.C painting their walls. I used what I had- a sock and shampoo packets to clean the walls, dismayed when I recognized one of the body fluids that moisture had reconstituted, and which stubbornly clung to my sock.

Again, I am a stranger, weird for craving sanitation. Someone's been pounding on his door for the last hour. No one's answering. Does he feel strange? There's a pain I feel, a pain that sucks the air from my lungs and the will to beat from my heart. It's a pain that I'm terrifyingly familiar with from having spent over 15 years in solitary confinement in Wisconsin's "former" supermax. I know that I can hide this pain by raging against this machine, yet my sinuses will still burn from the odor of residue of dozens of hundreds of prior occupant's piss.

My hope for this change wanes. This kind of treatment has been decried for decades yet persists even worse. (AT least in the supermax I could clean my toilet and cells were power washed after each captive was moved.)

Last week 16 captives (out 40 on the unit) went on suicide watch. Staff spent the whole day gassing and moving those guys. Others and I with residual COVID damage

and asthma were left in our cells struggling to breathe. The next day I watched a guy across from me eat over 150 pills listened to several captives call for staff to help that 17th suicidal captive and knew that staff would take their sweet time responding (they did, over twenty minutes, ten more to remove him from his cell, an hour more to get him to a hospital, several days more for the hospital to release him... back into solitary confinement).

Why do I feel so strange screaming inside of myself (who else cares?) for an end to this barbaric practice of housing humans in conditions that would cause mass protests if the authorities held less-sentient apes in the same conditions?

### The Stranger by Leo Cardez

My father became a stranger to me the night of the storm. I was still in my spiderman underoos when he dragged me out of bed half-asleep into the bright kitchen.

My father faced me, chest heaving, "The gutters!?" Then he punched me like a man. He devolved, in an instant, to the brutality that all men are capable of, that exists in our lizard brain. Blood rushed to my ears. Lump in my throat. "How could you," he demanded, "how many times have I told you to put the gutter extensions back on after you mow the lawn? Mulatto is swimming in the basement, What the," He stopped short, eyes on fire. I swallowed hard. My tears threatened.

I stepped back in fear as mama bear walked in, I glided toward her still in a dream. She positioned herself between my father and I and guided me out of the room and back upstairs. Who was that man? I wondered, as I lay back in bed.

My father stood motionless watching the rain stream down the window before rushing into the basement to try and salvage the furniture. That was the beginning of the end.

Men raised in violence never learn to live without it, but that is a story for another day.

**by Jeremy Brown**

At times it's easier to talk to someone you don't know than someone you've known for years because you can be your best with that person and there's no history you think about. No feelings have been hurt.

**At the Secret Lifer's Other Ball by Catherine LaFleur**

(Soundtrack Moves Like Jagger by Maroon 5)

Once again, strange doings are afoot in Camp Prisoney Land. It was a quiet Thursday when select inmates were called out of the dorms. Lifers! We ascended the stairs to the multipurpose room. Sorry, women staff and inmates only. All of the male staff and officers had to stay on the bottom where they belong.....of the stairs that is.

The tables lined along the back wall were decorated with tropical party favors and Caribbean colors. We all sat on the edge of our seats as our four staff sponsors gave us the news. Camp Prisoney Land is the newest compound to have a re-entry program focused on women with long or life sentences.

Two weeks prior a number of my fellow inmates gave moving and heart felt speeches to visiting groups who toured the camp. Included were representatives of a number of nonprofits looking at potential sites for re-entry pilot programs.

While there have been programs for men, never has the Florida Department of Corrections allowed any women's prison to host a re-entry lifer program. The house erupted as we whistled, clapped and stomped our feet.

Then the wall dividers at the side of the room were opened to reveal tables piled high with Little Caesar's Pizza boxes, flats of Krispy Cream doughnuts, and platters loaded with chicken tenders the size of your palm.

Stunned by all the food, a reverent hush fell over the crowd as we lined up for what felt like a holy sacrament. My plate was filled with two slices each of pepperoni and sausage, three pieces of chicken breast barbeque, jerk, and parmesan, a mile

high serving of triple cheese macaroni, two doughnuts, and strawberry fruit punch in a red solo cup.

Record scratch.....am I still in prison?

We ate, and ate, and ate. The Assistant Warden was admitted to uproarious applause as the author of our feast. A loaded plate was proffered. And then.....

And then.....

The Assistant Warden (a man) had to descend the stairs all the way to the bottom, with the rest of the male staff. Again, exactly where they belong because.....

The electric slide came booming through the speakers. Both versions played one after the other as inmates, officers, and staff boogie woogied across the floor. What didn't we dance to? Boot scoot boogie, The Twist, Peanut Butter and Jelly, and Macarena. Ersulie and I did the Shag and got both Ms. Evelyn and Ms. Francine two septuagenarians, out to do the Hustle. We did it all!

But wait, there's more!

Last was a Sing that Tune dance off. Not only were we required to sing the secret song but also dance creatively. One after another the girls got up, microphone in hand to warble along to Michael Jackson, Lizzo, Queen Latifah, and Bruno Mars. Tail Feathers shook the house to its very foundations.

Your very own faithful correspondent was dragged out of the audience. I sang Madonna's Borderline and during the bridge reenacted that scene from Magic Mike when I skipped around the circle pointing at people and pulling them out to dance.

After all, no one knew I got moves like Jagger.

I remain your faith full correspondent.

**By Nicholas Wilds**

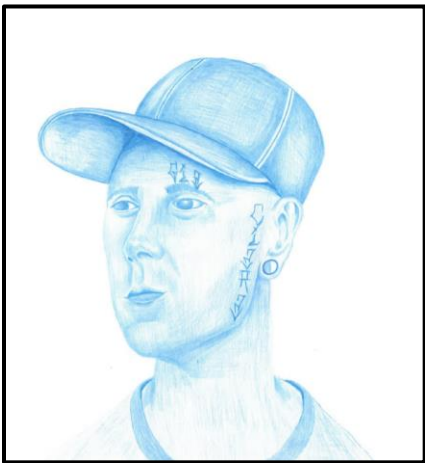
I don't want to be a stranger.

Not to my wife, not to my kids, not to my parents, not to my uncles, not to my aunts, not to my friends.

The judge says I have 237 more months left to try my best to not be a stranger to those I love. I guess I could blame the sentencing guidelines and mandatory minimums, the judge for giving me the higher end of my range, my lawyer for not working harder on my behalf, the BOP for sending me 6 hours from



home, not having video visits available, not having contact visits to hug and kiss my wife and kids due to covid, 15 minute limits on phone calls, etc.. I hear people placing the blame on all that, it sure would be easy to follow suit. Truth is: I and I alone am to blame. Not only am I to blame but I worked hard to be the one to blame. It's only right that I have to work even harder to not become a stranger to those my selfish illegal activities ripped me away from. I'll make the changes, I'll give the effort, I'll write the letters, send cards for all holidays, I'll take every class, program and course, I'll read all the books I can find to be a better husband, father, son, nephew, grandson, friend, human. I vow not to be a stranger.



Art by Michael Vandergriff

## Time as Money by SPIN

A few years ago, I was traveling across my state on business, when I decided to regain some lost time by taking a back road to get from one freeway to another. About 30 minus into this detour, the check engine light came on. 121 seconds later, the engine quit running altogether. I pulled off to the side, opened the hood, and stared at the snake pit of wires, tubes, and hoses. Fully expecting the offender to yell out, "Here I am, over here. I'm the bad guy. Just reattach me to that terminal and you will be on your way in a New York minute." After approximately 8 minutes of waiting for a response that never came, I turned around and leaned against the grill of my car as I contemplated my decision not to take auto-shop when I had the opportunity in High School.

That's when a very nice black and gray Lexus pulled up beside me. The passenger window lowered to reveal an even nicer black- and gray-haired woman behind the wheel. "Looks like you're having a bit of car trouble. There's a good mechanic in the next town. Would you like a lift?" I graciously accepted her offer and hopped in.

As we introduced ourselves and made the usual small talk, I explained what happened and how I had gotten there. "That phrase always struck me as odd, 'Make up time,'" she said. "As if one could actually create time and sayings like 'lose time,' 'find the time', or -the worst- 'save time'. Like we could deposit it in a time bank and withdraw it next week when we're 'out of time.'" I chuckled at her observations and offered, "What about the old adage 'Time is money?'" "That one almost makes sense, if people truly embraced it."

She went on to explain how people will scour the Wall Street Journal, pour over stock reviews, and quarterly company earnings statements, and examine financial instruments like mutual funds, bonds, and IRAs in an endless effort to maximize returns on their investments. They will create budgets that account for every last penny." And yet when it comes to time, they waste it as if they had a never-ending supply. If they really thought about it, they would treat Time AS Money.

She glanced over to find me riveted, to every word coming out of this amazing woman's mouth. "Ok. I'm with ya. Please continue," I managed to get out. She gave me a coy smile and elaborated on her comments to relate how time was *not* like money, because, "contrary to those cute phrases, you can't make time, or find it, or save it, or any of that nonsense. When it comes to time, we are all on a fixed income. There are only 24 hours, 1440 minutes in a day - no more, no less. The key to winning the time games lies in how you manage those minutes and where you choose to invest your time/dollars."

This was the crux of her declarations, and I would tell she had invested quite a few of her own time/ dollars to ponder the full extent of it. "Every day you should ask yourself how to best spend your allotment of time/dollars. And throughout the day, reevaluate your spending habits. 'Is watching this movie I've seen a dozen times, or playing this mindless game, the best purchase I can make with these 120 minutes?' If the answer is 'No,' then find something more profitable to invest your time in."

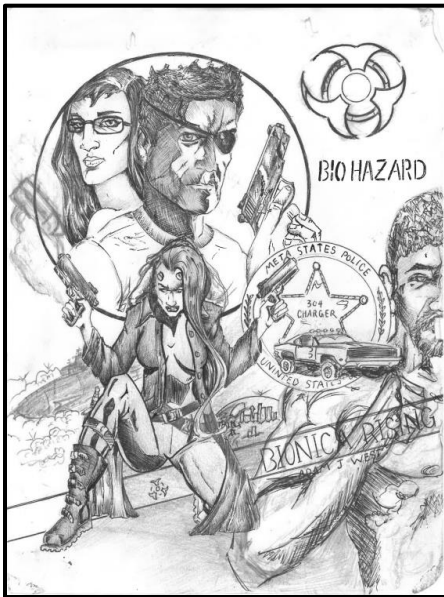
I saw an opportunity to participate so I chimed in, "Dave Ramsey will tell you that creating a budget doesn't mean you have to live like a miser. If you like going to the movies a couple of times a month, or going fishing, playing golf, or other hobbies, make sure to include money in your budget for them. Being fiscally responsible doesn't have to be boring."

Her face lit up to see that not only was I following what she was saying, I was engaged and exploring the concept. "Yes, yes exactly! Oh, he's wonderful, and you are so right. You don't have to pack every waking moment with work or spend all of your free

time with your nose buried in a self-help book, to make the most of your time. If you've had a taxing day and just want to veg-out with a little mind candy TV to unwind, by all means do so. Your time portfolio should be just as balanced and diverse as your financial holdings, make sure you budget some money/minutes for exercise, self-care, reading for fun, prayer, and other intangibles in order to have a physically, emotionally, and mentally balanced and healthy day."

I sat mesmerized by the profoundness of her insight. In all my years, I had never looked at time in this manner. It was a simple yet very impactful way of using this precious resource we often take for granted. I knew this woman was like no other I had ever met. A true person of character to go along with her stunning physical beauty and alluring charm. And I wanted to know more.

"Well, this looks like your stop," she said as we pulled up to the service station. "Sam is a crackerjack mechanic. He can fix anything. And he's honest too. Except when it comes to the size of the catfish he catches." Not wanting to lose the moment, I sputtered out "I'm starving!" And this might take a while. After I talk to Sam, would you like to join me for lunch at that cafe across the street? I can't think of a better return on my investment than spending more time listening to you." She smiled and blushed slightly as she batted her eyes. "Sure. I got time to burn today." It was the beginning of a wonderful relationship.



Art by Lior Atiyos

### by Earl W. Cox Jr.

A new job? School? City? State? Country? I believe most of us, myself included, have been a stranger on several occasions

during our lifetimes. Every time I started a new school, and there were several; or moved to a different state or country, I felt like a stranger. So awkward to move somewhere new and to not know anyone. I really detest feeling like the proverbial "fish out of water."

At fifteen, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I hopped on my bike and pedaled the four miles to my new high school during the summer; to both have a look around, and to meet whomever I could. I rode my bike onto school property behind the school building. Above the football field and track, sat a beautiful 16-year-old girl all by herself, under an old oak tree, crying like she'd just lost her best friend. In her shimmering, backless pink and yellow sundress, tears falling on her cheeks, I approached her cautiously.

I timidly said, "Hi," then asked her, "Are you hurt? Why are you crying?" I might have been timid initially, but I certainly wasn't entirely bashful, blurring out, "I mean, you're so beautiful. What are you crying for on such a nice day as this?" As a result, she began crying even harder. Then I added sharply, "Now stop that! Stop crying this minute, or I'm going to leave!"

She instantly perked up, replying, "You guys are all the same! Kiss 'em and dump 'em, then leave them all alone!"

"Whoa, Ms. Stranger! I haven't kissed you...yet. I'd certainly never dump you. Not for anyone! I'd also never leave you... If you were mine. Certainly never alone!!"

After a moment's hesitation, she finally replied, "My name's not Stranger, it's Michelle."

"So who's the jerk who made you cry?" I asked coyly.

"My boyfriend...ex-boyfriend...and he's not a jerk. Well, mostly not," she replied, finally smiling.

That's when bravado overcame common sense; and I leaned forward, and kissed her. Twice. "Nice," I said. "Please stop," she pleaded, adding, "I mean, I don't even know your name. Besides, my boyfriend and I just broke up. Again."

I got her to laugh by telling her, "You either stop crying, or I'm just going to keep you quiet by kissing you. And my name is Earl," adding, "I'd be happy to be your boyfriend." I had never been so forward with any other girl. Being a stranger gave me courage to be bold.

Michelle replied, "I'm pleased to meet you, Earl; but please stop kissing me. After all, I don't kiss on the first date."

I laughed, replying, "Well, that's good. Because this isn't a date. It's an encounter between two lonely souls." I was only 15, but smart enough to impress her with my honest feelings. I hoped she was impressed.

We might have been strangers, but I already knew I wanted to be more than just friends with this girl. I boldly kissed her a third time. A longer kiss, holding her firmly, adding, "You just remember this, girlfriend. Whenever you need someone to whip away your tears, or to kiss your tender lips; to give you a hug, or cherish you for you; I'll be there, like a bridge over troubled waters."

Having stopped crying, she grinned a huge smile; and herself laughing asked, "Where on earth did that last part come from?"

I told her it had been our school choir's favorite song the previous year. Then I added, "It's nice to be back from California."

She replied, "Wow!" Then, to my surprise, she kissed me.

"Tsk. Tsk." I said laughingly, adding, "Now don't be a wanton hussy, girlfriend."

She pushed me away, exclaiming, "A wanton hussy, am I? Is that what you think I am? Or what do you want me to be? And I'm not your girlfriend!"

I could see anger briefly flush in her eyes. Then something else??? On a hunch, I said, "Easy, my little Juliet. I meant no harm. Though you could be my girlfriend." I held her firmly in my arms, realizing suddenly how physically entwined we had become.

"Oh, my sweet love," I said, "How shall I live without knowing your address or phone number?"

As she started to stand, Michelle replied, "Uh. Uh. Not yet, Romeo. Not so fast."

So I spent the rest of the summer alone, feeling forlorn and forsaken. I pined after a stranger I barely knew. Life is hard at fifteen...I spent all summer remembering every detail of her. Obsessed? You bet! Love at first sight. Puppy school...I longed for Michelle not Stranger.

Two months later, amidst a hundred or more laughing, jostling teenagers, I saw my 'Juliet'. Would she remember me?

"Hi, Romeo," she said, smiling.

## Helping Humanity by George Hesse

Would you help the lady if she was drowning? She is a stranger so would you save her life? You HONESTLY care even though she is a stranger? How far, truly, do your morals and values go? Now lets dig. a little deeper. Would you help that beautiful stranger if she was a feet across the border?? Honestly? There are many, many strangers who are in danger and need help yet we" draw the line at borders? As a Native American who grew up on a Reservation in South Dakota, I don't see borders. I ONLY See PEOPLE, Humanity, One day soon when this world is almost destroyed and WE" have to migrate to another planet, We", will be the strangers then. If the strangers, the hosts of that planet turn us back to a destroyed EARTH, what would you do? do? Would back to face and accept a horrible inevitable death? Would you willingly beg to stay or maybe sneak in? Would you barter with strangers to SAVE your family?? We are HUMANS and WE, should help other humans Strangers" or not, strangers "friends we have not met yet." Strangers like pizza, strangers like to watch and play sports, strangers like to care for pets and animals. My ancestors once populated this entire Country, Strangers came, We welcomed strangers. Our population decreased as the borders were wide open and strangers filled the U.S.

My people wonder why the gates now. From strangers to other strangers and borders are to close? Is it because of the diversity of people entering nowadays? The Watchers my Rez see this as a Dark Age when people wont help strangers who are dying and suffering In my eyes all people, all strangers are loved. There are still some Humans left on Earth left who won't and don't view you as a stranger. I View you as a brother, a sister, A loved one. "WE", my friend, are NOT strangers at all, WE, have ALWAYS been, Family ....

## Strangers by Aaron Burnwell

When I read that the word theme for September would be "stranger," my mind started reeling. There's STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND by Robert Heinlein and THE STRANGER by Albert Camus. (Harlan Coben also wrote a novel with that title.) Music gave us "The Stranger" by Billy Joel as well as "Stranger in My House" by Ronnie Milsap. Netflix let us find out that there are STRANGER THINGS in the Upside-Down. Also there was a show called STRANGERS WITH CANDY.

However, the stranger that captivates me most is the one I see in the mirror every day. Yes, I see myself as a stranger. But it's not because I am in prison (well that's part of it). I see myself as a stranger because I have always felt like I don't fit in. I feel like

an alien trying to pretend to be a human, like Thomas Jerome Newton in *THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH*. I didn't know I had autism until after I had come to prison. "Normal" people don't feel the way I feel, trying to navigate a complex world with something that could be seen as a severe handicap. They know what to do. They can figure things out easily.

Being intelligent and having autism constitute a lethal one-two combo. Prison is not the place for people like me, but I'm not capable of being in a mental hospital. Every day I feel as though I am surrounded by morons who cannot relate to me and who I cannot relate to. I wonder if this place is meant to be my own hell; as Jean-Paul Sartre said, "Hell is other people." Maybe he was onto something. Being surrounded by strangers while seeing myself as a stranger: that is a hell beyond hell. I wonder if there's any escape from this hell, I have found myself in. My mind is not normal (see the first paragraph for proof). Sure, others may see it as a blessing. But it is more of a curse. I have to deal with it every single day. At night it keeps me awake with thoughts of how I'm a weirdo and I'll never be able to fit in this "normal" world. I am a stranger to everyone, even myself. And I hate it. If only there were some way to make me feel like less of a stranger.

Prison has a way of making us feel like strangers to our own families. I talk to my mom on the phone. I have not seen her in at least eight years. I forgot what she looks like. My brothers and sister do not communicate with me at all; they have their own lives to lead. They see me as the screw-up, the one who can't get his act together. Just another reason that I see myself as a stranger. Why can't the time just zip by? I wish I was home, but I don't seem to know where home is. That's the problem with prison it makes things you thought were familiar become strange, concepts that mean something different from their original meaning. Hopefully I can stop seeing myself as a stranger and start seeing myself as the person I am supposed to be.

### **Stranger by Gary Farlow**

Like most people, I had a Hollywood image of prison: smoke-filled dormitories inhabited by tattooed body-builders carrying hate and homemade weapons. I arrived at North Carolina's Central Prison on a Friday evening. I wore my fear and trepidation like an aura as I, a pallid 128-pound weakling, stepped into my worst nightmare. It was like that old television commercial for E.F. Hutton. All conversation and card games came to an abrupt halt as I walked into the dorm. Heads swiveled and eyes sized me up. My immediate thought was, I'm

going to die tonight. I was about to learn just how misleading first impressions can be.

I never knew his real name. Old Time, or "OT" was perhaps in his late fifties and had, despite imprisonment, he carried a demeanor of one who hadn't a worry in the world. As fate would have it, I was assigned to the bunk immediately above OT's. After a couple of days of observing me in my self-imposed isolation, OT approached me carrying a soda and sweet roll.

"Look like you could use a friend," he said gruffly, proffering the can of coke and jelly roll. My suspicions must have been written on my face as OT tilted his head back and laughed. "Don't worry yourself. I ain't gonna hurt you, and I want nothin' from you. My friendship and advice are free. You can repay the soda if and when you can."

My relief, all the anxiety, apprehension, and fear I had kept bottled up inside broke. Tears flowed and I slumped like a burst party balloon.

"You can live in prison one of two ways," OT explained. "You can serve time, or it can serve you."

Puzzled, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's obvious you were convicted of a crime, and I don't care what it was or whether you really did it," O.T. said, his eyes holding mind. "You can waste your time consumed in fear, anger, bitterness, and blaming everyone and everything else, or you can accept responsibility for your actions and make this time work *for* you and count for something."

"You mean, sort of like when life gives you lemons, and you make lemonade?" I asked.

"Kind," OT nodded. "You have the opportunity, albeit forced on you to better yourself. Get a handle on any problems, pursue an education, develop a talent. It's all up to you."

I stared dumbfounded. I thought, is this *guy trying to tell me to be grateful for prison?* "It sounds like you think I should be thankful to be here."

Shaking his head, OT replied, "No Gary, not at all. What I'm trying to tell you is that you should make the conscious choice not to waste this time. Have something to show for it when the time comes."

OT left Central Prison just a few days later. As is the case, inmates are a transient population. When I think of OT, I'm

reminded of seventh grade literature class and a book entitled Brief Encounters. It focused on the fact that we often meet strangers in our lives who we may never really get to know but who have a lasting and profound impact upon us. OT was such a person.

I took his advice. That meeting was over thirty years ago now. Since then, I have earned three college degrees aside from the ones I already held. I've authored seven books, had a play staged at Kennedy Center, and my art hangs in galleries from New York to San Francisco.

Most importantly, I've gained a greater sense of who I am and a deeper, more appreciative relationship with family and friends, all while making time to serve me.

Being in prison isn't easy, no matter how one elects to serve time. It still means being separated from those I love and hold dear. While I will never be *thankful* for prison, I have accepted my responsibility for being here and I choose to make serving time serve me.

### **Stranger by Genevieve Brüemmer**

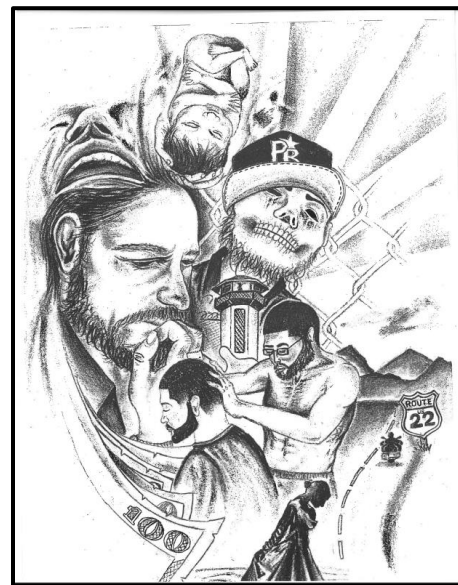
When I was twelve, I ran away from home. Literally. We had just moved, again, and I was so tired of it all, the picking up, losing friends, being the 'new girl', and just feeling alone. So, I bolted out of the cab with nothing more than my backpack - full of clothes and books - and out of that life. Allow me to say: I wasn't making great choices. I found myself alone, in a country where few people speak English, with no money and no food. So began a long, long line of poor decisions. But that's life.

Luck for me, I ran into (again: literally) someone who spoke English. True, it was broken English he had learned a decade before I was born, but it was English. He caught me, asked my name and what THE HELL was I doing? Try as I might, he did not allow me to escape. Finally, I caved, and I told this stranger my name, and that I had run away from home. The look he gave me said it all, but instead of hauling me to the authorities, he took me to a corner shoppe, and we ate noodles and fish. We talked for many hours, and he told me how he had run away when he was younger and joined the military. We talked about our families, and about God (I had recently denounced my faith, the Irish Catholic my mum followed, and he was a devout Lutheran, LUTHERAN, of all the-). When it grew dark, I began plotting my escape - he didn't physically restrain me, but I felt he would chase if I ran - while also beginning to wonder who this man was, and why was he so nice to a little girl? He bought me

dinner - more noodles and fish from the same shoppe - and we were eating, my da walked up (with a few of his MP buddies).

As it turned out, he had told someone to alert the authorities, then took me back to the shoppe so we were easy to find. My da thanked and rewarded the guy, then took me back to the flat he had rented. I never saw that guy again. You would think this story has a happy ending but not if it's about me.

I ran away again three months later, and this time I didn't go back. I did speak passable Nihongo by that point, so I was better prepared. Still, I cannot help but be amazed at the kindness of one man. He could've taken advantage of me, killed me, or simply left me at the mercy of everyone else; but instead, he tried to help me. Didn't work, but it's the thought that counts, no?



*Art by Wayne P Johnson*

## **Home**

### **Know What Home Is By David Morales Zenquis**

What is home? A shelter to reside in? Sure, but that would be more adequately called a house. A family? Close, but what about the people estranged from blood ties, or even the ones with little to no family (like me)? This cuts off a lot of people from home. Well, what about friends? Getting warmer, but sometimes, friends are the most susceptible to leaving us when our plight has shone - so we're back to square one. Hmm, community? Aha, there it is, the hearth is aflame. Yes, home is the community we build along with others, be it by need, shared interests, or shared experiences - be it in the same city or a thousand miles away. And when you weave through the pain and realize this, you'll finally be free of a weight. So thank you



everyone at PE, for giving me a home. Thank you Catherine LaFleur and your hooligan

Leo, you have given me something to aspire to. Maybe one day I'll escape the throws of all the liters I drank by the hours, the subconscious claws of my autism, and the shackles of the champions Diabetes and Alzheimer's that one by one eradicates my family – maybe one day I'll build my home. But for now, I'm content to just know what a home is.

### **Of Houses And Homes by Danny Evans Jr.**

I'm sure you've heard the expression, "That's a house, not a home," before (sometime in your life). That single expression can sum up my entire life. I was born to two white trash junkies, who lived with my maternal grandmother, in a car. From my very birth I never had a "home." My mother abused me—in fact my first memory is of her, homeless in the car, beating me for being fussy. I was maybe one-and-a-half.

My next vivid memory is of the crack and whore house we lived in. When I was about four, we moved into this run down hotel that was repurposed as "rooms for rent by the month," kind of like an apartment complex. In this particular memory my father came home from work just as my grandmother (read: caretaker) let me out to play with my transformers. This was about nineteen-ninety, so they weren't quite world renowned as they are today. I digress, my father told me to "get inside right now" to which my reply was "no, grandma just let me out." He screamed up the hallway, "Don't ever in your fucking life tell me now, now get in." To which I screamed "No!"

He ran to me, picked me up by my throat and pressed me into the wall. He was six foot two, two forty of muscle. I remember my strangulation well; gasping for air, now quite sure what I'd done wrong, trying to cry out into emptiness. I know now that I died. He brought me back though—CPR. When I came to, I remembered the feeling then. The "afterlife experience," but he wasn't done with me.

I screamed out, unsure what had happened. (Then, at least. I know now.) He slapped his meaty skillet of a hand over my mouth. He managed to cover up my nose and mouth, mid scream. I again could not breathe. So, inevitably, I suffocated. During that instance I felt the afterlife once more. I felt like I was leaving my body to return home.

Since then, I've lived through severe abuse, moving from house to house, living for seventeen years combined in two houses. You would think that I'd feel "at home" in that time. I've never

really felt that way. I tried though. I'd visit and stay with friends to emulate that "homey" feeling. I was desperate.

I'm thirty-seven as of this writing. I reside in a federal prison in Ohio. I've a lot of life left to live so I hope I find it. I know that in death, as morbid as that sounds, I'll have a home. I know it because I've visited before.

But I'm far from ready to leave this world yet.

### **by Kiera Henderson**

Home. Where is that? Is it where you grew up all your life? Or where you will spend the rest of your life? Or is it somewhere completely different, like in your mother's arms? To me home is where your heart is at. This temporary placement, which the state calls my home, will never truly be my home. 7 years and 8 days, the clock is still ticking until it hits 10 years. Then I will be free. Or will I ever truly be free from the prison that was created in my mind. Home is not a place where you stay, it is a place where you are happy and free. If you are neither then you cannot say you are home. When we were younger, we always would say "I can't wait to go home," but is that because that's where we lived at the time? Or is it because that was our comfort zone, and we can be who we are around the people we love. Growing up I lived in several different locations and all of them was called "Home." As long as the people I loved were there, it was called home. As for prison, when arriving for the first time you are told "You came by yourself, you're going to leave by yourself." So of course, your mentality throughout your sentence is going to be every man for themselves. With that being said it's hard to know if someone is sincere, due to the fact everything can change in the blink of an eye.

### **by Roy E. Addicks Jr.**

I've been incarcerated for 25 years now. And at no time in my life as it is in prison have I ever felt that this was HOME. Never!

To some in my same set of circumstances may have come to that point in their own lives whereby they have accepted the fact that this is and will always be home. But not me!

Home is a place where a person can be at peace with himself. Where he can be happy and comfortable in his surroundings. A place where he can welcome both family and friends and acquaintances as well. Where just the sight of his home invokes a delight and desire to be there. To stay there forever. Someplace he'd never think about leaving. It's a place he'd want to die. A place where his heart and soul is made a part of.

This place I'm at is more of a hell. Not definitely a home. I'd compare it to the camps the Nazis held the Jews, outspoken Germans, and others, who were not accepting of the Nazi rule and way of life. I don't think that anyone placed in these camps (if they lived long enough) would ever consider the camps' home. Never! Never home!

I used to live in a home. From the time my parents brought me home; to their home, I was in a home. And even after leaving home the first time, after enlisting in the U. S. Army, even so, this even was home away from home.

Once I was married to my beautiful wife Marie. We made a home for us and then for eventually our four children. You know, it is family that makes a home a home. Right? By yourself, well that's okay for a while, but when you have others that you care for and love, that's when it really becomes a home.

A home is nothing more than a building structure. But once you begin filling it with things and people you care for and love; it's then your home. And it's their home too!

### **Going Home by William Swiderski**

I was lost in my thoughts as I drove down Hwy 33 back toward the small town I grew up in (Necedah, WI pop 741). What a place. I couldn't wait to leave and never come back. Yet here I was headed home after 25 years.

Over the years I stopped myself from going back too many times to count. I pushed my family and friends to the back of my mind and forced myself to stay focused and forget all about my hometown.

But now, here I was driving 2,000 miles to see my dad one last time. To say all the things I should have said all those years ago when I was a tough, know it all kid. Yet I was afraid to open my mouth in fear of getting hit.

Now that I'm a grown man and finally figured it all out, it's time to go back. We both said things that couldn't be taken back all those years ago when I left. Looking back I was as hard headed as my dad and too proud to back down.

As I reached the town limits, I noticed things really haven't changed much. There were kids still hanging out at the Dairy Queen, same old stores on Main Street. But the streets were pretty empty today and I guess I know why. Well, I was home, and it couldn't wait any longer. I was ready and as I pulled into the driveway, I knew I'd have plenty of company.

Everyone turned to stare at the strange car with out-of-state plates. Surely no one would recognize me after all these years. But as I got out of the car and headed to the stairs, a few people nodded, so I guess they do remember me.

As I got to the door, my nerves kicked into overdrive. This wasn't going to be easy, but it had to be done. Should have been done a long time ago. But it took me this long to wise up, and now it seems our fighting and arguing was really pretty petty. But not to a seventeen-year-old kid who knew it all.

The first one to see me was my sister and as she ran into my arms, the place went quiet. Then both my brothers came over and it was like I never left. As my mom walked over to me, I knew I did the right thing in coming home and this whole time, I was looking over at my dad.

Well, I guess now is the right time and as I walked toward my dad, all eyes were on me waiting to see how things would go. I stood there not sure how to start but I did and I said all the things I should have said 25 years ago. About how wrong I was and how proud I was to be his son. I told him all about the man I've become and what I've accomplished with my life. That he could be proud of how I turned out.

I talked and talked with tears streaming down my face and finally my mother walked over and took my hand. I leaned down and kissed my father's forehead and then me and my mother walked away from the casket.

Me still wondering why I waited 25 years to come home.

### **Picture Themes**

A picture is worth 1000 words. Well, we give you 800. We look for pictures that we hope stir your imagination. I so appreciate the diverse writings a picture can elicit. I am so proud of the authors who conjure up these stories and have the strength of character to write them down and send them to us despite all they have to deal with in daily life. I salute you!



### **The Great North by Steve De Logé**

My brother lived in Redondo Beach, California, home to surfers and seagulls. I was living in Columbia Falls, Montana, about 40 miles from the west entrance to Glacier National Park. Our sister was in beautiful Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Wanting to visit her, Bro flew to nearby Spokane, Washington, and Janet picked him up at the airport. The next morning, they went boating on the lake and he saw half a dozen eagles flying by the cliffs. He was ecstatic. Wanting to also visit me, he borrowed Jan's Suburban right to drive the several hundred miles from the Idaho panhandle to Reservation, Johnny stopped to stretch his legs. He heard a twig snap and turned to see a large black bear, foraging just a few yards behind him. When he got to my house, he excitedly relayed these encounters with wildlife and said that if he could just see a deer or elk or something, his day would be complete. There is another type of wildlife in the area; college students working summer jobs for the National Park. They frequent a bar in the town of West Glacier and that evening we drove there to party with them. I got a bit too high that night and asked him to drive back. Driving on the dark highway through the woods, Johnny skidded into a huge deer. Apparently, the buck wasn't seriously injured because he ran away, but the front of my new van didn't fare so well. I was grouching about the damage and Johnny said with characteristic Surfer boy enthusiasm, "Well Brah, my day is complete. I got to see an eagle, a bear, and a deer!"

### **Bear by Paul Bero**

Wow, this photo of a bear really brought back some memories of 60+ years ago!

When I was quite young my dad was a really bad alcoholic, constantly, beer and whiskey. Way too often my dad would whip me with his belt for no reason at all. I grew up hating and fearing my dad. For years I'd have nightmares, they always consisted of me being chased by a huge angry bear, and every time the bear was about to claw me to death, I'd wake up, scared yet relieved it was only a dream. When I reached about 13 years of age my dad stopped beating me, and the nightmares stopped too. It is strange how long ago it happened yet is so clear in my mind.

At age 19 I joined the military, left home for good, and still hated my dad, we had no relationship at all.

Much later in life, in my late 30's I came to prison. I started to read the Bible and from that I (in my mind) forgave my dad. I prayed that I could see my dad, give him a hug, and tell him I loved him. It never happened, he died. Not long after his death, my dad's brother told me why my dad drank. He was in seven major battles of World War II, he drank to forget all he saw, all he did, just to cope.

I saw the picture of the bear; it brought these memories to me. I wanted to share this true story in hopes that if someone reading my story hates someone who was hurt by someone, try to forgive, even if it is not easy. I never got to tell my dad I loved him, but deep down inside of me I did forgive him, and I do love him-maybe he knows.

### **An Ominous Spring by Gary Farlow**

The bear let loose a roar of indignation, frustration, and hunger. Yes, hunger! He had come to this river every Spring upon awakening from hibernation to feed. This river teemed with salmon swimming upstream to spawn. He had noticed a decline in the number of salmon in previous years, but this year there were *none*.

What was wrong with humans? Better yet, what was the Creator thinking when *they* were given reign over the Earth?

Humans! The bear let go with another roar. Humans didn't even stop to realize that their fellow creatures could think, understand, and reason. Had needs.

Humans! Can't they see what they were doing to Earth? War, pollution, nuclear waste, oil spills, poisoning the water, the air, and the earth. The bears' cousins who once roamed their arctic home were now venturing further south as the polar ice vanished.

Humans! His distant relatives, the pandas of China, were starving as the bamboo fell prey to increased industrialization further eroding the environment.

Humans! Despite all the evidence, which every creature on earth could clearly see *but* humans, *they* chose to disbelieve the effects of climate change. Global warming is a myth, they claim. It's all a hoax! A hoax my furry butt! Just look! Wake up you despicable beings who were made "in the image of the Creator." This is *our* planet too!

Humans! The clock is ticking. As one of your own once said, *beware for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee!*

### **Bear in Me by Richard Schmidkofer**

From when I was a child to my adult life I was like a grizzly bear with my anger and temper. I would yell (roar like a bear), and use my anger to throw things everywhere, and hit people.

Since I've been in prison, I have learned how to control this grizzly bear with programs: Anger Management, Thinking for Change, and Yeshua (Jesus) with self-control.

I do not want to be that grizzly bear in my life. I was to be a gentle and huggable teddy bear or care bear.



### **Surprise by Al "The Outcast" Newberry**

Marcus and Shari snuggled on the couch in their cozy little apartment. They had been married for ten years now. In the past few years, their relationship had increasingly grown routine. Banal. If nothing changed, both knew their bond couldn't last.

Shari had awakened this morning to find Marcus' side of the bed empty. Oh no, she cried to herself. It's finally happened. It's over.

Suddenly she heard Marcus downstairs, singing some Marvin Gaye. The scent of freshly brewed coffee, fried eggs, and bacon began to waft up from down the hall. Marcus hasn't cooked in years, Shari mused. What's got into him?

As if on cue, Marcus appeared in the bedroom doorway. On his face was the slyest grin she'd ever seen on him. No, she thought. This was the grin she'd fallen in love with twelve years ago. What the hell has got into him?

"Good morning, baby," Marcus winked. "It's our tenth anniversary."

"You remembered?" Shari brightened.

"It's about time," Marcus dropped the grin, "Baby, I miss us. I haven't been the husband I wanted to be. What do you say we put the magic back into this marriage?"

Marcus then got down on one knee beside Shari's side of the bed. He opened a box with the most beautiful ring.

"It's our original engagement ring," Marcus explained. "I took it in and had them triple the stones." The grin returned to his face. "Shari, I've thought a lot about us lately. I could never, EVER, go on without you. Make me the happiest man on earth again. Renew our vows?"

Shari sat up, tears welling up, and threw her arms around Marcus. "Oh, honey, I could never say no to that."

"I love you, baby." Marcus nodded toward the kitchen. "I made breakfast."

"I know. Smells delish."

The couple walked hand in hand to the table. Marcus had gone all out. Eggs, bacon, toast slabbed with real butter, orange juice, and... a bottle of wine?

"Baby, let's go dancing after breakfast," Marcus suggested.

"What?" Shari giggled. "It's 7 AM. Where would we go?"

"I know the perfect place."

After breakfast, Marcus and Shari dressed up to go dancing.

Hand in hand, they exited the apartment. Down the stairs to the front door.

Shari froze. The street in front of their building was empty. Not even a car was parked on the block.

"Pulled some strings at work." Marcus worked for the city in the streets and parks department.

Shari looked both ways. The whole block was cordoned off.

A few neighbors watched from their doorways, smiling with knowing looks.

"Is EVERYONE in on this?" Shari asked. As she said this, music blasted from speakers down the street— Her favorite song.

### **Couple Dancing in the Street by Gary Farlow**

Louis had been away for four long years. He had joined the French Resistance that day in the Spring of 1940 when the Nazis rolled into Paris. His Paris. Julia's Paris.

He had quailed at the very thought of leaving his beautiful Julia alone. At the mercy and whims of the Nazi pigs. But if the yoke of Hitler on the French was to be lifted then it was up to men like Lous Mark Renault to do it. So, into the forest and sewers of Paris, he had slipped.

Living on often fewer than 500 calories a day, Louis watched his fellow resistance cadre members trap and eat sewer rats. He just couldn't do it. No matter how hungry he got, Louis never gave in. He viewed it as a slippery slope to begin compromising on his principles.

The war had finally ended with a beaten Germany and a dead crazy man with a little mustache. He dreamed of Julia's Paris apartment; her soft duvet-covered bed, the fat pillows, and the water with a lemon slice placed so lovingly by his bedside.

He longed for her soft auburn hair in his hands. She breathed his name during their passion as if uttering a mantra.

As he stepped off the train at Nord de Gard he took in the missing glass of the skylight, the gouged stonework, the slightly seedy, down-at-the-heels Paris. But what did he expect? The Nazis had occupied his beloved city for over four brutal years. The Eiffel Tower stood proudly over the city and Napoleon's Arce de Triumph. But so much *had* changed in his long absence.

Bricks and masonry littered the streets. Casualties of Allied bombers but at least the Nazi Prefect over Paris had disobeyed his Furher and had not burnt the city. As Louis walked down the silent boulevard from the train station, he hummed his favorite wartime ballad, "*I'll never smile again, Til I smile with you.*"

And there she was. His Julia. She was wearing the frock he had given her before leaving. He stopped. She stopped. Then Louis threw down his satchel and she was in his arms. Two lovers separated by war but now reunited in the rubble-strewn streets of Paris.

### **Freeze Frame by George Hesse**

The outside world doesn't exist with love. No hate, no violence, none of the negatives above to capture a moment it's just that priceless.

So, you can relive those times, especially while incarcerated. To see her beauty only grow better over time, than on day one.

That's one of the meanings of life, to hold someone close and love. So, treasure that first dance, first kiss, that first everything.

And remember your lover that way daily, you will never be empty.

### **Let's Dance by Leroy Sodorff**

I'll stroll your way  
you'll stroll mine  
we'll meet in the middle  
somewhere down the line  
So, let's dance  
to the same old tune  
arm in arm  
and in full view  
Ignoring all others  
who stop and stare  
and those passersby  
without a care  
It's been a long road  
that we've traveled down  
Each to his own  
Now tightly bound

### **A Moment of Togetherness by Jose Torres**

We all have this one moment of togetherness with that special one that if we close our eyes we begin to bring that moment into our minds, eye with little or no effort, we begin to feel once more



how we felt in that moment, we are almost present in it. We can hear the steady beats of our hearts complementing and perfecting our own. The whole world seems to halt once more and no sound or feeling or any distractions has permission to intrude on the moment, except that of the soft music we both can hear in our hearts as if our hearts and bodies composed it. The ambiance is thick, with love and peace and joy.

As we close our eyes throughout the day we are being drawn to this one moment of togetherness as the fish is drawn to a waiting lure. We long to feel her breath once more brushing against our hearts confessing her love and admiration, also the feel of our hands interlocked with one another with our arms wrapped around each other, as if the only thing holding the other to the ground. Cherishing embracing this moment of togetherness.

No one's thoughts could ever come close to how our hearts feel about each other at this moment. One may never want it to end much less think is possible, As people around us look on and murmur.

We could keep this moment alive whenever we want, we could keep our eyes closed and stay stuck in the past and never experience the present most times we don't want to come back. When we open our eyes the sounds and feelings began to fade, your touch, your heartbeat. The only sound we hear is a single heartbeat, a sort of offbeat, waiting, longing to beat once more with yours in a moment of togetherness as once before.

### **Last Dance by Leo Cardez**

I blame my father's side of the family. My father's go-to move is to pull me by the ear to get my attention, I was sure it was all that pulling that has caused my deformity. Also, my grandfather, Don Ignacio, my dad's dad, has huge pig ears. Don Ignacio told me I should be proud of my ears; they were a family legacy and made fun of my father's tiny ewok ears – the ears I desperately wished I was born with. In one photo, my grandad's ears resembled giant jug handles. It is clear I will NOT grow into these Yoda-like appendages.

The ears wouldn't be such an issue if I had other things going for me, but I wasn't a natural athlete unless you count tree climbing. I was lanky and weird, making playing sports humiliating and disappointing. I wore braces for four years and needed glasses young, I even had a Forrest Gump-like knee brace for most of 3rd grade. I was an outcast like Dumbo.

At this point, I must jump ahead.

It is now my sophomore year in high school and my Mama Pera is turning 90. We're Mexican so you know we're going to throw a loud obnoxious colorful party with lots of beer, music, food, and a pinata. (God, forbid we celebrate anything without a pinata.) Mexicans love their music and dancing is as ingrained into us as kids as soccer and the Bible. But I'm anti-Mexican. I hide my Mexicanness. I don't play soccer, nor do I listen to badda-bing badda-bing salsa music, and I have never learned to dance salsa, merengue, tropical, cumbia, none of them. Much to my mother's dismay. My whole life she loved to dance. Every morning and when I returned from school the music would be blaring and she would be sashaying as she was cleaning or cooking. She used to try and rope me in to join her, begging me to dance with her, but she grew tired of my side eyes and eyerolls. By the time I was ten, she learned to leave me alone, but that didn't stop her from throwing herself all over the house singing along to her favorite banda classics.

Mexicans have many unique traditions. Some I kinda like, like the huge family gatherings, others I can live without. Like the one at weddings or birthdays of older patriarchs, all the youth of the opposite sex are supposed to pin some money on the guest of honor's clothes and then dance for a few minutes with them. At my sister's wedding, she danced for almost 45 minutes, collecting over a thousand dollars in cash from half of the 300 guests in attendance. Now, I am being pushed to go dance with Mama Pera. It's tradition, they insist. Here's \$20 bucks to pin to her dress. I don't know how to dance. I am not a big fan of this witch...but familial pressure and guilt are not exclusive to the Jews.

At 90, she's not cutting a rug so I pin the money on her yellow frilly dress and begin to sway while holding her waist. She forgets things now. She can't live alone. She's not allowed to cook. She's shrunk. She's fragile in my arms. At 6'2 and a fit 180, I tower over her. She looks at me for a long second and exclaims, "Nacho, you're so handsome now. Look at your ears! They're beautiful." Her smile is so genuine, so pure, my heart melts and just like that I forgive her for everything she's ever said. She gently touches my right ear as if she can't believe it. I can't help myself and blurt out, "I didn't even need the operation." She's confused. Hurt. I regret saying it the moment it left my lips.

See, sometime around eighth grade, my curse was broken and my ears simply snapped back in place next to my head. And then everything else started to align. Braces off. Contact lenses. Grades. Popularity. No more bullies. Mama Pera is lucid again. She straightens up, looks me straight in the eyes, and explains how she just wanted the best for me, but my mom would have

nothing to do. She forbade her from ever speaking of it again, turning from drying the dishes with a large butcher knife in her hand and warning her if, God forbid, she ever hears about it from anyone else. Before I can respond, I get a tap on the shoulder, it's my cousin Eddie Spaghetti, it's his turn to dance with Abuelita.

Cut back five years.

Life has been difficult at home. My sister got pregnant young and had to drop out of school. My father had grown distant and hard. I was rebelling, hormones raging, from all forms of authority. I had cursed out my mother in a fit of rage, even raising my hand to slap her – all this for asking me to get off the phone to join the family for dinner. (It hurts me to write that sentence today.) I refused to speak to her and the few times we did it would immediately turn ugly and end up with me storming out of the house for hours or days on end. I would later learn she would pace the house worrying, crying as she walked by my empty room.

Back to the party.

I walk over to my mother who is chatting with her sisters at a large table. I hold out my hand and ask her if she still wants to teach me to dance. I wonder if I am saying the right words in Spanish as she looks lost and bewildered. Then. Then a smile so large and so bright I will remember forever spreads across her face. I have to go dancing with my son. She proudly tells her sisters and stands up to join me, almost jumping into my arms. I led us to a corner, too embarrassed to join the pros' center floor. She walks me through the 4-step basics box move. She shows me how to add a little flourish and panache or "sabor" (flavor) as she liked to call it. I stepped on her toes, but she never complained. I was awkward and out of step, she never stopped smiling. We laughed so hard and were lost in our little bubble that we missed the cake and the pinata.

That was our first and last dance.

Her love has never faltered even as it was tested under the harsh light of criminal allegations, a conviction, and a lengthy sentence. She never stopped dancing with me, and I regret I didn't give her more reasons to dance. One day, I pray, when I finally leave this dismal crypt, I will dance with my mother again. In this world or the next

### **Dancing in the Street by William Swiderski**

When living in a prison environment, you meet a lot of people and over time sharing stories and memories you begin to get to

know a little about their lives. What they enjoyed doing on the streets and what memories keep them going in this crazy place.

As soon as I saw this picture, I thought of my buddy Legend. He's always quick with a joke or a story so I can picture him all decked out in a cool outfit and just dancing the night away with a classy woman on the streets of Belize, just being in the moment. Looking into each other's eyes, not a care in the world, and enjoying life. Just him and his woman.

Things like that bring a smile to my face. Because even if we are in here, we want our families and friends to have a great and happy life. Knowing that keeps us going because the future might hold happy times for us. We now have something to look forward to, so when I see a picture like this, I know that someone, somewhere is having the time of their lives and that is awesome.

So, I hope one day my buddy will be dancing the night away. Not a care in the world. Just living life and enjoying his freedom.

**by Bryan Boldt Jr.**

My wife Chloe and I live just outside of Houston, TX. Our favorite team is the Houston Astros, and they just won the world series. We were just outside of the stadium in the middle of the street before the crowds got out. We held each other and danced to the victory and blocked everything else out. It was just me and Chloe by ourselves in a special moment. We look each other in the eyes, and she tells me that this is a perfect day, and we kiss softly and the rest of the world fades away as we sway in the streets.



**Time: Shortly before now by Ron Stark**

My clothes are muddy from falling in the mud. The mud is from the swampy old logging road. I'm running toward a clearing that is framed by tree branches hanging over the old road. They give the appearance of a cathedral doorway. Behind the "door" is a brightly lit mist.

A mysterious voice - a male voice - has called me to come into the mist. As I run through "the cathedral door," she meets me. I stop suddenly.

She stands quietly, looking over her left shoulder; looking at me with that half-smile. Beyond her is not the brightly lit scene I expected. This one is colored with muted shades of gray.

The sky is gray and the landscape is covered with wheat grass. I notice the gentle breeze and as it blows across the heads of grain they move side-to-side. Their movement imitating the waves of an ocean. The horizon is flat and featureless; no hills, no mountains, no buildings. There is a path, or roadway, that splits the grain field

### **TEXAS, my Love by SPIN**

I gape Westward upon the fiery horizon,  
tangles of crimson, ruby, and cinnamon curl  
themselves around clouds  
as the Sun relents to the rising Moon.  
And as my thoughts wander, again - I see you.

Submerging myself in her crystal clean springs  
engulfed in aquamarine blue bliss, feeling  
lost, helpless, and spellbound  
as if I'm gazing into your emerald  
eyes.

Oh, those eyes - I swore in which eternity dwelt.

Mesmerizing winds drift through Eastern pines, compelling  
them to stir to unheard rhythms  
like hands upon hips.  
Intoxicating and inviting they swing,  
sway, and smash -

bounce, bob, and beseech me to move with you.

The rising falls of the Hill Country  
with endless curves and plunging dives,  
mimic the savory peaks  
and graceful arches of your Venus  
akin body.

And a Southern Valley I'd spend a lifetime exploring.

Padding desert sands of the Permian Basin  
envisioning bronze skin beneath my fingers,  
forever finding you, here.

As I spread your ashes upon this mesa,  
the dying wish, of the Keeper of my Heart

### **Photographic Memory by Bryant Hernandez**

Our eyes are like the lenses of a camera. An instant flash that captures the beauty of life. Images stored in our photographic memory. As time passed by, the image of you stayed in my head. Many pixels creates a single image. Some are hued, some are black and white, but none are distorted for the reason I kept the best memories of me and you. I was awed by your beauty, your perfect smile and pretty face. But how can I forget your mesmerizing green eyes!? Powerless, because it was my Kryptonite. They were so dangerous that it was impossible to resist as they were big and deep I'd easily get lost in them.

I never knew that looks can kill, but now I do. What once was reality is now a dream filled with mere moments of time. The best thing about life is having the opportunity to live and endure the learning experience. I have to agree that love is the greatest pain. What we were meant to have was no more and no less. I moved on but memories will always last. I loved all of you completely, your personality, your face, your eyes, your smile so I kept all of that in my photographic memory.

### **Loose and Running in the Field by Catherine LaFleur**

(Soundtrack: Should I Stay or Should I Go By The Cure)

I quit! It's something that has been a long time coming. I am not the best nor the worst law clerk. I'm just the one who will take the most verbal and emotional abuse. Never admit to speaking and understanding a language other than English. Let's just say I know my name combined with the word 'puta' isn't ideal. Over the past six years, I've heard that word a lot. Perhaps it's my nickname? The situation is actually much worse than I can safely describe here. Maybe someday.

Sensing a disturbance in the Force, I sped over to the jobs office to put in my request for a change to dorm worker. Unbeknownst to anyone at the office I beat her to the buzzer. Elah!

Then I went to work like butter wouldn't melt in my mouth. Stuffing all my legal files and writing stuff in a jumbo-sized canteen bag, I waltzed out at the end of the day. Normally, Der Kommissar likes to hold legal files hostage. Claims of losing them are common. I summoned my Mississippi friends for a summer visit. The property sergeant is holding my box for Rus and Joy to pick-up on my birthday. More than one burden is being lifted from me in this season.

Its been a long strange trip. Over these years, I helped everyone who came to my desk no matter how I felt about them. Gratis, no less! Years of attending legal workshops given by University

of Miami Law School led to thirty- five evidentiary hearings. New attorneys got eleven of my clients retrials or reduced sentences. My job wasn't to be a lawyer or save the day. It was to crack the door enough for a real lawyer to bust it wide open.

What will happen now? I can't bear to think of all the work left undone on my desk. How will my days be spent without endless deadlines? Instead of hours of research and drafting motions shall I be at a loss? For most of my incarceration I have been assigned the law clerk identity.

Gasp!

I can now do whatever I want.

This summer I plan to sit at the diner-style table in the day room and enjoy a hot cup of tea each morning. The plan is to write for an hour each day and think only of self. Self, self, self! Each day I will check in, "Self, would you like to go for a walk on the recreation track? Would you like to sit under a tree? Want to go to the Minor Adjustment Beauty Salon? Self, want to go to the store for a cold soda?"

The only thing I have to remember is not to talk to my index finger ala the redrum scene from The Shining. People tell me its creepy.

I remain your faithful correspondent.

### **We All Have Secrets by Shaquille Davis**

He doesn't know me, just the person I want him to think I am. He has fallen mad in love with an imposter, but I can't tell him the truth. If I do, it could put his and my life in danger. So I continue this lie, as we spend our night next to a fire making love. He always asks me questions about my past, the ones I can't avoid. I just make up.

Wondering why he has never heard of me or my family in such a small village. Why, my accent sounds so weird, but I keep my lies up but when he gets suspicious, I have no choice but to find other ways of distraction. He has already planned out our whole future. How many kids we will have? What their names will be and what schools they will go to.

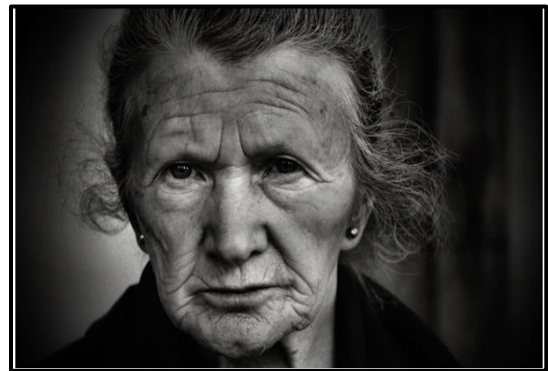
How can I tell him the truth and tell him he is living in a fantasy world? It isn't that I don't care for him but my true love is still out there. He got captured by the Nazi's, so that I may escape, so that I don't have to worry about going through the horrors we heard stories about. But he is tough, living in the slums of Poland will give you hard skin.

Now with the war almost coming to an end, as the Americans and Russians overpower the Germans, I can be reunited with my true love. But how can I tell the man taking my picture that? That I'm a Jew who fled, and is hiding under this alter ego to stay alive. As the Nazi's still do door to door checks, taking my people away in the darkness. My true love sacrificed too much for me to waste the opportunity he gave me.

So I will do what I have to, to survive and live this lie. That my freedom depends on keeping this ruse up, so I look back at him as he takes my picture in the field. Feeling pity for the man that has unknowingly become my savior. A deep guilt fills me, but I have to stay strong. It is the best for both of us that I continue this lie, be the woman of his dreams. He tells me I'm beautiful over a hundred times a day. Always saying that he couldn't believe I chose him that day at the train station. That out of everyone there, I mixed my luggage up with his.

Sparking a conversation like as if it was fate, but this story doesn't have a happy ending for him finding his one true love. But rather it's a piece of my story, of how I was able to stay alive, by using this man whose eyes told me everything I needed to know once I gleaned in them I knew he would be someone, I would be able to string along until it is time for me to leave.

That I'll be to him, his perfect girl, the girl he has always imagined he would marry. But that can never be as my heart has already been betrothed to another. Maybe my last day with him, I'll tell him the truth or maybe I'll just leave in the dead of night without a note or anything and just disappear forever. I have never been that good with goodbyes, but until then I'm going to be everything he wants me to be.



### **Abuelito by Leo Cardez**

The old woman looked at my father with a mix of emotions.

"Everything?" she asked again, "you want to buy all the flowers?"

"Yes," he said, and then handed her a hundred dollar bill - twice what the flowers were worth and more than she'd make selling her daisies at the Mexican cemetery in a week.

We were visiting my Abuelito's during our yearly summer trip to Mexico. I barely knew him - he died when I was six, but his legend was ... well, legendary.

My father loved to tell my sister and I stories of this force of nature. How once when my father was a child having trouble with a stubborn turd that refused to drop my Abuelito stormed into the bathroom and manually pulled the turd loose and then walked out without ever saying a word. She was a woman of action - turd pulling action.

The lines in the old woman's face softened and you began to see the hints of a smile. She thanked my father profusely and almost floated away in happiness.

My sister asked our father why he had purchased so many flowers when we clearly didn't need them? He sat us down on a grassy path next to Abuelito's grave and explained that it was a lesson he'd learned from his own father.

Every Sunday, they would go to the Mercado and buy goods from poor vendors - never haggling. [Sometimes they didn't even need the items. (And they weren't rich.)] But his dad explained to him that it was a form of being charitable while allowing them to keep their dignity. Also, it was the right thing to do. To help others less fortunate. And lastly, he said, "Did you see the look on that flower lady's face?" that alone made it worth it."

Abuelito was special... and so is my dad.

## **Grandma by B. Proffitt**

I never knew her name; we just called her Grandma. She was one of the few people in my comic tragedy of a life (or tragic comedy, if you're an optimist) who has ever really seen me. In the short time I knew her, Grandma saw into my soul.

Summer '98. The year that I hitched from north Georgia to somewhere near Four corners in Arizona for a family gathering in a record three days. It was the year that I saw Jesus meditating in the shade of an overpass in Texas; he was headed to the same place I was, so of course we gave him a ride. When we arrived at our destination, he borrowed my pocketknife; I had to find him to get it back. That summer in Arizona was so hot and so dry that we were not allowed cooking fires; so we prayed

for rain and it rained and rained (an rained) until the fire pit was a swimming hole.

After the party, after a slight change of perspective (about a quarter of an inch, squared) I woke up in Taos, New Mexico. Now, Taos is notable for two reasons: Mickey and Malory were married on the bridge outside of town and it is the location of the mysterious "Taos hum" (though, being honest, I didn't hear a thing.)

Our overpacked bus pulled up to what looked like a shanty house in the middle of the desert. A much smaller party materialized. I played the tambourine.

That was the first time I saw Grandma, sitting off to herself, minding the fire. After that night, she seemed to always be around. Her very presence was mysterious, yet friendly; powerful, yet gentle. She spoke little, her soft silence testifying to so many things, secret and known, that I would for too many years, refuse to understand.

A smallish Hopi woman, her features seasoned by time and sharpened by experience. Her frame was compact and her long hair, black as the desert night, had no end. Wisdom and love of a kind I was not familiar with at the time, radiated from her in waves. Long since a maiden, but hardly a crone, she was beautiful, she was Grandma. There was always a sense of reverence when she was there; a pervading awareness that the sacred was among us. There were about a dozen of us that stayed in desert that summer (individuals came and went, but the number stayed roughly the same); every one of us was different when she was there. Grandma made us better.

She loved us all, but seemed to often see us as children who just didn't seem to know any better. Thinking back, I guess we were. Most of us were mainly in it for the adventure, devoted but a little hazy on what exactly we were devoted to, a patch work of pseudo-spirituality holding the whole thing together like ethereal duct tape.

Grandma was solid, and at the same time, otherworldly. She was patient. Her silence was instructive, and her presence carried the weight of authority.

I remember one late night, smoking and talking, Grandma was there, quiet as usual. The conversation had turned ridiculous and somewhat vulgar (something about farts or similar nonsense). No one seemed to be paying much attention to the old lady by the fire. That is, until she exploded like a popping kernel of corn. Grandma burst to her feet. At her full height of



5'4", she looked down upon us all, menacingly, "When the conversation turns to shit, it's time to stop talking." with that, she flew out of the room.

'What's her problem?' I thought, but probably didn't speak. I don't think anyone did for a while.

But now I think I get it. "You can do anything," she was saying, "be anything, with this moment, with this miracle that is endless spirit under endless sky. So why do we choose to just turn it all to shit?"

One night, three of us were invited to Grandma's home; a little silver bullet trailer and a fire pit which sat on a small parcel of desert land, surrounded by a sea of white sagebrush.

We all chatted for a bit, the three of us puzzled about why we had been summoned. Night quickly enveloped us. Stars swarmed the sky like a nightfall of diamonds. We sat silently for a while, occasionally feeding the fire branches of sweet-smelling sage. The night was perfect but for what? What was it all about?

Grandma just smiled at me: that gentle knowing smile, stood, and walked into the shallow of the night until only her small silhouette was visible. I knew that she was waiting for me.

After too long, I went to her. We faced the darkness in silence.? Until a small voice spoke.

"Here we are," the sounds entered with the scent of sage. Soft. sacred. I was silent.

"...Grandmother can't open a circle. A man has to..."

Silence. Anxiety.

"I can guide you... whenever you're ready."

I pretended not to know what she was talking about.

We all sat around the fire until the black of night became the lavender of early morning, silent save for a few attempts at small talk that were quickly smothered by the weight of the night no longer tasting of sacred and sweet, but thick and stinking of fear and failure.

The other two were oblivious, seeming to be mainly focused on each other. Grandma had long since retired into her trailer. I decided to hitch back to the shanty, anger and exhaustion shrouding my true feelings of weakness and shame. I knew I

had let her down. I had been called upon but had remained silent.

I told myself that the old woman was just a feather short of a headdress. Just what the hell did she want from me? My child's pride, assuring me that I had no earthly idea what she was talking about.

But of course, I did. I knew that there were really no wrong words, no wrong tradition. In a world where everything is sacred, there is no wrong way to call the light I was called that night to be a man, take that first step. I was meant, not to just watch the fire, or tend the fire as Grandma was, but to be the fire; the light shining through, instead of just on me.

Afraid and embarrassed, worried that I would fail, I chose silence. I've maintained this stubborn silence for most of my life. Blaming the darkness for my own refusal to shine.

What would have happened, had I not allowed myself to be silenced by my fears and insecurities on that perfect desert night? If I had opened myself and opened that circle of light and allowed that wonderful woman - who was, at once earth, spirit, and time - to guide and teach me to see in myself what she saw in me; not just a pale reflection, but the light itself.

I'm sure she never knew the impact she had on my spiritual life. I only wish that I had really seen her, back then.

I see you now, grandma. I see you now.

### **The Matriarch by Eric Holliday**

My son and his mother recently moved to the East Coast in Connecticut. A small town called Wallingford. My son instantly informs me about a creepy old woman who lives next door to him. It doesn't make it any better that she has a yard full of cats.

I let my son vent about this old creepy cat woman. I told my 13-year-old, "She isn't creepy because she's old and has a lot of cats, she's creepy only because she doesn't resemble the average looking young or youthful human being that he's used to seeing and talking to." I gave him the notice that he too will get old one day, if he's blessed, and kids will think he's a grumpy old man, when indeed he's not. I instructed him to make friends with his new neighbor and understand her first before he judged a book by its cover.

My son listened. He started speaking and taking out her trash and watering her grass: things children did back in the normal

days before social media. The things normally done for elders in our community.

My son tells me she has a soft, sweet, and peaceful voice. And told him, she's a widow and liked her men how she likes her coffee: Dark Black. She informed my son that she had a big family, and she outlived all of them. She feels like she has bad luck. She stares at other families with deep pain in her heart, wondering why her life had to be so harsh. So many caskets and funerals. My son reminded her of her past grandchildren.

She really was lonely and wanted to have conversations with people. Even though she was 80+ years old, my teenage son was her new friend to be kind, helpful, and respectful with. She then unveiled the stories of all her mishaps, of how she was the matriarch of her family but also outlived them all.

My son longer looked at her as the creepy cat woman. Her name is Carrieann Sue, a beautiful lady who is in the ending years of her lifespan. Carrieann wanted harmonious conversations. Pure friendships, and to enjoy the rest of her time on Earth, so her soul could be soothed before she passed away.

Her evil states were cries for attention. The wrinkles all over her face reveal her journey and story of life without her speaking. Her silver studded earrings show she was once a diva. The hair out of place on the sides of her head shows life gets windy and could get and go all over the place. Who knew that Carrieann was the matriarch of a big family? A creepy cat lady would be disrespectful to her life and legacy! Long live Carriann Sue. The Matriarch.

### **Why not smile? By Todd Broxmeyer**

As a child I always smiled. I even smiled after working long days in the fields with my family. I smiled because of the love that surrounded me. Everyone we knew lived the way we lived. I was protected in a cocoon of youth and ignorance.

Then I grew a little older and started to see more things in this world. I smiled a little less. I learned of death, injustice, and the greed of others. All started to push my once infectious smile deeper inside of me.

As the pressures, worries, and stress increased, so did my frowns. The work with my family that was once fun, became serious. The years out in the harsh environment started to take a toll on my once beautiful features. Any sense of joy seeped out of me. People who have known me for years have never seen me smile.

Perhaps the saddest part of all this is I do not remember the feeling of joy that caused all my smiles. There was no one event, no defining moment. It was just a slow erosion of life's joy that stole my smile. Instead of looking out and seeing the beautiful sunrises and sunsets, I see my own mortality and mistakes.



### **What are we doing? By Anonymous**

What are we doing? We always try to play, like we are the most intelligent creature on this planet. But we are the only ones dumb enough to destroy it. Rather it's wildfires, flooding the drinking water with toxins, or just destroying the beautiful environment and bringing several species to extinction.

What we are doing as a species of this planet, we are the only ones that are destroying the beautiful planet we need to live. Are we that self-destructive as a people, that we don't care, we won't be the only cause of our own extinction but every living thing on this planet.

How selfish and miserable is that? How can you deny it because the people you vote for don't care about the environment. All they care about is paper money that holds no real value, you never seen any other creature on this planet fighting over shiny rocks, gold, silver, diamonds.

Killing and enslaving each other over things that have no real values. Creatures fight to stay alive, for food and shelter. We fight and kill each other just to add another comma to our bank accounts. Really think about the things you value to your new car, some new game system, what hold real value in this life, is your family.

Making sure kids and kids, kids, have a healthy planet to flourish on themselves. But how can we expect to leave them anything if we destroy everything we touch. With these meaningless wars

and violence. How can we really say, we are the most intelligent species on this planet and mean it.

Cause from our actions, it is. The farthest thing from the truth. Now the most destructive and suicidal yes, angry and spreads hate yes. Selfish and greedy, yes. But intelligent, no, because we give value to things that have no real meaning to a good life.

Most dogs live up to 15 years and they live it to the fullest, having fun and just doing what they do in their short time, but that 15 is happier and more fulfilling than most humans that lived to a hundred. We have got to stop all this destroying our planet and fighting with each other and come together. And quit giving value to things that have no real value.

### **Another Path in the Path of Life by Chrome**

The air is cool, and wet. The fog is so thick it smothers up the secrets of the forest. Where the smell of the dirt, moss and trees would have once filled up your nostrils overwhelmingly, there are now whiffs that you pick up as soon as you approach its source. Though the fog is white, down at the forest floor it's almost pitch black. The sun will not worm its rays into the cracks of the canopy and burrow through the fog until almost noon. The shroud of fog seems to cut off all sound as well, but rather it's because nothing dares stir within it. The only sense left to really hear is touch and the moisture has made everything soft. The soil squishes underfoot, and the moss-covered tree bark is likely a sturdy wet sponge. The dark, quiet womb of the forest draws you delicately into its supple flesh.

Three edges of a hill rise out of the forest, and the fog rushes up around them, making them seem as if by magic. The base of the hills swapped in fog, yet light begins to diffuse here; as the tree covers has dwindled. Approaching the hill is like having the womb release you from its grasp; the purse of the forest slackens with a sigh. The white air giving you sight also beckons you up the hill with it.

You climb up, as if a newborn crawling to its mother's breast. The rocky soil is slightly under you, but it does not reject you. The trees of the hillside, though smaller and sparser than the womb, lay out a firmament which guides you ascent.

At the peak, the fog is lifted and the view is bared for you to suckle. Though the world is vast, the early dawn gives only the glimpse of where you came from to sip on. Even as the day rises, your world view shall not dine upon the whole Earth. The maturity of the afternoon is not far from the morning's birth.

In many places, at different times, the sun shall be eclipsed by the darkness of the moon. Though the night has not yet come, caution is advised; you were not born for the darkness. Some may not find their footing and slide back to the forest floor. Despair is now in store, for the sun has hardened its supple flesh. Rather than return to the womb, you are imprisoned; entombed.

This prison is nothing like what you knew this morning. The air is parched, for the fog has lifted and cycled to another generation. The scents of the forest hit you full blast: the dirt, moss and trees, but also the blood of the freshly killed deer, the scent markings of the territorial mountain lion, and the pilfered decay of scavengers. The speckled darkness under the trees is somehow much more intimidating than the cool blind shroud of dawn. A cacophony of sound rattles you: the hammering of woodpeckers, the shriek of prey, the crashing potential of trees collapsed( no longer sturdy sponges) The touch of the forest is now rough and jagged. The soil is baked firm, and rocks and bone shards pierce your feet. This loud, blinding tomb of the forest is your punishment, and it is yours to toil and suffer to fruition. Imprisonment is just another path in the circle of life.

### **First Fires by Earl W. Cox**

It's been twenty-three years, but this month's picture stirred memories long buried; from when I had moved to Rural Missouri, in the heart of the Ozarks, to live with a disabled friend of mine. Though we only lived about ten miles outside of town, it was our morning ritual to drive to the country store, four miles away; for morning coffee, and news from around the local area.

One beautiful morning, we decided to go into town after we left the store. As my friend's rusted old farm truck meandered down the two-lane country road; I looked off into the distance and casually asked my friend, "What's that cloud over there?" On such a sunny day, it seemed so unusual to see strangely shaped clouds only a couple of miles distant. "Any rain today?" I asked. "No," he replied, slowing the truck down to 25 MPH, then to 15 MPH. "I don't think those are rain clouds," he finally added hesitantly. It was then that we realized the clouds were rising and getting thicker as we got closer.

"Oh, no!" My friend suddenly exclaimed, his face showing intense worry, adding, "Those aren't storm clouds. Someone's field is on fire." He sped up, pushing the old truck up to 70 MPH. He shouted, "Hold on, bud!"; then took a hard left turn onto a gravel-covered road, going even faster.

"Slow down a bit, old man," I teased only half-jokingly, as we bounced side to side. The old truck had no suspension. At this speed, even the brakes were problematic at best. "We certainly don't want to become 'roadkill'. Be careful!" I implored more seriously than intended, adding, "Over there, on the right, John."

"I see it," he replied nervously. I suddenly realized what a potentially dangerous situation we were driving into. "That's quite a fire," I replied, staring at what looked like a two-acre fire, next to a large strand of trees. Currently being "fought" only by an old farmer, every bit John's age, and his elderly wife. "We're at a tremendous disadvantage here, John. Only four of us." I could easily tell we were both more than a little bit scared.

"That wind picks up, we're in real trouble," John replied, mustering his courage. Turning, he shouted to the old farmer, "You all need some help?"

"Thanks," replied the older man, "Boys are both trying to round up the volunteer fire brigade in town. Girls are off for the weekend at friends." Waving at the fire, he added, "That fire hits the strand, we'll be in real trouble."

"Yup," replied John. A man of few words. "Let's do this." Looking at me, he added, "You best hang back. Not quite your usual pastime."

"Let's do this," I said, grabbing a rake and a water-soaked scarf for my face.

For the next 75 minutes, which seemed like an entire lifetime, the four of us took turns fighting the fire, in groups of three. My first break was supposed to be fourth; being the youngest, at 42. Instead, after the farmer and his wife each took five-minute breaks, John tapped me out next, shouting, "You're too close. Take five."

I've never felt anything so deadly in my life. As the fire brigade finally pulled up, thirty minutes later, flames shot into the strand. I watched the farmer directing them to the trees, as the rest of us, now including the farmer's two teenage sons, continued to battle the field. Only with their timely intervention did we finally manage to defeat both fires. Thank God they showed up when they did.

A couple years later, having eventually relocated to Colorado, I watched in awe as a massive fire blazed for days up in the mountains. One of our ladies from work nearly lost her life, while volunteering to take food and water to the fire fighters. She told us how a two-foot round fireball came directly at her. One of the firemen truly saved her life, knocking her to the ground and

shielding her with his fire coat. Thank god he was there! Both of them, him and god.

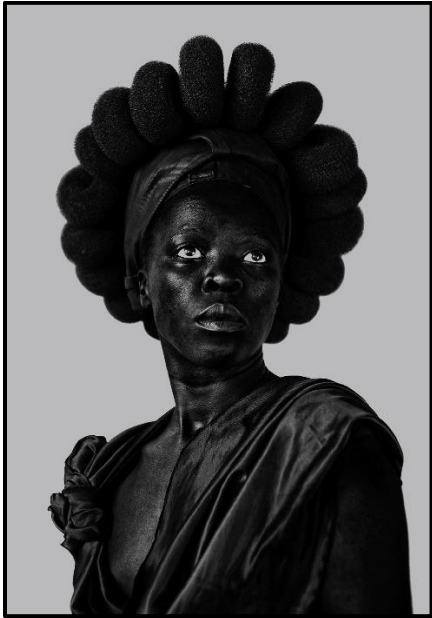
My hat goes off to the thousands of brave men and women across this vast country who fight fires. Both residential and commercial, as well as industrial, and especially those in our nation's forests. These men and women, and those who support them; risk their lives day in and day out, for a paycheck that in no way possible, compensates them for their actions or their losses. Fire-related injuries are some of the most horrific a person can receive. Healing often takes months, while the mental trauma can last for years, or a lifetime.

(Not surprisingly, after John and my efforts, neither of us could ever again spend our own money, buying coffee or meals; either at the Country Store, nor anywhere else in town. Though unnecessary, yet appreciated, both the old farmer and his wife took care of us after that fire.)

## **2AM at Winn-Dixie by Catherine LaFleur**

"Ma'am, can I help you with something?" The fresh-faced employee asked me. Startled, I realize I've been blocking the aisle holding the freezer door open too long. "I'll take these!" Beaming brightly into his freckled face as I grab a random stack of Lean Cuisine dinners for mother and me. Iris DeMent sings cheerfully through my earbuds, 'Go ahead and go home'. My list is forgotten back at the house. Doesn't matter much, I stroll with a bright red cart up one aisle and down the other. I've been shopping for my parents for weeks now. There isn't much variation to the invalid diet the hospice nurse gave us. Bread, Quaker Oats, Cream of Wheat, Campbell's Chicken Soup - stars not noodles, oyster crackers, Jello, Ensure French Vanilla flavor, just the usual items. I contemplate the bananas wondering if my father can stomach a mashed one. 2A.M. is the best time for grocery shopping. It's unlikely I will run into concerned friends and neighbors. The store employees don't care if I use the jumbo-sized box of Kleenex stashed in the front of my cart as long as it gets purchased at the cashier before I leave. Silent weeping is appreciated. Winn Dixie wants shopping to be a pleasure but for me these tiny grocery escapes are a catharsis. I pull some travel magazines from the rack at the entrance to the pharmacy section. One cover, a misty mountain side, reminds me of father's favorite poem, "the fog creeps in on little cat feet." His favorite to recite sitting on the porch at Balsam Mountain. Misty fog tiptoeing delicately over the ridge and cloaking everything in a soft veil. At the counter, the bored clerk waits for me to hand over the prescriptions. Where are they? I rummage in my purse frantically as my eyes water. "Catherine," I look behind me into the sympathetic eyes

of Mrs. Hitchcock, my parents next door neighbor. "Are you alright, honey? Can I do anything for you?" "I'm okay, thanks!" Closing my purse, I leave the cart. My father won't need any of this food or medicine. He died yesterday.



*"Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness" by Zanele Muholi*

### **America is Black by Karla Wooten**

My black is beautiful, it is me. Give me liberty or give me death is what this photo to me says. This lady has her hair like the Statue of Liberty in my mind she is saying America is Black like me. The country as a whole is a melting pot, it was built on the back of Black men and Black people from the White House to Harvard, America the home of the Brave, the land of the Free, America was built on Black people who look like me.

As a Black woman who has curves and a face that at 50 still stops traffic, I know that my Black is beautiful. I am phenomenal and fearfully and wonderfully made, we are as Black women every delicious awe inspiring and gorgeous shade. Black is beautiful in all of it's shades and tones from Butter Pecan Tan to the darkest chocolate, God made us every color of the rainbow and every color that He created is beautiful. I love my hair, I love my nose, I love my Mouth, I love my eyebrows, I love my face, I love my body with all of it's curves that are round and tight and high, I love the laughter that I express that fills the Earth, the Moon, The Universe and the skies with Joy as I laugh with delight. My Black is beautiful, I am a reflection of my Legacy. My Black is Beautiful I am a reflection of my ancestry. All of humanity that lives on the Earth is one chromosome from being Black like me, we all live beneath our skins as one dynamic spiritual force of unity. Some people may see my fascination with my skin color as an oddity but all I see is the wonderful

dynamic that is my Beauty. I know that I was once and still am a descendant of Kings and Queens from the Motherland-Africa, the cradle of Civilization and all of humanity. I was once a Queen and I am still a Queen, in fact I am and was an Empress and what does that make me? It makes me and every Black woman a Queen of Queens.

### **The New Lady Liberty by Chrome**

She stands proud and unashamed. She looks up, towards the future, with stern focus; her expression is not twisted in happiness, sadness, or anger. Her features are well-crafted, and have an appearance like a smooth, polished ebony statue. Her hair is styled like some bounty of fruit, or a newly designed halo. She wears a simple robe tied in a large knot in front of the right soldier. The robe is open in the front, and nearly exposes her bosom. This is done as a statement of her womanhood; there is no sexuality in it. Her aura is of a woman free to be who she is.

When the French artist who created the Statue of Liberty sought his muse, he likely never considered a woman like this. Yet, who is to say this woman could not be Lady Liberty? To generations of African Americans - especially those who have been incarcerated- representation and freedom have always been issues. A woman like her would make a fine symbol of freedom, an apt Lady Liberty, to many of them. Perhaps some prisoners, right now, are building a statue of her likeness as the new Lady Liberty.

### **Rich By Demacian Middleton**

All it took was for her to wear that black silk shirt her mother got her. The man sitting by the window of the coffee shop couldn't keep his eyes off her, and when she went inside, he sprang from his seat. He complimented her an uncomfortable amount of times, telling her how well the black went with her rich skin. He told her he was a scout looking for new modeling talent, and needed diversity. Aside from her mother, she'd never been complimented on her skin, so this made her wary of this new praise. After giving her a business card and showing her his work, she agreed to a shoot at a studio downtown.

The experience was extraordinary. She was treated like an A-lister, and her stylist created masterpieces with her natural hair. The wardrobe was exquisite, every outfit giving more emphasis to her vibrant skin. Soon she was doing shoots all over the country, then all over the world. From skin care commercials to perfume ads- everyone wanted her. But it all came at a price. With every photo shoot came more connections, and with more



connections meant more invitations, and with every invitation came the compulsion to please the people. Her life became a loop of shoots and parties, that after late nights resulted in methods to keep going. The chase for uppers and downers led her to develop a willingness to participate in more demeaning acts.

She had to keep her foot on the gas in the fast lane, letting people do with her as they pleased. Even after all of the meltdowns and a couple overdoses, she pushed herself to every shoot. They'd dress her up in black silk that made her rich skin glow, and do wonders to her hair, but the truth of pain and suffering will always show.

The gateway to the tattered soul:

The eyes...

### **Ladies Both Noble and Jolly by Catherine LaFleur**

'Tis I, your faithful correspondent, reporting directly from the bowels of Camp Prisonery Land. How you like my friends, Vicki H. and Michele L.? These ladies are part of my writer's cohort with Exchange for Change. Everyday I get to spend time with them. Don't be jealous! Because I hang out with these writers, my own writing has improved by leaps and bounds. Believe me that I get both praise and criticism from them. Hard criticism. They are seven times more charming and witty in person than they appear in writing. Among friends, sharing is caring. Which leads to my next question. Do any of you Prisoner Express Campers have friends who should be writing essays for Gary and his crew? There is plenty of room on the big comfy PE couch for all of us. We regulars should be dragging other writers by the scruff of the neck if necessary to the PE welcome mat. Be persuasive, charming, and firm. Writing is about changing hearts and minds: yours, mine, the world's. All of us are building Prisoner Express story by story. It's reach is farther than we can ever know. Would it surprise you to know that Sheila Labarre and I did time together here at Camp Prisonery Land? More than ten years of friendship and encouraging each other produced some amazing essays. Now that she has transferred back to her home state in New England, Prisoner Express has traveled with her. There are many other writers Prisoner Express has encouraged and given voice to here at Camp Prisonery Land: Marina Bueno, Sandy Sysyn, Cody Bruce, Cynthia Castoro, Leeann Parker, and Quontesha Worlds. Perhaps they will write for all of us again or not. What I can tell you is this, writing changed them. Whether it was a single piece or many. Your

essays and stories change us all. Keep writing PE Campers! And for Nate. First, you may address me by my first name. Second, I have long been a fan of your work through both Prisoner Express and LexisNexis. You have broken my heart reading some of your personal legal travails. Third, about the "bad boy lifers". It was meant to be funny. I passed it around first to three of my bad boy lifer writing friends in other states: Texas, California, Maine. However, I do see how it could come off as offensive and hurtful. A thousand apologies, please forgive me. James, your toll bridge doesn't accept my quarters. GPS needs recalculation.

### **By Sam Sudduth**

I come from a long lineage of royalty, the former kings and queens of many of today's African nations. Even though these kingdoms have been greatly reduced, the memories of my heritage will never be forgotten. My family's forefathers reigned in the once powerful Buganda Kingdom, in what is now the Republic of Uganda. The traditional kingdom, including my family's Buganda Kingdom, were abolished by the British in 1967 and merged into the Commonwealth of Nations of the united kingdom of Great Britain,

My grandfather once reigned as king, passing the title of prince to my father, ultimately making me a princess. That title means nothing in the world today, but in my heart and mind I will always be a crown princess of the Buganda Kingdom. My mother, a princess by marriage, and I are all that is left of my family. Our heritage has made us proud and strong women today. We persevere!

Once President Yoweri Museveni took power as Head of State and Government of Uganda in 1986, many conditions in the country improved. He and his government quasi-"restored" the former traditional monarchies, including my family's Buganda Kingdom, in 1993. Although, this was done for the monarchies to serve a nominal ceremonial purpose only, it still gave my mother and I cause for celebration. In a pseudo-capacity, mother became queen and I became crown princess of the Buganda Kingdom once again. The Buganda people rejoiced again! We gained a renewed sense of pride for our family, and our kingdom and its people.

So I still wear my crown and hold my head high in reverence, forever a Ugandan, but more importantly as a princess of the Buganda Kingdom.

## Upcoming Picture Themes



**Due 4/1/24**



**Due 5/1/24**



**Due 6/1/24**



**Due 7/1/24**



**Due 8/1/24**



**Due 9/1/24**



**Due 10/1/24**



**Due 11/1/24**

## Final Notes

### From Sophie:

*Hello everyone! I just want to jump in and say a quick hello. My name is Sophie, and I'm the assistant director of the Alternatives Library, here where Prisoner Express lives and operates – I work mostly with the book collections here, and with the library itself. If you've been a part of Prisoner Express for a while, you may remember me from my work with the Journal project or with the bookroom, many years ago. It's been a pleasure to watch Prisoner Express grow and evolve throughout the years, and I'm sending everyone my best and warmest wishes.*

***I also want to reach out with a specific call to those who are located in women's prisons and women's facilities.*** Gary and I have been putting together a program that sends books to the libraries in women's facilities: often we receive donations of books that are oriented around women's issues or women's voices -- books that we think may be particularly helpful to communities of women (and those who identify). If you are in a women's facility and feel that your library could use such donations, please feel free to pass our information along, or be in touch with us directly! You can reach me by sending mail to "Sophie at PE," at our normal mailing address -- we appreciate any thoughts or recommendations, and are happy to have these books find a home. Thanks to all, and be well. – Sophie

### From Lee:

Hi, all! I'm Lee – the new Volunteer and Outreach Coordinator for Prisoner Express and the Alternatives Library. I've only been working here since early February, but can already tell it was a great decision. Your letters make it clear how much enjoyment, enrichment, and relief our programs provide for you, and I'm honored to support them however I can.

Gary asked me to give you a brief overview of my role and myself, so here it is! As Volunteer and Outreach Coordinator, my focus will mainly be communicating with folks on the outside. I'll recruit volunteers to write you letters, find gallery spaces that would like to host your artwork, plan events to show off all this good work to the community, and so on. Basically, I'm the PE hype-man, and you all make my job easy. The quality of work you send us is outstanding – as soon as people read or see it, they want to get involved!

I have too many hobbies to list, but the big three are Medievalist, Poet, and Clown. Here are a few unsolicited fun facts about

medieval Britain! 1) There were trans people back then. 2) Until very recently, it was considered immoral to charge interest on a loan. 3) The medieval Church hated clowns because whenever a traveling troupe came to town, a bunch of people would skip Mass to watch the show. (I can't imagine the priest was juggling swords, so can you blame them?)

Thanks so much for having me here. Gary, Sophie, and the students are all a joy to work with, and I'm looking forward to getting to know you all better through your writing. One last note: **If you have friends or loved ones on the outside who would like to receive the newsletter or get involved in other ways, they can reach us at [prisonerexpress@gmail.com](mailto:prisonerexpress@gmail.com).**

Peace and solidarity – Lee



Art by Steve Marquez

### From Gary:

Prisoner Express was originally created to benefit all of you, so it has been a pleasant surprise to see how enriching it has been for the program volunteers, especially the students who participate in this program. They enjoy writing to you and learning about your lives and experiences through your journals, poetry, and art. They are usually thrilled when they get a letter back from you. These interactions are breaking down barriers, and everyone's humanity shines through. We are so much more alike than different. The stresses and strains of life cause some



of us to adopt aberrant behavior, but most of us recognize goodness, and are attracted to it. Your good nature will naturally emerge if you feel safe and secure. I understand prison is not meant to cultivate that good nature and I am sorry that our national policy does not recognize the power of care, concern, and respect. The fact that Donald Trump has so many supporters gives us a glimpse as to how many people are focused on retribution, anger, and revenge. It speaks to the same imbalances in society as you experience in the prison environment; it is just more subtle and less obvious in the free world. For me, the crux of societies' problems is the wealth disparity in the world. If that is not addressed our problems will get magnified. Underneath most social issues is the movement and control of wealth. Of course, some folks like to set up diversionary issues to hide that fact, so they create culture wars about sexuality, gender, or reproductive rights, but often those same folks are exposed as hypocrites because they do what they want rather than follow the rules they make for others.

This program is about finding an outlet creative expression that can bring you personal satisfaction, internal calm, and balance. We create it up as we go along, especially by paying attention to the feedback your letters provide. If you have some insight as to how we can more effectively help you, both individually or collectively, send in your suggestions. We are all on the same side. The side that wants goodness, care and concern to rule the day. The side that has you spreading kindness and concern to those around you. The side that honors the golden rule of treating others as we want to be treated. There is enough for everyone if we could learn the value of sharing vs. hoarding. Fear drives people to hoard, and the more we allow wealth inequality to dominate our society, the more fear is generated. Those of you who have been participating for a while know I used to rant even more about the crazy bald head politics that rule the day. Lately I have not done that, but today I want you to know a little more about how I feel and what I value.

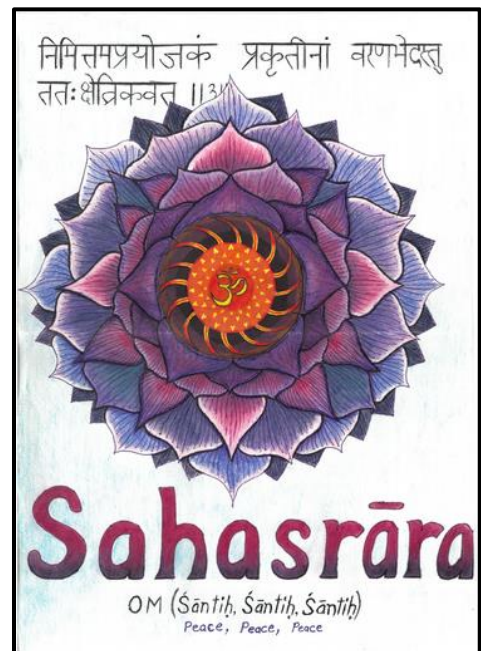
I hope our mail gets through. We are doing the best we can with what we got and what we know. For years I thought if I was only smarter, I could figure out the mailing system, but I have realized this is a bigger issue than me, and that I will keep plugging along and not let the mail problems overwhelm me. I am glad I have found all of you to correspond with and hope you know that there are hundreds of people passing through the library to help create all that we do at PE. Some volunteers might spend 1/2 hour writing a letter and never come back, and others have volunteered for years and keep coming back. Together all of us, including you, make a team, and I am a firm believer that this team is greater than the sum of its parts.

I am still trying to figure out how we might get a PE app created for your tablets, but it is no simple task. Creating the app is one issue, but then figuring out all the various tablet providers and how to get them to carry the app is another.

Thank you for your participation. Till next time- Gary



Art by Matthew Ellington



Art by David Lee Wilson

# Spring 2024 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. **Checks should be made out to CTA/PE.**

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 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**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.

**Poetry Project** – Please send me the next Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 30. I understand that to receive the anthology I am required to submit a poem for consideration in the anthology.

**Building Trades Primer** -- Learn about building site management and organization from a construction professional.

**Advanced Climate Change Packet: Our Heating Planet** – Educate yourself and gain a deeper understanding of the changing climate and its effects on all beings.

**Body Weight Fitness** – Use your body weight to develop an effective fitness routine.

**Human Development** – Come learn the principles of human development and see what insights it provides into your own perception of your life and your place in the world.

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

**Puzzles** – Send me a booklet of puzzles and brainteasers.

**Rattle Mag** – Send me a new issue of Rattle magazine [Note: Limited to first 500 responses.]

**Meditation** – Send the meditation packet including a copy of Pema Chodron's book on Meditation.

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

**Paper Folding** – Learn to create animals and other shapes by folding paper.

**Miscellaneous Essays** – Come explore the selection of essays that were submitted to the program, that Dayanara thought would be worth a read.



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

Electronic Service Requested

# Prisoner Express News

## Winter 2024

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 and the scope of our programs

## Publication Direct from Publisher

*Art by Jerome Washington*

