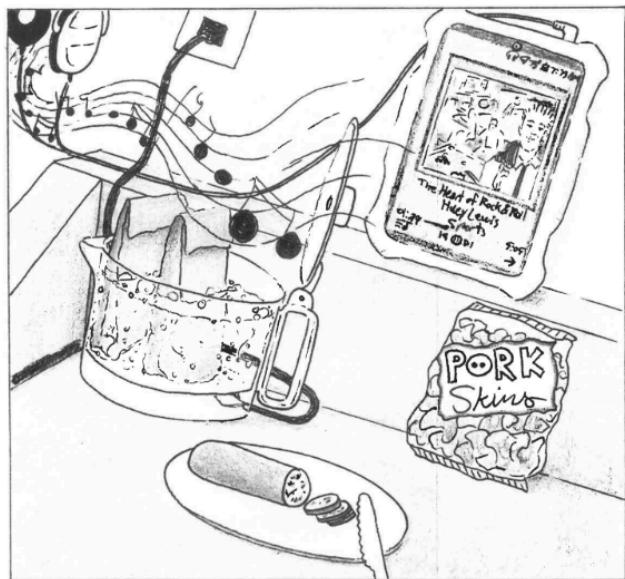


Prisoner Express Newsletter

Summer/Fall 2025



Leo Cardez

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From the Director

It's a pleasure for me to begin constructing a PE News. There are always so many inquiries that come in between newsletters and I don't have the resources to reply to individuals. The newsletter is my chance to answer some questions and update you on what's available to you as PE participants. I appreciate all of you who participate in giving life to this project.

I am Gary and I began Prisoner Express in 2004 from a single letter from Danni in Texas asking for books. The power of his letter inspired me many years ago, and the power of your words are felt today by all of the volunteers who read and view the stories, poems, journals, and art you share.

The Prisoner Express Newsletter began because so many of you had such interesting writing and art to offer; we at PE saw its importance and recognized an opportunity for community building by sharing some of that impactful work back out with all of you.

You are not alone in your experiences of incarceration. Often the systemic issues you face in everyday living will cause you to feel lost, broken, and unmoored. When you read the words of others also dealing with restrictions and loss, it becomes clear to many that you are not individually broken, but rather feel crushed by a system that can be difficult, at best, to navigate. Whether we are talking about prison or modern society, it is the same. In free world society we are in a pressure cooker of some kind and don't know how we got there. In prison it is often clearer how you got there and the pressure you live under is more intense. It is an honest assessment of a living situation that relies on individual separation and despair to move forward.

This is where PE steps up. We recognize the intense pressure you live under and while we can't change the outside environment you live in, we can offer some fun ways to create meaningful activity in your day and gain skills that will help you in the present and future. We want to engage your mind, body, and spirit and we offer a variety of educational packets that you can sign up for. The packets are described later in the newsletter and there is a signup sheet at the end of the newsletter. We ask that you write to us or send a writing submission or response at least once every six months to keep your membership active. Any mail or message from you is sufficient to keep you enrolled. You don't need to ask.

As we all know, things continue to change in the world and also here at PE. Adjusting to change is key. Here are some things we are up against. I want to apologize to anyone who has waited an extra-long time for a mailing or book package. Our staffing shortage issues this summer have educated us as to how we have to reorganize our scheduled mailings to all of you to better reflect our capacity to follow through.

Printing costs have gone up 4x. In order to print our programs at a price we can afford, they need to be sent to the printer in one fell swoop. Last cycle I was quoted a price of \$24,000 just for printing the Spring '25 distance learning programs. By bundling them I got it down to \$6,000 which to me is still too much. But now I can't get things printed until I have every packet done. I order as many as I need and a few extra, but once they are mailed, I don't have any more. If you are reading this for the first time and it is late November 2025 or after, please bear with us as it might be too late to register for the programs offered in this cycle. Feel free to write and ask because at times mailings are delayed and you might still get it, but it is a bit of a long shot. Please know that if you miss the packet mailing, you will still be on the list to receive the next newsletter.

We send our mail by bulk mail rates. Anything else would be prohibitive. Mailing costs are also on the rise. The only thing not climbing right now is donations, though we are very grateful for those we do receive. Donated funds go to postage, printing, and supplies like labels, paper, ink etc. Just so you know, no one at PE is paid with any of the money we raise. PE is a program of the Durland Alternatives Library, and the library pays the salary of myself and Jen. We run the PE program when we are not doing our

regular library work. Our student workers are funded through the Federal Work Study program. We also have many people volunteering to keep the program moving forward, especially when school is in session. Our hired student workers and many volunteers are gone in the summer, and that is why we fall behind. As September rolls around, our staff and volunteers return.

We wish we could reply to every individual who writes, but when we send packets to individuals, it is often the cost of mailing 5 packets by bulk mail. We protect our ability to mail to all of you by not using our funds to respond to every individual request. If I could wave a magic wand, of course we would have the resources to do everything, but for now we offer PE services to anyone who cares to join us given these limitations.

It used to be we had one address for each of you, but now many of you have two addresses, and depending on the state or which for-profit communication company contracts with your facility to provide tablets or electronically scan your mail, there are different rules for how to get mail to you. One state's rules can make mail to another state ineligible for delivery. We serve folks in county, state, and federal facilities, so there is no consistency. We do the best we can but are fairly toothless against censorship. We do our best to comply with every rule we know, so you get our mail. Even with the best of intent there are lots of reasons why you might not get mail from us. Please update us as to any moves you make. Bulk mail and media mail do not follow you when you are moved.

I know many of you receive meaningful letters from PE volunteers who read the work you submit. If you receive a letter from a PE volunteer, please note their ID number, and if you respond, write their name and number on the envelope, so we can get your letter to the intended recipient. It is okay to put letters for more than one person in an envelope; just be sure to include all the numbers on the outside of the envelope.

If you don't hear from us, write! As of now we do not plan to go away. Sometimes folks write and ask us about a writing they submitted years ago. I must confess that we are stuffed with paper and we do not have the resources to archive all the submissions we receive. Our mission is more to spur your own individual creativity and to help you find purpose and meaning in everyday life than it is to be a

historical record of everything written and submitted. We still digitally archive portions of your journal, poetry, and art submissions on our website, PrisonerExpress.org, so they can be shared with readers; usually, we display work from the last two years.

Along those lines, I want to make you aware of The American Prison Writing Archive (APWA), an organization that is looking for essays about direct experience with the U.S. prison system to help grow their online archive. Feel free to contact them with your questions and they will send you a Permissions-Questionnaire form.

Call for Essays

The American Prison Writing Archive (APWA) is a growing public, internet-based collection of non-fiction writing about direct experience with the U.S. prison system. Anyone who has been incarcerated or has volunteered inside can send handwritten or typed pieces. All writing skill levels are welcome. 5,000 word limit.

Visit us at: PRISONWITNESS.ORG

We read and respond to all writing. No reading fees or SASE required. A signed Permissions-Questionnaire (PO) form is required for writing to be included in the APWA. For more information, or to receive our PO form, please write to:



American Prison Writing Archive
Johns Hopkins University
3400 N. Charles St.
Baltimore, MD 21218

Fall 2025 Programs

Many of you reading this are new to Prisoner Express. This section of the newsletter will describe the next cycle of programs and packets we are offering. Sign up for any of the packets you want, but please only sign up for the things you will actually do. It always comes down to the cost of postage and printing. I used to raise funds from selling used books, but it is not as lucrative as it once was, and I have to be resourceful in finding funds to underwrite the costs. Except for the Expedited Book Program, all programs are free and open to all.

Arts and Crafts Packet

Since we began PE in 2004 we have included an art component. Now we are combining efforts from a number of contributors focused on inspiring you to explore the world of art, where you can find freedom and meaning. This art packet will include Treacy's **ARTknows**; a section

on **Creating Collages**; and another fun **Art Expression** collection of art facts, tips, and assignments created by our new partner, the members of **Art Beyond Cornell**. They are organizing a show of PE artists this November at Cornell. Send in any artwork you'd like to be considered for the show.



Robby Waddle

Creative Writing Packet

The Creative Writing Packet is a compilation of a number of PE initiatives. Some are ongoing and others are one-of-a-kind experiences. First up is **Journaling**. You'll hear about how and why to keep a journal from Danish (pronounced DAH-nish), a student who describes how journal writing helped her survive her experience growing up in war-torn Afghanistan, and how writing also helps her process her feelings about the experience now that she has made it to America.

This packet will also contain a **Writing with Friends** section compiled by Catherine LaFleur. Any longtime member of PE has been delighted with Catherine's theme essays and in this lesson, she will peel the curtain away and share writing and publishing tips and strategies.

From Catherine: Hello Fellow Writers! Prisoner Express is bringing an exciting new opportunity. Writing with Friends is part of a new creative writing packet written by us and for us. Writing with Friends will bring exercises and tips you can complete solo or share with a group. We will also

share information on publishing opportunities. Have you been published or won any awards? Do you have a favorite writing exercise? Want to share ideas on your writing process? What does your writing community look like? Please share your ideas. Responses may be sent to Prisoner Express, Writing with Friends, P.O Box 6556, Ithaca, NY 14851.

Also in this packet will be a selection of **Miscellaneous Essays**. These are writings submitted by PE members that aren't necessarily written as part of or in response to any of our ongoing programs. We get a lot of these! A team of students and volunteers goes through all the unsolicited writing and selects submissions to include in this packet. You never know who or what writing will be included. Our hope is that you will find something you connect with, learn from, or that inspires.

Developing Your Mind and Body Packet

The lessons in this packet seek to provide information to strengthen your mind and body. This packet will include **Let's Learn Spanish**, a lesson originally created 5 or so years ago by Hope, a former PE worker. Hope has gone on to graduate law school and I believe her exposure to all of you through the PE program will influence her legal career. This packet received high praise when it was first printed, and it has been asked for by many of you over the years.

Additionally, this packet will have a **bilingual lesson** (Spanish and English). This is a good choice for Spanish-speakers as well as anyone who wants to learn a new language; if you only speak Spanish, you will have a chance to see how it is translated and the same will be true for those who only speak English. Yazmin, who created our previous bilingual packet, will take on some historical and political issues in this lesson. Here is what she has to say:

Hello everyone! It's Yazmin. I'd like to present you all my new upcoming packet centered on **the History of the United States-Mexico Border**. I'll be covering a range of topics, including treaties, law, migration, geography, and current politics (to name a few). This packet will also be bilingual, featuring a Spanish translation of the entire packet. I aim to make language learning accessible, immersive,

and enjoyable for all of you, and I see this as a great steppingstone. If you have any interest in learning Spanish (or English) and have an interest in U.S.-Mexico relations, this packet might be the one for you!

¡Hola a todos! Soy Yazmin. Les presento mi nuevo paquete, centrado en la **Historia de la Frontera entre Estados Unidos y México**. Abarcaré diversos temas, como tratados, derecho, migración, geografía y política actual (por nombrar algunos). Este paquete también será bilingüe e incluirá una traducción completa al español. Mi objetivo es que el aprendizaje del idioma sea accesible, inmersivo y agradable para todos ustedes, y lo considero un gran paso adelante. Si les interesa aprender español (o inglés) y las relaciones entre Estados Unidos y México, ¡este paquete podría ser ideal para ustedes!

The Developing Your Mind and Body Packet will also include some **Physical and Mental Exercise** routines to make you stronger and calmer and hopefully some breathing techniques that can help you navigate challenging circumstances. There may be more to add to this packet as our student workers and volunteers return.

Expedited Book Program

Before PE even had a name we started as a simple book mailing program, mailing customized packages of books to whoever requested them. The more we mailed, the more requests we received, until we had 1000+ people waiting for books. We did not have the funds to mail them and that was frustrating. We adapted by asking for \$4 contributions from you to help offset the postage cost.

In some states you are allowed to send stamps and if that is the case you can send the donation that way. **IMPORTANT: If you send a check, please make it out to CTA/DAL or we will not be able to deposit it.**

If you do sign up for the book program and don't send funds, please know that we most likely will not be able to accommodate your request.

If you write directly, please send us a list of the types of books you'd like. A typical package will have 4 to 8 books chosen for you from our ever-changing collection. You can ask for specific titles and authors but mostly we ask for subjects and genres so we can make the best match

possible. This work is done by volunteers and sometimes it takes a while for us to fill your order. Please let us know as many different types of books as possible as it helps us make a good match. If I can't make a good match the first time through, I set the letter aside and hope some books show up that match the request. If upon a second try, I can't match you up, I do my best to send you something I think you will like. If this doesn't sound like it would be acceptable to you - i.e., if you're only looking for very specific books - *please do not sign up for this program*. I think we do a very good job at sending interesting books, but I don't want anyone to feel they were misled or didn't get exactly what they asked for.

You can also have friends or family contact us. If you have a family member contact us, be sure they know about the \$4 contribution and the types of books you like.

Please note that this is our only program where we ask for a donation to participate. The rest of our offerings are open to all, though sometimes there are limitations to how many people can sign up for certain programs.

Figuring Things Out Packet

Things need to be figured out. For many of you your biggest priority is understanding the legal system. A Cornell University Law librarian has agreed to oversee the creation of a series of lessons on the legal system and legal research. Each lesson will stand alone and if you collect them all, you will have a primer on the American Legal system.

In this packet:

Understanding Legal Documents

This educational program builds upon the prior legal educational program titled "Introduction to the American Legal System and Legal Research" but is also a standalone packet that can be used independently. This packet broadly covers basic legal terminology (and includes a glossary of some legal terms) and provides an overview of basic legal documents such as contracts, court documents, legal citations, and reading case law. Two law students worked together to create this packet, and they hope you will find it to be a useful introduction to understanding basic legal documents and that you will reference this information with other sources you have access to in your law library or tablet, such as treatises, practice guides, and legal encyclopedias. If you have thoughts you'd like to share with the law students about this packet, or if you have thoughts about future legal education topics you'd like to see covered, you can write to me at Prisoner Express: Law Librarian, volunteer number 1328.

The Figuring Things Out packet will also contain our **Chess Newsletter** with strategies, puzzles, and information on famous chess players, and a **Puzzles & Games** section with pen & paper games, Sudokus, mazes, and other challenging puzzles to keep you going.

Inner Work/Outer Expression

This packet focuses on inner exploration and outward creative expression. It will include **Rattle Magazine & Poetry** as well as a section on **Spirituality, Meditation, and Recovery Journeys**.

The mailing includes two books: a new copy of Rattle poetry quarterly and a book by Pema Chodron. Every 6 months the editor of



Rattle, Tim, selects an edition he thinks you'll enjoy and sends us 500 copies to distribute. We have a similar arrangement with the Pema Chodron Foundation. Pema is a bestselling author, and a practicing Buddhist Nun and her books help us explore a deeper side of ourselves. We have mailed many Pema books through this project, and I can see from the responses that these books are easy to understand and provide deep and powerful insights for many of you.

Here is a description of Pema's book *The Places That Scare You* that will be sent this cycle: *We always have a choice, Pema teaches: We can let the circumstances of our lives harden us and make us increasingly resentful and afraid, or we can let them soften us and make us kinder. Here Pema provides the tools to deal with the problems and difficulties that life throws our way. This wisdom is always available to us, she teaches, but we usually block it with habitual patterns rooted in fear. Beyond that fear lies a state of openheartedness and tenderness. This book teaches us how to awaken our basic goodness and connect with others; to accept ourselves and others complete with faults and imperfections, and to stay in the present moment by seeing through the strategies of ego that cause us to resist life as it is.*

The Inner Work/Outer Expression packet will include additional information on **creating poetry**; **Tara's meditation instruction** and her offer to take refuge from afar with Garchen Rinpoche; and **explorations of spirituality and recovery**.



Louis Delgado

Poetry Anthology Vol. 33

Every six months we publish an anthology of poems written by the members of PE. That's two volumes a year. We are currently creating Volume #32 which translates to 16 years of publishing PE poetry! Here is how it works. Everyone is encouraged to submit one or more poems for consideration. When you submit a poem, you are also enrolled to receive the next volume of PE poetry when it's printed. It is not unusual for 400+ people to submit one or many poems to be considered. Our poetry program students and volunteers read through and select the ones they want to include in the anthology. Don't take it personally if they don't choose you; it is up to the literary taste and disposition of the editors who put together each edition who decide what to print, and the group is always changing; no one person has ever been an editor of more than two editions of the PE poetry anthology.

While only a small portion of the submitted poems are printed in the anthologies, we scan many more poems and put them in our online Prisoner Express Poetry Archive that folks anywhere can read. Usually, we have about two years' worth of submission available. We don't put every poem online but definitely way more than are in the paper anthology. Volunteers are encouraged to visit our archives and write a friendly letter to PE poets. I know many of you have heard from PE volunteers in the past. I asked Mimi #1370, a summer worker, to select some poems she liked for inclusion in this newsletter. We felt it was a good thing to reflect back to all of you a sample of what we have received in the past six months. Hopefully reading them will inspire more of you to put pen to paper.

Despite being raised around poets and poetry, I find it difficult to describe what makes a poem good. Some of these I whispered aloud to myself, admiring the meter and rhythm used in the poem. Others I fell in love with because of the typography, the shape the words made on the pages. Others still evoked imagery and emotion that were hard to ignore. The existence of poetry is difficult to place into an artistic category, and yet it's clear to see that the poems below, as well as many of the poems I have read during my time here, capture the feel of poetry that I remember with nostalgia. Thanks to all the poets showcased here, and every poet with Prisoner Express, for the words you put out into the world. Your work is truly appreciated. - Mimi (#1370)

Poetry Spotlight

Untitled

by Darren Butler

You break my bones,
And shatter my heart.
With sticks and stones,
You tear me apart.

With mean words,
That don't mean a thing
As empty and hollow
As the scars that they bring.

You push and shove,
And drive me to the edge.
You don't give a fuck
If I jump from the ledge.

Only surface deep
Though the words may be,
The right ones
Could set me free.

I write them down,
Even before I can think.
They're of my flesh,
And my blood is the ink.

Win or lose.
This fight has become mine.
And I will keep writing,
Until the final line.



Joseph Gonzalez

I AM THOUGHTFUL, I AM WORRY

by Kathia Coreas-Lopez

I wonder why people die
I hear them loved ones cry
I see people getting robbed
I want them to get a job

I AM THOUGHTFUL, I AM WORRY

I pretend I don't pay attention
I feel sometimes my isolation
I touch my grandmother's hair
I worry for her not to meet my heir
I cry to hear the same story

I AM THOUGHTFUL, I AM WORRY

I understand this is the destiny
I say this is not easy, isn't it?
I dream I can be free
I try not to forever let them sleep
I hope this not a repeat story

I AM THOUGHTFUL, I AM WORRY

Spoke Romeo

by Ruidong Jin

Generations past,
utopia beyond,
humane efforts to cease control,
swallowed by sand,
three years a stone, for cravings of addictive pain,
easing numbness -
a constant hum.

Loathe be thy companion,
suffering numerous,
favoring none,
all to find paradise,
fooled by a lover's jest.



"Magazine Girl" by Thomas Ryan

Dead End

by Manny

Death - speaking to Love -

I'll follow you, cuz you're all I know
I look to you, as I hold you close
You know I cherish you, even when you're wrong
Cuz you can lift me up, when I can't be strong
I feel safe with you, as I lay down
You always make me smile, as our passion
drowns
When I'm with you, there's no doubt
It's us till the end, until our hearts give out

Love - speaking back to Death.

Don't catch on to me, you'll only go astray
Be your own man, pave your own way
How can you be you, if I'm the only one you seek
Please open your eyes, so you can really see
That I'm not who you really think I am
Even if we walk together, I'll just ruin your plans
I'm only warning you, cuz you could be right
But if you take my hand, you might lose your life.

Compass

by Jonathan C. Holeman

Do you have a compass
That will lead me back to you
Will it point in a direction
That sends me somewhere new?
Or will it leave me lonely
With nothing left to do

Can that compass find you
When you're standing next to me
So near, but far away
Asking to be free

Will that compass break apart
When you drift too far away
Will the compass speak for me
When there's nothing left to say

Soledad

by Arnoldo Juarez

La soledad sera mi tormenta
y mi paz
Soledad sera mi incertidumbre y sera
mi sotesa
La soledad sera mi amiga fiel, y amante fogaje
Soledad es lo que conozco, y ella nunca se va.
Soledad, soledad, tu quien mas me conoce, mis
miedos, mis
suenos, y este corazon cada vez que se rompe...
Soledad, soledad...el frio de tus besos y abrazos
me
alientan el alma, es el sentir el calor de un nuevo
amor
que me espanta...la sorpresa de tu existir es lo
unico
Seguro...no importan mis fracasos, tus reproches
siempre sin mudos.
Esta vida que vivo, siempre has estado conmigo,
en
las perdidas mas que nadie fuistes un honesto
testigo
nunca juzgando pero friamente tu silencio me dio
paz
y calor...
Soledad, soledad gracias por tu frio...que es lo
unico seguro...y muy mio.

Mental Healing

by Richard Woodard

Dirt covered soccer field.
Razor wire glints.
Emotions; hold on to what's real.
Stuck inside this fence.
Do the dance of inmates,
Chow hall, then go lay it down.
Never let 'em see you cry,
Or barely even frown.
Wear that shit upon your sleeve,
If you'd like a real long stay:
Take your time and learn to breathe,
And live another day.
Bottle all your feelings in,

But at such a cost.

Do that to your own chagrin,
Your sanity is lost.
Go to programs, pour it out
And say what's on your mind.
Find a vent valve for your ire
Or to your feelings bind.
Mental health is here for you
Whether you go or not.
That, my friend, is up to you.
A resource that we've got.

The Noise of War

by Ali M. Mattar

War is a contest, a brutal refrain.
A grim, hollow match in a stadium of pain.
Nothing is gained but the bruises of pride,
With generals cheering as innocents die.

It bellows and cracks like a ravenous storm,
Clashes of metal in blood-red form.
It moves like a chant from lips soaked in rage,
Belligerent, callous, refusing to age.

Politicians, well-fed, preach freedom with ease,
They push from afar while they sit at their ease.
Their promises echo in hollow charades,
Unapologetic as bodies cascade.

And what of the cost, the prize at the end?
No victor to post, no wound left to mend.
Just fields of the fallen and lives torn in two,
For the game of the power-hungry few.

The silence that follows is thick with the weight
Of dreams left to shatter, of love turned to hate.
For war is no glory, no prize to be won-
Only a contest where all comes undone.

Untitled
by Eye Too Flyy Sun Child

It Be
She, Goddess Most-High
Who
Anoints...Eye
With...The Light Of Life
Imparting...Of Her
Vivifying Spirit.

As Surely As...She
Ordains...Eye...Soul
Eye...Should...Submit
To Her...Calling
And...Manifest
A Testament To
Her Graciousness
Her...Greatness.

Her...Inner-Tuition
To Show...Eye...Her Way
The Best Way...The Good Way
Eye Am Called
To Make...My Way.
Eye Can...See It.
Eye Should...Strive...To Be It.

Wa-Amen
Birthed...Eye
Vivified...And Invigorates
In-Livens...Eye.

Eye Am Created
To Honor...Wa-Amen
With All...The Life...She Bestows.

Hey what they say?
by Jeremy Hoffman

So they say...
We ain't ban men
Shed that vile spirit
We don't even hear it!

So they say...
This voyage is for crown and country
When really inner demons sit on the throne
Locked in cages now all bewail and moan!

So they say...
We set sail to the new world our new home
All we require is y'all gonna toil the soils
While we water the fields with the blood of
any who oppose!

So they say...

No one knows we're criminals plus we're outta
reach

Hurry make something up to teach & preach,
it'll look just,
Now they put shackles on us & call it the land
of the free!

So they say...

Look democracy see all the while tyrants holding
up masks
Luring all with freedom just to subjugate us
Yes we the people are their prize

So they say...

This & that random facts yet if they continue the
narrative
Character seeps because actions speak
History repeats & they'll bleep
Trying to keep it discreet

So don't heed what they say
Look to your right now clockwise
And ask them all what they say!!!

Theme Essays

The theme essays are the heart of PE. It was reading your theme essays years ago that convinced me to start this newsletter and the PE project. Your stories bring the humanity of all incarcerated men and women to life. I see a connected community of writers bonding over each other's stories. It becomes a case of feeling like you know someone without ever meeting them. When I first started the theme essay program, I was thinking it would benefit the authors. What I came to find out is that it is in the reading of each other's writing that magic happens. Understanding that others are feeling the same as you opens a door to something deeper than your own story. Horizons expand when we walk in another's shoes. When we read someone articulate what we feel, we feel known. You are no longer invisible, whether you wrote a piece, or if you see something of yourself in someone else's writing.

I encourage new participants and old to consider submitting a piece for the program. I notice that as people stay with this program their writing skills improve. We offer two theme cues

every month. One writing cue is a **word or phrase** and the other a **picture**.

You can send in a submission for one or both. **The word cues call for a true story or an essay about something you believe. The picture cue writing can be fact or fiction; your choice.** The length of the submission should not be more than **800** words. Everyone who submits a word or picture theme will get a copy of the monthly theme packet mailed to them. As we deal with increased prices for printing and postage we may be changing some of the procedures of this project. Till now we have typed and printed every theme received each month. The packets are getting more expensive to mail and print. We may eventually adopt the model used in our poetry anthology where we choose a certain number of stories to print, but everyone who submits for consideration still gets a copy of the monthly theme packet mailed to them. For the near future the intention is to keep putting every theme in the packet, but if that changes down the line you will at least understand why.

Please be sure your theme essays have your name on them as they may get separated from the envelope when they go out to be typed. We do not include themes that are over **800** words, or if they promote hatred and prejudice against others based on race, ethnicity, gender or sexual preference. If I am concerned that the content of an individual's theme will get the whole issue censored, I will not include it. That's always a tough call as each state and often individual mailrooms have different standards of what is allowed. Other than that, we ask you to share something of yourself in the stories. Upcoming word and picture themes can be found at the end of this newsletter.

Because so many of you do not get the monthly theme essay packet, we use this newsletter to share a limited number of writings we received during the past cycle. I hope these writings inspire you to pick up a pen and join us in this or any of our creative writing projects. There are many compelling stories each month and it can be difficult to know which stories to share.

Prisoner Express Mini Word Theme Anthology

March Word Theme: “Great Minds”

Misfits, by Gary Farlow

One advantage in looking back at history is that we do so with clear vision. Hindsight is truly **20/20** as the old saying goes.

Few stop to consider that most of the great leaders throughout history, the great minds, belonged to people who were, in their day, malcontents, revolutionaries, misfits, and oddballs.

While most today consider Jesus and his disciples to be “conservatives,” in reality they were all quite radical in philosophy, and one, Simon, was an actual revolutionary, a “zealot”. Translation in **2025**: terrorist. Truly, one man’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter.

Advance to 18th century America. Our own founding fathers (and mothers!) were liberals in their age, battling a conservative and repressive government. Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Hamilton - were all quite socialist in their views. Malcontents.

Move to 20th century India. Gandhi was an educated and duly licensed attorney who could have lived a life of comparative ease that his profession would have provided for. Instead, Gandhi forsook all of life's luxuries to lead a “silk glove” revolution of non-violent protest against colonial oppression. Clad only in a loin cloth, he inspired millions. A liberal? Certainly.

The pages of history are filled with great minds who were, in their day, part of a counter-culture that we view today as traditionalist or orthodox, and were anything but conservative.

Betsy Ross, sewing her revolutionary banner that we call “Old Glory” today; Abe Lincoln, a Republican, with his Emancipation Proclamation, a radical notion then but the very lynchpin of freedom today; St. Francis, a priest of a conservative order, who led a movement to care for lepers; Mother Teresa, Martin L. King, Nelson Mandela, Walter Reed, Christopher Columbus, Franklin Roosevelt, all heroes today, but anti - “business as usual” in their day.

If the adage is true that great minds think alike, then history clearly shows that those great minds were not afraid to speak up, speak out, and go against the grain.



Len Whitman

Convict Chronicles, by Leo Cardez

You'd be surprised by how much you can learn about people, the world, and yourself from a convict. For example, you wouldn't think it by looking at him, but Malo was a great mind.

Malo knew how to bite. Mean mug? Check. Boots laced up? Check. Head on a swivel? Check. Malo was an old school convict tattooed from earlobes to ankles, five feet six inches of "Don't fuck with me" vibes. He was everything I wasn't, I was more than a little jealous.

Looking back now I can't help but wonder, why the hell was I jealous of this gangbanger? I'm better than him, right?

Malo had heart. He never shied away from a problem. When he walked the yard, the seas parted. His rep preceded him and even the guards stood down. He never complained even though he hadn't had a visitor or a phone call in ten years.

I didn't grow up on the streets. In prison, I avoided drama. In the world, I was normal. In here, I was considered soft. So maybe I was jealous of Malo because he had the one thing you can't buy in prison, respect. But Malo wasn't all shanks and beefs, he had the other kind of heart too.

Malo looked out for people. He'd go to chow just to give his tray to someone hungry. He gave Gambino fresh fish, a care package so big the kid staggered to carry it. He spent three years in the hole for refusing to snitch. More than his war scars, in those moments he was bigger than life.

Generosity doesn't come naturally to me, I wasn't born with that gene. I especially didn't feel

overly generous in prison. There's truth to the prison adage: kindness is often mistaken for weakness. But still. Something nagged at me then that I can only now recognize.

Malo came from nothing and had next to nothing, but still. I had every opportunity and family and friends keeping my books stacked, and yet. What does that say about me? What kind of man was I? Am I?

Malo left on some random Tuesday back in 2020. No one talks about him anymore, but I think of him often. I think of him when I look for opportunities to help someone else. I think of him when I refuse to rat. I think of him when I stand up for what I know to be right even when the repercussions could be brutal. I think of him every time I catch myself wanting to judge someone else, more so when I judge myself.

Great Minds, by Christopher Cross

I once thought that I had a great mind. Ha. Turns out it was a manic delusion fed by arrogance. Bipolar disorder can get a bit tricky sometimes. It can lead you into alleys and side streets that wind on for a long time, filled with many potholes that you just storm through, breaking toes and not realizing it until you come down.

That mania can be a great thing as well; if you can master it, which is difficult. I won't presume to say I've mastered it, but I am in a clearer space now. And I've realized some not-so-great things about my own mind. Qualities that it lacks.

Great minds should first and foremost be disciplined. You must be able to sustain effort to follow a thing to its completion. Of course, the destination must be where you really want to end up. Especially with mania. Because it can fuel you to get there if you stay focused. Which can be a bad thing. I've followed not-good courses of action to undesirable results. Sidenote: I have hypomania, not full-blown mania. I can sleep, usually. I am on Prozac and don't hit the lows too bad. It's more manageable. Still, I'm not very disciplined.

Great minds should possess the faculty of discrimination. And by that, I don't mean screaming at the immigrants next door. In yoga, discrimination simply means discernment. That helps you to set your course in a favorable, karmic direction. You see whether a thing is good or bad for you and your goals. I used my will to turn my intellect in a destructive direction.

A great mind should be able to set fear aside to do what is necessary. Now that I have pretty much mastered it, again, sometimes to my detriment. Sometimes fearlessness leads to stupidity.

A great mind should have empathy. We humans are social beings, so we must be able to enter the other's mind to facilitate social flow and harmony. This comes to me naturally. However, I had shut it down and am now in the process of opening it back up.

A great mind is able to concentrate, meditate, and enter into samādhi (absorption). Without focus, it is difficult to get anything of value completed. Samādhi, in my own words, is the peak state of union between self and object of concentration. Basically, we enter into what we are doing, or contemplating, etc. Fully and without reserve. This does not come naturally to me. I have worked to cultivate it, and am far from perfect. Meditation is a great aid.

A great mind is able to shut up, smooth the ripples (thoughts, emotions, images, etc.) and experience the inner self. This is not natural to most people but may be cultivated through japa (mantra repetition), chanting, meditation, martial arts, hatha yoga, etc. This is Bliss.

A great mind must be rooted in joy, nourished by humor, and watered by lightheartedness until it is time for serious action. Then it should return to the former state.

A great mind needs to be able to reflect upon itself. At least I have that. I realized I was mired in a swamp of arrogance and rage. But within myself lies the seed of a great mind. It too is in you. Let's grow our own, together.

My Art is... Greatminds, by Marino Leyba

An artist? Yes! My art is...

Let me get some paint and a brush. Hush!!! I am working and so are other great minds.

Let me draw the lines, Karla Wooten's rhymes blow my mind.

And don't get me started about Catherine LaFleur the way she writes to soundtracks is not fair.

I mean both these writers are always great to read. They are great minds, and great at getting their points across to truly succeed.

Now let me breathe...

Leo Cardez is another artist I like to read.

I mean sometimes it is like they share one great mind. I love how they all mention each other in some of their writings. To me this is community, it is what makes Prisoner Express so special. Greatminds!!! I love the connections, it makes me always want to read their writings first.

I will put my brush down for now until I choose to paint some more, but for now I hope you enjoy the picture, the masterpiece, of three of Prisoners Express' Great Minds.

April Word Theme: "Good Sport"

Convict Chronicles: Good Sport Spoiled, by Leo Cardez

I try to be a good sport about things in prison. I mean, come on, I get it: Prison sucks. But they always seem to find a way to push me, to push my buttons, push my limits. For example...

I wasn't upset by the Orange Crush officer. I had decided after my fifth year of incarceration to no longer be afraid of the cops (how we refer to the prison guards). Orange Crush was extra AF, almost funny with their bat-size batons, black hockey-goalie helmets, half body shields meant to make me feel scared, guilty, and criminal. In the past, their mere presence would send a fear signal shooting through my body and sticking in my throat. When they appeared behind me or in my line of sight, my heart rate accelerated, my breathing quickened, and my muscles contracted. I became acutely aware not only of what I was doing but also of what the cops might think I was doing.

But I had decided I wouldn't allow myself to feel intimidated by these under-educated, over-paid adult babysitters. Why? First, because I am middle-aged, college-educated, and generally law/rule-abiding. Second, because it occurred to

me that they believe they are better than me and these fear tactics are part of the psychological control they attempt to impose on me. And third, I had worked as a successful communications executive for over two decades before my arrest. I paid my taxes—taxes that help pay his salary—so in many real ways he was my employee. I was tired of feeling afraid of them. So I'd decided to imagine the cops in general—and this guard demanding I keep my eyes down, in particular—as someone simply doing their job as they have been trained, for better or worse. I refused to take it personally. He didn't know me.

And so, for the first time in my life when this guard came to my door, I looked him in the eye and asked him as gently and sincerely as possible what he wanted. "Shut up, turn-around, strip." He told me, "That's what I want." Then asked, with a wry smile, if I had any drugs or weapons on me or in my cell? When I told him no, he asked again, "You don't have any contraband in here? It's better for you if you tell me now versus if I find it." Again, I looked him straight in the eye and shook my head.

The rest was a blur. I was strip-searched and man-handled and sent off to wait in the Chow Hall with a sharp jab in my gut that doubled me over. By now, I was already cuffed and could do nothing to defend myself. I looked up at him and asked if he thought that hitting a restrained man made him tough?

"That's prison life" was his only response. I took a mental picture of his young strange white face. I wanted to remember what men are capable of.

This day was another setback in my effort to mature and rehabilitate. As much as I didn't want the guards to control me, mentally, in the blink of an eye this man had brought back all the anger, hate, and fear associated with prison guards. That's the nature of prison, one step forward, two steps back. Even for those of us that want to better ourselves, the system is not built to rehabilitate inmates. It is simply mass human warehousing.

Good Sport, by Jeff Hovatter

The world that taught me to strive to be a good sport, to be courteous and respectful, to treat others as I would like to be treated, to take loss graciously without rancor, surely fooled me. Completely.

That world is long gone. Society today cheers the bully, retribution, and unfathomable greed. Honesty and integrity are considered naive and weak. Values that I consider admirable are not admired.

There is no shortage of unscrupulous people to take advantage. It seems that dealing truthfully only gives liars an advantage. The liars say anything, promise whatever, to coerce the person who is honest to do what they want, with no intention of living up to their rhetoric. Some even define greed as a virtue.

The spectacle of the current president being the opposite of a good sport does not bode well for any return to traditional values, such as good sportsmanship. Greed, the desire for getting more than one needs or deserves without regard to others, or even to the detriment of others, is not admirable, whether for wealth or power. The number of voters who defend and justify everything the megalomaniac does or says is mind boggling to me.

My own experience has been that nice guys finish last; being a good sport seems to be no longer valued.

Good Sport, by Kelly Messenger

I'm not really into sports and I'm not a fan, but one year, back in 2017, I finally got parole. I was so excited and thought I was about to go home. I bought me a brand new pair of all-white Nike running shoes and decided to start running the track every morning for 1½ hours and 1½ hours at night. I was busting a stunt on doing a home run like I was playing baseball, running every single day for months, 3 hours a day.

I wasn't bothering nobody.

Two evil ass guards who were in a relationship wanted to get joy out of my downfall and seeing me fail, so I got set up and never made it home. Sometimes when you are in a place like this and around so many people who are so evil, it will make you think about doing unthinkable things.

But the good sport that I am, decided to just brush myself off and try again ... you know, stick to myself, if I really wanna make it home.

Keep Going, by George Hesse

Moving again to this prison was rough. It's been rough like 18 months. But my leg healed. I DIDN'T make parole, but God has me alive in here, so you know what? I'll make the best of the next three years. That's a good sport.

To Karla and Catherine, keep ya head up.

November 2024 Word Theme: “Moonlight”

On the Dark Side of the Moon, by Catherine LaFleur

Soundtrack: “Nobody Sees Me Like You” by Japanese Breakfast

'Tis I, your faithful correspondent, reporting from the bowels of Camp Prisoney Land. Yes, I'm still here just in a different area of the park. This experience is crushing. Finding my place is difficult.

Honestly, I am very downhearted. I'm separated from my snug little writer's nest and all my writerly friends (Vicki H., Marina B., and Michele L.). In my mind, I'm quite independent. In reality, my creativity requires others to stoke the flames.

I feel isolated. At night I watch the moon from my barracks window. The sun emanates light but the moon only reflects it. No one can look directly at the sun, the moon is kinder.

In 1969, Apollo 11 brought Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin to the moon. Michael Collins, the man who didn't walk on the surface, remained in the command module orbiting the moon. The mission required him to pass to the dark side of the moon. Dark because he was without radio contact from mission control on Earth, dark because he was further away from Earth than any man had ever traveled, and dark because he was more truly alone than anyone had been before.

In his book *Carrying the Fire*, Michael Collins said he was "indeed alone but was never lonely". He looked forward to the experience with awareness, confidence, and exultation. Unlike Collins, I am surrounded by other humans. I try to look forward to each day with anticipation and interest.

In the 120 days I've been in the dark side of Camp Prisoney Land, this is what's happened. I am an aide for the reentry program. These women are going home in 90 days or less. I help them build résumés and type up their presentation packages. Exchange for Change gave me all their curriculums on the Lantern program for the tablet. Classification has authorized me to run two classes facilitating Survey of Creative Writing. I'll be with one adult class and a class of youthful offenders this Spring. Of course, you will be meeting them on these pages.

Now, for the many thanks I owe. First to Prisoner Express and Gary, the Big Daddy of us all. You can't possibly know how much each issue is read to tatters here. Not everyone writes but most of them read with great interest. For the volunteers, your letters of support and admiration are so appreciated.

For Nate, of course, we are in a competition that has been ongoing for 10 years. You finally noticed! See that distant figure on the horizon? That's me waving back at you. I'm winning, by the way. Still, you have a chance (a slim one) to pull forward and win the prize. More discussion on this later. You are a great writer. And you make me laugh out loud—a hearty Klingon laugh that startles the women around me.

And for Mark P....I suppose it's alright to confess the real reason I retired from the law. My civilian supervisor, who is in a steady cognitive decline, became enraged at the time limits in the Florida Rules of Court and smacked me in the face with three rolled-up People magazines. Like I was a bad puppy. Repeatedly. This caused me to drop the book with a thud, my glasses flew across the room and I sustained paper cuts on my face. All the other law clerks were standing there shocked with jaws practically unhinged. But now I'm hundreds of miles away and more than a year has passed. The writing program was more important to me than an angry response. The Alternatives to Violence Program works. Think before reacting!

And for George, Marino, Shaun, Rolf and so many others who like my work, I am full of gratitude. You sustain me and I get a silly grin on my face whenever someone compliments me. Thank you all for being the moon for reflecting light to remind me that I am still a part of a writer's

group no matter in what part of Camp Prisoney Land I find myself.

I remain your faithful correspondent, a multiple PEN America Winner, the first woman named a Luis Angel Hernandez Poet Laureate for O Miami, the inaugural winner of the Belle Chivigny Prize for Women's Prison Writing..... guess I should be more forthcoming 'cause I'm letting you further into my circle.

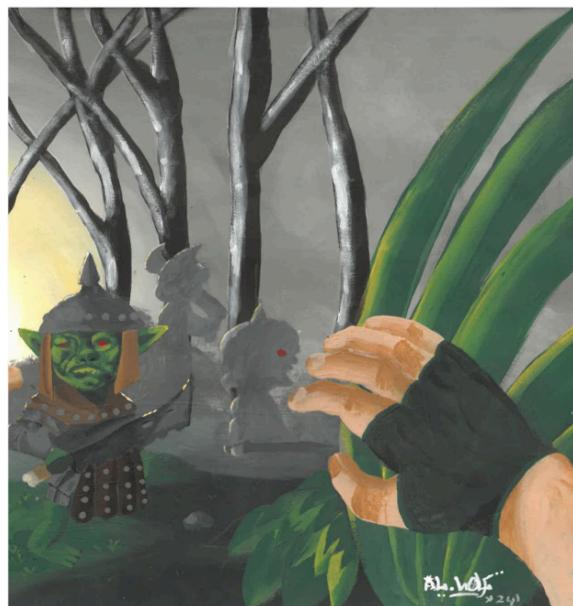
Moonlight, by Todd Broxmeyer

There are many of us in prison where getting to experience the natural beauty of "moonlight" is very rare. In many prisons, especially some higher-security ones, getting outside at night is impossible. Even at prisons where a person can get out until 8:30, the night sky is blocked out by a ridiculous amount of light. If you have not been to prison, the best comparison is if you stood in Times Square and looked up. You will see the darkness and the moon but just how majestic it all is, is lost.

It was like that for the first fifteen years I spent in prison. Then I got transferred to a federal low prison close to my NJ home. The first night I walked outside I was in absolute shock. See, this prison is right on an Army base and is directly next to an Air Force airstrip. They do not have 100-foot-high light poles with lights that are daylight-bright. I was able to look up and see the stars and see how bright the moon was shining.

When I was transferred here it was with a lot of others I had known for years. So for the first few weeks, we would walk together. All the while we would talk about how incredible it was to see the moon and the stars. We discussed how the years under the lights made us forget what we were missing.

Then a truly sad thing started to happen. Over the past couple of years, I started to take the sights of the stars and the moonlight for granted. Actually, I had not thought too much about the night sky since those first few weeks. Then I saw this writing prompt. I have to remind myself to look up and see the stars. I need to remember how it was to spend seven years without touching a tree. I have to look beyond the fences. I need to appreciate how special it is to simply walk in the moonlight.



Angel Ponce

The Beauty of Moonlight, by Wes Lee

Beneath the silvery moonlight, we truly lived. Free as birds, racing through the forest and later the streets, enjoying our youth one moment at a time.

Beneath the silvery moonlight, I made love with the woman who had my heart. Afterward, we made plans for the future – our future – and promised each other we'd be together forever.

Beneath the silvery moonlight, I flipped a switch, illuminating the Christmas lights draped elegantly across the home in which we planned to grow old. Our children, bundled up in warm jackets, wool hats, and mittens, clapped with glee as the festive lights turned on for the first time.

Beneath the silvery moonlight, I laid on the summer ground with my son and daughter, sandwiched between cozy blankets, as we watched shooting stars streak across the night sky. Their first time experiencing such wonders of space, they made wishes and sighed with wonder. I pulled them closer and smiled with contentment.

Beneath the silvery moonlight, I raided buildings occupied by America's enemies as dust and bullets competed for space around me. I fought for my life and for those of the men by my side. I lived, but woah, the cost. Woe the cost.

Beneath the silvery moonlight, I changed. I became someone else, I lost my sense of self, my confidence, my path. Ultimately, I lost my liberty.

With it went the woman who had my heart, the home we were to grow old in, and my children, adopted by their new father.

But, through hard-fought battles in prison - mental, this time, rather than physical - I made a valuable discovery. The beauty of moonlight is that it is a reflection of the sun, a guarantee that even the darkest nights come to an end. It is a reminder that my life has not simply ended in darkness, no matter how often it may seem endless or infinite. There will always be light. There is always tomorrow, an awakening, a new beginning. There is always a future, and it is bright.

I see it in the silvery moonlight.

Close to the Moon, by Jessica Saleman

When I look at the night sky, my eyes go straight to the moon. At night the moon is my guide when it's really dark. I love it when moonlight reflects off of water, whether the ocean, lakes, or a puddle.

I pick nights when the moon is full to sit outside. With the back porch light off, I don't need a flashlight because the moon is so bright. Looking at the night sky is so peaceful. Sometimes, I envision myself in an old-time Western movie, lassoing the moon to bring it near.

I grew up in a very rural part of Upstate New York where we had full moonlight. I thought the further North a person lived, the closer they were to the moon.

My family went camping under the moonlight in the Allegheny National Forest. Mom and Dad led us through the trees with only the moon lighting the way to the music of chirping crickets and a dance of fireflies. This memory sticks in my head like a famous painting.

When I look at the moon from this prison, I wonder who else is looking at it in this exact moment. I wonder what the future will be and remember special times.

Moonlight, by Jack Simpson

It was a wonderful Saturday night. Jackie and I sat on the tailgate of my old Chevy truck. We had just been eating cake and having a soda pop. It was my birthday, and who else better to celebrate it with? Only the love of my life.

The hill we were parked at had a clear view of the heavens. Stars shone bright overhead. A full moon had started to rise above the treeline. I felt so special with her by my side. Holding her close was all I needed. She knew that as well. Most people can't be happy just holding someone.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said. I could only laugh. We both had the same thing on our minds. No, it wasn't sex. We just knew each other so well that we could finish each other's sentences. To hold her by my side and just be close enough to steal a kiss and smell her hair. That was all I needed.

"Jackie," I said. "This is the way I would love to leave this world. Sitting here with you in my arms and kissing your sweet lips." She made a little groan sound. I knew that sound so well. It was her stamp of approval. "How about a penny for your thoughts, while we are on the subject?"

"Nothing makes me happier than to be with you no matter where we are. I would travel to the ends of the Earth with you. For the two of us to be together after all these years is a blessing by itself."

Under the moonlight, we shared thoughts of our past and future dreams. We both hold our love for one another stronger than any bond. I give thanks every day for you, and for the night we shared our love under the moonlight.

December 2024 Word Theme: "Silver Lining"

What News From the Underworld, Persephone? Dispatch #5, by Catherine LaFleur

Soundtrack: Born Free by Andy Williams

'Tis I, your faithful correspondent, reporting from this hellish prison-scape in central Florida. I am looking hard for the silver linings in this delightful camp.

I joined the Pickle Ball League and the Sneakers Walking Club. On Monday nights I run a Survey of Creative Writing class. Hopefully, you will be meeting some new writers. My cold-weather clothes are getting a workout. The kitchen serves a lot of fruit.

Although I'm in a barracks-style dorm, there are a few pleasant things. There is no need to scrub my cell for 45 minutes every day. My bunk area is tiny. It only needs a quick sweep and mop in the morning and afternoon. Before, I had to keep all of my uniforms in my tiny locker. Now I

have a cubbyhole in the laundry room. There is enough room to fit *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry* and *The Chicago Manual of Style* in the back of my locker drawer.

Once the dorm is released, I can stay out for an hour or more. This proved problematic at first because I drink a lot of water. It's important for health reasons and for hydration. Florida is hot and not in the good way. Water in means water out. There is a significant paucity of inmate potties. Almost every bathroom is inside of a locked building. I bemoaned this fact to Honeybee, my old friend from the south. She works for the grounds crew. Bee pointed out two roofless walled areas in the yard. Gasp!

There is outdoor peeing and pooping here! At first, I hesitated. Can a lady drop down and take care of business in the open air? Then I remembered that I come from a family of campers and hikers. Plenty of times I've had to balance on a fallen log or squat over a Southeast Asian-style basin toilet.

This is truly the best of both worlds. With a throne-style toilet under my fundament, a light breeze swirling around my ankles and birdsong accompaniment indeed, I am free.

Silver Lining, by Michael Blackburn

Everyday is a struggle for me to see a silver lining in living a life in prison with no outside support from those that called themselves family. Then again, I have struggled with finding a silver lining in living since I was eight. I've been on many medications, none of which have ever changed the way I feel towards life and my want for a timely death.

Rejected, abandoned, lonely, hurt, abused, lost, stupid, ugly, uncontrolled, screwed up; these are just some of the mixed emotions I feel each day I am still alive. I find comfort in listening to my music, meditation, and most of all, the love of my life, who came into my life seven years ago but did not confess his love for me until last year.

We both have confessed to each other the truck loads of baggage we've brought with us, such as trust, fears, insecurity, low self-esteem, depression, and many others we've discovered over this past year.

My mate has done something that no other person that I have been in a relationship with has ever done. He has stuck by my side, no matter how difficult I've become, gently nudging me to do better and letting go of another piece of my negative baggage.

When we first started, I felt that I had to be everywhere he was, afraid that he would leave me too. Over time, I've slowly aimed to give him space and accept that I was struggling with codependency. We now work opposite shifts, talk about our concerns and accept each other's feedback while keeping others out of our relationship's business.

All in all, I realize my meaning and purpose for living is having found love in the darkest place when no one else cared. This is my silver lining!

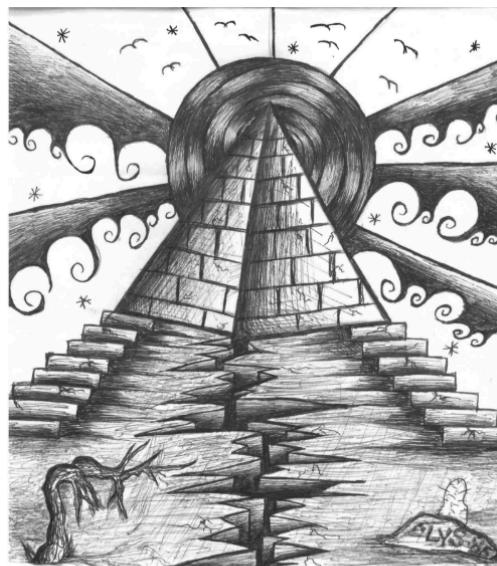
Free Expression, by David Lee Wilson

Through all the years I've spent incarcerated, 12 in-state, and five so far in the Feds, with 10 more in Washington State to go, I've come to realize that everything in our lives is temporary, and changing. Nothing is static and certain, except our ability to observe and remain aware. That's it! Our consciousness remains fixed, even when our bodies fail us and break down.

What we take with us, consciously, from eye blink to heartbeat to eye blink depends on our focus in those exact moments.

People who have lost everything, including full use of their entire bodies, have openly expressed their conscious thoughts through blinking their eyelids, or moving their eyes. They express themselves to the world one eye blink and one eye movement at a time.

The silver lining is we are incarcerated, but we have one another. A wonderful community and volunteers who are a part of this community who care and value our free expression, who share our free expression with the world one blink at a time.



Salvador Hernandez

Silver Lining, by Robert Downs

“There are no true beginnings but in pain. When you understand that and can withstand pain, then you’re almost ready to start.” - Leslie Woolf Hedley

I had to lose everything I knew - my biological and self-made family, “freedom,” my very own reality, as I then knew it — and it almost killed me. I watched everything slowly fracture and fall away, one jagged piece at a time. As those lifeless pieces bounced across the bare concrete floor, my pain intensified — helplessness, despair, and hopelessness flooding my emotions in equal measure. I foolishly equated myself with those aspects, and I lost them. I felt like I was being torn asunder.

After I came to prison, my cold, harsh reality came crashing down on me like a raging tsunami. I soon realized I was the architect of the prison I was sitting in: my past actions, unwieldy mindset, lack of empathy, and careless usage of my own life and time were the construction material; and my two hands became the tools I used to lay each block, ratchet each bolt, and block each door. No one could be blamed but myself, although I tried doing just that over the next five years. I became angry and bitter towards everyone I knew except the person who was truly responsible.

I desperately held on to that detrimental way of thinking for five long years. It lit a slow-burning fire within me that fed off of everything I was responsible for losing. The flames’ heat and intensity fed my anger, which I used to fuel my grueling exercise regimen. While this helped me get into the best physical condition I’ve ever been in, it had the opposite effect on the part people cannot see: my fractured psyche. I ignored it until it demanded in a shrill baritone my undivided attention.

Everything suddenly screeched to a halt: my motivation to reeducate and improve myself evaporated over a few days, and I was left with only my despair and agony. And they were starving; they had gone mad during those years of flame and ember.

I was forced to dismantle my past, one missed opportunity, failed endeavor, careless mistake, and neglected responsibility at a time. I held the jagged, tainted piece of my past in my hands, turning it this way and that way, as I reflected on the piece’s origin and its effect on my life. After gleaning as much information from the piece as I could, I tossed it over my shoulder and reached for the next one. The realizations and spiritual enlightenment I slowly gained from this arduous task truly saved my life: the things I did, and the things that led me to this place of eventual change and true ascendance — allowed me to recreate myself into who I was always meant to be, the real me.

And THAT is my silver lining. (mic drop)

Silver Lining, by Benjamin Munson

“Mr. Munson, I am sentencing you to sixty-two years in federal prison,” my judge said. Most may think I am a bit mental, but I tell them this was a silver lining. The judge had just sentenced me to pretty much a life sentence. I’ll be released in 2075, and I’ll be 85. Now, I am not complaining about my time or the age I’ll be, there are people on the U.S.P. Tucson compound who have double, triple, or even quadruple the amount of time I have. So, why was my sentence a blessing or a silver lining?

Some may think that it is because I am no longer on the streets causing the harm that I was causing. But this is not the case. This just made my life easier. You see, I was first arrested when I was in high school, two and a half months before I graduated. My first federal sentence was five years in prison and ten years of supervised release (probation). There is an old prison adage that goes something like, “time stands still for those incarcerated.” For those who have never been incarcerated, this generally makes no sense. Allow me to try and explain. I was 19-20 when I went to prison and was 24 when I was released. Mentally, I was still 19 and had a high school mentality, meaning I had no real-world adult experience, but the world saw me as a 24-year-old adult. Society expected a 24-year-old with 24 years of experience. I only had a vague idea of what being an adult meant.

Prison, to me, is easy. I do not have to worry about much, and I know where I need to be at particular times. My food is served regularly in the dining hall at the scheduled times. For the

most part, I follow the rules. I have never done any drugs, including marijuana, and I have no desire to start. I do not get indebted to others. Some talk slick to me, but I pay them no mind. I pretty much just stay in my lane.

So why is my prison a silver lining? Well, for starters, I write. I am currently in the process of writing a book - well a few books, but that is neither here nor there. When I was on the outside, I was too caught up in life and what I was doing that my writing fell by the wayside. I caught the writing bug when I was doing time for a probation violation, and I had a bunch of ideas that I was fleshing out. Plotlines were becoming more apparent, characters more lively and real, the world more vibrant and colorful.

Upon my release, like so many before me, life happened, and I got caught up in the little things again and was arrested almost six years later. So now the only thing that I have to look forward to, besides being a strapping young 85-year-old man, is seeing my name, or pseudonym, printed on a book that I have written.

My 62-year sentence will, hopefully, see this come to fruition. I have nothing but time. Some people here call me antisocial, but I enjoy my time alone writing. I like to call myself an antisocial social butterfly. Sometimes I feel like being social, other times I just want to be left the fuck alone. Alone with my world's plots and characters.

A silver lining does not always have to be around a dark cloud. Everyone's situation is different, their mentality is at different levels, and their mindset can be good or bad. Either way, it's all about how you look at things. Do I like being locked up? No. It took me away from the life I was trying to live, which I was thoroughly enjoying. However, regardless of the color of the cloud, I try to always focus on the positive. Make the best of your situation in any way you possibly can.

January Word Theme: "Good Company"

Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know by Catherine LaFleur

Soundtrack: *Bad Company* by Bad Company

(Names changed to protect both the innocent and the guilty).

"Why do I have to be black boxed?" Ginger whines. "I'm going home in three months." Five of us are on a medical trip to Larkin Hospital. The transport van has conventional cushioned bench seats, which we are all belted into like schoolchildren.

Every woman is also shackled, cuffed, and belly chained. A black box with an additional padlock pierces the short links between each pair of cuffs. This arrangement severely restricts my range of motion. I can barely scratch my nose, much less push up my glasses.

"How am I going to eat lunch?" Maryann complains. A peanut butter sandwich rests in her hand, but the restraints prevent lifting it to take a bite.

Traffic jam. We are more than late and caught in Miami's morning rush hour. Stop and go jerks us around, unbalanced and uncomfortable. Our chains jingle and chime.

Officers Gilligan and Skipper converse on the cell phone. Faintly, we can hear ".....Dangerous high custody inmate..." Skipper guns the engine and hooks a sharp left. Our bodies push back in the seats as the van rockets down the center median, bypassing the good citizens of South Florida.

Our chase truck with armed gunmen struggles to keep pace as Skipper weaves in and out over canal bridges and through interchanges. Gilligan white knuckles the dash.

Lovey twists around in her seat. "Who's the dangerous criminal?"

We all side-eye each other. It's a motley bunch. One's custody is a delicate issue. It's comprised of a mixture, including criminal acts, sentence length, and observed behavior in prison. Inmates are rated monthly by the staff: below satisfactory, satisfactory, or above satisfactory.

For those who cannot obey the endless rules or learn to play nicely with their fellow inmates, there are stints to the prison jail lasting from 15 to 90 days.

Maryann's never had a corrective consultation (slap on the wrist) or a disciplinary report (prison jail). She's as pure as the driven snow. Ginger has a number of trips to the prison jail on her record for inappropriate relationships with both staff and other inmates. Vequasia is an independent recreational pharmaceutical consultant both inside and outside of the Big House. Lovey is notorious for her Humans R Us resale business and will be moving on to federal prison once her Florida sentence is served.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who IS the most dangerous of us all?

Yep. You guessed it. 'Tis I, your faithful correspondent.

"Catherine! Say it isn't true."

I say nothing, only giving a little three-cornered kitten smile.

Moral Relativity in Prison, by Nate A. Lindell

Beggars indeed can't be choosers, especially in prison, where we captives are fish in society's barrel of deplorables, forced into a school with those we often would prefer not to swim with.

Dope fiends, the largest distinct group of captives. You, out there, can't trust them (they will sacrifice their own dignity and their own health for their god; only the deludedly desperate fail to understand that dope fiends will sacrifice relationships too), and neither can we captives. (Spare me your excuses.) I have had two as cellmates this year, both with rotten toenails, the current with rotten fingernails too (fungal infection). As bad as those two cellmates were/are, at least they were/are not trying to have sex with me. So, relatively speaking, they were/are not that bad.

The guys I sit at a table with and eat meals with are not that bad. One is a partially paralyzed Hmong (broke his neck while high on meth), another is a stereotypical white stoner (opioid addict), while the last one is a dairy farmer framed for owning/possessing a stolen piece of farm equipment (that stuff is crazy expensive). I'm in here for murder, been in since I was 22 years young, since 1997.

The paralyzed Hmong is dying (bad heart). The dairy farmer is out of his element yet fighting for justice. I'm striving to be as human as possible. Only the stoner is indifferent to the reality of the barrel we are being held in. Relatively speaking, these guys aren't "that bad."

Alas, except for the several litigators with whom I collaborate, and some of the writers for this forum, I don't come away from my interactions with my tablemates or cellmates whom I've had since... for years... with any enlightenment; instead, I feel drained.

But all is not despair-inducing!

I am blessed to have some wonderful fish outside of this barrel with whom I can swim, at least on occasion. They are some top-notch fish, too, including a daughter whom I managed to produce without sex (Catherine, you will hear

from her, inviting you to be part of our prison journalism collective), which I think makes me a God. The fish I school with are onto something, very competent and witty, trying to save the world from itself.

While you may think I am judgmental about whom I wish to swim with, you are right! But that does not mean that I condemn while wishing to be allowed to rise above my own mistakes. It means that I choose to associate with those seeking to progress within my moral boundaries.

Anyone's welcome to join me on this journey.

Good Company, by Olivia Hernandez

Who knew you could find good company in a county jail? Well, gather around as I tell you how I found just that!

It was March 4th, 2021, I had just turned myself in on a warrant for my arrest. The accident occurred three months prior, so I still had scrapes, bruises, and a very broken left leg. When I was being booked, they did a full-body x-ray. The officer doing the scan said, "Damn girl, you broke that leg, didn't you!" He proceeded to take my brace because it had metal in it. He led me to a big cell with white concrete walls, a big metal door, and thick, clear, plastic windows. The cell was in full view of the officer's desk. Later, I would find out it was an observational cell for inmates on suicide watch. I stepped inside, there were two boats on the floor. Have you been to jail? No? Good! I wouldn't recommend it... zero stars! A boat is a hard plastic cot with a mat that lies close to the ground.

I was in front of a large metal door with a small flap and a padlock on it. The guard opened the door and there, in a room with four cement walls, a sink, a toilet, two bunk beds, and two boats, were three women. Two were very pregnant, and the third was lying on her bunk. Later, I found out she had a miscarriage and had just come back from the hospital. Even with the stigma that comes with my charges, I said, "For driving drunk and killing someone." The look on their face surprised me because it showed empathy. They each shared why they were there: drug possession, domestic dispute, and violation of probation.

Hours later, the door opened, and the guard said, "Hernandez, roll up! You made bail." The girls cheered, and I cried. They each hugged me as I made my way to the door and a waiting

walker. I don't remember their names, but I will always remember their kindness and compassion for a stranger.

Birds of a Feather, by Bryan Petitt

To all my fellow writers, poets, and artists: I am happy to be a part of such a strong community. Every month, I see my peers putting all of their effort, their heart into beautiful, meaningful stories, poems, and pictures, and it fills me with joy to know that so many people have learned the same valuable lesson I have: the simple act of expressing ourselves in a meaningful way is more rehabilitation than nearly anything else we can do behind these walls. I have laughed with you all, cried with you all, and learned from you all, and I am so grateful to share this experience with you.

To Prisoner Express: Thank you for providing these pages for us to share. There are other outreach organizations that do their part, but in my humble opinion, they don't hold a candle to PE. You go above and beyond at Cornell University by not only providing us with a medium with which we can express ourselves, but also by giving us prompts to focus on, packets to educate us, and volunteers to motivate and guide us. Without a doubt, you have changed lives, and I think I can speak for us all collectively when I say we are grateful for it.

And, briefly, to all my fellow PEN America Prison Writing Contest winners, it brings me great pleasure to share space in multiple venues with others who have been so fortunate. Congratulations on your accomplishments! If you ever get your hands on the 2023 anthology, check out "Maybe Tomorrow" in the nonfiction/memoir section.

I am proud to be in such good company.

Good Company, by Terry Olney

It's hard to find Good Company when you live in solitary confinement. No, I'm not actually in solitary confinement, but that's how I live my life. I don't let anyone in. And even when I'm alone, I'm not in Good Company because being alone with Me, Myself, and I is a dysfunctional relationship.

You see, "I" don't like "Myself" because I blame myself for everything, and that leaves "Me" caught in the middle.

Are you with me so far?

Freud called it the Ego, the Id, and the Superego. And they're at constant odds within

me. So for ten plus years now, I awaken each morning from the sweet oblivion of sleep into conscious self-condemnation. I admit and accept my being wholly responsible for the choices I made and the actions I took, regardless of any contributing circumstances. And thus, I realize that each day, all day, every day is my punishment. That everything and everyone on that day is a part of the punishment that I brought upon myself. And it pains me to the core. It hurts mentally and emotionally, and I am sure there is a physical toll as well. So I suffer in the silent Good Company of self-solitude. Because after ten plus years, there exists a part of me that believes that is exactly what I deserve. To suffer alone and in myself. Prison has just become the place where my body is housed and fed while I impose upon myself a sentence worse than any court could ever order.

All in my own Good Company.

For even if I wanted, good company is hard to find when you seem to share so very little in common with the majority of those who surround you. When you are forced into association with attention-seeking adults who act more like adolescent children attempting to garner the notice of others of like mind.

Yes, Good Company is hard to find.

The rare individual who thinks before they speak can express a coherent thought without the use of the phrase "You know what I'm sayin'" multiple times.

These are the rare islands of good company in a sea of ignorance. And when and if you do find someone of Good Company, you are inevitably separated from them and left adrift yet again.

But Good Company is what I find with you all inside the pages of Prisoner Express.

Each of you, with your artfully articulated words, invite me into the Good Company of your lives of emotion and experience.

I am invited to the Good Company of sharing in your life, hearing your thoughts, and vicarious inclusion in your emotions, just as I invite and welcome you all to mine.

Society at large should share such Good Company as we do. But I fear they don't want to acknowledge our existence on such a human level. That might call into question their judgments of us. It may even cast doubt upon their own estimation of what Good Company they are.

So I will continue in my isolation and longing for connection and Good Company until

you all visit me again within the pages of the Prisoner Express.

Among Wolves and Saints, by Amanda Webber

On the very last day of a rigorous year-long computer programming course, my classmates and I arrived in class in eager anticipation. Not for what there was yet to learn, but for our promised graduation gifts. A generous church group had organized to donate hygiene products to each of us - products unavailable on canteen. Our options are so limited, a stick of Secret deodorant can fetch over \$30 should it hit the compound.

So, when the packages entered the room dangling from the arms of three male teachers, cheers broke out. We'd made it this far, earned our certs, and now this! The clear plastic toiletry bags holding jumbo-sized shampoo, conditioner, body wash, and more were enough to make us drool. Compared to the flimsy, overpriced make-up bags on canteen, which tear within days, these were highly desirable.

The men dropped the bags onto the floor and left. We did a quick inventory and seconds later realized a problem. There were only 12 bags, but 14 of us.

What felt like a blessing moments earlier quickly turned sour. Fear that no one would get a bag unless we all did gripped us all. We stood in a ring around the pile of bags like they were a dead body on the floor. We didn't know what to do. Our teacher, devastated by the mistake (not hers), promised to find and deliver the two missing bags.

At that, a saint-like member of the cohort stepped forward and volunteered as a sacrifice. She'd wait for one of the two bags to turn up. Then, a less saint-like member of the group pointed out that two among us would leave within a month. Do they really need these things? The company had promised to provide everything we needed when we leave.

All eyes turned toward the soon-to-be-free women. The bottom lip of one began to quiver. She didn't want to give hers up. The other spoke.

"If that is true," she said, "I don't need mine."

"It is," said the teacher, "I will meet you at the gate with hygiene, clothes, everything."

"Okay, then, I'm good."

A rush of gratitude for these good women among us diffused the tense situation. Thanks to

them, the rest of us would get to leave with our gifts today!

Then, like wolves eyeing their prey, our attention fixed on the bags. Each one looked slightly different. How would we divvy them up? I bent down and casually inspected the one I wanted. The one with cocoa butter.

"So, what's in here?" I asked.

With that, the women pounced. Each lurched for a bag and darted away. Alone with their kill, they dug in with their paws, inspected the contents, and inhaled the fragrances. Then they peered at each other's bags.

At her desk, Judith opened her bag. No body wash. Again, our teacher promised to rectify the situation.

Judith turned away from the teacher and began to cry.

"I feel like I always get the shit end of the stick," she said through her tears.

I gawped and turned away.

Another woman, Sienna, turned around to ask about the matter. Choking on her tears, Judith replied, "I didn't get a body wash. I always pray for everyone - I prayed for everyone to get this and I get the shit end of the stick."

Sienna paused. She nodded. Stood up from her chair.

"You need a minute? I think you need a minute." And with a pat on the back of Judith's hand, she walked away.

The Cell Room, by Craig Pinkston

As I sit here in my cell room, as I call it, I think back to my free days when all I did was work, drink, play with my dogs, and argue with Kim, my wife. Since getting a 5-year sentence on a burglary charge, I've been in prison. It's a far cry from a max joint, mainly just people with under 10 years, and most are soon to be released. I live in the administration building, which houses a lot of disabled older people, crazy people, and people who need medical assistance. I'm neither (well, I'm old), but I've been here before, and this is the premier building to be in if you're here at EMCC. I'm an old white dude, and I share a cell with three other men. One of them calls himself a silverback, but he's really just a big teddy bear. He's been locked up for about 20 years for notorious reasons, and is finally approved for work release, and I'm glad for him. He deserves it. He loves to play chess with one of

my other cellys, Yatti (yä-te), but mostly succumbs to ass whippings from said Yatti. My first celly, who thinks that every woman who looks at him loves him, has a lot to learn in the free world: everything from cell phones to work. But I'm going to miss him dearly.

Then, we have Yatti himself! He came here a couple of months ago with a colostomy bag and a good spirit. Stomach cancer really sucks, he said with a smile. He is a survivor, and it shows. Since he came, he's had surgery to have the bag removed, stayed in the hospital for a month, and is now back with vengeance! Yatti got turned down for work release the same day my other celly got approved. It was kind of quiet in the cell that night. I wanted to hug my celly and be loud and proud, but Yatti was devastated, and I didn't feel it was right to be so happy when he was so sad.

And then there's the celly, Rio. Rio is a walking dictionary, one very smart guy! At any given time, day or night, you will find him either sitting in the day room, paper scattered all over the table, typing like a song, pencil in mouth, like he's the happiest man in the world while doing his thing! His thing is learning, writing, and going to college. At nighttime, you'd find him beading or writing, taking notes, or figuring something out. He's one of them pocket protector type kind of square ass people that are not supposed to be in prison. And in all reality, he should never have stepped foot in prison. He is a good person who was honestly railroaded and unduly prosecuted. I'm sure of it. Anyway, he's a cool guy (still a nerd). He got his writings and stories published all over. He's written plays that are in the theater as I write this. Even wrote a play for developmentally disabled people. On top of all the articles, plays, etc, he still found time to have a 4.0 GPA. If you don't know what that entails, it is straight A's or better. Nothing below an A. I have never even had an A. As of now, he will without a doubt be valedictorian of his class. And it's well deserved, anyone who can prosper like that in prison, I respect.

As an older man who has spent a lot of time in jail and prisons, I've never had a better bunch of cellys. In my cell, I just have friends.

February Theme: "Lost and Found"

Lost and Found, by James Bauhaus

I just finished reading Amanda Knox's memoir about her time in Italy, trying to earn a degree, but instead, being sidetracked for years by a corrupt Conviction System. She lost 15 years before fighting herself free. She describes the local Bushwack Team as piranha. Piranha don't make 'mistakes;' they just smell blood, then eat. Her memoir is a powerful account of how false convictions are created in Italy. Another book I just finished is John Grisham's newest about the top ten best examples of how a good system on paper is gradually converted into a money-sucking Graftopolis launching pad for the most ambitious and unscrupulous local officials into higher political office. Centurion Ministries contributed five of the examples in "Framed!"

I found a 3rd book that I hope to get soon. Daniel Sapiens was on TV, like Grisham, selling his work, "The Sing Sing Files." He quoted a program that tracks innocent convictions, saying that 3200 innocents were "Found!" over the past 30 years. It took an average of 14 years for them to overcome the appeals judges' Conviction Preserving Bias. After Herculean efforts by many others, they are "Found!" Can we estimate how many remain lost? Yes, given these facts. In 1976, DAs were given back their death privileges after passing out too many death sentences to minorities by excluding them from juries. Since then, they have passed out 900 more death sentences. In 1987, irrefutable DNA science forced judges to free more than 164 innocent victims of death sentence abuse. By dividing 164 by 900, we find that the minimum false conviction rate is 18%. We can use this jury-failure rate to estimate a minimum of how many innocent convictees remain "Lost" among the 2.2 million US captives. Because 3,200 innocents "Found!" represent the Minimum Innocent-Conviction Rate, we divide this by 18 to find 1%, then multiply by 100 to get the minimum number of total innocent captives, which is 17,777. Subtract the 3,200 "Found!" from this and we discover that at least 14,577 innocent captives are still "Lost."

My own book is like this, showing statistics and providing a comprehensive analysis of how the Conviction Creating Industry really works. It is Titled, "Methods of False Conviction." It is free to anyone by email, and essential for preventing our kids from being "Lost!" to Conviction Industry.

Brute Minimalism, by Amanda Webber

I used to be a careless brat. I lost things all the time. Once, a Blackberry left behind in a taxi made a miraculous return, curbside at LaGuardia, moments before liftoff. A Tiffany necklace, likely stolen by my cat, was found gnarled under a floorboard years later. Several years' worth of photos from past lives and trips abroad are forever trapped in countless lost and broken cameras and phones. A cheap coin purse dropped in the street was found and mailed to me by a stranger (missing the \$20 inside). A Prada wallet, also forgotten in a cab, was not returned. One silver, handmade earring was misplaced, replaced and then lost again, thanks to a faulty clasp.

Now that I am where I am, I have few material possessions to lose. Immaterial gains and losses are a different conversation. That's the beauty of downsizing to a single, two-by-two drawer: I have only what I need, I know where everything is, and the value of each item is not lost on me. Prison has made me a mindful minimalist, surviving in the wild.

When tidying my bunk one recent morning, I nearly lost one of my most valuable belongings. One that brings a critical iota of peace in a chaotic place. Earplugs. And, hear me out – these are not prison earplugs made from latex gloves and wads of tampon cotton. These are real earplugs, the type used to drown out jackhammers, leaf blowers and lawnmowers. They are a rather rare commodity in here. A luxury I need to maintain sanity.

So that morning, after I made my bed, folded away each article of clothing and wiped down the cold grey metal bed frame, I panicked when I found a lone earplug next to my mat. I quickly deduced that I must have thrown out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. In a panic I ran to the trash can.

First, I was thankful to find the bin at the door – I reached it just before it was to be emptied. Then I peered in, terrified that the runaway earplug might be in there, terrified that it might not. Fortunately, it was floating on the surface, like a bright green gem, alongside crumpled perfume samples I'd torn from an issue of Elle. I reached in, careful to avoid touching any trash or causing the gem to slide down into the abyss, where I would certainly deem it lost for good.

Successfully extracted, pinched between my forefinger and thumb, I held the earplug up above me in a show of victory. I scrubbed it with bleach, never happier to find anything in my life. Then I reunited the pair and locked them both away, safe in my metal chest.

That evening I climbed into bed, squished the foamy torpedo and stuck it in my ear canal. The eighty-five women who screamed, fought and ran amok around me were silenced. Their ruckus became a dull and distant murmur that faded away when I closed my eyes. Thankful for my precious earplugs, I succumbed to as peaceful a slumber as one can hope to find in prison.

Lost and Found, by Scott Asalone

It was a baked potato. And they even gave butter and salt with it. Inhaling the delicious, nutty aroma, I split the potato open and allowed the butter to melt into the crevices I opened with my fork. The salt highlighted the intense, earthy flavor. Savoring every morsel, I realized that I had lost something.

I used to be able to scarf down food without tasting a bit of it. Now, whenever I have a fresh vegetable, newly baked bread, or something as unique as a baked potato (which I haven't had in a year and a half), I savor every bite. Long gone is the careless consumption of a meal while engrossed in my phone.

Prison robs you of things. No longer do I get to check my clothes in a mirror, making sure they hang well on me and are up to date in fashion. That moment (well, much longer than a moment), has been taken. Prison blues simplify choices in the morning when I'm getting dressed. Of course, I've also lost all the time I spent choosing the best ring, perhaps a chain, and of course, the right watch. All the time I spent primping has been taken from me. I just wear what I have.

Aside from reading the magazines in the library, FOMO (fear of missing out) has been taken from me. I can't access the latest news and gossip on my phone. Now, I have conversations with real people. It is especially annoying when someone raises a question — we have to figure out the answer ourselves rather than looking it up on Google. I've lost instant access to so much. Now, I have to talk with people and work with them to get things done.

No longer do I rush from task to task, enveloped by the busyness of all that I am doing.

The self-importance blurred my vision from seeing what was around me. Gone is the need to speed-walk, head down over my phone, to my next appointment. Now, I stroll to and from the chow hall, admiring the sky, identifying the birds, and breathing in fresh, free air. If I am lucky enough to be out after dark, there is always the moon to fill up my time. My business of busyness is gone.

Along the way, I lost my old identity. I am no longer the sum of the work I did or the titles of different jobs I held. None of that matters in here anyway—but it is gone. All I have left is myself, the basic adjectives of a human, if I choose to live them: kind, loving, generous, etc. No titles, jobs, perks, status.

It's been lost. All I have left is what is real.

Lost and Found, by Olivia Hernandez

Oh to be young and in love. I was 15 years old when I met Jason. He was my first real love. I say real love because it was not a one-sided crush; it was reciprocated. It was 1999, and after watching him for 3 days during lunch, two tables down from me, I got the courage to walk over to him.

I said, "Hey, where did you get that Sailor Moon patch?" That's all it took. He offered to walk me home. As we stood awkwardly by the gate in front of my house, I said, "You want to be my boyfriend?"

He said, "Okay." I had my first kiss that day. Like most adolescents, we thought we would be together forever. One lunch hour during my senior year, Jason surprised me by getting down on one knee in the quad in front of the whole student body. He pulled out a silver flower-shaped ring and asked me to marry him. As everyone cheered him on, I said yes.

You would think our parents would be mortified; you would be wrong. At this point we had been in each other's lives for almost 3 years. His family adored me and my family loved him. But alas, like most teenage love affairs, it started off full of hope, wonder, and unrealistic expectations. The harsh reality set in after graduation. There we were, 18 years old – I had gotten into college, he had not. So much change was ahead but we were too blinded by "love" or what we thought was love, to see we weren't allowing each other to grow.

One night during one of our many arguments, I ripped the ring off my finger and threw it at him. And so started the vicious cycle.

No matter where we were, I would rip the ring off my finger and throw it. I threw it out the window, down the drain, in the trash, at the ocean, in a bush. After each outburst, I would find my ring. I found it in my pants pocket, my jacket pocket, the washer, the dryer, my dresser drawer, my glove compartment. Every time I lost it, it would find me.

Jason and I stuck it out for 6 years, until one night after a gut-wrenching argument, I knew I had to make a choice. I calmly pulled the ring off my finger and placed it in his hand. I packed up my belongings and left. I never saw that ring again.

I finally lost the ring, but I found myself.

Always the Last Place You Look, by Nicholas Fugate

If you had asked if I was missing anything in life prior to incarceration, I might have said "a wife." Subconsciously, I ached for something more. I had almost everything I was taught that life was about— a good career, a house, a reliable car. The last piece of the puzzle was to start a family. This was the good life. The life my parents would love to have seen for me.

Of their three kids, they had high expectations for me. I was in advanced classes, did not curse; overall I was what other kids would call a "goody two shoes." Oh! How that changed. I was the only one to have experimented with more than just alcohol and cigarettes. Maybe it was the strictness of my parents, the lack of an outlet for these curiosities; but after finding the joy of smoking weed my senior year of high school, it was on. It wasn't long before I tried a whole array of different drugs: shrooms, cocaine, crack, ecstasy, heroin, pills, LSD, ketamine, Xanax and bath salts. However, I never let it get too out of control. I always had employment, paid my rent, and eventually went back to earn an associate's degree, then a bachelor's degree in mathematics. And then, a good career and a house on ten acres.

Despite having all these things I was told to strive for, I was not happy. Now, after having lost my house, career, and some friends, I realize that it was not a significant other that I was missing (though that would have made life a bit more tolerable). I was missing a more meaningful life. I still haven't found what that means, but I at least know what I'm looking for. It is this that has me thankful of my incarceration.

I found I have an insatiable appetite for political history and revolutionary literature. I found George Jackson, Angela Davis, Eldridge Cleaver, Mao Zedong, among others.

In a world that is burning I can not settle for a boring 9-5. I am not sure how I fit in to be a positive agent of change. It seems hard to initiate change on the inside like the Badass Karla Wooten. Luckily for me I have about 7 and half more years to arm myself physically and mentally for when that opportunity comes.

I was lost and prison found me. Sober, unsatisfied, and angry, with no responsibilities, I am more focused than ever before. I'll be more than ready to walk out that door.

Family, by Gary Farlow

*Life can be a cruel teacher
that gives the test first,
and the lesson second.*

Prison is filled with feelings of fear, anger, and shame. One's arrest, trial, and incarceration can make a person accustomed to abnormal living conditions through enforced conformity and brutality.

You lose far more than freedom. Coming to prison results in estrangement from family; as kin and friends fade away, you hear from them less and less, and visits become rarer.

When I first entered prison in 1991, I had a Christmas card list of over 200 people to whom I wrote regularly, including family. In 2024, that number has fallen to 17. Many friends, my Mom, two brothers, and one sister have passed away.

This sense of loneliness came home to me during my first Christmas in prison when I phoned home on Christmas Eve to my Mom's. Everyone was there as usual in a festive spirit – minus me. It became startlingly clear that my poor choices had taken me from those I love and I had lost far more than liberty.

Over the last 34 years I have "found" a "family." I have learned that *family* is not limited to the people with whom you share blood or DNA. Family can mean many things. During my arrest, trial, and prison, I became "out of sight, out of mind" and faded away for people with whom I once felt a close bond. I'd like to believe if the roles were reversed, that I would be more devoted to the one in my shoes, but the truth is that I can't truly say if I would be.

Sadly for some, gangs fill the breach and loss with acceptance, support, and "family ties" to replace what prison took.

Yet, I have found that in this "barren land" of toxic masculinity, violence, and shame, there are true examples of what "family" means. I have met some of the most understanding, loyal, tolerant, caring, generous, and accepting individuals I have ever had the privilege to know.

This bond carries over once many have been released, as the aforementioned 17 people on my mailing includes a solid dozen people I've served time with, now free, who I have regular contact with including mail, messaging, calls, and even visits. So while I did lose a lot as a result of incarceration, I have also found a new family of people with whom I share more than DNA – we share a bond forged in the very fires of hell on earth known as prison.

Finding the Lost, by Jacob Lester

Listen to what your mind and body attempt to tell you as you sit, calming your mind and focusing on your breath. As you let the chatter of the Monkey Mind start to naturally still, what do you find? Follow the breath, feeling it at the tip of your nose, in, out, in, out. As you do, does the thinking begin to slow? Breath slowly allowing your body to do as it is supposed to, but keeping your attention focused on the breath.

As you do, notice what is lost and found. Slowly, ever so slowly, the racing thoughts calm, allowing the mind's inner calm to be exposed. As you gain focus, you find the inner calm that so many of us have lost and do not realize we have. So breathe, and when the world is becoming chaotic and overwhelming, follow the breath until calm returns.

What is Lost when ChatGPT writes? What is Found when a Human sits at his Desk and Opens a Vein? A Convict's Musing on ChatGPT, by Leo Cardez

Unlike ChatGPT, human writers are Beautifully Messy. With ChatGPT there are no surprises, no imagination (not really), no vault of forgotten memories locked away in secret chambers waiting to bleed on the page. We have an opinion then change it, an idea then kill it, heart then break it; let our monkey brain swing from branch to branch with only a vague idea of where we're heading.

Forget being deemed subhuman and warehoused in one of America's finest gray crossbar resorts on the fringes of the world without access to information or technology. Forget your prison pen, a torture device like the innards of a real pen, causes cramps that will lock up your hand within the hour. Forget the lighting has two settings, squint and squint harder. Forget the stench, like trying to write while stuck in a dumpster in the August heat. Forget you earn less than fifty cents a day scrubbing toilets for eight hours just to buy a ten-dollar typing ribbon. Could you forget all that? Yes? Good.

Imagine what began as a nonny to stave off the tedium alchemizing into an act of identity and defiance. Imagine writing becoming both your compass and your anchor. Imagine your family telling you they are proud of you (Hard stop. Goddam, imagine that!). Imagine achieving a type of freedom that is not decided by where you live but instead your writing soars over and through concrete and steel to help one person survive what you have endured—just one. It's hard to imagine, I know.

ChatGPT writes, sure. But only because a combination of ones and zeros decides it. We write because it is how we make sense of the world, because it exposes our greatest fears and truest selves; wounds, scars, and all those messy parts, because writing our unique experiences is what we can give to the world. I'm going a bit woo-woo, in a rare flow, the words coming naturally. I write because I want others to understand, hell because I want to understand. I write because I miss the personal connection, because I'm desperate to feel something (anything), to feel like I still matter, to show the world I'm still here—you can't see me, but you can hear me... if you're willing. I write to justify my life, my living. I write because to not write would feel like I'm already dead and buried. Is it beautifully messy? Damn right.

Lost and Found by, Jeremy Brown

Quit hanging onto the handrails. Let go. Surrender. Go for the ride of your life. Do it everyday. - Melody Beattie

Many things I have lost, few things have I actually found.
What abounds is the sound of Self,
As I continually re-find my lost Self,

I do become refined, in between Time, inside a space,
Inside this space, I reach, for what I thought I lost,
Until what I found became lost,
As my true self, unchained & unbound,
Reached higher and higher, until my Highest self, once again became found.

Prisoner Express Mini Picture Theme Anthology



Girls' Night Out, by Tisha Morley

Girlfriends are the best! They love you no matter what and they'll be the first to tell you the truth when you are on the wrong path. They outlast annoying teachers and are there for you when that guy breaks your heart and will resist all urges to say they told you so. They listen when you need to talk about everything and nothing.

I miss mine. I miss our nights together and nights in with our kids when we couldn't get a sitter. I miss the easy, the non-judgment, and the fun. Recognizing that things changed, I look forward to hanging out with them again.

Girls Gone Wild II, by Karla Wooten

Now is the hour when women need to speak truth to power – to get out and vote before there is no more hope. What about our children and grandchildren and how we have been set back for 50+ years?

What about our Pain, our Rights, and our Tears?

5 decades of our Rights have been erased—what does it say about the state of the world when in America in 2024 we have no rights to make decisions about our health?

Now is the hour when we need to vote and put these men out of office who are a colossal joke. How dare men make these decisions about Women's Rights – stand up LADIES... now is the time to VOTE & FIGHT for our rights.

I'm feeling anxious like a little girl about the state of America and yes, the fate of the world. I am concerned about my grandchildren, especially my little girls...

But what do I know?

I grew up on the wrong side of town living in the generation of Girls Gone Wild. No sense or sensibility – the MTV/VH-1 generation with all common sense lost to reality TV.

A world where everyone is going to hell – and those that are NOT end up in jail. I shudder when I think of the horrors and troubles I see.

My generation seems doomed – people's whole world is consumed by Zoom, the Trump Show, & reality TV.

Mothers against daughters, fathers against sons, mass shootings and everyone has a gun.

All day on TV people are getting killed by guns – by each other and the police – it seems. Like war has ravaged this world, it is not safe for women, men, boys, or girls.

Everyone wants the Wild Girl but where is her protection? Everyone is longing for the past, like Arizona and those 1864 laws.

When civility was first and not the last resort sought in conversation, when people pretended like they truly wanted to do right for the nation. The world is longing for times when words spoken were actually true and not mass political, gaslighting manipulation of me and you.

When politicians seeking power did not LIE like dogs all day, every day. 24/7, politicians seek 15 minutes of fame. They are despicable without shame.

Politicians deprive millions of their Rights to vote, causing women to live like the Great Depression, enacting oppressive laws every time that

Congressional & Republican legislatures are in session.

Republican politicians all want to live in a white house built by the slaves, in the home of the free and the home of the brave.

This is NOT a joke—where is the HOPE?

Women keep being told there is H.O.P.E. - (Hold. On. Pain. Ends.) When will this pain end for Women, friend? What is this world coming to? The truth is it's time that the Wild Girls Rule. When I say Wild Girls I mean LGBTQ+, Women with the Power to lead the charge and to make the change, women who decide that everything must change; and Women who will make the excellent decision that the Status Quo for Women can NOT remain.

I worry about the world and its insanity – people in power who do not care about Humanity. They have no compassion, they have no soul.

Women/Girls Gone Wild are the last Hope.

Joy in Shared Friendship, by David Lee Wilson

This brings back wonderful memories of my friends and I. All standing in my backyard huddled around a towering fire, and the charcoal grill going. We were all together, happy swapping stories, snide comments, playing around, and joking with each other. Cooking steaks, dogs, and burgers on the grill filled the air with the amazing taste and smells of a meal worthy of cherishing. My neighbor had a gorgeous Malamute that befriended me and would often break free from her backyard prison to spend time with me. Her owner would lock her up on her chain outside, and then she would go to work.

So when this beautiful Malamute broke her restraints, she would traverse the half block to my house in Tacoma, Washington, and then called for me until I came for her. This day of backyard celebration was no different. Out front next to my two 50CC gas-powered scooters and 1200CC 1984 Yamaha Venture Royale was this precious Malamute howling and barking dragging along

with her a large portion of her still-attached chain.

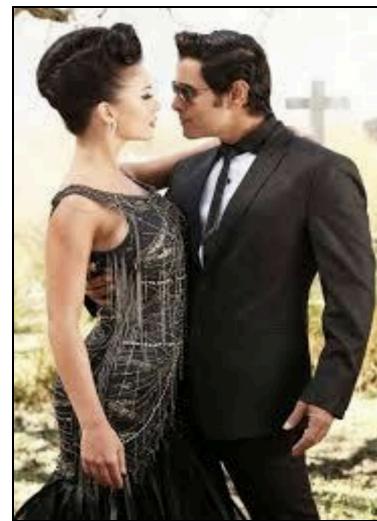
My friends and I saw this precious fugitive as needing a friend. We aided and abetted her escape by inviting her down to the backyard where we promptly pampered her with devoting love and affection before hand-feeding her expensive steaks, dogs, and burgers.

We then freed her from her reminder of captivity (the long chain) and put her into my 2012 Chevy Malibu LTZ. I took her to the pet store where I bought her a harness and leash. From there, I fitted the harness onto her with the help of the store owner, and we walked all over Tacoma's business and university districts before returning to my car. That evening, this gorgeous animal and I returned to my house and we both savored some much-needed water.

When her owner returned home from work, she had her boyfriend in tow. They went inside together and disappeared. One of my friends asked if we should take her dog back. I said don't bother. She knows where to find her. Sure enough, this nice woman and her boyfriend arrive to retrieve her companion, her boyfriend giving us all dirty threatening looks, while my neighbor asks us if she has been a problem. We ensured her that she was loved and adored. No problems at all.

Retrieving her snapped chain, I removed the harness and leash. The owner then asked us if she told any of us she loved us. I was confused but said no. The owner asked if I minded, as she pointed at the plate of dogs. I said no, not at all. She grabbed a dog and hung it over her companion's face. She instructed her to sit, and she complied. She then said "Okay, now say I LOVE YOU," and out of this beautiful creature we all heard "I Wuvvv Ou, I Wuuuvvv You!"

Our friendship included an unexpected addition to our joyous celebration, who then became the apex of our joy and attention. That was July 4th, 2019. Memories cherished, we cling to forever. May all of yours remain forever cemented in your hearts.



Forever My Love, by Jack Simpson

Barb and I got married on June 23, 1972. We dated for over five years. We met in fifth grade and started as friends throughout our school years until we finished. Our love for one another has been that strong.

During the summer, I cut grass and saved my money. Wintertime, I would cut wood and rake leaves to help save money up for our future. On the weekends, we would go to the picture show and enjoy the movie, popcorn, and a soda each. It was my treat. The best part was holding her close to me.

The house we bought was built in the '30s, a small house just right for two people or three. "Hey Barb, what do you want to do in the kitchen? Are we painting or are we papering?"

"Hold on John," was all I heard when she came into the kitchen. In her hands, she held one gallon of paint and in the other strawberry wallpaper. "I would like both. Before you start, we will paint first and then do the wallpaper last."

So I opened the paint and started with the trim. The ceiling would be done in no time. I found out the hard way that two people with different ideas don't mix well.

The wallpaper was a breeze. At 8 PM, I opened a soda and sat back to look at our finished work. The wallpaper looked great, and the fresh paint added the final touch.

"Barb, you did a great job on the wallpaper. It adds so much to the kitchen."

"I'm glad we got all of this done in one day, John. Now I can cook us a proper meal in our new kitchen."

"That would be so nice, Barb." I did it only for her, as I rose to hold her close.

Only for forever, my lover.

Spiritual Clarity, by Carl Oliver

It's in our embrace. The moment we lock eyes to tango, we move with such grace; it's got to be the Lord's dance. All I see is you and nothing else. I feel a love like I've never felt before as we glide across the dance floor. It's as if someone else is driving, and we're just enjoying the ride, lost in each other's eyes. We could die today and be in our Sunday best, ready to meet our maker as he opens the gates for us and invites us to dine with him for eternity.

Last Dance.

#1 Fan: In the Shade of Her Shadow, by Terance DeJuan Wilson

But she was a creature of the wind, always setting off to this or that corner of the world to star in some fashion show. Destinations that I'd only dreamed of, like Monaco, Milan, Bogota, Dubai, or Tel Aviv. She would step from the pages of *Vogue Italia* onto the Lanvin runway, catch a red-eye flight to New York to shoot an editorial with the deputy general manager of Dior, have brunch with Anna Wintour, hop on a five-hour flight home to LA, go off to some charity event, then step through my television screen from the set of the Late Night show directly into my bedroom to settle in. These were the best of sleepless nights, her long slender legs in black tights, a fitted black mesh top on, and blue Dodgers ballcap on backward. No makeup. It went like that for a while. I never did call. She would at her leisure, usually after midnight. More often, though, she would just drop by, the best secret hiding in plain sight. Usually, we lay up in bed. I never did say much; I just listened to her thinking out loud. She would compartmentalize her thoughts or write them down to read them to me. When she spoke, I listened, thankful for the gift of her imperfection. More than anything, I desired to gain her confidence, to understand her. I needed to get under her guard to preview what that thing was that she was protecting. Sometimes, she just needed me to calm her down. Slow her down, to remind her that she was deserving of every achievement to her name, because she had a lot of haters. I had the distinct impression that she wasn't entirely at peace with herself, and no amount of success, fortune, or fame would ease her discomfort.

Seeing Eye to Eye, by Jon Frey

I was with my wife for 25 years before I got locked up. We were always great friends and had a good relationship, as long as I was in charge.

My criminal conduct and conviction came from a childhood injury I never dealt with. Sometimes, early life traumas are so bad that they get packed away without realizing their impact on present-day decisions.

Thanks to my judge, I was given a year of pretrial release and was allowed to surrender voluntarily to prison. That year afforded me opportunities to dig into my past through therapy and recovery groups to understand my thought processes and how they affected others.

Slowly, I was able to let go of my need to be in control. Facing a lengthy prison sentence and being kept on home confinement gave me no choice but to let go of things I could no longer control.

The more I let go, the more I could share with my soulmate, who is willing to do anything for me. For the first time, I felt like my wife and I were seeing eye-to-eye. I handed over control of my life to her, and she knew exactly what to do to take care of us. I no longer call the shots, and she relies on my knowledge to make decisions for us.

While prison has created a physical barrier between us, this separation has forced us to see everything eye-to-eye for the good of our lifelong coupleship and our family. I need her, she needs me. I can't function without her, she can't function without me. As the cliché goes, there is no "I" in team.

When we are reunited in the world, our relationship will be much more meaningful and fulfilling in ways I never thought possible through our mutual love, commitment, and dependency, seeing each other eye-to-eye.

Couple Dancing, by Omar Recalde

I met Maggie at Lincoln Center Tango night about 1,000 years ago, when I was young and beautiful. For about a month in the summer, there were dance classes given in front of the Met Opera House: salsa, foxtrot, waltz, and tango.

She had her hair swept up, cat-eye glasses, and a green suit with a skirt an inch or 2 above her knees. She was dancing with another woman. I had been dancing with an elderly woman. That's how I thought my night would be, really. Sort of well dressed as I was (clean T-shirt, brown henley that matched my dress shoes, and

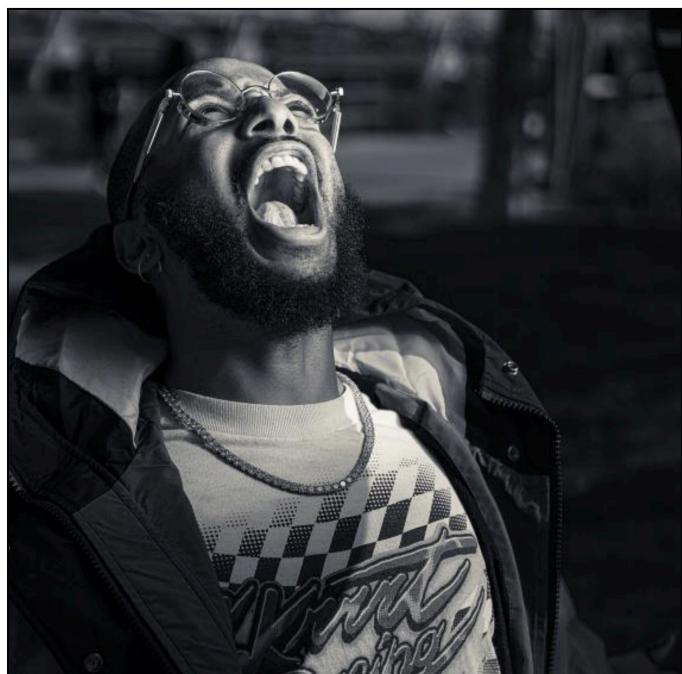
blue jeans), I thought I'd take the subway in from Queens, dance for a couple of hours in a group setting, then come back home.

In reality, there were maybe a dozen of us who were paying attention to the instructors on stage. The old woman must've seen the gleam in my eye or my small moves as I learned the steps. She invited me to dance. She was real good (must've been a terror when she was younger!), and I was having fun. After the instructors had left, the DJ took over. That's when I saw Maggie across the dance floor. It was crowded by then, and I lost sight of her almost immediately. In that brief flicker of eye contact, I'd never seen a more beautiful woman. Living in NYC, I'd seen a lot of attractive women, but Maggie was something else. I don't know if she danced into an actual spotlight, but it felt like it was her, and gray all around her.

I danced another two or three pieces with the sweet lady. She said goodnight, and I gave her a little bow.

I stood for a while, watching the other dancers, doing a little shuffling. And then Maggie was there. She asked me to dance. I asked about her friend. She said they'd just met. She asked about my grandma. I smiled and said the same. We danced together for a couple of minutes before she said, "Hey, let's just do our own thing." We danced, this time adding salsa and merengue moves, just moving.

It was one of the best nights of my life.



I Release, by Jeremy Brown

I release myself from this torment,
I scream at the indifference of this world,
I release my soul from the Horrors I have seen,
I release others from the suffering they will have
to endure,
I release myself from the Duality that recurs,
I release myself from all the pain I have incurred,

I release my soul from the physical hell of a dying
body.
I release myself from all versions of the created
me,
I release myself into Eternity, The Cosmic Sea...

Screaming, by Alana Duncan

All I hear is screaming.

Every nerve of my being screams with guilt,
shame, pain, regret, longing, and sadness.

The demons taking refuge in the dark corners of
my soul tire from screaming for light, for peace.

My body screams for human connection: to hug
my children, to embrace a lover, to once again
hold close the dear ones left in my life.

My heart screams for silence. It prays for the
relief that only sleep can bring, only to face the
dread of waking to it again.

My words fumble, and I get nervous and
awkward. The troll in the back of my brain is
screaming, "You're not good enough," "You're
doing it wrong," "NO ONE CARES ABOUT YOU."

Everyone is screaming over the top of each other,
and sometimes it gets to be too much.

I search for a quiet, safe place to hide, but there
is none. Not here.

The screaming gets louder and louder. Sometimes
I can block it out. Other times aren't so nice.

I scream at you with my eyes, pleading for
someone to notice I'm falling. Catch me, please,
someone... anyone...

Angry Black Man, by Shaquille Davis

How can we not be angry? The people who came to a place populated with good-hearted Native Americans slaughtered and raped them. Too lazy to build on top of the bodies, they decided to go to another country of kind-hearted people. They enslaved the Natives, brought them back to a new world filled with demons.

Forced them to work, as they tortured, killed and raped their people. Treated them as less than livestock. Bleed their own culture out of them, forcing a new religion on them, and whitewashed a proud people who flourished in their own lands. 400 years later, suddenly, the enslaved descendants are the ones being treated as the bad people.

The ones too afraid, the ones who are the savages killing and raping. As the oppressors try to switch the narrative and roles in a country built on greed and bloodshed. The same people who claimed to be the good ones, the saviors, forced the enslaved descendants into poverty-stricken areas, giving them no opportunities to better their situations.

Not letting any of them leave this area, getting shot by the ones paid with tax dollars, and not getting held accountable. But the enslaved ones' descendants are the bad ones, right? Who are the ones killing the innocent without any repercussions? Who are the ones who made the rules and laws that affect one demographic more than others?

Finding ways to put as many as they can in prison. Who are the ones pushing propaganda to brainwash the American people into believing the lies they are weaving? Demonizing the whole over the actions of the few, punishing the majority. Of course, the black man is angry. You would be too.

I Scream, by Christopher Stechman

I sit out here in the day room of my unit, having just returned from my work assignment. Before getting to this chapter of my life, I had become accustomed to the post-Christmas drop, and so I wasn't surprised by it this morning. Here is a major difference, though. Show no weakness. Let nothing bother you. Everyone is cut off from family and loved ones, so don't bother to mention that it is what is on your mind. "Regular" rec and diversions are on an interrupted schedule due to the holidays. I'm thankful for the staff we do have and the activities they help provide, however, it seems like just as the need is the greatest, they

are least available. Airwaves jammed with holiday specials do nothing but remind us of other times. Push those thoughts deeper into the dark abyss. Bottle up the frustrations.

Try not to think about the poor decisions that brought you here. Not just those that stripped away comforts and family, but those that forced the move back to the beginning. Oh yes, that will never work. Not here in the dayroom of the "starter" unit. Constant reminder of how different life here is from the clean and quiet of the honor unit. Keep pushing those negative ideas further down. Drown the depression with more commissary. Not even hungry, yet in goes the junk food. Junk food for a junk life.

Posters on the walls advise healthier eating. The posted announcement proclaims the advent of a weight loss and wellness challenge soon to start. Vending machines tempt with sweets and soda. Relentless opposing thoughts and urges.

Push those bottled-up emotions ever further down. Deeper into the ever-darkening abyss. I may not be out in the world to express myself with others, but instead, I am trapped within my own mind. A great echo chamber repeating and amplifying that which should instead be vented and forgotten.

My insides rumble. My hands tremble. Breath grows shorter. The world is crumbling. The gravity of my situation sucks all negativity into a single fine point. This star, this once glimmering soul, is on the brink of collapse.

I scream. Voiceless at first. Reaching deeper, the pain grows louder. The anguish pushes volume to all new heights. The agony of futility rumbles through every time.

I scream at the absurdity of our justice system. I scream as I know I am the one to blame. I scream in vain, hoping my voice will be heard. I scream as it is all that is left for me to do.

My insides settle. My trembling hands slowly calm again. The storm may have passed, but I know the cycle is simply restarting. It's just a matter of time. The eruption lies dormant, awaiting the pressures to squeeze forth the next scream.

Feeding Time, by Michael Sussman

At this prison facility, one of the educational handouts offered by the treatment program uses an analogy to explain how people can choose to manage their unhealthy behaviors.

Imagine

you have two bears fighting inside of you, each seeking to control your thoughts and behaviors. One bear desires to follow the principles of the "Intimacy Cycle," with the ultimate goal of building healthy relationships and living a life characterized by humility. The other bear desires to live in the "Offense Cycle" by deceiving, manipulating, and hurting others for selfish gain. Which bear will win the fight? The one you keep feeding, of course.

When I was growing up, some of the kids at my school tried to feed my Offense Bear by making fun of me. Alas, Offendy ate well as I believed what these kids were telling me: that I was weird, ugly, and "not good enough." My older brother fed Offendy every time I begged him to do something with me because he would always reply with "Let's not and say we did." The funny comment made me smile, but deeper down I felt the sting of rejection. Even the rock band Van Halen fed Offendy with their music video "Hot for Teacher," which ridiculed a boy my age who looked similar to me.

In time, Offendy learned to feed himself, as I told myself that I was a freak who would never fit in with the "cool" people... the ones I desperately wanted to be like.

Meanwhile, my Intimacy Bear was sorely neglected. My parents fed Intimie desserts that had some nutritional value, but not quite enough. Dad played catch with me in the backyard, taught me to play chess, and took me hunting and camping. Mom bought me clothes, packed my lunches, and cleaned up after me. What was missing were the meat and vegetables: the hugs



and kisses, the social guidance, the discussions about life.

By the time I was thirteen, Intimie had grown weak and scrawny, while Offendy was powerful and dangerous. I hated myself and resented everyone around me: the bullies who made my life miserable, the girls who thought they were too good for me, my friends who were social rejects just like me, the teachers who didn't give a crap, and my parents who remained clueless. For the next twenty-seven years, Offendy went on a rampage, feeding my emotional needs in countless selfish ways while Intimie lay in a coma.

Finally, at age 40, I was arrested.

My first year in prison, I enrolled in the treatment program, and everything changed. I had to disclose my offensive behaviors to the other group members – not the list of crimes I'd been charged with, but the nitty-gritty truth of what I'd actually done. To my surprise, the female therapist responded with compassion instead of revulsion, and the other men didn't judge me, but instead, showed appreciation for my honesty. That's when Intimie regained consciousness.

It was the first time since I was little that I didn't see myself as a piece of garbage. Instead, I realized I was just a regular human being who had been hurt and who had made some really bad choices while trying to survive his childhood trauma. I learned that I didn't need to continue making those same choices. I could strive to become a healthier man instead.

I stopped feeding Offendy when a friend helped me identify the things I hated most about myself, and I started working toward change. I vowed I would never again allow bullies to walk all over me. I would never again quit when the going got tough. I would never again lead a hypocritical double life.

I stuffed Intimie full of treatment concepts, using new-found revelations about myself to learn how to manage and overcome my offending behaviors. I joined a Christian Bible study and realized for the first time that Jesus didn't come to Earth for the perfect people... he came for the sinners. He came for ME. I realized God still loved me, even with all of my imperfections.

As I gradually turned into the person I wanted to be, I started to love myself again. Today I love who I've become, and even though I'm still in prison, I'm finally happy. Nonetheless, my bears have never stopped fighting. If I get yelled at on the soccer field or pickleball court,

how can I remain humble while still not allowing the other person to verbally abuse me? Next thing I know, Offendy has me in the guy's face asking, "Why are you being such an asshole?" and BAM! Jesus is somewhere shaking his head.

That being said, I've learned that the toughest form of humility is having to apologize after hurting someone. That's Intimie for you.

Territory, by Howard B. Brown

Upon seeing each other, Mr. Black-bear and Mr. White-bear felt an instinct to challenge each other.

"Hey, Mr. White-bear stay out of my territory!"

"What are you talking about Mr. Black-bear?" growled Mr. White-bear. He reared up to stand tall on strong legs.

"That tree marks my territory."

"What?" growled Mr. Black-bear. As he reared up he growled.

"That tree marks my territory!" Eyes stared at eyes in anger. Sharp claws out front, paws getting ready to strike. Both growled.

"Wait!" growled Mr. White-bear. "The tree marks the end of both our territories. Let us go in peace. We are not like men fighting over someone else's territory."

"I am sorry Mr. White-bear," said Mr. Black-bear warmly. Each turned to go back to their own territory.

Untitled, by Christopher Cross

The Dance of Yin and Yang
is a delicate balance.
They are opposite - polarity.
Yet necessarily complementary,
they merge into One.

The Nameless.

Inescapable, yet not obvious,
one is contained in the other,
sister and brother,
seemingly two,
they merge into One.

The Faceless.

Manifested in all Her Children,
the Tao is made manifest

Faceless, She wears the mask of polarity.
All is many, all appears chaos,
yet will merge into One.

The Seamless.

Learn to Dance.

Enjoy it.

Shall We Dance, by Gary Farlow

"I just don't get humans!" the polar bear said.

The black bear, who was leading, just shook his head. "Make that two of us."

The duo were in a small forest clearing, having met quite by accident. The polar bear had wandered a bit further south than usual, his normal habitat shrinking due to global warming.

The black bear was farther north than he typically traveled, a combination of wildfires and human development of wilderness forcing him, like all animals, to seek new homes.

"I mean," the polar bear continued, "humans think of themselves as being so advanced, the supposed *masters* of the Earth. *Masters? Them?*"

"Imagine that," the black bear chimed in. "They are destroying the environment, waging wars all over the globe, and literally *hate* each other."

"Yeah. One human will actually despise his fellow human just because his skin is black!" the polar bear said.

"Look at us," the black bear laughed. "My fur is black, yours is white, and we're dancing!"

"We're both bears!" the polar bear said, laughing. "And how 'bout them Pandas!"

"Don't forget the Koalas!" the black bear added.

"Hey, they stay high on Eucalyptus all day, they jus' don't care!" the polar bear laughed uproariously.

The duo continued to dance, ignoring the foxes, squirrels, and even a moose who had all gathered to watch.

"Just imagine," the polar bear mused, "if humans could be more like us..."

"No climate change, no war, no hate," the black bear said. "Kinda hard to imagine."

"Well we can dream," the polar bear said, a bit sadly.

"And while we do, we dance!" the black bear smiled.

"And we dance," the polar bear agreed.



Chasing Peace, by Jeff Hovatter

A long week of hot, sweaty days, and fitful nights had me longing for quiet solitude in nature. A few essentials in a day pack to get me through a night of (hopefully) rest under the stars in the mountains north of the city, waited in my truck.

Traffic dwindled an hour out of town. Another hour, and I parked at the trailhead, noting a small, dusty coupe as the only other car. It had Wisconsin plates; a very different place than these dry mountains of Arizona.

The trail climbed at a gentle rate for the first couple miles, then climbed sharply to follow a flat, wooded ridge. The broad sandy path allowed me to approach unheard as she stood looking into the treetops.

Nearly my height, with dark hair to her shoulder blades, a deep copper tan suggested Native American ancestors. She turned when I spoke from five yards, to reveal chiseled, pretty features with full lips, a sprinkling of freckles under her eyes and across her nose, prominent dimples bracketed a wide, bright smile.

“Hi, I saw a squirrel up there, but I don’t know where it went.”

“I hope I didn’t startle you.”

“No, not at all.”

She was exploring the west before returning to college in a few more weeks. Her plan is to return to the hardwoods and lakes to become a primary school teacher. A suggestion from a gas-stop clerk had sent her to this trail, and she was glad she had come. “What brings you here?” she asked.

“I’m looking for quiet and solitude. The city gets me down, work wears me out, and I go off to nature to escape my demons.”

“Your demons live in the city?”

“No. Unfortunately they go where I go, but it’s easier to avoid them in open spaces... in town they sneak up on me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, but it’s my load to bear. They come at night for the most part. Hard work, the good-tired of outdoor activity, a quiet dark desert night, combined, can help me elude them for a few hours.”

“Do you want to talk about them?”

“No.”

“I don’t mind.”

With a short shake of my head, “No, they make me cry when I try to talk about them. I appreciate the offer though. I had better keep moving, I hope to stay by the stream in the next valley tonight.”

She chose to walk with me for the next hour, turning back where the trail dropped over the brow of the ridge.

After several hours of restful sleep, I woke to breakfast by the gurgling stream. At mid-morning I bathed in a shallow pool, and wishing I had planned for a longer stay, reluctantly headed back the way I came.

Into the Woods, by Andrea Lindsay

Into the woods I go, and no shortcomings or disabilities will stop me.

The woods beckon to me, and I answer the summons.

Inside I hear the creatures stirring; I listen to the whispers of the leaves as the wind dances through the trees; I sense the vegetation growing.

Here I am home, and no one can take that away from me.

In the woods, I feel no judgement or condescension.

Away from society, I am at peace for a while.

Thank the Goddess for this refuge!

The Hike, by K. Daniel Okken

This is what I do. This is what I do to clear my head. This is what I do to rejuvenate my body and spirit and mind, and to give my body strength. Hey, I’m only 5’3, weigh 140 pounds, and I’m 70 years old. But it is nothing for me to carry

a 60-pound external frame backpack, with a camelback and full extra; all my gorp, jerky, dried foods, gas stove and tank, tent, sleeping pad, flashlight, camera, et cetera; and make 10 to 13 miles a day in rough terrain. Or 25-30 miles a day in a prairie type landscape. My distance depends a lot on whether or not I need to make it to a re-supply waypoint by a certain time.

Otherwise, I like to take my time exploring off-the-beaten-path, taking pictures, examining the flora and fauna, and enjoying the scenery. If I have the supplies to last me a few days, but only have to go one to make a resupply point, I might camp in a secluded park and, like Thoreau, make notes and sketches of what I see around me: a Flicker hammering its rows of holes in the back of a yellowwood tree, hoping the sap will attract insects so he can come back and gobble them up; a ruby-throated hummingbird sucking the nectar of a columbine; the leathery leaves of a laurel and their sweet fragrance along with their cousin the rhododendron, or the splashing and murmuring of a stream, tumbling and gliding through rocks and pools on its way to the sea.

Ahh, life at its grandest; the peace that the wonders of God's creation brings when understood within the timeless realm of his majesty!

Ahh... But then I come out of my daydream and stare at a 7 x 12 realizing it's been 12 years since the above happened; and that only pictures like this cause me to take these hikes in my mind as it wanders through God's wonders. And it leaves my mind only hoping that one day I will be free and able to do this again... well, someday.

Another Life, by Brandon S. LaVergne

When I was a child, I often went into the woods near my home and played by myself. I would make trails to follow. Build tree houses. This was southern Louisiana and we have bayous instead of creeks. The woods I played in had a bayou running through it. I sometimes swam in the bayou. Built a bridge over that bayou. And when the floods came and destroyed my bridge I would just build another one.

As I got older I would string ropes across that bayou and "fast line" across it wearing homemade harnesses. My tree houses got better. Camping out in the woods became a thing, friends became involved and we cleared out a camping area for our sleepovers. Even let the girls join us.

Looking at that girl in the woods with her backpack reminded me of my childhood wooden playground. It seems like another life now. A distant memory. I'm 45 years old with LWOP. Yet I'm determined to see those woods again one day. Maybe swim in the bayou again. The things we miss when we lose everything. We learn to appreciate it when we get it back.



The Island, by Karla Wooten

No man is an island, is a statement which is true - we all need someone in our life, if for no other reason than for friendship or companionship.

We are not ships that are passing in the night. We require sunlight and community, peace, hope, love, joy, and unity.

There are studies that indicate after the pandemic, the United States had millions of people experiencing dynamic mental health crises that went undiagnosed as a result of the isolation that was a factor from COVID.

Medical personnel did their best to handle millions of people's deaths. Most medical professionals' lives were forever changed, and most Americans know someone who died or that was ill from COVID.

No man, woman, boy, or girl is an island, and this is true. We all need each other in some way - you need me, and I need you.

The Island, by James Bricker

The first thing that I thought of as I looked at this picture was in regard to my life being incarcerated. There are many times when I feel like I am all alone on a deserted island and there is no chance of being rescued. Where I am currently housed at, it is a three hour drive from my home area which makes it difficult for me to get a personal visit with my family. Plus, my father is not very good at using a computer, so he is unable to do a video visit. This means that I have not had a visit since before the start of the pandemic.

This past September, my mother passed away from difficulties in regard to the stroke she had three years ago. Due to me being in jail, I was unable to attend the viewing or the funeral. Even though I regularly talk to my father, I have to be careful of what I say on the phone so the prison officials do not take it the wrong way and place me in isolation. In addition, the chaplains were not much help and it made me feel all alone. It was like being on an island without another person being present.

Another thing that came from me looking at this picture was that everyone needs to find a place of inner peace and tranquility. The island in the middle of the water represents a place where someone can go and meditate and be by yourself, if not physically, then at least mentally and spiritually. Prisons have an environment where inmates live in dormitories or in a cell with another person, which means it is hard to be by yourself.

No matter what is going on in your life, you should not be an island. It will cause many kinds of problems if you try to do everything on your own. Everyone needs someone to talk to. So, in conclusion, an island is only a temporary refuge but all people should look to the shore in order to share their life and views with the rest of the world.

Island Shadows, by Jonathan Holeman

We are all just drifting islands
Floating deep out in the sea
Our shores are never really touching
And grains of sand like memories.

The brightest point in every shadow is found in the center. There's one little speck of light surrounded by shades of darkness. The reasoning

mind might attempt to deny this. Some things tend to defy logic. Years of odd scientific testing and measuring are undergone to disprove or prove a theory or anomaly.

Still, light is a wave that bends around any object, and in that object's shadow, there will always be one bright spot.

We live our lives casting shadows in every room, every place we travel. Still a shadow cannot exist without light, and in every shadow, light exists. When two shadows touch, the shadows' objects might not be touching at all.

A person's mind can be full of light but still that kind of light casts shadows. Sometimes the shadows inside are the darkest of all.

If we all are just like islands, separated by the oceans, then maybe we are only really touching when the light causes our shadows to meet. Our memories are just like the grains of sand on any beach. Millions of tiny soft or sharp little grains; when we pick up a handful, we are lucky to find the ones we want. Sometimes, the waves will wash pieces of us away. Perhaps we will explode as the volcano below melts us away. Maybe we will just break apart and be swallowed by the sea.

We are all just drifting islands
Floating deep out in the sea
Our shores are never really touching
And grains of sand like memories.

Too Late, by Shaquille Davis

Fools. Fools. Fools. Why didn't you listen to the scientist? Why didn't you pay attention to the signs? Fools. You listened to the religious fanatics, and look where we are now.

Could you not tell the planet is a living creature? We were a cancer on it and it fought back and won. You thought your gods would save you, you thought he really created this magnificent world in seven days? You believed it because you're a fool, an ignorant fool.

You just thought the worsening storms and weather were god's wrath. Wrong, you fool. You were killing the world that provides everything you needed to survive, polluting it with your filth and overfishing the oceans, contaminating your drinking source, you fool. You built factories that exhale toxic fumes into the air to build your phones, you fool. You have covered the land with the blood and corpses of the unchosen, on your path to power, you fool.

You made a bomb with the power to kill everything on the planet, for what, you fool? Power, a dream, peace? The world has had enough and finally decided to fight back. Reverting back to her beautiful blue marble appearance she had once before, pure, virgin. And I don't fault her for that, you fool.

Upcoming Word Themes:

- **Due Nov 1 2025:** “Fork in the Road”
- **Due Dec 1 2025:** “Gifts”
- **Due Jan 1 2026:** “Masks”
- **Due Feb 1 2026:** “Lies”
- **Due March 1 2026:** “Dogs”
- **Due April 1 2026:** “Bottled Emotions”
- **Due May 1 2026:** “The Test”

Upcoming Picture Themes:

Due 11/1/25:



Due 12/1/25:



Due 1/1/26:



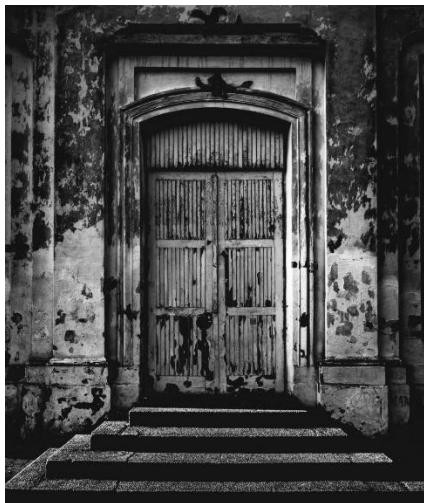
Due 2/1/26:



Due 3/1/26:



Due 4/1/26:



Due 5/1/26:



Word & Picture Theme Guidelines

Use our word and picture “theme” prompts as a starting point to get your creative juices flowing! Send us your writing for a chance to be included in our Prisoner Express Theme Anthologies. **When sending in your work, please be mindful of these guidelines.**

- 1.) **Word Theme** submissions must be **nonfiction** (true stories or your thoughts/beliefs).
- 2.) **Picture Theme** submissions can be **fiction OR nonfiction**.
- 3.) Your writing should be **semi-cohesive and clearly relate to the theme** consistently throughout the essay or story. The reader should be able to generate a connection between your writing and the themes at hand.
- 4.) On the first page of your submission, **please clearly indicate which month and theme** (picture or word) your submission is for.
- 5.) **Please include your name & page number(s)** on EVERY PAGE of your submission. **Your first and last name;** OR your pen name; OR your first and last name with a clear note that you wish to be “Anonymous.” (When using a pen name, keep in mind that if your piece is published to

our website, people will not be able to respond to you as they won’t be able to look up your address.) **Page numbers** are very important if there are more than one!

- 6.) Please **write legibly**. If we can’t read your writing, we can’t transcribe and print it.
- 7.) Please keep your entry to **800 words maximum**.

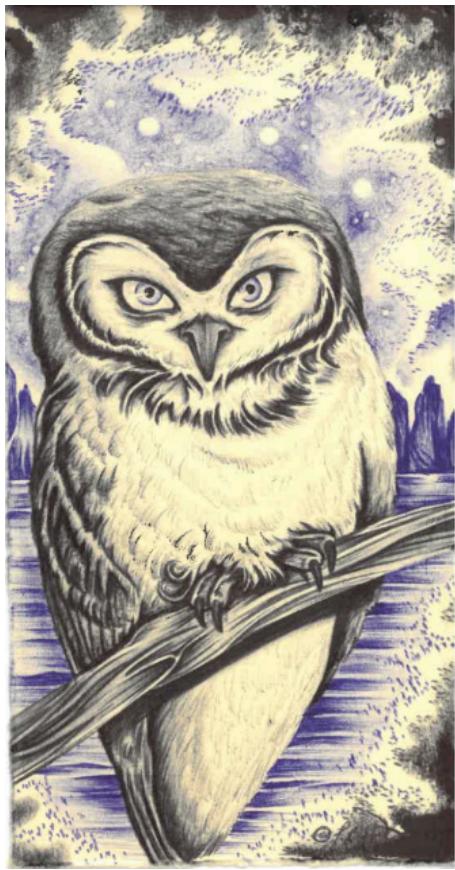
Send your submissions to:

**Durland Alternatives
Library/Prisoner Express**
P.O. Box 6556
Ithaca NY 14851

OR email them to:

PrisonerExpressThemes@Gmail.com
Contact us with any questions.

Please note! Submissions will not be included in the anthology if they do not follow the guidelines.



Jonathan Holeman

Final Notes

These are changing times on so many levels. We start with a president ruling by executive orders. That is followed by a Congress that up to now has not challenged his authority to do so and a Supreme Court that up to now is reluctant to reign in his instincts to believe his word is law. I watch it all with great concern and try to meet this challenge through kindness and generosity. I don't think my railing against others, even though I feel the urge, is my best path forward. I wonder what it is like for you who are in prison to see someone leading the nation who seems to be able to ignore or stretch the law to his will. If anyone has something to say about that, write to me. Put **Attn: "Rule of Law" - Gary** on the envelope so it comes to me. I am fine if you disagree with my perspective. I'd like to know how our current political scenario is playing out with you.

Even in prison I urge you to stand up for your truth but to do so with kindness and generosity

when possible. If we are to live in any community and we want a good life, I believe we should want a good life for all and find ways to organize as a society to provide that. Of course, that seems to be wishful thinking today, but tomorrow is still to come. I hope you have read this to the end and that what comes across is that there are many people working on the outside who care about you and the conditions you live under. We have limited means to change how things are, but if we all contribute a little then big changes can happen.

When you participate in one or more of our programs, volunteers may write to you regarding your submissions. Please note that some volunteers will continue to write and engage in an ongoing exchange of letters, and that others will not respond more than once or twice. Students get so busy with their studies and others with their jobs. That they are volunteering to read your materials and write back is a great first step. Don't take it personally if the correspondence doesn't continue. See each letter as complete and whole unto itself. Some of you send in lots of submissions and my guess is you will get the most letters. As much as the lessons we prepare are important, long ago I began seeing the multiple positive benefits of PE volunteers writing friendly personal letters to you. It breaks down barriers we did not even know existed, as preconceived notions dissipate through an honest exchange of ideas.

We hope our efforts make a difference in your life. I know speaking for myself and the folks who work on this end to keep the program going, that reading your thoughts and stories certainly impacts our lives and gives us a better understanding of the situations you face while incarcerated. We are searching for a way for you to find some inner peace and freedom to balance the confinement you currently experience.

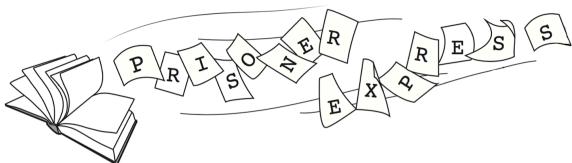
I hope you have access to other news sources than right-wing radio because they make it

sound like it is chaos in America while really the chaos is being created by our rulers in the White House who are grabbing power however they can. Don't be fooled by lies. It is ironic for me to be writing this to people in prison while our leaders seem to flout the law. Support one another as best you can. Uniting through community gives us the best chance to stand up to injustice.

Till our next newsletter I wish you well.

Gary

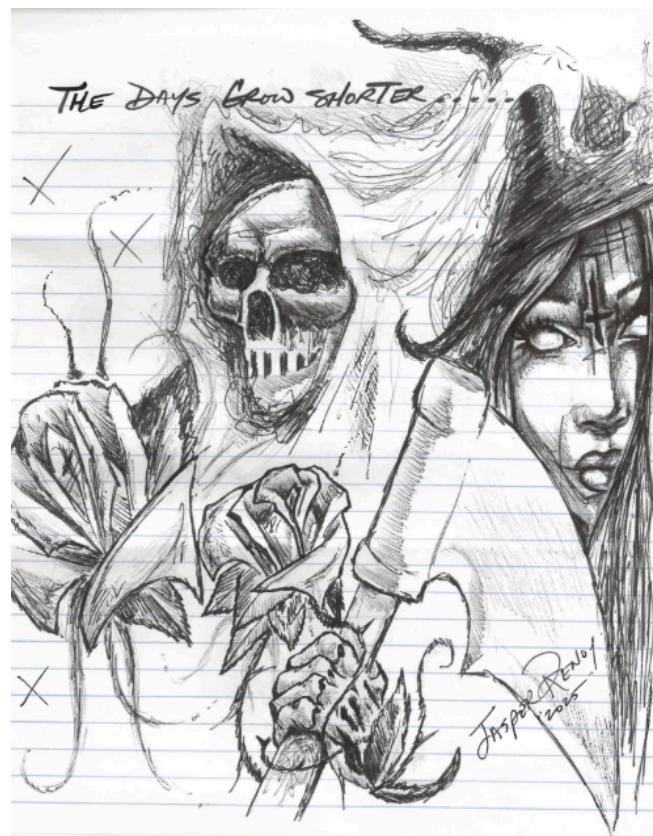
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Final note on mailing packets: The registration form is on the next page. Please remember if you send it in after we already mailed the packets you probably won't get them this time, but you will be on the list to get the next Prisoner Express newsletter. Please know you can always send in poems, journal entries, and theme essays to join those three programs immediately.



Jasper Renoy



Jasper Renoy

Fall 2025 Registration Sheet

Please carefully read the requirements of each offering before signing up.

- Arts and Crafts (A&C):** Includes ARTknows; Art Beyond Cornell; Collaging.
- Creative Writing (CW):** Journaling; Misc. Essays; Writing with Friends.
- Developing Your Mind & Body (DYMB):** Learning Spanish; History of the U.S.-Mexico Border (bilingual); Physical & Mental Exercise.
- Expedited Book Mailing Program:** Please check with the administration of your facility to be sure you are allowed to participate. If yes, please send \$4 to cover postage. Checks should be made out to CTA/PE.
 - Yes, I have enclosed or will note here how I will cover the \$4 postage:** _____
 - Number of books allowed:** _____ (Required)
 - Check ONE of the following:**
 - I am allowed hardcover and softcover books.
 - I am allowed softcover books only.
 - These are the types of books I'm interested in::
- Figuring Things Out (FTO):** Includes Understanding Legal Documents; Chess; Puzzles & Games.
- Inner Work/Outer Expression (IW/OE):** Rattle Magazine & Poetry; Meditation, Spirituality, and Recovery Journeys. Please note that this program includes two books. Please check ONE of the following:
 - Yes I can receive books;** please send them to me with the packet.
 - No I cannot receive books;** please send me the packet on its own.
- Poetry Anthology Vol 33:** This packet is an anthology of selected poems submitted by PE members. We encourage you to send us one (1) or more original poems for consideration in order to receive the packet.
- ★ Word & Picture Theme Essay Anthology - No signup required.** This packet is an anthology of word and picture theme essays by PE members; **please send at least one (1) submission for an upcoming word or picture theme to receive the packet**

NEW Permission Statement

By sending your work (including essays, artwork, journal entries, poems, etc.) to Prisoner Express (PE), you grant PE the right to publish your work in our newsletters, on our website, to our social media accounts, and/or to include it in displays designed to raise awareness about the Prisoner Express program. You retain full rights to your work and are welcome to publish elsewhere in addition to Prisoner Express at any time. If you do not wish to have your work published by PE, or wish to use a pseudonym, *please clearly write "Do Not Publish" or your pseudonym on what you send.*

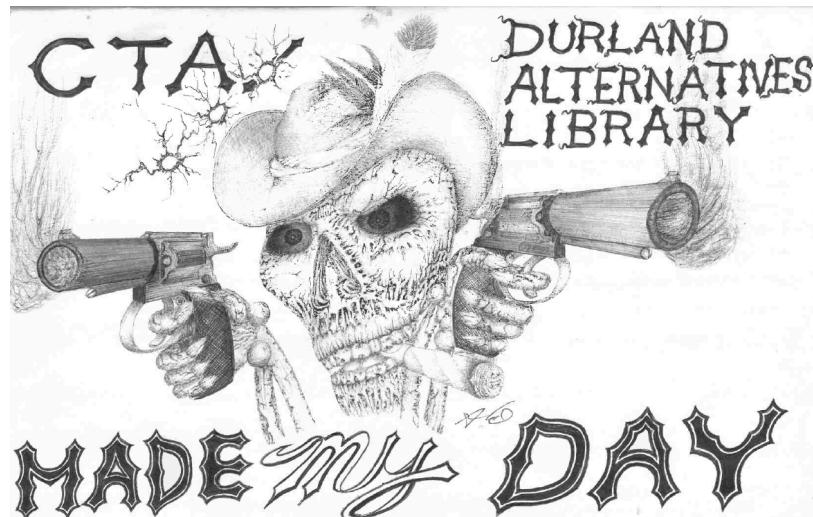
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Aaron Obeginski

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