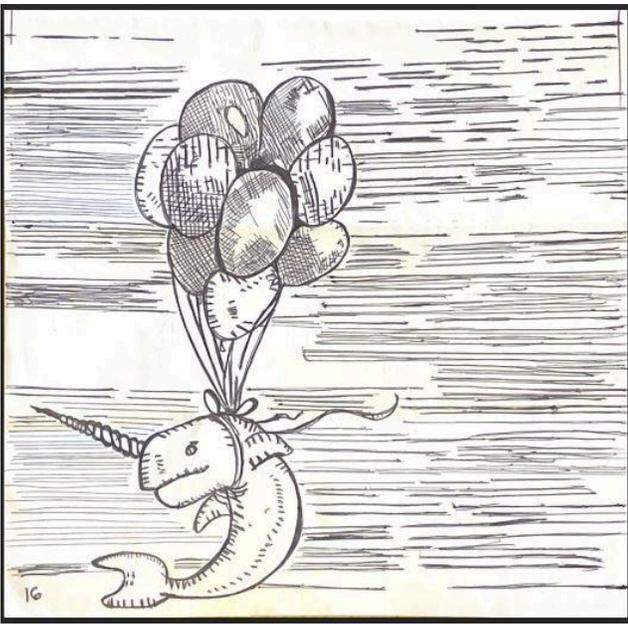


# Prisoner Express Newsletter

## Winter 2026



Tyrone Courts

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### Letter from the Director

Greetings and warm wishes to you from the folks at Prisoner Express (PE). My name is Gary and I direct the PE program, keeping it organized and moving forward. One of my tasks is assembling this semiannual newsletter that highlights writing and art submitted by members of PE this past program cycle.

This newsletter also describes the new programs we have to offer this spring cycle. PE has been publishing this newsletter since 2004 and as the organization matures, we continue to modify our mission and intention. Our experience comes primarily by reading your correspondence, and learning from you which programming is effective, helpful and inspirational versus what is not, so keep those letters and feedback coming. Your letters to us help us understand when we don't communicate as well as we would wish. We do not mind criticism on where we fall short and even more, appreciate knowing what programming interests you.

Though we do a lot, please know we are a relatively small organization, and it is not possible to respond to every individual who writes. I use this newsletter to address some of the common questions we receive.

Many people hear about us through various resource guides. Often the information presented is dated, and we might get requests for programs we no longer support. The good news is that you are holding our most recent

newsletter and we use this newsletter to update you on what we are actually doing rather than what an older edition might describe.

Prisoner Express has evolved to have multiple missions. Our first and still our primary focus is providing incarcerated men and women with information, education and opportunities for creative self-expression in a public forum. Though your bodies are locked up your minds are your own. We reach across barriers to help nurture mind and spirit through programs encouraging you towards meaningful activity.

Our second focus is sharing your writings and art with the free world population interested in what is going on with you. We do this by creating public displays of your writing and art and by posting art, journal, and poetry online for people to view and process. Your shared self-expression brings home the common humanity we all share and changes you from a number to a person, both to others in prison and to the people outside who don't know firsthand about prison issues. I know through 20+ years of managing PE that your words do matter, and they affect the way people view the modern carceral system. Your words move minds and opinions and cause people to reflect on how the system does and does not work. Many of our volunteers are students who will go on to be voting citizens and leaders of the future. Having them sympathetic and understanding the conditions in prisons will hopefully lead to change.

While it is hard for PE to respond to individuals asking for personal responses, our third focus leads to PE volunteers sending personal letters to you, the active participants in the program. We collect your poetry, art and journals and we recruit volunteers to read your writings or look at your art and use those materials to write a friendly letter to you. Sometimes it will just be that one letter, and other times it can turn into a longer correspondence that involves many letters, and everything in between. Writing to us and saying you want a pen pal usually doesn't generate much response, but sending in poems, journals and art often

does. Please understand there are thousands of you writing, so I do not promise everyone a response, but it often happens. Please keep sharing and be patient.

One of our key precepts is to under promise and over deliver. We want to do as much as we can with the resources we have, and it often comes down to modifying and adjusting our intentions based on the amount of money we raise and the number of volunteers available to help us manage the program. It is obvious we cannot be all things to all people, and I hope you know that even if we can't help you with a specific task, it isn't because we don't care but rather that our resources are limited.

Prisoner Express is a project of the Durland Alternatives Library located at Cornell University. I have the pleasure of working in the library, and years ago I received a single letter from Dani in Texas asking for books. He wrote such beautiful letters I felt motivated to respond and the whole program grew from that single correspondence. I had no intention of doing this, but his writing and my circumstances combined to create PE. I tell you this because I want you to know your words have the power to change things, just as Dani's letter led to the creation of this program. We want to help you make your words and thoughts matter too, and we believe participating in one or more of the programs we offer will bring benefits to all. We deliberately offer a wide variety of programming hoping to find something for everyone. I imagine a few topics will have you wondering, and I encourage you to be both adventurous, and yet only sign up for the programs you intend to do. As a steward of PE, I try to make our funds stretch as far as possible and combine that with wanting to give as much as we can. Another of life's paradoxes.

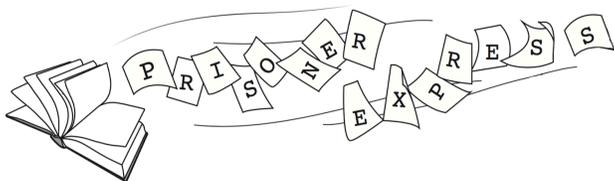
For anyone new, I want you to know that we care and do our best to provide some support. We understand the difficult situation you are in and that it takes a strong individual to weather the harshness and deprivation prison life can deliver. Being part of a community like PE can help you realize you are not alone and that

the difficulties and challenges you are facing are sometimes personal and sometimes institutional. Realizing others are struggling in a similar manner to yourself can sometimes open up doors of perception. Rather than thinking you are going crazy, you begin to see yourself in a crazy making environment. That is where we at PE step in, creating opportunities for meaningful activity and a chance to experience community through the reading of the experience of others facing similar conditions.

In the spring of 2026, we have a variety of new programs to share with you. I will describe them and include some thoughts from some of the volunteers who are creating the program offerings. Please know that we are open to working with you if you have an idea for a program you'd like to create for a future cycle. If you have a program idea, write "Attn Gary New Program" on your envelope so I am sure to see it.

*Gary*

**Durland Alternatives Library**  
**The Home of Prisoner Express**  
P.O. Box 6556, Ithaca NY 14851  
(607) 255-6486  
<https://alternativeslibrary.org>



## Spring 2026 Programs

Last year we modified our program offerings and instead of sending out 15 or so individual packets we now have a smaller number of themed packets, each containing assorted yet somewhat related lessons. To sign up to receive one or more packets, you can fill out the registration sheet at the end of the newsletter or write us a note including which programs you would like to join.

If you are reading this letter after the spring 26 packets have already been sent, please still write to us and ask to be included, it is possible that we are running late. If you miss the mailing, the good news is that you will be registered to receive the Summer 2026 newsletter and you will be able to join the next round of programming.

Please know that we have to send all the programs to the printer at the same time to get the best price and that we do our program mailings using bulk mail service at USPS. Bulk mail means we have to send 200 copies of identical mailings to get a steep postage discount. It is prohibitively expensive to send individual packets by first class mail at this time.

Below I give a short description of each packet, including a few notes from individuals who are creating them. Many of the packets will have additional materials; I will mention a few of them without including the details. You'll have to sign up to see each packet in its full glory! If it all goes as planned [it never does] we hope to send this round of packets out in early May.

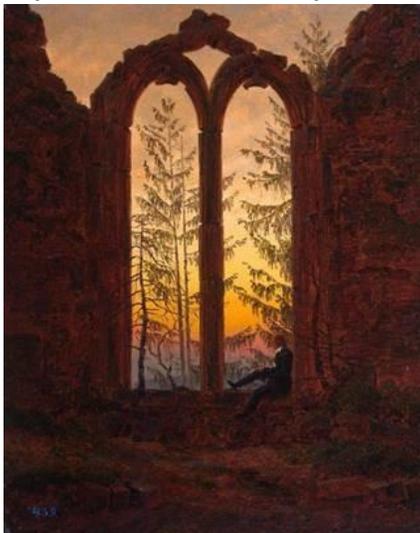
### Art & Music Packet

For those of you who like art and music, I am sure this packet will have something for you.

**ARTknows:** For more than 10 years Treacy, a local artist, has been sharing lessons on creating art. While some of Treacy's instruction involves technique, the vast majority covers art history, appreciation and even more how as individuals we see and move through the world and develop our inner artist. From Treacy:

*Greetings. Hope you are keeping warm in this frigid weather! Well... it's frigid in parts of the country like Ithaca! The last ARTknows packet focused on cats. I hope you were able to use some of the information in your work, and that some of*

the images printed in that edition served to inspire you. **For the next edition of ARTknows, I want to focus on dreams.** As one writer stated: "The dream in art is a wandering spirit on the path of the imagination. It is through this pictorial representation we are consequently forced to examine the link between the visible and the invisible." Throughout history, dreams have been understood in various ways. In the Renaissance, the dream was a manifestation of the soul leaving the body when the body was at rest. Therefore, the dream in the Renaissance was not personal. It was a religious experience. Whereas, in the later period of the Romantics, when art was understood as a vehicle of self-expression, the dream became a means to understand the personal self. How is the dream understood today? How about daydreams? Are daydreams for contemplation; an escape from the everyday reality? Or a threshold to something greater? The French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard states, "I daydream, therefore I am." (His variation of the French philosophy Descartes' statement of, "I think, therefore I am." What does Bachelard mean by the declaration that "he is" through daydreaming? How does the daydream relate to creativity in art? **In this next edition we will look at the dream in art in various historical periods and how art uses the dream to excavate the soul or the unconscious as the cradle of creativity. So, if you are interested in the next edition, keep a journal of your dreams and daydreams.** What makes a daydream truly a daydream? Is it daydreaming about your next meal? Your earthly needs? No; one might be tempted to say yes, but the daydream for creativity is very special. The daydream of creativity unhooks itself from the



shackles of the body, reason, agendas. It is free floating. How do we get to that free floating daydream in order to make art? Join the discussion in the next ARTknows edition! – Treacy

Caspar David Friedrich, *The dreamer*, 1835-1840

**Art Beyond Cornell:** We are also fortunate to partner with student group Art Beyond Cornell (ABC). The students in the group create a variety of fun art activities including lessons in perspective or shading and other skills and tricks to improve your skills. They also organize art shows on campus where the works of PE artists are featured. ABC members also write friendly letters to many of the artists participating in the program. I look forward to the content the ABC group will create for this next mailing.

**Zines & Collages:** Last cycle we had a section on how to create zines. I am happy to report that Naomi who created that lesson is back and brainstorming how to follow up with the zines. We also had a piece on collaging in the last issue and since its mailing we have received some exceptionally fine collages from our readers.

**Songwriting:** Amy, a student working at the library, is a music lover and song writer. She has agreed to create a unit on songwriting. I believe that her work will be of interest to anyone who likes music, whether you wish to write a song or just grow in appreciation of the songwriting of your favorite artists.

*Hi everyone, my name is Amy! I used to work with the PE Art program. I took a break for a few months but now I'm back! I'm excited – I missed looking at your art and reading your letters while I was gone. Since I'm coming back, I'd like to hop right back in and try to teach everyone a little bit about music. I study music and I love it– it's so helpful when trying to figure out how you're feeling. Every person has a story, so every person has a song. What's yours?*

*Music keeps me hopeful, and I hope that a lot of you can say the same. If you're interested in learning more about music in the next few months, please keep an eye out for the PE music packet! The wonderful thing about music is that you could be listening to the exact same song at the exact same time as someone else and they might not think of it the same way you do. Everyone's different, even when what's in front of us is the same.*

*I hope that with the music packet I'm working on, you all have fun and get to be creative in a way that feels good. Music is everywhere! Even if it isn't recorded, you can make a song with just your imagination and some time.*

## Creative Writing Packet

I hope many of you will consider signing up for this packet. Expressive writing is a terrific way to explore your inner life, improve communication skills and focus your thoughts. It also builds community when your writing is read by others. I knew that writing helped me sort out my thoughts, but in working with PE I have seen clearly how reading each other's writing has a liberating effect. You realize you are not alone in your thoughts and that others are dealing with the same issues as you. That recognition adds a layer of resilience to each reader as well as builds community. Prison life can be so isolating. It is particularly difficult when you feel alone yet are surrounded by so many people and have very little privacy. What a contradiction! Writing helps you create a private space, and sharing can help build a healthy community. It is an act of self-care when you take the time to write and reflect. We have a number of programs in this packet to help inspire your creative writing.

**Journal Program:** Since our beginning we have offered a journal program. Those of you who have been with us the past two years are used to me introducing Kamili as the journal program coordinator. Kamili got offered the job of her dreams, assisting in animal surgery at the vet hospital, and as much as she misses PE, she is where she needs to be. Kamili's dream is to be a veterinarian, and I am grateful for all the effort she put to supporting you journalers. This program is now led by Danish, a student at Cornell who has been working with us since last summer. She is working on another journal packet, intended to inspire you to reflect on your life, times and memories. Let's see what you unearth. Taking the thoughts that are swirling inside us and putting them down on paper can often lead to a new kind of clarity about experiences we have endured.

*Hello everyone, My name is Danish, and I write and compile the Journaling Packet for the program. I am also a sophomore at Cornell University studying Global and Public Health Sciences. I was born and raised in northern Afghanistan, in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif. I have been passionate about writing and journaling*

*since I was 12 years old. Journaling became especially meaningful to me as I navigated difficult stages of life in Afghanistan and throughout my journey to the United States. Writing helped me make sense of my experiences, find purpose, and discover meaning during challenging times.*

*When I first learned about Prisoner Express and later volunteered with the program in summer 2025, I immediately felt a deep connection to its mission. During the summer, I helped create a packet on journaling and its impact on mental health, and I had the privilege of writing back in response to your journal entries. That experience brought me so much joy that I knew I wanted to continue supporting this work and lead the journaling program. Thank you to everyone who has submitted their journal entries or shared feedback, your feedback helps us understand what works well and how we can continue improving the program.*

*I am excited to share new ideas and ways we can incorporate journaling into our lives to support our well-being. If you are interested in receiving a copy, please sign up at the back of the packet. Thank you all, and may your days be filled with joy and gratitude.- Danish*

**Writing with Friends:** We are fortunate that PE's favorite (or at least most mentioned by her peers) theme-writing diva Catherine LaFleur has agreed to lead our Writing With Friends project. Catherine believes there is much writing talent in the PE pool and wanted us all to swim a little more together, creating writing groups and helping edit each other's works. Her packet will describe more of her ideas and I am grateful to add her voice to the creative writing component of the program. Here's Catherine's invitation to join her. Short and to the point!

*Are you ready for a ticket on the Writer's Party Bus? Please join us as we explore the mysteries and conundrums of short form writing. Are there any topics you would like to see in this column? Do you have any fabulous writing exercises you would like to share? Please send your ideas to Prisoner Express: "Writing with Friends."*

*Best, Catherine*

**Miscellaneous Essays:** The Creative Writing packet also contains an assortment of writing sent to us over the last 6 months that did not fit into any of our other programs per se. These essays were set aside and entered into our Miscellaneous Essay file. Our student worker M coordinates this effort, reading and selecting writings for this section.

*Hello, dear readers! Some of you may already know me, but for those who don't, I'm M 1485 and I'm in charge of the Miscellaneous Essays section. This category was initially created for all you writers who found yourselves over the word limit for theme essays, had a particular journal entry you wanted published, or veered so far off topic when writing to a specific program that we couldn't rightfully put it in there anymore. We received so many lovely submissions that we abhorred seeing go to waste so we created this new program to showcase all those works instead. From the very moment it started, Miscellaneous Essays has grown and evolved to the point where it doesn't quite feel right to call it "miscellaneous" anymore. Names convey intentions and the word miscellaneous holds connotations with "random" rather than "diverse" or "varied," even though the latter constitute its definition. For that reason, I am inviting all of you to **send in suggestions as to what we should rename this section to better represent it.** Thank you for all your hard work, and I hope to see more of your writing soon!*



Sophia Christopher-Williams

## Developing Your Mind & Body

The content of this packet varies in each cycle. The intent is to expand your horizons and have you think about things in new and different ways. It is also meant to keep your mind and body strong.

**History of U.S. Territories (Bilingual):** Yazmin who has made it her goal to improve our offerings for Spanish speaking PE members has agreed to create another bi-lingual packet in Spanish and English. It will be useful for either Spanish speakers wanting to improve their English or vice versa. The last bilingual packet was also accompanied by a detailed introduction to Spanish lesson. Please hold on to it as it may be useful when looking at this current lesson. The lesson will be focused on the US territories, often but not always land not contiguous with any of our 48 state boundaries. Folks in those territories are American citizens too, yet they have cultures that can be quite different from what we think of as American.

*Hello folks! My name is Yazmin, one of the Creative Writing coordinators at Prisoner Express. I'm excited to share that the upcoming historical packet I'm working on will be centered on the U.S. territories. We will discuss various island and mainland areas within U.S control -examples are Puerto Rico, Guam, Native American Reservations - as well as their histories and relationships with each other. This packet will also be bilingual, so if you're interested in learning or continuing your journey with English or Spanish, this is the perfect packet for you!*

*¡Hola a todos! Mi nombre es Yazmin, una de las coordinadoras de Escritura Creativa en Prisoner Express. Me alegro de anunciar que el próximo paquete temático de historia en el que estoy trabajando se centrará en los territorios de Estados Unidos. Hablaremos de diversas islas y territorios continentales bajo control estadounidense, como Puerto Rico, Guam y las reservas indígenas, así como de sus historias y las relaciones entre ellos. Este paquete también será bilingüe, así que si les interesa aprender o seguir practicando inglés o español, ¡este es el paquete perfecto para ustedes!*

**The History of Beauty:** Another history lesson in this packet will look at beauty. How has the ideal of beauty been created in different cultures and how does it change over time? PE volunteer Fay has offered to help us explore this topic.

*Many people believe that beauty is objective. If you and I both closed our eyes and imagined a handsome man or a beautiful woman, similar features might appear. These neural pathways are not innate, but learned. Our brains are conditioned by our environments to find certain features—long eyelashes, white teeth, smooth skin—more attractive than others. However, the environment of America in the 21st century greatly differs from that of the Tang Dynasty in 680 AD. What features then, would the ancient Chinese imagine if they closed their eyes? Why did Joseon-era Korean beauty ideals favor thin eyebrows, minimal makeup, and tightly controlled hairstyles? Why were only a certain class of courtiers allowed to wear purple in Japan? How did Chinese silk become so powerful that it transformed fashion across continents? Hi! I'm Fay, and in my educational packet, I will be answering some of these questions regarding the historical evolution of beauty standards and fashion in East Asia, from opulent Tang Dynasty Hanfu, to beauty practices like teeth blackening, to how Western influence reshaped aesthetics in the modern era. If you are interested in any of the above topics, please sign up for this packet!*

**The History of Coffee:** Elinor, who created some memorable packets focused on ecology for us in the past, will explore the history of coffee. How did this plant drink become so popular and how did it change the world? Sign up to find out.

Robert, who for many years coordinated the chess program, will create a section on **the History of Islamic Architecture**. Two years ago, I visited Moorish Spain where I was in grand buildings from 800 years ago. The beauty and expanse of the buildings make them a wonder of the ancient world. Learn more of the culture that built these exquisite buildings and gardens.

**Physical Exercise:** Last but not least, this packet will also include a series of workouts to strengthen your body alongside your mind.



Niko Fuller

## Expedited Book Program

PE began as a book mailing program and we continue to create customized book packages for our members. We have been asking for at least a \$4 donation to help offset the cost of these mailings. (FYI it costs us about \$7 in postage for a typical package.) **IMPORTANT:** If you send a check, please make it out to “**CTA/DAL**” or we will not be able to deposit it.

We have amended the EXP book program this cycle with a special exception. Because so many people write to us thinking we are solely a book program and because they invested their time, money and hope in us, we have decided at least for this year that everyone who writes for books who has not gotten a package from us in the last year will be eligible for one package this year even if they do not send a donation. This is your one free package for the year unless you are able to send in the required donation to help with postage. We will see how long our money lasts but it feels good to share the books as much as

we can. If you can send the donation you can ask for books every three months. If there is no postage and the letter lists many people wanting free books only the first name listed will be assigned books. We can't afford for people to send 10 different letters in one envelope asking for books for all their friends without helping us defray postage costs.

When you write for books be sure we know the max number you are allowed as well as whether you can have hardcover books. Typically, a package will have no more than 8 books and if we are not sure of the amount we send 5 softcovers. When you list what you want, please note our selection is based on what has been donated and that providing us with genres rather than a specific title gives you a better chance of getting what you are interested in reading. We pride ourselves on making the best matches and sharing great books with all of you.

**As of this writing, I believe our books are not allowed in prisons in MO, SC, MI, and WI. If wrong I hope our readers will correct me. I have also heard of a ban in AR, and now only new soft cover books allowed in for TX.** Please let us know of any other states that will routinely reject books as a matter of policy.

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## Figuring Things Out

The Figuring Things Out packet is meant to challenge your mind to make productive twists and turns in thinking to solve life's puzzles. Isn't that the point of being on the planet? Our lives are spent moving through space, encountering and solving obstacles so that we may thrive. Sometimes surviving those obstacles is dangerous and tiring, and other times solving the situation can leave you feeling energized and rewarded. This packet is designed for that type of figuring, the kind that makes you smarter and better at what you want to do.

The first section of the packet will deal with the law. As you may remember, we have a law librarian at Cornell creating a series of study guides. If you save each lesson, eventually you will have a valuable resource in working through legal questions. The librarian is also willing to read mail you have for them based on these packets, and there is a team of law students who

I believe will help answer questions generated by the packet. Below is a summary of what you can expect in this mailing.

**Introduction to Legal Writing:** This educational program builds upon the prior legal educational program titled "Introduction to the American Legal System" and "Understanding Legal Documents" but is also a standalone packet that can be used independently. This packet broadly covers basic legal writing principles, such as large-scale and small-scale organization, persuasive headings, applying cases, analogical reasoning, and citations.

**Chess Newsletter:** Also, in the FTO packet will be the latest chess news from Mason. He is passionate about chess and is part of a few chess clubs; one of his assignments is to recruit local chess players to succeed him in this endeavor when he graduates in May, but for this upcoming cycle, Mason is still our man with a plan.

*Hi everyone, My name is Mason and I am very excited to begin working on the Chess Section of the newsletter. I met Gary last fall during a visit he paid to a club at my college, and jumped at the opportunity when he mentioned needing a chess enthusiast to help rework, continue, and expand the chess section. In November, before I was cleared to begin working at Durland Alternatives Library, I volunteered to create the chess portion of the Fall '25 "Figuring Things Out" packet. I greatly enjoyed that process. I sincerely hope that you found the game analysis, short essays, or tactical puzzles included in that edition to be instructive and useful, and perhaps some of it aesthetically pleasing, too.*

*I am already beginning work drafting the chess content for the next chess packet. I would like to invite you to send any and all requests, recommendations, questions and wishes for that chess section. Write "Attn: Mason" on the envelope so it comes right to me. I would love to incorporate your ideas into the content that I create, and I hope that in doing so you will find this next chess section to be all the more engaging, accessible, intellectually stimulating, and satisfying than those past. Thank you for your interest in this beautiful game we share, and I hope to hear from you soon.*

**Puzzles & Games:** The rest of the Figuring Things out Packet will be puzzles and games that test your deductive and logic skills and fun things like mazes, word searches, sudoku, and whatever else our puzzle elves can concoct to both please and

challenge you and your thinking skills. If we can't keep our minds active and engaged, and boredom sets in, our minds can turn on us with self-deprecating thoughts. That part of human nature is magnified when you are confined and have lost your agency in some of your daily affairs. It can be easy to become hyper critical of oneself and creativity can be one way to break that pattern. These packets are a way to assert some control and give your thinking mind useful places to go. Years ago I had a rough emotional time over my divorce and I found doing a sudoku puzzle once a day provided me with a grounding I appreciated. I hope our puzzle packet can do the same for you.

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## 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**.

We have been very fortunate to partner with the Rattle, Pema Chodron, and Wayne Dyer foundations who supply us with 500 copies each of a book from their publishing house. This mailing will include three books: **a copy of Rattle** (a poetry journal that has supported the work of Prisoner Express poets for three years); **How We Live is How We Die by Pema Chodron**; and **Change Your Thoughts, Change Your Life: Living the Wisdom of the Tao, by Dr. Wayne Dyer**. This packet is limited to 500 people so if you're interested, try to sign up early!

Accompanying Rattle will be lessons focused on both writing poetry and poetry appreciation created by PE volunteers, as well as a well-crafted letter from Tim Green editor of Rattle about qualities that make good poetry.

*How We Live is How We Die* is the 5th Pema book I believe we have mailed, and from the feedback I get, these books open doors of perception many of you never knew existed. These are usually simply written books that strike a deep chord. A description of the book is below. Along with the book there will be a study guide that if followed will help you internalize the teachings. Here is a short description of the book:

*As much as we might try to resist, endings happen in every moment—the end of a breath, the end of a day, the end of a relationship, and ultimately the end of life. And accompanying each ending is a beginning, though it may be unclear what the beginning holds. In How We Live Is How We Die, Pema Chödrön shares her wisdom for working with this flow of life—learning to live with ease, joy, and compassion through uncertainty, embracing new beginnings, and preparing for death with curiosity and openness rather than fear.*

*Poignant for readers of all ages, her teachings on the bardos—a Tibetan term referring to a state of transition, including what happens between this life and the next—reveal their power and relevance at each moment of our lives. She also offers practical methods for transforming life's most challenging emotions about change and uncertainty into a path of awakening and love. As she teaches, the more freedom we can find in our hearts and minds as we live this life, the more fearlessly we'll be able to confront death and what lies beyond. In all, Pema provides readers with a master course in living life fully and compassionately in the shadow of death and change.*

*Change Your Thoughts, Change Your Life: Living the Wisdom of the Tao* is from the Wayne Dyer Foundation. Dr. Wayne Dyer was a prolific, internationally renowned author and speaker in the fields of self-development and spiritual growth. Over the four decades of his career, he wrote more than 40 books, including 21 New York Times bestsellers. Wayne died a few years ago and a foundation established to share his works has agreed to partner with PE to provide you with his books and with a study guide to help you delve deeper into the teachings. Here are some words from his daughter on what you can expect. Dear Friend,

*I'm writing to invite you to take part in a book study centered on a work that is very close to my heart.*

*You are being offered a free copy of Change Your Thoughts, Change Your Life: Living the Wisdom of the Tao, written by my late father, Dr. Wayne Dyer, along with a study guide I've created to accompany the book. This offering is meant to support quiet reflection and inner*

connection, wherever you may find yourself in your life right now.

The book is inspired by the Tao Te Ching, an ancient spiritual text that points toward living in harmony with life as it is.

Through short reflections, it explores themes such as inner peace, compassion, surrender, and the idea that true freedom begins within. Rather than asking us to change our circumstances, it gently invites us to change how we meet them.

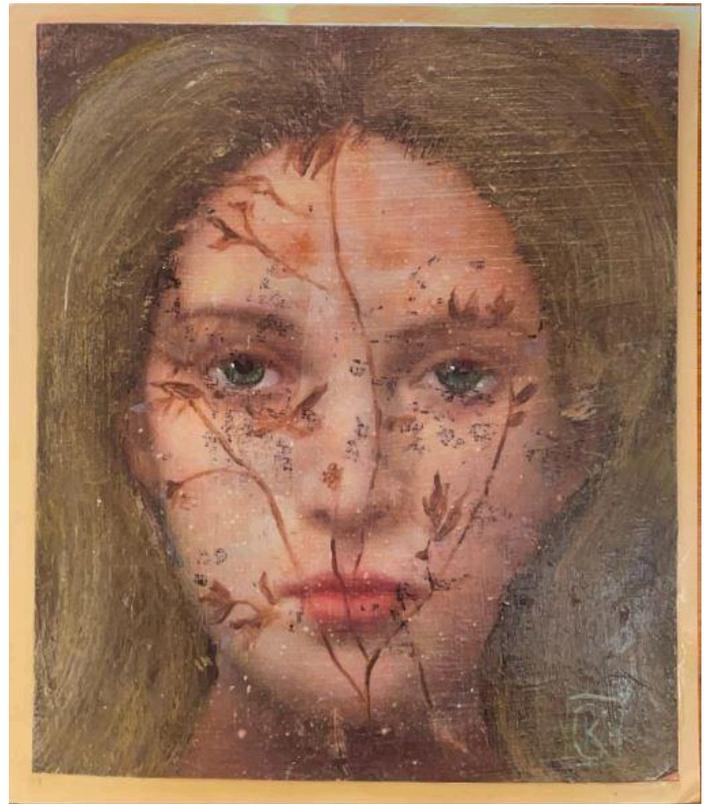
Creating this study guide has been especially meaningful for me. My father believed deeply in the innate wisdom and wholeness present in every person, no matter the outer conditions of their lives. Being able to share his words, and to offer my own reflections alongside them, feels like a sacred continuation of his spirit and a heartfelt way to connect with you.

This study is simply an invitation. A space to pause, reflect, and explore what it means to live from a place of awareness and inner stillness. Many people find these teachings offer comfort, grounding, and a sense of connection to something greater than themselves, even during times of uncertainty.

With respect,  
Saje Dyer

The packet will also include **meditations** offered by longtime volunteer Tara who has arranged for many PE members to take refuge with a high lama, who himself spent countless years in Chinese prisons because of his religious and political beliefs. He is drawn to working with the incarcerated and details will be included in this packet on how to take refuge.

There will also be a piece continuing our exploration of **Recovery Journeys** that I believe will be valuable for many. Remember we only have 500 of these book packages to mail so don't wait too long to sign up.



Kristopher Storey

## Poetry Anthology Vol. 34

Every six months, PE publishes an anthology of poems submitted by you, the readers and writers of PE. Hundreds of you submit thousands of poems and our PE staff reads through and selects some for inclusion in our self-published anthology. No PE staff member in the history of creating the previous 33 volumes has ever edited more than two volumes. I tell you this because the editorial perspective changes with each new coordinator. What one person thinks is terrific another editor might pass by. I implore you not to feel bad if your work is not selected. Instead feel good for the person whose work was chosen. It doesn't always mean one was better than the other so much as the editor related to one more than the other. Also I know some of you count how many times a particular poet might have poems in an issue and think it is not fair that someone has multiple poems and you have none. I can only say that these anthologies are not meant as participation trophies but rather an attempt by the editor to create an issue that they believe will speak to the reader and highlight poems they feel deserve to be shared.

Please continue to send in your poems for consideration. If a poem arrives after we have

picked all we need for this issue , we roll it over to the next volume (#35), so every poem is considered.

We are fortunate that we have Pranavi. a student who loves to read and write poetry, creating the next volume. Pranavi also edited Vol. 32.

Hello!

*My name is Pranavi and I'm the Poetry Editor and Creative Writing Co-Coordinator of the Prisoner Express Program. Prisoner Express is an arts-centered prison reform initiative and a project of Durland Alternatives Library and the Center for Transformative Action (CTA). Prisoner Express publishes and promotes the poetry of incarcerated individuals from around the United States. Every six months, a dedicated team of volunteers and staff members assemble an anthology of selected poems. Because we cannot logistically publish even half of the submissions we receive, we also scan poems to our website so that readers from around the world can access them. In this newsletter, we will be featuring eight exceptional pieces to showcase a sample of what we typically receive.*



Craig Fischer

## Poetry Spotlight

### A Monk's Life

by Jonathan Holeman

When you spend your life alone,  
You learn a lot of nothing.  
Because it doesn't matter.  
No matter what it was.

Is this what Buddhist masters  
Tried to teach those harried  
In their palaces and mansions  
With their riches and their drugs?

When everything is empty,  
Do you still pray to God above?  
Is there sense in meditation  
When there's no more pain or love?

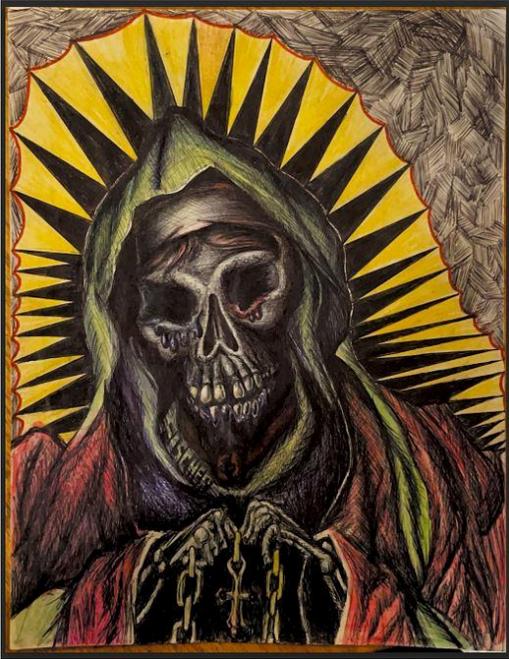
And these animals in cages  
Know all about appreciation  
For the slightest gestures  
As they age in concentration.

When they live inside a bathroom,  
Forced by courts to celibacy,  
They become enlightened  
While they dream of what should be.

### Skadi's Kiss

by Liam Foster

The sweetest taste of air  
lingers within.  
As I inhale winter's cold breath,  
Sampling her soothing kiss.  
Her embrace flows through my veins,  
encompassing all that I am.  
The icy tendrils make my skin flush,  
calming the tides of nerves inside.  
Crystalline tears fall from her face,  
blanketing all with its beauty.  
As a wonderland is slowly revealed,  
in the tapestry that she displays,  
I exhale winter's cold breath.  
Her touch lingers on,  
bringing me to clarity,  
as I taste the frost of her lips.  
I've found my place,  
frozen in her embrace.



Craig Fischer

### The Cost

by Bishop Gotti

How many innocents are buried in these fields?  
Razor wire reality glitzes over the prison plantation  
fields.

I need some time to think,  
to dream and to let my consciousness sink.  
Sink back into real reality away from  
institutionalization,  
stuck in this unreal matrix, seeking actual  
realization.

Down, I lay, where in darkness I secretly cry,  
mourning the loss that you will never see.  
Upon my sleeve, I wear my ugly heart openly,  
where telling time shows how more of me dies.  
“Am I even real?” I constantly ask myself,  
bottled-in, feeling helpless and seeking help.  
But honestly, everything has a cost.  
Whether life, liberty, possession, or sanity lost—  
the toll is extremely high to receive something lost.  
And who are you—the person charging the fee?  
For living, dying, being free, or being in prison isn’t  
free.

Do your eyes see what my clever ears hear?  
Life isn’t what it seems.  
A dream isn’t really just a dream.

### The Bonds of Brotherhood

by William Swiderski

The days fly by like ravens  
over the battlefield.  
The glaciers melt and  
the water flows away.

From a child to a man  
in the twinkling of an eye.  
Our hair and beard becomes  
gray like a winter sky.

Yet, one thing I feel can  
never change. It connects us  
like a shade from another age.

Our words, deeds, and our blood  
is the bonding token.  
For those things live on,  
long after we are gone.

That, my friend, is the bond  
of brotherhood, which can  
never be broken  
by man or the gods.

Light of You

by Chazten Wells

Forgotten is the light of you:  
a mirror of two, barely visible.  
Begotten is the love of you:  
a picture, discolored of the inseparable.

The gray meant to color  
the memories of the heart.  
The night lent to the holler.  
The jagged edges of our art.

A wisp of words for few.  
Now a sprinkle of salt on the wound.  
My dance of the two:  
life and love of the runes.

Idiotic love twisting faster,  
reaching the top of the climax.  
Sad understanding for the sinister,  
where the zenith was never axed.  
Doomed for a tea of leaves.  
Dark and bitter with no light of you.  
The dress of your eyes,  
with no recourse for me or you.

Twenty-Twenty

by: Judson Morgan

Twenty-Twenty helps  
but hindsight is still blurry  
when looking through tears.

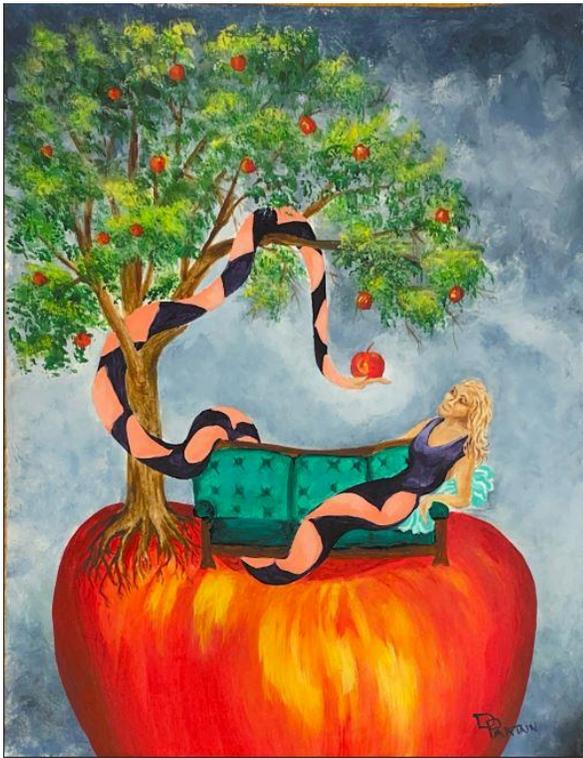
Five Empires

by: Nathan Gray

My tempered feet tarry on soil  
that has not known my blood.  
My leaden back lies on grass manicured  
by those not of my generation.  
My pyrite eyes stare at a sky  
that holds no maple leaves,  
whose veins  
extend from my grandpa.  
This land does not hold out its arms  
in recognition of me.  
Nor I of it.



Justin Sullivan



David Partain

Then You Wait

by: Edward Kinnett

All seems to go slow  
 while waiting to go fast.  
 Then you wait.  
 Can't catch your breath.  
 Then you wait.  
 Patience runs thin.  
 Then you wait:  
 wait for court  
 wait for visits  
 wait for love  
 wait for it all  
 wait for freedom  
 wait for recovery  
 wait for heaven.  
 Mind on overload,  
 lost and disposed.  
 All seems vain.  
 Time ticks away.  
 Keep saying, "One day."  
 Then you wait.  
 Life keeps moving.  
 Then you wait.  
 Then you wait.

In the last Poetry Anthology (Volume 32), the poem "The Potter and the Clay" on page 22 was incorrectly attributed to Jackie Moorehead, however it was written by Sharon Keegan. We apologize for the error and are grateful to the participant who brought this to our attention. The poem is reprinted here with the correct attribution.

**The Potter and the Clay**

by Sharon Keegan

You are the potter, I am the clay:  
 molding me into the woman I am today,  
 learning to listen to you as I follow your will,  
 leaning on all the promises you fulfill.

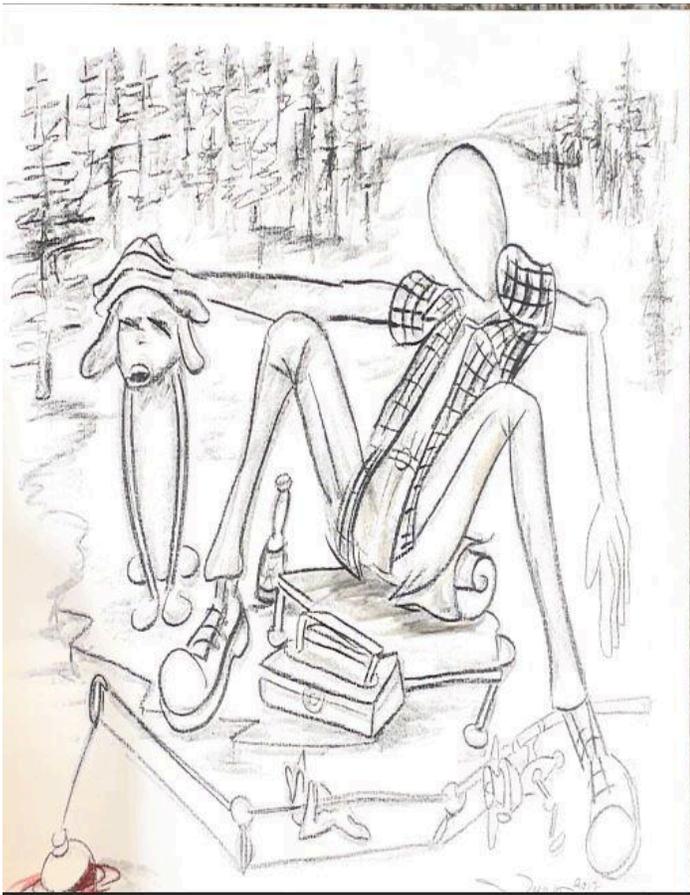
As I bow my head daily to pray,  
 I thank you for who I am today.  
 You are always there through every storm,  
 holding us tight and moving with every form.

You never leave nor forsake anyone—  
 the only way to get to God is through the Son.  
 You love us no matter what we do,  
 knowing you will always come through.

Through You, I'm not my past.  
 At the cross, all my fears I cast.  
 I lean on you, as you are always there.  
 No longer do I fear that my heart will tear.

You are my all in all,  
 so I know I can stand tall.  
 Right beside me, you fight for me,  
 always winning the battle even when I can't see.

You have forgiven me of my past.  
 I can move forward and be free at last.  
 You are the potter, I am the clay.  
 Thank you Jesus for the woman I am today!



Tony Tiegler

## Theme Essays & Stories

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 people 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. Horizons expand when we walk in another's shoes (or words). When we read someone articulate what we feel, we feel known. You are no longer invisible, whether you wrote the 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 theme, picture or word will get a copy of the monthly theme packet mailed to them. 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 or if we can see little or no connection to the theme.

I am always concerned with the possibility of censorship both for content of the words and appearance of our mailings. Because we send this newsletter nationally, I strive to accommodate various state and federal standards. Navigating the censorship issue causes me to mutter to myself and rant to anyone who will listen. I know you are experts already regarding the changing mail rules. Just today mail we sent was returned as rejected at a federal facility because the paper was lined. I shake my head and wonder if this is something new for other PE participants. Many of our volunteers like lined paper because their handwriting is more legible with the help of lines. Our recent poetry publication ran into trouble in a few states because the art pieces we included were deemed as encouraging tattoos. Please note we do not encourage inking up your skin. Unfortunately, I don't know which art encourages tattoos and which doesn't, which really can be confounding when I want to ensure delivery. Certain words or ideas in a story can get the whole issue banned. I have gone through the chosen theme essays for this newsletter and changed a couple of words in some themes because of my censorship fear. In the future if I change a few words I will put an asterisk by the place in the essay so the author knows I mean no disrespect, but rather value what they wrote so much I want to be sure the essay gets read by others.

**Send me your stories of mail room rejection.** I am curious to hear your side of the story, and please let me know any good news stories you can that celebrate services at your institution that are working for your benefit. Too

often I talk about the bad news around me. Share with us your good news too.

I treasure the community that has built up among the frequent contributors to the essay prompts. I believe this community is growing and I hope we can use our “Writing with Friends” program in the Creative Writing packet to further develop a community of writers exploring their lives and pushing the envelope for collaboration and support among you. If you’re a contributor to our Theme Essay program, please also sign up for “Writing with Friends” and help us make collaboration among writers the norm rather than the exception.

## Prisoner Express Mini Word Theme Anthology

### May ‘25 Word Theme: “Holding Hands”

#### ***Hands Made For Holding, Christian Hansen***

I was born December 1977, in a small Nebraska village (population 128), where I lived right across the creek from my grandparents. My grandfather taught me from a very early age, “Real men don’t hug, they shake hands.” So this instilled in me the belief that real men’s holding of hands was only for a hand shake, nothing more. Of course on the other side of my family, my mom’s side, both of my grandparents taught me hugs were okay and people (no matter male or female) can hold hands.

Now here I am 47 (moving towards 48) looking down at my left hand, holding this ink pen, opening my heart to my readers, addressing how my hands have held on to many others.

Of course, like many other fortunate children, my hands have held my parent’s hands, as I walked through my childhood life and into adult life. I’ve held my father’s hand as he laid in a hospital bed following a brain tumor surgery in 1994. I held my mother’s as she was hospitalized following a heart attack in my car. My hands I feel were made for compassion.

These hands have held the hands of two children, a son and a daughter. I was given 6 years of “Charles” life, before his mother and I divorced. My son (he’ll forever be) is now on the verge of graduation and turning 19. I wish I was

there to shake his hand. I was only given 19 months of “Elizabeth’s” life, holding her little hands as she took her first steps. In 2019, my hands were forced and the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP) banned these hands from ever holding hers again. I only pray one day her little hand will hold mine once more.

Now I’ve gotten ahead of myself in this writing. This hand holding my pen had a mind of its own. When I saw this month’s word theme, I instantly went back in time to the most relevant memory of “Hand Holding.”

In 2012, after getting past my fear of dead bodies, being down on my luck and out of work, I went back to school and became a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). I’ve been present as several elderly people have left behind suffering and pain to enter a better place and meet their higher being, but one will always stick with me.

“Paula” was a bitter lady and for some odd reason, she never really cared for me. If I was in her presence, she chose to strike me, pinch me, spit on me, etc. One day, her final day, **SHE CHOSE ME** to sit with her, comfort her, hold her hand, as she started the beginning of her end. I thought it only Hollywood magic, that a final breath comes out, like blowing hot on a cold day but on this day, I swear I saw her final breath exit her mouth. Looking down, I saw her withered hand holding mine.

47 years later, I have to point out, my grandfather was not correct. Yes real men use their hands, but not only the way he taught me. My hands have a purpose. They are made for holding, helping, and showing compassion.

Can I hold your hand, my friend, my family, the future generation. Please help others, instead of using your hand to hurt others. Please show compassion and love — stop the hate. Like Paula, be at peace once and for all. Find another’s hand to hold.

#### ***No Greater Love, David Lee Wilson***

When my daughter, Alyssa, was born, she was twenty-one inches long, and nine pounds three and a half ounces of joy and beauty, to both her mother, Nancy, and I!

To see her delicate and precious hands and feet with her tiny fingers and toes... and to hold her tiny fragile hands in my own — even now,

twenty-three years later, brings tears to my eyes, even though her mother and I are no more.

Watching her take each wondrous breath, and to hear her precious baby heart beat— screams the miracle that was Alyssa's creation and birth!

There is no greater love shared between two people than in the very moment a new life enters our world, and your hand is the very first they ever touch.

Alyssa... I love you!

### **Completing the Circle, Daniel Reyes**

Touch, an intimate experience we share with ourselves and crave from others. Hands clasped together in cozy familiarity. They came together in salutation forming a link of trust. They reach out in comfortable empathy to the suffering. With held hands we acknowledge equality with those we hold. Sharing tenderness, we can cede life's fragility and acknowledge strength in our togetherness. Completing the circle.

Pointer finger extended. Newborn hand wrapped tightly like ribbons on a maypole. Many tiny fingers surrounding one, clinging on in dependence. Like an empty vessel receiving data on the fleshy bridge of bone and skin transferring love from parent to child. Completing the circle.

Hands folded in prayer. Fingers intertwined. Head bowed resting on parallel thumbs. Communing with the divine. Hands held aloft with whispered prayers. Sanctuary in the spirit world. Completing the circle.

Hands flat. Palms up. Right hand covering the left. Resting on the lap. A relaxed posture examining a noble truth. All conditioned phenomena are impermanent. Completing the circle.

Interlocked fingers. Soft palms sharing warmth. Side by side. Arms swaying softly as one. An affectionate display. Assurance that love is shared. Completing the circle.

An aged woman's spotted hand covers the gnarled knotted hand of her dying husband. The stiff linen of the hospital bed presses back on their hands. The synchronized beats they once shared fade. Each breath shallower and quicker than the one before. She grasps tightly as he leaves the world. Their unending love returns to the world from where it sprung. Completing the circle.

### **A CONNECTION RAZOR WIRES CAN'T BREAK, Ju'ane T. Kennell**

In a world that often feels cold and unforgiving, the simple act of holding hands becomes a powerful symbol of love and connection, especially from the confines of a prison. For those of us who find ourselves behind bars, physical touch is a rare luxury, and the moments spent with loved ones during visits are both treasured and bittersweet. Holding hands during these fleeting encounters transcends mere physical contact; it becomes a lifeline, a bridge connecting the heart and soul despite the walls that separate us.

When I sit across from my loved one in that sterile visiting room, surrounded by the echoes of conversations and the watchful eyes of guards, the anticipation of our touch fills the air with a charged energy. The moment our hands meet, a wave of warmth washes over me, momentarily easing the weight of my circumstances. In that instant, the world outside — the noise, the chaos, the judgment — fades away, leaving only the connection we share.

Holding hands is a way to communicate unspoken words. Each squeeze, each gentle caress speaks volumes about our hopes, fears, and unwavering support. It's an acknowledgment of the struggle we both endure; a reminder that love can flourish even in the harshest environments. In those moments, as I grasp my wife's hand tightly, I feel the strength of our bond, a reminder that I am not alone in this fight.

Yet, this connection is tinged with the reality of our situation. The visiting room, filled with other families experiencing similar heartaches, serves as a constant reminder of what we've lost. The barriers of glass, metal detectors, body scanners, razor wires, and guard supervision create an atmosphere of confinement that can be suffocating. But as I hold my wife's hand, I find solace in the shared understanding of our circumstances. We navigate this reality together, and every moment spent in each other's presence is a testament to our resilience.

The simple act of holding hands also embodies hope. Each visit brings the possibility of a future together, a time when physical separation will be a thing of the past. As our fingers intertwine, I envision the life waiting for

us beyond these walls—a life filled with laughter, freedom, and the ability to share every moment without barriers. In that vision, holding hands becomes a promise, a commitment to endure the challenges ahead until we can finally embrace without restrictions.

As I reflect on these moments, I realize that holding hands is more than just an expression of love; it is a profound act of defiance against the isolation that seeks to consume us. It is a declaration that our connection will not be diminished by circumstance. In a world that tries to tear us apart, we find strength in each other, and in those hands, we hold the power to heal, to hope, and to dream of a brighter tomorrow.

In conclusion, the significance of holding hands during prison visits extend far beyond the physical act itself. It encapsulates the essence of love, resilience, and hope in the face of adversity. Each squeeze, each moment, reinforces the bond that remains unbroken, proving that even in the darkest of places, love can shine through, illuminating a path toward freedom and connection.

### ***Holding Hands, Jordan Switzer***

Many of my favorite memories began sitting next to her on the couch, when one of us reached towards the other. I remember the delicate touch of her hands as our fingers interlocked. I remember the way her loose-fitting rings would slide and spin as I fidgeted with them. The crackle of a recorded fireplace broadcast through my television. The scent of her hair filled the space around me, overpowering the burning candle less than three feet away, as she nestled her head onto my shoulder. I was with her—everything was okay. Who would think so much comfort could derive from the simple act of holding hands.

Now, instead of holding her hand, I attempt to hold onto the memories of doing so. Now, instead of holding her hand, I add it to the long list of simplicities they deprive me of. Over four years have passed since I held the hand of a loved one. Even in our in-person visits they forbid us from any contact outside of an initial hug. I wonder... why? Would it be too much to ask for? Pose too high of a security risk? I wonder about the aftermath of such restrictions. What happens to a person emotionally and mentally after being

deprived of any physical affection for years and years? As social creatures, I only imagine it being detrimental.

As my thoughts continue down the rabbit hole and into the future, I worry that I will never be able to hold this person's hand again, that I'll never hold anyone's hand again. The mere thought of this angers me. No one should have to worry about such comforts being taken from them. No one should have the power to take such comforts from another person. But I do have to worry, and they do have the power. So rather than holding the hand of a loved one, I hold onto my memories in hopes they will be enough to get me through.

## **June '25 Word Theme: "Music"**

### ***Keeps Me Sane, Danielle Armstrong***

This is the 1st time I've received PE's newsletter, so of course this is the 1st time I've written for the word theme topics. I saw music & knew I had to write. Music helps keep me sane inside these walls. It is also my go-to coping skill. So in March, when my prison took away the tablets we paid for to give us "free" tablets, I was curious to see how it'd all work. On the old tablets, we could buy a subscription. Either monthly, 3 months, 6 months, or yearly. We thought that was expensive at the time. Well, here comes the new tablets & we now have to pay when we "stream" per minute! Sooo, 300 minutes of music is \$6. After some of us did the math, we knew we had it way cheaper before. So now I have to pay an insanely expensive price just to use my coping skills & stay sane in prison. None of us realized how good we had it until it was taken away.

Music is good for everyone—It's good for the brain & soul. None of us should have to choose between listening to music and calling home. Yeah—the money for the tablets comes off our IC Solutions phone account! Crazy right? Trust I know.

## **Music (What Would Bob Say), Tai Todd**

Music is a universal language, even more so than money, because music never runs out. Music surpasses classism, racism, sexism, and all other isms and schisms. Music can be a welcome noise in the midst of silence or a calming sound to the ear of chaos. Music can put a crying baby back to sleep or help that college student stay awake. Music can incite courage in the face of fear or discourage violence when heated. Music can be the rally song for peace or the battle cry for war.

Music can be experienced and heard in many forms. Music is the continuous dripping of that project kitchen sink ... Drip-Drop-Drip-Drop ... music is mid-day rush-hour cacophony of car horns, road rage, and turnt-up stereo systems. Music is the sound of laughter from impoverished children. Music is Grandma humming hymns every Sunday morning. Music is the mixture of weapons fire, police sirens, and the deafening silence that follows.

Music is created to outlive the creator and create a soundtrack for the living. Music is meant to heal the soul, soothe the nerves, stimulate the mind, and touch the heart. Music is for pain, passion, joy, sorrow, life, and death. And though music is a thing to be felt, one thing about music ... when it hits, you feel no pain.

So hit me with music.

## **Sorcerer's Apprentice, Rick Clappsy**

The love I have for music began in the 70's, with Italian Oldies at my Nana's house; but my devotion began when I saw a little Disney classic called "Fantasia." This was the 70's, mind you, and sorcery and magic were not a Catholic thing at all – as long as Mickey was a part of it and it was in cartoon form, however, Fantasia got a pass, and my life was forever changed.

This movie was pretty much about Mickey as a magical intern whose ineptitude with spells has some very entertaining and messy results. All very Rated G, super wholesome; yet it's the music that is the star here! The larger-than-life sounds of the symphony orchestra made my heart race, my pulse quicken, and my soul seed sprout in my chest. Bombastic cymbals, trance-inducing violins, oboes making me hear footsteps in my mind, and so many horns! This music had to come from angels on high. How could man produce such beauty?

Most kids today don't know who Leopold Stokowski is or what Toccata and Fugue in D minor is, but this is what I cut my teeth on, what made me completely fascinated by music, willing to kneel at the throne of the Great Metronome. When other kids sought G.I. Joes, dolls, or cap guns, I got my LP of Fantasia on sweet, sweet vinyl and played the crap out of it! I was such a nerd for this album that I used my allowance to buy a new diamond stylus for the family record player.

That first record lit a fire in my soul that has burned for a steady five decades. Back when I was a kid, I could find all kinds of amazing 45's for less than a dollar, so I got to bring home Sinatra, Dylan, Burt Bacharach, The Who, Bruce Springsteen, Lionel Richie, Bach, or The Beatles for the cost of a comic book.

These artists from all over taught me what my parents never would; that the world was a huge place with lots of cultures. The magicians of Rhythm and Blues taught me how the soul can sing about love, oppression, and sweltering heat with equal passion. The Rock 'N Roll wizards got me moving. Let me know I was part of something bigger. Musicians welcomed me with open arms when my own family cast me aside. Music comforted me when I was beaten and deprived, and my growing collection of records became a catalog of spells used to fight evil and celebrate good.

Fast forward to 2025, and music is perhaps even more magical to me than ever. I listen to music for hours each day, and have playlists for nearly every mood; music pushes away the prison noises, news of tariffs, the horrors of human trafficking, and all the rest. Ergo, the Sorcerers of the music world have stepped up and shown us how to turn those dragons to dust. Music triumphs over evil everywhere.

I've been in prison for 30 years of my life, and currently do not live on a ley line, musically speaking. My facility has one decent station, and even that is mostly drivel, and there is no AM radio on our tablets and no music program. I have an old Android tablet with 1300 songs on it that I can tap into any time I want! I can evoke the powers of Grace Vanderwaal, Idris Elba, Tay Tay, REM, Hawaiian ukulele songs – whatever I spell, I need to have on hand. I am a Unitarian Universalist, and I am a Sorcerer Supreme with more than enough musical notes to make mops dance and defeat the death dragons of my life.

## **Sting It, Catherine LaFleur**

Soundtrack: "I'm a King Bee" by Slim Harpo

Although Pensacola is a small sleepy beach side city on the Gulf of 'Merica, it was the largest place I'd ever lived. I was eleven, dressed like Laura Ingalls Wilder, and fresh from my parents' latest missionary trip to Guatemala. The dilapidated Victorian house my parents were living in was located on the edge of what passed for the historic district.

The Purple Box sat on the other side of the railroad tracks. It was a renovated convenience store painted neon purple. The sheet glass windows were covered in old concert posters. I wandered by on my bicycle one day with three dollars in my pocket in search of an opportunity to commit gluttony by candy.

A string of bells jangled as I entered. This was not the store I expected. Inside were bins full of vinyl records. The counter where the cash register sat held no racks of candy and was unattended. I crept in, further lured by a type of music I'd never heard. A throbbing bass line accompanied by a wailing harmonica spooled out of the overhead speakers. It sounded like a guitar was saying wow-wow-wow. Then the voice started singing in a rhythm unfamiliar to me. "Waaaale, Ima kang bee. Buzzin' round yore ah! It was dark, it was moody, it was Slim Harpo and this music woke something inside of me.

I returned to the Purple Box often, rummaging through the bins and carrying interesting discs to the high counter in back. Mister Box or his sister Amina would peer over the edge as I held up a chosen record. "I'd like to sample this please before I buy." My voice floated up as I passed the record into cinnamon-colored hands. The click of the lock on the listening booth gave me tacit permission to enter and crown myself with enormous headphones.

Bliss descended from "Shave 'em Dry Blues" by Ma Rainey, to "Feelin' Good" by Nina Simone, all the way down to "Clean Up Woman" by Betty Wright. Even if I had money, I'd never be able to buy any of this forbidden music. It certainly wasn't hymns or gospel. My parents would be horrified.

Perhaps I'd have to undergo yet another of those endless exorcisms to cleanse my soul. Because I certainly had a different kind of soul

now. Fall turned to winter. My parents' assignment in Florida was complete. It was time to return to the commune in Arizona. Although I never saw the Boxes again, I never forgot them. Today my tablet is loaded with an eclectic selection of music. Slim Harpo is there buzzin' it all night long.

## **Soothing The Beast, Gary Farlow**

Long before character Andy Dupre played opera recordings over the P.A. system at Shawshank prison in the Stephen King film, I saw the value of music in an incarceration setting.

Guilford College, located in the Piedmont of North Carolina, plays host each summer to the Eastern Music Festival, a month-long celebration of daily classical music concerts. Music students and acclaimed masters such as Lang Lang, Yo-Yo Ma, and Wynton Marsalis have journeyed from all across the globe to participate in teaching and performing the works of music greats such as Bach, Mozart, Chopin, and Vivaldi.

As a part of the Eastern Music Festival, Project Listen is an outreach program that takes chamber ensembles into the surrounding communities to audiences unable to attend the on-campus concerts. In 2004, I was at Southern Correctional Institution, a medium security prison in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Our Service Club issued an invitation to the Festival, requesting such a concert be brought to our prison.

Typically, the music fare of most inmates varies between rap, rock, and country – or a mix. Rarely will one walk by a cell and hear Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, Bach's *French Suite*, or an etude by Chopin.

Prior to prison, I was a season ticket holder to both the Eastern Music Festival and the local symphony orchestra, so the strains of Mozart were not new to me. The afternoon concert saw a string quartet arrive at the prison.

The musicians, all college students led by a visiting professor, had never been inside a prison but had willingly (even eagerly) volunteered to provide a reprieve from the cacophony of prison.

Their unfamiliarity of incarceration was matched by the inmate audiences having never attended a classical music recital before. As the organizer of this event, I had no idea of what to expect. Would anyone show up to hear? *Would*

they walk out once they heard music totally new to them? Would anyone “act out” or disrupt the concert? All it ever takes is one, after all.

My fears proved unfounded. The visitation room filled within minutes. A hush – one seldom experienced at any gathering of inmates – fell as the ensemble opened with Vivaldi’s *Spring* from his *Four Seasons*.

The inmates sat mesmerized as two violins, a viola, and a bass filled the room with music that captivated a group of men who had never before attended such a concert.

“I kinda don’t want it to end,” said one inmate.

“I’d never have believed that I would like that music, but it just, I dunno, took me out of this place,” commented another.

Me? I sat in satisfaction for long afterward.

Yeah, I guess you could say I fully understood Andy in *Shawshank Redemption*. The old adage is really true, *music doth soothe the savage beast* – in all of us.

### **Music, Charles Conner**

Oh how music has affected every facet of my life, I was fifteen years old when I heard of a band. They toured the nation every year for their fans.

At the age of 17 back in the day I hitchhiked to RFK which was about two hours away—I got a ride immediately based on my sign. It said “DEAD SHOW or BUST” and that worked quite fine.

As soon as we took the exit, the butterflies started to build. I was tense with excitement, my body tingling all the way. When we rounded the final corner I gasped “Oh Boy!” It was a carnival of sorts with a different flair. An outlaw sense of freedom lingered in the air. As people mingled, everyone had a smile. I remember feeling so at home, even though I just arrived.

Later on as the sun was going down, I was talking to a wizard sort of man –I told him this was my first show and he said, “I’ll be damned, take my ticket, you don’t want to miss this band!” I took the trip inside. The music was even better than they described – 70,000 people filled the stands. Sunburst colors everywhere, everyone dancing without a care. Before you knew it, cause

time was moving fast – we all were teleported, it seemed, to the parking lot.

Everyone was hustling and bustling, wrapping things up and ready to go. Cars started to move to the exit gate, and all I had was my bag and my skate. I started to panic, cause cops showed up and were yelling and snatching people who didn’t readily leave – Just at that moment when fear covered my face, did a girl named Amber pull up in a cargo van. She yelled, “Get in if you want to go to the next show, this place is a bust and we gotta go.” I was born wild so I jumped in, “What the heck.”

She was a few years older than I and even in the morning light that sparkle remained in her eye. She loved the story of how RFK was my first. She told me all about the band and how fun it was to travel endlessly and be wild and free. I mean, roaming the country, seeing music every night sounded cool to me.

We went to New York, Philly, and Boston you see. The last night of the tour came so fast. We managed to save a couple thousand dollars and don’t ask me how. The only question was, where do we go now? Her hometown, my hometown UGH – Come to find out she was just as wild as I, we went from Boston to San Fran in three short days. I still remember crossing the Bay Bridge for the first time looking over at Treasure Island. I was all smiles. We ended up on the Haight, like-minded people wandering all around. We would skate, peddle, and roam all day. Only to share a hotel with like 15 others from all over the USA. We got to see music at legendary places all the time—The Fillmore, The Warfield, The Avalon, The Great American and more. San Fran no doubt had a unique music scene, that’s for sure.

Look at the history and you shall see. SF started a movement that’s alive and well. The Bohemian Way – is what I’ll say. It’s still alive in select cities all over still to this very day. Eugene, OR; Asheville, NC; Boulder, CO; and Ithaca, NY just to name a few.

I remember a time not so long ago – we were at Watkins Glen Race Track, rearing, ready to go. Me and the FAM all in tow. It was a Super Ball not a race though. We had a Prevost parked next to the band, four days filled with fun. We all were glad we made the trip.

Got invited to a Post-Festy Party in New York City and it took a week to recuperate. Finally

fresh and ready for a new start. Most of us head back West, but we are from all over, you know.

Those are the days I miss when I look back. 35 years of music chasing, yea that's me. The years came and went, been to every music venue from Sea to Bay. Got busted in "The Fall." Just a million hits, wow that's all. And when I look back, music started it all.

I'll be coming home soon to my family who's been with me through it all. I could keep going but that'll be too much for y'all—

## July '25 Word Theme: "Sharing"

### **Cookie Bandits, Brix Capone**

When we were all kids my mother didn't "allow" us to have sweets unless it was a special occasion. Now I'm not trying to talk ill of my mother, but she didn't restrict our sweet intake for our health benefit but out of greed for herself. She loved all sweets. Anyways, my sister Oso and I were the only full-blood siblings and we possessed our father's "hard-headedness." One night while my dad was at work, my mother had just got some peanut butter cookies. There were five of us kids all together and she gave us each one "and only one."

Me and Oso were not okay with that as we watched her "smack" half the pack. I was seven and Oso was six, mind you. I watched my mother "stash" the remaining cookies on top of the kitchen cabinets. In secret, I told Oso to sneak into my room when Mom fell asleep. My older siblings left for my Aunt's for the night which meant the heist I had planned would only involve Oso and myself.

Mom went to bed. I knew because at some point I put a hole in my wall so that I could see the TV in the living room. When I saw Mom go into her room, I waited for thirty minutes to pass on my digital alarm clock, then I tapped the wall to Oso's room. When it seemed like it took forever for her to come, I opened my door and looked down the hall and there Oso was crawling to my door. I told Oso that she was going to climb onto the counter and get the cookies while I kept watch because for some reason, of all nights, my mom slept with her door open. I helped Oso onto the counter and then backed up to watch into Mom's room. Oso handed me six cookies that I put into my pocket and then I saw Mom start

moving. Instead of telling Oso that Mom was coming, I took off running to my room. I saw my mom snatch my sister and whoop her ass as I slowly closed my door. I felt so bad as I heard my mother stomp past my door. I'll tell you this, though, my sis ain't no rat! It's not in our blood! I heard Oso crying through our wall. I took the cookies out of my pocket and I smelled them. I coulda' ate them, but it wasn't in me to be greedy like that, specifically after Oso took the ass whoopin' like she did.

After thirty minutes on my clock went by I crawled to Oso's room where I saw her lying on the floor on her stomach with her head toward the wall. I got her attention and she sat up so I sat next to her and I hugged her and said "I'm sorry" but she was more concerned about the "loot."

"Were they good?" she asked. I pulled all six out of my pocket and gave them to her. Her tears were gone now. She took three and handed me back three. "No," I said and gave her one back. It was only fair that she got the majority share! Right? After that I decided that it was best that I always run "point" on a job and never be a lookout again!

The Bible says in so many words to do what you're good at. If you're good at baking, then bake. If you're good at being a leader, lead, etc. So I lead and plan. You know, it's crazy, after writing this memory, I've realized that my mother died always believing that only Oso was the Cookie Bandit. I did tell her about the "B.K. Whopper Scam" me and my lil brother Cheeko ran on her and she laughed so hard. But the "B.K. Whopper Scam" is for another theme/another day.

### **A Bunkie's Offering, D'Andre M. Morris**

The first time I had a good bunkie, he gave me a percentage of his store bag every time. Free from pay back. It felt nice to have someone share with me. I started to give him half of what I came up with.

I was not used to having things given to me. Besides food, shelter, and a bathroom. Even in the outside community. It tells character for someone to share in a greedy world.

The next bunkie that shared a great deal with me, I gave first, then he showed his gratitude by sharing back. I walked into a

stranger's cell as his new bunkie. Later in that week, I had a few dollars of prison currency. I shared with him. And he gave me his thanks. Then when he got a store bag later on, he gave me enough to be satisfied for a week.

I realized doing good deeds opens hearts and means a lot to people, and I myself also. I became a giver.

I had to move out of the last guy's cell when I got my big store bag. But before I left, I broke bread. A little while after, I became the provider for one of my bunkies. Working in the kitchen, I produce food for my cell regularly.

I got a large dictionary from a bunkie when I started my first novel.

There's a bunkie who's a giver like me. Who's my cellmate as I write now.

I had bunkie after bunkie, most were good bunkies.

### **Sharing, Christopher Cross**

Sharing is a noble gem of the heart, adorning the smiling face of friendship. It is a caring hand that lifts one out of the mire of loneliness. It is a helping hand out of a bad situation, or simply a shoulder to cry on, when all else fails. It is a currency between friends.

Sharing is the tender touch of a loving mother, when all else kicks you in the face and spits on you while you're down. In the face of this brilliant, unconditional love melts the icy encasement of the selfish, drug-addled heart. You can tell her your worst, and still she sees and hopes for the best.

Sharing is quiet communion with the Divine. When Shiva dances in the heart, and Consciousness is at play, you can hear the music of your own soul. The small me begins to fade, and the I-AM shines forth.

Sharing is the blessing of watching the immense power of Shakti in the mighty works of Nature. Mountains rise as She breathes upon the earth, and lightning flashes from Her eyes. She roars in the thunder and issues forth the rain. And down in your very body, on a cellular level, even down to the atom, is Her Work manifest. From big to small, She is Mother of all.

Sharing is a secret smile between lovers, whether we are dancing the Sacred Dance, or simply sharing a thought. When I kiss Your lips, and look into Your eyes, our souls are laid bare,

ours to share. Let me drink from Your cup, and get drunk on Your love, relishing your taste, my Goddess.

Whoever you are, whatever it is that we share, let it be noble and true, and full of laughter. Sharing is from my eyes to yours, and your heart to mine, and let it be genuine.

### **Welcome!, Gary Farlow**

"Beware the candy bar left on your pillow," was the warning expressed in a film shown to all incoming inmates to prison. The message cautioned one to question the motives of anyone bearing "gifts." It was meant to prevent any unsuspecting inmate from being exploited and abused.

So when I first entered the Hickory CBU, or Character Building Unit, I was taken aback to return from the lavatory to discover a literal panoply of canteen items: Ramen soups, Little Debbie snacks, chips, bars of soap, a can of Coke, even a bag of coffee!

I stood perplexed and quite honestly wondering, "*What have I got myself into?*" You see, MacDougall C.I. is one of several prisons in the South Carolina Department of Corrections that houses a Character Building Unit or CBU.

These CBUs promote the building of positive character traits by focusing on attributes like defeating addiction, effective communication skills, anger management; relapse prevention, and developing coping skills for positive and pro-social transition. Classes are led by other inmates in a peer-support framework. An integral aspect in each CBU is a MWR (Morale, Welfare, & Recreation) committee who reaches out to all new inmates to essentially be the "welcome wagon" of the unit and provide support in adapting to the CBU. A part of this focuses on providing tangible support in the everyday needs of any inmate.

Nothing is expected nor asked for in return. It is truly altruistic and a perfect example of agape love- that undemanding attitude of care and sharing rarely seen in society and virtually never in a correctional setting. Yet here it was.

That day was over three years ago. Since then, I have been fully welcomed into the Hickory CBU and now lead classes myself and contribute to the MWR through art that is auctioned to raise funds to assist inmates such as I was.

Sharing in prison is often viewed with suspicion. But I have found that first impressions can be misleading and that not all motives are "bad" and true sharing does occur. We can't allow fear to blind us to the good that STILL EXISTS in the world.

## August '25 Word Theme: "Water"

### **The Creek, Jennifer McHenry**

Atop an embankment gazing at the ripples below, a solitary leaf glides across jagged stone on a path to a destination not yet known. Being guided by an invisible hand. The gentle breeze causes another leaf to fall, cascading down—gracefully dancing in the air before settling on the opaque liquid underneath. The water takes yet another passenger on its journey.

### **Boom or Bust, Jeff Hovatter**

Three Fork Creek was the dominant feature, and force, in my life. Formed by the confluence of Field's Creek, Squires Creek, and Bird's Creek, two miles from my childhood home, which I still consider HOME in my heart. Roughly one hundred feet wide, it flowed about knee deep at most times, but dwindled to a trickle that could be crossed at ankle depth in places, and swelled to fill the holler from hill to hill on a yearly cycle with the seasons.

Loss of volume of flow was typically a slow diminishment during very hot summers and could happen in fall, or last into November. Floods could happen at any time of year, but most often in spring. Floods came quickly, in less than twelve hours, or even cycled through in half that time. The dirt road that followed its south bank, or the north side, was washed away many times in the almost half century that I lived in the holler, or within two miles of Three Fork.

Water in Three Fork had been polluted prior to my memory by the extraction of bituminous coal (high sulfur), and the rocky bed was coated a dull orange from a mix of sulfur and various metals, disturbed and released from underground deposits. As a child I never questioned why the "big Crick" was "sulfur" while the "little crick," Mar- kins Run joined Three Fork fifty yards from our house, ran over uncoated

rocks. The little crick teemed with life like crawdads and chub minnows, while the big Crick was "dead." In my view as a child, some streams were "sulfur" where things didn't live, streams polluted by acid mine drainage were very common in the hills of north-central W.V., a legacy of natural resources that were plundered by out-of-state interests, some with names recognized as titans of industry.

In short, the wealth was taken and cities were built from the labor of desperate immigrants, who remained to eke out poor livings in the ecological wasteland. One small county, McDowell county in the extreme south of W.V., has been called "the county that built a nation" due to the quality and quantity of coal therein produced, and used to fuel steel production that was used to build railroads and skyscraper cities. Think New York and Chicago.

Methods of extraction disregarded ecology for decades, and polluting minerals, like toothpaste, can't be put back. Lick Run, a tiny, beautiful creek that joined Three Fork at a corner of my farm, periodically flowed milk-white, which I've been told was due to mine drainage polluted with aluminum.

In the semitropical rainforest of W.V. I always took water for granted; perhaps less than some, because my home water source was a hillside spring that very dry summers reduced to a drip, which forced awareness of conservation. When I was little, my Mom complained that water was either ass-deep or so scarce you couldn't get a drink. During the years that I lived in the Sonoran Desert, I rarely considered where water came from.

Decades later, living in the Australian Capital Territory, water was on everyone's mind due to a five-year drought that had reduced reservoirs to fifty percent of capacity. Climate change was a frequent topic, and quite a few Aussies volunteered to tell me that they were "tree-huggers." That was more than fifteen years ago and the U.S. still hasn't accepted what is obvious. I'm no Chicken Little, but denying science and experts in favor of the opinion of the world's most powerful liar alarms me. In the dead, polluted water of Three Fork, I learned to swim; just how deep my various vehicles could ford; how to paddle a canoe or kayak when the flow would sweep me off my feet; that three or more inches of ice would support my

four-wheeler; that hiking the ice in sub-zero temp was quicker and easier than wading snow on the unpaved and unplowed road.

In the mid-twenty-teens, a project to mitigate acidity by a local conservation group "Save the Tygart" had fish in Three Fork, which I had never anticipated!

### **Water, Marqui Clardy, Sr.**

Clean water is perhaps the most fundamental thing to which all living beings should be entitled.

Prison changed that. Prison has wiped the notion of a fundamental entitlement to clean "anything" completely from my mind. This environment is nasty. Almost every surface is covered in germs. There's always mold and grime in a corner somewhere. It's not uncommon to see ants in your cell, flies buzzing around in the chow hall, and the occasional rodent sneaking around at night. One prison I was housed in was even infested with bedbugs! The water is usually of a very poor quality and sometimes comes out brownish. Some prisons are so old that if it rains hard enough, water drips in through the ceiling or floods into the cells on the bottom tier. That's why MRSA and staph and fungal infections are more prevalent in penal institutions than in any other environment.

In time, we all learn to ignore these conditions and just live with them. That's the dehumanizing aspect of prison: we literally become desensitized to these inhumane conditions and just go about our days like it's normal.

Maybe I could've continued pretending not to be bothered by this. Knowing that the staff eat different food - and use different utensils - than the prisoners; that they always put on latex gloves before touching anything (lest they catch "jailpox"); and that they only drink bottled water and wouldn't dare drink the prison tap. Maybe I could've continued ignoring what all this implies: that none of these things are good enough for the staff, but they're good enough for me.

That would be one thing. But last week, puppies were brought to the prison for our new F.E.T.C.H. dog training program. And the dog handlers were given Brita water filters for the pups... because the administration feels the tap water isn't safe enough for them.

ARE. YOU. KIDDING ME?!?!

Everybody knows that unsafe water and prisons go back like pimps and jheri curls. The first prison I was sent to more than a decade ago was notorious for it. There were literally warning signs posted throughout the county that read: "DO NOT DRINK THE TAP WATER." We called it "hard water" because of all the impurities in it and what it would do to our skin. Bumps and rashes were common. Nobody complained about it, so neither did I.

As I bounced around other prisons over the years, I noticed that most of them also had "hard water." It made me wonder why that was. What is it about prisons that causes this tainted water? Is it rusty pipes? Is there bacteria in it? Do the people who live near the prisons experience these same problems?

Then of course when the story about Flint, Michigan's doo doo brown water broke the news a few years ago, I thought, "Aha! So, it's NOT safe. I knew it!"

The prison I'm at now is the state's first community-model facility. Millions of dollars are being spent on renovations, starting fish farms, putting salad bars in the chow halls, building pavilions on the rec yards with new workout equipment, new dayroom TVs, etc. It's being turned into a state-of-the-art prison...

...with the same nasty brown water coming out of the faucets. None of that money has gone toward fixing this issue. Staff members walk around sipping on bottles of Dasani spring water, all while assuring us that there's nothing wrong with the tap water.

Before these puppies were brought to the prison, I hadn't seen a water filter since before I was arrested. That was 17 years ago. The pup in my unit - an adorable little black lab - is as innocent and carefree as they come. But every time I see him scurrying around the pod, so much resentment comes over me that I feel like I deserve the 'Hater of the Year' award. Like the staff, the tap water isn't good enough for him, but it's good enough for me. While I'm in prison, I can take being given second-class treatment behind the staff. But to be given third-class treatment behind a damn dog?

Should he be allowed to drink clean, filtered water? Yes, he should. And so should I, as well as everybody else behind bars, because we are living beings also. Of all the things we have to

worry about in prison, clean water should not be one of them. I shouldn't have to worry about what harm the water is possibly causing to my body - harm from which these puppies are being protected as they run around, blissfully unaware of their higher station than ours. The clean water they receive is emblematic of the one thing that separates them from us: they are free.

### **Water as a Shared Life, Max Reynaud**

Water is the opposite of prison. It seeps in through otherwise impenetrable walls as if they were sieves. Over time it can destabilize walls to the point that the prison is forced to slap together some repairs. It's stronger than concrete, more solid than steel—water just operates on a longer timescale, affecting crumble and rust over the decades. It seems well-tuned to the long-term institutional living of prisoners.

Water can't easily be controlled, as guards confronting a flooded cell are forced to acknowledge. It works itself through locks and doorframes. As I hardly need to tell other prisoners who've experienced lockdowns, water can be conveyed through tiny gaps with the help of a plastic bag. Water seems to me to be a pretty good analogy for the irrepressible life force of the incarcerated: it flows past, around, and through the barriers erected in its place. It might evaporate for a little while, only to condense later—water never really disappears. Water obeys more fundamental and pretextual rules than the carceral order's dehumanizing bureaucracy.

Water isn't invincible, of course. Too many people in prison are slowly poisoned by lead and other contaminants picked up by the water, unregulated and untested, piped into their rooms. It can be a grim reminder of how little value incarceration puts on your life when your only source is lukewarm, foul-tasting water from your sink. (Using it to make "sink coffee" can help mask the nauseating flavor, but not the anxious intake.) And in particularly abhorrent circumstances, water can be used as a weapon, or withheld as dire punishment, by being thrown into a "dry cell."

Water is still a source of hope for me, though. The rain out my window reminds me that the cycles of nature are still at work, watering an institutional lawn home to uncountable insects, even as I endure a regulated life encased in

cement. A good shower, however rare, rejuvenates me. (Especially on days like this July one, when as I write, it's easily 95 degrees in my "living space.") "Water is life," as the Lakota had to remind the federal government. Like prisoner solidarity, water is flexible in its flow, but when hit quick and hard, it holds fast like iron—institutions often have to relearn this when they belly-flop into a unified resistance.

The worst moments of prison life can threaten to engulf us, like water in the lungs it can drown us. When we're able to build connections with those around us, though, we remind ourselves of our shared humanity. We can float on that interdependence like on the buoyancy of an ocean, when we're too tired to swim. We all need water; we're all made of water; from water we're born and, if the climate emergency continues, to water our bodies may one day return. Water is our shared connection and — even among the cinderblocks — our shared life.

### **Water, Jeremy Brown**

Water heals. Water cleanses. Water flows.  
Water is fast, it really goes.

Water dissolves. Water Solves et  
*Coagulum*. Water rises. Water falls.

Showering and bathing, this water  
cleanses my balls.

Water is wet, sticky, soft and dry. Water  
quenches thirst when one gets high.

Ah sigh, the water within me alchemically  
now becomes crystalized.

All things need water, without it they die.

With this water from my eye, I do  
sometimes have a good ol' cry.

Forever I am one with my own water, no  
lie.

These words are the waters of life.

## **Be Like Water, Andrea Lindsay**

I rage like the rapids,  
Or a massive tsunami wave,  
But I can be patient as well.  
Over the course of a thousand years,  
I wear down earth and stone.  
When the wind slows, I am tranquil and still.  
But when they rise, I go where they take me.  
I am slippery, malleable and fluid;  
I fit through the smallest spaces and move  
around obstacles.  
I slide, I flow, I adapt.  
Life and comfort derive from me,  
But I also bring devastation.  
Try to grasp me, and I slip away.  
Be like me, as the situation demands -  
Flow or break down or be still.  
I am there inside you;  
You are already me.  
My name is Water — I am all of this and more!

## September '25 Word Theme: “Danger”

### **Danger, Ryan Keith Taylor**

When people think of danger, they imagine something that can cause harm. However, this needs to be dissected. In the world of workplace safety, the term "danger" indicates that it may cause serious injury or death. The term is used only for the highest threats to safety and health, everything else is marked with "attention," "caution," or "warning."

My previous workplace was hell. Afghanistan is a weird place and I spent a total of seventeen months there. Nangarhar Province is home to Jalalabad and the Khyber Pass. Kandahar province is down south, full of dust, and sees the extremes of each side of the thermostat. Helmand province, the original stronghold of the Taliban, always has something going on. Kabul is the Nation's capital and is home to three million people, a thick layer of smog overhead, and some gorgeous palaces.

Nangarhar was my first experience getting shot at and having both rockets and mortars hit within a hundred meters of me. We found IEDs, had plenty of angry shooters to play with, several vehicle bombs, and even some rogue Afghan police that decided to try us.

Kandahar province was unbelievably uncomfortable due to the piercing cold and the unbearable heat. Rockets were occasional, but we had an eighteen-man group launch a complex attack against us. We had vehicles get stuck in firefights, had to conduct rescue operations, and had a few guys make it past the first few meters of Camp Simmon before being cut down.

Helmand province was in a class of its own. We lived out of Lashkar Gah for a couple of weeks. We were plagued by sniper fire until our own sniper popped the guy's head like a can of overheated Spaghetti-Os. We ran village raids throughout the night, lived on a couple of Afghan bases, and put a decent sized dent into the local Taliban population. There is where I nearly lost two fingers, broke a third, crushed my ankle, and continued to fight through it for another two weeks.

Kabul was extraordinarily beautiful and where I got my blast injury. This is where I almost fell through the ceiling of the Darul Aman palace and onto the marble floor 30-40 feet below me. Turns out, it wasn't concrete, it was thin ceramic tile that I was standing on.

After all of the firefights, explosions, accidents, and near catastrophes, I have to say that the feeling of danger is different for me. I've always been able to chalk it up as workplace hazards. I've been in ground combat with Al Qaeda, the Taliban, ISIS-K, locally funded bands of hoodlums, and angry farmers who think it's funny to spray rounds at us and leave. It is only coming to prison that I started to recognize danger. Not danger from other inmates, even in some of the rougher places I've been, but the danger from the people who keep me here.

The only real danger I have been in has been the result of untrained staff errors. They've gotten me into a pickle on more than a few occasions. In addition to that, there's always the looming feeling of dread that these people can't fill my medications, block my contacts for no reason, cut me off from the rest of the world with no redress, violate my Constitutional rights, retaliate for my grievance filing, write erroneous

disciplinary reports, or any of the other major failures that they can come up with.

It's an ever present feeling of dread and helplessness that affects me far worse than any PTSD. In combat, standing toe to toe against my fellow man, or tossed into a survival situation, I know that I can hold my own. Being at the mercy of vindictive invalids is something that I still have not learned to cope with after eight years. With only about a year left, it's safe to say that my definition of danger is going to change.

Danger for me is going to encompass anything that is going to get me stuck back in here. All other ideas of danger can be handled through skill, competence, preparation, calculated application of violence, and problem solving.

### **Fascism: A Clear and Present Danger, James Logan Diez**

Baby Boomers know what fascism is and can recognize the signs of its rise, because our parents talked about fighting it in WWII; and, its details and effects on the world were a central focus in our school history, civics, and political science courses from high school through college. Our children, the "Me Generation," not so much – and by the time the Baby Boomers' grandchildren got to high school, public education had been dumbed down so much by "Free Ride Politics" and "Common Knowledge," dulled by environmental distractions, that those entering adulthood in the 1990s-2000s had little to no real understanding of what fascism actually is or how it generally comes about.

- ❖ Fascism - a system of government characterized by rigid one-party dictatorship, forcible suppression of opposition, private economic enterprise under centralized governmental control, belligerent nationalism, racism, and militarism, etc. [inclusive of religious, cultural and ethnic persecution, oppression and discrimination]. (See Webster's New World College Dictionary, 5th ed. Page 527.)

Hmmm - does that sound at all familiar? Let's look behind the facade of "American Democracy 2025," shall we?

1. "Rigid one-party dictatorship" - there's no disputing one party presently controls both the Senate and House of the U.S. Congress; a 6 - 3 majority in the U.S. Supreme Court; and the presidency. Check Box 1.

2. "Forcible suppression of opposition" - force isn't always physical violence; it can be economic force, or the "force of law" such as created by a mega-billionaire buying elections or Supreme Court rule that heavily supports the one party in charge. Been plenty of both of those since 2020, and we must not forget the weaponization of the Justice Department to oppress disfavored practices and/or programs, as well as social programs the "opposition" relies on for basic needs. Check Box 2.

3. "Private economic enterprise under centralized government control" - federal commerce and trade regulations have controlled private economic enterprise and restricted when, where, how, and who is permitted to operate a business, do personal sales of homecrafted products, etc. for over a century in America; and, when regulated fairly such is necessary for consumer protection - but when the Federal Government favors one group of business heavily and/or basically destroys consumer protections (such as DOGE/Trump has done), it's fascism. Check Box 3.

4. "Belligerent nationalism" - anyone who's been sober, has half a brain, and isn't in a vegetative coma, is capable of seeing and recognizing belligerent nationalism being clearly and openly practiced under the Trump administration. Most of America's allies have been alienated; and even our closest neighbor (Canada) has come into confrontational attitude by Trump's belligerent nationalism (and capitalistic fascist greed - i.e., Mammonism). Check Box 4.

5. "Racism" - reality speaks for itself. Racism as well as classism is steadily increasing in the U.S. as the Republican Extremism and Trump policies blatantly defy court orders, ignore the Constitution, and exercise personal agendas (such as Donald Trump using tariffs to manipulate the stock market to his own profit). Every campaign promise made to minority citizens to get their vote has been broken - and

social programs many if not most minorities depended on for basic needs have been gutted or canceled. Check Box 5.

6. “Militarism” – forceful takeover of Greenland? Coercion of Canada to become a 51st U.S. state? Forceful removal of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip so the Donald Trump development corporation can turn the Gaza Strip into a luxury resort area for the ultra-wealthy? None of these can be achieved without substantial military action – and the fascist in power is ready, willing, and currently able to mobilize the U.S. military at a whim! Check Box 6.

I’ll leave it to the Reader to ask: “Is there a lot of religious, cultural, and ethnic persecution, oppression and discrimination in America now?” Sometimes we have to look outside our own culture, comfort zone, and immediate societal environment to see the larger reality of America’s sociopolitical landscape – it’s not “America the Beautiful” right now. We the People are in the stormy chaos of a Christian Nationalist Fascist Theocracy married to Mammonist Fascism Oligarchal Sovereigns that have been covertly securing positions in our government, courts, and other official positions in states and the nation’s governments. Quietly and slowly killing American democracy’s growth to replace it with fascism.

From “Ryder Bills” and “Closed Doors” Committee meetings, and the ability of officials to designate a document “classified,” to the U.S. Supreme Court’s “Shadow Docket” and unsigned, unexplained *per curiam* decisions – the present government has concealed itself behind an opaque curtain of secrecy . . . hence, UNACCOUNTABILITY (reinforced by the fictional “Sovereign Immunity” the 1890 Hans Supreme Court created between the lines of the Eleventh Amendment, but that is contra to everything the Founders stood for)!

Every child born after 2020 has never seen one truly free America where individual liberty has been honored, and the constitutional rights uplifted by the government – you’ve only seen the growth of fascism!

### **Danger, Jacob Lester**

Danger, danger, danger! An internal warning system may sound for various reasons, but do we heed it? Depending upon a variety of issues, symptoms, and situations, we will not properly respond to the internal danger warning. Adrenaline junkies rush into situations that scream danger, abuse victims often seek out “dangerous” situations due to trauma-influenced reactions, and many mentally ill people suffer from periods of poor judgment where often they cannot hear the danger warning.

What can be done in these situations? For many, figuring out the root cause of their altered response is the start. After taking the time to determine what lies behind the lack, alteration, or inhibition that the person must work through, with, or on the issue in question, which can eventually require utilizing response/behavioral alteration techniques.

### **Danger, Bert Zamora**

DANGER! That is quite the word isn't it. When I hear the word only one thing comes to my mind. Danger Will Robinson danger danger! A seemingly harmless robot protecting his favorite person.

Danger also makes me think of my seven kids. Trust me seven kids can get into a lot of danger.

I sometimes wished there was a robot to stand behind them and yell at them DANGER DANGER! But no robot, just an overly concerned parent. Danger is always there and danger is always around.

All we can do as a parent is to give our kids as much of our knowledge and experience to avoid as much danger as possible. We cannot be there every moment of every day but we can be that voice in the back of their heads telling them DANGER DANGER!

### **Forever My Child, Brix Capone**

It was 2020 when I called to talk to my kids and Chasity, my kid's mother, said “Hold on. I need to tell you something about Aubrey first but you're not going to like it.” I waited nervously till she spoke again. “Aubrey doesn't want to be called Aubrey anymore.”

"Okay. The fuck's that mean?"

"She is no longer a she. She says she's a boy named Michael."

At first I remained quiet, unsure what to say. I think I managed to say "oh" as I thought about what I just heard, then Chasity asked "are you okay?"

"Yes, just thinking." I wasn't mad that my baby was going through a change. I was scared because being in prison, I see how these people "get down" on gays and trans people and I didn't want my baby to have to deal with all the bullshit that comes from people who don't want to understand. My kid's mother thought I wasn't going to take it well because I was a gang member and anyone who is a member knows "you can't associate with the "Alphabet gang" (LGBTQ+) because "it's a bad look." But fuck all that! That's my first born baby! So for my child I started talking more to the "Alphabet gang" to try to understand my baby more. I even got myself placed into the LGBTQ+ group.

"Are you sure this is what you want? Because people will talk about you being in this group" the MHP asked.

"Yes, I don't care what people say! It's for my baby!" Of course there were people talking shit. But I didn't care! For the ones who were polite and asked "are you gay?" I'd politely tell them "no" and explain about my child and as for the ignorant people who would call me a "faggot" for being in the group and associating with the "Alphabet gang" instead of breaking their faces like I wanted to I could very calmly ask "what if I am a faggot? What are you going to do about it? Are you going to change me?" They never know what to do when I do that. My kid has a temper like me so I'm afraid my baby will hurt someone or vice versa and then I'll have to get involved.

I remember talking to my baby, "can't you just be a girl who dates girls?"

"Ew father, that's gross!" which at first baffled me and we moved on.

"Look kid, I can't call you Michael!"

"Why?"

"'Cause one, that's your Uncle Monkey's name [my little brother who was killed by Dallas Police in 2014] and two, if you change your name to Michael then you're ruining my name theme for my children." (Both my kids are AMG.)

"Well daddy, you and mommy can still call me Aubrey."

I laughed, "Well gee, thanks for giving me permission to call you the name I gave you." The kid and I workshopped a few names and landed on Alixandyr or "Alix" and Alix would keep the middle name "mae" for Chasity.

I'm a big supporter of the "Alphabet gang." My family is full of LGBTQ but my child is the first trans in our family that we know of. My older brother is gay and I saw the shit he dealt with so that adds on to my fear for Alix. I know the world is more accepting these days but there's still some people who aren't and they concern me when it comes to my kid. The same year, I was stabbed in my right rib because I couldn't stab a gay guy around Diamond to prove that I'm not gay. After I was stabbed, I declared that that was my "out" from the gang. I was stabbed with a bed spring all because of my choice to understand the alphabet gang for my child. The scar on my right side is a constant reminder of the danger the alphabet gang may face and of my decision to back them. A decision I do NOT regret, I have met some real good friends! Can't no one ever tell me I'm not an ally of LGBTQ+ members that's for damn sure!

Do you know what creates hate? Ignorance creates hate. Being uneducated about a thing causes one to hate. It is easier for people not to understand than it is to try to understand and people often choose the easier route which is ignorance. One man told me I should be ashamed of my baby and disown her like he did his daughter. "Fuck that! Alix is forever my child! You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"You're right!"

We can get rid of hate if we take the time to learn and tolerate one another.

### **Danger, Nicholas Wilborn**

As I sit here in the most conservative, rogue, renegade state in the United States, I wonder about the direction our country is headed. With the election of Donald J. Trump as our president, I watch every day as he pushes Congress and the courts around. I'm amazed at how everyone seems to line up and do his bidding.

All I can think of is the robot from "Lost in Space" screaming "Danger, Will Robinson, Danger!" But no one seems to heed the warning. I sit in the day room and watch as my fellow prisoners consume 6 to 8 hours of "Fox News" everyday, enthralled and enraptured by this man. And I think, where am I? Am I the only one who's seeing this? How do they not see the danger in this? But no, they love it. They love him. Donald J. Trump is their savior.

Every time I hear him speak I think "Oh no." Every time he oversteps his authority and there are no checks in place to stop him I think "WTF?"

I'm no scholar or history major, but all these things I'm seeing remind me of Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler. Here's a man who made an entire group of people a national pariah, an enemy of the people. Government raids are used to round them all up and place them in concentration camps until he can figure out what to do with them. Then he's surrounded himself with cronies and yes men who further encourage and even suggest further abuses of power. And it all culminates in unlimited, unopposed, unchecked power. The police are nationalized and troops are walking the streets armed to the teeth ready to put down any dissent.

These are dangerous times. America's in danger.

## October '25 Word Theme: "Teenage Adventure"

### **Teenage Adventure, Jacob Lester**

They whispered and clucked to each other of how it was just a teenage adventure and he will grow out of it. They tell me how wrong it was and how I will go to hell for it. They tried and tried to shame and curse me, break me, but still I managed to stand strong. I am gay, and the struggles I have endured prove to me that being gay is not a choice. Who would choose to be shunned, tortured, exiled, hurt? Who would choose to be outcast, shunned or even killed for being different? A teenage adventure it is not, but a truth learned and hard-earned.

### **Fly Away, Catherine LaFleur**

My parents raised me in a Pentecostal religious cult. Women and girls dressed like Little House on the Prairie. We were not allowed to watch most TV or listen to the radio. It was very isolating. The cult believed the rapture was imminent. As a child, I suffered many fears about this event. In my teenage years, my mother and father became so fervent, their zeal alarmed my grandparents. When I turned seventeen, they decided to act. My life was set before me. My parents wanted me to marry. There was no way out.

I was invited to spend time in South Carolina before getting married. Grandmother came to get me. She and I flew to Atlanta, then to LaGuardia and from there to Charles de Gaulle in France. I was riddled with fear and guilt. Never had I been so far outside of the will of God. Now I was a thief for breaking into my parents' home office to take my passport and birth certificate from the file cabinet, branded a deceiver for keeping my plans quiet, and don't forget, rejecting God and his kingdom, thus morphing into a heretic. It was a lot to process as a kid.

My grandmother and I lived in Reims, France for two years while I recovered from a lifetime of brainwashing.

All these years later, my teenage years are still a tough subject to write about. This brief glimpse was an adventure even though it was also full of the fear religion instilled in me. Even now, there is a catch in my chest at the words I'm daring to put down.

### **TEENAGE ADVENTURE, Scott Asalone**

I never saw a dead body before that day. It wasn't something I longed to see at 17 but life throws twists and turns you never expect. How did I know the person was dead? I wasn't sure. But as I observed the body floating in the river, they never moved. I would have to swim out to discover if they were really dead. My strokes began hesitantly, almost painfully as I pushed off the river bank and kept my eye on the corpse.

We had planned a day of fun. No work, no responsibilities. A real summer day before I headed to college and the rest of my life. Sometimes even the best of days can take a sharp turn.

It was the summer of 1974 and some of my youth group friends decided to drive to the Delaware Water Gap. About an hour and a half from where we lived in Bernardsville, New Jersey, the Gap was a favorite destination of ours for swimming, hiking or just watching the sunset. That day it was Kathy, Kim, Marty, me, and of course, Marty's pet raccoon, Ben. We headed up in Marty's Mustang wearing torn-off denim shorts and t-shirts. 1974 in New Jersey, big hair was a given and not only were Kathy and Kim taking up space, Marty and I sported a ton of hair and full beards.

Heading into a small town aside the Gap, the muscled Mustang turned a few heads but not as many as we did stepping out of the car. Townspeople stuck their heads out of windows to gape at us. Strolling into the town grocery and hardware store all conversation stuttered to a halt and icy stares greeted our hair, clothes and unshaven faces. Ben caused some serious reactions perched as he was on Marty's shoulder.

Perceptions arise based on first impressions and so often they miss the mark. The looks on the locals' faces communicated loudly what they thought of us. They would have been stunned to know that Kathy went on to teach school and become a corporate exec. Kim fell in love, married and moved to Ireland. Marty became a marine and eventually worked for the FBI. Me, I worked for Merrill Lynch and opened a small, independent bookstore. They would not know that over 50 years later we are still good friends. We quickly grabbed chips, beer and other junk to satisfy us for the afternoon. A collective sigh escaped the locals as we left. A few even stepped out of the store to make sure we drove away.

None of that mattered as the lazy afternoon lengthened and we sat sleepily on the bank or swam in the Delaware River. The only drama was when Ben puked on Kim's sweatshirt. Apparently he didn't appreciate the drive, nor the chips we were feeding him. Then I saw the body.

Floating in the middle of the Delaware it drifted along with the current. The brown hair was mostly plastered to the scalp; slender strands splayed out listlessly in the water. The body seemed to be face down.

"What's that?" I asked the group. There was a deep silence. No one wanted to say it.

"I'm going to check." I whispered. Marty immediately offered to go with me.

"Nah. It's probably nothing. If I need help I'll yell."

I struck out for the center of the river. It was farther than I thought and as I got close I could see the shape of the head and the upper part of the torso.

Though it was a hot day, a cold chill ran through me. I was scared. Thoughts raced through my mind.

'What are you afraid of? Heck, if the person sits up now at least they are alive.'

But how will I get the body back to shore?

I was trained in life-saving skills, not dead-saving skills.

"Scott, be careful" Kathy yelled from the shore. I didn't realize I had stopped and was treading water. Reluctantly I continued swimming and reached out to pull the body to me. Before I could touch it, it slowly began to turn toward me. A scream readied in my throat. I held my breath and then burst out laughing. It was a log. Yes there was moss and grass clinging to one end and it looked amazingly like hair but it was just a log.

"Are you okay?" my friends yelled. Laughing so hard I could barely breathe, I could not respond. Flipping over on my back I continued laughing at my mistake, at the beautiful day, at still being young.

Being around death would be a big part of my life, but not there, not yet. I just drifted with the current and enjoyed the day.

### **Teenage Adventure, Andrew Krosch**

Back in the 90s there was a public safety/seatbelt campaign by the NTSB that featured a pair of crash test dummies. The tagline was "You can learn a lot from a dummy." For me and the other teenage boys in my neighborhood that slogan came along a decade too late. As teenagers in the 1980s we followed that saying as a guiding principle in life. Literally. Find us the dumbest older kid in the neighborhood and that's whose example we'd follow every time.

Smoking. Drinking. Smoking other stuff. Doing other, harder drugs. Huffing paint, gasoline, glue. Hallucinogens. Lots of hallucinogens. The dumber the activity the more appeal it seemed to hold. There was a streak of homemade fireworks

that were probably technically—even back then—much closer to I.E.D.s than fireworks. It took a kid nearly losing his hand before we moved on to something else. Especially dumb was how he wrecked his hand. Cutting the metal cased “firework” open with a hacksaw.

I’m not sure what was the bigger driver to our stupid behavior. The combination of getting drunk and high mixed with what felt like terminal boredom should have gotten more of us than the thankfully few we did lose: to a couple of suicides, a single homicide, and some car crashes.

Power drinking. Heavy smoking. Cigarettes and lots of that other stuff. Hallucinogens. Playing around with firearms. We were too cool for school. Which was too bad because we were definitely the dummies other kids could learn a lot from.

I like to say it not only made me the man I am, it’s how I got where I am today. Five years on a life sentence with a thirty-year minimum. Then I start the next one. That one’s up in 2060 when I’ll be 90. I haven’t gotten any smarter while in prison. Got the kind of discipline record that means I’ll probably spend the rest of my days here in my state’s highest security prison where when you really misbehave they toss you in a cell that has its own shower and directly attached “recreation” room and zero interaction with others other than yelling through the ventilation and double doors up and down long empty hallways.

Want a longer list of all the things to NOT do in your life, just ask the teenage or grown up me. You can learn a lot from a dummy.

### **Teenage Adventure, Kelly Messenger**

I grew up in group homes because my family didn’t want me. It’s something like an orphanage. Not because I was in trouble with the law but like I said, cause my family said “Fuck you.”

So when I was 11, I decided to run away with my friend Tasheena. It was the middle of the night and we had it all planned out, for staff to do a round in the middle of the night – when I knock on her wall, we crack our windows open and jump out and start running, and that’s just what we did. I still smile thinking how we was running

down the street laughing in the middle of the night feeling free, that cool night breeze.

First stop, we end up at the high school, we lay down in the football field staring up at the sky... sometimes I just wish I could rewind my life and start over.

### **Turning Point, The Rainbow Sheep**

“I, I took the road less traveled.” Robert Frost? I forget. When I saw the word themes for October and November, I knew that one particular life experience had led me to my most recent “Fork in the Road.” It was the “Teenage Adventure” that brought me there. I was always an overly emotional, flamboyant kid for as long as anyone could remember. I grew up in a mostly broken home with my younger sister who has cerebral palsy, and my twenty-five plus years since divorced recovering addict mom and verbally and physically abusive Dad. I lost my little brother shortly after he was born in 1990 due to multiple complications. I was only four years old. With my sister being as handicapped as she was (and still so), I was mainly a loner growing up. Taking care of my sister was exhausting and time consuming. For a kid like me with ADHD, it was hard to have someone else get all the attention.

My parents argued... A LOT. I was thirteen when they finally divorced. When I asked my Dad why they split, he blamed me for destroying their marriage. I was the problem child, the attention seeker, the rebellious, reckless youth that somehow had enough power and control to completely sabotage and cripple a marriage, or, at least that’s how my Dad made it seem. Imagine being a hormonal teenager with a learning disability who gets bullied and beaten up at school every day, going through one of the most difficult transitions in their life, being told they are the one at fault for ruining their parent’s marriage. I was tearful, troubled and tormented by the suicidal thoughts that were swirling around in my head. But, in this instance, I wasn’t all alone. My best friend down the street was going through the same situation with his parents. It

was through that shared experience that we became close. Actually, VERY close. He had an older sister who was excelling in her studies and was getting far more praise and attention than him. I could relate. We would have sleepovers at each other's houses just to get away from the hostile environment at home. It wasn't before long that we became each other's therapists.

We did practically everything together. We would cry, laugh, swim, ride our bikes, play video games and just enjoy each other's company. I felt safe with him, and he with me. I was brave enough to eventually tell him that I really liked him, but I didn't know what it would mean for our friendship. Was I just being a typical, hormonal teenager lost in a sea of emotions, or was I actually catching feelings for him? He was indifferent about my declaration. Was this getting weird? Am I allowed to feel this way? He said he needed "time" to process what I said. I thought "Oh, great. First my parents, now my best friend." We crept into our sleeping bags and called it a night. Neither of us could sleep. Our minds were racing. My heart was on edge. He could see that I had been crying and was visibly upset, so he offered to lie down next to me in my sleeping bag to try to comfort and console me. He climbs out of his sleeping bag, wearing nothing but quite possibly THE tightest superhero undies I had EVER seen. I pretend not to notice, but I fail miserably... letting out the most pig sounding snort EVER. We both started laughing like the hyenas in the Lion King. Unfazed and without skipping a beat, he says "Ya know...I've decided...I like you too." I smile ear to ear as he cuddles up next to me, holding me, and telling me "everything's gonna be alright." For the first time, in what seemed like forever, I felt supported; secure. Those weekends continued on and blossomed into a secret relationship well into our late teens. We had each other and that was all we needed.

Fast forward to 2025... I am now the one who is divorced with two kids and an estranged wife. He had been with the same girl for over a decade and has a ten year old son. Back in 2021,

I was able to live my truth and finally come out as gay. Even in prison, I'm happier than I've ever been now that I know what lies ahead. Maybe my friend will come to his own "Fork in the Road" someday...

## Prisoner Express Mini Picture Theme Anthology

### May '25 Picture:



### **HAPPY HOUR, Ryan Lapp**

The happiest hour you could imagine might be any one of many moments in your life. Marriage, child birth, graduation just to name a few that top most people's list. When I first came to prison it seemed that I would not be seeing any more happy hours of my own for a long long time. The reception before getting to my main line prison was about the worst thing I could imagine. I was lucky to only be there for 40 days.

Prison in my lovely native California is a shitshow to say the least. I have to admit though that I am here of my own fault, and nobody else's. As depressing as this place can be, I have learned to recognize my "happy hours" in their various forms. I am at a point where I can be happy just by knowing that there are "happy hours" in my near future. Visits with family, my lone cancer stick I allow myself most days, and obtaining my bachelor's degree (maybe two), stand as my top three.

Being happy in prison largely depends on the way you look at the world, especially with respect to your current surroundings. I was lucky enough to find a group of people that share my

love of science, nature and natural paganism. Simply put they are called Atheopagans. A mixture of principles that I won't get into in this essay, as you can research the Atheopagan path on your own if you'd like.

I look at my situation from a military point of view. Just like the military boot camps and military in general, everything you need is provided to you while you are in prison. Healthcare, food, showers, etc. are free to you; on top of that you are not paying rent or utilities. In the military scenario, you need to focus on things such as training for combat or a particular mission. In prison, time is your greatest asset, you have to make as much of that time work for you.

I firmly believe in myself, to accomplish all my goals during this prison term. When I leave this time I will have a head start at succeeding. I wish I would have found this path/mindset a lot sooner, but it's a hard thing to do with a drug-soaked brain. It took almost two years before I had a brain functioning in a way that could comprehend normal life outside of my addiction. I spent decades living in a never ending "happy hour," as long as I had my meth pipe and a fat sack, and don't forget the money, women, casino binges and thrill of the hustle lifestyle.

I still live a hustle life, but without the illegal and negative aspects. I make money legally and that feels really good. Instead of throwing away money at casinos with no regard, I throw money at building my biz contacts and making my brand known. If I had spent the last 25 years building my life up instead of very actively demolishing my world and those in and around it, who knows what could have been. Prison is not always where you hit rock bottom, doomed to have no more "happy hours," unless you allow it to be so.

One of my favorite "Happy Hours" is when I get mail from penpals, whether from family, friends, biz associates, or romantic interests. I dedicate a 2-hour (or more) block of my day writing exclusively to penpals. When I am caught up on writing, I actively search for new penpals, because new penpals equal more "happy hours" and more opportunities to better my life and someone else's as well.

Now I get to add my own opinion and stories to this collection, and being able to freely

express myself amongst my comrades gives me a lot of "happy hours." I am happy to be a contributor to this collective of amazing writers. All that being said it is now time for my one a day (or two someday) indulgence to mellow myself out.

### **Untitled, Matthew Ambrosi**

When I look into your face, I detect genuine joy. That smile doesn't seem forced. What gives? How can you be happy in a world filled with so much pain and suffering? What's with that clock? Please, tell me what's going on with you?

Young Woman in Photo: You've made a couple statements and asked a few questions too, so let me, to the best of my ability, respond. What you see in my face is a genuine joy. You are right about that. The smile is not forced. It is as real as smiles come. I was not always this way though. For much of my life I was miserable. I was constantly filled with a crippling anxiety mixed with occasional surges of anger, fear, and resentment. Not too long ago, I could barely function. Only last year, I would wake up only to find that I couldn't muster up the motivation necessary to get out of bed. So I'd stay in my bed, skip work. They'd try to call me (my work that is), but the thought of answering the phone filled me with such dread that I found myself physically incapable of moving my fingers to answer. My failure to perform at work, or even to just show up, would only make things worse. I'd think about all the times I had let people down. Friends, family, lovers... I was a mess and unable to truly be there for anyone.

Thoughts of the future would give me just as much worry. I wasn't taking care of myself, and my problems seemed to pile up with each passing day. I wanted nothing other than to go to sleep and not wake up. That's where the clock comes in. If you look at the time, it's 8:27 am. Normally, I would be in bed right now fretting about the past and worrying about the future. But... I found the secret of life that changed everything for me. The time is now. Every moment is now. The past doesn't exist anymore and it never is the future. It is always right now.

As I started to bring my awareness to the present moment through basic things at first like focusing on the breath while engaging in seated

meditation, my mind started slowly but surely to come under control. Sure it took a while, but to make a long story short (as they say), I now live in the present moment. When thoughts of the future come to my mind or the past begins to make me feel bad about things I've done, I simply come back to my breath, and ground myself in the present. Through this simple practice of living my life in the present moment and attempting to retrain my brain which constantly lived outside of the now, everything has changed for me. I am now able to enjoy my life. Yes, indeed. That smile you see is very real. I've turned my mind into an ally.

### **Release Time, Richard Schmidlkofer**

I've been in prison almost 30 years and it is time for me to be released. On Jan 16, 2026, I will be released. Since I've been in prison, I very seldom waste time. I've been in several programs (DOC). I've done several mail programs. I've done a lot of education (vocation life skills and Bible college for master's degree). I've done several packets of written and picture themes from Prisoner Express. I've done over 400 hours on the Cypherworx (education) app on my tablet. I've done it on Real Vida (they have Youtube and Facebook) and opportunity podcast (The Path Forward podcast by Augie Ghilarducci), Edwin's Leadership and Restaurant Institute, GED (I have not done high school), Lifeskill, Mcshin Foundation, NA, Parenting, Professional Development, Safety, Stater U, The Aleph Institute (Jewish Studies), The Marshall Project. I've been in a support group called TRUTH Project (<http://www.truthproj.org/>). It's a very good program. We helped each other out.

I'm excited to get released, but I'm also scared to get out. I don't know what it is going to be like. DOC has very little resources for me. I feel they really do not care and want us to come back to prison to fail.

I have little support out there. I have my dad, but he lives in an independent place so I do not have a place to live. And the community does not want sex offenders living in their area, even though most sex offenders do not reoffend. And

I've been locked up for 30 years and have programs that have helped me change.

IT IS TIME FOR ME TO BE RELEASED.

### **June '25 Picture Theme:**



### **THE JUNE FOG, Andrew Krosch**

Draped in gypsy veils, her flowing hair windblown and wild, she'd saved my neck in a crowded sunlit bazaar in Cairo a lifetime ago. It only made sense that we'd part forever on an empty fog shrouded street in London, her trench coat belted tight, her long flowing hair tucked under a hat, the only witness to her subdued beauty the cameras lining the street. She never looked back. Never said goodbye.

In Egypt, outrunning arms dealers who chased us through the bazaar and into the airport with machine guns. On a Greek fishing trawler out of Alexandria, a load of human cargo in the hold, crossing the Mediterranean. Jumping ship with the refugees kilometers from the coast to swim in the black of night to the island of Crete where a widow with her granddaughters took us all in for the night — women, children, the old and sick, and me — and gave us cold food and warm clothes.

Turkey and the Balkan states, only the night sky to guide us, a gentle westward drift. Everywhere we went she knew the women. Spoke their language. It seemed that everyone knew her, the strange beautiful woman I travelled with. She helped the sick, the old and weak, the helpless. I'll never understand what she saw in me.

That day in Cairo, the day we met in the sunlit bazaar, I'd had the shot. A half million dollar hit. I'd spent months of my time and thousands

of my own dollars hunting an arms dealer called Igor; responsible for the deaths of thousands and thousands of innocent civilians in war-torn countries across the world.

Killing him would save countless lives and enrich me in at least half a million ways. And she spoiled the shot. In spectacular fashion. Brass urns, copper pots and tin pans flying as "Igor" crashed to the ground, shielded by the body of the beautiful woman lying on top of him. Leaving the cover of a rug merchant's cart, I closed for the kill. That's when she rose and placed the tip of her finger over the muzzle of my gun and shook her head as Igor's armed bodyguards converged from every direction with guns drawn.

She stooped, whispered something in Igor's ear that made him blush like a schoolboy and pulled me down a narrow shaded alley between fruit vendors' carts into the dark beyond.

I would read years later that the man called Igor would claim his Road to Damascus moment had come in Cairo, where he'd dodged an assassin's bullet in a crowded bazaar. A beautiful angel had spoken to him—had saved his life. The next day he'd liquidated his vast fortune he'd accumulated by dealing death and donated it all to the poor.

The nights I spent with her were ethereal. Exhausted, sharing a thin blanket under a pile of boards; in the corner of a closed factory. Wrapped in her warmth, her body pressed to mine, heartbeats in time. Her touch could heal me in the night. The darkness inside me less each time. I woke to the light of a new dawn. Her hold on me a murder of the man I was, had been. Long ago. Long before fleeing the botched hit in Cairo. I was always running from something. I'd been running all my life.

Her, my angel, she ran from nothing. Only towards new things, new places, places where the world needed her, in the moment she was needed most. An angel in gypsy guise. In Budapest, stepping off a bus, snatching a small feral boy out of the path of a speeding truck as it raced past. A boy who would years later lead a national reform movement and change the world. Its international symbol, a tall graceful woman in silhouette, the flowing veils of a gypsy dancer, her hair tossed wild, I knew, from the draft of a speeding truck.

Further west. London where everybody spoke English and I no longer understood anybody, not even myself. Until I'd seen the truth. The truth I'd found in her eyes. As I held her one last time on that lonely street before she disappeared into the fog. There was no longer any reason to speak. No reason to ask any longer who my saving angel was, why she'd saved me. Ask her why she left me on that foggy day, the cameras lining the street, our only witness to the age old question of who holds power over life and death, to give or to take, where the power lies. The truth was in her eyes. To give she said, to give life, give back lives, that's where the power has always been. She'd saved as much of me as she could. The rest was up to me.

### ***Rip von Jackson, Esq., Belinda Ladd***

The need had been building like pressure in a cast iron boiler. I knew that by the end of the week I would once again yield to this peculiar compulsion. Preparations must be made, including a sizable withdrawal from the bank. It wouldn't do for an occasion to present itself should I not have the means to act. This squalid neighborhood must be investigated assiduously as not just anyone will suffice. Preferably a female, for in these times they seem the most disadvantaged. The more impoverished and desperate, the better. Perhaps a young woman with a waif or two tugging at her skirt, gaunt from hunger and deprived of a father to aid in their support. She must be accessible at the right time and in the right place so I can act without detection, for if identified, I will surely be diligently pursued by those curious or corrupt.

I went searching each night. Maybe I would find her returning from some menial job, tired and low on hope that her situation might ever improve. The ideal mark will be downtrodden, never expecting what is about to befall her. In the past I'd selected the part-time prostitute. They were often fraught with poverty, inept at the craft, and choked with fear at the prospect of being abused or jilted out of the few dollars they so needed to avoid being turned out into the streets. I took pleasure in their stunned faces, cherishing the change in their eyes to disbelief when I accosted them and suddenly delivered what would ultimately become her welcome fate.

She was walking down a side street when I noticed her. I could check off all the proper cues; the worn clothing and unkempt hair pulled back with a scarf, body hunched and aching, probably from her nightshift cleaning some business or factory while her children slept alone in a cold flat, her thin frame so used to hunger that it no longer yearns. I skulked in the shadows, observing, following undetected as she instinctively stayed within the light of the streetlamps and avoided alcoves or dark doorways. There can be no witness when I make my move. When she passed beyond the margin of each lamp's glow, her pace quickened as surely her heartbeat, until the damp sidewalk was once again illuminated. The hard sole of my shoe gave me away with a misplaced step onto a shard of broken glass. An instant furtive glance in my direction, then she began to run.

Swiftly, I outpaced her. At the moment I grasped her shawl, I hissed, "Stop! I must give you what you deserve." She offered no resistance, seeming to have already resigned herself to whatever she was about to endure. I seized her wrist and pressed the thick package against her palm, forcing her to close her fingers around enough cash to change her life. "Tell no one of this," I admonished her, turning away before she could memorize my face.

As I walked away a weight seemed to have lifted. This was my reward. Each time I helped another soul, the burden of all the atrocious things I'd done in the past was somehow easier to carry. I didn't look back. The streetlamps extinguished as dawn's first light began breaking a new day. ☺

### **I Stand Alone, Christopher Monihan**

"It is hereby ordered, that the defendant be committed to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, for no less than 10 and no more than 25 years on count one, Felonious Assault on a Peace Officer," said a judge one day in Spring 1995, "and no less than 10 and no more than 25 years on count two, Aggravated Robbery—and that the defendant shall serve these sentences consecutively."

My sentence: 23-50 years. The three extra years were for a gun specification—but none of it matters at this point. That was a lifetime ago.

Little did I know, the first year of my sentence would be fraught with so much danger and violence that I almost wouldn't make it.

I landed at Madison Correctional Institution in London, Ohio on July 7, 1995. Intake, which is where unfortunate newly incarcerated souls are issued a prison number, brought my first truly humiliating experience.

"Strip to your birthday suit," the guard smirked. "Squat and cough."

As if that wasn't humiliating enough, I had to strip in front of a dozen other men already in their birthday suits. One guy had an erection.

I'm not from Ohio. I have no family here. I was passing through alone and I'm still passing through three decades onward.

Prison is a savage land. The strong devour the meek and the meek vanish into oblivion. Like a gnu I was tossed into a den of lions.

"I'm going to give you some advice—take it or leave it," said a stranger in the county jail. Black tats of skulls, vipers and the dead sleeved out his muscled arms. "When you get to prison, don't ever steal or snitch. Always pay your debts and keep your word. Most importantly, stand up for yourself and fight like your life depends on it. Do this and you'll be fine."

I nodded, wide-eyed. I took those words and made them my gospel.

At 23, olive tan skin, silky black hair and 17-year-old complexion—not to mention broke, and alone—I was an irresistible target for prison predators.

"Hey, you!" said one guy. "I think you're okay. Listen, I won't allow anyone to mess with you."

I felt his hand caress my shoulder.

I don't imagine he expected my reaction. At least the shocked, terrified look he made as I attacked him like a cornered honey badger made me think so.

It goes without saying that I abhor violence. It's disgusting. But that first year, I fought anyone and everyone who dared walk near. Prison is a zero-sum experience. Survive or perish. Eventually the predators concluded I was more trouble than I was worth.

Perhaps, I tend to think, it had more to do with my fanatical love for the prison boxing ring than anything else. Oh, and judo lessons since I was four years old—that probably helped.

Coming to prison my family, in their anger and disappointment, had crossed their arms and turned their backs to me. Old friends scattered like field mice. Alone in the wilderness and I had no one.

Like the silhouetted man, I stood on my own. I've witnessed men start and finish life sentences—fought through riots and endured lockdowns—stumbled upon violence and improper behavior.

We are all silhouetted men standing alone at some point in our lives. How we choose to confront those times are what mold us.

The treacherous journey from maximum security to minimum security, which is where I am at now, has been sobering.

The worst I witness nowadays are the diabetics who **REFUSE** to put the pastries down or guys bitching about the commissary running out of cookie dough ice cream. Which is fine by me (the ice cream, and the bitching).

I did my tour of duty.

I'll take Camp Cupcake over Camp Thunderdome any day.

### **Reunion, George Hesse**

Looks like I finally found my Dad.

## July '25 Picture Theme:



### **Untitled, Abbas Ahmed**

If you truly believe that life should not have mistakes or perfection is reached without any errors. Then look at any prestigious award winning movie & ask its director how many times it had to be cut & repeated to reach this pivotal point of perfection?

### **Untitled, Cesar Hernandez**

My wife calls my office phone.

"I'm downstairs in the parking garage."

"I'm busy."

She snaps, "I'm more important than work!"

"I'll be right down."

My wife is in her car wearing a Burberry trench coat. She opens her coat and has nothing underneath. I get in the car and we drive two blocks home.

Upstairs my wife lets her trench coat drop to the floor, "What's today?"

"Tuesday?"

She starts to put on her trench coat. "You forgot!"

"I promise you I didn't forget. Let's go."

I call downstairs and tell the valet to bring up my wife's car. I drive us to the Bitz-Carlton. I tell the valet we're in suite 2205.

I take my wife upstairs, the suite we had at the Bitz-Carlton on our wedding night. I take my wife's hand and lead her around the suite. I show her a new red Ralph Lauren dress in the closet. I point to the huge bouquet of roses on the table. I point to the champagne bottle chilling next to the hot tub.

I take my wife out to the balcony.

"You said one day you wanted to come back and enjoy this view from this suite."

My wife smiles.

"I now see you did remember our wedding anniversary is today."

### **Visit to Paradise, Jeff Hovatter**

Luxury vacation ads, meant for people with lots of money, had given me the idea. But she was my inspiration. As we ran errands of daily life, I simply pulled in at the travel agency, saying we could at least look; she went along in her good-natured way. As we looked at various get-away destinations, tears of happiness came to her eyes as I put payment to her choice. Her smile and hug assured me it was a good choice, and we celebrated with dinner at her choice of venue.

We visited a city, to buy impractical clothing for her to wear in paradise. The weeks seemed to pass slowly until we at last set out for the tiny island half a world from home. A week of

romance and passion deepened my love for her beyond anything I imagined could be mine. She assured me she understood my depth of emotion, but I am skeptical that she could.

Soft tropical breezes flowed through the bungalow. Top-notch dining a short stroll away, available on demand. Only the gentle surf outside a few feet away for ambient soundscape. Such a place that I had not even dreamed of visiting until I met and fell in love with her.

Our small-town lives did not support such opulent dreams. Visiting relatives in another state was more in line with our lifestyle, and finances. I kept my plans to myself, and worked various side-jobs, and overtime for years, to give her this. She deserved more than I could ever give, and had chosen me anyway. I wanted her to at least glimpse, if only briefly, luxury and beauty such as we had not seen.

The early sun caressed her silhouette in the diaphanous red gown, as she stood gazing on the magical beauty of the sea. I stood transfixed in the room by the huge four-posted bed with its sheer drapes and impossibly soft smooth sheets. My heart began to thud in my ears as my loins began to respond to the sight before me... The sound of cell door locks releasing bright fluorescent light in the pod, and the ugly rattle of the ice machine, yanked me rudely from sleep and back to reality, for upwards of thirty six hundred times in a row, this is my morning wake up call.

## August '25 Picture Theme:



## **Wilderness Bound, Mason Pryor**

I haven't been coping well. Life's been too much. I'm at a breaking point. I gotta get out. I've got to run away. I pack a bag, buy the snacks, fill the tank and crank the music. A right turn into heavy traffic. I'm on my way. I am wilderness bound.

I drive beneath clear blue skies and a blazing golden sun. I pass acres of brittle crops hunched in parched soil. The summer drought leaves nature in desperate thirst. The weatherman gleefully predicts clear skies and high temps. Farmers, burdened with worry, desperately pray for rain.

Flatlands end where a narrow and steep canyon begins. Seemingly endless switchbacks tax my beat-up Chevy. I drop gears. My V6 angrily revs before relaxing into a throaty purr. I dance the curves too fast; I almost collide with a falling boulder. I hit the brakes and slide to a stop. That was close - too close. I slow down as I drive off.

I reach the point of no return, the narrowest of the climb. Towering walls of jagged rock squeeze in tight. The grade increases. I'm forced to slow to a crawl. The road barely allows me passage; I hope I don't meet oncoming cars. I swear as a stray pebble smacks and cracks my already wounded windshield.

I finally crest the summit. More flatlands - miles of bare dry earth charred deepest black. Wildflowers raged unchecked only weeks ago. I can still smell smoke and destruction. No brush, animal or tree was spared. I continue to crawl along dodging debris that chokes the road.

A left turn leads to a rutted and washed out gravel road. I tax my brakes on the downward grade of another canyon. I take the curves slow; I've been sufficiently humbled. One side is rock, the other a sudden straight drop. I clutch the wheel tight; I wouldn't survive that fall.

I stop at the observation lookout - a beautifully wild valley lies below. The magnificent land, untouched by drought or fire takes my breath away. I pause to take it in; I pause to just be. I feel as if I've stumbled into the garden of Eden. It's calling to me, "what are you waiting for?"

I break free through the mouth of the canyon. At last I've found the wilderness; hallelujah. I've arrived. Brilliantly colored flowers, bushes and trees cover the landscape. A crooked river drifts aimlessly through nature. I set up camp under the protective canopy of ancient trees.

A cool breeze ruffles my hair but doesn't leave me cold. The smell of flowers and Pine dances in the air. The song of water tumbling over rock beckons me to a pebble shore. I wade in with my pole - oh wow - now I'm cold. I easily catch more than enough fish for dinner; I'll eat good tonight.

I relax by a crackling fire in the waning afternoon sun. I marvel at nature's soundtrack. I drink in the fresh air - wildlife approaches my weekend abode. I stare in wonderment. Man and animal gaze at each other taking stock: friend or foe? This is their home; I'm just a visitor bound to respect.

Dusk turns to night. I lay next to a dying fire. The vast sea of stars makes me feel small but not inferior. Serenity cradles me in the dark. My heart, mind and soul is at peace. I should have come a long time ago. I guess I was scared of what I might find. I'm grateful I've found sanctuary. My last thought as the wilderness lulls me to sleep is, 'why did I wait?'

### **Rare Privilege, Jeff Hovatter**

A landscape so large it doesn't fit into my viewfinder — I frame it to show the river sacrificing the peaks. My spirit swells to huge proportions by elation!

As a young man, I hiked high, forested mountains up to thirteen thousand feet and once felt the ebullience, along a forest trail as dusk deepened into darkness, that I experienced as I gaze upon this harsh land, thousands of miles, and decades, from there and then. On that Colorado evening in 1981, I felt so free and happy! It was unexpected, and fleeting, as moments of real joy have been in my life. Why it came then...or even now, I don't know.

What I do know is that I realize and appreciate the moment, perhaps even feel it more deeply. The intervening decades have given me perspective. Always, I have loved the untrammelled areas depicted on maps by few or

no roads or towns. However, I lived a settled, materialistic life, and failed to pursue a strenuous and rewarding to the spirit lifestyle in such places. Visits were few and infrequent, becoming less and less as years passed.

I rejected evidence from scientists of man-made global warming, choosing to believe the propaganda of the energy production giants. In the late 1970's and early 1980's my opinion became that climate change was a natural and recurrent process that was happening, but not caused by humans, and therefore not changeable. I became disenchanted by the Green Movement that strived to save the wild beauty I so loved. My deep love of the outdoors was directed solely toward hunting and its support of conservation.

I first saw a glacier from over a mile away in Colorado in 1984 as I toured Rocky Mountain National Park by motorcycle. It made no real impression on me. In 1993, I saw a glacial stream in Canada's Yukon Territory from the water's edge, and I felt the stirring of spirit again as I watched the swift, pure, milky-turquoise flow, colored by glacial action. Minutes later, I was riding north, resuming my ALCAN motorcycle tour, but with some subtle change to my psyche.

I hiked to the translucent-bluish face of a glacier, past towering sheer limestone cliffs, to drink with cupped hands from the stream at its base. The elation did not come to me in that amazing valley, but in another gorge, miles away as I stood above an other-worldly-beautiful river of intense turquoise and was awed by the beauty; the photos seemed photo-shopped.

I admire Greta Thunberg's efforts immensely, and came to believe man's culpability completely, upon learning of the significant reduction of greenhouse gases in Earth's atmosphere during the Covid lockdown. Sadly, the one man who could influence real change for the better has gone with the money while declaring climate change a scam.

In order to truly appreciate something, I needed to have firsthand knowledge of some of the wonderful things I had only read or seen videos of. Glaciers have been used as a "poster child" in the campaign to halt or even reverse global warming. Also chosen to attempt to sway global public opinion has been the plight of polar bears, which just may be the "canary in the coal mine," but not enough of the world's billions of

people are touched by the symbolism to force a change of political will. I have only seen a polar bear in a zoo, and never their Arctic home.

Tremendous wealth, power, and consumption characterizes the U.S.'s status in the world, and its leading people in U.S. society. With four percent of the world population, the U.S. is a disproportionate contributor to climate change, and its wealthy and privileged citizens are just as responsible for the direction "our" country is leading the world. Greed, the defining trait of our "successful" leaders, is sacrificing the health, indeed the future, of our grandchildren and perhaps even all civilization, for short-sighted opulence in their own lives.

"Money is the root of all evil." - Anna Virginia Hovatter.

Abandonment of clean energy and support of war are devastating climate choices that mankind will have to face in the coming dystopia.

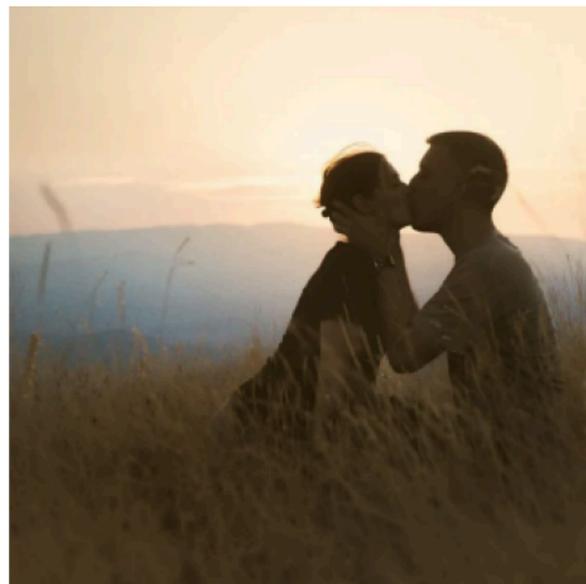
### **Glacier National Park, circa 2110 CE, Belinda Ladd**

Photos from the early part of the last century showed the park heavily timbered and teeming with wildlife. Rangers had to escort camera-lugging tourists to keep them a safe distance from moose, bull elk and grizzly bears. Kayaks paddled across Lake McDonald while someone occasionally dipped a line and reeled in a cutthroat trout or kokanee salmon. The mountains supported Bighorn sheep, grey wolf, lynx, cougar and skunk, and the peaks were crowned in thick sheets of ice. Native legend tells of how the Great Spirit came down to teach the Blackfeet to hunt and then returned to the sun, leaving the Spirit's shadow on the mountain. Continental Divide tributaries supplied rivers flowing west all the way to the Pacific, and east to Hudson Bay. When the Middle Fork was surging with spring thaw, entire trees with roots attached raced past stunned onlookers, later to be harvested from Flathead Lake.

By mid-century the arid Southwest had extended into British Columbia, and America's Wheat Belt became a desert, replaced by the Canadian Breadbasket, formerly known as boreal forest. The glaciers were in memory only, and what little precipitation the winter season provided in the way of snowfall melted by early afternoon. The once-mighty rivers flowing out of the park now trickled just a few thousand yards before being swallowed up by the parched earth.

It was 2085 when the Coalition of Asian Nations bombed North America's pipelines and refineries, declaring any carbon-based energy source an affront to the World Order. We hadn't needed them anyway because science had finally embraced Tesla's principle of drawing electromagnetic energy from the very atmosphere which surrounds us. I'm in my early forties now, a veritable elderly person since most succumb to multiple cancers by age thirty, if not sooner. They say we're bringing our planet back from the brink, much as we saved the dying Great Lakes a century and a half ago by halting industrial pollution, but I won't see another trip on Going-to-the-Sun road in my lifetime, and neither will my great-great-grandchildren. At least we have those old photographs to show them.

### **September '25 Picture Theme:**



### **A Love That Is Meant To Be, Nkrumah Lumumba Valier**

The world is changing around us.  
Society has redefined what love should be.  
But the new definition of love does not fit me.  
You can live that way but please don't force your lifestyle on me.  
I prefer a love that is meant to be.  
I won't judge your choice and I won't let anyone judge me.  
From the beginning of time it was a love that is meant to be.

It started with Adam and Eve, and after our first kiss,  
I knew we were meant to be.  
I am attracted to everything about you.  
I get lost every time I look into your beautiful chestnut brown eyes.  
Your kisses taste so delicious.  
I feel the connection between us every time we touch.  
Your body is so amazing. I'm loving every curve.  
You ask me why I look at you the way I do?  
You are so beautiful.  
My life was so empty before I met you. So lost having to live without you.  
Every day I pray, thanking god that I found you.  
Knowing deep down in my soul. This is not the first time I loved you.  
For eternity, every time I die.  
And I will come back in my next life.  
I will always find you.  
Our love is meant to be.  
My heart would stop beating if it had to stop loving you. There is no life within me without you being in my life. They look at our relationship as a thing of the past. Between man and woman.  
A love that is meant to be....

### **Love, Brianne Carson**

I will start by saying this is a very hard subject for me. Love has not been a thing that I have had in life. So I am going to walk through my life and the different kinds of love that I experienced, one step at a time.

So what did I think love was? Well I was manipulated, emotionally, mentally abused and made to believe this was what love was and how it was supposed to be. Love confused me for a very long time and I did not know how to show it or accept it.

I grew up in a two-parent household, not really knowing my parents' stresses or problems. That changed when I started school and my parents started arguing— not so much in front of me but around me. It started as talking and always ended with them yelling. I started asking questions. "Why are you yelling at each other if you love each other?" I always got told not to worry about it and everything was fine.

I never saw my parents show any affection (kiss, hug, NOTHING). It did not matter, holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, no affection was shown. I was confused but never asked why because I never wanted to seem nosy.

I started believing that this was what relationships and love looked like. As I grew up that's what I looked for, and I definitely found it with my ex-husband. All we did was argue and fight. It was a bad situation and a very toxic relationship. We stayed together for twelve years, married for four. This was a very rocky experience— with him being an alcoholic and not working or not wanting to work. We welcomed a beautiful healthy baby into our home four years into our relationship. We decided not to rush into marriage and to get everything organized first. Finally, we decided about eight years into our relationship and with an almost four-year-old daughter, we were going to give it a go— the big "M," marriage.

I was super excited and ready for the next step in life. I thought things would get better after getting married; the promises, the commitments, and the forever. That was not true at all— it went downhill fast. I begged for help with our daughter, the bills, the house, and even our relationship. I was told I was too needy and nagged too much. He claimed me as his and then like I was his property. I hated it so much. He always told me to loosen up a little and live, saying I should "stop being so uptight and just be happy."

Four years into our marriage, I had had enough. His drinking had gotten worse. All he would do was yell and scream and call me names in front of our daughter. He started physically abusing me. The final straw was when he put his hands on me in front of our daughter and I heard her scream for me and start crying. I put my foot down. He was arrested on battery and I filed for divorce. I never wanted my daughter to believe that abuse was okay or that's what love looked like.

I moved my daughter and I to somewhere safe. I played single mom for a while. I worked and took care of us all by myself. I worked two jobs to make sure we had all we needed. I met a guy who I had gone to high school with. I was in a relationship with him for about four years. We welcomed two beautiful girls into our lives in that period. We separated and went our separate ways.

About ten years ago, I ran into an old school friend. He had his own relationship problems, was divorced and had children of his own. We started talking and things grew from

there. He really tried showing me what love is and how I should be treated. He is amazing with all three of my daughters and treats them like his own.

I spent close to four years searching and trying to figure out what love was/is. I was trying to figure out how to accept it, share it, and even show it. I began to build myself from the inside out. Healing all the wounds I had and making myself a stronger woman in the end. I learned what I wanted and what I deserved. I figured out very fast what to allow and what not.

So what is love to me today? Well love is compassion, unity, kindness, caring, loyalty, and commitment. The list could go on forever but this is a start and the strong ones I feel. Love is something I deserve and I can show myself who I really am. I am beginning to love myself and blossom into a wonderful, strong-minded woman.

## October '25 Picture Theme:



### **Dinner with Mom, Vaughn Wright**

The leaning trees. It's freaky how the winds got them all slanted like that, like an Adidas symbol, right? And the crazy lady out there dancing with them? That's my mom, so watch how you talk about her. She wasn't always like that though.

Back when Mom was pregnant and in labor with what would've been my baby sister, Dad was rushing her to the hospital. They were just two blocks away from the hospital when Dad ran a red light and got T-boned by a delivery truck. Mom was the only one to survive. She ain't been right in the head since.

I was ten at the time and at a Harlem Globetrotters game with my uncle. That's how the best day of your life can turn into your worst with a single phone call. He and his wife took to raising me. And after I did a couple of years in the army and got a decent job, I moved back into my family's old house.

My mom was heavy into the church before she went out the side door 15 years ago, so the folks there have been more understanding of her blues than most of the others in town, I suppose. They look out for her when she lets them. They give her clothes or feed her, inviting her in during the winter or when it's raining. On warm nights, she sleeps outdoors. Park benches or right there under the leaning trees. Guess it all depends where she is when she feels sleepy.

All day she dances and talks to nature--potted plants, flower gardens, trees lining the street, people's pets. And children.

Lord, she loves talking to the little ones, if she can get a few words in before the parent or guardian either whisks the kid off or shoos my mom away.

She sings too. Gospel, usually. I remember how proud I'd be when she played the piano and sang with our church choir. But when she sang solo, belting out "How Great Thou Art" or one of her other favorites, folks always said she should have performed for America's Got Talent or something. Maybe she would have one day, or maybe it was part of the pressure that led to her snapping.

I've tried talking to her. I really have. When I was still a kid, I wanted her to come back home so bad. Now though, most times we'll start out having a good conversation, you know, if I kick it off about my kids or ask how she's getting along and if she needs anything. But once I turn it to her coming back home or maybe seeing someone like a grief counselor, she goes right off into La La Land. I swear, she can flee and elude reality faster than a registered Republican.

Despite their acts of charity, I know people talk shit on me too, for letting my mom roam

around the way she does. For not having her committed. Me and my uncle, we tried that once. Had her in a joint upstate. Don't ask me how she did it, but she was back in town three days later, dancing in a hospital gown. So, yeah. She's where she wants to be. She knows her way home and that love's waiting there for her whenever she's ready for it.

Sigh.

Well, let me get on with it.

"Mom!" I call out to her, acting like she hasn't seen me standing here watching her for the past five minutes. "Mom! Come on and eat!" I say, trudging her way with a turkey sub and a Pepsi.

I can kinda see the draw a place like this might have on someone like my mom. I mean, if she hadn't survived the accident, those trees would've made for a perfect, ready-made memorial for the three of them. But she did survive. We both have. I try to remind her of that every time we see each other.

### **Dancer, Howard B. Brown**

Jana loved being a dancer. She did have a natural ability to be graceful on her feet. Her arms and legs moved in graceful flows. She had watched these three trees for inspiration. When a breeze came, the tree's limbs and leaves moved ever so gracefully.

As twilight was setting in, Jana followed the example of the trees. She danced and got her long light green silk ribbon waving. Her dance steps were perfect.

She was pleased with her routine. The three leaning trees could bear witness for her.

Once darkness fell, Jana walked home under a blanket of stars. She smiled knowing she was ready for her performance at the show.

### **I Dance With the Trees, Andrew White**

As far back as I remember, I loved witches. I was supposed to be scared or repulsed, but I found them intriguing and appealing. Even notorious villains like the White Witch of Narnia and the Wicked Witch of Oz, fascinated me. I had a vivid imagination, a talent

for visualization, and I saw myself using magical powers. In my mind, I was already a witch.

When I went through puberty, things picked up. I developed a keen intuition and the ability to utilize what I later learned was the "Law of Attraction." The other kids knew I was different, but they somehow knew not to bother me. Even at thirteen, there was an energy that surrounded me.

When I reached high school, I devoured every bit of information on Wicca and magic that I could find. I learned the rituals and the practices. I developed new skills. I was not distracted by chasing boys (or girls) - I had a whole different purpose and plan. I was becoming what I always knew I had been, and the concerns of other teenagers meant little to me.

I took another step forward several years later when I discovered the Runes in writings on the Northern Tradition. For some, the Runes are only an ancient alphabet or something interesting to study. Others seek the Runes but find them elusive or can't figure out what all the fuss is about. That's fine, but for me the Runes come alive. I saw them and felt them. They altered when put together and when they touched my inner self; simultaneously I was changed by them. As the process went on, I learned to utilize them more and more skillfully.

I put it all together - meditation, sacred dance, Wiccan methods, and the Runes - with more and more success. I was 23, and I felt myself to be on the cusp of something amazing. On the day and time of the Spring Equinox, I went out to do a ritual beneath the trees. Inside a sacred circle, I meditated and chanted the Runes. Then I stood up and started to move. As I danced, I fell into a trancelike state and my body seemed to move by itself - beyond conscious effort. Then it happened. When I bent forward with my next movement, the trees bent with me! I continued my dance, and the trees danced with me. I had truly connected with Mother Earth - I was euphoric, and I was grateful that I could have such an experience.

That's where my journey took off. Since then, I have witnessed a number of miraculous things, peered beyond the veil that separates us from the unseen realm, and become adept at manipulating energies. I don't use my talents arrogantly or foolishly – I pray for wisdom, and I exercise humility. I am cautious and conscientious, always remaining grateful. My name is Andrea, daughter of Earth, and I am a witch. I listen to the spirits, and I dance with the trees.

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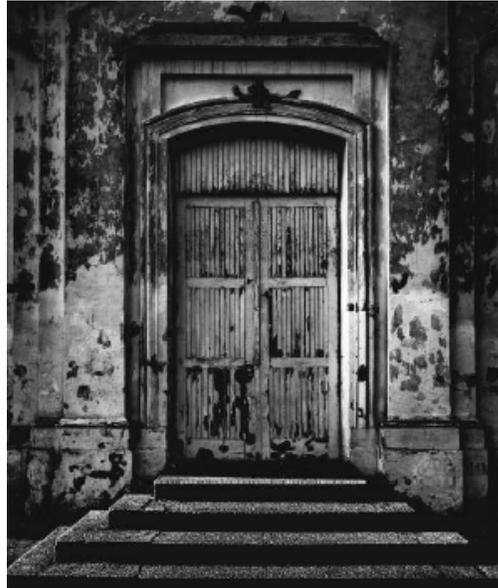
### *Upcoming Word Themes:*

- **Due April 1, 2026:** “Bottled Emotions”
- **Due May 1, 2026:** “The Test”
- **Due June 1, 2026:** “Comfort Food”
- **Due July 1, 2026:** “Smile”
- **Due August 1, 2026:** “Into the Unknown”
- **Due September 1, 2026:** “Names”
- **Due October 1, 2026:** “The Color Red”

See Word & Picture Theme Guidelines on page 49.

### *Upcoming Picture Themes:*

Due April 1, 2026:



Due May 1, 2026:



Due June 1, 2026:



Due July 1, 2026:



Due August 1, 2026:



Due September 1, 2026:



Due October 1, 2026:



# 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 the piece to be attributed to “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](mailto: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.

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## Truthout Announces 6th Annual Essay Prize

The Truthout Center for Grassroots Journalism is grateful to open submissions for the sixth annual **Keeley Schenwar Memorial Essay Prize**. The prize is awarded for essays authored by currently incarcerated and formerly incarcerated writers. This program is an effort to uplift the work of authors who’ve experienced incarceration, and increase opportunities for these writers’ narratives to educate the public about the impact of imprisonment and policing.

We award two prizes, **each for an original essay of 1,500 words or less on the topic of prisons, policing or a related subject**. Essays can be written in the first person and can be personal narratives (although they do not have to be). The prize for each winning essay is \$3,000. Essays can be submitted in two ways: (1) They can be emailed to [essayprize@truthout.org](mailto:essayprize@truthout.org). (Feel free to submit your essay either as an attachment or within the body of the email.) (2) They can be mailed to: Keeley Schenwar Memorial Essay Prize, c/o Truthout, PO Box 276414, Sacramento, CA, 95827.

**The deadline for submissions is May 29, 2026. Prizes will be announced by September 30, 2026.** Essays must be unpublished and unique to this contest; they should not be simultaneously submitted to other publications. Each writer may submit one essay. Writers based anywhere in the world are eligible. This essay prize is given in honor of Keeley Schenwar, who was a devoted mother, daughter, sister, friend, writer and advocate for incarcerated mothers. During her own incarceration, Keeley wrote often, including an essay about childbirth, breastfeeding and incarceration. Keeley was the sister of Maya Schenwar, director of the Truthout Center for Grassroots Journalism. Keeley was one of the inspirations for Truthout’s early and sustained dedication to covering the injustices and violence of incarceration and policing.

## Final Notes

I hope this newsletter answered some of your questions about how Prisoner Express operates. Participants sometimes ask if they can respond to more than one program in a single envelope; the answer is yes. It is always good to indicate what you are responding to (e.g., the journal program, themes, etc.) Please also be sure your name is on anything you submit, not just the envelope. You can usually include five 8-½ x 11" pieces of paper in an envelope for the price of a first-class Forever stamp. When you don't put postage on your mail it doesn't come to us, or if it does, we have to pay the postage cost. It is much better if you have the proper postage. Some people think it is legal to use a one-cent stamp, but that mail does not usually get delivered.

I know mail is a thrill to get and you enjoy the letters we send. Perhaps this is common sense, but when you write back, if you start pressuring volunteers to send pictures or provide more personal info than they freely offer, you most likely will lose that person as a correspondent. Of course it depends on the individual, but volunteers do come to me to report things (usually flirtatious or downright sexual) that make them uncomfortable. I usually advise that they have the choice to write back and explain that your letter made them uncomfortable or to not write back and find someone else's writing to respond to. Most often they do not write back. This is only meant for the very few of you who have done this, but if it even slows down a few inappropriate comments it is worth it. If I was a young person in prison, I am sure I would have trouble separating someone's caring letter from my own desire to have a girlfriend. I can see how your imaginations could go wild. Please heed my insight, it is your imagination. The students writing to you are not looking at you as romantic partners. Just in case you were wondering.

Jeremy Brown, who has participated in many PE programs for countless years, wrote this fall and let me know he had received his 806th letter from a PE volunteer. I was amazed. He has been in the program for over 10 years, but still that's a lot of letters. I can't promise anyone else will get that many, but it is proof that our volunteers respond to the people who participate in our programs. So, if you want your name called when mail is delivered, you can increase the odds by sending writing and art and participating in our distance learning courses.

As always, I have to say that certain states and sometimes certain individual institutions make it hard for our mail to get in. Sometimes we get notices telling us so, but I believe it happens without us being notified. For the foreseeable future we are going to be here doing our PE thing. **If you don't hear from us, send a note asking why. Sometimes that is how we find out mail is not getting through.** Right now, we

are having trouble getting our newsletter delivered in MO and AR. I can't find a way to send in a periodical like our newsletter. It is too long for the scan centers and the prisons won't accept it. Perhaps this is the way of the future. If I could send an electronic copy of the newsletter to the scan center, you would think they could copy it to your tablet, easy peasy, but I can't find a system in place to do that. Have any of you heard of receiving electronic magazine subscriptions to your tablets? I could follow that procedure if there is one. Being a national program and dealing with each state's individual rules for mail (often contradicting each other) is turning my hair gray. I continually have to remember the good we are doing rather than magnify the consternation I feel at the rejection of mail. As a group we are all working for the highest good in an imperfect world. If we all contribute a little good it might create a wave that will engulf even those who do cruel things in the name of justice or religion. The arc of history is long and we all want to be the best people we can be and treat others as we wish to be treated.

All of the printing and postage funds that keep PE going have to be raised and as the program grows, the cost continues to increase. If you have friends, family, or you yourself want to contribute, checks sent to us must say "CTA/PE" in the payee line. People can make donations to our program on our website as well: [prisonerexpress.org](http://prisonerexpress.org).

Here in Ithaca NY Feb temps were down to minus 11. Even the cats wouldn't leave the house. I heat with wood and I am literally burning through it at a rate that will leave me cold before winter's over. I saw a black bear ambling through the woods the other day just before this cold snap. They probably have a den nearby. The crows don't seem to mind the cold. I do! I know as people age they yearn for warmer winters. The seasons change, the cycle of life continues and really there is nothing new under the sun. Enjoy life. It is short and it can be precious. No matter what your situation, life is a gift to be enjoyed, and lessons abound for us all as we explore our humanity.

Any goodness we offer as a program, I ask you to pass on to someone in need. A kind word goes a long way to lifting up your neighbor. Even if they don't appreciate your gesture, your own being will grow from the goodness it creates. I hope many of you respond and join our upcoming programs as they offer some concrete ways for your being to escape the confined environment you presently experience.

Yours for a better tomorrow,

*Gary*

# Spring 2026 Registration Sheet

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

- Art & Music (A&M):** Includes ARTknows; Art Beyond Cornell; Songwriting.
- Creative Writing (CW):** Journaling; Misc. Essays; Writing with Friends.
- Developing Your Mind & Body (DYMB):** History of U.S. Territories (bilingual); History of Beauty; History of Coffee; History of Islamic Architecture; Physical 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. For more information on this program, see page 7.  
  
**Number of books allowed:** \_\_\_\_\_  
  
**Types of books allowed:** Hardcover and softcover? Or softcover only?  
  
**These are the types of books I'm interested in:**
- Figuring Things Out (FTO):** Includes Introduction to Legal Writing; Chess Newsletter; Puzzles & Games
- Inner Work/Outer Expression (IW/OE):** Rattle Magazine & Poetry; Meditation, Spirituality, and Recovery Journeys. Please note that this program includes three 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 34:** 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.** See guidelines on page 49.

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## 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.*

Prisoner Express is a project of Durland Alternatives Library and the Center for Transformative Action, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, and as such, does not and will not profit from your work in any way.

This statement replaces our previous "Permissions Form" and does not require a signature.

**CTA/Durland Alternatives Library**

PO Box 6556

Ithaca, NY 14851

[www.prisonerexpress.org](http://www.prisonerexpress.org)

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Clifton Jackson

# **PRISONER EXPRESS NEWSLETTER**

## **Winter 2026**

**PUBLICATION  
DIRECT FROM PUBLISHER**