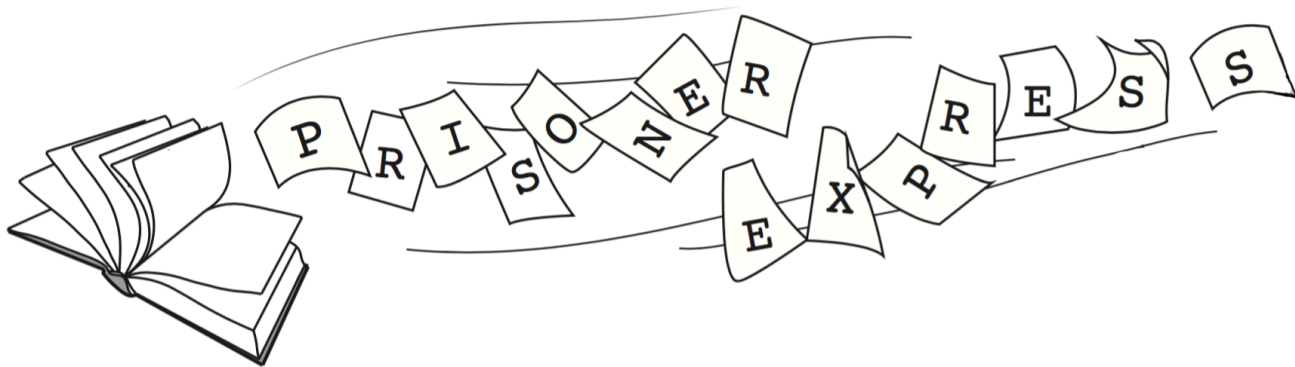




Prisoner Express Newsletter

Summer/Fall 2026



Jason Hale

Letter from the Director

Dear Readers,

I am glad for the opportunity to produce another edition of the Prisoner Express (PE) Newsletter. This newsletter is a chance to check in with all of you who have been participating over the years as well as to welcome members who have been inactive for a while or folks who are receiving our newsletter for the first time.

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About Prisoner Express

If it is your first time, I welcome you! My name is Gary and I began Prisoner Express 25 years ago out of the Anne Carry Durland Alternatives Library at Cornell University, where we are still located. The mission of Prisoner Express is to provide people who are incarcerated with information, education, and opportunities for creative self-expression in a public forum. This takes shape in three main ways/services: (1) Our distance learning program (you can sign up for the next cycle of program packets described in this newsletter); a Book Mailing Program (see pages 4-5); and through the sharing of your work with each other in this very newsletter (see the mini anthologies of essays, stories, poetry, and art), through Theme and Poetry Anthologies mailings, as well as with the broader

public both online (through our website, prisonerexpress.org) and at public art exhibits. Please see the permission statement at the end of this newsletter regarding sharing your work and note that you retain ownership of your work at all times.

I function as a hub in a wheel and there are many volunteers and student workers who are the spokes of the program keeping it moving forward. As some of you may have read in past newsletters, we also welcomed my full-time counterpart Jen to the project in 2024. She is a degreed librarian who handles collection development for the library and functions as the editor-in-chief of Prisoner Express.

I started PE during a slow time at the library, and as it has grown over the years it has taken more attention and time to keep it going. The good news is that I find it to be a rewarding endeavor and feel good about giving the time needed to keep this project responsive and relevant. The downside is that there are not enough resources financially nor people-wise to be all things to all people.

Setting Expectations

The letters many of you send remind us of the hardships you face in everyday life and the desire for the services we offer as well as requests for services beyond our capability. Part of my job as the hub of the wheel is to determine what we can realistically accomplish and what endeavors are too much for our organization to commit to completing. Mostly I am good at staying within our capabilities and limiting our offerings to what we can actually do, but every so often I find I have overreached, offering services we cannot maintain. Then, I must carve back what we say we can do so we can successfully meet our mission. It is a fine line to walk and luckily having the years of experience doing it, I can realize sooner than later when I have overcommitted. This newsletter is one of my best ways to communicate with all of you at the same time, so we are moving forward together. Mistakes can happen in so many ways. To keep the program going, especially in the summer months when our student workers are mostly away, I recruit everyone I see to come in and help. Even with the best of intentions, mistakes happen. I ask for your forgiveness.

People often find old editions of Prisoner Express laying around and write to us asking for programs that were mailed out a few years ago. The nature of our organization makes it hard for us to go back and fulfill those requests. What we can do is sign you up to receive the very next newsletter so you have a real-time explanation of who we are

and our current offerings. If you are wondering why you have received this, it is probably because you or someone you know asked us to sign you up for Prisoner Express.

With thousands of people writing and asking for services, it is too much for me to answer individual letters, and I look forward to this newsletter so I can both update you and assure you that PE has not forgotten you. I am just starting to hear back from folks about programs we mailed last spring. The more feedback you send us the better able we are to create future programs that are meaningful to you. We are glad to have your constructive feedback.

Fall Program Packet Mailings

The Fall Program Packets described in this newsletter will likely be mailed in late November. If we don't get your request before then, you may not get the packet(s) you hoped for. It happens all the time and I have not created an affordable work around that lets me send a packet to any individual who asks. Hopefully in the near future we can get our packets on Edovu or other tablet apps, and that can make it available to you.

For now, if you send in a request after the mailing has already been sent out, you can at least rest assured that you will be registered to receive the very next newsletter and then you can get in the flow by registering for the upcoming cycle of programs before they have been mailed. I know many of you reading this experienced that last cycle, but now here you go. A newsletter hot off the press with a listing of program packets you can sign up for.

Correspondence with Volunteers

Our programs are meant to provide meaning and outlets for your creativity. They are also geared to improve your communication and critical thinking skills. It is good to have a way to reflect on the world we live in and draw conclusions about what can give you the best life possible given the world as it is. We try to offer programs that cover a wide variety of interests. Basically, we look to have something for everyone.

Many of our programs invite you to creatively write or draw. Participants in these programs will often get letters written by PE volunteers who want to connect with you after reading the journals, short stories, poems or art you share with us. Sometimes these single letters turn into a longer-term correspondence. Other times volunteers write once but do not answer your reply. I tell you this because occasionally PE participants have written to let me

know they don't like that the student volunteer did not continue the correspondence past a letter or two. That is the nature of our program. Students and volunteers come and go and seeing them as long-term correspondents can set you up for disappointment. Many of you are already living in the realm of disappointment and the last thing I want to do is grow that feeling. On the other hand, so many of you exchange heartfelt meaningful letters with our volunteers, and accept the passing nature of this correspondence and value the feedback, engagement, and encouragement our volunteers' written letters can provide.

Having been doing this for 25 years I can tell you with certainty that those who participate see their writing, thinking and communication skills improve. As that happens it often inspires even more volunteers to read your work and write friendly letters in response. We are not focused on you being the best in the world at anything, but rather that you continue to develop as a thinking, feeling and compassionate human being.

Below is a brief description of our fall educational program packets and what you can expect to find in them. At the end of this newsletter there is a sign-up sheet for the programs. Please note that all of our program mailings are free except for Expedited Book Mailing.

Fall 2026 Programs

Arts, Crafts & Music Packet

The title says it all. If you sign up for this packet, expect to receive a blend of **art history**, some instruction on different **arts and crafts techniques** and a section focused on **music**. There is so much talent in all of us. Of course we show it in different ways. Whether you are an experienced artist or songwriter or someone curious to know more, we will do our best to entertain and educate you with ideas and projects.

Creative Writing Packet

I know that writing can change lives. When we write and put our thoughts on paper, it is one step towards making our thoughts concrete. It is also a way to save history. Your history. We try to share your words outside the prison walls by posting writings online and in our publications. If you have

Rein Kolts



ideas in your head, this packet is for you. Personal self-expression is something no one can ever take away no matter how harsh your environment. You can claim your power through writing. This packet will include:

Journal Program: This evolving project works on a number of levels. There will always be information on keeping a journal and ways in which you can share your journal entries with us, if you choose to. We share these writings with our volunteers and often volunteers write to the journal participants regarding your entries and just to say hi and share a bit of themselves with you.

Miscellaneous Essays: We have a number of organized writing projects, including the journal program mentioned above, our poetry program, and our theme-writing program, but in this packet we also feature independent, unsolicited writings we receive from you. Currently we call it "Miscellaneous Essays" but are thinking about changing the name as many of these essays are now sent with the intention that we print them. Hard to call that miscellaneous. We receive so much writing and only select a limited number for inclusion in this packet.

Writing with Friends: Catherine LaFleur, a beloved contributor to many previous Prisoner Express Theme Anthologies, has created a writing group at her home institution and is helping us create a section in the Creative Writing packet focused on the craft and camaraderie of writing. “Writing with Friends” is meant to be a clubhouse where you can share thoughts on writing and the joys and challenges of being an incarcerated writer. It is conceived to be a place where participants in our Theme Writing Program (see pages 11-44) can share thoughts about their writing habits. I know from reading your letters that the regular participants in the theme writing program start to feel a kinship with one another after reading each other’s themes month after month, I know I start to feel like I know some of you well just by reading your monthly themes, and I believe many of the participants feel a connection though they have never met except through reading each other’s words in PE publications. I hope Writing with Friends can inspire you to create local writing groups, publicize calls for submissions from other publications, and to give all PE writers a place to share their thoughts and experience on the art of writing.

Developing Your Mind & Body

This packet is meant to expose you to new ideas, to offer introductions to subjects that may interest you, and to strengthen your body alongside your mind. It will include the following:

At least one **Bi-lingual (Spanish/English)** lesson from Yazmin, one of our PE student workers. These lessons are great teaching tools for those who want to learn a new language or strengthen their reading skills either in English or Spanish.

Political Conversations: How have your political opinions changed throughout your life? Has being incarcerated changed them? This question will guide the first part of our Political Conversations section, which will contain stories from individuals who gained political awakenings while incarcerated and became leaders for change. The second part of the section will cover current political conversations. With the aim of sparking debate and conversations within your community, topics will range from shifts in political party ideology, the influence of the wealth gap, gerrymandering, and pending legislation and court cases. This section is designed to be accessible for everyone, so whether you are a

lifelong political follower or new to the topic, there will be valuable information for you.

Introduction to AI: We hear about artificial intelligence (AI) constantly and how it is changing everything. This lesson will provide an introduction to AI, shedding light on what it is (and what it isn’t), how it works, and potential benefits and concerns.

Understanding Human Rights: Leah, a new PE volunteer, is developing a packet on human rights that explores the history of the human rights movement, its key principles and foundational documents, international organizations dedicated to protecting human rights, and examples of how human rights have been practiced around the world, especially today.

As always there will be an **Exercise Component** in this mailing so besides a stronger mind, we want to encourage a fit body. Strengthening your body and mind while incarcerated can boost your overall wellbeing now and strengthen it for your future self.

Expedited Book Mailing Program

Important Update: As of August 2026, Prisoner Express once again **requires a \$4 donation for book packages**. Please read on for more information.

The Prisoner Express Expedited Book Mailing Program started twenty-five years ago with a single request from Dani in TX. I sent Dani some books and their enthusiastic response let me know that receiving that package was the best thing that had happened to them in a long time. I began sending books to any prisoner who asked, until I woke up to 1,000-plus book requests and no funds to mail them. I wrote everyone on the list a letter letting them know about the situation and I realized then I had better be careful about over-promising and underdelivering on what I said I would do. Well, it seems I forgot that lesson in the last PE News.

I felt bad that folks would write and ask for books based on something outdated they had read or something they heard, and they would have to wait many months before they received this next issue of the Prisoner Express Newsletter to explain how our program worked. Earlier this year, I had a number of people write and ask for books without sending any funds. I had some extra funds and a room full of books and I figured PE could send one package to anyone who hadn’t received books from us before. Feeling confident, I put out the message in the Winter 26 PE News. We were quickly

inundated with book requests, and we sent out more book packages than ever. Well, you can guess what happened. The requests kept coming. Sometimes I'd open an envelope and there would be 25 scraps of paper each from individuals asking for books. The book room was quickly depleted of stock, which made it hard to make good matches for the folks who had sent in the \$4 donation as usual to receive books. I had to shut down the room for a while and the requests kept coming in.

I have managed to restock our book room, but I now know that we just don't have the capacity to send a package of books to the thousands of people requesting them.

Perhaps a donor will hear our collective plea and help underwrite the staggering postage cost of sending books to anyone who wants them. (FYI it costs about \$7 in postage for a typical package.) Until then, I have had to curtail the "free books to anyone who asks" mailing and start once again asking for a \$4 donation sent in whatever way you can to help offset the cost of mailing the books. **IMPORTANT:** If you send a check, please make it out to "CTA/PE" or we will not be able to deposit it.

When you write for books, be sure to include the maximum number you are allowed as well as whether you can have hardcover books or softcover only. Typically, a package will contain no more than 8 books and if we are not sure of the amount or type, 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 specific titles gives you a better chance of getting something you are interested in reading. We pride ourselves on making the best matches we can.

For all of you who sent in a book request and received a package, I am glad we could help. For those of you who sent in a request and did not get books, please know that you are now a part of our mailing list and you have the opportunity to participate in our free programs. If you sent in a request for books with many other folks' names also wanting books, it is possible that not everyone was added to our mailing list individually. Please share this newsletter with your friends and have them write if they would like to get their own copy.

I certainly know the value of a good book while being confined. I hope you share any books you receive from us with your institution's library if possible so that others may read them too.

Figuring Things Out

Keep your mind sharp by figuring things out. In life there is always something on the horizon that needs to be dealt with. It is easy to see how prison can dull your inquisitiveness, and much of what you might do in a day is dictated by a routine set outside yourself. Focused thinking is a wonderful way to maintain independence, meaning and a sense of accomplishment. This packet brings together diverse subjects and challenges that take concentration to understand or accomplish.

This packet will include **Financial Planning & Managing Personal Finances**; an **Expanded Puzzle Section** that will strengthen your ability to think logically while having fun; and a section on **Chess**. (Over the years we have received so many requests for books on chess we figured starting our own project would help, given how few chess books are donated to our book mailing program.)

We are also including another installment in our **Understanding the Law** series created by a Law Librarian at Cornell: *"This educational packet explores the **intersection of trauma and the legal system**. It begins by defining trauma and examining how trauma manifests in individuals. It then discusses the link between trauma and violent or impulsive behavior. Finally, it considers the growing influence of neuroscience on the justice system, particularly in the context of juvenile justice. It argues that similar scientific evidence should also be considered as a basis for mitigation in adults who have experienced trauma."*

Inner Work/Outer Expression

The emphasis of this packet is on self-exploration and developing your spiritual nature and letting it flow into all aspects of your life, especially in your ability to be creative. This packet is limited to the first 500 folks who sign up for it as we receive 500 copies of books from three different foundations to share with you.

This packet will include the book **Welcoming the Unwelcome: Wholehearted Living in a Brokenhearted World** by Pema Chodron, along with a companion study guide. Here is a brief description of the book: *"In an increasingly polarized world, Pema shows us how to strengthen our abilities to find common ground, even when we disagree, and influence our environment in positive ways. Sharing never-before told personal stories from her*

remarkable life, simple and powerful everyday practices, and directly relatable advice, Pema encourages us all to become triumphant bodhisattvas--compassionate beings--in times of hardship. Welcoming the Unwelcome includes teachings on the true meaning of karma, recognizing the basic goodness in ourselves and the people we share our lives with--even the most challenging ones, transforming adversity into opportunities for growth, and freeing ourselves from the empty and illusory labels that separate us. Pema also provides step-by-step guides to a basic sitting meditation and a compassion meditation that anyone can use to bring light to the darkness we face, wherever and whatever it may be."

This mailing will also include a book and study guide from the Wayne Dyer Foundation: **The Sommer of My Life**, in which **Marcelene Dyer** reflects on her life as wife to Wayne Dyer, mother of seven, and her daughter's struggles with addiction: "In this deeply personal memoir, Marcelene Dyer explores the joys and sorrows of her daughter Sommer's life as an addict: a journey filled with resilience, spiritual growth, and the unbreakable bonds that transcend time and space. Marcelene lived through the deaths of her parents, her brother Rich, her husband Wayne, but never thought she would outlive one of her children. After years of battling opioid addiction, Sommer lost her life in May 2022 at 38 years old. Through prayer, meditation, and silent reflection, Marcelene was able to release any judgment about her daughter's life, find solace, and harness unconditional love. Guided by her faith and with a little help from ayahuasca, she came to understand that life is measured not by one's actions but by the depth of love we share. Marcelene offers an intimate look at her embodiment of love and how it has shaped her path--challenging conventional expectations and recognizing love as life's greatest purpose. The Sommer of My Life is a testament to faith, healing, and the enduring power of connection."

There will also be a poetry book from the **Rattle Foundation** accompanied by a letter from Tim Green, the editor of Rattle, sharing his insights into what goes into the writing of a good poem.

Along with these three books and study material associated with them, the packet will also contain information on **Meditation and Taking Refuge with a Rimpoche** from Tara who has been contributing to the spiritual ministering of PE members for more than ten years.

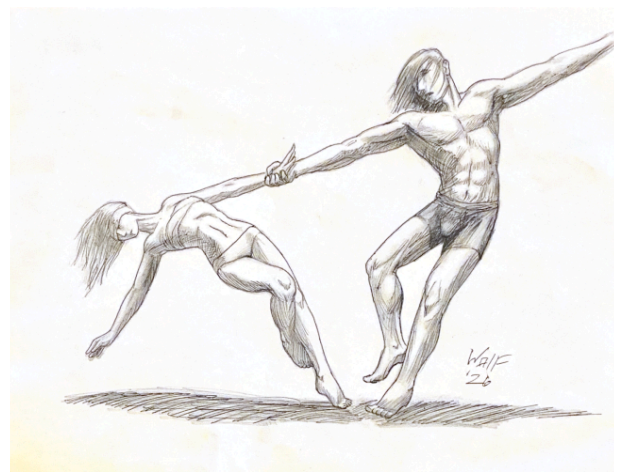
Poetry Anthology Vol. 34

Every six months, we publish a new Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology. Print copies are mailed to PE participants and the anthology is also published on our website where anyone can download and read it. As with the PE Journal and PE Art programs, volunteers regularly read your poems and write friendly letters back to the authors. If you like getting mail, submitting poetry is one way to encourage our volunteers to write directly to you!

We will publish Vol 34 this fall; poems received after the final selections have been made for Vol. 34 will be entered into consideration for Vol. 35.

I am impressed at how our volunteers, including Leah, enjoy reading the many poems submitted. Here's a note from Leah and a short compilation of poems that caught her eye over the summer.

Salutations and warm wishes from Prisoner's Express! My name is Leah, and I am a summer volunteer assisting with poetry coordination for the upcoming anthology. Here is a selection of poems that I chose to share from the recent submissions. All of these poems hold so much merit, and above all, are genuine in the way they relay things about the author's lives, which is why I have chosen them for the anthology. I hope that you all enjoy them as much as I do, and perhaps relate to these authors in all of their authenticity and determination. I hope many of you will be inspired to write and share some of your original poetry for consideration for our next anthology.



Jack Moran

Poetry & Art Spotlight



Steve Fegan

Time Lost

by Demetrio Ramirez

Lost for a moment
Lost for a time
These walls surround me as I retreat into my mind.
The world keeps turning, life goes on as I sit here
left behind.
Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda's entwine the senses
The heart weighs heavy stuck behind beige walls
and barbed wire fences
Lost for a moment, lost for a time
Despair is a choice that washes away whenever I
Hear that tiny voice
That voice on the other end of the phone
"Daddy we'll still be here when you come home"
Lost for a moment
Lost for a time
These prison walls may hold me but do not define
me
They lock me down but cannot confine me
I am a Son, a Brother, a Father, a Friend, yet more
importantly
I am not alone, because in the end when I pick up
that phone
"Daddy we'll still be here when you come home"
The darkness recedes, the light comes forth
Formerly lost, truly seen, Forever Found.

"I See You"

by Andrew Satalino

Dad I see you
It's ok you don't have to hide,
I backed into a vacant parking spot across the street
From the abandoned Jack in the Box in my stolen car
To see you getting high,
I've had this shirt on for 3 days, it reeks with
The question, how did I get here?
I too wallow in the bottomless pit of sorrow
Consuming narcotics to attempt to snuff out
My miseries, although you are my father
We are now in a way brothers of struggle,
No don't go,
I need help injecting this poison,
I don't know how to use a syringe
I can tell you don't want to,
But I threaten to go find someone that will,
I still remember
The feel of your stubble from your moustache
When you kissed me goodnight as a little boy,
Dad are you crying? What are tears?
Is this what being dead feels like?
I love you
I never meant to say I hated you when you
popped that balloon,
As the needle pierces my skin
I look at you, but it's hard to see,
The lights were shut off months ago
Although such an inopportune time,
I apologize for your troubled past
We were all born with the eyes of God
as newborns,
Until we are tricked into biting from the
Fruit of Corrupted knowledge,
Perverting our innocent minds,
Joining our unfortunate
Brothers and sisters
In the depths of hell here on Earth
Realm #number#258 Sector-C
The dope hits my bloodstream
I hear thunder crack it's presence
Across the pacific,
See I'm an upperman myself
never was too fond of downers, though
I do enjoy listening to Pink Floyd on occasion,
Dad I'm blind
I can't see, I'm scared,
Does it snow in South Florida?
Dad how long is forever?
In Agony,

Andrew Satalino



Craig Fischer

Easement

by Jack Losee

If you'll grant me squatter's rights
 To an acreage of your heart,
 I promise to grow flowers
 Of every color, shape and size,
 'Til that heath of barren loneliness
 Becomes a fragrant prairie mead,
 Where you can always find me,
 Amidst the butterflies and hummingbirds,
 Reaching for your hand.

The sentence didn't kill me, if not...What she did.

by Love

I smile for nobody can see I'm hurting,
 They always ask me, how long you doing.
 With a swift motion I say to them, what Time?
 When I got smoked at 18 to 20 years, I never
 cared for the Time.
 I never knew how much love hurtled,
 Until she gave my soul to the unwanted.
 The person I thought was for me, made 2 little
 Angels with the boy who thought was a Hitta,
 To the one who dressed all red and I'm not
 talking about Santa.
 Until this day I still find it quite amazing,
 How can you eat, laugh & sleep without sensing
 danger approaching.
 Now I'm 32 years older, still counting years,
 Not knowing if tomorrow death is getting near.
 I still talk to her even though I know is wrong
 But when you know what your heart needs, you'll
 do anything for he can stay strong!
 I think i was made to suffer in silence
 Because living happy for me isn't in my presence
 All I can say, Forgiveness is a Must,
 Live for you not for Lust.
 Holding on to Any Hate only brings you Pain,
 Love all, That wish you to Fail and remain.
 Do you think you can Lov3
 After Everything?

Untitled

by Edward Matina

A birthday greeting
To you my homie
A true friend, not a phony
The 26th of April
A day of celebration
Get up and get down
Make a joyful sound
The queen bee
Has turned 33
Here comes, Shazy
Strolling and rolling
Wearing thigh high boots
Dressing kinda snazzy
Tsk, tsk, tsk
Know this
Come high or low tide
I'm always on you side
We've been through some hell
Yet the sun always does shine
Pick a pink bubble shell
A friendship that's divine
Has passed the test of time
Raise a truely
Shake your booty
Mix a mule
Cuz sites a steller
Not a teller
A class act
That's a fact
Cheers!
To many more years
Hip hip, hip hop
It's your birthday!

Relations to I or Me

by Tomamalo Saipale

I am an island boy
Born on mainland
But my childhood
Was beach and sports
But my mom sally
Who raised me.
I remember she would
Be rolling lumpia
In our Van Econoline
While we would be
In the water wetsuits on

Waddling waiting for the biggest best
Of the waves that would
roll in, in sets thats
When you wait patiently but
Not too long or you'll be upset
You missed the whole set all together
The same way. I have watched
Too many sets pass me by
Afraid of the added responsibility
or the the sheer power of the big waves
But all that happens when you eat it
Is you go through a washer machine
I mean I have been thrashed pretty good before
Sometimes the sets bash you
One after the other but I found
If you stay calm you will be just fine
In the end, choose your wave
In the sets choose your perfect wave
It felt so good and free riding it to the end
When you finish you turn around
And go for more back then
As a child we didn't have any brakes
Mom sally would have to come
Out or send steven my younger
Of the first four.
Because we would be out there
Raining, freezing, hypothermic almost
Until almost night time,
It was free for my mom
But we'd go home and
She would make the best filipino food,
I would go shower get all the sand
Out my butt ah ha ha ha!
That's when I feel the closest to
My brothers. Out of the four
There are two of us left.
I reflect now and remember the
best times with Toa and Poi.
I miss you little brothers
Rest in paradise
Save me a spot in the beaches
Of heaven. We will ride to eternity
But in life I will catch the right waves
From now on I will not fear
The responsibilities anymore Brothers, not anymore
If i get any more chances, I will catch that wave
And Not Look Back. (Because of where you came
from)
Let go of the past, (but remember where you came
from)
Don't Fear the Future, Just Live on the Wave right
now.

Souls

by L. Roudebush

Who are they?

The ones that look directly into my eyes–

The birds, the rabbits, the squirrels.

How do they know me?

Do they know that

I feel their recognition

When they stare at me, as if to say,

“Hey! Remember me?”

Are they aware that we were once

Brother and sister, or

Mother and daughter, or

Husband and wife?

They need to hold my hand,

To stay near to me,

As they always have.

Our souls crave this proximity.

With every gust of wind, every tidal wave,

Every sunset and lunar glow,

The souls move to their next incarnation

In a passage of divine cosmic breath.

How very fortunate to acquire a human birth.

Is it? Or is it better to be the one

Flying through the air, or

Hopping across the yard, or

Running through the stress

With no cares about their soul’s next destination?

To be the one looking at me, as if to say,

“Hey! Remember me?”

Living in daily apprehension of your loss,

Yet when lost, you are not missed

by Robert (Bobby) Viveiros Jr.

As I thrash through this shackled strait,

I have no one to love,

and everyone to hate,

a darkness I can’t make light of.

I see monsters every night,

enveloped by dead air,

there is no night light,

to fight off this nightmare.

In this suffocating air,

it’s hard for me to breathe,

my hearing and sight are impaired,

I’ve become absent without leave.

Here, is where I fade away,

all around me, demons are dancing,

flocking like birds of prey,

hungry, vultures are salivating.



Jeff Hovatter

Theme Essays & Stories

As I mentioned before, PE has evolved over the years from a basic book-mailing program to the sprawling entity it is today. When we first started sending books into prisons we received so many thank you notes and the overwhelming majority all said the same thing:

- People felt like they were going crazy.
- Writers wrote they disliked the people around them, especially folks who are different from them.
- Folks expressed reluctance to share their real feelings with fellow prisoners as they felt they would be seen as weak for being living, feeling beings.
- And receiving mail was the most important thing in your life.

I wasn't sure how to respond to those reactions. We started the theme writing program with the promise that if you send in a theme writing on the word cue offered that month you would receive a packet of what everyone else wrote that month including a letter from me. Well, we did that for a few months and something radical happened. The people receiving monthly theme packets changed their tune. They wrote that they realized they weren't personally going crazy but were in a crazy making place. They thought they hated people different from them but in reading the themes they saw all the commonality they shared with others no matter their race, religion, gender or ethnicity. Folks receiving the packets wrote how they wanted to share what was really going on for them and appreciated the honesty and vulnerability others were sharing in their essay.

Seeing these changes inspired me to start publishing this semi-annual newsletter in 2004, so I could share a sample of the essays in each month's packet with all of you. I wanted you all to realize you are not crazy, and it is safe at least at PE to share your real feelings and that folks who seem different from you are experiencing those same thoughts and feelings as you. We are more alike than different. I also hope reading these stories will inspire you to send in your own word and picture cue responses, so you can get the entire packet in the mail.

I realized the antidote to living in a crazy making place was meaningful activity. That is why we create the assorted distance learning programs for you all on such a variety of subjects. My hope is that at least some of the packets can provide you with activity that feels meaningful and productive. Good mental health happens when your life has

meaning and it is my hope that reading each other's writing and inspiring your own creative self can help you stay sane and balanced in an environment where deprivation is never far away.

Your words have power. I never would have thought of starting a semi-annual newsletter until I saw the power your theme writing has on one another.

By submitting a writing, you will receive a complete packet of all the writings submitted each month. The newsletter is meant to give you a taste of what our PE writers are up to and to encourage you to put pen to paper and write on one of our theme topics.

As of late we have not been able to keep up with typing and mailing out the packets as quickly as we would like. It is often because there is much to type and proofread each month, and we lose many of our volunteers in the summer months. The longer it takes to mail out the monthly packet, the more likely the authors have been moved and the packet is undeliverable. In order to give us more space to mail the packets in a timely manner and also to preserve our ability to develop our other PE projects, beginning Jan 2027 we will offer Word and Picture cues every other month so we will be mailing out the packets 6 times a year rather than 12. For those of you who want to write more often we encourage you to contribute to our other creative writing programs, including Poetry, Journals, and Misc. Essays.

I chose a number of essays from the previous 6 months to share with you all here. After the essays you will see a guideline for submissions as well as a list of the upcoming word and picture theme prompts. I hope more of you are inspired to pick up a pen and share your stories with us. Writing them down can help you remember and process the memories of your life, and it can be invaluable to the readers trying to make sense of their own situation. Prison life does much to keep people apart and reading each other's writings and sharing your inner life does much to help this community gain strength and resilience.

In reading through the themes I always want to reprint way more than I can fit in this newsletter. After reading these for 20+ years I can say that practice makes a better writer. I have seen individuals improve their writing and communications skills through their participation in this and other PE projects. Please consider using writing to begin to understand yourself and the experiences of your life.

Prisoner Express Mini Word Theme Anthology

November '25 Word Theme:
"Fork in the Road"

Everything is a Fork in the Road by Todd Broxmeyer

Robert Johnson went to a crossroads and supposedly sold his soul to the devil for talent. Some would argue he suddenly became the best to have ever been. If you are not familiar with the blues but a fan of music he is worth the effort to find. I write that to give perspective. Some of us come to a fork in the road and the choice we make may grant wishes or end up in a nightmare. If the Johnson story is true I assume he ended up with a bit of both.

How many seemingly mundane decisions are made that inevitably change a person's life. Go left and end up in an accident, go right, home safe. As a child many decisions were made using eeny-meenie-miney-moe, supposedly leaving choices to chance. Now we realize every fork in the road is nothing but chance. Buddhism shows us that the only thing we control is the immediate choice in front of us.

Prison is a constant reminder of this. From the moment the reality of being arrested sets in, a person lives in a world of "if-only." I am in my eighteenth year of incarceration and have had this conversation with hundreds of people and countless times with myself. Going back decades to decisions made that I can rationalize led to my situation. Hind sight being clear, each fork in the road had large neon signs pointing me to a better path, all ignored. The reality is looking back like that is a waste of time and energy.

Life is not a paint-by-numbers or simply following a yellow brick road. It is a long series of forks in the road. Some seemingly boring, others supposedly epic. A life-size version of choose your own adventure. We just have to hope each fork leads to a positive situation. We accomplish that by focusing on the now. The inevitable fork in the road. Make each choice with the best intentions. That is the only way to build a positive quality of life. One fork in the road at a time.

Convict Chronicles: A Stubborn Skeptic by Leo Cardez

I grew up with a Bible in one hand and a rosary in the other, but refused to rely on anyone I could not see for myself. God sounded like a character out of one of my comic books, some superhero who lived in the clouds and could control my life. Then.

A fork in the road that would change absolutely everything.

Convicted and sentenced to eighteen years in prison, in many ways, feels like dying and going to purgatory. Prison, like purgatory, a weigh station for weak men.

A place beyond time where the line between good and evil is a razor's edge. I can't find all the horrible words to describe it; my mind fights against my memories.

And yet.

It would be unfair and dishonest of me not to acknowledge that prison's profound suffering led me to unexpected, even wonderous, revelations. See, when I first arrived at prison, regardless of how many fellow inmates surrounded me, I never felt more alone. That desolation unlocked a key truth: God was here with me because He lived within me...I was not alone. I never had been. Even as I denied Him, He never left me, waiting patiently in a secret chamber of my heart. Only through this difficulty and pain could I discover WHOSE I was.

I've often said, I wouldn't wish this experience on my worst enemy, and yet I'm sure I'm a better person for having endured this time in God's furnace. Prison, a full immersion, shook me out of my internal narrative and pushed me to my mental and emotional limit. I felt dislocated, isolated, and utterly vulnerable. I needed that forced humility to allow Jesus Christ to find me behind these cold steel bars and guide me on a quest of self-discovery and inner recalibration. This experience became my life's most intense spiritual journey and catalyst to creating the child of God I was meant to be. God's challenges in our lives can be like a strong wind, not because they're meant to hold us back, but because they're meant to strip us down to our true self.

Today, I no longer doubt God nor do I fear the pain of life's tribulations. Firstly, I know, God is always with me. Secondly, pain is God trying to get my attention--illuminating a path to Him. So, I welcome the pain, lean into even, as I continue to rebuild myself from the inside out.

I lived consumed by fear, shame, and loneliness, but purged that shell. Even shackled in this dark, dank hole I am more free than I have ever been.

Fork in the Road

by Jacob Lester

We all walk along a path, our vision directed forward, as we try to find our way. A goal we may think we have, a clear path we think we've charted until we hit that snag, that fork, that ultimate choice: do we or do we not? The time to pause, the time to reflect on who we are and where we are going? These forks, hurdles, stumbling blocks, all serve as a chance to reflect and learn. What brought us here? Who are we right now? Where do we want to go? A choice. We can use it to either improve our lot or a choice we can ignore to our likely detriment. So when you stumble, falter, or hit a hard spot reflect upon who you really are and where you really want to go, before making a decision you might regret.

Fork in the Road

by Andrew Krosch

Part car crash. Part fork in the road. Every trip to segregation breeds reflection. Most are simple course corrections, a chance to reset, take a breath, away from the cellblock. Others, a rare few in my case, profound.

Almost two decades ago now, while I was doing a year stretch in seg in neighboring Stillwater prison, I read a poem about how it isn't the big things, the tragedies, life altering events that destroy us. It's all the little things. Little things as they pile up. Wear us down. Tear us down. Destroy us a little more. In ways we'll never get back. Straws and burdens and broken back camels is too much of a simplification.

The poem and the person who shared it with me left a lasting impression. She was my psych dept therapist who also passed out the reading packets in seg. (Printouts. Absolutely no staples or paperclips! Soft cover books only!) Tough but honest and compassionate the way those who've never been in any real trouble never slipped over to the dark side of life can be. In an open conversation it didn't take long for guys to see that she was a fellow traveler with a past and demons too personal to ever share.

The other women in the prison openly hated her, worn plainly on their faces. Even the attractive ones felt like ugly ducklings to her swan. Catching up on fifty, she wore her gray hair long, with pride, still movie star beautiful. She had the kind of looks where you know she'd been drop

dead gorgeous when she was younger. Nothing that hinted at the fact that she hadn't always been a professional. That she'd been a heroin addict in a past life. Her job at the prison is a second, maybe third act in a storied life.

Real kindness and compassion really register with you, especially during longer rips in seg. Small things, little things, the right poem (and other reading handouts) at the right time. Simple common courtesy. Allow a guy to salvage his pride after an awkward question. Like the time I found the word in a 19th century psychology book and asked her to look the word up and how she diplomatically shared the definition at our next visit without making me feel like a complete dumbass. (Hint: it's an activity teenage boys and prisoners tend to do way too much and hopefully are sufficiently embarrassed if they get caught; mid *onanism*-ing.)

Being treated like you're a human being. Like the rare times when the cop on duty—who's already doing security rounds every half hour—doesn't make you wait several hours to do something as basic as get you a roll of toilet paper.

And the little things, the slights, disrespectful acts that'll drive you nuts. Get you so pissed off your head feels like it'll explode. Like slamming your food slot door every time they drop off and pick up meal trays.

There's no shortage of little things with big potential to set you off, including when you're back in the cell block. All the little things that'll get under your skin, infect you with a level of hate and anger that's so disproportionate that it's impossible for the uninitiated — for the sane — to understand.

Today, I'd like to say that I've learned my lesson, that I no longer let the little things get under my skin. Nope, still too thin skinned for my own good. But maybe I handle it better, let it go sooner, no longer stewing (for days, weeks, months, even years) on slights and imagined disrespect from people, that if I'm honest with myself, barely recognize that I exist, that I am present in their midst. I don't know if I've grown up, or simply grown old, without the energy to get truly bent out of shape.

There's really only one way to know: Wait, watch, and see how I act and react the next time. Hope for the best. Brace myself for the next fork in the road, whatever it turns out to be.

Fork in the Road
by Timothy Scott

Would you choose water over wine and be the one behind the wheel?

- "Drive" by Incubus

I have aimlessly wandered in circles for years, even before I was incarcerated. Time and time again I have come to points where one decision would dictate the course of my life. I have always walked the path of least resistance: whatever was easy, whatever didn't require me to think. Now I'm in prison. My fate has been chosen. I'm done letting fear rule me, but I've never taken the time to figure out what it is that I want out of life. I begin this journey of articulation upon discovery of this newsletter, you guys have shown me that the time to start is here and now. I now make my own fork in this road. I don't yet know where I'm going, but I will stumble in my direction.

A Fork in the Road
by Michael Medina

I once asked a wise man, "If there was a fork in the road, what would you do?"

The wise man looked at me and without hesitation told me, "I'll pick it up."

"What?! That's not what I meant!"

"To me, it did. It's all about perspective."

What I always saw were choices, this and that. And the choice I picked put me in prison. I figured this choice was a dead-end for me, with no way out, no way for redemption. It took years for me to truly understand what he meant... What his perspective was. What he saw was an opportunity.

It burns to say but I would have not appreciated the things I had before until I came to prison. Though what I had is lost, that doesn't mean I can't capitalize on what I have now. I have the opportunity to find a new career path to take and earn a college degree in it. I have the opportunity to attend self-help groups that help me change my old way of thinking and to build empathy. I have the opportunity to talk with counselors to help me with the passing of friends and family that I never dealt with. I even have the opportunity to become closer to my higher power.

What I saw was the end of my life. What I see now is a new opportunity for myself.

December '25 Word Theme: "Gifts"

Gifts
by William Swiderski

When most people think of gifts, the first thing that comes to mind is a birthday or Christmas gift. Now that I'm older and an Odiniist I view this so much more differently. My greatest gift is my family: my daughter Stephanie, and my four grandbabies, Chris, Serenity, Shane, and Shiane are the ones that keep me going. Just hearing their voices gives me energy and allows me to feel connected to my family no matter what my day brings. I feel loved.

Being in prison for a total of 40 years, so many of my family and friends have either died or drifted away. Those who have remained are truly gifts from God. It gives us here on the inside the inspiration to change and live our lives in a way that will make our family and friends proud. We don't have to remain the people we were. We don't have to be judged or remembered for what led us to prison all those years ago. We can make changes that bring forth new people and the gifts of family is what makes that all possible.

I can't even imagine the life I would be living if I didn't have my daughter and my grandkids in my life. I have 3 sons and some grandkids with them. But I haven't heard from them in over 30 years. That does make me sad, and it weighs heavily on me. But I view them as future gifts just waiting to be opened, and what a happy day it will be.

People
by Sheila K. LaBarre

While housed at HCI, FL City, FL I met Catherine LaFleur, a beautiful lady, very intelligent, articulate, and kind. She is a writer. Unique in every way. Catherine told me about Prisoner Express and encouraged me to write themes for publication. Catherine is a divine gift in my life. Although I returned to New Hampshire and am housed at NHCI-W in Concord, I think of Catherine often. I wish she would obtain an Interstate Corrections Compact to be sent here. We would be together again and our friendship would continue to grow. She is a true friend. The population here is a little over 100. A small facility, with 3 housing units. Of course, Catherine would apply to be a part of the "IF" program. She would

be chosen and sent to CA where she would have a room to herself; no cellmate. She would enjoy the peace of space she did not have to share. I know she will read this theme when it is published. I hope she considers my wish.

The Facility is N.H.C.F.-W

The Warden is another gift in my life. She has extensive experience with the NHDCC. Her patience, fortitude, and energy is wonderful. She cares about every inmate and takes the time to listen to us. Time, in itself, is a priceless gift.

I am blessed to have my sister, Lynn. She is the greatest gift in my life. My sister is an angel on earth. Her generosity, wisdom, kindness, and love is heavenly. Lynn has supported me in every way. She is lovely. A mother to two sons, Gary and Brant, and a daughter, Megan. Lynn is like a rare emerald that sparkles day and night.

Gifts that are wrapped in boxes with pretty paper and bows bring delight to people young and old. However, please remember, the greatest gifts are the people who love us, because true love cannot be bought or sold.

My Best Gift — Ever!

by Gary Farlow

Growing up in the South during the turbulent 1960s was difficult. Such was especially true if one was gay. This was way before the LGBTQ+ movement. Prior to even the historic "Stonewall" riots. A gay person wasn't "gay." You were a "queer," a "fairy." So as Christmas neared and was heralded by the arrival of Sears and Roebuck's annual "Wishbook" catalogue, I found myself secretly coveting my very own Easy Bake Oven.

At just 9, and the youngest of six male siblings - all avid sportsmen and hunters - I didn't dare ask my dad for a pink (the only color at that time) Easy Bake Oven. My brothers were all asking for shotguns, basketballs, electric football games, and guitars.

My parents, though born during the pre-Roaring 20s era, were actually quite open-minded. They were Kennedy supporters. Believed in civil rights. But to ask for a "girl's toy"? They overlooked my "borrowing" my sister's Barbies. Boy, oh boy, did GI Joe and Ken get along well! No, I just couldn't build up the courage.

The Sear's catalogue typically arrived in late October. By December it was reduced to a ragged relic with cut-out pages that were strategically

"left" — on mom's pillow; dad's place at the breakfast table; taped to the mirror in my parents' bedroom.

I confided my secret to my oldest sister, Josie. At 24, she was an "adult" whom I trusted. Fearfully revealing my secret Christmas wish, Josie smiled in compassion and told me that Christmas was a time of miracles and that I had to believe.

The days until Christmas pass so, so slowly when one is 9 years old. But the big day finally came. Christmas morning dawned sunny, but bitterly cold in 1968. It had been a difficult year. Dr. King had been assassinated, Vietnam was consumed in the Tet Offensive, riots consumed American cities. War, unrest, politics. Funny, despite over half a century [having passed], so little has really changed.

In my family, everyone had a designated place in which their gifts were placed on Christmas morning. As I walked into the living room, still clad in my "Wizard of Oz" PJs, there sat my pile of books in the wingback chair next to the tree. Mom and dad never skimmed at Christmas, getting their "gift" from watching their offspring rip through the carefully wrapped packages.

At the very bottom was a large box. The paper was white with holly and the bow bright red. I had saved it for last. Sparing little time for a new sweater, converse sneakers, paint-by-number sets, GI Joe accessories (wonder how Ken will look in camo?), I arrived at the last, big, box.

With a slightly nervous hand I undid the bow and tore off the paper. There, in all its glory, was my coveted Easy Bake Oven.

I immediately turned to look into the faces of my parents, who were watching me intently. I silently mouthed "thank you," not trusting my voice to form the words. This was so much more than just a Christmas gift. This represented acceptance of me for who I was. It was an acknowledgment of my worth, my validity, my right to be me. There were still years ahead and many disagreements, but this meant that I was no longer trapped in fear.

My dad came over and, placing one hand on my shoulder, told me, "You're my son. Whatever road you take, no matter who you are, you're my son and nothing can or will ever change that." That Christmas I received a gift for more than what could be wrapped in paper or bows. I was given unconditional love. It was my best gift — ever!

Gifts

by Scott Asalone

Even behind bars there are so many ways our lives are gifted. These gifts are not pretty, nor bow-topped and don't come under a tree. However, the gifts we encounter and share while behind bars can be life changing. Early in my incarceration I was having a bad day. One of the inmates, Eli, asked "what's the matter?" I started spilling a list of complaints. Eli let me run on for a bit. When I finally stopped he said "have you ever thought of the millions of people all over the world who would like to have the comforts that we have in here? Three meals a day, a bed, clothing, clean water, shelter, and though we don't have perfect safety, we are not being bombed or shot at."

The idea stunned me. I was not used to thinking of prison as a place to be grateful, but he had a point. When I listen to the news and hear of Gaza, Sudan, and so many places where people are running for their lives or barely existing, I realize that despite what I want to think, in here I have gifts many people would love to have.

Prison unleashes two other types of gifts. When you spend a little time behind bars, you see the gifts that the inmates have and can share with each other. They become masters at using what is at hand to be creative, do repair, or just be ingenious.

The ear buds to my tablet stopped working; the sound gently dying until there was silence. I have found that inmates have amazing abilities to fix almost anything. Asking around, someone suggested James. He is in class with me but he is in another pod.

"James is great," they said, "and he will do repairs for free. He feels like it is a gift he can give." I spoke to James about the ear buds.

"Sure I can fix them. Bring them to class." He took them from me at class in the morning and an hour later met me on the way to lunch. "Here you go." They were wrapped in what looked like strips of cloth and some of the wiring had been replaced.

"Wow," I said, "that was quick." So I asked him, "do you like popcorn?"

"Love it," he told me. The next day I gifted him three bags of popcorn even though he didn't want any payment.

The cooking, sewing, mending, coloring, artistry, writing, teaching, role modeling that you see behind bars is amazing. That is what makes the warehousing of us who are "returning citizens" so ridiculous. We could be volunteers in the community at nonprofits to help provide assistance. Using our gifts out there would provide a benefit and some repayment instead of laying in our bunks and feeding the prison corporate complex by our purchase of TVs, clothes, commissary, etc. The talent wasted behind these fences is ridiculous. Because more than anything, what you see in here is the gift of being creative by using what is available. I have seen amazing repair jobs on electronics, clothes and even shoes mended, incredible cheese cakes with little or no cheese, and of course wine. These men are uniquely talented at finding ways to make things work. God knows our world could use a bit of that right now.

Aside from the gifts that we could bring to society, is the gift we can be to each other. When I speak with my family and tell them of the help, the care and concern that I've experienced and seen for myself and others, they are stunned. The world wants everyone to think that those of us behind bars are animals. Not so. The men in here are gifts to each other. We care about and take care of each other. Sadly most of us have no idea what a gift we can be with a smile, encouraging word, or a listening ear. We just give it freely, because that is who we are.

There are no bows and ribbons around these gifts I've mentioned here. But they are given with more love and thoughtfulness than many store-bought gifts. Perhaps the world does not realize it, but we are a gifted community both with what we can accomplish using makeshift material, and the gifts we are to each other. That is something that always makes me grateful.

January '26 Word Theme: "Masks"

The Masks that Hide the Man

by Steven Beauchamp

Masks have played a huge role in rendering me almost unrecognizable through 51 years of life. I've donned a plethora of ugly, disfigured, sometimes perverse masks at any given time to camouflage my authentic emotions and deeply engrained pain. As a writer and poet, I've pondered if my hiding behind masks wasn't easier than facing the unadmitted truths about myself. Let me give you a peek into my world of pseudo-personas, often self-imposed auras I've hidden behind for far too long.

As a teenager, my world was plagued with angst, anger, and social anxieties. At 14, I discovered two life-altering outlets – masks, if you will – for expressing my anger and releasing my exploding hormones: Heavy Metal music and Porn. Heavy metal, thanks to Metallica's song "ONE", gave me a sense of edge. The darker the lyrics, the more liberated I felt. Bands like Slayer, Bathory, Venom, Carcass, Slipknot (later on), and Korn showed me worlds of pain, emotion, anger, and death that were foreign to my smalltown-America upbringing. Any emotions or anger I experienced could easily be attached to thousands of songs I'd heard. The opening lyrics from Sevendust's "Skeleton Song" aptly describe how my life's been using music as a mask for decades. It says: *I'll stay right here with all these familiar faces / and shut out everyone else from the world we've created / instead of becoming the sick and twisted / I lose myself in a song again.*

Porn, however, and even sex as I aged, often became masks for insecurity, failure, self-loathing, loneliness, and outright addiction! Porn introduced me to a stigmatized, fetish-filled, alternate universe where my paralyzing fear of rejection found no pushback. Images on the screen never said "NO!"; never judged or ridiculed me. This mask became my dark sanctuary. Then it became a monster of debilitating obsession that, at age 43, landed me in federal prison for 17 years! How ironic that the very thing I used to subvert my loneliness put me in a place built to bolster that same loneliness. My porn mask cost me everything I truly loved: my family, my career, my dignity, tens of thousands of dollars, and the curse of a life that'll remain highly scrutinized after prison.

Similarly, when I was younger I used to drink excessively as a way of masking shyness, insecurity, and mostly to feel included. Alcohol, specifically bourbon, filled me with lots of false bravado, faux self-confidence, and a supercharged libido. Drinking cast off my ineptness socially and opened doors to sexual opportunities that, without the mask, I likely wouldn't have pursued. Again, as with music and porn, alcohol took my problems, and emotional turmoil, and reduced their tenacious grip, if only temporarily.

But alcohol's mask carried a sinister side that appeared if I was drinking due to anger. I was like Jekyll and Hyde. Everything I'd stuffed down and refused to address erupted like a volcano, spewing white-hot vitriol on everyone whom I perceived as an enemy. That blind rage almost got me killed (literally) on two occasions!

The easiest mask, and probably most detrimental to wear over the last decade, has been the mask of anonymity the Internet entices. The vast majority of people online are hiding behind a multitude of masks, some of which I'm all too familiar. Social media sites and anonymous chatrooms require a modicum of blind trust to successfully function. My masks of deception, misdirection, and addiction have taken me down some treacherous rabbit holes. Ultimately, it was the deceptive masks of the FBI, posing as a teenaged girl, that used my own weaknesses and immoral proclivities against me. Karma at its best!

As I've sat in prison for now 8 years, I've had time to reflect on numerous things in my life. Thankfully, through unexpected blessings bestowed on me by a 20-year old friend named Cora, I've found someone who's helped me remove many of my masks and show her my genuine self. Her friendship, for the past year, has been incredibly cleansing, healing, and uplifting. She's instilled in me a sense of HOPE I'd longed for. One day I will meet her, face-to-face, and show her how much she's meant to me!

Prison has also given me lots of time to convert my masks into raw, emotional glimpses into who I really am through the poetry I write. My vulnerabilities, fears, anger, loneliness, pain, and LOVE all flow through my poems. To see me unmasked is to read some of my poems. I'm thankful for this outlet, and for the select group of friends who've finally met the real me.

Masks

by Michael Conner

Prison is a place where the 'masks' prevail, more than 90 percent of the population wear masks. This includes the Correctional Officers, Medical Personnel, and even the chaplain. An inmate can be in a cell with his cellmate for months and years and not know the true identity of his celli. No one is willing to let their guard down because they fear the repercussions. Being yourself can lead to being victimized. Pretending to be something or someone you are not is the expectation.

"Prison not only robs you of your freedom, it attempts to take away your identity." - Nelson Mandela

In such a ruthless environment fear is the predominant emotion. If you are normally passive it is best to wear the mask of the aggressor. "Never show weakness or fear" is the prison adage of every political and racial culture. But the mask of appearing invincible comes at a price. I've been in prison for over 20 years, and many of those years I was obliged to adhere to the prison dogma because I believed it would be the only way I would survive. I wore so many masks, I self-diagnosed myself with multiple personality disorder. I wore the mask of the habitual criminal, the mask of the addict, the mask of fitting in, and more. I learned the mask only prolonged my healing and created a disconnection with myself and my loved ones. For as long as I wore the mask, I could not work on rehabilitation or have intimate relationships. It is very hard to be vulnerable (a requirement in any meaningful relationship) when you don't know who you are.

"Some of us have lost the ability to experience joy and if we haven't lost it, we've lost the ability to be able to express it. So we always walk around stone-faced, making folks uncomfortable." - Tim Kornegay

Long before the pandemic I wore a mask in the belief that I was protecting myself. The stone-faced mask was the hardest to peel off of my personality, because I had worn it for so long I had a permanent frown. People were always asking me "what's wrong?" Even on the occasions

I was happy. Circumstances would have it that I was compelled to participate in self-improvement groups. Over time I learned that the group did not wear painted on smiles or frowns, we were in a trusting setting where I saw some of the hardest inmates on the yard be themselves. "You can't make decisions based on fear and the possibility of what might happen" (Michelle Obama). I learned to take off my mask despite my fear of being judged and rejected. My desire to grow and rebuild my life was more important than any possibility of being exposed for my weaknesses.

There is always the possibility that you will not be accepted and celebrated by everyone but you cannot let that be the reason you hide your true self. The safety and security of the mask is an illusion and it is not healthy to our mental health or our communities.

Taking Off the Masks

by Max Reynard

It's not surprising that queer and trans people in prison tend to wear metaphorical masks. Some of us, for physical and emotional safety, have to use a mask of straightness, or at least plausible deniability, in order to survive. We might police our behavior - or more toxically, the behavior of others - for being "too gay". We'll feign interest in topics that confer some "straight cred" (sports, say), step carefully around the pronouns of past lovers, or we say nothing in the face of homophobic or transphobic jokes. Yet even those prisoners who publicly claim queerness - or who are simply incapable of "passing" - tend to wear some form of mask. We're rarely able to show our full selves in here, even if we feel safe enough to share some small parts.

And the amount many of us feel safe with has been shrinking. In the federal BOP, recent guidelines from the president and his cabinet seem to have empowered bigots among both staff and fellow prisoners to threaten expressions of non-normative sexuality or gender, apparently with impunity. A new attempt to renounce PREA directives meant to keep trans prisoners safer - however flawed PREA may be - appears calculated to greenlight forms of violence, motivated by nothing but abject cruelty.

It's true that nearly everyone incarcerated is pushed into some amount of emotional numbness by the expectation that feelings cannot be safely expressed. An outburst or a meltdown, even among friends, could be misinterpreted by observers as the prelude to an attack, a threat of self-harm, or an embarrassment other prisoners must "correct". So we wear masks of toughness, happiness, or aloofness to show that the petty dehumanization of the system can't reach us. But it does, of course, if only subconsciously. Behind every mask of emotional stability is a scream.

For queer and trans people in prison, these masks get woven into our human need for dignity and social inclusion. Even the proudest, most self-reliant person can be unmoored in a place that doesn't acknowledge your existence and is designed to frustrate any attempts at comfort or support. Those on the margins often have to deal with maintaining a public face for survival, from DuBois's double-consciousness to Fanon's white masks. I don't want to flatten all forms of oppression into one experience, but I think queer and trans prisoners can learn from the ways Black communities survived in the face of attempts at their own erasure.

The challenge often seems to be how to know when a mask is a shield, cumbersome but necessary, and when it is a prison in itself, limiting our growth and freedom. We shouldn't ever feel fully comfortable wearing the mask, or we risk a temporary strategy for survival becoming the only way we know how to live. Do we have real concerns about our safety, or is it fear itself that's keeping the screen in place? Audre Lorde wrote that in weighing fear above "our own needs for language and definition," we are suffocated by a "wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness." Forcing our lives to always be safe murders the parts inside us most worth protecting.

Are we unwittingly internalizing an oppression in our survival? We must constantly check the fit of our masks. Do we need to have them on as often as we do? Must they be quite so opaque? Are there others who can help us see the parts of the mask that have become too tangled in our truer selves, where the mask might be pushing its tendrils where it doesn't belong?

In prison, it can be hard to find those others, sometimes. Yet even when you do have confidants and supporters, the clearest path out

isn't by soliciting love, but through self-love. James Baldwin, who said a lot about the importance of self-love in the face of dehumanization, wrote, "love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."

If you're queer or trans and in prison, you may not be able to take off your mask right now, but you can nurture that spark inside that contains your whole self. You are not the person this grim apparatus of immiseration tries to turn you into; you exist at a deeper, truer level than their policies and programs can ever touch.

Wearing a mask doesn't mean you're giving up, it means you're surviving, pending revolution - just don't forget your true face in the meantime. When you can, ask yourself whether your masks of silence and conformity are still necessary, and where your deepest vulnerabilities can, in love, power your greatest strength.

Masks

by Christopher Cross

I think nearly all of us wear some type of mask, especially in prison. But out in society as well, sometimes we try to fit in. We mask our emotions, we care what others think, and we generally try to present our best face to the world, those around us. Being social animals, I believe we have evolved to create masks to wear, according to the situation.

That can lead to good or bad results, depending on who we surround ourselves with, and who we are trying to impress or fit in with. In prison that can lead us into bad situations. In prison, you are expected to be tough, and if not, people try to exploit you.

I'm so over the tough guy routine. That got old when I was a teenager. And this is my second time in prison for stabbing somebody during a fight, so you can see what it's earned for me. Really, I believe I was trying a mask on to impress myself. I was picked on as a kid, and felt I had something to prove to the world, but most of all to myself. Okay, I proved it, so I can take that mask off. I'm 32 years old.

Too often we put on the wrong masks to earn the approval of the wrong people. Honestly, it's not the end of the world if we fail to live up to somebody else's standards. I'm in maximum security, but I've put away the tough guy facade.

I'm really not too violent of a person, so I don't have to act like I'm Toughy McTougherton. I can be aggressive or violent, but only if I want to, and only if my heart is in it. Now, usually, I don't feel the need. Sometimes I do, though, and I thoroughly enjoy it. But as for giving anything to anybody, I'm over that. Perhaps I'm simply too arrogant and self-centered to care what they think. I'm not sure. Because after I take off all the masks, I don't see anybody. It's empty underneath. But not in a bad way. It is a fertile void. And it gives me such joy. That's why I enjoy meditation. It strips away all the dross of the ego and shuts the mind up.

I can still put on whatever mask I choose, for my own play and enjoyment. Raising hell, for instance. I get such joy out of it. I put on my nutbag persona and have fun with it. But I take that mask off again when I'm done, and I hang it up.

Really, I don't think we can do away with our masks, not altogether. I think we can just become free from them by not identifying with them. All the world is our stage, and we are merely actors. So I think we should have fun with it while we are alive.

Masks

by Cesar Hernandez

Recently, I was able to participate in the four day Kairos Christian retreat. We quickly realized it was a no-mask zone.

People in prison have a variety of masks they wear daily. They have separate masks for their cellmate, neighbors, co-workers, guards, etc.

At Kairos, the 42 participants left their masks at the door. I saw many people in a new light. Including the two neighbors who also took part in Kairos.

During the four days I was not only surrounded by inmates and guards. The thirty volunteers were grandfathers, fathers, husbands, sons, uncles.

At my table we had two seventy-year-old engineers. It was so refreshing to not need to wear a mask. We discussed a wide variety of topics.

They also fed us a lot of spiritual food, with our table being a non-judgement zone. Four of the participants at my table I have not ever seen before.

After the first day we really opened up to each other. I was able to remain non-judgemental even as we shared many of our faults.

I have found a new community in Kairos. I look forward to attending Kairos fellowship every Tuesday.

February '26 Word Theme: "Lies"

True Self

by Jonathan Holeman

Everyone lies. Don't deny it. That would be a lie. If then, as is the truth, everyone lies, then what lies matter? Is it the degree of, or intent, behind a lie that makes it abhorrent? If one only lies to gain something, is that then always such a horrible thing? The fact is, in general, people like to believe that they are honest. Does one lie, two, ten, make one a "bad" person? Perhaps lying, it's just in our nature? Think about it.

If a person lies to save a life, are they so terrible? It happens all the time. Hospitals are full of well intended lies. So are courtrooms. In hospitals, paperwork is "fixed" so some patients might receive a treatment their insurance would only cover if this or that variable is in place. So, some well intending nurse or doctor saves a life, with lies. Courtrooms are full of lies, and liars of numerous degrees. Sometimes a lie puts a disgusting pervert in prison. Sometimes a lie will free an innocent man or woman.

If someone lies to gain, are they evil? Are they lying to steal some honest person's life savings? Obviously, this is not the work of a completely great person. What about those little lies? The timecard at work, when it shows you were there until eight, but you really left at seven fifty. Just a little lie, but one for personal gain. Consider the billions of people who've done this exact thing. Then, when a "boss" notices, usually it's overlooked. Overlooking lies, it tends to be good work ethics.

Could lies, and lying actually be so common, that it is part of our nature? Animals lie. A cat, or dog, monkey, or goat. They might fake an injury to gain some sympathy. A lie, created with its sole purpose to make themselves happy.

How many lies do we tell ourselves? Those daily morning affirmations. Lying to ourself to make us believe the lie is true. Oddly enough, it works.

The Stories We Tell

by Rolf Rathmann

We believe our own lies. That's a load of crap. There, I've said it—We know when we've done wrong; when we're not being honest. There is no such thing as believing one's own lie.

The Story I Tell...

Doug: We're concerned about you, Rolf. Are you okay?

Me: I'm fine. What are you talking about?

The Story I Tell...

Dawn [sister to the owner of the company I worked for]: Rolf, we received an anonymous voice mail that you're back to using drugs.

Me: Whaaat?! That's crazy. Definitely not! (Laughter ensues as we gossip about our employees).

The Story I Tell...

Sal [owner of said company before he offers me a promotion]: How much of a risk are you to my company?

Me: All's under control! (I stare him down. I want to smoke a bowl. I got the job).

The Story I Tell...

Robin [my fellow manager as she visits me in the hospital after an overdose, which I will explain away]: We're worried.

Me: I was so scared I was having a heart attack. Turns out to be a panic attack. (Lying by omission.)

The Story I Tell...

Doctor: Your blood pressure is unusually high— 150 over 110.

Me: Must be the four energy drinks I've gulped this morning. (*You mean showing up to my annual physical with Meth, Amylnitrates, ghB, Viagra, Xanax, liquor, and Monster energy drinks in my system wasn't a good idea?* I keep those thoughts to myself).

I'll amend my opener. The lies we do believe are the negative self messaging we've told ourselves most of our lives—that passive muck

that's become so ingrained, so pervasive, it runs rich in our blood, no different than immutable traits such as eye or hair color:

"I'm not smart enough", "I'm too fat," "Too scrawny", "ugly", "never amount to anything", "I'll always be a failure", "I'm an idiot", "I'll never grow up"—and "no one wants to hear what I have to say."

Fortunately, thanks to the Federal Bureau of Prison placing me in Residential Drug Abuse Programming (RDAP) and RESOLVE (an outpatient Trauma Program), I now have the tools to not just weather any storms, but to morph those lies—negative self-talk—into positive messaging.

And that lie, the biggest of all—that no one wants to hear what I have to say—I know it is not true.

Just like I cannot wait to relish the words of Leo Cardez, Catherine LaFleur, Gary Farlow and so many others whose names escape my sixty year old mind—LOL—I know my words are equally relished by P.E. readers.

So, the truth is — I AM VALUED!

Demagogues and the Power of Lies

by James Logan Diez

A "demagogue" is a person who speaks no 'whole' Truth— rather they passionately spew forth blatant Lies, mixed with twisted facts, presented out of context with seeming conviction of belief (even though they know they're lying). They do this to appeal to the listener's emotions and personal biases/prejudices...especially their fears, in order to gain the listener's support; hence, usually gain some position of power such as political office. America's current president, Donald Trump, is a textbook example of a 'demagogue.' But what looking up the definition of 'demagogue' does not explain to intelligent people seeking Truth is: demagogues never attain the ability to use their lies until others before them have laid the groundwork, and created the sociopolitical circumstances in which The People (or majority thereof) are of a mindset that they'll WANT to believe the lies the demagogue tells.

People ask me why I care: Prisoners cannot vote (yet); Prisoners must exist under such conditions and in an environment that has literally been determined to cause a VERY serious form of psychosis [Ganser Syndrome], of variable effect, in the majority of long-term prisoners ["long term" being 5 or more years of continuous confinement] –

the longer the period of confinement, and the more isolated the prisoner, the more severe the symptoms of Ganser syndrome; and, whatever sociopolitical circumstances, there's really not much (repeat- not MUCH) a prisoner can do about it. My answer to "why":

I have loved ones I honestly care about (both in and out of prison), inclusive of my readers; and, while I may not be able to do a great deal- I do still have a voice through my writing; and the voice of truth can be a very BIG deal (especially when others share it).

Demagogues till the soil of hopelessness, disappointment, despair, need, ignorance, and (most of all) FEAR. They are "minions" of The Darkness that present themselves as "Saviors" who will "rescue" The People and Nation from some serious sociopolitical chaos and injury- a chaos and injuries created by other minions of darkness over a period of decades (or even centuries). The People's Minds must FIRST have been conditioned AND PROGRAMMED to accept what the demagogue says- and to perceive him/her as someone who can be trusted. Such is ALWAYS the case when a demagogue rises to power, because when a Nation's People are satisfied, happy, fulfilled, well educated, they don't need saving! America's political system, and its members, have spent decades conditioning The People to ACCEPT as true anything the government says- Even most News Services report as "True/Factual" whatever government asserts in their "Press Releases"; few have the type of "Investigative Journalists" who are willing to take the risks, and devote the time, necessary to dig out the real Truth in its entirety. Plus, since the 1960s, major media producers and broadcasters have flooded Prime Time TV with a plethora of "police drama" glorifying the Police State, and FICTIONAL shows presenting the government in a friendly, glorifying light to program The People to believe what the government tells them in "Official Records."

QUESTION: WHO VERIFIES the accuracy and completeness of "Official Records"?

ANSWER: The Government SELF-verifies the records! So...

How can The People KNOW, then, or Believe any Government "Official Record," eh? This topic, "LIES," warrants a much longer dissertation- but this forum limits my word count- so, I end here.

Lies

by Shyanne Place

You told me you loved me, you gave me a child. You told me you'd be here, yet it's something I've yet to see. You left with no word or no hope of return.

It's been 2 ½ years and our son doesn't even know you. I'm no better sitting behind these bars. Our son is in the system calling someone else Mommy & Daddy. The pain it brings from the lies that were told are so surreal it feels like there's no hope. I look for an email almost daily wondering when reality might kick in and those lies you told will come crashing in & you'll feel a sense of regret for leaving us behind. He's getting big if you ever wonder and oh those beautiful eyes they favor you. A son needs his father and ours is no different. I'm fighting the lies of the system all alone. Throughout it all I'm strong all alone and I will fight tooth and nail the lies of you & the system. My baby will grow up knowing I never gave up hope of one day being reunited despite all the years.

March '26 Word Theme: "Dogs"

Dogs

by Larry LaFleur

"Mr. LaFleur, can you come in here for a second?"

I was elbow deep in a toilet, cleaning the restroom. I thought to myself, what does the doctor want now? I am an orderly in the psychology building. Usually I clean, empty trash, do dishes and once in a great while the staff will ask questions about something going on in a unit or in the yard. Today was different—MUCH different! As I washed and dried my hands and made my way towards the office, I saw a man standing there in street clothes that I had not seen before. One of his hands was down to his side and he was holding something. I could not make out what he was holding.

"Yeah, what's up doc? What do you need?"

"Come in the office," is all she said. As I stepped into the office there was—golden beauty

on four legs! That is what the guy was holding, it was a leash! Instantly I sank to the floor and buried my face in the dog's soft golden fur as I caressed her head and ears. The stress, tension and chaos of daily prison life melted away. As the tears flowed down my face, I felt peace.

The doctor introduced Eric and Kimber, the therapy dog. I think I acknowledged Eric but the truth is that my attention was all on Kimber. Being able to touch a dog after three plus decades in prison—there are no words! Pure joy and calm in a place full of chaos. Now there are several dogs who make the rounds once a month or so. The joy and comfort these dogs bring cannot be measured. The unconditional love these dogs give without judgement is a balm for the weary soul. It is true, dogs can change lives!

My Lost Syn

by Jacob Lester

Companions come and go, but their impact upon you never fades. What many have discovered is the joys that a dog can bring into your life. Each one is unique and special just like each of the breeds. Each one has his or her own personality and will often bond to the owner/companion as closely as a child/friend/partner. Then if the worst ever does occur, agony, sorrow and loss can fill your very soul.

From eight weeks old, I raised my dear Syn. A chihuahua-terrier so small that she fits in my hoodie pocket. Black, white and tan, she was small and adorable. From the start I would take her to work with me. Her visits with the elderly residents cheered them up, bringing a brilliant light to their day, providing them entertainment different from the normal day to day.

Quickly she grew and grew until a year later, she weighed over twenty pounds. Tall and energetic she was a bundle of energy that could brighten the gloomiest of days.

Then a mistake I made, getting caught up in only Lord knows what. Upon my arrest, animal control took my Syn away to heaven only knows where. Lost to me, she is, and often still I wonder what her fate has been. A pain and agony that still rears its head.

Dogs

by Terry Olney

I wish I were a dog.

Most people like dogs and won't go out of their way to be mean to them or hurt them.

Most people will go out of their way to help or comfort it, if they see a dog alone that's cold, hungry, or scared. Either with kind, gentle words or giving it food or taking it home to bring it into their family or getting it to a shelter.

And even when it's there in the shelter and no one wants the poor thing still, at least they will do the ultimate kindness and end its suffering with euthanization rather than keep it locked up alone, unwanted and unloved.

God I wish I were a dog!

Paranormal Pet Connections

by Jonathan Holman

People are generally not meant to live alone. Some however tend to find life more agreeable without the distractions of others. For some of those, it is often the friendship of animals that tends to fill any gaps. Ample research has been developed that can easily prove this point. Even in religion we often find the great importance of our relationships with animals. More often we, humans, have a capacity to believe that animals are here for us, as food, or perhaps we are to be the caretakers of animals? As more thought and studies are done, however, it begins to come clear that animals might hold a much greater significance as our protectors. Dogs, which live closer to human beings than any other animals in our current times, have much more to offer, than the mere capacity of a simple pet.

According to veterinarian Doug Knueven, it is a spiritual connection that explains the benefits of sharing life with animals (Venture Inward, Winter 2021, "Our Pets Are a Part of the Family Too"). In the same article Knueven explains that he has witnessed phenomena where a dog will take on physical maladies of its caregiver.

Scientist Rupert Sheldrake explains hundreds of cases of animals displaying spiritual connections with their owners through a phenomenon he calls "Morphic fields," ("Dogs That Know When Their Owners are Coming Home", year unknown). Is it these morphic fields that allow pets to know when their owners are sick? If these morphic fields are a

form of communication between mankind and animals, is it a form of empathy or something far more remarkable?

Some believe these spiritual connections can relieve a human in distress, improve social integration between children and those on the autistic spectrum with other humans. A number of such scientific studies research can be found at the website HABRI.org. Such research has also shown a significant percentage increase in the general attitude, well being, and multitude of positive impacts whenever dogs have been integrated into various hospital and prison programs. If the mere presence of dogs can improve health, and even cause violent prisoners to be more productive and calm, then what are the possibilities?

Even biblically we find God creating animals of every kind, then giving mankind dominion over them (Genesis, Chapter 1). In Odinist/Ausatru belief systems we find all the gods and mankind in a constant give-and-take spiritual relationship with all manner of animals. Native American culture, African Nok culture, Shintoism, and every known modern and ancient spiritual belief system has various stories showing the importance of our companionship with animals. If all religions show this, why then is it difficult for so many people to see the need for further research into this spiritual connection?

Animals are not just here for mankind to eat. Nor are they simply here for our amusement. What if the key to all of our most bizarre paranormal questions has been right there in front of us, our entire lives? Dogs, since they have lived so close to us, can sense our moods, our illnesses. They even might know when our 'lives' are near to end. Personally I would argue that we are not intended to protect animals, but that they are meant to protect us. This protection spans past our current realm of understanding.

It simply became a choice then. A matter of faith. Is it easier to have faith in our government, our society, the stranger walking down the street, or in your most loyal friend?

Have you ever had dreams of your dog, or other pet? Have you ever felt angry or full of sorrow, then found your pet approaching you with a compassion that far surpasses any human attempt at connection?

Our dogs, our "pets", are far more important than anything inside our physical plane of existence. All the answers might lay right at our feet, if only we found the ability to span that gap in communication. Instead, we carry on, making machines that very likely will replace us.

The Other Puppy by Chrissandra Brewster

I found out the hard way, never make a promise to your children and expect them to forget about it. Alize, my two-year old daughter, overheard me talking to her daddy one night about the Boxer he had as a child.

This prompted a time-honored question: "Can I have a dog?"

"Well, babygirl, mommy and daddy don't have their own place," I responded. "I promise that when we do then you can have a dog."

Fast forward four years. We moved into a townhouse. We had a little brother, KC, for Alize and her older brother Jaelen, who lived with us every other week. It was the beginning of the holidays, so I started thinking about possible presents. Unbeknownst to me Alize, now age six, has also been thinking of present possibilities..

I'm in the living room doing some online shopping on my tablet when she crawled up on the couch next to me. "What are you doing, Mommy?" I responded, "Just looking at stuff," as I clicked out of the windows. Alize moved the laptop and settled into my lap to look me straight in the eye.

"Can I have a dog?" Before I could answer she continued, "You said when we had our own place that I could have a dog. You promised!" So I decided to get a dog for my kids and my baby daddy, Phillip as a surprise. Specifically, I'd get the kind of dog he had growing up, a Boxer.

After weeks of searching and following dead ends, I found a litter for sale. The owner said she had two males and two females. "Perfect!" I said to her on the phone. "I want a female." The same kind of female Phillip had, with a fawn coat and a white star shaped patch on her face.

We agreed to meet the next day, Saturday, but she lived in Miami about three hours away. Also she couldn't meet us until after work. We agreed she'd call. How could I trick my family into a trip? As luck would have it, there was a super home decor store in Ft. Lauderdale. I simply had to visit and complete shopping and furnishing our home.

Imagine this, myself, Phillip, and two of my children in the car for a long trip. Then I led them around the

decor store throwing random items into the shopping cart. Finally, the call came and I slipped into an adjacent aisle to take it.

"Phillip!" I called. "We have to drive south right now!" Confused, he left the cart and we got into the car. As we hit Miami we kept driving deeper and deeper south following the directions. Soon I realized we were in Little Havana. It was full dark when we finally found the house. After ringing the bell a snarling bark was heard behind the door. A massive Boxer stood next to a Hispanic man. He told us both females were sold earlier in the day.

To say I was upset is an understatement. I wanted to surprise Alize by keeping my promise and Phillip by giving him something from his childhood. We agreed to look at the remaining puppies and were led to a porch. One puppy ran up happily to Phillip. He bent down to pet him but I wasn't seeing a connection. Hidden in the shadows at the back of the porch was another puppy.

"You don't want this one." The man said. He placed the other puppy in front of Phillip. "It's the runt." Phillip got down on the floor slowly so the puppy didn't startle. He held out his hand and waited. The puppy approached slowly so as to not startle Phillip and laid his head in Phillip's palm. It was the connection I hoped for. "We'll take this one." He said.

We found the newest member of our family. That night I drove home because Phillip and the puppy couldn't be separated. It fell asleep in his lap. The kids went back and forth about what to name him. Alize won and named him Kingston.

Dogs

by Sandra Cook

When I was 16 years old, I would go out to Stark's, Florida and hang out with Josh, my high school sweetheart and his family. We rode go-carts and horses, played in lakes, and did what most kids do when having fun. Little did I know that the next door neighbors were breeders of my favorite kind of dog in the whole world, dalmatians.

When I got wind of this news, I went to asking questions. "Are you letting any of them go? How much are they?" Surely if I asked my dad he'd give me the money.

I was in luck! They were getting rid of a few and keeping the rest. I would come back in a few weeks when the puppies were six weeks old. I did return with bells on my shoes. I picked out the girl I wanted. She had a heart-shaped spot on her left ear. It was love at first sight.

When I picked her up, she peed all down my front. I didn't get mad, I was in love. Driving home with my new baby, I thought up the name Dotty Kelly O'Steen. My kid was with us well into my twenties.

When I got into trouble, my mom took her. Dotty was eleven years old. I asked about her every day. "She's doing good," they said. But that wasn't true.

Dotty grieved herself to death. I was all she knew. Dogs love us. They truly are man's best friend because Dotty was mine.

Coping with Incarceration Borne PTSD the Canine Way

by Christopher Monihan

I have worked numerous prison jobs. None have helped me more than handling and training dogs as a dog handler.

Over the 20 years I have worked in the dog programs my official titles have included: Dog Handler, Animal Trainer, and even Cat Handler after a one-year stint nurturing kittens back to health in our now-defunct cat program.

Unofficially I have been called the Bird Man, Snake Guy, and Mouse Dude—monikers coined by the men around me after the creatures I've caught flapping, slithering, and skittering about my cell.

The pound program is where I got my start two decades ago. I was 10 years in on a 50-year sentence and struggling to cope. The dogs rescued me. In many ways pound program dogs and incarcerated people share a common adversity. Both are viewed as societal throwaways without clear futures.

Once here I nurtured the dogs back to wholeness through constant interaction. I then trained them in basic commands—such as sit, stay, down, and come, to name just a few—and prepared them for eventual adoption into new forever homes.

Seven years have passed since I donned my latest hat and today I am a staff Dog Handler. As the name implies the dogs I care for and train are staff owned.

To become a dog handler in this program required federal certification, which I earned

through a two-year 4,000-hour apprenticeship in the pound rescue program. The staff-owned dogs tend to be calm and well mannered. It is a stark contrast to pound dogs which are a random walk. However, life behind bars hasn't always been good.

I didn't always have the benefit of the dogs. For many years I struggled with trauma inflicted by the prison environment like so many incarcerated people do. I found no help from the prison system.

In my 2023 Prison Journalism Project op-ed I wrote about incarceration borne PTSD (IBPTSD). The prison environment is uniquely structured to foster trauma because the primary focus of prisons is on confinement. Little consideration is made for how the prison experience affects the psyche of incarcerated people.

The problem is compounded when incarcerated people experience verbal or physical violence, the loss of a loved one, even the stress of parenting from prison. These potentially traumatic events, also known as PTEs, are supported by a 2019 literature review that determined PTEs and PTSD share compelling correlation.

On the prison yard, the warmth of the morning sun soaks into my pores. A light breeze grazes my face.

"Arabella! Arabella!" I shout to the two-year-old American Bully. "Get the ball!" I dance an exaggerated two step on the grassy field. Arabella returns the ball at my feet. She is owned by one of the staff.

"Ready?" I fling the pink nubby ball high and far.

Arabella recedes into the distance, her brown and white legs pumping. A crowd of men has gathered afar along the concrete walkway.

The guys aren't allowed on the grass, only us handlers. Although I can't hear their voices I understand everything. Watching the dogs at play is how they are coping with prison. It is their therapy.

Incarceration borne PTSD (IBPTSD) isn't recognized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders, the authoritative source on mental disorders used by psychologists and health care providers. There is nothing in the literature and there are no IBPTSD studies.

The closest thing to recognition is the term Post Incarceration Syndrome. It recognizes that millions of restored citizens struggle once back in society but no one truly knows why—except, of course, those who have endured incarceration. Maybe someone should ask us?

The key, I feel, is recognition that IBPTSD is real and borne from the prison experience. Mental health advocates are starting to acknowledge that

the trauma of incarceration itself may make some people more likely to develop PTSD. Trauma left unchecked can become severe.

"Good girl Arabella," I said. I petted her head and flung the ball one last time.

I inhaled and exhaled. My eyes met the sun and for a moment I felt peace. My unofficial therapy moment was almost over.

Tomorrow, if I am lucky, I will get to do it all again.

April '26 Word Theme: "Bottled Emotions"

human
by Diego Ayala

I honestly don't aspire to be a poet or a writer, I'm just a man who is finally starting to peel back all the layers around my heart and soul, the scars that only come from massive childhood traumas. When I was a kid I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up and I said bodybuilder. I longed to be powerful because my whole childhood I was powerless to stop anything that was happening to me.

In reality I never sat down to think about my future, I didn't have that luxury, I needed to focus on survival. In a house where none of the dinner plates were for me I survived by stealing food from those plates, lifting some of the plastic wrap from each plate and taking a little bit of rice and maybe a little piece of whatever meat they had, careful to put the plastic back and even out the spot where I took food so it wouldn't be obvious that I ate what was made for the people who were loved, unless I wanted to have more words that had already destroyed my self love completely. I survived by trying to avoid my tormentor so that they wouldn't let out their anger on me, but trying and succeeding are two different things so every single day I was broken down verbally, emotionally and sometimes physically. Sometimes I wished that I'd just get beat instead of having to hear everything that was said to me. So how could I dare think about my future when I was hoping that there would be no tomorrow?

Since before I was even born I've been unwanted, I had literally survived an attempted abortion, that fact was brought to my attention during one of the countless times where I was berated just for existing. I was a boy that was always abandoned and neglected, abused physically and sexually, broken mentally and emotionally, a boy that never got help for any of the traumas so I grew up to become a broken man with broken thoughts, but now everything that I do and write is for my little princess, the most beautiful little girl in the world.

The little girl that has the unique superpower to make me both smile and tear up every time I think about her. It's because of her that I'm willing to finally let everything out, to hopefully have some of the things I write published so that I can save them for her so she can see that she was my inspiration to become a much better man, to become the person that I should've been from the beginning if I had just been given a chance. I want her to know how much I love her, how much I'm willing to do to make her love me before she grows up and inevitably ends up disliking me, maybe even hating the fact that I'm her father but I hope that when/if she gets over these emotions, whether I'm still in this world or not, at least she'll have my words to read. To know that I'm not a monster, that I'm much more than just the biggest mistake I made in my life.

Hopefully this will also help others like me open up and release their pain and maybe help the rest of society to stop judging us and try to understand us. Why should my mental health issues be demonized while the world tries to be understanding of everyone else? I may be a "monster" in people's eyes but I know that I'm not. Monsters don't miss their child like I do, they don't kiss their baby's pictures before going to bed like I do, they don't lay in bed with their arm positioned like if their baby is laying with them like I do. Monsters don't cry like I do. That all sounds very human to me. I am not a monster!

Molotov Brewery

by Belinda Ladd

Where do I begin? Man, you have no idea. Or, maybe you do. In my 20's I had so much vehemence on tap that all it took was for somebody to wave that middle finger and I'd run them off the road and dare them to fight. Hey, I'm no warrior, and I'm not Billy/Betty Badass either, but they'd take one look in my eyes and back off. Then one day I took offense, drove up over the curb, jumped out and challenged this full-on biker dude to get off his Harley and get some satisfaction. He declined and I showered him with Mountain Dew, got back in and drove off. There were a zillion rush hour commuters watching us and he just rode away, his beard and chrome dripping, and ignoring all the stunned spectators with their jaws agape. I was stunned too. I couldn't believe he hadn't pulled a cannon out of his leather vest and blasted me.

Survival instincts told me that I'd better get some help. I went to a doctor and told him that I was angry and depressed. I showed him the needle marks and said I'd been self-anesthetizing, but it wasn't working. I explained that my mate frustrated me, that between us we couldn't make enough money to get ahead while supporting kids and one-on-the-way, that I was keeping up this facade of being an upstanding citizen but was also on out-of-state parole for an old crime, that my family and upbringing sucked, and that I had to keep all these conflicts inside because nobody understands. When it came to capping my emotions, I had more unlabeled bottles than a micro-brewery, and they weren't done fermenting.

Doc was pretty empathetic. He told me that people don't need a reason to be depressed, often, it can be a chemical imbalance in the brain. In your case, he said, you have plenty of reasons. He wanted to try the most common medication, Prozac. Told me that sometimes it takes a few tries until they find the right one for the person. Didn't work a bit. Then he tried another one and it did work, so well that I traded my extreme behavior for a foggy brain each morning. We

tested the theory when I ran out of the pills a few months later and the doctor's secretary phoned the pharmacy. We filled the prescription and I continued taking it. A week later my mate accused me of not taking my meds, and said she could tell. I blew up in my defense and she demanded to see the bottle. It was the wrong stuff; the secretary had called in the first anti-depressant prescribed, the one that wasn't right for me. I took them for several years and managed to do much better. We bought some land, developed it, and things were working out. But I was still packing a case of twist-offs, each one waiting for someone, or something to pop a top. I wasn't dealing with my emotions, just keeping them in the cooler. Problems don't go away by putting them on ice.

When I returned to prison the medical provider took away my medication and tried to put me on some anti-psychotic meds that had me walking around in someone else's skin. I battled with the administration for several months and finally got the right prescription, but by then I was doing a year in the hole. Each day the nurse would come by the cell and give me a dose. Then suddenly she just walked right past. I'd beat on the door and yell I got missed, and she'd say that my order had expired, and I should send a communication form to renew. That would take several weeks, and two weeks later they would stop supplying them again. This was a drug that warned against discontinuing cold turkey, as the suicide rate became very high. I got tired of them turning me into an emotional yo-yo this way, and finally told them to just forget it. I would either deal with my anger...or not. In prison there's nobody to coddle you. If you continuously lose your composure, eventually somebody is gonna bust your glass.

Since then I have pulled my head out, you might say. I used meditation, prayer, and personal reflection to train my mind not to pop off. And good thing, because those medications ain't good for your innards if you take them long-term. So instead of running folks off the road and getting yourself shot, relax. Take little sips, and stop driving around with all those bottles in the trunk.

Nothing Could Be Worse

by Aaron Poe

As I was opening the front door to my house, I heard yelling. I figured it was the T.V. once again turned up too loud. Then I recognized the voice. It was my mother's. I slowly closed the door and proceeded to her room. I had no idea who she was yelling at.

"Is she watching something political on T.V.?" I thought. I decided to wait outside her room and listen.

"You lied to me! You said you would never leave me!" she shouted. Her voice sounded hoarse. This must have been going on for a while. "You promised me. You promised me forever," she said softer, almost to herself. I knew she could only be talking to my father.

For a second, I felt a bit of relief. I was glad it wasn't my brother or she was fighting one of her friends. Her bottled emotions finally exploded.

Thinking she might be finished I entered her room. She looked more hurt than I have ever seen her look. I rushed past my father and sat next to my mother on her bed. I felt so helpless as I sat. I pulled her into an embrace and kissed her on top of her head.

"You're alright now, I'm here," I calmly said to her. Her sobs became deeper and louder as I held her tight. Nothing could be worse.

I turned to look at my father. Tears started to fill my eyes as I continued to look at him. I held them back the best I could. I had to be strong for my mother. I wiped my eyes with my sleeve to remove the blur that the tears were causing as I stared at him.

The silver urn he was in atop my mother's dresser was moved. She must have picked it up a few times. I turned back to my mother and kissed her head again. She squeezed me so hard that I thought a rib was going to crack. I felt how much pain she was in through that hug. I never want to be hugged like that again.

Now she is gone as well. My brother and I spread their ashes together at their favorite hiking spot. With both my parents gone, who will hug me?

Hope

by Christopher Ridley

What a world it would be without fear, discrimination, and hate due to the color of someone's skin or cultural background. If minorities in America could succeed without all the structural and systemic racism built into the nation's healthcare, education, and business institutions. If we could heal the American divide by apologizing to the descendents of the African slaves — chained and beaten into submission, bought and sold like cattle, whose stripped back this country was built on—for the barbaric practice of slavery.

What an amazing nation America could be if politicians had the best interests of ALL people in mind in everything they do so ALL Americans could thrive instead of only the wealthy and special interest groups. Or they didn't consider those with different views as the enemy. What a slate of culturally diverse leaders America could produce without the political gerrymandering of voting districts. We could actually be the shining beacon of democracy the world believes us to be.

Imagine if we celebrated when a boy fell in love with another boy or a girl fell in love with another girl instead of displaying disgust, ridicule, or bringing violence against them. If we practiced as Native Americans and revered the two-spirited among us, letting their true self shine through.

What a peaceful place the world could be if ALL religions practiced unity, compassion, empathy and love for ALL every day instead of preaching fear and vengeance against those of different faiths or those that do not fit in the "box" created by the Bible or Quran.

What a moral and just place America could be if its criminal legal system was wholly concerned with truth, justice, and the whys behind crime instead of only retribution. If someone with a criminal record wasn't punished for the rest of their lives, even after serving their term of incarceration, given a true second chance. If there was no "Scarlett Letter." If

American society actually invested in solutions to end poverty and the treatment of mental health, the true roots of crime. If the media quit sensationalizing crime, ended the "If it bleeds, it leads" philosophy.

Imagine if legislators crafted laws that actually provided for public safety, based on facts furnished by criminologists and social scientists instead of the emotions of victims or the "tough on crime" optics. If law enforcement acted with compassion, empathy, and understanding for the reasons behind crime. If they actually practiced their motto, "Protect & Serve" instead of acting as bullies with badges. If district attorneys were truly concerned with finding the truth about why someone committed a crime and then acted accordingly. If they pursued the truth as hard as they pursued convictions. If they were less concerned with their political careers and more concerned with ensuring the system was fair and equal for ALL. If they ensured Lady Justice truly was blind.

If judges were the true gatekeepers of justice. If courtrooms were a place where facts and truth came to light. If judges would pronounce a sentence equal to the crime and the individual who committed it. If they sanctioned those court officers—prosecutors, police officers, attorneys, experts—that broke the law, in the same manner as any other criminal defendant. If white collar crime was pursued and punished as vigorously as street crime.

If jails and prisons were true places of rehabilitation, not human warehouses. If mental health and addiction conditions suffered by most behind bars received the medical treatment they require. If ALL corrections staff were honest, compassionate, and engaged in wanting to see everyone return to society a successful citizen by providing the materials and support each reentrant needs.

Planet Earth—Clear blue skies everywhere. No pollution. Clean drinking water for everyone. No contamination. Flora and fauna protected, learned from, managed, only harvested to fill

basic needs. Oceans respected for their power and bounty. Not treated as the world's landfill and sewer system. The power of the sun and wind fully harnessed instead of the decay of the past. No more exploiting of her natural resources, mountain tops blasted, open-pit mines dug, old-growth forests cut down, wetlands obliterated, superfund sites created, or other man-made disasters.

What could America look like if we had honored the Native Americans for their stewardship of nature and adhered to their practices instead of subjugating and trying to exterminate them.

What a glorious dream.

Does any of this only have to be a dream?

Bottled Emotions by Margaret Barker

I keep my emotions bottled inside, there's not a place for me to hide.

No longer do I cry, not one tearful drop in my eye.

My anger I try to suppress, by finding a nice quiet corner to rest.

Being in prison, there's a lot of bottled emotions around me, that's why I leave them alone, let them be.

My emotions, I don't want anyone else to see.

When I'm about to break I go in the showers to be alone, my heart aches, wishing for a way home.

If you show your emotions in here, they will use it against you then cheer.

I have to stay silent and bite my tongue, hoping for one day to freely run.

So no hollering or shouting, just do me a favor, let me be, all bottled up with my emotions inside of me.

Prisoner Express Mini Picture Theme Anthology

Nov '25 Picture:



A Mother's Embrace by John Williams

I would cherish, and most importantly, I would love one. Could I dream of something so simple as this. It's all I have dreamt. Don't remember dreaming all that much but when I did it was this—

A mother's embrace.

I ache still for a mother's embrace, still suffering this persistent pain. I would cherish this more than money or gold. I could only imagine the amount of love in just one.

I did learn something from this absence of love: hug your children. Give them that warm embrace. Hug your children, I would always remind myself.

Nothing more a child wants than a mother's embrace.

Strange, one may say, this very natural or what should be natural made me who I am today, a better parent, a better man.

A mother's embrace is warmer than the sun shining down on a hot summer day in July.

This mother's embrace would have made up for all the many things you were emotionally unable to give me.

Unloved

by Brix Capone

"Anthony, I know I wasn't a good mother and I apologize for being a shitty mother to you!"

"Okay but why were you so shitty?"

"I didn't try to be, it was just out of all my kids you seemed like you didn't need me."

"It didn't matter what it seemed like, Ma. I was a child and a child always needs his mother!"

"I'm sorry Anthony, I love you, to the moon and back!"

My mother and I had this conversation over the prison phone the same year that she died, 2021, almost as if apologizing to me was the last thing she needed to do before being ready to die. I understand now what she meant by it. Seemed like I didn't need her. It was that Persistent Leader quality in me; I was very independent, liked being by myself and doing what I wanted to do. My 4 other siblings were a bit needy. But between my mother ignoring me and my father beating me, it made me feel unloved. I seriously thought my mother didn't love me.

The first hug that I remember (I'm sure she hugged me as an infant but I don't remember those), I was facing juvenile charges for breaking into a house and stealing a bike for my uncle. My mother came to visit me and she hugged me. The first thing I thought was, *she's just trying to look good in front of the officers*, like we were a family that hugged, but it made me feel loved.

The next time we hugged wasn't till years later when my grandmother died. I may have been a very persistent, independent child but I needed and wanted my mother. I'm 34 years old and I'm man enough to admit that I really could use a hug from my mother! If anyone thinks that makes me soft or weak, then you're welcome to come try me, and I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. If anything, feeling neglected as a child made me a very tough man who knows he can survive anything. But not everyone deals with shit the way I do.

So I have a message for parents who think their children "seem" like they don't need them. It doesn't matter if your child is real independent and content with playing alone, your child needs you! So show them love! Hug them! Give them kisses! Give them your time! I promised myself I'd never let my babies feel the way I felt!

Dreamy Hugs

by Alejandro Macias

In jail, one of the sacred rules (if not the #1) is to respect others' sleep.

This I take very personal, and I agree; it's the only moment when my mind and soul are not confined, when they are free and I do everything that I hope to do one day. For example, drive a motorcycle, eat something more healthy or get a hug from my mom. Something that I have wanted for a long time.

I am from Mexico, which is more than 3,000 miles away. I was 20 years old when I left Mexico. I was allowed to work in this country for 8 months, so I didn't have to make a big deal of me leaving; I only said goodbye to my girlfriend, a few friends; I gave a small hug to my dad and my mom and left, because "I'll be back anyway" I thought.

5 months later I was facing life in prison.

Sentenced to 22 years to life, I went to jail. I didn't know how to speak English, I was oblivious of the awful things that people have to go through on this side of the fence. I was alone in a delusory world.

With time I learned how to navigate through the darkness of this world by myself, but from time to time I was missing the warm hugs of my mom; at this time of my incarceration (16 years later) I still dream of wandering through the streets of my town trying to get home. Sometimes I get there and see my friends and family, some others I wake before I get home or before I see my family. Only a few times I have hugged my mom in my dreams, which makes me feel sad and happy at the same time.

I had heard many times stories from 1/1's where they have lost their siblings during jail or which is worse, right before their release. Perhaps they are missing theirs as much as I do, or maybe not.

But I do, and every time that I dream with my loved ones I don't want to wake up, I just want to hug them.

Just like a few weeks ago, I dreamed that I was chatting with my mom, we were having fun talking, wandering through the streets that I so much miss and that have changed a lot, but right before I open my eyes, she told me: "It's time to come back home," to which I replied; "Almost there, only a few more. Just hang on mom."

In my dream I knew that I was in jail, and that I had to wake up to go to work, but at the same time, I didn't want to leave her, I wanted to hug her; I stretched my arms, but she started to fade away, before I knew it I had my eyes open.

I couldn't go back to sleep, even if I wanted to. I had 20 minutes to go to work.

It's for reasons like this that I respect others' sleep. I don't know if they feel the same way; be somewhere else rather than this place. But I rather be in my dreams hugging my mom...

Going Home

by C. A. Fischer

Thumbing through the pages of the Prisoner Express Newsletter Winter 2025, I knew immediately what I would title my essay for the photo prompt due Nov 1st.

In the margin next to the photo I penned in: "Going home." Everything about the prompt evoked the spiritual. It's a rare thing for me to be moved in this way. I've spent around 48 years of my nearly 65 years of life in prison. And any sense of the spiritual has been ripped from me root and all by the system – or so I thought. I was surprised when out of the depths of my soul – a voice spoke to me: "Going Home." Mixed emotions, a welling in my eyes, I felt the indescribable.

I've been lost for so long in this razor wire wilderness that I've forgotten how to feel. Over the past 25 consecutive years I've numbed all feelings and emotions down with illicit substances which the state of Kansas in all appearances tends to support and make readily available to all its wards; all the while chanting the mantra: "At least they're not bored."

Jobs or work opportunities are for the elite residents, programs are artificial and anemic, or nonexistent. Nearly the entire prison population is currently addicted to illicit substances. That is where I've been – and why not? I'm human, and it's not like I've anything better to do . . . except write, create artwork, think clearly . . . or feel; none of which I can do when I'm jumping over the moon with a needle and a spoon.

I'm tenured in the school of hard knocks, some would even say "Professor Emeritus." "Double or Triple O.G."

In reality I'm just a tired, old convict living on borrowed time. A remnant of another time and place. I am not of this century and every day when I look out upon those old walls, part of me is still there – reverberating, yet I'm here – fenced in, writing my messages to the world, hoping someone might hear. Yoohoo – anybody out there (does anyone ever read my essays)?

Well, here is another message in a bottle thrown over that wicked fence.

I've been a lost soul in a small boat trying to navigate this sea of anguish and despair without a sextant for many years. As of recent, I seem to glimpse a distant shore and now I can hear the waves crashing on the coast – I've abandoned my small craft and tethered myself to the unsteady buoy of my dreams. Fighting against the currents and riptides, I struggle to swim into the light.

I know she's there waiting for me.

I want to go home.

I want to feel what it feels like to feel again.

Like the child in the photograph, I want to be in my mother's embrace, my head laying gratefully on her shoulder. The look of love and satisfaction on her face – then hand in hand she will lead me into the eternal light.

Going home.

Dec '25 Picture:



Lakeside Proposal

by Bert Zamora

We are lost! she says.

He looks at her. I am a man, we don't get lost.

She huffs, then rolls her eyes. So where are we then?

He smiles. We are in uncalculated territory.

She laughs. You are such an idiot. She sighs. This was supposed to be a spontaneous little drive.

It's only been a day. Besides, Mike said we would love the place we are headed to, he says.

She looks at him. Your brother is as much of an idiot as you are. Besides, he gets lost more than you do.

We are not lost! he says.

Just as the old 4x4 they are riding in climbs over a hill they see it. They both gasp in amazement at the sight in front of them. They exit the 4x4 and stand in front of it together.

So what do you think? he asks.

It is the most beautiful sight I have ever seen, she says.

Me too, he says.

She looks at him. What's the first thing, she asks.

He smiles. You of course.

Liar! she says.

Before them is a large lake with big hills in the distance made of rock. The sky is clear and the day is warm and beautiful. They stand and stare for a long moment. They set up camp. A tent, a camp fire and chairs to sit on. They eat, swim, then sit by the fire and stare at the stars.

The next day, she wakes up alone in the tent. She gets up and dresses. She exits the tent, looks around then sees him down on the beach. She smiles when she gets close to him. He turns around when she gets close. She notices the circle of flowers around him and he is wearing the suit she bought him for his last birthday. She looks into his eyes. What's going on?

He kneels and grabs her hand. He places a ring on her finger. Will you marry me?

You didn't have to do all of this to ask me to marry you.

I know but I wanted it to be special.

Just being with you is special, she says.

So, he asks!

So what, she says.

He rolls his eyes. My knees are starting to ache.

She smiles. It has and will always be yes. He stands and they kiss.

Serenity

by Herbert Groves

I see, far across this placid mountain tarn, the house of my friend. He lives the hermit life. He is happy to do so as long as there are occasional visits to break up that spare time.

We will break bread and I will tell him the news from civilization. He will tell me of his inner discoveries and ask me to deliver his latest manuscript to his publishers.

We will spend hours in silence and solitude, letting our minds expand to encompass the truth of the universe. He will teach me once again how to

breathe in time with the stars. How to quiet my twitchy muscles and tumultuous mind.

Before I return to the bustle of civilization he will ask me what I've learned. I will tell him I have once again learned to find peace within myself and towards others. I will promise to spread his good words.

Then I will awaken within these four gray walls and instead of feeling woe and angst at my current situation, I will find peace of mind and soul. Knowing that no matter my circumstances the house on Serenity Lake, and the yogi within waits to welcome me.

Untitled

by Charles Whitfield

This photo reminds myself of photos taken of Crater Lake, Oregon, where there once was an ancient volcano called Mount Mazama that exploded and its caldera collapsed. What remains is the famous lake we see now.

The crown jewel of Crater Lake is a small island in its middle called Wizard Island. Just looking at this pic with the snow-capped mountains in the background is the perfect antidote for anyone who needs a mental rescue.

Mirror Image

by Disty Steely

When I look at this picture it reminds me of myself looking into the mirror and what I see reflected back at me. And how that image has changed throughout my life but only I can see the differences in what is reflecting back...

It's crazy how what others tell you about yourself, whether it is true or not, is what you start seeing when you look in the mirror. When I was just a little kid the others in school would make fun of me cause of my hair color. My parents were poor and I didn't dress like all the other kids. Top that off with parents who treated you like you didn't belong and I felt like if I just would disappear the world would be a better place. I can't tell you how many times I stared in the mirror and cried wondering what was wrong with me and telling myself that I deserved every bad thing that happened to me.

As I got older what I saw looking back in that mirror was not someone I wanted to see. I saw a wife who cheated and lied to her husband, I saw a drug addict who wanted drugs more than her children, I saw a piece of shit, but I was the only

one who saw these things because no one else saw the real me. They only saw what that mirror image let them see.

I am thankful for my time in prison because now the image that I see is exactly what I want to see. When I look in the mirror I see a woman who has overcome a lot of hardships in her childhood. I see a woman who has forgave and moved on with her life. I see a woman who has been clean for a couple of years and does not want anything to do with that lifestyle. I see a talented, loving and fun person that deserves love and a chance in life. I see a woman who loves her kids and is not afraid to be who they want and need.

The reflection that everyone else sees is the same reflection that I finally see.

Still We Stand

by David Reynolds

As I sit in my cell, I look at this picture, I see mountains that are still standing even after millions of years of dealing with all types of elemental changes and hardships. I use this in comparison to us (Black People) and I sit and think of the oppression, the humility, the discrimination, the pressure, and the drudgery that we have been put through. But like the mountains we still stand. We went from Kings and Queens to cotton fields, forced to work long strenuous back-breaking hours in the blazing heat, but still we stand. We went from where one's gaze or even tone of voice could get you beat up or killed (hung), but still we stand. Separate bathrooms and water fountains, ridiculed and singled out because of our beautiful skin color, but still we stand.

When we decide to take a stand but we get beat, sprayed with hoses, and even dogs sicced on us, but still we stand. When I look at this I think of the anger, the hurt, and all the things my ancestors went through and realize the sacrifices that were made for us to even have a chance at equality. We still stand. Through the police brutality, the senseless killings of black people, we still stand. The crooked cops and government officials, the overcrowded prisons that are made and designed to keep you in the system in constant rotation, still we stand. The lab made drugs that was put in our "hoods" and "ghettos" to keep crime up and keep us killing each other, we still stand. Aids and the many other manmade drugs that's designed and created to decrease us, we still stand.

Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream but it's a steady ongoing nightmare we live in but still we stand. They promised us 40 acres and a mule but

all we get is food stamps, W.I.C, welfare and daily coping tools (drugs) but still we stand. It's time to break the cycle but until then like the mountains still we stand.

Jan '26 Picture:



The Family

by Shana Coffey

I hear their footsteps and laughter long before I see them. Being careful to stay hidden in the shadows of the building towering over me. The lighthearted voices of the children excitedly retelling the events of the day. The sights, sounds, and smells of the zoo. The wonder still evident in their voices when they chatter on about how big and tall the elephants and giraffes were. My imagination makes them 20 feet tall, bigger than my familiar surrounding skyscrapers. I smile sadly because I may never know the truth. The mom and dad chuckle softly as they move on to imitating the growls and roars of the tigers and lions. I long to join in and make a soft mewling nose of my own. My sound must not have been quiet enough because the little girl suddenly looks my way. Her eyes widen as she sees me, and I hold myself super still. I really want to run out to them. Join hands with the dad or mom. Become one of the family, become part of the memories. Be loved, be taken care of, be warm and safe. Fear keeps me rooted. Fear of pain, rejection. I'm unlovable, unwanted, forgotten. Part of the shadows craving the light of the sun. It's not to be though. As the girl opens her mouth to speak, the mom mentions pizza and ice cream. Just like that

I'm forgotten. The family walks on and I huddle back into myself, blending again in the darkness of my surroundings. A forlorn child only remembered later at bathtime by an overimaginative little girl babbling about a shadow baby in the alley.

Untitled

by Christopher Cross

I had a pretty idyllic childhood. We didn't pose such a striking image as the family in this photograph, which looks pretty Disney-channel PG. But I had a good childhood.

I was born July 2nd, 1993, in Fredericksburg VA, to a working-class family of Clyde and Christine, married, and a brother who was already 6 years older than myself. We weren't a struggling working-class family. My Dad formed and ran his own brickmasonry company, and our family had everything we needed.

I'd say we were borderline middle class, or upper working class, if you want to make a distinction. The neighborhood, called Sylvania Heights, wasn't the best neighborhood, which abutted a trailer park, River Heights. There were rednecks who drank (such as my Dad) and drug users and riff-raff in the neighborhood, especially the trailer park.

My parents tried to raise me proper. And they did a pretty good job at it. At heart, I am a good person. All of my errors are my own, and I take full responsibility. I started fucking up at age 13. Probably younger. I do remember chasing other children with a knife when I was still in like 3rd or 4th grade. And once I pulled a knife on my own dear Momma. I begged her not to tell Dad, once I had calmed down. My ass would have been grass. So at an early age I showed signs of what my future shenanigans would look like, e.g. the use of knives. I didn't get along with many kids and would fight. I also always liked to play with fire. I may or may not have set fires in occupied dwellings, portable toilets, and other structures.

I don't know what made me such a nutbag in my early years.

I know I was diagnosed with ADHD. Now I'm diagnosed as bipolar, hypomanic. So who knows? I still engage in shenanigans at times, now age 32, but mostly I am sedate. Or rather sedate. I don't take Adderall, which I did as a kid. I now take an orchestra of mental health medications, and boy, what a symphony they make! I'm on Prozac,

Remeron, Zyprexa, and Clonidine. Maybe I should have been on some of this stuff as a kid.

Anyway, I raised hell in elementary school. In middle school, 6th grade, my parents separated and I moved out of Sylvania Heights with mom. We moved about 15 or 20 minutes away, to a subdivision called Deerfield.

I developed pretty strong social anxiety at this time, and was hurt and confused by my parents' separation. I've heard of this happening to kids at school, but it wasn't supposed to happen in my family!

So my shenanigans were parked until 8th grade, when I got expelled for the first time for a fight. My mom had enough of my shit by then, so I moved back in with Dad in Sylvania Heights. That quickened my descent into criminality. I did get good work experience before I went down, though. My Dad made me come to work with him. If I wasn't going to school, then I was coming to work. Those were the best years of my childhood, once I got used to the tough labor. He instilled a good work ethic in me.

Unfortunately, I started experimenting with drugs; weed at first, and then pills, particularly benzodiazepines and opiates. I became a thieving, lying piece of shit from 14 to age 19. Then I did my first prison sentence for stabbing a guy in a fight.

Well, they tried to raise me right, really, they did a good job as parents. I just had other ideas of my own.

Family Holding Hands

by Joseph Colon

Enjoy your travels.

As we walk the streets of this new land, the land where the people are supposed to be in charge, life is unclear and unwritten. These streets we walk together where at any time the gestapo, ICE, the King's army, whatever you want to call them, can just pick you up and detain you just because you look like you don't belong.

Like a memory trapped deep in the back of your mind, the journey into the future is long and dark. However if we walk it together hand and hand, we know that no matter what happens we'll have each other to pick us up and lead us in the right direction.

As we walk this new land, shall we go up where the streets are paved in gold, or down where the streets are potholed and ravaged with trash. Is it a tough choice? No, the answer is easy, it's up, but the way there is super hard, and unless you're able to pay tribute to the king, you'll only make it to the

first crossing. Then you'll rudely be turned around, and if you argue you'll suffer the most severe of consequences.

Most unfortunately will be forced to go down, and there they will travel and traverse the hardships. Knowing all too well they will never find the high road again. Truth is, in this land of milk and honey only those born with the silver spoon avoid the low road. So as you travel amongst the trash and misery, hold hands, hold favor, and never give up hope and always enjoy your travels.

A Promise of Tomorrow

by Remus Lethe

"YOU'RE WHAT?!?" I say while slamming the brakes and swearing I misheard her. Nervously biting her lip, she quickly looks away and repeats softly, "I said I'm pregnant." With those last two words light easily becomes the second fastest thing in the universe, because my train of thought is racing lightning.

Ever since I was a child I just absolutely knew that I would one day want children. I would come up with thousands of different names and would daydream, more times than I can count, about being there for goldfish funerals, broken lovesick hearts, and proudly mournful First Days of School. All the things I never got as a foster kid. No, I swore I'd never be my mother and father. I would teach them the same unconditional love that my wife taught me. But with all of these promises, why am I hesitant? Why am I so reluctant to accept what I've always wanted? Because I don't deserve them. I don't deserve to have a beautiful little girl or a strong and caring son! I'm a washed-out foster care loser whose own parents knew he was worthless the moment he was born! No way do I deserve a child, because they certainly don't deserve someone like ME for a father!

"Baby?" she says, bringing me back to the now. She's staring at me with a face full of worry and concern, but I can't look at her; I'm not worthy enough to receive her love and care. "It's ok if you're not ready," she continues,, "I know your childhood wasn't exactly a walk in the park. And... look, if you don't want it then my sister knows this guy who can fix it, ok? No questions asked and-and- and it won't even cost that much? Just- just ... please!" We sit in silence for an eternity or two. "Just please say something," she whispers. Finally I look up and feel ashamed when I see that she's crying. WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU MAN?!?!? You know she wants this baby! And she's willing to sacrifice that ... FOR YOU! If you can't

grow a pair and be a better man for yourself, then do it for her. Do it for your kid! Seriously, how selfish can you get?! I finally manage to croak out, "No." But then clear my throat and say more firmly, "Just... no." I grab her hand from the console and kiss the ring I put on her finger not even a year ago.

"I made a promise to you. I am yours as much as you are mine. My love is yours just as yours is mine. mind, one heart, one future. I will not abandon my family." I crank the car back up while she tries to dry her now joyful tears. The rest of the way home, I can't help but daydream about the promises of tomorrow.

Feb '26 Picture:



Untitled

by Ryan Lapp

This photo of a random city looks like a place I wouldn't mind visiting. I see those mountains in the back of the city and I get the "itch" to go prospecting for gold. I have had gold fever since I was a child and it is one of the few positive addictions I have, although I admit it is an expensive one, more so than my old drug addiction. The city street in the foreground looks like there is most certainly a gold buyer located somewhere in the immediate area, gold is the worldwide currency after all. I am getting closer and closer to going home, only about 2 years left before I am back in my element doing my thing in the Sierra Nevadas and foothills of California. I have plans to travel and prospect for gold and precious stones globally. I will have to finish parole before I can travel. That should be easy in California, it's only 2 years of parole, and

usually they cut you loose after six months of testing clean and not breaking any laws. That's all I have for this daydreaming session. Are there any others out there who are into mining or rockhounding? I am always looking to collaborate with others in the mining community, it's a small one but close knit just how I like my friends and family.

China Town

by Kelly Messenger

When I was in the second grade, my dad took me and my brothers to Washington, DC to do a tour inside the capital. It was kinda cool, when we left there we went through New York. My dad wanted to take us to see the Statue of Liberty. Everything went wrong. My brother ate a Quarter Pounder from McDonald's and threw up all over the van. It stunk so bad. Then we drove through a place my dad called China Town that looked kinda like this place in the picture, if I can remember right. It was raining really really badly and there were Chinese people everywhere with plastic bags over their heads and brooms in their hands sweeping the water out of the places of business. We never did find the Statue of Liberty. Well my dad said he couldn't find it, so we just left and went home.

The City of Desolation

by R. Michael Urban, III

The merchants of the market have left their crowded shops. All that remains are the birds of prey, feasting upon the streets that are full of litter and waste.

Rome has fallen.

"Where shall we go?" the people wonder.

There is nowhere left.

The modern city of today will become the ancient city of tomorrow. The ruins remain a reminder of what once was. Such things will never be again. The city of desolation is the greatest teacher.

We are the disciples. You and I.

When the natural growth cures the disease then we will understand how incapable we are of surviving on our own.

Rome has fallen. There is nowhere left. I live in the city of desolation.

No one saw the warning.

If they did—

No one seemed to listen.

March '26 Picture:



The Moment of Truth

by Aaron Poe

I never knew my biological parents. Hell, I didn't even know I was adopted until I was 16. That little tidbit of information I found out by accident.

It was the first week of spring break of my senior year, and my parents made me stay home and help with spring cleaning. So instead of going to Cancun, I found out I was adopted. I was shocked, but not as shocked as my parents were when I opened up a manilla envelope I found. I was in my father's study and decided to clean out his desk, oops.

Months passed by fueled with a mixture of anger and sadness. Why was I never told? How could I love these people who have lied to me my entire life? It took almost a full year for me to be able to see the situation from their view. They raised and loved me as their own. They came to all my sporting and cheerleading events. They turned me into the woman I am today. And you know what... I like me.

I had a great childhood. I believe everything would be different if I would have known. How could I ever question my love for them? How could I not love them? Being adopted doesn't change anything other than the fact I didn't come out of my adopted mother.

So here I am, sitting in a subway car, two years after finding that envelope. I took roughly a year to track down my biological mother. It was tough, but I did it... you got to love social media! The only address she posted on her page was where she worked, and that's where I am heading.

As I sit here on this long subway ride, I have to admit I am getting cold feet. This may not be such a good idea. What do I say? Should I

approach her at work, or follow her home? Would they be happy to see me? What if I ruin their perfect life by showing up? Maybe this was a horrible idea. You know what, I'll leave it up to fate, just as they did when they put me up for adoption. I should have a coin here somewhere in my purse. Ahh, here's one. Alright, heads I go and see them, tails I go back home. Alright here goes nothing! I open my tightly closed eyes to reveal the moment of truth and it reveals...

Nikita / Nikki

by Gary Farlow

Things were so different now. Fleeing the advancing invasion of foreign troops, Nikita, her mom and younger brother and sister traveled first to Poland, then on to New York.

Leaving behind her father, older brother, and uncle Vanya, Nikita suddenly found herself "head" of the family. At just 19, she had become proficient in English at the urging of her father, Ilya, who told his daughter, "you're going to need it." Truer words had never been spoken.

Nikita's mother, Arushka, had never learned English, and was totally lost amidst the hustle and bustle of the Big Apple. She had withdrawn into their fourth-floor walkup in Brooklyn and Nikita had taken two jobs, done all the shopping, escorted her siblings to their pre-school, plus taken classes at City College.

My god, she was exhausted.

"Mama," Nikita urged her mother. "Please, just go outside. We are in America now. It is safe. You can go to the Ukrainian Center. They will help you—us."

But Arushka just shook her head, still wearing the blue-and-gold kerchief, muttering "nyet": "no."

The war at home dragged on. The front lines writhed to and fro like a snake, hiding the hundreds—thousands—of men and boys, even women now, dying in defense of villages just rubbed under the unrelenting assault of a superior force.

She laid her head against the cool glass of the subway on the ride to Brooklyn from Manhattan. Nikita, now known as "Nikki" to her American peers, thought, "If I could just rest." But she had far too much to do.

None of her new American friends seemed to grasp what was at stake in Nikki's homeland. Did they honestly think that the aggression would end if Kyiv fell? Did Hitler stop after annexing Austria? Or the Sudetenland? Or all of the former

Czechoslovakia? Just as in 1939, it wouldn't end now unless it was met with equal force.

History was repeating itself. Nikki's mother had not received a letter [addressed to Nikki] from either her father, brother Gregory, or uncle Vanya in nearly three months. They feared the worst and Nikki went each afternoon to light a candle at the tiny Ukrainian Orthodox Church for their men.

Alighting from the subway, Nikki approached the brownstone that housed her family. On the steps were several social workers from the Ukrainian Relief Center and Father Dimitri of the church.

One of the women took Nikki's trembling hands. "Nikkita, I am sorry..." but she got no further as Nikki collapsed in sobs, taken into the arms of the priest as he muttered comforting words in Ukrainian. Falling to the wet pavement was the letter bearing the Seal of the Republic of the Ukraine.

"It is with profound sadness that we inform you that Ilya, Gregory, and Vanya Piecynski were killed in action along the frontlines of the Crimea. They gave their lives in defence of Ukrainian freedom. All are being awarded Medals of Valor posthumously."

Night to Day, to Day to Night

by Leonard Ortiz Jr.

Exhaustion. It's not your friend, trust me. I hate being tired, especially when you still have more to do.

After work you see someone tired, trying to relax, only to have to work again when you get home...

Single mothers and fathers, parents—working from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. then from 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. Working more than one could imagine! Dally, being overworked trying to provide only the best for their children. If you've never been a parent, just ask your own.

Those years, from birth to 13 or 14 years old are crucial developmental years. Children need caring, nurturing, love, to foster a good upbringing. To do so, parents broke their backs to do everything they could. Here, in the 21st century, raising beautiful offspring isn't easy.

So, when you see someone nod off on the bus, train, or even car, remember, they could be resting for their next job. Pray for them, pray to God to take away their stress and give them strength and energy...Lord knows they need it.

April '26 Picture:



The Door

by Daniel James Sigler

This closed door is a conducive contrivance keeping us caged in cold corridors, continuously counting calendars, til' our cadavers are carried-out by Coroners.

Kangaroo-Court causation keeps us contained in Kong-type captivity, condemned to claustrophobia cubicles, constraining us condescendingly.

Cops kidnap us out our communities on incursionary conquests, causing countless accused criminals to coercively confess, then convey us through incarceration like a kidnapping contest!

Calling us incurable incorrigibles and catch us like catfish, increasing convictions, claiming we're culpable culprits!

Consequences of complexion, contumaciously callow kids with carrows, accumulating us for countryfied chain-gangs like a conjuration of Jim Crow!

As Congressional candidates campaign on cutting crime as a challenge, creating a counterculture of cutthroat cannibals and Komodo Dragons, clever crocodiles, constricting cobras and condors, combative Comanches, killer-bees and carnivores, chased by constables since childhood, criss-crossing the chessboard, in creased handkerchiefs and house-shoes was corduroy, chilling as Chucky, criminally-active kids, consolidated in Children of the Corn, cultivated cliques into close-knit clans, and out came cold-eyed Convicts carrying curved cleavers like Candyman.

Compunctionless as they compact us in concrete cocoons of compression, in concentration camps of carnage, we become our captor's crude collection, til' caskets we clash with, America's corporation of corrections . . .

The Doorway of Souls

by The Lost Prince

Mom,

I don't know what to do. I'm so lost without you, I'm so sad and lonely. With no shoulder to cry on, no arms to hold me. No family left or friends to rely on. It just builds and builds, I find myself hoping and praying, more and more each day and night. I'm just waiting for it to pop, so I can drop and leave this world.

What am I supposed to do in a world without you, now that you're gone? I'll have to change, it won't be the same. How do I heal, how do I deal in a world without you near? How much of me did you take with you? Alone and hollow is all I feel, is all I am.

You left me alone, I wasn't ready, you weren't supposed to go, not yet, not now, not so soon. In a world of hate with an unknown fate. Your love you took, my heart you broke. The sun doesn't rise, the stars don't shine. Up in my mind the memories climb. The happy, the sad. The tears of joy and the sadness we shared.

Your acceptance of me my whole life, even after I came out to you, and you told me you already knew and you've known for years that you were just waiting for me to accept it myself. You were my greatest support. You were always there for me when I needed you the most. I need you now, I'm lost and hurting, I feel forgotten.

Mom, I miss you so much. I can't believe it will be two years May 31st. It hurts so much, I really do miss you.

The Door by Mark Lewis

Here I am anxiously waiting at the door. My escort has left. Its name? "Santa Muerte" aka Grim Reaper.

Santa Muerte has many different faces, some human looking, others – not! It's never seen the robe scythe version.

While the faces of Santa Muerta are everchanging, the door itself remains the same. Old decrepit, and time worn. As though it has stood through eternity.

As I stand here, a thousand thoughts run through my head.

1. Will it be an abyss?
2. Will it be paradise?
3. Are my loved ones here?
4. Is it my eternal home?

As I'm waiting suddenly the Door opens, a slight crack is revealed, and suddenly:

A bright light!
A Voice!

And I hear: *Sir, your surgery is over, you are in recovery and there were no complications "this time"!*

I've been through this 5 other times and still have more to go through.

One of these times,
The Door
Will
Open!

The Doorway of The Stone Building by Bert Zamora

A priest who has been on a long journey from his town has walked to pray at a sacred temple. He has never been here before but was told God is always there so he made the long journey to the place. He reaches the large walled temple. The walls are all stone and there is only one entrance. A wooden doorway. Two faded white doors stop his way in. He pushes and pushes on them. The doors are solid and he is a small, frail man. There is no way to break them down. No way to climb over the walls. They are too high. So he pounds on the doors and yells but no one appears. It took him days to

get here now he is stopped by a doorway. He walks around the temple walls but sees no other way in. Eventually he sits on the steps by the doors and falls asleep.

Days pass as the priest sits, stands, and walks around. There is nothing around. No food, no water, and shelter. Hot days, cold nights, and he has no supplies left after his long journey. He cannot go back. He would be a failure and he would surely perish without food or water.

Days later, he is ready to die. Sitting on the steps laying against the stone wall. A woman appears and walks up to him. But she pays no attention to him. She walks up the steps and to the door. She pulls the right door open and walks in. He stares in disbelief. I am an idiot, he thinks. A handle right there and I tried to push it open. I could have gone in this whole time.

Look For The Open Door by Jacinda Lee Allenbaugh

Doors. We go through many doors in our life, going to and fro in our busy, frantic lives. Most of us are plagued at one time or another, by closed doors. Maybe it's a personal loss, such as a death or failed relationship. Or maybe an opportunity we once had is now lost to us. Too often, we are too focused on the closed door behind us to notice the open door in front of us. We grieve and mourn the loss of something or someone, and if we but look for the open door, we can find peace and harmony, as well as new fulfillment for our lives. For years, I was plagued by closed doors. It was only when I noticed the open door and passed through it that I found peace and contentment. I learned that for every closed door, there's an open one. All I need to do is look forward and be open to it, welcoming change and new experiences. Is it easy? No, but it can be done. May you find peace.

In similar words, Santayana, Churchill and others have stated what should be deemed a basic truth: Those who do not learn from the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it. So, as a picture theme, the image of the door spoke to me of age, appearing to have seen many years. I have chosen to let it be symbolic of history. But, besides its appearance conveying age, all can be reminded about the most obvious thing;

It is a door.

So much of the serious and worsening wrong in our world has happened before. If I didn't already know the answer I would ask: How is it that so many human beings can be simultaneously blind to so many of the obvious, and ominous, parallels from the past? Another smart writer gave us the answer: "That men do not learn much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons in history." – Aldous Huxley

The lowest human garbage ever to darken the face of the planet have always used some of the same basic ploys. Create problems, harm, threats, crises, and use it as justification to increase power and to do what would otherwise be unacceptable. (Power always abused, never surrendered),

As a baby-boomer turning 70 in September I remember a very different America during my youth. The masses were not in danger of widespread brainwashing by armies of so-called "influencers," spin-doctors, political pundits, who, today, would put Joseph Goebbels and his Ministry of Propaganda to shame. And what kind of people, by the millions, imply that they're so weak-minded and lazy they need "influencers" to tell them what to think, who to vote for? FYI, there are these things called books. In fact, for a big part of the message, behind the door of history more Americans need to open, is this: Go to page 265 of the 30th Anniversary edition of William L. Shirer's 1600-page THE RISE AND FALL OF THE THIRD REICH: "Now we stand before the last election," Hitler concluded, and he promised his listeners that, "regardless of the outcome, there will be no retreat." If he did not win, he would stay in power "by other means... with other weapons."

Eisenhower, McArthur, Patton, Halsey, Bradley, et al, the **only** reason proper remedy has not been brought to bear is because some eras breed greatness and others feebleness. Besides a military hierarchy who have consented to being a shit stain in history's underwear we have a judiciary doing the same. History highlights the glaring absence of a Brandeis, Cardozo, Brennan, Wendell Holmes, or a Robert Jackson who prosecuted the NAZI hierarchy at Nuremberg. (Today's Supreme Court is complicit.)

I know people will be lazy, ignore history. But don't be double damned. There's AI today, a new door to compensate with. Here: I leave you with a

clue as to what all are soon to be seeing; Use these two words, "last election," as having come out of both Hitler's mouth, and Donald Trump's mouth, in the same year. Tell the AI to focus on **context**. Tell it to also weigh Trump's discussion of war as a justification to suspend elections and his administration staff talking about 2028, 3rd term, or installing J.D. Vance. Those of you who naively think that there's Santa Claus, an Easter Bunny, Tooth fairy, EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW, may also think that the massive usurpation of power isn't in progress undermining American democracy. HISTORY, the old, unopened door. Behind it also lies the truth that the very biggest factor enabling the NAZIs to do what they did was the average "good Germans" ignoring what happened around them.

And to you, young people: you are the majority shareholders of the future. The notion that the culpable older generations should wield their corrupt authority over you, lying, cheating, killing innocent citizens as dictators? You tolerate it - you deserve it. BE THE MONKEY WRENCH IN THE GEARS. UPSET THE APPLE CART. OPEN THE DOOR.

Upcoming Word Themes:

- **Due November 1, 2026:** "Sacrifice"
- **Due December 1, 2026:** "Fairy Tale"
- **Due February 1, 2027:** "Surveillance"
- **Due April 1, 2027:** "Dreaming"

See Word & Picture Theme Guidelines on page 44.

Picture Theme Due November 1, 2026:



Picture Theme Due December 1, 2026:



Picture Theme Due February 1, 2027:



Picture Theme Due April 1, 2027:



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.
Contact us with any questions.

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

Final Notes

As I bring the newsletter to a close, I can feel the weight of all your needs for a connected, balanced, and sane life. I wish I could wave a magic wand and bring that vision to life for all humankind, but it is a lifetime project just to manifest that for myself. I think of PE as a life preserver for folks cast overboard. The life preserver helps keep you safe in an often harsh environment while you figure out how to get to shore. Underneath all we do at PE is the belief that we are all related, connected, and deserving of belonging, and by helping one another we also help ourselves. We don't yet have a big boat to pull you all in to safety, but we want to give you some comfort and respite while you are bouncing around on the rough currents of incarceration. Please know there are many people involved in getting these PE programs created and mailed to you. People do care and want to help you grow and thrive and gain skills that can serve in having a full, rich, and meaningful life. Our aim is to be as much as we can without over-promising and disappointing you. It can be a fine line when our urge to help meets the reality of our finite resources.

I want to sum up some of the upcoming changes explained earlier in the newsletter:

- **Theme Writing Program goes bimonthly in 2027:** This will cut down on the expense of the program while giving us more time to read, type, edit and compile your submissions for each anthology.
- **Book Mailing Program - \$4 donation for book packages:** We have reverted back to our longstanding book program rules, where if you send us \$4 in any form (to help offset mailing costs) we will send you a package of books from our collection of donations.

And some reminders:

- **Send feedback and suggestions for programming** you think you and others would enjoy/benefit from being created by PE volunteers.
- **Put your name on all your submissions** as your various submissions often get separated from the envelope they come in.
- **When a volunteer writes to you, there is no guarantee that they will keep writing.** While PE is solidly rooted at Durland Alternatives Library, we do not have a dedicated pen pal program and students and volunteers tend to move along at a steady pace.
- Are you reading this after November? It may be too late for you to receive our fall mailing, but please still write to us so that you can get added to our mailing list for the next issue where this program process starts over again.

I hope this newsletter brought something of value to you. We at PE hope that our concern and care for you and your situation comes through. If we all try to be helpful and do a little good in the world, the aggregate of that energy will allow for positive, meaningful and compassionate changes in the way society is now organized. It is all I can figure to do in the face of all the dysfunction I witness in my daily life. We know much of the way we live is not sustainable and that future generations will pay the price of our choices but we don't seem able YET as a society to make the changes needed to protect other creatures from extinction and from poisoning the environment. Working with PE gives me a project where the results of my actions bring some joy and pleasure to many of you. Any kindness we show you can be repaid by passing it on to someone you meet who could use a helping hand.

I am grateful for the privilege of writing out this newsletter. In the past I used it as a way to share some of my personal life with the many of you who write and share yours. I have downplayed that aspect of the newsletter recently, but I must report that 2026 is turning out to be my best gardening year of this century. I haven't had such a robust garden in forever and I am getting great pleasure in watching the plants grow and eating straight from the garden. The seed corn is now peaking and I don't even cook it. It is delicious just off the stalk eaten raw.

My children are all grown up traveling and having the same kinds of adventures I had when I was younger. The world keeps on spinning. Homo Sapiens have only been on the planet for 100,000 or so years and we are an interesting feature of an evolutionary experiment that will keep going far into the future even if we as a species disappear. **Fun Fact: Scientists estimate that 99% to 99.9% of all species that have ever lived on Earth are now extinct. Over the course of 3.8 billion years of evolution, billions of species have emerged and disappeared**

through natural environmental shifts, competition, and five major mass extinction events. While some might find that idea unsettling, I find it liberating. Everything is changing as we are all part of something so grand we can hardly understand it.

Til next time,

Gary

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<https://alternativeslibrary.org>



"If I Could Do It Again" — A Writing Invitation

We usually only ask "how did you get here" to people who've made it big. Nobody asks the people who've lived through the hardest stuff. I think that's backwards. Those are the stories that actually teach us something. My name is Swaru, and I'm putting together a short writing project called "If I Could Do It Again." I want to hear from you: the choices, the turning points, the things you know now that you wish you'd known then. A selection of your responses will be published in my book.

Here's how it works: it's completely voluntary, there's nothing to lose by taking part, and your words will be published anonymously unless you tell me otherwise. Write as much or as little as you want (250-800 words recommended). Answer one prompt or all of them. Change your mind at any point, no questions asked. Ready to write? Send in a reflection on one or more of the prompts below:

Prompts:

- Is there a moment in your life you wish you could go back and do differently? What would you change?
- What is something you understand now that you didn't understand at the time?
- If you could tell your younger self one thing, what would it be?
- What has this experience taught you about yourself?
- What does the phrase "if I could do it again" mean to you?

If you would like to participate, please send your submission to Swaru 1774 at the regular Prisoner Express address. *Please note that the "If I Could Do It Again" project is independent of Prisoner Express (PE), which serves as a liaison for the project. Questions should be directed to Swaru 1774.*

Fall 2026 Registration Sheet

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

- ☐ **Arts, Crafts & Music (ACM):** Includes ARTknows; Art Beyond Cornell; etc.
- ☐ **Creative Writing (CW):** Journaling; Misc. Essays; Writing with Friends.
- ☐ **Developing Your Mind & Body (DYMB):** Bilingual Spanish/English lesson; Political Conversations; Intro to AI; Understanding Human Rights; Exercise.
- ☐ **Figuring Things Out (FTO):** Intersection of Trauma & the Legal System; Chess; Puzzles & Games; Financial Planning.
- ☐ **Inner Work/Outer Expression (IW/OE):** Rattle Magazine & Poetry; Meditation, Spirituality. Also includes three books. Please check ONE of the following:
 - ☐ **Yes I can receive books.**
 - ☐ **No I cannot receive books; please send me the packet on its own.**
- ☐ **Poetry Anthology Vol 34:** Anthology of selected poems by PE members. We encourage you to send us one or more poems for consideration 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 44.

★ **Expedited Book Mailing Program:** Please check with the administration of your facility to be sure you are allowed to participate. If yes, please read complete guidelines on pages 4-5 and send \$4 to help cover postage. Checks must be made out to CTA/PE.

Number of books allowed: ____

Types of books allowed:

- ☐ Hardcover
- ☐ Softcover

Types of books you'd like:

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.

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Summer/Fall 2026

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