

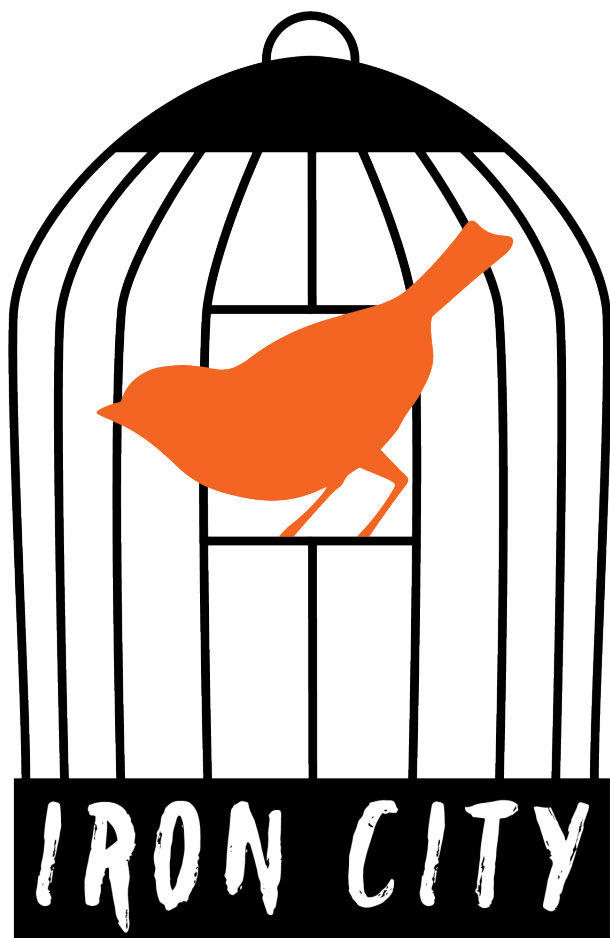


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M A G A Z I N E

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ABOUT *IRON CITY*

Iron City Magazine is an online and print magazine devoted entirely to writing and art from the prison world. It is our hope that through this creative platform, incarcerated artists and writers find value in their stories, fuel for personal growth, and pride in their accomplishments. Inmates are, first and foremost, people. They own stories worthy of telling and sharing. *Iron City Magazine* aims to highlight these stories in a way more permanent than a private journal.

In addition, we serve to remind the general public that inmates can make meaningful contributions to their communities. So often, this potential is forgotten or overshadowed by their crimes. By validating inmates' humanity through writing and art, we encourage a culture of understanding and transformation.

SPONSORS

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LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Dear Reader(s),

I would like to address two questions. The first is *Why Write?* This includes painting and drawing or symbolic expression generally. It also includes oral storytelling and spoken passing of information. The second question is *Why Publish?*

(I'll say "we" a lot because I am feeling out for you all, not to claim your thoughts, but to include you in mine, realizing I can speak really for no one but myself.)

Other animals also have language, of course. They communicate in myriad ways. They warn each other of dangers and signal to each other that they've just landed on a food source or that they want to mate. They even communicate joy and gratitude. But tell a story? As far as we know that's ours alone. Birds have flight. Gazelles have speed. Lions have strength. Alligators and crocodiles have very big teeth. And humans have story, the capacity to connect past, present, and future, to weave time and experience into meaningful symbols and sequences. Although an elephant's memory is reputed to be mammoth, other animals, as far as humans know, communicate in a persistent present.

Dwelling in the present is a blessing too, one that human animals often forgo in fretting over the future or regretting the past. Sometimes we write to relish the present more fully.

We write or pass on stories because if we don't, in a single generation, there could be no past.

We write because time, perhaps our most human invention, is on and in our hands. We write because we are here.

We also write to clear ourselves, and we write to get clear of ourselves, to get ourselves out of the way so that we can learn our purpose and go about our business.

We feel before we think, but until we articulate our feelings, we don't know them. They are strangers inside us. We write because we can't know the truth of ourselves until we tell it.

Remember the childhood taunt:

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
What you say is what you are.*

We might reprise it:

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
The less you say (or write or draw),
The less you are.*

LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

We write because storytelling or writing begets and nourishes empathy. Through stories, both in the writing and the reading of them, we inhabit others' experiences and at least imagine how others feel. Sworn enemies, patriots each to his or her own country or cause, can listen to tales of family, loss, courage, longing—and question why they are fighting. We write to explore possibilities: feelings and solutions.

I believe writing is an act of love. Even the bitterest complaint is affirmative. It says, I think things can be better than this. Writing is a loosening or extending of the soul, a natural unfolding, a being true to...both the positive and the negative inside and around us.

And so we also write to heal. And who in the world is not wounded? We write because we are inspired by the words of others, or by an experience that has moved us, or to get to the bottom of why we are so angry. Sometimes writing brings fear...of what we might learn about ourselves through it, but writing should never be censored. It doesn't all have to be shared with others, but oh what we lose when we censor ourselves to ourselves! An unprocessed piece of us goes missing, and we lose an opportunity to claim and refine it, to correct or embrace it. Inviting even our darkest secrets into consciousness through writing is also a type of listening. And sometimes of laughing at and with ourselves.

Particular readers may be cruel or indifferent, but writing is inherently kind. One of the many wonderful things about it is that no one has to see you mess up there. Whatever stuttering we put down, whatever embarrassment, we can typically erase or throw away and start over before anyone else sees it. And what worlds open when we share!

Which brings me to the second question: *Why Publish? Iron City Magazine* is our way of gathering writers and readers from far flung and often lonely places around a single campfire, the way we imagine our ancestors gathered thousands of years ago, the walls of the cave behind them lit and dancing with paintings and ideograms.

Telling and hearing our stories, we both save and savor our lives.

Thank you, contributors, for writing and drawing and gathering everyone here.

Cornelia "Corri" Wells
Editor-in-Chief

LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Dear Reader,

"Still and all, why bother? Here's my answer: Many people need desperately to receive this message: 'I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people don't care about them. You are not alone.'" —Kurt Vonnegut, *Timequake*

The question being addressed here is why bother writing? Why bother creating?

Kurt was onto something in his response—and I think it's something that we've stumbled upon here with *Iron City*, too.

The people who contribute to this magazine are connected in that the prison system has in some way touched their lives. They are inmates, they are prison educators, they are survivors of the system. In all cases, there is a propensity for loneliness because the prison world is such a surreal one.

Most people won't understand it. But there are some who do, and we are here. If razor wire bisects your horizon, you are not alone. If a thick steel door stands between you and your students, you are not alone. If nightmares steal your nights even though you are no longer on the inside, you are not alone.

You are part of a community of writers and artists who are brave enough to share their truths. There is incredible candor and fortitude within these pages.

I urge you to continue to bother creating. Bother writing, drawing, performing—whatever your art is. There are so many others who need to see that your story is their story.

Welcome to Issue 2.

Natalie Volin
Managing Editor

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The Yard

A. Kevin Valvardi, California

Bright lights on
the empty yard;
weathered track
sits cold and hard.

Pig iron rests
so cold and still,
feeling not
the midnight chill.

Handball courts
inside the track;
horseshoe pits
with wood in back.

Concrete tables
and concrete chairs;
baseball field
but no one's there.

Fences topped
with razor wire;
towers high
for rifle fire.

Watchful guards
up in the towers
while away
the quiet hours.

Nothing moves,
nothing stirs;
on this night,
nothing occurs.

Estrellado

Leah Weed, New Mexico

When *sol* and *luna* are absent,
 human lights dimmed,
myriad distant suns appear:
 beads on a dark cloth
with which a man, a woman, stitches
 imagined constellations.
Las estrellas are lodged in their familiar places;
 myth and history attempt patterns
out of gorgeous asymmetry.

As we map the earth
 (and *Here there be monsters*)
we map the sky,
 pointing arrows and crosses
toward the cold north,
 pinning hopes and obsessions
to the sky's jagged brilliance.

In a solitary cell, cocooned in absence,
 bereft of human light,
a man finds the glittering
 hard kernels of his being.

A moonless night sky shivers,
 shattered and gleaming.

Who Am I?

YOGI V.81, Arizona

I am that jaguar
unique in my own ways,
born in a land that did not accept me
running wild through life,
learning how to feed, to sleep in trees,
overcoming fear to live on my own,
hunted down because of my ancestors,
judged for my spots.

Who am I?
I am that butterfly on the barbed wire
beautiful but unseen
wings closed standing still
waiting for my time to fly
that gust of wind that will help me glide
to one day show the colors I hide,
letting the world know I'm here.

Who am I?
I am that jaguar
that could not change my spots,
so I learned how to change my outlook on life.
I am that butterfly on the barbed wire
that dreams and will one day be free
to spread my wings flying among the trees.



Goose Who

Mitch Hand, Arizona

Acrylic on Canvas, 11"x14", 2016



Future King

Mitch Hand, Arizona

Acrylic on Canvas, 8"x10", 2016

It's a Shame

Jennifer Harding, Michigan

So many stories untold, so many wounds left to heal
We put on our fake smiles and try to hide how we feel

We are mothers, we are daughters, we are prisoners of war
Let us out a gate & bring us back through a revolving door

Programmed to modify our behavior while we get treated like dirt
Expect us not to whimper when they wound us beneath this khaki shirt

Not allowed to be individuals, our badges read "offender" larger than
our name

Though everyone's the product of society & circumstance,
We are the ones the ones that bare the blame

It's a shame

M.D.O.C.*Jennifer Harding, Michigan*

It's all just a charade type game
Best friends that don't even know each other's name
Amount of locker contents gives them their fame
No remorse for why they came
Sick minds, hold up big heads with no shame
Monsters you cannot tame
Livin' this life style like it ain't lame

Some with no future in sight
Going to bed hungry every night
Snakes in the grass ready to bite
Snitches steadily writing a kite
Fat mouths always lookin' for a fight
All I can say is this shit isn't right

Creepin' mother fuckers everywhere you turn
I guess there's a lesson to learn
Play with fire & you're bound to get a burn
Your life is only your concern

So remember it's all in the decisions that you make
—and the risks that you take
Pray the Lord your soul to take
Mean what you say. Don't be fake

Purple

Kevin D. Sawyer, California

Blue and red make purple
I wear blue these days
But I still bleed red
Jimi sang about “Purple Haze”
But Jimi is long since dead

Purple is passion, so they say
Prince succeeded Jimi in every way
The Purple Prince—not Machiavelli’s
Think of the movie, Purple Rain
Or Alice Walker’s tale of pain

Purple is a color
It comes from red
And Prince’s passing leaves me blue

Two primary colors
Which one of them are you?
I am both,
and purple too

November in Retrospect

Jimmy M., Arizona

Yellow tape wraps twelve, twenty-two
In a type of tintype sombrous view
Of something not meant to be seen,
And in the shadows lies a woman dying
So soundly you'd think her sleeping.

Red, white, and blue lights flash in
Syncopated madness, painting the already
Painted bric-a-brac homes he's passing.

His face in the car is like the face of someone
Left in the dark too long and just barely
Catching the ending of his own life's movie,
Thinking: *Wasn't I supposed to be*
The one in the bag as the credits
Started rolling?

In the doorways with the knock-kneed
Kids and flimsy screens there are ghosts,
They haunt the eaves and say of the boy,
Like neighbors watching:
He is just a boy.

Up the street, just past the looming
Water tower, they hang a left at
San Carlos Park. The trees and the swings
Are still, and the shadows in the deep
Are black mud melting, hinting
At something: a danger lurking?
But it wasn't always there... *was it?*

Tomorrow the headlines will read of an
Arrest made: SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD MURDERER!
Why were the warning signs missed!—
And how the community's left reeling
In the aftermath.

Some will say of it, that it was
A premeditated act of violence as black
And white as photos of the crime scene.
But the boy who is *just a boy*—
His mother will cry to think of his emptiness
And of his dark eyes brooding.
She will see him in an instant.
And say that it was her fault.
She will feel it in her bones and wonder
Where in the years she went left instead of right.
Or what was unsaid, or not said enough.

Yellow tape flaps at twelve, twenty-two,
And the autumn breeze is low.
A new ghost, they say: a bit confused
But don't reach for her if she reaches for you...

Look away!

Chronosphere

Angelo Niles, Arizona

Sinking into outer space,
Thrice flung beyond the sphere
of blue-misted oceans.
Thin air collapses
beyond the mercury promise of stars:
A solar burst gone faintly
into her cold black gaze.

The cracking heat transfixes our compound eyes
as spark angels swarm from hungry thrusters.
Aroused by this alien dawn,
we slither like nymphs from gelid hibernation—
cast like vapor from our hive at moonrise.

Encounter thus ye heavens:
birthing infinite nebulae upon thy stygian eyes...

Time.

The Clock

Angelo Niles, Arizona

It bides its time,
Like an old rocking chair—creaking on and on.
Cold, murky creaks on the fringe of sleep
Whence echo the baleful howls of yester eve.

Tick!

I gaze into a pale, wanton face:
That old Gypsy's winding eyes;
Night after night
Its ghostly orbs whip into a maelstrom.

Tock!

There on its perch,
Ticking, ticking—waiting ever still.
Not a sentinel but a grisly, scornful thing:

“Out there, boy,” it scowls.
“Them languid shadows are drifters, vagrants,
The leftovers of time.
Ain't a one of 'em know'd what they is, no.”

Tick-tock!

The pendulum stirs
In silent combs—dark depths deep down
In the bowels of memory;
Alas, time...

Open Your Mind

Peter Moon, Arizona

Look beyond the thing
you see,
for there's much character
inside of me

If you'd open your mind
you would see
the man God believed
that I could be

COME FORTH, LAZARUS—
I'm lifted from this grave
Judgement w/o Justice
is turning from God's
Grace



Honoring Their Heritage

Clyde Dillinger, Arizona

Pen and Colored Pencil, 2016



Insane Optimism

Clyde Dillinger, Arizona

Pen and Colored Pencil, 2016

Papertrail

Keith H., Arizona

Emerson, Ralph Waldo,
We, Man
Still follow,
Trapped in that Hollow,
That prison, that past,
Those shadows, dogmatic
So deeply cast, static, so lethally mapped;

By our fathers, by our fallacy,
Fear failing to adapt, still forced to follow,
We, Man,
In that Hollow, falling,
Still trapped;

Still born, still blind, still choking,
On dust industrial, and capitalist lust,
The methane of too many,
Flatulent Sacred Cows,
The forests still smoking,
As I gaze at the tar sands and gasp
At what devastation our greed and dogma allows;

Malkuth

Keith H., Arizona

Venom, bitten
Swelling burst into Void
I become

Undulation, spiraling and spawning,
Into and out of infinite scale,
Slowing into the separation and sludge
Of ceaseless function and form

These bodies
These gravity-grounded near-haultings
Of light twisted into quintessent veil,
Mirage of solidity, sparsely aware
Of its vaporous transient nature

A wisp of Mind in the Grand Mode of Time
A fleeting spark in the jaws of Kaliyuga
Barely Ever 'Here'...

...And EVERYTHING matters
We want answers
We plea for contact
We surge with urgency upon the shores of Satori
To Know, To Know, To Know, To Know!
...And be known
To be seen, to be felt, to MATTER to everything
...To have a name.

Gerty's Body Mantra

Keith H., Arizona

This body, these parts, am I whole? A whole 'I am'?
I body, I part, I whole, I am, I am, I am a whole body apart
Am I am, I am I?

Without this body, what and where am I where this body is without I
Wear this body out, out of this body where am I part of a whole
Whole of a part me, part of me, part of me, a whole part of me

Karma's carnal cage of my making Karma in a cage
Making my Karma carnal, making cages making Karma in cages carnal
In cages, in cages, in cages of karma made carnal making me
I am out of a cage, I am made out of a cage, a cage made
Out of me, out of me, Karma made a cage out of me

Release

Jennifer Lukanovich, Arizona

In her life she feels there's nowhere she belongs
She's been holding on to her past way too long
Having been beaten, battered and abused
Everyone in her life left her feeling lonely and used
Looking back at the child who hurt so much
Who in life was only craving a loving touch
As she was growing up she had dreams of her own
Now they'll never be reached, never be known
There was no one and everyone for her to blame
Yet it was all her fault that she felt the shame
Every time the tears came flowing down like rain
Hoping somehow it would erase the pain
Wanting someday, somehow to let go of the past
This time she meant it, she needed it to last
There has been such hurt and pain can't you see
She needs to let it go, release it and be free!

Redemption's Harvest Moon

Yitzchak ben Yehuda, Arizona

Dreams have fled away from desert cells, raw
With the touch of early dawn, wrapped in a silent peace,
Hears through an open window the desert yard draw
Long pitch black breaths lay bare its human flesh,
Richness of blood splitting scars to sweetened soil,
Exhaling rough emotions of despair against iron bars.
Nearer the river the Truth sleeps Yitzchak, all toil
Locked fast within a dream with worn down iron gates.

Domestic summer harvest, like an animal with a number
Long used to handling by those ignorant prison guards,
Rubs their egos' hide against the old cell block wall
Sensing a fragrant moment of insanity come back again—
Not this half-tolerated human consciousness that
Plants its vulgar grammar in her yielding weather
But that unspeakable laughter, growing more familiar is
Where he falls asleep in Shabbat Queen's soft arms together.

Wakeful moth-wings blunder near his cell light,
Tossing their light shell at the glass, and go
To inhabit Eden's starlight. Stranded hair unknown
Stirs still in his linen. It is as though the soft
Breathing which billows her sleep, her eternal desire
Was drugged under judgement, waned and bearing daggers in
His flesh. Then, down the lifeless hallway they came,
Moving like Freedom's women: Truth, Justice, and Revelation
Revealing to his eternal Soul, Redemption's harvest moon.



Butterfly Maiden

Chris Vasquez, Arizona

Water Color and Acrylic, 2017

Forever Lost

J. Barr, Ohio

Forever lost, bound by chains, gasping for some air,
My troubles have caught up with me, and trapped me in this lair.
I've been gone, for much too long, I know my days are done
Doesn't seem there's hope for me, no longer on the run.
Screams and wails, fill my ears, while demons run around
Razor claws and gnashing teeth keep me in the ground.
Light, my eyes, have not seen, in this wretched cage
Sane am I, do not know, all I feel is rage.
Deep inside this blackened pit a Dragon stares ahead,
Glowing eyes, a wicked grin, he's the ruler of the dead.
There's no escaping torture, no matter where I turn.
I should have given my life to God, before he let me burn.

Desert Shadows

Dominic Murphy, New Mexico

The desert is barren, dry and silent
Rolling away—always—towards forever
roots quietly search, shadows cover more than their creators
I dream of fulfillment. I dream of open sky.

Sand shifts, reborn when it stops.
Like neighbors who don't speak, only move about.

The desert is full of secrets, turning brown
Fading away—always—towards forever
Searching for that oasis that comforts
I dream of stillness. I dream of cloudy nights.

Sand washes the landscape clean
Like the bones of travelers long gone cold.

The desert is full of life, yellow and green
Growing away—always—towards forever
patiently waiting for the chance to bloom unnoticed
I dream of movement. I dream of dawn.

Sand rises into crumbling towers of Babel
fleeing loneliness like lovers accepting the burden.

Pod Ice

Boyd Edwards, Arizona

I want to sit in a cage
in a heroin-induced haze
and over-and-over again say,
“Paaawwd ice, set A.”
into a scritch-y-loud PA
with a drawl that crawls
like time, all day.

Set ‘A’ of the gray gates
that keep us separated
like Offspring
used to sing.

The pod-porter pops up
from an afternoon nap
and mops his way
to retrieve three bags
of sweet relief at set A.

Chills ten gallons of gold
in hot pods of shelter
constructed of concrete
bunkers to cool our feet.

We wonder if the other color—
the guards armed with gray—
see our devious deeds
preserved for prosperity
(all apologies to posterity)
on closed-circuit tv
as merely mirrors of society
who put us all away?

And who join us behind
razorous time, everyday.

Braces and Razor Wire

David Evans, Georgia

Kids wearing braces,
Hidden behind cinder blocks
And razor wire, stab their
Childlike fantasies to death.
Appearing weak is like
Whistle-calling a pack of wolves.
Predators prey. Mamas pray.
First you're a baby, then a kid,
Then a 10-95. Welcome to the
Chain gang, kid. You're state
Property now, part of the
Subhuman race. This food
Ain't like Mama's cookin'.
Strip down.
Nuts and butt.
Squat and cough.
No one here gives a damn
About you. And you better not
Get free-picked.
Voices reverberate throughout
The fenced-in jungle.
"Let's get high."
"Get your GED."
The po-po yells, "Tuck
Your shirt in, inmate."
Inmate. You goddamn *inmate*.
A lower status doesn't add worth
To the "Worthless." It never does.
It's all about control.
Not corrections. Control.
Inventory control in the warehouse.
But there's no such thing as
Mind control. Knowing this is
The only way out. And the only
Way to not bleed on the razor wire.

Great Mindz

Daoud Omar Boone, Alabama

Drapetomania

It's only a cage

Don't panic, just try to manage, this make-up applied in black face

Break a leg, be a sport, it's merely a play

Even though acting is not my passion, I'm ordered to stay on this stage

This play betrays my monologue, am I the only one that's enraged???

Plagued by so many free thoughts

Enslavement is lonely

So I dash

Fast behind me, they yell stop, or tell me to run slowly

Abnormal

The doctors say I'm abnormal, so formal with their dynamic
nominalism

They keep calling me insane or unsafe

Not knowing, I'd rather be defined or called crazy, than forever encased

The mind is a place many never escape

Not me

Free thinker...open mind

Drapetomania

The sickness of greats!

Poet's Notes:

Drapetomania— In 1851 American physician Samuel A. Cartwright coined "drapetomania" as a mental illness, a disease causing slaves to be addicted to attempting to escape slavery.

Dynamic nominalism— Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking coined this phrase for the science of how names interact with the named.

Crystal

Wish U Would, New Mexico

She's the devil.
She can take you O' so high.
You can touch the sky,
fly around the moon.

Taste the stars like a God...

Then as fast as it takes a star to fall,
she can take you to the deepest abyss.
Even though she has taken everything,
you still yearn for her sweet tender lips.

You'll find yourself willing to do anything
for one more kiss.
Looking like a skeleton,
yearning for the thrill.

As you come undone,
you remember how it all began.
You were wound up on love like a top,
as the world spun.

Her touch the tingling sensation,
her beauty so divine.
You wonder how you came,
to this broken road.

And just how many souls
Crystal the she-devil stole?

Trans-Suicide

Amy McGeehan, Missouri

I love to wear dresses, dance, and twirl, fix my hair and give it some curl. I paint my toes, and fingers too, my favorite shade is baby blue. Mom caught me in her makeup and spanked me with all her might. "Don't do that again, it just isn't right." She cussed, yelled and threw things on the floor, then told me "get out," and slammed her bedroom door. Dad tries to make me be someone I'm not. "Take off that dress, you weird little snot." He took my Barbie, it was my favorite toy, then screamed and said I should "act like a boy."

All the kids laugh and say that I am gay, so I hide in my room and that's where I stay. I am only ten, but I know who I am. Why is it so hard for them to understand?

Mom keeps her pills right here on this shelf. They help her to sleep, she told me herself. I am not a boy, and I am not her son. I'm getting this bottle and taking every one.

I will sleep forever and put this to an end, no longer will I feel the pain, or have to pretend.

A Vampire's Heart

Amy McGeehan, Missouri

I was forced into darkness by no choice of my own.
Flying by night with anger and despair in my eyes.

A monster is all that is left of me, bound to an
Eternity of bloodlust and rage.

Nothing can hurt me, for my body is dead, killing
to survive, blood is what I crave.

An animal with no feelings is all they see. I am
death, yet I long to die, but cannot be free.

I can never grow old. No one is there when I wake.
People run from me on sight.

Everyone I have loved is gone, lonely and desperate.
All I have is darkness to call my own.

Never will I enjoy a sunrise or flowers in bloom,
yet I starve for a love that can never become.

How I wish it could go back to the way it was.
Still, I must carry on in coldness, and hide from
the world.

Life Surrounding

Daniel Cox, New Mexico

Rays of Light
Touch me, Deep
In the heart of the forest.
Plants grow. Creatures scurry

I am Alone
Though surrounded by Life
Deep in nature's grasp
I am Alone

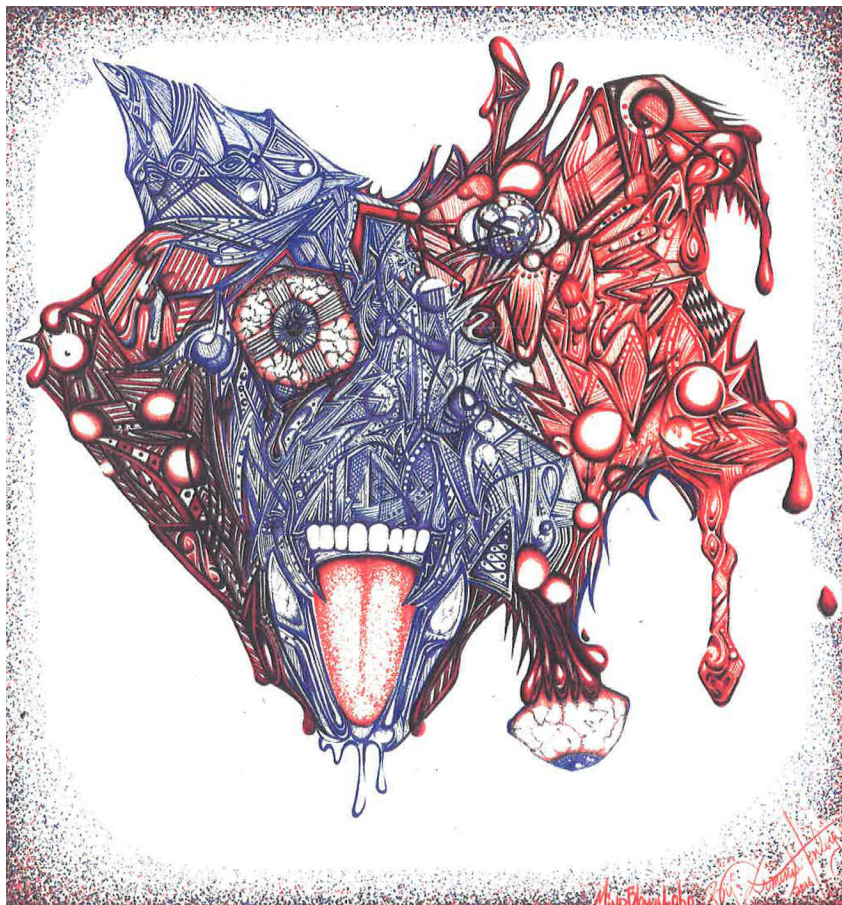
Birds Sing
High in the branches.
Wind softly Whistles
Through thickets of trees

I am Deaf
Though filled with Music
The Songs of Nature
I am Deaf

Flowers Bloom
Around me. Leaves change
Color. Vibrant
Exotic Landscape

I am Blind
Though Brightly
Engulfed by Beauty
I am Blind

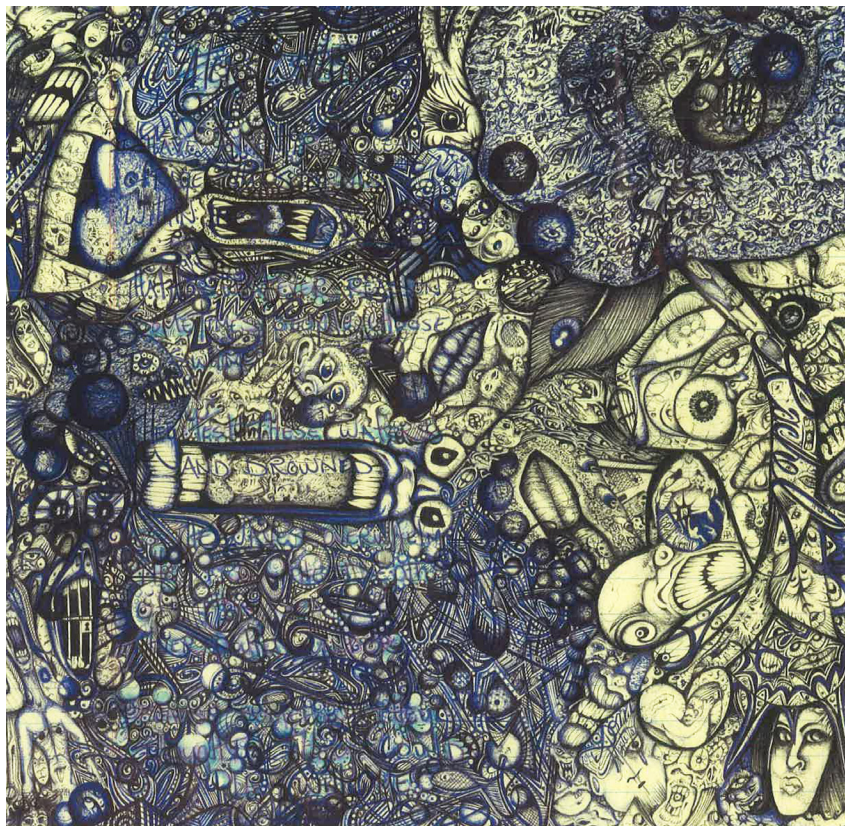
How do I learn
To See, to Hear, to Live?
How do I Learn
To Truly Experience Life?



Mind Blown Lobo

Dominic Montoya, New Mexico

2016



Rachel in Mind

Dominic Montoya, New Mexico

2016

Lost in a World / Battle of the Deranged

Darnell "Tequila" Smith, New Mexico

Clawing and knocking on this subcellar door of hell

I'm locked in—

Forever suspended from the world's freedoms & reality, anguish

I'm trapped in...

Dumped half alive in an early grave hyperventilating in this cold coffin

My body drenched in an ice cold sweat, but enraged & lava hot to the core, yet—

Ferociously I kick, punch & eerily scream...

95% curious 5% afraid about the next step this warped & twisted life'll bring...

Awake but sleepwalking like a fuckin' zombie in this evil delirious dream!

Held captive in a room the size of a school-kidz lunch box

All alone to fight all these nonstop eternal corrupt thoughts...

All my no longer reassuring optimism and willowing will

Entangled in iron chains and keyless steel padlocks...

The motive unknown in my past violent juvenile delinquent upheaval

In a blink of an eye 35 years later, I'm suddenly immersed in an ocean of evil...

Satanz lustful, decrepit, clawed fingers slowly pulling me deeply down

Chillingly and maliciously chanting my name and aliases—

A wicked but such a captivating luxurious sound...

I've been suckered into this fragilent existence—

All the good I ever did or wanted in life

Dismissed without hesitance—a thousand tragedies in 24hrs. accepted

Without any resistance...

Shit! I've been floating on rock bottom for far too long!

My conscience bloated and rotting, struggling to decipher all my rights from

Doing a life of wrong...

Unable to break free of the devilz compelling spell

Desperately locked and buried in this cold coffin—Which is my bed in my cell...

My pleas are non-stop to the creator for all that is positive—

Begging for change...

Growing blackhearted from being coated in hate, anger and pain—the
side effects

Rage!!!

Abandoned and lost in a world and battle of the deranged.

(This is the aftermath of being isolated

In a fuckin' D.O.C. cage...)

All Together Now

John Bergeron, California

Black, White, and poor lives. Do they really matter?
Blood, bone, and skin in alleyways they splatter.

“Hands up, unarmed. Please don’t shoot!”
If they know someone’s watching, you may only get the boot.

“Please stop choking me! I can’t breathe or catch a breath!”
Police answered this cry with a quick and speedy death.

In the deserts of Arizona: “Rise up and stand still!”
As a homeless man rose, they opened fire to kill.

Playing with toys as all children have done,
Has now cost the poor many daughters and sons.

Another teeny bopper digging raps and rhymes,
Police shot in cold blood sixteen times.

Mentally ill, not in his right head.
Safely locked up is where they pronounced him dead.

How many more of us have to be shot in our backs,
While those paid and trusted plant tasers to cover their tracks?

When will it stop? Will it ever end?
Local, state, and federal can no longer be called our friend.

A Prisoner's Cry

John Bergeron, California

A cosmic explosion that knows no bounds
like the gates of hell guarded by hounds.

A deep thing we hold on to fast
as we're tripping forward into the past.

Déjà vu is a bottomless pool;
how many times must we go to school?

Lessons taught again & again
until they are learned with a friend.

The key is not to swim alone
or you'll sink to the bottom like a stone.

Please be my friend and swim with me,
and together we'll make it out of this sea.

Ode to Emily Dickinson

Joshua W.R., Arizona

The Body is a Broken Vessel
When treading 'pon this Earth—
He feels the hands caress
As the Ticks go passing by—

The Body unto the Soul
Is a Severed Half—
Long kept apart from knowing
His precious other Self—

The Spirit is a soaring Dove
Floating 'pon the Breeze—
Yearning to rejoin
Her precious other Self—

The Body and the Spirit—
A Union soon to make—
Together—for Eternity—
The Soul they both Become—



Ometeotl

Hector Cedillo, Arizona

Graphite and Charcoal on Toned Paper, 2016

Seasonal Haikus

Michael Lee Wotih 'nisa-Moore, Alabama

Spring

Pink and White Blossoms
children singing in the orchard
songs of ripe red cherries

Summer

Trees full of green lanterns
cherries like men grow up and forget
pink and white blossoms

Autumn

Pink and white blossoms
the seeds of our reality
the tree lectures the cherry

Winter

Pink and white Blossoms
are dreams of the white-robed trees
waiting to be born.

Spring

Pink and White Blossoms
slumbering amidst the green leaves
dream only of summer

Before the Bulldozer Awakens

Michael Lee Wotih 'nisa-Moore, Alabama

Before the bulldozer awakens
far beneath Grandfather Mountain...

The Old Ones speak: many winters
ago there was a cave crevice

Leading a Cheyenne Holy Man
to find a Bundle of Arrows

Arrows so sacred they say that
not a single Arrow was shot

These days The Way of the Arrow
is forbidden to 'Breeds' like me

Still I wonder where they are now
standing here in the predawn dark

Robed in the Old Ones' dying dreams
I wonder if I too shall die

Unlike perennial wild flowers
whose colors are holding me fast

Crimson creeps along the horizon
Puma on Grandfather Mountain

Old Ones' cries carried on the Wind
WARRIORS: where are they, our warriors?

WAKE, whisper-shushed by the wind's song
the Voice of the Old Ones fades into Prayer

Mountains, Pines, Pumas, Wild Flower
and Rivers...Here they stand for they must

Rooted deep in the Earth Mother
planted by something far greater

Greater than man! So Here I too
must stand before the bulldozer

Long before 'Breeds' and bulldozers
Old Ones envisioned their coming

Here and Now that living Echo grows
rooted deep Here where I'm planted

I'm the Living Chain to the Past
I the Living Chain Holding Back

Hear me Bulldozer Run In Shame.

Home Run!

Brian S., Arizona

The batter's ready, steady as
 Sweat trickles down his cheek.
The home-town crowd is silent now.
 —No one dares to speak.

The pitcher glares into his goal
 The catcher's dusty mitt.

Then winds and hurls that leather sphere
 With faith his foe won't hit.

The ball sails fast, straight and true
 Its journey nearly done
The batter swings and wood meets ball
 It could be a Home Run!

Higher! Higher! Still it soars, up
 Through the summer sky.
The faithful crowd leaps to their feet
 And cheers the noble try!

Up! Up! Back! Back!
 The spinning ball still flies!
The crowd is going crazy now;
 The win is in their eyes!

The batter's heart beats fast with joy
 The game has just been won!
With the kind of hit fans love,
 The walk-off kind—Home Run!!

M.V. E.

Rebecca "Ducky" Russel, Missouri

Hot and sweaty with little to no pay.
Attitudes are flying from tired overworked brains.
As the day runs hard,
Hot and sweaty with little to no pay.
When will the girls break? Who can say.
As tools are lost and found and CDR's written
Without any cares or pains.
Hot and sweaty with little to no pay.
Attitudes are flying from tired overworked brains.

Poet's Note:

M.V. E. is a prison clothing factory that pays 50¢ an hour.

Blown With the Wind

Super Ban, Arizona

I see I'm as the wind
Paid not too much
A shadow cast by the sun
Tossed about this non-fiction
Like a ghost, they don't feel me

A poltergeist no one believes
Years in prison, same orange sleeve
An exorcist's what one may need
Labeled the same as all, indeed
What an angle to plant a seed

I drift with the dust, they can't see me grow
The sun's glow can't cast my shadow
Why understand me when it's all
I can't walk is all, how can I
Rose in my flesh, brought to a new low

How may I rest with my bones
The truth lies deep, the wind I combed
Thrown out my body; my home
Why busy me, behind bars and stone
Where would I be, if I were left alone

A tree, a leaf?
A pig, a hog?
A rock or God?
A mantis, a frog?

Jail

William Marshall, Ohio

Jail kills your ambitions, kills your joy.
It's a landfill where your dreams are void.
Jail isn't for me, I told myself
Until I was handcuffed and thrown in a cell.
Jail made me miss out on my kid's
birthday and Christmas as well.
Funny how you can be dying inside
when living in a cell.
My friends wrote me when I first came
in. But I told them I was alright
and haven't heard from them since.
Some people come to jail and act
like being locked up isn't really
a big bother.
But, I'm here to tell you
it hurts like hell when you are used to
being a father.

One Day

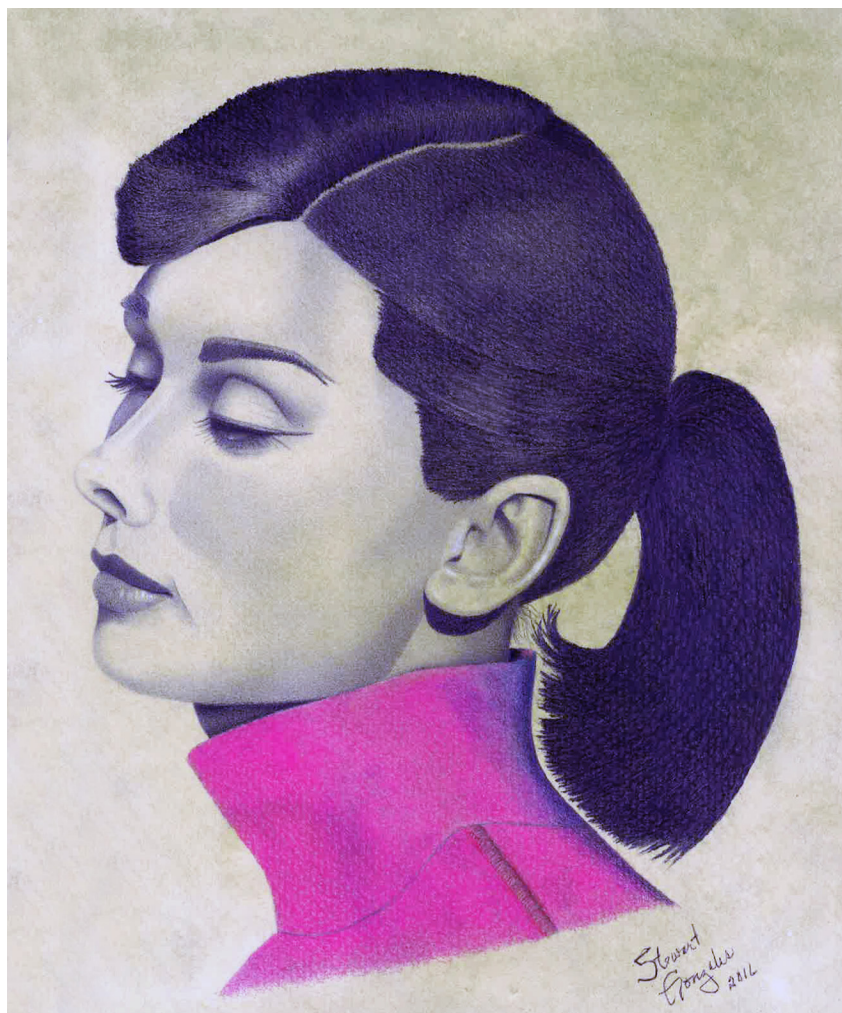
Michael Snyder, Arizona

Harsh desert winds scorch my flesh.
Grating metal bars open too slow.
Stepping forward into free air,
Too many years gone by.
I am freedom.

City lights mesmerize and blind.
Sticky sweet fumes of diesel
And the din of real life attack me,
But my journey continues on.
I am strength.

My footsteps slow as I near,
My thoughts are lost and confused.
Breathe in, breathe out, muster courage.
The wood is foreign to my hands.
I am fear.

Laughter, joy envelop my senses.
Overloaded, my strength wanes.
Tears roll softly on my cheeks.
I smile truly, effortlessly.
I am home.



Audrey

Stewart Gonzales, Arizona

2016

Where the Roses Grow

Dominic Montoya, New Mexico

If my tears could be
 turned into roses,
And my fallen faith
 into flowers,
My pain
 would give Growth to a Garden.
A Garden
 of such amazing beauty.
Beyond comprehension
 of even the most vivid mortals' imagination.
A Garden so Grand
 this home of my hurt.
A place to surpass any and all
 of this world's most exquisite creations...
My Paradise,
 my Pain.
It's here I laid you down
 among my deepest sorrows.
Puddles of tears
 turned into a bed of petals.
Borrowed
 from the blossoms of a broken heart.
My Paradise,
 my Pain.
A poison coursing through my veins.
 Still burning from the past
 Holding you inside
Within
 No Win
Body's wet
 From a cold sweat
Time's falling drops.
 Torn apart
Powerful emotions pouring out
White Hot Rage!
 To soothe the sadness

In my soul
 My Paradise
 My Pain
Mind Tired,
 Worn out, and weakened.

But can't let go
 Drowning,
In my Dark Pool of insanity
 filled with drops of life.
My Torture Reigns.
 This is where I exist
Heart hidden,
 Among the roses
In the Garden of
 My Pain.

Her Private Room

William U. Nailler, Arizona

Late afternoon slips through the windowpane
So easily, bringing sounds of children
Playing on the sidewalks all along
The avenue; and as the day descends,
The westward dimming sun transects the room
Obliquely: slow across the floor and up
The wall and on, by indigo consumed.

Anita, sitting at her window seat
In reverie, not mindful of the murk
That took the day, is weeping shadow-tears.
They flow like silent ink across a page
Obscuring reminiscent normalcies.
A hundred times she's waved these shades away,
But like a black-ball image of the sun

That lingers in the eye's translucent streams,
Come dreams—a painting in the hall, a glimmer
At the door—she still sees the cradle
In her private room where secrets play.
Today, it would have been his third; high time
For yesterdays to fade away, yet here
Again, no birthday for her unborn's grave.

Slow Going to March

William U. Nailler, Arizona

I just stood there in the doorway throat-sore at your going
on that blue afternoon in September... and a stillness settled in
thin as the wind oozing through the thorn to northward
and your passing echoes calling.

Humiliation kept me hagriding your ways while my composure
slowly crumpled in October... and the swaying trees of autumn
flayed by dizzying winds let their russet leaves go flying
and the fall crows cawing.

They too fled the carrion threat at play in the hearts of men.
I grew old in November... In the evenings at my window
I'd watch the low south sun lean its tall shadows on the lawn
and the embers of night fires falling

called me on to maudlin reveries of love and I sighed to sleep
in the frozen fugue of December... I dreamt I saw you then
shy like a winter doe shunning hunters in the killing snows
and the angst mouse gnawing

at my dull whimpering with the whispering winds wearying me
of the white death of January... then an ague took me under
into a fever dragging me down to drear deliriums of refund ruin
and the bruise of a cold moon crawling.

Then the sublimate came sending tendrils of mist adrift
of the splay of death that lay on February... and ice picks
dripped and snapped and shattered from their window frames
and yellow beams gleamed in the hall.

Now the easy running sun imbues winsome sprigs with wicking
green in the helicoid gardens of March... and the wild
were-winds slew again through the blue hedgerow thorns
and the slow going is gone.

Chasing Wind

Michael Lacy, Arizona

Today I'm wearing all black, as I often do. The two people sleeping on my apartment floor, I don't know. They must be good friends. They look comfortable lying next to each other. Their long, curly, black hair intertwined—they're so close. I'm going to pick up food for all of us. After last night, we can definitely use some nourishment. If they are here when I get back, then we all eat. Maybe they'll be gone along with the rest of my appliances and furniture. Either way, I really don't give a damn.

I close the door behind me and look up at the lava red sun, half hidden by clouds that seem to be shaped like scorpions. A few birds fly by. I enjoy the scene and take a deep breath before looking ahead, slowly pacing down the stairwell. I hear lighters flicking. I hear coughing from the meth heads always hanging out down there. That's their home, bottom of the stairs, two sleeping bags. They don't ask me for anything anymore. It's understood that if I have extra change, I'll give it without any need to beg.

No one bothers me on this block. The jack-boys and gang members have seen my affiliates from the other side of town. When I moved in a month ago, I saw them scoping me out. With no words spoken, my traffic and actions set a tone of respect. I walk through with no issues.

Those girls trashed the back seat of my caddy last night. I don't even want to look at it right now. I walk to the store. It's only down the block. I give a what's-up nod to just about everyone, but no words. My jewelry speaks for itself. I even nod at the local pimps who hang out in front of the run-down carwash. I nod and smile even though I can't stand the competition. The nod isn't for them. It's to the girls standing behind them. I see the curiosity in their eyes. If I had the time, I'd turn these guys' empire out here into a memory.

I walk into the store. The Arab wife and husband team that run this place smile when they see me. Always pay cash and never want change. I buy two quarts of Donald Duck orange juice, four deli sandwiches, and two big bags of Funions. As I walk out, a girl with green eyes approaches me. I character scan her: she's not a hooker, not a dope fiend, but definitely some fixture of street game. Her teeth are porcelain white and straight. Her clothes are clean, not revealing any skin. Her demeanor is poised and confident.

She explains that she and her friends robbed a pawn shop. She has two guns and jewelry for under half price in her hotel room down the street. I get in her old green Honda Civic and let her take me there. Upon arriving, I ask who is in the room. She says no one. Her partners in crime are recruiting clients. We enter the room and she directs me to the closet in the back.

I can't wait to see this stuff. More guns, more gold for cheap. I'm all in. I enter the closet, turn on the light. There is nothing there. Maybe my eyes are deceiving me. So I move my hand around. Nothing but air. I step out to look for the girl. I look at the couch. Nothing. Then smack. A metal object hits me in the side of the head. Intense throbbing with each blow. As I fall, I use both arms to cover my grill. I fade to black.

Slowly waking, I smell my own blood. I listen before I move. My attacker is gone. I stand and reach in my pocket for my phone. Nothing. Maybe there is some change in my other pocket for a phone call. I reach in. Nothing.

Running out of the room, I chase after the girl, my phone, my money. Outside is nothing, only the wind.

How Night Tree Mouse Outwitted Wise Ole Owl

Michael Lee Wotih'nisa-Moore, Alabama

“Lesi, Lesi. Uncle, come quick and see what is hanging in the Tree!” says my city dwelling niece in an excited cry.

“What is it, Tojan?” I ask.

“It’s a Bird, I think, but it’s hanging upside down, and it squeaks like a Mouse,” she hollers to the back porch.

Again I ask, “Tojan, what has you so excited?” I come out of the house into the evening air.

“Look, Uncle!” she says to me as she points to the lowest limb of the Locust Tree.

“Why, if it isn’t lil Night Tree Mouse,” I say to my astonished niece. “Come on in and wash your hands for supper, and after we have eaten, I will tell you the story of how Night Tree Mouse and his people the Night Tree Mice outwitted the Wise Ole Owls. Would you like that?” She nods her little, blond-haired head.

So in the evening, after we have eaten, I take Julia-Ann back out to the gnarled ole Locust Tree, and we watch the band of Night Tree Mice flutter beneath the stars and full moon, across the evening sky.

And with the Cante Ishla, Eye of the Heart, I look beyond the stretch of years and recall a similar evening and the story of the Night Tree Mouse.

“Unci, Unci, Grandmother, what is the bird that flutters like a butterfly and squeaks like a mouse?” my young self asked, as I watched the night open its eyes of stars.

“Why child, that is the Night Tree Mouse, or what your Daddy’s people call a bat,” Grandmother said to me.

“But, Unci, it’s a bird—it flies—not a mouse, so why do you call it Night Tree Mouse?”

She closed her eyes and tilted her head, as if trying to hear a voice on the wind, concentrating on it and it alone. And in little more than a whisper, she began.

When Inamaka, our mother Earth, was young, we Two-Leggeds followed the Sunkmanitupi (Wolves) out of her and into her world beneath lights of the Wi (Sun), Hanwi (Moon), and Wacipi (Stars), and Nations (Tribes). The day animals fed on the plants and animals of the day, and the night animals such as Hinhan wi (the Owl) fed on the

night animals.

And so it was the way of things, but in time all things change, even the way things are. And so one evening a brave little Night Tree Mouse named Hanmaca, meaning “He sees in Darkness,” fell asleep on a Tree branch. He was awakened by cries of birds, and when he looked up, he saw the multitude of birds of the day, hunting and chasing each other. Sometimes the Kites and Kestrels feasted. At other times, their intended prey flew away. And seeing this, Hanmaca thought that if only his Tribe had wings, then they too would have a chance to get away when the Owls hunted them. And so that night as Hanwi (Moon), grew full, Hanmaca said good-bye to his Tribe, left the safety of his Tribe's camp, and went out to find one of the silent Hunters of the night, silent Hunter of his Tribe. He set out to find one of the Hinhan wi (Owls).

He wandered the limbs of Those-Who-Always-Stand-In-A-State-Of-Prayer (the Trees), until he spied his prey sitting upon a limb. It was the great wise Owl known as Wahancipe, Night Dancer. Crouching, Hanmaca uttered a prayer of deliverance to waken Lanka, the Great Spirit, closed his eyes, and waited for his fate to be revealed. Hanmaca never heard Wahancipe leave the branch above, but he felt the strike that snatched him from the earth and drew him into the depths of the dark night.

Then landing on a scarred branch of Can (a Tree), Wahancipe spoke, “I am going to eat you now, but before I do, I must ask your name and why you did not attempt to scurry away and escape your fate like the others of your Tribe do?”

Hanmaca replied, “I am Hanmaca. What use is there to attempt to flee? How can one hope to escape the Owls and their wisdom?”

“True, true,” said Wahancipe, “you were wise not to waste your efforts to escape.”

As the Owl opened its mouth to eat the brave little Night Tree Mouse, Hanmaca spoke, “Do you know of the Kites, Kestrels, or Hawks and of their great joy of the hunt and chase?”

“Why, yes, I know of such things, for the Hawks are my winged kin and being hunters of the sky, we have shared much of hunts between our Tribes,” said Wahancipe.

“Yes,” repeated Hanmaca, “but do you personally know the joy of such a chase—the joy that such a hunt brings?”

“No,” replied Wahancipe, “I do not for there is no one like the Dove for us to chase, nor are there any of the Winged-of-the-Night for my

kind to hunt.

Looking into the eyes of the Owl, Hanmaca said, "So sad, so very sad it is that the Winged-of-the-Day should know the joy of the chase but the Winged-of-the-Night should not. But if they could, what a joy it would be for both the hunter and the hunted. What honors each could gain!"

Wahancipe, the wise ole Owl, closed his mouth and gently set Hanmaca on the branch beside him. He stared off into the Stars, pondering all that Hanmaca had spoken. Awakening to all the possible greatness and honors he could gain in a chase, such as capturing his prey. Only then could one Owl say to the other, "I am the best hunter and have earned honor as the Hawks do."

Wahancipe looked down at Hanmaca and said, "Come, let us see Wahasaka, the Snowy Owl, and holy one of the Owl Nation. He would know if we can share our medicine of flight, and the Way-of-the-Night-Sky with you and your Tribe."

Therefore, the Owl gently closed his talons around the brave little Night Tree Mouse, and rose into the Stars. Flying over North, they came at last to a Hante (Cedar Tree), where a Snowy White Owl sat. Wahancipe landed and shared all that had happened that night and all that he had contemplated about the chase and honors of such a hunt. If only they, the Owls, could share the medicine of Owl Nation gifted to them by Wakan Tanka.

The Snowy Owl, Wahasaka, sat, silently listening, then said, "All that you have said is good, and what you speak of has been done once before. Wakan Tanka, the Great Mysterious One, once allowed it, but he forbade the placing of feathers on the Flying Squirrel. It can be done. He warned that change is sometimes painful and not always in ways that one expects.

And so on the last night of the Full Moon, the two Nations gathered, and the Holy Ones of the Owl Nation thrust Hanmaca between Cedar poles and shook their round heads. For the first time, they got a glimpse of the amount of change that would be needed to transform the mouse into a Winged-One-of-the-Night. They grabbed his little arms and began to twist and stretch them so the arms would be long enough for wings. They stretched and stretched only to find the arms were then too long for Hanmaca's body. All the while, Hanmaca cried out in pain.

The Owls paused to look. "Now what shall we do for wings?" the

Owls spoke in a chorus.

“We can do as the Winged-of-the-Day did with Flying Squirrel,” says one.

All of the Holy Ones of the Owls came forward then and contributed a piece of their medicine from the Great Horned Owl. This was given to Night Tree Mouse and so was the sense of hearing as well as great horned ears. Even the lowly screech Owls gifted the newest Night Flyer.

The Creator, Wakan Tanka, the One-Who-Is-Within-All-and-Above-All, watched as the Night Tree Mouse breathed the medicine of the Night Flyers upon all of his Tribe. They took flight, and the Creator laughed at the sight. The Creator then called all of the night world animals and welcomed the new Night Flyers. Then, the Creator told the Owls that since they created the Bats, they could not feed on them for they were now a part of each other. And since the Bats had no feathers, they would flutter like Butterflies and not soar like their feathered kin.

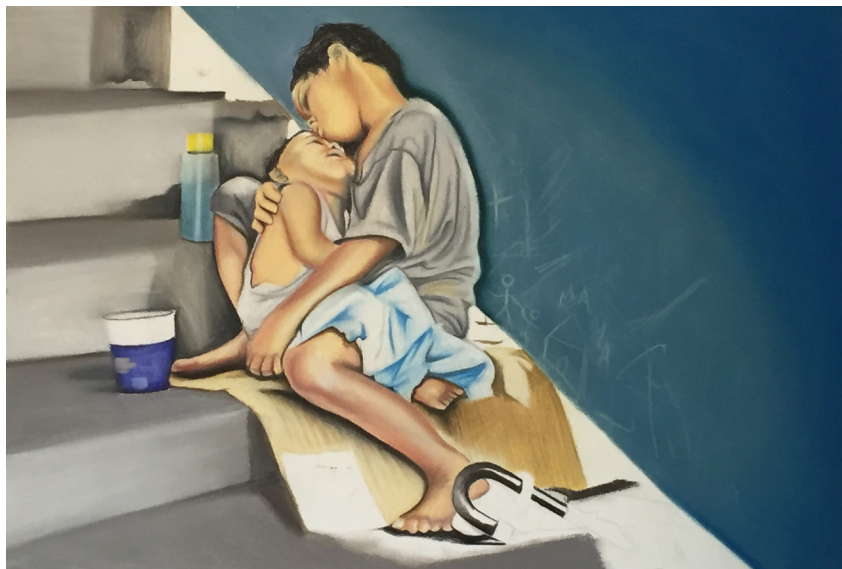
And that is how the Bat came to be.



Hope

Hector Cedillo, Arizona

Pastels on Toned Paper, 2016



Unbreakable Bond

Hector Cedillo, Arizona

Pastels on Toned Paper, 2016

Twelve Days to Count

David Roberts, Arizona

Matthew flipped through a *Boy's Life Magazine* left on the rolling tray shoved against the wall in intensive care. It had taken mere minutes to turn his attention from the depressing room to the tall and narrow window set above his seated eye level. He had spent an hour looking out at the hazy spaces between grey-blue sky and grey-white clouds, seeing Christmases past. Images had appeared with the quality of an eight-millimeter film, jumpy and discolored but true: a tree too large to fit through the double doors until cut back and decrowned; a train running on plastic tracks too quickly to hold the corners in any configuration but one; an unwrapped plush dog, slept with for years, before being relegated to guard duty at the foot of his teenage bed. Now, he propped his clean-shaven chin on his knuckles and hid his face behind a children's magazine that he thought to have gone out of print twenty years before—to keep his mind from the reality laid out on the bed before him: Santa was going to die.

Over his periodical blindfold came a familiar timbre from across the room: “This can’t be right. Is this the way it’s supposed to be?”

Lowering the magazine, Matthew saw a flash of red beneath the long white beard, Christmas colors so common that he hesitated at understanding their combined significance. The big man had one arm raised, holding the material out like a magician spreading his cape, blood suddenly staining the bleached hospital sheets and gown. Matthew leapt to his feet, tossing the magazine aside while rushing for the door. He grabbed at the frame, leaning into the circular hub, and called in panic for help to a seemingly empty space.

“My God,” he thought, “is anyone ever around when you need them?”

Three small women in identical dove white dress and whisper quiet shoes appeared from a wish and moved efficiently toward the agitation. In moments, the narrow room became a bluster of snowy elves, rapidly becoming a chorus, running to and fro, pulling carts and pressing flesh. With a singular sense of purpose, a thorough investigation followed, and the origin of the blood was found to be an intravenous line pulled loose from the patient’s arm. Soon tubes, tapes, and sponges restored order with vigorous mystical charms. With a clicking of his heels on the hard floor, a man with a clipboard strode in to take charge by

giving voice to what had already been understood. "Let's put a port in the shoulder," he said to a bobbing of compact hats, a flutter of waving white flags.

Now with a definitive direction and a telepathic eye, action resumed. Some stepped out for further supplies; others began to organize the big man's bedding.

"Sir," spoke the eldest of the white noise, a rounded woman whose profession had turned her voice chalky, "we need to do a little procedure on you and we need your permission to do it. Do you understand?"

Santa lifted his eyes from the now tidy packaging of his arm to the indifferent face of the nurse.

"I need to ask you some questions to be sure you're competent to give permission. Do you understand?"

He smiled at her as if she were his grandchild playing "adult." He answered in slow and clear concentration, "Yes."

"Can you tell me your full name?"

His beard reared as his chest rose beneath in a deep breath. Looking to the ceiling, he listed in a monotone voice, "My name is John-Anthony-Joseph-Joseph-Cowboy-Bobo-Roberts."

The frenzy of motion about him ceased as the efficient team considered delirium. To Matt, the room seemed frozen like an illustration: Norman Rockwell's "Christmas Trauma" with exaggerated surprise turned to serenity. First, the cacophonous thunderclap which comes at the end of the world, leaving Matt orphaned in the chaos of the crowd. Then the hand, the arms, the grizzled cheek with Old Spice, a murmur, and being pulled back to peacefulness...

"No! No! That really is his name!" Matthew stepped forward, parting nurses while waving his palms. "He has two middles names, and he took the same name when he was baptized, so he's 'Joseph' twice. And when he was a little kid he called himself "Cowboy Bobo" when he got this horse that bounced in place on springs. He's just joking about that. He's being funny."

Matthew looked down at the grinning face and touched the edge of the mattress with his fingertips, "Don't joke. They need you to be serious now, just for a minute."

A wink came in response and somewhere a line of belief was crossed, causing the tableau to break into motion once again. Matthew turned away, stepping back toward the window.

“OK, John,” a slight nod dropped. “Can you tell me what you did for a living, John?”

The sly smiled returned. “I used to walk on water.”

Matthew spun to the immobilized crew, raising his hands now to complete a living panorama of Da Vinci’s “Last Supper.”

“No! No! ‘walking on water’ is an old joke!”

The crowd looked at him dubiously.

“He used to do surveys, on dams, and when the water froze he’d walk on it, so he always said he could walk on water. It was his job. He walked on water.”

The waters flowed from an upstream dam, the cicadas rasped over the treacle... Matt remembered a scene.

He and his father only had one fishing pole on the water. Matt caught a single fish: a steelhead—a rainbow trout. He passed it on the line to his father, who gripped its struggling form firmly to his chest. As the hook pulled from its cheek, Matt saw the flesh of brilliant colors along its writhing side.

A voice interrupted the memory.

“So you’re retired now? Well, that must be nice. What do you like to do with your time?” the nurse asked.

The great bearded face rolled from the nurse to Matt, who stood with his chin burrowing on his chest. Matt stared at the heavily-veined and liver-spotted hand resting atop the stark sheet.

“What do you like to do?” she asked again.

Turning from Matthew, he rolled his head back to her and spoke with accentuated pronunciation, “I-am-Santa Claus.”

Again, all eyes froze on the smiling patient, and the room became paralyzed.

On a coffee table sat two albums spilling beyond capacity with photos of Old Saint Nick. There were photos where children grinned manically. There were photos where children cried or cringed in shock at the brightly colored Kringle. There were pictures where couples hugged, kissed, held hands. In these photos, all the rings, necklaces, bracelets, and car keys gleamed. The first page appeared odd, though. In it, a six-foot-four, forty-year-old child of five was tackling Santa to the buffed tile. The photo had been taken minutes before Matthew had dropped in to visit Santa at the mall.

That day, it had disoriented Matt to find the colorful character sitting atop an upturned mop bucket in the custodian’s closet of a

department store. Santa had told Matt, while lifting his great coat to check for bruises, the tale of how he got tackled. The bruises were many. Then Santa proceeded to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich from his lunch pail. The bearded man rinsed his mouth well before wiping his face and hands with wet-naps, careful to remove any oils for peanut allergies. He was always considerate of the kids.

Seeming fine, Santa had resumed his activities. Matt walked Santa back to the red cushioned throne trimmed in gold rope. Matt looked at the towering tree nearby and then back at Santa.

"It might look strange to the kids if I kissed you on the cheek," Matt said.

As Matt walked away, he looked back, but there was already another toddler sitting on Santa's lap. At the throne behind, elves stepped up to lift each child to Santa, and when they climbed down another hastened into his wide arms and the smell of his butterscotch-scented breath.

Matt passed by the lengthy line, which stretched along the gaudy displays of stores filled with clothing, cooking utensils, and pianos. Adults cut heedlessly through the procession, creating gaps with their bodies and their bulky bags. The human train would rally and the distanced cars would joyfully race to reattach and secure their place—waiting, waiting for one moment with the man.

"Wait..." said a nurse in a slow, ethereal tone, scrutinizing the long white beard, the twinkling blue eyes. "Wait, I'll be back." She dashed from the room.

"Santa Claus?" said the man still holding the clipboard to his side.

What would happen when the children stopped climbing into Santa's lap? When a child could no longer see the magic, did Santa stop giving? How could he if he is Santa Claus?

But what would happen when the bag emptied and Santa had nothing left to give?

What happened when Santa had tried to sell real estate? A genuine, caring, and giving man, a man who would never take advantage of anyone, doesn't get far because he refuses to pull the rug or glad-hand.

What happened? He pulled his bell-topped cap on in the car to wink at children in the next lane; he handed out candy-canes to stunned siblings who stopped fighting on a July beach; he smiled and he joked; he told stories to the bank teller, the grocery clerk, and the limo driver who brought a re-gifted basket of sausage and cheese for his grateful and gracious father; Santa built a fire in the hearth with the

birchwood displayed for ten years and offered a serving tray of crackers and cheddar like Scrooge's plum puddings and fat goose. Santa had given and given until he had collapsed into a hospital bed weak and bloody from cancer—and then he gave more.

Matthew pushed through the crowd and stepped between the patient and the impatient. He leaned in to kiss his father on the cheek and then stood straight. Taking the aged hand in both of his hands, he spoke to the uncertain room. "He is Santa Claus. He's more Santa than the stories. He is the real Santa pretending to be one of the pretenders—in the malls and on street corners, the ones who still want something back for the excitement and the joy they bring. He is the real one, and if you've been listening, he's given you a gift, one you can carry home to share with your kids and your grandkids. Do what you need to do. He is the sanest person in this room. He is the real Santa Claus."

"Look!" the nurse said. She extended a tightly gripped photo, retrieved from the album. "Look, there he is with my son. He was only four. Look how little he is. And look who's holding him!"

She looked back at Matt. "He really is Santa!"



Things Are Looking Up

J. Hoepfner, Arizona

Acrylic, 2017

Xenophobia

Angelo Niles, Arizona

Only one beast on Earth did this, Miles Keehan told his writhing innards. Crosses, silver bullets, crystal amulets—all beyond the pale of this queer species; certainly so, considering the way it chose to cocoon the anthropoid's body. Subtle flecks of gore and keratin marred the Venetian tiles. Moonlight from an open window splashed icy blue tendrils over a tarsal bone, rib cage, tibia, and a perfectly set femur still pulsating within the chrysalis. Slow and meticulous efforts were underway to free the Venusian astrophysicist from the silken husk. The partially exposed digits spoke of small, strong fingers—most likely manicured, if not pampered by a fastidious life in Lake Oswego, Oregon.

As condos go, this one had its perks: a wide veranda overlooking a sere lake shore, silk drapes, Mies van Rohe décor, terrazzo marble fireplace, Picasso prints, and a plasma fish tank with sexy holograms diving for coral. Eyeing it all was an oil painting of Dra-Conth Raj, Venus's crown prince and heir to the intrasolar energy conglomerate Raj Solar Dynamics. Those eerie compound eyes dug into Miles' keen human orbs. Almost accusingly, he felt, blinking at the alien noble.

The cocooned victim, Thleus Fyrbud, had enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle Earthside. A playboy scientist with a fetish for exotic art and lovely Slög escorts. Good life. Bad way to go, Miles thought, closely inspecting the skeletal ridges. Wedged in the bony sculpture was a single black pearl. A calling card, like the four Lake Oswego hits before it. Something noir. Cutesy. Only one beast adored such things. Miles knew, even without the forensic report, that Thleus' killer had probed his scaly flesh through and through, feeding on his urges.

"Yep," Miles breathed. "Perp got messy on this fifth one," he told Detective Rudy Gunwick, the primary on the scene. "They mucked things up bad. See this splotch?"

"What splotch?" Gunwick asked, pushing his masked nose closer. "I don't see nothing but—" He caught sight of it. "Oh, shoot, that! Hey, you're good, Keehan. One freakish piece of work."

"Only mistake," Miles noted, as if he admired the perp's handiwork. With a latex-gloved hand, he traced the subtle outline of a bloodstain, barely washed from the terracotta tiles and still apparent to the naked eye. "Got careless just this once," he said. "Or got bored with the

efficiency of the other hits. Either way, it's toying with our profilers, I'd say."

There Miles went again, referring to the killer in that chilling way as an "it" rather being gender-specific. Maybe it was the flimsy thing fluttering at the sliding glass door, tiny wings of a gypsy moth lured by the scent of blood, the charred marrow. As if it were a tiny ghost haunting Miles. Eyes so luringly hypnotic, like those Puritan angels he'd encountered not long ago in Darwin, Nova Scotia. A ghost taunting his soul: Never forget your promise, Miles Keehan. Give those ferns all your energy and love and care...

Had he failed in his promise? Were such infestations from the stars a result of humanity's sins upon the planet?

Of course, the young detective could scarcely know about bone fetishes, about rare pearls, or star-faring succubae who thrived on leathery screams and chitinous fear. Even so, Gunwick took a stab. "Okay, so it's the Bone Maker guy, for sure. Snuffed Fyrbud out shortly after nightfall, like the others. That's your take?"

"So far as it looks," Miles replied. It grated on his nerve how naïve the cops were. The Portland PD acted as if it wasn't an alien demon they were dealing with, for God's sake. But then, how could Gunwick fathom such a thing? After all, an extraterrestrial psyche was far too clever for ordinary protocol. Miles sighed harshly. "In case you didn't notice, the whole body's eviscerated. Nothing left to exhumate but fused bone and about a third of Dr. Fyrbud's skull. I'd say that's a pretty good indication we're dealing with the Bone Maker absolutely, Gun."

For six weeks now the killer had struck terror. Mostly its prey had been off-world bachelors, five in all. All dead: One by one, the thing had stalked their skins, had left nothing of their identities but ossified trace. It had drawn the attention of the FBI's Serious Crimes Unit. And NASA's Exoplanetary Crimes Office. Once again Vincent Roselli was heading the investigation, and once again he'd called on Miles like he had in solving the Lake Murders. Only a xenobiologist of his ilk could snare a fiend like the Bone Maker, NASA insisted, secretly edgy over the political fallout should Venus catch wind of Fyrbud's gruesome demise. The Bureau was getting antsy, too. But for the life of him, Miles hadn't snared a single suspect. Even the County Medical Examiner's Office was lost for explanation. To make things worse, they'd ignored Miles' hunch that their killer wasn't human, thanks to that prissy Dr. Prescott.

Well, he'd just have to prove them all wrong. "Ever figure how he

did them?" Gunwick asked as Miles dug the pearl from an ulna. "Bones don't look right, you know? I mean, how'd they get fused like that anyhow?"

"Theory is," Miles huffed, "they got torched somehow."

"Like in a kiln?"

"Got me. Fact is, we've got a pissed off psychopath out there. One capable of outsmarting every Dick Sleuth this side of the Willamette. Even had Prescott's sepal in a bunch."

"Oh yes, the pathologist I heard of. Cute gal. Consults for the FBI like you. So, nobody's got a clue, then?"

"Clues we got. Suspects?" Miles held the extracted black pearl at eye level. "Got no fibers, no hairs, no prints. Just this puppy here."

Gunwick aimed a flashlight at the crevices, chasing more evidence, but knew, as Miles did, that the place was clean. Save for the bloodstain, the ghastly bones, and a faint scent Miles couldn't place. A vile scent. One that clung to the skin long after the deed was done. Pure evil. Miles knew it well, for he'd touched it before, had wandered into its lair and brushed against its bristly darkness. Like he had on Europa with Cynthia Atkins, when he'd foolishly strayed into that cove of lust and curiosity; when that sentient liquid oozed darkly from the gelid depths, questing out his ochre skin, nearly killing Miles as it did Cynthia and the entire deep space exploration team.

Since that catastrophe on Jupiter's icy moon years ago, NASA had kept close survey on Earth's newly arrived migrants from the Kepler regions, from far off nebulae, and planets newly colonized in the Solar System. Oh, the Bureau had its psychics, its experts in the paranormal, but only scientists like Miles Keehan truly understood the morphic nature of the beast at hand.

As he eyed the pearl, a cold gust touched his nape, felt up his spine like fingernails. A whiff of gardenias kissed his sinuses, stirring his loins. A rosy dash of camphor. Cripes Almighty, she had all but surged from the stygian night, pouring onto their cozy crime scene like fog.

Dr. Royce Prescott.

All legs and shapely curves under a jet-black Versace overcoat (and Miles hoped to hell nothing else!) draped over snugly fit Gucci slacks and high stiletto heels. If she wore anything under that leather coat, it would shatter his reverie of savoring her supple—

"Bones again, boys?" asked Prescott, breaking his spell. She damned well knew the crime scene well before her arrival. Like the four before

it, this one had the same *modus operandi*, set in scoria hues in the brick tomb just inches from Fyrbud's silk drapes. Another chrysalis spun by an unearthly creature, yes.

She pursed her rosy lips. "Back on the prowl, Miley boy? Though the Bureau chased you from Special Crimes after that fiasco. The Boles file, wasn't it?"

Still had fangs. Knew how to sink them deep into his cold, hungry flesh. He frowned, convinced she was seducing him right in front of poor Thleus. Admittedly, Miles was aroused by her steely aura, her catlike eyes, fiery auburn hair cropped short tonight, with steel earrings falling over a long, sensuous neck. Dressed to kill the likes of Rudy Gunwick. Likely he'd never seen a Vermeii in the flesh.

"It's Dr. Keehan," Miles demurred, embracing her icy wit. "And, yes, I'm back on the prowl, or whatever the Corpse Farm calls it nowadays."

She gave him a sultry grin. "Easy there," she urged, flashing her genie eyes.

Miles knew well the tender probe of her blood red nails, kneading his Terran flesh just a winter ago, an eternity back when he'd been led by investigative lust. A fling, yes. A xenobiologist's dream, heavenly angels, making intimate case study of Earth's newest colonizers: sixty light-years out from their Red Cluster birth place whence this Vermeii vixen was spawned.

She whistled softly, eyeing the bony protrusion near her gloved hand. "Ghastly way to go," she said. "Am I seeing what I think I am, boys? Blood?"

"That's right, Dr. Prescott," Gunwick confirmed, suddenly a forensics expert. "He's getting sloppy, looks like."

"He?" she replied.

"Or a she—maybe even an it," Miles spoke up. He had to assert his objective charge. "Who knows, really? But it's definitely the Bone Maker. Doubtful your expertise can do much for the deceased now, I'm afraid."

He looked searchingly into her swirling green slits. NASA had deigned to rely on Prescott's ability to deduce cause of death simply by olfactory probes of cell tissue. Scent cilia on a Vermeii's brow ridge could sniff out foul play like no canine on Earth. Still, Miles mistrusted the medical examiner's methods. "Care to tell us why you're even on this case, Royce? Given the guy's lack of flesh, isn't it obvious what the cause of death is?"

Miles got serious. "Say, Gun. Don't you have a report to begin? I mean, the photographer's job is done, so why don't you go do what you PD boys do? Give us some room to scrape the paint, so to speak. Deal?"

"Oh yeah, sure thing. I'll just go find a donut somewhere." He holstered his flashlight and his pride, then left obediently, although Miles was hardly in charge, being a mere NASA consultant on an FBI crime scene. Washed up goods, Miles Keehan. Your credibility's teetering on eggshells after that Titan outbreak got you demoted from the status of a real xenobiologist. Still, Miles had talents. Despite the events on Europa and Saturn's moon, Miles was a keen profiler.

"Straight-edged cop," Prescott observed aloud.

"Portland's finest," Miles agreed.

"So why the leave-us-alone routine? Got some deviant hunch going through your mind? Some kinky theory? Off the record, like?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Prescott. It was a fling, that's all. Or didn't I satisfy your fetish enough that night?"

She touched a protruding cheekbone in the brick surface. "Oh, come now," she cooed, lifting her alien face to his. "Aren't we going to be adults about this? After all, what's my skin fetish got to do with work, huh? Besides, love is only skin deep, Miles darling."

Miles stammered, "Duh-don't g-go there. That was a big mistake. We're not even the same species." Cloudy arousal seized his senses as the Vermeii pressed closely, shooshing him with a talon.

She kissed him wetly. Crimson petals. Her lips devoured his, her tongue probing his life force, tasting his hidden fears. She breathed against his stubbly cheek.

"No, don't," he said, trying to break her tender spell. What did she think? He'd just melt in her arms after the way she'd ignored his calls? After treating him like a pariah in Laguna Beach? That he'd simply—

Camphor roses. Sweetly intoxicating, oh heavenly bliss.

She held him close. So near that eerie chrysalis...

"Royce," he insisted weakly. "I don't think we...we should..."

She purred. "I know all about you, Miles. I know exactly what you are and what you've done. Poor, poor Cynthia. She was your best profile, wasn't she? Got every detail right because you knew the beast up close. You knew the risks. Taking those bioengineered sporophytes to Europa, exposing Cynthia and those crewmen to a dark sentience. Of course you knew the modus operandi, didn't you, Miles? I've known from the day we first touched, the day I smelled it on your skin."

Shock drew over his brow, etching into his soul. No, no. He'd been so very careful. There in Jupiter's gravity well, on Europa's icy surface, when he'd staged the crime scene, setting loose those spores on the survey team. Albeit by accident, he'd been responsible for the catastrophe. He'd returned Earthside, grief-stricken, and forced into hiatus. He'd sought recovery in Darwin, but found no escape from Cynthia's haunting memory.

Even years after losing his fiancée, Miles felt guilt, a need to redeem his soul with offerings of ferns, orchids, fuchsias, and newly germinated seedlings left at all those crime scenes. Days or weeks before the genetically altered silk moths descended on each of their ossified remains—aliens all, invaders who'd overrun the planet with their exoplanetary genes, stealing Earth's resources from right under humanity's noses. They didn't belong, Miles told his writhing innards. Someone had to exterminate the infestation. Thleus Fyrbud, that Cryon banker, that Ftyri engineer, a Slög cabby in Seattle—all cocooned by an unlikely demon spawned in a NASA laboratory.

"If you hadn't left the flora, I'd never have seen the link," she told Miles, her eyes flickering like fiery emeralds. She lifted a talon to his cheek, probing the bone though not piercing the skin. "Nash Fahey, the botanist at Quantico, got me thinking. Exactly how does one breed a tiny thing like a gypsy moth? Ah yes, a genetically altered killer. Bred right in your own Laguna Beach condo of all places."

Miles could hardly swallow, couldn't breathe. Yet he muttered, "Who...who are you, Royce? What the hell are you? Some kinda jinn? Some cursed...empath?"

"Oh, you already know what I am."

With sudden fury, she threw Miles up against the tiles, was on him before he slid down, and she purred: "You're such a flimsy moth, Miles Keehan. Too bad you misjudged my fetish that night, too. Ah, humans are so easily lured by the lustful scent of mortality. All those lives. Souls snuffed out by your misguided fears. Each of them cocooned, one by one, by avarice and Earthly decadence.

Blood-curdling fear racked his being. She was a devil, a Versace-cloaked succubus of some origin unknown to science. Miles reeled in horror. She was not a mere Vermeii pathologist sent by NASA. Royce Prescott was entirely beyond any carbon-based biology. A dark angel come to rectify humanity's blight upon the cosmos.

A red tongue flicked over her gorgeous mouth. With Miles groping

for a Glock he never bothered to carry, she poured from her clothing, wavering before the terrace, a mere watery after image stalking his will, drawing out his energy in wispy cords. He tried to defy her preternatural prowess but couldn't. If only Miles hadn't sent Gunwick away. If only he hadn't begged Roselli for the lead on the Bone Maker case. If not for that and his knack for staging the most inexplicable crime scenes ever to cross anybody's desk at Special Crimes, maybe he could have kept far from the dark thing he'd unwittingly become. But he hadn't resisted the urge, the awful xenophobia that drove him to what he'd done to all those Slögs, those poor migrants from Kepler-16B.

As if melding with the scoria tiles there alongside Thleus Fyrbud's bony husk, Miles felt his skin furl back, blood surging hotly. He felt his cells morph, felt his molecules join hers. Royce Prescott, sweet as a fecund breeze pouring over Lake Oswego. Dear God, she was altering his very DNA, as she'd done with Fyrbud, leaving raw cartilage...and bone!

Gunwick burst into the room, his tachyon gun coughing laser-beam pulses at the offending Vermeii. She let go of Miles with anguished howls, furious at the cop's intervention. But NASA had armed its terrestrial forces with technology no Vermeii could thwart or evade. Milliseconds exploded over the fiend's vermilion curves and reduced Prescott to vapor and extrasolar ash.

"Boy, did Roselli call that dead on," Gunwick revealed, holstering the silvery weapon. "Gotta say, Dr. Keehan, we'd never have gotten our perp without your keen insights. And those gypsy moths, yeah."

Miles blinked. He grasped his own limbs, not believing he was whole still. He'd nearly succumbed to that ghastly fission, that horrid metamorphosis that claimed Fyrbud and the others. "He knew?" Miles gasped. "Roselli knew what Prescott was all along?"

"And you, Dr. Keehan. After your psychotic breakdown on Europa, when that outbreak took your beloved Cynthia, they pretty well knew you'd fit the profile."

"Profile?"

"A grief-stricken vigilante on the Bone Maker case."

Gunwick gently coaxed Miles from the crime scene and out into the cool Oregon night, where a swarm of FBI agents prowled the grounds. Vincent Roselli waited with hard grey eyes set on the xenobiologist, who'd become a case study for the boys at Quantico. The dark-suited agent-in-charge gave the detective a knowing nod, then requested the

high tech sidearm holstered at his side.

"Neat toys you Bureau guys have," Rudy Gunwick remarked, giving up the classified tackyon gun. "Any chance Portland PD can clone that tech, agent?"

"Not a chance," Roselli promised. Sighing at Miles, pity laced his voice as he informed him: "We're all sorry about your tragedy, Doc, but fact remains you violated interstellar law and are facing charges of xenocide. Slögs got a right to life too, Miles Keehan."

The ensuing tribunal led to a fierce debate on that fact as Earth's many scientists and theologians examined what it truly meant to be human in a cosmic sea of intelligent life forms. Maybe, just maybe the Universe held far too much diversity and far too few habitable worlds on which to congeal all those genes into a common Eden. It also came to light that the origins of those sentient sporophytes unleashed on Europa and Titan lay far off in the Magellanic Cloud, given to Miles by that trio of Puritan angels he'd encountered in Darwin, they concluded after reviewing his report about the near-dead ferns rejuvenated by Faedra's touch. Apparently, Nash Fahey testified before the tribunal, those potted offerings left by Faedra and her clone sisters were themselves intelligent life.

"Spore breeders," Fahey explained, "capable of mutating living cells into replicas of Earth-born flora like roses or orchids. The aliens must've exposed Miles Keehan to the sporophytes well before they arrived in Darwin. Perhaps years before the Europa landing of 2038. Poor Cynthia Atkins and her crew were likely exposed to the outbreak unwittingly when Dr. Keehan arrived with the experimental payload. NASA bears culpability too, I think. They knew the risks. Alien pathogens don't belong anywhere near Earth's delicate ecosystem, if you ask me."

Only nine long months of grueling testimony and evasive cross-examination by NASA's legal geniuses led to an eventual acquittal of all charges. After all, poor Miles had himself been the victim of a psychosis born of extraterrestrial origins. He wasn't to blame for his xenophobic foul play. "Best we keep all this classified," Roselli told the Bureau's director. "Wouldn't want the Venusians retaliating for Fyrbud's fatal exposure to the moth pandemic."

Yep, Miles old boy, the cosmos may yet have plans for that green thumb of yours. Otherworldly planets and moons throughout the Milky Way await the fecund seeds of humanity's hubris. Ah, yes...



Shark-Bit

The Illustrious and Incomparable Mr. Mr. Ward Y., The Great, Chosen-One, Golden-Child, Esquire, III and V, Sir, Arizona

Inmate-Prodigy (Astounding feats of brilliance from within the prison walls): The Anatomy of a Shark-Bit

The Illustrious and Incomparable Mr. Mr. Ward Y., The Great, Chosen-One, Golden-Child, Esquire, III and V, Sir, Arizona

I've always been an avid fan of shark documentaries. In fact, my appetite for adventure has often led me to believe I could've been a great marine biologist or ocean explorer. Though my path has led me "elsewhere," the Discovery Channel's "Shark Week" has spurred my pondering of a dream that could've been. And until only recently, that dream seemed oceans away...

Having drunk too much coffee one evening, I wrestled with myself to get to sleep. After several failed attempts, I decided instead to turn the TV on to preoccupy my mind. As fate would have it, Discovery's Shark Week was on. As I lay there, the back-to-back episodes prominently exhibited some of the latest research on the whole span of shark species. From the mass feeding-frenzies of Hammerheads to the bullet speeds of the Mako. From the gluttony of the Tiger Shark to the sea-to-sky aerial attacks of the Great White. Scientists and biologists remain bewildered by the aggressive behaviors of these fish. Weeks, months, and even years—and perhaps millions of dollars—are spent filming these elusive creatures to capture the essence of their violent temperament. Still, in the end, we're left absolutely mystified by these most aloof and often terrifying tyrants.

The coffee must have heightened my senses significantly because I soon found myself enveloped, even transfixed. Hour after hour, I watched, even studied, one shark attack after another with a caffeine-induced diligence. I could hardly look away. Then I made note of something peculiar. I couldn't quite place it, but something struck me in a way that eluded my grasp, and it felt on the brink of revelatory. It frustrated me that I couldn't put my finger on it. The unfinished thought toyed with my eager mind. I couldn't just let it go.

Soon, I became so frustrated that I forced myself away from the set, if for no other reason than to give my burning-eyes a reprieve and grab a snack from my locker. I then made myself a peanut-butter sandwich to quell my anxiety.

As I bit into the sandwich, I was struck with an epiphany! It hit

me like a bolt of lightning! “Of course!” I whispered to myself in a controlled excitement. My brow furrowed in disbelief, and a tingle shot up my spine as I now contemplated the unraveling of a centuries-old mystery surrounding shark attacks. Could it have been this simple? Could I have just figured out the very riddle that has plagued these scientists for so long...from in prison, no less! It seemed preposterous, I’ll admit, but likely nonetheless.

I made haste to my archive-box, where I had kept notes that I had taken years ago while watching the late, great, marine-explorer, Jaw Cousteau. I felt as though my long-lost dream of becoming a marine researcher was coming to fruition as I resurrected my data regarding jaw-movements and mandible-structures. My theory, if correct, would revolutionize the way we perceive shark attacks forever and solve this puzzle once and for all!

Studying my notes, I was able to systematically deduce that when sharks approach their prey, they tend to open their mouths, as if wanting to take a bite. Though the researchers and scientists must have overlooked this key element, this very movement of the jaw-structure rang familiar to me the moment I bit into my peanut-butter sandwich. It was then, that through a very strict application of associative principles, I was able to piece together this startling conclusion: SHARKS ATTACK WHEN THEY ARE FREAKIN’ HUNGRY!

*** I’ll be sending my findings to the National Marine Life and Ocean Research Foundation, once they are copyrighted and protected by the Library of Congress.

*** In addition, I am withdrawing all of my financial support towards any continued shark research, as this case is now closed!

Do Owls Dream?

David Evans, Georgia

Three years in a hole changes a man. I don't know where my hole is, exactly, but I know a forest surrounds me. At night, when my captors mercifully fall asleep, I lie awake listening to the life of insects and birds and land mammals and tree mammals and amphibians thriving in the trees and brush around me. Once a night, to stave off the teeth of the wild animal called Time, I try to imagine the faces of Nicole and Hayden, my wife and son.

Sometimes I write poems. I'm not allowed pen and paper, and my memory fades like the mating calls of birds, so I recite my poems over and over. Not great poems. Just poems. Like the one I wrote last night:

Do Owls Dream?

*For a long time
I went to go to bed early
Forever in a hurry
To end the day.*

*Now I stay
Up with the owls
And wonder:
Do owls dream of gliding
Like eagles
Above the clouds?*

Mama's Party

Marquis Loudon, California

Sounds of laughter and music woke me from a half sleep. I could hear the clinking of glass as drinks were poured and the rhythmic thud of footsteps as folks danced to the music.

This was nothing unusual. Mama had her get-togethers just about every other week. It was either that or she would be going out clubbing with her friends. I usually enjoyed those nights. I would wait for the door to close and let a few minutes pass, just in case she forgot something. Then I would run to her room, jump on the big bed and watch cartoons until after midnight. This wasn't one of those nights.

The smell of heavy perfume and cheap cologne seeped through my door and fogged up my room. I got out of bed and slowly walked to the door. Listening to the excitement, I imagined being a part of the party. I wanted so badly to open the door and yell out, "Here I am!" But Mama would surely whup my butt for that. So I just listened. I could hear laughing. Folks singing along with the music.

"Get me some papers so I can roll this joint," I heard a voice say.

Then I heard Mama. "Hell, no, Rodney. Y'all can smoke on them cigars, but if you wanna puff that shit, take it outside. My son is in the other room."

"Aint nobody finna' light up in yo' house, Kim. And why you always got lil' Dre cooped up anyway? You need to take ya nipple out his mouth and let the boy grow up."

"You let me worry about me and mine. Okay?"

Overall it sounded fun. Why was Mama trying to keep this from me?

Why did I have to stay in this room alone while she had all the fun? It just wasn't fair. I didn't care if I got in trouble. I had to see what was on the other side of that door.

Slowly I turned knob, opening the door just an inch to see if anyone was paying attention. All I saw was teeth, gleaming through the red glow. No one cared about me. They were focused on having a good time. The temperature went from cool to humid in an instant. Beads of sweat began to occupy my forehead, and my heart raced.

A single red light in the corner of the living room set an eerie glow. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought I had just stepped into the pits of hell. I stood still, observing this situation. There were

folks hugged up by the sofa, slow dancing to the music. Some guys at the table were playing cards and drinking and blowing clouds of smoke from their mouths.

He was sitting at the head of the table, looking down at me. It was like he was waiting for me. We locked eyes. In that moment, he was all I saw. He gave me a nod. The single gesture hypnotized me. This bald-headed man with a long beard then grinned at me cynically. He blew smoke through his nose as if he were a raging bull. Then he smiled, revealing his shining gold teeth. I thought, *He must be the Devil*.

The Devil motioned for me to come to the table where he was sitting. My eyes searched the room for Mama. She was in the middle of the living room dancing with a man dark as midnight with long dreadlocks. Mama's head was tilted back and the big black man was whispering something into her ear as he slowly wrapped his massive arms around her like two pythons squeezing their prey. I looked back toward the Devil. His shiny teeth were still exposed. I could tell he sensed my fear. He threw a hand Mama's way, as if to say, "Don't worry about her."

Don't be scared, I told myself. So I took off. I went right up to the Devil and said, "What y'all playin'?"

He looked at me for a second with those deep eyes and replied, "Poker."

"Can I play?"

"Naw, lil' man. This a grown man game. You can watch me take these fools' money, though." The Devil then picked me up and sat me on his knees.

In that moment, I felt a part of this whole new world. This could be me one day. Head of the table, in charge. The other guys at the table seemed weak compared to the Devil. I looked at all three of them one at a time and not one pair of eyes met mine. That was one of the first lessons of my young life: the power of eye contact.

"What's that?" I pointed to a red cup near the Devil's hand. Each of the other three guys at the table had one as well. They were the same cups Mama filled up with juice and gave me with dinner.

"This here is grown up juice, lil' man."

"Can I have some?"

The Devil took the cigarette dangling from his lips and set it into the ashtray. He grabbed the cup and handed it to me.

"Here."

It was that easy. Ask and you shall receive. I took the cup and put it to my lips. The Devil was looking down at me with a big grin on his face. I took the first sip and my face scrunched up. I spat out the liquor all over the floor—I didn't care where it went. I just wanted it out of my mouth. Everyone at the table started laughing at me. I didn't want them to think I was some punk, even if I was just ten years old, so I took another sip. This time it was a big one. Before I could put the cup down, I heard a powerful voice, "Rodney, what the hell you doin' with my boy!"

Once again, I spat everything all over the floor. Mama charged over to us. She had that same look she gets when my teacher calls from school and delivers bad news.

"DeAndre, get yo' ass down from that table." Mama grabbed me by the arm and forced me down. She slapped the Devil across the face.

Rodney stood tall and looked at Mama with those deep eyes. He turned around and walked out of the apartment. By this time, the music had stopped playing, and all eyes were on Mama. Mama looked at me, eyes wide, and said, "Go to your room."

I knew very well what that meant. In my room, I could hear the goodbyes. A man's voice said, "He's just a boy, Kim. Let him live a little."

"Don't tell me how to raise my son," Mama said.

The sound of the front door shutting caused me to jump. I could hear footsteps coming closer to my room. The door opened. Mama stood in my doorway with her favorite leather belt.

"So you wanna be grown?" she said to me, and she moved forward, wrapping the belt around her hand as she had done plenty of times before.

"No, Mama. I don't think I'm grown," I said through tears.

"Oh, I haven't gave you nothing to cry about yet."

"Mama, I'm sor—" I felt the first whack of the belt hit me on the back, and I yelled out.

"You're not gonna grow into a thug," Mama said, as she hit me over and over.

All I could do was yell and scream, hoping someone would hear me and come to my rescue. No one came. They never came. After I got my beating and Mama left my room, I curled up in the corner sobbing. All I could think about was sitting at the head of that table.



Lost Someplace, Somewhere in Time

Nick James Gonzales, New Mexico

Pencil, 5 1/8" x 8 1/8", 2016

Rob

Daniel Cox, New Mexico

Alfred felt his full seventy-two years as he painstakingly rolled out of bed. Every joint in his body seemed to scream out its disapproval at having to get up. He stretched cautiously, trying to relieve the stiffness he felt. It was not working. His muscles decided to join in the argument with his joints, demanding he lay back in bed. But he didn't. If old Alfred was anything, it was tough. He got to his feet and continued his stretch.

Alfred found that in his old age he had become a man of routine. He did not stray from it. It felt unnatural if he tried. He crossed his small bedroom, his bare feet dragging on the cool wood floors, to his tiny little bathroom.

It was a very basic bathroom. It had linoleum floors and a porcelain tub, toilet, and sink. The shower curtain was two shades of blue: light blue on the top with dark blue waves on the bottom. Pictures of dolphins lay suspended out of the waves.

Alfred didn't care much for the thing, but his son's wife Anna had got it for him. She was also responsible for a little wicker basket filled with seashell-shaped soap, a picture frame with a dried starfish and beach sand in it, towels with seashells intricately sewn into them, and bottles of scented soap that sat on the edge of his sink. Anna had declared that the decorations gave his bathroom character.

Alfred did not see the need for character....It was a bathroom for God's sake. He knew she meant well though.

He faced his sink and mirror and began to brush his teeth. He was very meticulous about his hygiene, especially his teeth. At seventy-two he still had them all, a feat he was very proud of. He brushed and flossed vigorously.

After showering, he dressed in sweats and started his daily walk. His routine never changed. A quarter mile from his house was a large park. He would walk there, circle it twice, then stop at the coffeehouse on his way home. Alfred enjoyed the walk. The park was tucked in the middle of the city, and to him, seemed like a secret oasis. Brick and stone buildings surrounded the lush green park, making it like a pearl hidden within its sturdy shell. The park was mostly consumed by a frisbee golf course, which consisted of large open spaces, scattered trees for obstacles, and several metal baskets that acted as the "holes." On the

far side of the park from where Alfred entered was a pond. There were several trees for shade, benches, and even ducks and a swan that called it home. Not only was his walk around the park physical exercise, but it was mental exercise as well.

He went to the same coffee shop every day. It was located on the corner of his street and was called Morning Brew. He had been going there almost every day since he had moved here nearly three years ago. The owner worked the counter most days, and all the baristas knew him well.

"Morning, Al," the woman said from behind the counter. It was Carrie, the owner. She had called over the heads of about a dozen customers waiting to make their order. The counter was all glass and displayed the variety of sweets and pastries that were all baked in-house.

It was busy for a Saturday. Everyone seemed to be up and about this morning. To the right of the entrance was a large open space filled with tall, small round tables with chairs. A window filled the right wall. On the back wall was a small stage. They held poetry slams on certain nights. Alfred never attended.

"Morning, Carrie," he said as he skipped the lines. To his left was a little nook with a couple of the same tall, small round tables. One sat empty by the window. It was a prime spot...

His spot. He removed the small reserved sign and took a seat.

The sweet smell of pastries mixed with the savory aroma of coffee filled the coffee house. Alfred sat and enjoyed the scents. Behind him, along the back wall, sat a big tan couch. A large, glass-top coffee table was placed in front of it. Along the left wall was a book case. On it were several books, "Morning Brew" coffee mugs, bags of whole bean coffee, and other things the shop sold.

"Mornin', Al," a young woman said softly as she began to place his regular order on the table: black coffee, newspaper, and one half of a cinnamon roll, no icing. "Here's your regular."

"Thank you, Tina," Alfred said as he smiled at her. Tina was Carrie's daughter and usually helped out on weekends. She was always really sweet to Alfred. He pulled out an extra dollar for the tip.

"Thanks, Al," she replied. "Let me know if you need anything else."

Alfred nodded as she turned and headed back to the counter. He surveyed the people. Alfred loved to sit and people watch. The coffee house was perfect for that. He always smiled at the rush everyone was

always in. He knew he was like that when he was younger too. Always running from here to there. Only in old age had he discovered that you missed so much when you rushed. You end up running yourself right through Life.

After about an hour, in the shop he headed home. His house was called a condo, but to him, it was just a small, one-bedroom apartment. It was located on the ground level of a large complex. The building housed several other condos. What he liked most about his unit was that it had its own entrance. There was a small gate outside his front door. He had his own mail slot in his door along with a mailbox for posting letters just outside his door. He did not have to share an entrance with others. His condo was its own cozy, little home. This was exactly how Alfred liked it.

As he got closer to his place, he noticed his son's car parked out front.

Great, he thought, as he approached the gate. I'm in for another surprise.

Victor, his son, knew his routine well. Victor only showed up when Alfred wasn't home, to surprise him with some new thing that Alfred would otherwise send away. Victor had his own key and was already inside.

Victor worked as a sales rep for a major high-end software and robotics company. It was called Servi-Tech, and they specialized in personal automatons and robots.

In the last decade the electronic/digital age had boomed. Robotics had advanced dramatically. Everything seemed to be automated and digital now.

Smart cars that drove for you. Smart homes that took care of you. Smart phones and computers that thought for you.

Robotics had also been integrated into healthcare. Large, square machines acted as R.N.'s and even personal hospice care nurses. Police departments around the nation and across the globe utilized robots for bomb detection and removal. There were even several departments using specialized robots as meter maids.

The biggest hype in robotics was personal robots. Companies were racing to put out the best and most efficient personalized bots, from cleaning and manual labor robots to butler and companion robots. There were several models that could hold a conversation with you and seemed to adapt and think.

This was what Victor specialized in selling. And business was good. Everyone was looking for something new that would make their lives easier. Lazier is what Alfred believed.

Victor had brought some new gadgets to Alfred in hopes that they would simplify his life. His life was already simple. He didn't need fancy coffee machines and ugly housecleaning robots. He could clean up after himself....But Victor always insisted.

Alfred loved his son but he was not ready for all the gadgets. He hadn't even got used to the internet before the world was swept away in robots. He was an old man. What was that saying? You can't teach an old dog new tricks....Sometimes he'd wish his son would leave this old dog to rest. To hell with robots.

Alfred didn't make it to his door before Victor was outside greeting him.

"Dad," he said with a genuine smile. "There you are. We've been waiting for you." He stepped forward and embraced his father warmly.

"Yeah, yeah," Alfred replied as he let go of Victor. "You knew very well that I wouldn't be home. You know my routine. You came early so you could sneak something into my house." He watched Victor suspiciously. "What did you bring me?"

Despite Alfred's suspicion, he was always glad to see his son. For Victor's part, ever since his mother passed away from cancer three years ago, he had been determined not to let his father slip into oblivion.

Victor had strongly disapproved when Alfred sold their large family home after Eleanor passed. Alfred had reassured him that he didn't need all that space anymore. Something small and cozy would do fine. Though the truth was that Eleanor was wrapped all around that house. Her memory was everywhere, and he had found it too painful.

Victor made it a point not to let his father fall into despair in his little condo. He worried about him, "all alone in his little apartment." Alfred missed Eleanor every day, but it had been three years and he was well past grieving.

Victor wrapped his arm around his father's shoulders. "You got me, Dad," he said with a smile as they walked to the front door. "I brought you something, though you don't deserve it... That robot I got you is still covered in dust in your closet."

"I don't need no housecleaning machine. I can clean up after myself."

"And I don't think you've ever even used that coffee machine. That

will make you the best coffee in the city, right here at home, with just a press of a button.”

“But I like Carrie’s coffee,” he said as they stopped at the door. “Plus, it gets me out of the house like you always suggest.”

Victor looked over at his father as if he were a child needing to be soothed. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Now before we go in, I need to warn you.”

“Yes, I know,” Alfred said. “Anna is redecorating.” He put air quotes around “redecorating.”

Victor laughed. “You know us too well. Now you be nice.”

“I’m always nice, Son. A real sweetheart.” Alfred opened the door and Victor followed with a smile.

“Yeah...a real sweetheart.” Victor said under his breath.

Alfred could see the additions as soon as he walked through the door. He stood in the narrow hallway with the hardwood floor that led into his home. A door to the left held his coats and that ugly square bot that Victor had got him.

Anna had brought a long, thin rug that now lay the length of the hallway. Four beautiful picture frames lined the walls, two on each wall. They depicted Anna and Victor laughing on some beach. Anna, Victor, and Alfred smiling in Hawaii. A young Victor standing between his mother and father. And a headshot of Eleanor and her award-winning smile.

Alfred had to admit that he liked these little touches. From the door you could see straight into the living room with its soft, dark carpet. The living room was large for such a small place. The far back wall was a sliding glass door that led into a community courtyard with a small garden and flower bed.

To the right of the hall was the kitchen. A small but beautiful area with pearl white marble counters and dark mahogany cabinets. Taking up most of the counter was a huge, unused coffee machine.

To the left of the hall was his bedroom, dominated by a large king-size bed and shoulder-high oak dresser. The condo’s only bathroom was accessed through Alfred’s bedroom.

As Alfred came down the hall he watched Anna expertly place a dainty looking vase with colorful fake flowers on his coffee table. The table sat between his large leather La-Z-Boy and a dark tan suede loveseat, which he bought specifically for Victor and Anna’s visits.

“And what is that?” Alfred asked with shock in his voice.

Anna kept her back to Alfred and her attention on the vase. "This," she answered as she set the vase just right, "is character." She stood back and admired her handiwork. "Isn't it lovely?" she said as she turned to face Alfred.

"It's very nice," Alfred answered through gritted teeth.

Anna laughed and closed the distance between them to hug Alfred tightly. "Hi, Dad," she said and gave Alfred a quick peck on the cheek. "It's good to see you."

Alfred's voice softened instantly, "You too, Sweetheart."

Anna had been calling him "Dad" ever since Victor had proposed. She had grown up most of her life without a father, and she took a great interest in his life.

Anna and Victor had been married almost twenty years. They fit most people's view of the good life. They, of course, had their problems and fights, but it was clear for all to see that they were very much in love....

They also looked perfect in just about every picture they'd ever taken together. Victor was six foot four and broad-shouldered. He kept his dark brown hair short and parted to one side. His brown eyes held the intelligence and confidence required in a successful salesman. Whether out of habit from work or because he enjoyed it, you would almost never catch him wearing anything but a tailored suit.

Anna was five foot eight but looked even smaller next to Victor. Her dark blonde hair fell just past her shoulders. Her bright green eyes were inviting and friendly. Her smile would brighten any room. She was petite yet fit and wore clothes to show off her tight muscles: tight fitting jeans and t-shirts or body-hugging dresses.

Alfred was proud of his beautiful son and daughter-in-law. He showed off pictures of them to anyone willing to take time to look. The staff at Morning Brew had seen his pictures easily a dozen times.

"You look good, Dad," she said as she inspected him. "You've been cutting back on Carrie's cinnabuns," she smiled and poked his stomach. "Haven't you?"

"I don't know what you mean," he said as he acted shocked. "Carrie's lying if she said I still eat her pastries. I always listen to my doctors."

"Mm-hmm," she said with a look of suspicion. "I'm sure you do."

Alfred stepped from the hall into the living room. His chair was facing the left wall where his thirty-two inch T.V. once hung. Now he

stood frozen in shock. He let out a small whistle.

"Yeah," Victor said as he put his arm around Anna. "I brought you that."

Instead of his thirty-two inch T.V., a sixty inch smart T.V. took up most of the wall.

Alfred turned and eyed Victor. "Okay. The T.V. is great...But what else did you bring??"

Victor let out a laugh and watched Alfred rush into the kitchen and check cabinets. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," Alfred answered from the kitchen. "Last time, when you brought me this...thing," he said, pointing to the coffee machine, "you showed me that chair first," he pointed to the leather monstrosity, "so I wouldn't complain." He eyed Victor seriously. "So I ask again, what else did you bring?"

"I told you he'd suspect something," she said as she pressed against Victor.

"You were right...I'm too transparent."

"So!" Alfred looked to be getting impatient. "What is it?"

Victor smiled and raised his voice. "You can come in now."

Alfred looked around, confused. He was about to ask who he was talking to when his bedroom door slowly opened.

The man entered the room. He didn't look around or seem nervous. He was wearing a light blue button down shirt with a dark blue vest. His black slacks were pressed, and he had shiny black loafers on his feet. His short black hair was parted down the middle. His eyes were a remarkable sky blue. As Alfred looked into them, they didn't seem real.

"Oh," Alfred said, clearly caught off guard. "Who are you?"

The man stepped forward and extended his hand. "Hello," he said in a soft, deep voice.

Alfred took his hand and shook it. The man had a good, firm grip and kept eye contact. That was good. But there was something about his eyes...and his handshake seemed different too...off somehow.

Alfred took back his hand and looked at Victor. "So," he asked, again turning back to the stranger, "Who are you?"

Instead of answering, the man turned and looked at Victor.

Alfred suddenly got a weird feeling. "Who is this, Victor? Someone from an old people's home?"

Anna gasped, "Dad! We'd never do that!"

Victor kept smiling. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

“Dammit, Victor,” Alfred said, taking a step towards his son. “Why the hell are you smiling? Who is this?”

“Your reaction is better than I expected,” Victor said through his smile. “It’s priceless.”

“You better start making sense, Son, before I get angry.” It was clear Alfred was already angry.

“Stop teasing him, Honey,” Anna said, smacking Victor’s arm. “Tell him!”

“Okay, okay.” Victor held his hands out in front of him. “Dad,” he said, motioning toward the man. “I want to introduce you to Servi-Tech’s newest product...HIRB-Pro1.”

It took a moment for Victor’s words to register. He stared at the man’s eyes and face. He recalled his firm handshake and the warmth of his hand.

“What?” Alfred turned to his son, then back to the man. “What do you mean...product?” He stared hard at the man. Suddenly, it hit him. This was not a man. This was a robot.

Alfred sucked in a deep breath and stepped back. “You...You mean...He’s?...It’s?...” Alfred couldn’t say it.

“Yes,” Victor said, sounding excited and pleased. “He’s a robot. The newest line of personal robots.”

Alfred was speechless. He watched silently as Victor excitedly approached the robot. He stepped behind it and pressed the back of his head. The robot’s chin fell to his chest.

“What...What did you do?” Alfred asked, still shocked.

Victor gripped the robot and physically turned him around. Alfred watched a small square open on the back of the thing’s head. Little lights blinked on the exposed circuitry.

“I switched him to rest mode. See,” he motioned for Alfred to get closer. “It’s easy.” Victor was pointing to a small switch inside his head. As he switched it back on, the robot’s head slowly lifted back to life, as if a puppeteer had pulled its little string.

Victor looked at the robot and said, “Go to your charging station.” Without responding, the robot marched back into Alfred’s room.

“Where is he going?” Alfred followed.

“His charging station. I set it up in your room.”

Victor had set up the charging stand on the opposite side of the room, at the head of Alfred’s bed. As the robot turned and backed onto the platform, a metal strip lit up behind him. Two small metal straps

wrapped around the robot and held it in place. The head again dropped to its chest.

"Oh no!" Alfred was shaking his head. "I don't like it. I definitely don't want it at my side while I sleep."

"Dad! It's harmless." Victor stood beside his father as they both gazed at the robot. Anna and I have had it for over two weeks now." He smiled at his dad. "He's amazing... You'll see."

"If you like it so much, you keep it."

"Dad, I need your help on this."

"My help? Why? I don't know the first thing about robots."

"That's exactly why you're perfect." Victor looked seriously at Alfred. "Me and four other reps got one of these. We have sixty days to test them out. They are extremely advanced robots meant for every person, from beginner to expert. So you see, I need your help. Test him out. Keep him a few weeks, maybe a month, then tell me all about his perks and flaws... Everything."

"I'm sorry, Son... I... I just don't feel comfortable with this... this thing." Alfred looked at the robot with contempt. It was too much for him. It looked like a man sleeping standing up. It was too lifelike.

"Please, Dad," Victor said with sincerity. "I need your help."

Alfred shook his head. "I... I don't like this, Victor... not one bit."

"Please," Victor begged. "A week. Give me at least one week! Please, Dad."

Alfred hung his head in defeat. He couldn't deny his only son.

"Okay, Victor. That's it. One week." Victor smiled broadly at his father. "You have one week, then you come and get it or I throw it in the trash."

"Deal," Victor shouted before Alfred could change his mind. He walked back into the living room and smiled triumphantly at Anna, who had waited for them.

"Thanks a lot, Dad," she said to Alfred as he appeared behind Victor. "I know technology seems alien to you sometimes, but this guy is amazing... You'll see. You're really helping Victor a lot by testing him out."

"Yeah, yeah," Alfred sighed, still looking defeated. "Just tell me what I gotta do."

Victor laid out manuals and guide books for the robot. They spent the rest of the afternoon going over them.

"So, wait a minute," Alfred said after Victor had described the skin.

"That's real skin that covers it?"

“Well,” Victor explained, “it’s synthetic skin. Skin made in a lab. It is much thicker than our own skin, but, essentially, yes. It is real skin.”

Victor began to speak more excitedly as he explained the robot. It was called HIRB-Pro1 for Human Inter-Relationship Bot Prototype1. The purpose of HIRB-Pro1 was to gauge the reaction of the public to a lifelike robot, as well as showcase its new programming, which allowed it to change, adapt, problem solve, and essentially think for itself.

“The skin may be grown in a lab,” Victor continued, “but it is very much alive. If you cut him, he will bleed,” Victor laughed at his father’s reaction. “Not blood of course. Oil. He’ll bleed out the synthetic oil that runs along the whole length of his body.” Victor picked up a book and showed his father a diagram. “The skin will heal itself to stop any leak.” Victor had a childlike wonder in his eyes. “It’s amazing.”

“It’s scary is what it is.” As Alfred said these words, Victor turned as if slapped. “Mixing live tissue with machines. It doesn’t feel right. It feels wrong. Very wrong.”

“Oh, cut it out with the horror routine.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. This is the future, Dad. Can’t you see that? It will change everything.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Victor stared at Alfred, trying to figure out how he could alleviate his father’s worries. He couldn’t come up with a decent answer, so he went back to describing the skin.

“Look. Under the skin are hundreds of thousands of tiny receptors that react to the tiniest change in temperature and pressure...Don’t you see!?...He can feel!”

“I don’t like this one bit,” Alfred replied, shaking his head.

“Dad. You can’t be prejudiced and give me an honest evaluation of him. You have to open your mind to this. This is the future, whether you like it or not, and I’m asking you to be part of it.”

“I’m sorry, Son, but no matter what you say, my feelings will stay the same. I agree that I can’t give you an honest evaluation because I have an image of it already in my head. I’m prejudiced toward the robot. It’s better that you take it with you when you leave.”

Victor and Alfred stared at each other, waiting to see who would back down first. Victor finally hung his head and looked at the floor.

“Fine, Dad.”

“You’ll take him back,” Alfred brightened.

“No,” Victor said and looked back at his father. “I will take your prejudiced evaluation.” He noticed that Alfred was not happy about this. This made Victor smile. “You have everything you’ll need. I went over the override procedure through his head circuitry...” He stood and gestured toward the books. “I guess that’s everything.”

“Good afternoon.”

They all turned to see the robot standing in the doorway. “Guess he’s done charging, huh?” Alfred said with irritation.

Victor smiled, “You remember that he detaches himself when he’s charged.” He nodded proudly.

This gesture irritated Alfred. “I’m not a child,” he argued. “I can understand things just fine.”

“Pff,” Victor huffed, “you sure fool me sometimes.” Before Alfred could respond Victor turned and addressed the robot. “We are leaving. You are to listen to everything my father says...understand?”

“Yes. Of course,” the robot said seriously and nodded his head.

Anna rose and went to Victor’s side, “Thanks again, Dad.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he quickly embraced them both and walked them to the door. “Remember, one week.”

They turned and left. Alfred was standing all alone with this new robot.

The robot had a strange presence about him. It made Alfred feel unsettled. He had tried to dismiss the thing several times, but there wasn’t really any place to go in the small apartment. Alfred decided to just go with it. If he and the thing had to be around each other, he’d treat it like a pet or unwanted guest.

“Well,” Alfred said from the kitchen, “I don’t suppose you need to eat or drink anything—do you, Robot?”

“No,” he answered, his soft, deep voice carrying from the living room. “I require no sustenance.”

Alfred grumbled under his breath. He had made himself a light dinner of rice, broccoli, and sliced chicken breast. He carried his meal to his La-Z-Boy and settled in for his nightly shows.

The robot stood behind him silently. It was so quiet, Alfred almost forgot it was there. When the news came on, and the robot decided to speak, Alfred was slightly surprised.

“This,” the robot remarked, “does not seem like a good thing. Is it always this way?”

Alfred half turned to look at the robot. "What? What is not good?"

"Well," it said slowly as if contemplating its words. "It seems unhealthy for citizens to be fighting each other in this manner. Is it always this way?"

It took a moment for Alfred to understand the question. The news was showing men and women rioting and attacking the police. The robot was responding to the violence on the screen.

"The police," the robot continued, "are meant to keep order, to protect and serve. Do I understand that correctly?"

Alfred faced the robot full-on. "Yes. That is their main purpose."

"Then why are the citizens fighting them?"

"Well, that's not a simple question." The robot only stared, waiting for Alfred to explain.

"Ok," Alfred sighed. "Many people...or citizens...believe that the police are abusing their given power and are not protecting the citizens as they should be."

The robot looked confused. "But...if it is their function to protect and serve, how are they not doing just that?"

Alfred watched the robot as understanding came to him. The robot understood commands and followed those commands without question. People obviously didn't do that.

"Humans are fundamentally flawed. We are not created to follow commands as machines are. We have free will. With free will comes choice. So regarding your question, some police abuse their power for personal gain rather than do as they swore...to protect and serve. Those police officers who defile their badge by being corrupt, or by misusing their power, create distrust among citizens towards all police. When in a position of power, like police, there is a huge amount of trust laid on them. We, as normal citizens, trust in them to use their power to protect our interests as well as protect us physically from harm. Many people believe law enforcement are violating that trust. They don't feel protected."

The robot took a step towards Alfred; he was clearly intrigued. "I believe I understand the matter of trust and corruption...but why do they attack each other?"

Alfred let out a small sigh. "That is a good question. People can be ignorant sometimes and not always make wise decisions. I guess they believe if they lash out, it will cause a change in the current system."

"You do not believe this will work?"

"I don't agree with the violence, no. But I don't know if it will cause a change either. It just might. I personally do not feel a lack of trust towards police like a lot of people do right now. But I see things differently."

The robot again looked confused. "How so? Do not all humans think the same?"

"Nooo," Alfred said with a draw. "Far from it. We are all extremely—individualistic. We contradict each other's ideas constantly. Emotions play a huge part in it, but also our beliefs affect our ideas. We don't all believe in the same things." Alfred watched the robot analyze his words. He wondered what he was thinking.

It...What it was thinking. A computer could only see things one way, the logical way. People did not do that. Alfred looked at the thing. Even though he seemed so human and lifelike, they were worlds apart in thought.

"Hmm," the robot started. "You have given me much to analyze."

Alfred stared at the thing a little longer, then went back to the news.

* * *

The next morning Alfred woke up with his normal pain. He slowly rose to sit on the edge of his bed. That was when he first noticed the robot. And the smell.

The robot was standing at the foot of his bed holding a cup of coffee. The rich, robust smell filled the room. The robot watched him expectantly.

Alfred jerked in surprise, "Dear God, man. What are you doing?"

"Mrs. Anna preferred her cup of coffee first thing in the morning. I thought it proper to bring you yours."

Alfred stared at the robot as the savory aroma wafted up his nose. For some reason the inviting fragrance angered him.

"No!" Alfred said as he stood shaking his head. "I...I didn't ask you to do that. I don't want my coffee now! Why...Why were you standing over my bed like that? No...Just get out of my room." The robot looked confused and somehow wounded, Alfred thought. The robot, without saying a word, turned and left.

Alfred went through his morning routine, constantly thinking about the robot's reaction. It had almost looked sad.

No, Alfred thought. Robots don't feel sad. They don't feel anything.

By the time he was dressed for his walk, his anger had completely faded. He now felt silly at getting angry with a machine. And when he

stepped into the living room he felt bad for the lifelike robot, who was standing in the far corner like a child being punished.

"Look, Robot, I didn't mean to be short with you this morning. I was caught off-guard." He scratched the back of his head uncomfortably. "I have a routine that I like to stick to, and it seems I get upset if something interferes with that routine." He laughed awkwardly.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable by my presence or upset your routine. I am here to make your life more comfortable...even if I seem to be doing the opposite...I apologize...I will keep trying."

"Ok," Alfred turned towards the door. He was eager to leave the uncomfortable situation. He opened the front door and turned back to address the robot once more. "I am going for a walk. I'll be back soon, okay?"

The robot nodded and Alfred left.

Alfred thought about the robot's actions and reactions to the morning as he walked. He felt sure that it had felt bad after he had spoken roughly to it. As ridiculous as that sounded, Alfred thought it had felt something.

It would not be uncommon for a personal robot to want to please him. That's what it was designed to do...right? But the fact that it might gain its own pleasure in doing so was a startling revelation.

Did an alarm clock feel joy at waking you up? Did a fridge feel proud that it kept your food cold? Would a coffee pot be sad if you didn't drink all the coffee, thinking it had failed you in some way?

No. These were just machines. They did what they were programmed to do. They didn't gain anything from it.

The robot was nothing but a machine. Yes, a highly sophisticated machine, but a machine nonetheless. Yet Alfred could not shake the feeling that this thing was more aware than other machines, that it would have been happy if Alfred had accepted the coffee and was upset when he didn't. If the robot did feel that way, then it was almost cruel, to make it so different from those around it while also making it feel compelled to fit in.

After Alfred's visit to Morning Brew, he decided to walk the park once more. He was not in any hurry to return home. He started to feel silly about thinking the robot had feelings. It was an awful big stretch for a machine.

When he got home though, the thought was only confirmed. As he went inside, he could see the robot in the living room. He was sitting

on the loveseat with a huge smile on his face. In its lap was Twinkles, one of the neighbor's cats. It was stroking the cat gently, and as Alfred approached, he could hear the cat purring softly.

"The cat likes me," the robot said with what looked like pure pleasure stretching across its face. It looked natural as it petted the furry creature, like a human.

But Alfred knew the truth. This was a robot...a happy, smiling robot?

"You...You look happy," Alfred said, slightly startled.

He was surprised at the affection and care the robot was showing to the purring kitty.

The robot looked down at the cat, then back at Alfred. "Yes, I believe I am happy at the moment." It looked back down at the animal. "This creature's acceptance of me makes me...glad."

Alfred came forward and sat in his La-Z-Boy. "What do you mean?"

"Well...I don't seem to make this animal nervous or afraid. She sees a difference in me, that much I can tell, but she still...trusts me. I like that feeling very much." It gently petted the delicate creature's back.

Alfred seemed to become more alert by the robot's words. "Feeling? Are you saying you were programmed to feel?"

It lifted its eyes from the cat and looked at Alfred. "I am unsure if that was my creator's intent," it said slowly as it thought. "I was given a rather flexible program, built so I can evolve and adapt to my surroundings. Whether it was the goal of my designers for me to feel or not...it seems I am feeling either way."

Alfred wasn't quite sure how he felt about this new revelation. A machine that felt. He sat in silence for some time, and when he spoke again, his voice was low.

"Well...Robot, I am going to my room to rest awhile."

He rose from his chair and went to his room. "Please do not disturb me," he said in the doorway.

"Of course." Again, Alfred saw what looked like pain cross the robot's face. "I apologize if I brought you any discomfort...I am sorry."

Alfred looked at the thing that not only looked, but sounded, so human. "No. Don't apologize. You have done nothing wrong. I just need some time to think." The robot nodded solemnly as Alfred went into his room and closed the door.

Alfred spent the whole day and night pondering what the robot

had said and shown to him. He was amazed that the robot had found its way into his life. It was clear the machine was more than just that....It could feel and think.

The next morning the robot was not in his room. Alfred went about his routine and when he emerged from his room, he found the robot staring out the sliding glass door into the courtyard garden.

"Hello, Robot," Alfred said.

The robot turned to look at him. "Good morning," it motioned out the glass. "It seems like a beautiful day today."

Alfred looked outside. The sun was barely up and didn't penetrate into the garden, but it still seemed like a nice day. "Yes, I believe it will be nice." Alfred looked at him.

Him....Yes, him, Alfred thought.

"I think I owe you an apology," Alfred said, slightly uncomfortable. "I've been rather one-minded towards you."

The robot cocked his head to the side. "How so?"

"I've been treating you like a machine. I realize now you are more than that. You feel and think for yourself. Machines don't do that." Alfred shifted on his feet as the robot watched him. "I'm sorry I didn't realize there was more to you than just wires and parts...I've been calling you Robot. I'd like to change that and call you by a name. Is that okay?"

"Yes. I would like that very much." You couldn't read his eyes like a human's, but his expression and relaxed movement showed that it meant a lot to him. "I would be honored to be given a name."

Alfred smiled uneasily. "It's not a big deal. It's just a name. Do you have anything in mind?"

"My creators called me HIRB-Pro1."

Alfred laughed. "That name sucks...Sorry, but it's true."

The robot smiled. "I agree that it is a little...stiff."

"I was thinking something new and easy...How about Rob?" Alfred watched him to judge a reaction.

"Rob," he whispered, then mouthed the name a few times. He looked up at Alfred. "Rob...short for Robot. That seems very clever. Short and easy, yet it fits me well...I like it." Alfred smiled at him. "You may call me Rob," he said, with his head held higher than normal.

"Rob it is then. That was easy. And you can call me Al. All my friends call me Al, okay?"

"Okay, Al it is," Rob said, copying Alfred.

"Well Rob, I'm off for my walk." As he got to the door, he stopped and turned. "Hey Rob, wanna join me?"

"I would very much like to join you," Rob said with a smile. He glided forward and followed Alfred out into the world.

They made the trip to the park in silence. Once in the park, Rob became quite interested in the pond and ducks. Rob stopped at the edge of the walkway.

"Ducks," he said softly. "I've never seen ducks outside of pictures." He turned and looked over at Alfred. "Can we stop for a moment?"

"You stay, Rob. I walk the park twice anyway so I'll get you on the way back."

Rob looked torn. "Are you sure? I could still walk with you."

"No, it's fine. I'll catch you on my second trip around."

Alfred continued his walk around the park, leaving Rob mesmerized by the ducks.

On his way back around, Alfred spotted Rob right on the water's edge, where a swan was staring him down. Alfred hurried his old bones as fast as he could.

He made it to the pond just in time to see the swan strike out at Rob's outstretched hand. Rob jerked back his hand, lost his balance, and fell into the water with a splash, completely drenching himself.

With its foe vanquished to the waters, the swan waddled off back to her young, only yards away.

Alfred came to the edge of the pond with a smile. He looked down at Rob, who looked ridiculous. He had righted himself and stood in the water thigh-high. His whole body was soaked, and algae stuck to his head and shirt. His face was flat and unreadable.

"I leave you alone for five minutes..." Alfred laughed and watched as Rob climbed out of the pond. "What happened?" The amusement was still in Alfred's voice.

Rob looked at the swan and chicks briefly before coming towards Alfred. "The swan..." Rob looked back at the pond like a kid eyeing a bully. "She bit me."

Alfred quickly plugged his nose as Rob came closer. "Pew! You stink." Rob wore the damp, decaying smell of pond water.

Rob stopped and began to pick algae off himself.

"I only wanted to hold one of the chicks. But the swan attacked me."

Alfred laughed at Rob again. "Of course she did. She thought you meant her babies harm. You can't do that."

"I would not have harmed them!"

"She didn't know that. Come on, Rob...back to the house. You need a shower...bad. I'll let you change into some of my clothes."

After Rob showered, Alfred allowed him to pick an outfit from Alfred's wardrobe. He waited for Rob in the living room. Alfred laughed silently as Rob appeared. He looked quite different outside his fancy clothes. Rob had picked out a faded pair of blue jeans, an old pair of tan work boots, and a black t-shirt with a bold print that said "HAWAII," an impulse buy from last year's vacation with Victor and Anna.

"Well?" Rob asked expectantly.

"Well what?" Alfred said with a smile.

Rob frowned. "How do I look?"

Alfred laughed, "You care how you look?"

"I wish to appear...normal."

Alfred let out another small laugh. "Well, you've got that down. You don't look quite as ostentatious as you did in your slacks and loafers." Rob continued to watch him. "Ok," Alfred smiled. "Yes, Rob, you look normal. Like a real average Joe."

Rob looked sideways at Alfred. "But I wish to appear like an average Rob. I do not want another name."

Alfred laughed. "Easy, Rob. That's an expression. It means you look like everyone else."

"Then I am pleased," Rob said but did not smile. His face held its normal stoic serenity.

"Good," Alfred smiled. "Now, I missed my morning coffee, so if you'd be so kind as to get that machine going and whip me up a cup."

"Yes, of course...I apologize for my distraction this morning." Rob headed into the kitchen.

Alfred stayed in his La-Z-Boy. "Don't worry about it, Rob. It was actually pretty entertaining." Alfred chuckled as he pictured Rob soaking wet. "Now I have a good story...you all covered in algae."

The coffee machine was going now and the aromatic fumes of roasted coffee beans began to mingle with the air.

"You know, Rob," Alfred continued. He settled back into his chair and the leather sighed. "That's all life is. A collection of stories. Some good and some sad. Today, I earned me a good one," he snickered, "a funny one that will make me laugh for years."

"I am glad my mishap brought you pleasure," Rob said matter-of-factly. There was no hurt or sarcasm in his voice. Alfred laughed again.

"You know, I like you, Rob. I was hesitant at first, but you make me smile...and think. That's a very good combination, Rob."

"Thank you, Al," Rob said as he brought Alfred's coffee.

Alfred took the cup and after blowing on it took a hesitant sip. He looked up at Rob. "Mmm, that's good." He took another sip.

"I have a question for you," Rob said as he stood in front of Alfred.

"Shoot."

"Shoot? Shoot what?"

"Uh." Alfred sighed. "Never mind. Ask your question. But sit down first. I'm old. I don't need to be straining my neck to look up at you."

"Very well," Rob said and took a seat on the loveseat. "On my first night here we spoke of how humans think differently from each other and have different beliefs about things?"

"Yes, I remember. What of it?"

"Well, how do humans decide what is best? How do you all know what is right or wrong for your race?"

"Hmm. That is not something I can truly answer. But I'll try."

Alfred thought about his words and then said, "First, we don't make decisions together as a whole race. We are separated into nations. Nations then try to decide what's best for their people. Nations differ greatly from each other. Some nations are ruled by one person, while others are ruled by many. Here in America, we are ruled by many. There are elected leaders that speak for the people. Every adult citizen is given a chance to vote for those leaders. Now, as to what is best for the race, there is always debate. Since people tend to think more about themselves, what's best becomes what's best for the individual, not humankind."

"That does not sound logical."

"No," Alfred shook his head, "it isn't. We have destroyed many things in the greedy pursuits of one man...or of many men."

"That seems...sad."

"It is."

They sat in silence for a few moments before Rob spoke again.

"So, what if nations do not agree on certain things...Does this happen?"

"Oh, yeah. Actually, it seems as though that is all that ever happens. What is best for one nation doesn't make it best for other nations. Nations disagree all the time. They then bargain and deal with each other until a reasonable middle ground can be established. When that

isn't possible and it gets to a point where no agreement can be made, then nations go to war."

"Ah. War. I know little of war. But what I do know I do not like."

Alfred looked seriously at Rob. "That is exactly how I feel, Rob. You said it wonderfully."

Again, they sat in silence for a moment.

"I fear I will never understand humans," Rob said finally. "You are all very confusing and complicated."

"True. We don't even understand ourselves."

"Do all animals function this way?"

"All animals?" Alfred asked as he took a long sip of his coffee.

"Yes, other animals; are they the same way? Do they rule in the same manner?" Alfred looked confused, and finally Rob noticed.

"Humans are animals." He cocked his head at Alfred. "Did you not know this?"

Alfred began to laugh as understanding sank in. "Oh...yes, I know we are considered animals. But the difference between us and other animals is huge. As for your question, I don't believe many animals, if any, war against each other as humans do.

"But animals do have leaders in many cases. It usually falls on the strongest and most fierce to lead. Those leaders choose what is best for the group. Again, what's best for one group doesn't mean it's best for another.

"As for humans being animals...we are advanced. We ponder life. We communicate and share ideas. Animals don't. They don't have consciousness."

Rob stared at Alfred. "You mean to tell me that you don't believe animals are conscious?"

Alfred shook his head. "Not as humans are, no. This is how we can dominate other fiercer animals: with thought and ingenuity. It's our consciousness that makes us different...better."

Rob shook his head now. "But do animals not communicate with each other? Do you believe that animals do not think? Or feel? I have had few interactions with animals, but I would say they do all these things. Did the cat not purr in my lap? Was that not its way of communicating its pleasure or contentment? Did the swan not attack me, as you said, to protect its young? Did she not then feel fear and love for her chicks? Did she not care? So how are humans different? Yes, you seem to be smarter and have a higher capacity to think, but

does that make you better? If that is true, then what you are saying is that intelligence privileges you to rule over the more simple-minded, that because they are simple they do not feel? Is this how you feel, Al?"

"Well, I've never heard it phrased quite like that." Alfred sat and analyzed Rob's words. "These are very good points. I'm not sure how I feel now. I will have to think about it more. It's rather frightening to think that humankind acts like cruel children, tearing the wings off butterflies."

"We both have things to think about, Al"

Later that night, as Rob stood on his charger, Alfred swallowed his pride and called his son.

"So you'll keep him the whole month?" Victor asked triumphantly. "It's an amazing robot, huh?"

"Yes, he's amazing." Alfred had already listened to Victor gloat for the past ten minutes. "You were right."

"So...that means...you were..." Alfred could hear the glee in his son's voice.

"It means you were right, and I'm hanging up." Alfred refused to admit he was wrong even though it was clear he was.

"Okay, okay," Victor said with a laugh. "I'll see you in a few weeks. Love you, Dad."

"You too, Son."

The next morning Rob went walking with Alfred again. This time he steered clear of the duck pond.

"What's wrong, Rob?" Alfred teased. "Aren't you going to go and see your friend the swan today?"

"I can see the swan just fine from here," Rob said as they continued to walk by.

"Yes," Alfred laughed. "I'm sure you can."

When they reached Morning Brew, it was fairly busy. As normal, Alfred bypassed the line and went to his reserved table. After a moment of silence, Carrie appeared.

"There you are, Al. We missed you yesterday," she said as she put the morning paper on the table. "I see you brought company today." She turned to Rob and introduced herself.

"Hello, Carrie," he said. "I am Rob."

"Well, we are glad to have you, Rob. I know what this old horse is

having. What can I get you?"

"I require no sustenance," he said as serious as ever.

Carrie looked at him sideways and grinned. She waited a moment, expecting his laugh and an order, but when she realized he was serious, she blinked and turned towards Alfred. "Okay then. I'll bring your regular."

Alfred smiled from the brief interaction. "Thank you, Carrie."

When she left, Alfred laughed. "I-need-no-sustenance," he said in a robot voice and laughed again. "That's not how people talk, Rob."

Rob said nothing and seemed to be watching the people in the coffee house.

It was priceless to see Carrie's face though, Alfred thought. She looked so helpless. Good stuff.

Samantha, a woman in her mid-twenties and cute as a button, brought Alfred's coffee and half cinnabun."

"Mornin', Al," she said with a slight southern drawl. "I missed you yesterday." She frowned and placed his order on the table. "I was worried about you."

Her sweet flowery perfume reached his nose, and he smiled. "Oh yeah," he said, smirking at her. "Did you worry my old age had finally caught up to me?"

"Al!" she shrieked. "Of course not....I worried you had run off to some other coffee house with prettier baristas."

"Prettier than you...pff...no such place exists."

"Oh stop it," she giggled. She turned to look at Rob. "And who's this? I'd say your son, but if that were true you would have drowned me in his picture already." She batted her eyes at Rob. "I'd surely remember seeing this one's picture." She looked back at Alfred. "Well...Are you gonna introduce us?"

"Oh, sorry...Samantha, this is my friend Rob. Rob," he motioned to Samantha, "the enchanting Samantha."

Rob looked at Samantha, who was smiling at him. "Hello, Samantha. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Alfred watched as Samantha flirted with Rob, who, of course, was completely unaware of the added attention. He gave short answers and his face kept its stoic normality. He would look at her sideways when she'd giggle for no apparent reason, which was often.

"Well," she said at last. "I better get back to work. I think you've distracted me long enough." She gave another winning smile to Rob.

She took the money Alfred gave her and before leaving said, "You make sure you bring this one back, ya hear."

"She was...interesting," Rob said when she left.

"That was beyond interesting, Rob. She was flirting with you!"

"Flirting?"

Alfred spoke in a falsetto, "girlie" tone, "Oh, Rob," and laughed. "Let's go, Romeo, before she falls in love." Alfred stood and Rob followed.

"Romeo? I thought I was Rob."

"Ugh," Alfred huffed. "Come on... I'll explain later."

The rest of the month passed far too quickly for Alfred. He spent every day with Rob and had grown not only to enjoy his company, but to consider him a friend. He was amazed at how aware Rob seemed to be. He thought deeply with both intellect and emotion.

Who would have thought that this old man, who struggled to work a DVD player, would grow so fond of an advanced robot. Rob's empathy surprised him the most. He showed an interest in those around him and truly cared how they felt. He showed more empathy for life than most humans did.

When the day came that Victor was to come and pick him up, Alfred was sad. And, not surprisingly, Rob picked up on it.

"Tell me, Al, what is bothering you?"

"Ah, it's nothing."

"You cannot lie to me, Al. I am an advanced robot capable of discerning the truth." There was a tender smile on his face. He was trying to cheer up his friend.

"Yes, I remember," Alfred answered, not rising to the bait.

"Please, my friend. I wish to know, as you say, what is on your mind."

"I...I guess I'm going to miss having you around."

"Yes, I will miss you too, Al."

"I wonder where you'll end up," Alfred said as he watched Rob.

"I suppose I will go back to the factory," Rob answered in his soft, deep voice. "It is only logical I go back there to fix any problems I may have."

"Problems? What do you mean?"

"I mean anything that my designers deem as unnecessary."

"But...they can't do that!"

Rob cocked his head to the side. "I believe they can, Al."

"I know they can physically, but morally it's wrong. You feel...you are conscious."

"I'm fake human life. I am only a machine."

Alfred stepped closer to Rob. "You can't believe that, Rob! I don't. You've been here a month, and I've seen more humanity in you than in most humans. Now you're saying you were faking it, just imitating human life?"

"No, I have faked nothing. I only say what my creators will say. I am only a machine in their eyes."

"That doesn't scare you, Rob? If they tamper with you, you could lose the consciousness you have now. Essentially, you'd die."

"Yes, Al. I am aware of the consequences. I do feel something like fear. But there is something else I feel as well. And it is a stronger feeling..."

"And what is that, Rob?"

"Hope," Rob answered more serious than ever. Alfred stared at him silently. "I feel what I believe is hope. A hope that all of this has been for something. That even if I am deemed...defective, the information I've gained and feelings I've experienced will have a positive impact on future generations of my kind, robots."

Alfred let this sink in. Rob had just given him a very real and humanistic view on life and death, one meaning for existence. He had grown so much in such a small amount of time.

"Al," Rob said as Alfred pondered his words. "Will you remember me when I leave?"

"Yes," Alfred answered without hesitation. "Of course I will, Rob."

The robot smiled. "I thought as much. So you see, Al, I'll remain as long as I'm remembered. And I'll treasure these memories as long as I have them. I'm thankful I was able to call you a friend."

Alfred found himself getting emotional at Rob's words. He stepped forward and embraced him. "Yes, Rob. You have gained a friend...as have I."

Victor had let himself in some time ago. He and Anna watched silently, bewildered as their old technology-hating father embraced a machine.

"Yeah," Victor whispered to Anna. "This is the future."



MacArthur Park
Hector Cedillo, Arizona

Label Me American

Jimmy Ray O'Kelley Sr., New Mexico

The importance of the label cannot be stressed enough. Marketers, designers, and inventors look for a catchphrase or fancy name to give consumers the first impression their company desires.

Take the label "second-class citizen."

It perplexes me why people for whom such words are intended would then give themselves a label that coincides with such ugliness. Why, for instance, do black people call themselves African-American?

The label says this person is an African first, and an American second.

I've never been to Africa. I've only met a few Africans in my life. I'm well-aware of the history in all its horrific details. However, I, like most black folks in America, am several generations on American soil. I was born in America to American parents with American grandparents who probably didn't know anyone from Africa either.

Yet my people still call themselves African-American.

Coloreds, Negroes, Africans. If the intent and purpose of the labeling of black people was to say American and not slave or property, then American will and would have done just fine.

After all, we must remind ourselves that no other people so willingly accept a label that says American second. I've never met a white person who calls him or herself European-American.

It is irrelevant to me where a person's parents were born.

If you were born in these great United States, you are solely and simply an American.

If black people want other people to see us as equal, we must bring in a new marketing director to reconstruct our label.

First impressions will save lives.

Police need to see a person, an equal, an American, when they pull over a kid in a hoodie.

Not a Nigger, or Negro, or colored person, or even an *African-American*. It's worth remembering that the fraction of the second it takes to get from African to American in the label, could literally make the difference between death and life.

Silent

K.D. Falsetto, California

My name is Frank & I don't speak english at all. Sometimes when people talk around me, I hear nothing but complete silence coming from their words. At times, I may catch an english word that I understand. I desperately try to piece words together to comprehend the base of the conversation, but most of the time it's to no avail. The only time the audio comes in to assist is when another inmate from my same culture speaks to me in my native tongue. But then again, we are not the majority, so conversation is limited in my world. I have to read body language, pay attention to situations from afar to kind of understand what's going on around me. I may not understand english, but I look into the faces of men around me & I can see the despair, lost hope, loneliness & heartbreaks of prison life, which I completely understand. I speak that language.

Initiation 6.2

Josh Cook, Washington

I didn't sleep the previous night. I'd heard so many rumors about Green Hill from being in juvie for so long. I'd also heard that before I got to Green Hill, I would have to go to the DOC (Department of Corrections) Shelton prison to be "processed" because I'm DOC custody.

DOC custody means that I'm not in the jurisdiction of the juvenile court, even though I'm a juvenile. They say "adult crime, adult time." I have to be treated as an adult in every aspect, except I can't be housed with adults. It's a way to give kids a lot more "hard time," and by doing that, takes away the rehabilitation portion of being locked up.

Juveniles are the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration (JRA). Green Hill is a JRA facility, where DOC inmates are housed until they're 21. If they fight, however, then they go to DOC at 18. DOC prisons are much different, much more frightening. The tactic there is to "scare" kids straight.

In Green Hill, I'm going to be locked up with murderers and rapists. I heard it's a free-for-all. I heard I'm going to get in fights.

I finally got to sleep around 6:30. The Skagit County Detention staff woke me up at 10:30 by yelling at me on the intercom that I was about to go to Shelton. I jumped up and started throwing my stuff on my bed and getting personals I wanted to take. "We have no time for that," the staff said. "You need to go now. The bus to Shelton is leaving." I yelled a final "goodbye" to the staff and kids I spent the last ten months with.

They brought me to the intake center. The big-muscled DOC officers gave me an orange jumpsuit three sizes too big.

"How old are you, son?" the biggest one, the leader, asked.

"Sixteen."

"Good luck. The cons are probably going to yell at you for being juvenile and all. You can talk to them if you like, but you don't have to."

They put one ankle chain on tight and the other one very loose. My left ankle had a bruise for a week. My handcuffs were loose, to the point where if I wanted to, I could probably have pulled my hands out of them very easily. The officers slowly shuffled me outside and I looked around, taking everything in.

I was walking next to three officers, and one of them was holding an automatic rifle. On either side of the bus, two more officers were

holding assault rifles. They put me in a little cage inside the front of the bus and the adult inmates were behind me. I could see them in the reflection and I counted ten. That number went up to twenty-nine before we got to Shelton.

On the way, I was praying that the adult convicts couldn't see me; that they wouldn't talk to me. I stared straight ahead and tried to make the least amount of noise possible with my chains. My heart was racing the whole time. I was listening to the guys' conversations, and was kind of surprised that they were very polite to each other. I guess there's a stereotype in my head that criminals are always mean to each other. One popular question I would hear is "If you don't mind me asking, why are you going to Shelton?" and usually when telling their stories, they didn't glorify them. I mostly heard regret in their voices.

When we started entering the prison area, all the adults started commenting about how many barbed-wire fences there were. As we drove farther into the prison, they got more frequent, as did the checkpoints and gates. The officers finally stopped the bus and everyone got silent. The officers came up to me in the cage and led me out. One of them grabbed my arm and started walking fast. I couldn't keep up with my ankle shackles so he said, "Hurry up!" and I said, "I'm going as fast as I can!" He continued to drag me towards a white building. We entered and I looked around.

Two cages full of silent men stared straight ahead. I was brought over to a computer where they took my prints right in front of the adults in the cage. I didn't dare look up at them, but felt as if they stared right through me.

I got the nerve to glance up at the cage of convicts for a split second, and nobody was looking at me. "They must have their own worries," I thought.

They finished with my prints and shuffled me back over to where I had entered. They unlocked a personal-size cage and led me into it. Inside that cage was a much smaller cage that they put me in. Inside was a bench with a little bundle of food. They unchained me and closed the cage. I ate the apple, then a muffin. My nervous stomach meant I couldn't eat much.

A few hours later, a smaller DOC officer came up to the cage. "You a juvenile?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Get ready for Green Hill."

He came back in around ten minutes, strip-searched me, and then chained me up. He took me to a van where another DOC officer was waiting for me. When we started moving, I looked around the prison. Those barbed-wired fences looked a lot more intimidating from the inside. It seemed like there were more of them and they stretched a lot higher.

The DOC officers were talking quietly among themselves. I strained to hear them. They were friendly in the sense that they didn't harass me like some DOC officers. About halfway there, the passenger asked me how much time I was given.

"Fifty months."

"Fifteen months ain't bad," he said.

"Not fifteen months—fifty months—as in five-zero—as in four years, two months."

"Damn."

When we got to Green Hill, I sighed a big relief because it didn't look "scary" at all. In fact, it looked like a boarding school, aside from the barbed-wire fence surrounding it. I also noticed why they call it "Green Hill." In the center of the property, there's a large green hill.

My heart was still racing, though.

In the intake center, they took my chains off. They took me to a bathroom and gave me "normal" clothes to change into. After taking my picture, they took me to the medical center. The first thing the nurse did was take my vitals. My heart rate was racing at 120 beats-per-minute.

It was now around 7:15 PM, and I hadn't gone to the bathroom all day. She did all the checks I needed and finally asked me to pee in a cup.

Once that was done, a nice staff member showed up and told me I was going to be placed in Maple unit.

We started walking there.

"Maple will be a good unit for you because of your crime and size."

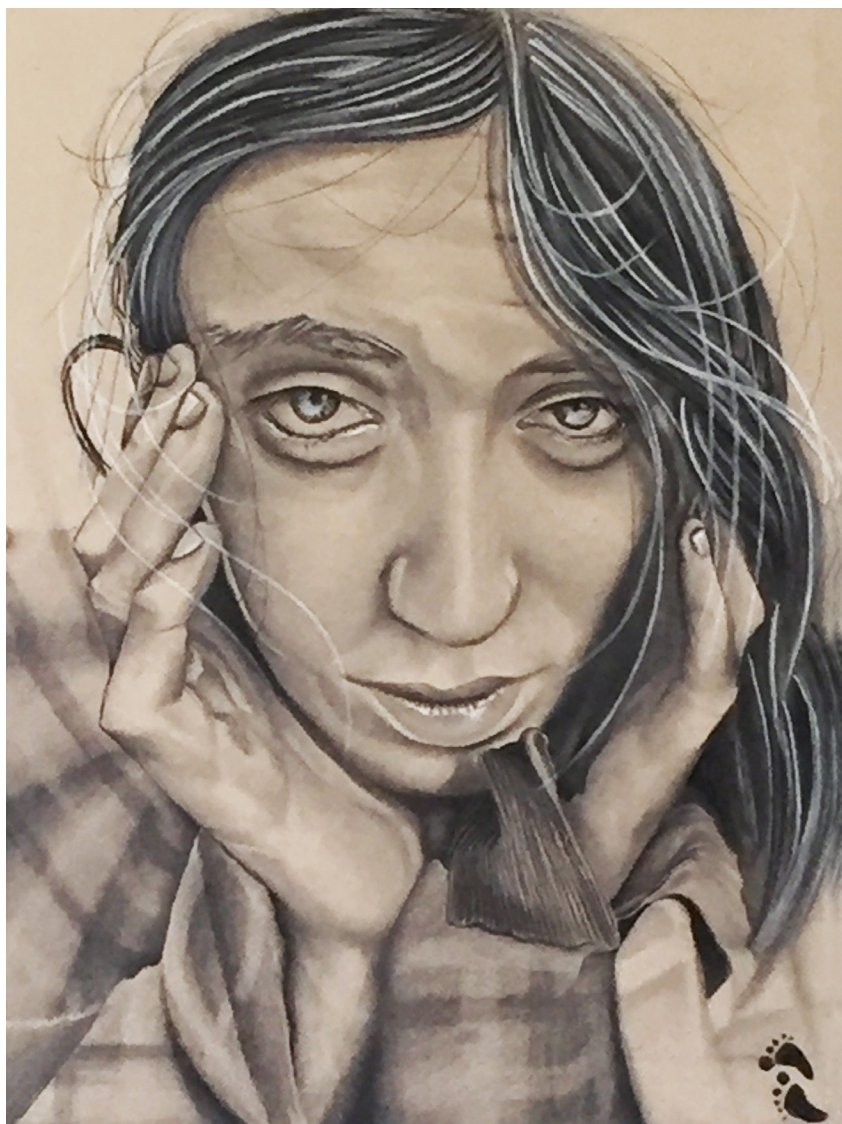
My pulse slowed, and I started to calm down.



Homeless Little Girl

Hector Cedillo, Arizona

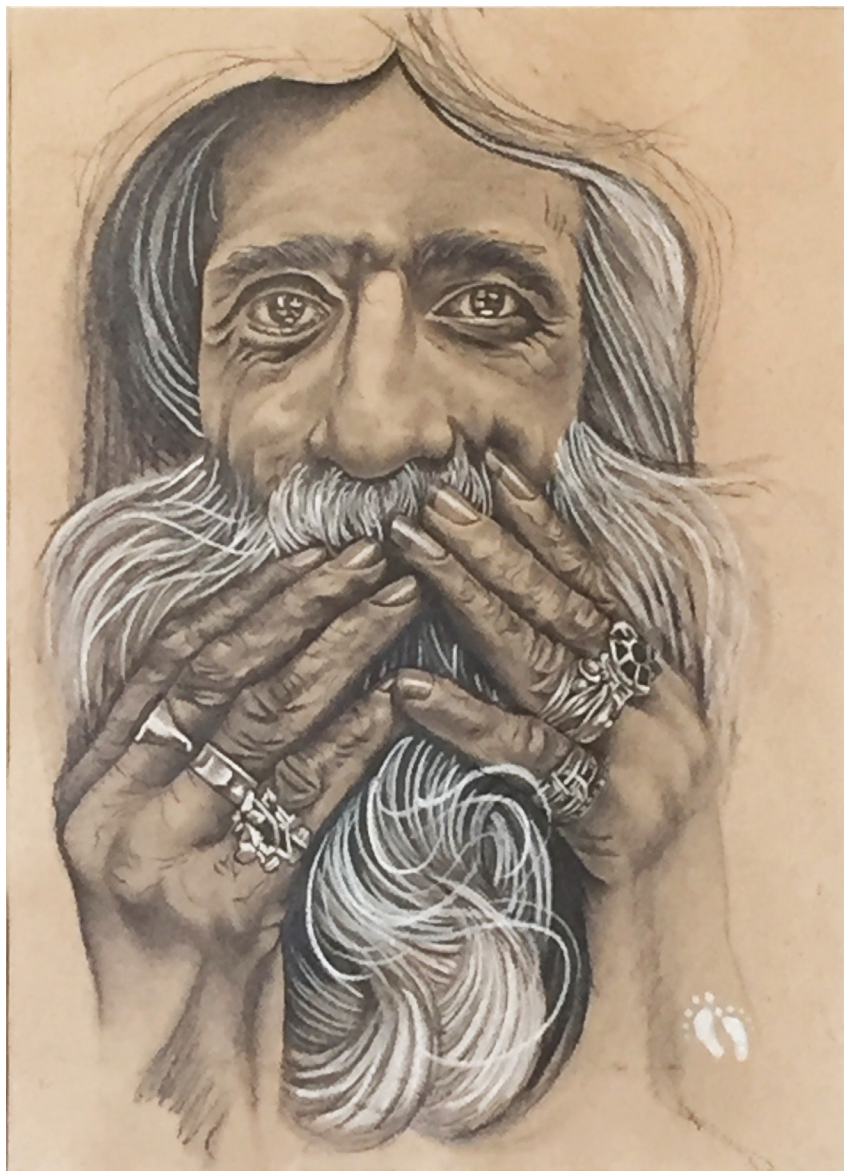
Graphite and Charcoal on Toned Paper, 2014



Homeless Teen

Hector Cedillo, Arizona

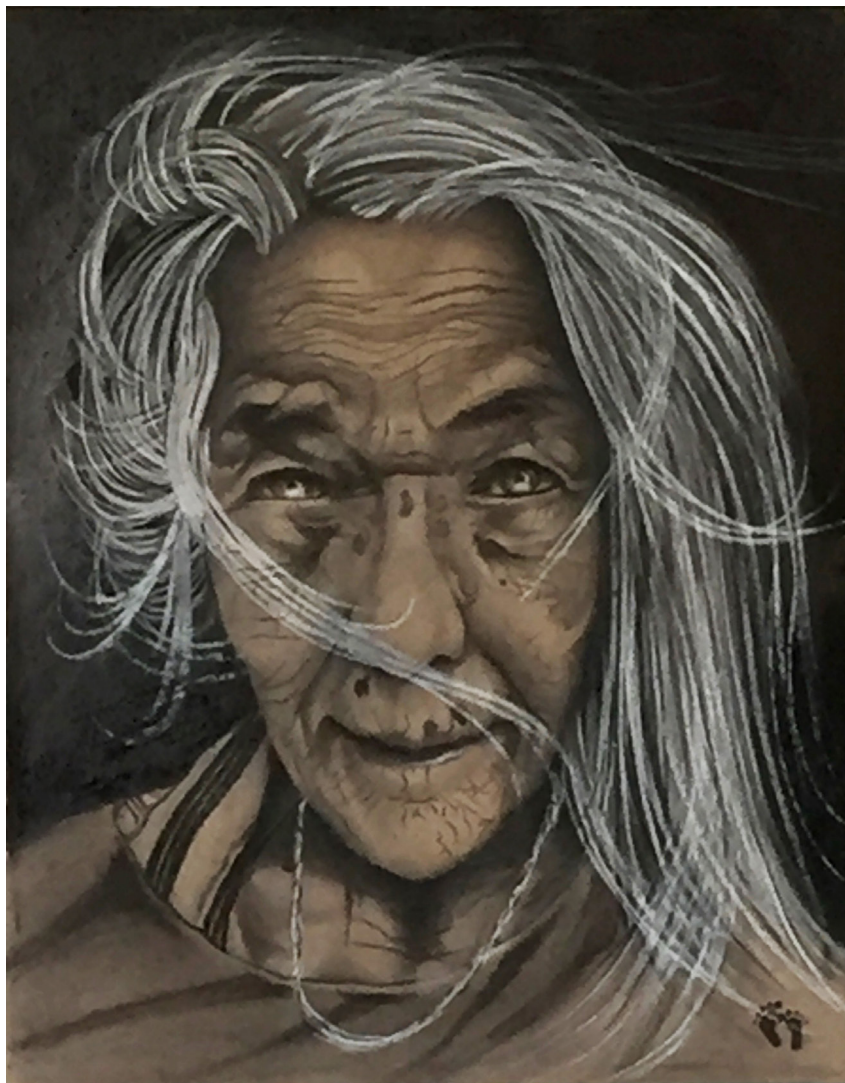
Graphite and Charcoal on Toned Paper, 2014



Homeless Man

Hector Cedillo, Arizona

Graphite and Charcoal on Toned Paper, 2014



Homeless Woman

Hector Cedillo, Arizona

Graphite and Charcoal on Toned Paper, 2014

The Stories We Save May Include Our Own

Matt Malyon, Washington

I. Birdwatching

Late night on Watson Bridge—a span across the Skagit River in Northern Washington—a trumpeter swan flies into a light pole. The pole reverberates with sound. The bird drops onto the highway and stands in the amber light filtering from the large bulb above. No—it *reels*, dizzy in the vibration of its unplanned encounter with steel. It flaps its huge wings and begins to make sounds that might best be described as cries of terror, as it moves in and out of cars unable to stop their hurtling forward for the sudden and surprising descent of the large white bird.

I spend most Wednesday afternoons with youth in orange jumpsuits, holding a yellow No. 2 pencil between my fingers, and leaning over a black-marbled notebook. The youth in juvenile detention have landed "inside" for various reasons—gang related incidents like drive-by shootings or territorial violence, domestic disputes, harm to animals, or items involving alcohol and drugs. Unless they write about their past, which they often do, we leave such matters at the door. I shake their hands and welcome them as equals. After introductions we settle into the work at hand—reading literature together, and responding to it through discussion and creative writing.

In the early days of facilitating *Underground Writing* workshops, I began to notice our tendency to bring literature of a darker vein. *Underground Writing* is "a literature-based creative writing program serving migrant, incarcerated, recovery, and other at-risk communities in Washington Skagit Valley." The works we brought in included, among others, Dante's dark wood, Sherman Alexie's poetry of lament, the non-fiction-fiction of Tim O'Brien, the wars and adventures in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the migrant experience of Juan Felipe Herrera, environmental issues in Martha Serpas' poetry, the tragedy and loss in the poems of Jimmy Santiago Baca, Osip Mandlestam, and Natalie Diaz, and the darker undercurrents hidden within Robert Frost's well managed forms.

I caught myself introducing workshops by saying things like, "I know we discuss a lot of darker stuff, but...." In time, I realized our

students did not share a similar anxiety. They recognized their own stories in this very type of difficult literature.

The truth is that our *Underground Writing* students, in one way or another, are struggling. Youth struggle with the adult crimes they wake to discover they have committed; adult students struggle in the physical and mental aftershocks of drug addiction and incarceration; migrant leaders struggle within intricate webs of cultural and familial tensions, in a country seemingly half against them. Such darkness needs be named, and our dynamic discussions indicate our students intuitively know this.

Late night on Watson Bridge—a span across the Skagit River in Northern Washington—a trumpeter swan flies into a light pole. The pole reverberates with sound. The bird drops onto the highway and stands in the amber light filtering from the large bulb above.

The story that opened this essay was told during a workshop by my friend and colleague in *Underground Writing*, Chris Hoke. Chris has a gift for images, and this one stuck with me for some time. I could see it. I could hear it. I wanted to include it in a piece of my own writing. But it wasn't my story.

In the days that followed, however, something began to evolve.

I recalled what came to mind in the workshop when I heard the story—my father in an auto parts store in Anaheim, California in January 2000.

Two months before my father's death—after his fifth surgery—he decided to get new seat covers for my mom's car. He would have nothing to do with anyone telling him anything different. And so, with a body emaciated from years of radiation, cobalt, and chemotherapy in the 70s, and again during the return of his Hodgkin's Disease in 1999, my father climbed carefully into his golden yellow Volvo 1800 sports car and drove to the local auto parts store. He was nearly a ghost by this point. A perfectionist his entire life, he had only recently given up shaving due to a lack of energy. He weighed less than a hundred pounds.

I was in Iowa at the time, so I wasn't there to see him walk gingerly down the aisle, past the various car fluids, on his way to the seat covers. And I didn't hear the break, as somewhere between the ankle and the knee, his tibia simply snapped. My beloved father, a man of dignity and grace unlike I've ever known, fell to the floor in agony, surrounded by

bottles of motor oil and antifreeze, his brief descent ending in shock, as he turned onto his back, stunned by the white light and the faces above him appearing quickly from all angles of his vision.

As *Underground Writing* has grown, as we've journeyed from the adrenaline burst of new beginnings, articles in the press, and T-Shirts into the settled rhythms of a more established program, one facet of what we're doing has become increasingly important to me—how our stories overlap, how they connect us.

In January 2016, my beloved mom passed away. It was a grief unlike I had known in years. Part of the intensity was due to the fact that both of my biological parents were now gone. When I shared this news at each of our sites, invariably the room grew quiet. It was as if I could see in slow-motion-time-release the change in the students' perception of me—white, middle-class teacher to fellow human in a shared journey. We were now strugglers together, and with a common language. We sat together in that moment of silence. Mere seconds, usually, but it often felt as if time expanded so as to contain the gravity of death. And I suspect we each sat in that silence with images and stories flickering through our minds. Stories of blood and lineage and loss and grief, the students unconsciously experiencing a transformation as my narrative merged briefly with theirs then faded into other thoughts based in their lives, their stories.

Late night on Watson Bridge—a span across the Skagit River in Northern Washington—a trumpeter swan flies into a light pole...

In the days following my hearing of this tale, I realized that the stories I was hearing in the workshops were no longer easily defined as something other, as "theirs." And the stories I was sharing from my life were not exclusively "mine." In fact, my friend's story was becoming mine, or a part of it, as were the stories shared by our students. In my hearing of them—my taking them in, as it were—they had not been merely received. The stories had some sort of agency, something that is ongoing. The stories, I believe, are generating connections with stories from my life. They are intertwined with my own and are changing my perception of my past. My stories are also becoming part of others' stories. Located in the Skagit Valley for a little over a year now, I join these storytellers. My life now includes their lives. I am being changed day by day, reeling in the reverberations of such beauty and sorrow.

Weeks later, I recalled a photograph famous in my family for its seeming absurdity. In the foreground my beloved father and his brother are horsing around with their father, my grandfather, on the west-facing, hard brown sands of Manzanita, Oregon, our family's preferred place of sojourn for four generations. My cousin is building a sandcastle in the background, and behind the small edifice, the Pacific Ocean in all its glory—deep blue, brightly glistening under the evening sun. The lighting is appropriately the golden hour. My father, on the left side of the photo, separated by a human-width gap from his father and brother, has his hand held up and out like one side of a cross. Far in the background, but clearly visible, and seeming to rest on my father's fingertips: a gull, its wings expanding, about to take flight.

II. Gravedigging

In our line of work, my colleagues and I often talk about bringing life into places of death. Whatever a literal resurrection might entail, I'm learning most people need first to discover their entrapment. They also need hope, something that is in scarce supply for many of the students with whom we work. What little remains often needs to be exhumed.

We use creative writing as a shovel.

It's hard work, but the willingness to dig is quickly evidenced in the discussions that follow our group reading of a text. And the soil, prepared by the literature, is pliant. By the time the writing prompts are finished, students—through some grace moving in language itself—have often dug down deep enough into the self to reach a grave.

Spaces like these are shelters for decay, narratives of darkness. I hear such stories on a weekly basis... The youth who confesses to me he's in juvenile detention for killing his grandma's dog and doesn't know why he did it, who then proceeds to tell me of his long history of physical abuse at the hands of an angry father; the man in his twenties I'm asked to speak with on the phone in the glass-protected booth, who is missing an arm he himself sawed off, who has swastikas below his eyes and "perdition" written backwards on his forehead so he can read it in the mirror, who tells me he's from Manson's farm; the look on the guard's face the other night when I asked if any pastoral care had been

given to the Cascade Mall shooter, who is currently being held in Skagit County Jail; the youth I counsel who tells me he's having flashbacks of standing over a rival gang member he's unwittingly stabbed six times in self-defense, listening to him beg for mercy.

There are other movements in the darkness, too.

We're privileged to see some of our students on a regular basis and build long-term rapport. It's satisfying to see the maturing work they produce. Many of our students, however, we see only once, maybe twice, for an hour or two at most. These are the students I wonder about. Will their notebooks ever get used for creative writing again? Will the impact of encountering literature in a given session spark something, anything? Will they contact us on the "outs"? Will they remember writing is a gift and a tool for life? I continue to hope. I continue to believe that literature read together in a hospitable atmosphere, paired with writing prompts connected to both the readings and the students' lives, begins something beyond what we can quantify. Words matter. Literally. They take shape, and form a space in which things can grow.

Leaving the workshop with a notebook full of words and photocopies of good literature is not our only goal, of course. We're seeking both inspiration and transformation. This may take the form of a participant's continuing to pursue the craft of writing and reading in a more purposeful manner. It may simply mean they read more. Or it may mean they discover writing as a tool to help process a world that usually leaves them confused, angry, and sad. Whatever the case, we endeavor to resuscitate and nurture hope, something tangible that can be built upon, furthered to the point that an imagination of a different future begins to arc toward what they might become. It is across this bridge of the imagination, as it were, that the participants can begin the long journey towards embodying a different future.

I've seen writing work this way for two of the students who participated in our program's initial week of workshops.

Robert is from another state, but was being detained on various charges in Skagit County. Although he was noticeably quiet, I often caught him grinning at certain things read or said in the workshop. There was a light on. I liked him immediately.

A month or two after *Underground Writing's* debut, our workshop group was discussing the letters of James Baldwin in *The Fire Next*

Time. "Letters can be literature," we told the youth. "Let's try it, too." For our writing prompt, we asked them to write a letter to someone. When it was open-share time, Robert decided to read. "I call this one, 'Dear System'," he began.

Dear System,

Ever since I was born you've been there. You were there when my biological mom would relapse and let my sister and I run around free. You were there again as I began to realize how to work on my own and take care of my mom and little sister. You were there when my biological dad went into a rage and hit someone. You were there when my mom used up her last chance. You took me and my little sister from her. You weren't there when I passed from family member to family member. You were there to give me a new family. You were the one who put both my parents in jail. You put my biological dad in prison. Now you are here again, but this time just for me. You are here putting me in JRA for the same reason my biological dad's locked up. You have brought me nothing but pain in the 14 years I've known you. You have torn apart my family time and time again only to put me in a new one where I've done nothing but disappoint or make people angry.

So, System, before I finish this letter, I just want you to know I will never forgive you.

Robert

The room was silent. Not only because we'd just heard a sort of foundational text that solidified we were on to something important, but also because Robert's writing was inarguably powerful. In five minutes, his emotions had been honed into something concise that moved beyond mere self-expression. He'd interacted with literature dialogically, and by the look on his face, something transformative had happened to him during the process.

Robert's out of state now, so we stay in touch these days via letters and the phone. During the course of our last phone conversation, he told me he's working on a section of a long autobiography project, as well as completing a set of song lyrics. His letters, too, bear witness to

the continuing impact of writing...

I'm happy that "Dear System" is helping people. That's a side of my writing that I never considered I am still writing. So far I have gone through three notebooks... I miss going to Underground Writing sessions. I liked it there, I always felt welcomed.

I've also seen it in Josh—a native to our county, held in Juvenile Detention for a record number of months, due to the seriousness of the charges against him. Josh's interest in writing has had extremely tangible benefits. In our workshops he was always eager to share his work.

Thinking

*So I'm in deep depression now
There's nothing I can do about it
I've been sleeping all day
I get real tired when I'm this way.
I start thinking and thinking
And my mind goes crazy.
I get the same thought
Over and over—
What would things be like if
I ended my life today?
I stare, and I stare
I think everyone
Who loves me hates me,
Who wouldn't care
If I just disappeared one day
I think and I think—
Wouldn't it be better if it all
Just went away.*

Josh is determined to survive. Likeable from the start, he's a person I've come to appreciate for his strong desire for change and restoration. In the fifteen months I've known him, he's taken to writing as if it were an iron lung. His first letter to me implied it might, in fact, be

something of the sort.

As you know, I missed creative writing. I was really bummed out because that's my favorite programming that I look forward to all week. I'm a 'security risk'. I'm really stressed out and just going crazy. I've never had such severe, strong, and sudden emotions.

Near the end of his stay in Juvenile Detention, we began meeting once a week. In turn, I met with him as a teacher or a chaplain, determined by his need on any given day. By the time he was finally sentenced and sent to a juvenile prison two hours south of our county, we'd begun letters back and forth.

So I made it to Green Hill! I was in Shelton for about 3 hours then they took me. I've been here almost 24 hours. I'm not sure what to say about this place other than it's definitely a prison... I found a small section for poetry in the library, but they have like 80% Shakespeare and really old stuff.... I've been writing a ton but most of it is private stuff or my new book, 'To My Love.' I'm really excited to hear what you think about my prologue. My mom is sending all of my writing from the outs and Juvie. It is so much that she had to put it in a package in the post office.

When I look back over the past fourteen months, writing is the thread that is so apparently woven through Josh's future progress and restoration. More so, what I believe propels Josh is what to one degree or another propels all writers and poets—he has encountered the self through writing, and in that process, imagination, mystery, and hope.

Our correspondence has notably increased in the six months since his transfer, most of it being driven by Josh's own desire to continue learning the craft of writing. He is an exemplar of our program's hoped-for impact. In 41 letters and counting, we've edited and re-edited draft after draft of various poems and short stories. We've shared a bit of our own stories. And we've also been working on a co-submission to a literary journal, an item that has facilitated further momentum toward change for Josh.

I've been inspired once again to be a part of Underground Writing or a similar group/organization when I get out. This program changes lives. I am a prime example. I now have something to work towards, to strive for. I have something I want on the outs.

The weekend after Thanksgiving, I was able to visit Josh at Green Hill School, a juvenile prison in Chehalis, Washington. Amidst a room full of families and loved ones visiting their sons, their boyfriends, their dads, I sat with Josh for one and a half hours. We talked about his life at Green Hill, as well as his hopes for the future. He's feeling settled in his living unit, and his medications have finally stabilized. There have been challenging and good reconnections with his family. He's just turned eighteen and is registering to vote. He's applying to take classes through a local community college, and is determined to use what little money he has to help his mom pay for his tuition. In my estimation, the hope for change has transformed into actual and definable progress.

"You're doing great," I say to Josh as we shake hands. "Really great. So glad to see it." I tell him I'll return in a month or two.

He smiles. "You're going to send out our submission next week—right?"

Reading Flannery O'Connor recently, I was reminded of a story received from the early Christian hermit tradition of the desert fathers and mothers in Egypt:

There was a hermit living in the region of Scetis who had become seriously ill. His fellow monks, upon visiting him one day, discovered that he had died, and began to prepare his body for burial. All of sudden, he awoke, opened his eyes, and began laughing. After recovering from their surprise, the brothers asked him what he was laughing about. He told them he was laughing because they feared death, because they were not ready for it, and, finally, because he was passing from labor into his rest. With this he rolled over and died.

Death for such monastics was a way of life. A way to life. And reportedly, some monks in ages past did indeed sleep in their coffins. When presented with this bit of history, my son tells me the monks

were probably hiding from something. I asked some of the youth in *Underground Writing* what they thought.

Anthony: "To get away from everything for a while."

Lorenzo: "Maybe it was part of their praying."

Luciean: "Because they're getting ready to die."

In some sense, all of these answers are correct. Monks have always been consciously mindful of death. Sleeping in coffins was simply a more obvious way of facilitating this. It was likely their way of hiding from the very act of hiding—a way to actively seek an encounter with reality. Whatever the people in surrounding communities may have thought of the practice, to say nothing of the explanation, it was not a sorrowful thing. Nor did it lead to depression. In fact, a monk's literal descent into his future place of death allowed him to more fully engage life. It became a conduit for joy, allowing a monk to wake to the freeing realization of his mortality.

In the literature we discuss with youth and adults, in the writing we do as a generative response, we more often than not enter into the darkness of our lives. These unlit places may be as simple as a general lack of clarity or as complex as navigating the extrication of oneself from the clutches of drug addiction, gang involvement, or repeating cycles of shame and perceived failure. Whatever a student's degree of darkness, by directly descending into it—through the profound mystery of reading/writing—something begins to happen. Student writers begin to voice the ineffable. Words become sentences become beauty. In less than an hour, it's surprising to witness the claustrophobic encasement of each student's life opening up a bit. So begins a fissure. And through such gaps daylight begins to filter in.



Morning Light
Dutch, Arizona

The Hole

Wes Hester, New Mexico

*My strength is gone,
Gone like water spilled on the ground. ~ PSALM 22:14*

Twenty Years. It's a long time. In the past twenty years, the world has moved on. I have never used, or even held, a cell-phone. I've never used the internet. My children no longer know me. Everyone I loved is gone. In the past two decades, people have been conceived, born, and come of age while I have sat in a cage. I am no longer a part of the world outside.

My writing group sponsor suggested I write about the results of long term segregation, also known as solitary confinement, or simply, *the hole*. I thought a lot on this subject. It was not easy to think about. With the memories came pain and depression. One who has not been that isolated will never understand.

Think of your life the last ten years. Where have you been? What have you done?

Of the twenty years I have been locked away, I have spent over ten in solitary. A decade locked in a cell. An animal. No sun. No air. No hope. Nothing but the screaming of the other animals who cannot take any more.

Then, silence, as the guards haul out another suicide.

You peer through the cracks in the door, watching the hazmat workers clean up blood, or carry off the rope fashioned from a bed sheet.

Ten Years.

I used to be human. I had a job. A career. A family. Two boys and a wife. I had land bought and paid for. The byproduct of my hard work.

Now I live in a bathroom with another man. I have not seen the night sky in so many years I have forgotten what it looks like. I have not felt the rain on my face in twenty years. These are the things that haunt me in the hole.

The effects of "Long-Term Segregation." It sounds so simple. A sterile phrase. An intellectual concept of a devastating practice.

So, let me tell you about this "Long-Term Segregation."

I have been thrown in the hole for numerous charges. I spent twenty-two months in maximum security without any disciplinary infraction. I was placed there by a vindictive warden who thought I needed to "learn a lesson."

Then, I spent another sixteen months there under the same warden, simply because he didn't like me. Again, with no disciplinary infractions.

Then, twelve years later, in a different facility, that same warden placed me in the hole and charged me with attacking three gang members who entered my cell and attacked me while I sat in my WHEELCHAIR. I am in a wheelchair, unable to walk, as a result of being beaten by three guards, who broke my back and shoulder.

I have spent the last eight years in this chair. Without medical access. Without legal access. Nothing but threats and trips to maximum lockup whenever I request medical access or legal access. Yes, wheelchair and all.

The last trip to the hole I went on a hunger strike that lasted forty days, all in an attempt to get some kind of justice. I was accused of being suicidal.

Those in charge just don't understand.

I am fifty-two years old. I no longer care if I live or die. Even now I am facing trumped up charges for fighting a twenty-year-old gang member from my wheelchair. The same fine, upstanding staff that threw me in the hole the last time are intent on doing so again.

But this time I don't intend to come out of the hole.

I am no longer human. I pray for the mercy of death every night. Bible in hand, I pray for death. That's my nightly ritual.

I wake every morning depressed.

That is the effect of long-term segregation. Every day staring down the barrel of a gun. Every day, waiting for some kid half my age to exercise his power trip to show what kind of a hard-core cop he is. All the while knowing I will not come out alive (God willing).

And, not giving a shit.

Yeah, that's the effect of long-term segregation.

Welcome to my world.

The First Night: A Memoir

Joshua W.R., Arizona

"Alright, head down to your house. We'll get you a mattress soon," the corrections officer says dismissively.

I pull open the metal door and step inside. Dull fluorescent lighting casts a pall over row after row of gray bunk beds lining each side of the building. Dozens of eyes follow me as I march past clutching two net bags. Nervousness radiates off me as I move deeper into the pod.

I stop beside a bunk with a large double-door locker welded to the bed and a large 34 painted on it. The man lying on the bottom bed gets up, looks me over, and sighs.

"Name's Kenny. What's yours?"

"Josh," I reply as I look around, trying to absorb everything.

"They getting you a mat?"

"Yeah, the CO said it would be here soon."

He looks toward the control room. "If it's not, I'll get on them. It's bullshit that they sent you in without one."

Kenny points to the upper bunk. "Throw your stuff up here for now. I'll introduce you to the head." He walks toward the back of the run, and I follow. He enters the last house on the left and says something to a grizzled man in orange shorts and a T-shirt. They both step out and come toward me. Tattoos cover the grizzled man's arms.

"I'm Donny, the head white guy around here. You've been down before?" he asks.

I swallow, "This is my first time."

"Well, Kenny here is a good cellie to have. He'll show you the ropes. If you got any questions, just ask." He returns to his bed. Kenny and I walk back to our house.

As we arrive, Kenny opens the end locker and removes two framed drawings. "This is your locker. You can throw your shit in here. Once your mat gets here, I'll help you get it settled." He walks in and begins rummaging under his bed.

I grab my bags and begin placing my meager belongings in the locker. I'm just about done when someone approaches and gives me a cereal bar. I thank him as he moves on. Over the next several minutes I'm given two Ramen noodles packets, a bar of soap, a bowl, a cup, some shampoo, another cereal bar, and a few magazines. I retrieve my towel, soap, and clean clothes, and I head to the bathroom. Four sinks

line the right wall with three stalls opposite them. Beyond the stalls are three showers facing three urinals. I climb into the last shower, hang up my things, and strip down. The temperature is adjustable; I take my first hot shower in almost five months.

I kill the water and towel off. I throw on boxers and a shirt and head back to my bed. I set my soap in the locker and hang up my towel and washcloth before climbing onto the bed. I sit on my blanket and peruse a Popular Science magazine.

About halfway into the magazine, Kenny walks up lugging a thin, gray mattress. "Hop down so we can get your bed made."

In just a few minutes Kenny finishes the task and zones in on his TV.

I climb back onto the bunk. I lie down on a prison bed for the first time. I think of the generosity and the kindness shown to me by these strangers. And, for the first time, I'm not worried about the next three years.



The Love of My Life

Hector Cedillo, Arizona

Graphite and Charcoal on Toned Paper, 2017

How It Is

Daniel Cox, New Mexico

Can a culture be changed? I believe the answer is yes. Cultures have changed hundreds of times over decades. Innovation and inventions change cultures. Progressive thinking or war can change cultures. I know it's possible to change a culture, but I also understand that it takes something big to change it. And I don't see much hope for change in the culture I find myself in now.

I'm a prisoner, an outcast, a hopeless soul, a lost creature. I'm an insignificant part of the whole that is to be discarded, abandoned, forgotten. Out of sight, out of mind, right? I hold a title, or label, that usually inspires fear, disgust, and contempt. I'm a convict. A number. This is how it is.

Well, regardless of popular belief, I am not an outcast or an insignificant soul or even a bad person. I'm just a person, like you. I feel. I have emotions and regrets. Though most of society sees me differently. They deem me unworthy of the most basic human qualities and see me only as the "title" I carry. A fuck-up. A lost cause. This is how it is.

As a prisoner I find myself steeped in an alien culture. Things that seem cruel and illogical have become the norm, the law. We are all here for breaking the law, yet we come here and adhere to another Law. Not the law of the guards but our own Law. We've created these rules that all of us must follow. This is the culture I speak of when I say there is no hope for change. We have created this harsh and violent surrounding that we live in every day. Hell, we sustain and enforce it! I help to sustain it too. That's how it is.

The law here is pretty straightforward. Don't snitch. Don't speak friendly to the guards; hate them actually. Mind your own business and never ever ever show weakness of any kind, especially physical. If someone comes to prison for messed up charges like rape, child molestation, or other real child cruelty, then they can't walk the line (be in general population). Snitches, people who are too afraid to fight, and those who come with fucked up charges go to PC (protective custody). This separate housing unit is just for them. In the eyes of the other convicts, PC inmates are the scum of prison. So if any of these inmates do make it to the line it is rule #1 to kick the crap out of them and send them packing. They will be beat, kicked and sometimes stabbed and

killed. The other convicts will take all their shit and leave them in a bloody mess for the COs (corrections officers) to clean up.

Think about this for a moment... Messed up, right? That's just how it is.

There are also things, as prisoners, that we can't say or that we must do, like certain words that can't be said without there being a fight. *Bitch* is at the top of that list. It's definitely a taboo word, the ultimate insult to a man's pride and unforgivable. Fighting is a must. Everyone fights at least once, as a way to prove they're not scared or weak. If there's a confrontation between two people, it is almost a certainty that there will be a fight. There is no backing down because that would imply fear, and thus, a weakness. Too bad if it was all a misunderstanding. There will be no logical chats to sort it out. You can fight or you can PC. Your choice. Because if you choose not to fight, then your group (usually race or gang related) will kick your ass and send you packing to PC. And once you're in PC, you can never hit the line again. No second chances. You become marked, like a leper among the healthy, with no hope of a cure or a return to normality. This is how it is.

On the street I would never adhere to such "laws." If you see someone in trouble, you help them, right? Not in prison. Mind your own business, remember. I also believe it takes a better man to walk away from a fight than to pursue one. I don't want to hurt anyone, physically or emotionally. Logic should rule our actions, not these self-imposed laws. Unfortunately, this is prison and the "laws" are set. I didn't make them, but if forced, I must act, and I'll break your teeth just to prove a point! I'm not scared or weak, and I'll never be a PC inmate. This is what our so called laws do to us. Sadly, this is how it is.

As for the guards, the CO's, I won't hate someone for providing for their family. For many, this is just a job. I don't hate them like I should. I'll always show respect to another person who's just doing what they need to do. I understand they're just doing their jobs. But there are those other officers that came to work to bask in their newfound power of controlling others' lives. This culture needs to change, but it won't. This is how it is.

As a convict I am stripped of everything: my family, my freedom, my choices, women, love, time....The list goes on. I suffer every day! There is no need for someone to come and make it worse, to take my dignity and disrespect me, to talk trash to me, knowing if I retaliate I'll

get more time. That's not right, but it happens all the time. Some officers can't wait till they can come to work and make our lives even worse, and they'll smile as they do it. This is how it is.

Administration is no better. Once, I sat in seg with a broken toilet for two weeks. Two weeks! My toilet is in my room, not five feet from where I eat and sleep. It's bad enough to have a toilet sharing the space with your kitchen and bedroom, but to have it broken is disgusting. I complained and wrote grievances, yet it took two weeks to fix a ten minute problem. That's unacceptable. There are people who get forgotten about in segregation for years at a time! This is how it is.

Drugs flow into prison so heavily there is no possible way that administration doesn't know about it. I believe they let this happen in the hopes that the drugs will leave us docile and easy to manipulate. What kind of rehabilitation is that? Sadly, the people who should care about us convicts, and our reintegration into society, don't. They encourage recidivism. Remember, prison is not only an institution for criminals, but it is also one of the biggest businesses in the country. And what's good for businesses? Return customers. As horrible as that sounds, through my own experiences, I believe it to be the truth. This is how it is.

I came to prison due to an accident, and I can't change that. But I'll get out one day (95% of us do get out), and I constantly think of ways to better my opportunities for when I am released. Unfortunately, many don't think this way. The majority of convicts are born into this life, as most of their family members are also convicts and prisoners. They come to believe that this is their only choice, their only way of life. This mindset has to change. Education needs to be more readily provided. Education is the only proven "cure" for recidivism. I don't mean the anger management and drug class stuff. Those classes only work if the person wants to change. How can we want to change if most of us believe this is our only way of life? We need to be given a better way of life, real education, college courses, that will open up opportunities for us when released. Give us a reason to want to change, something that will teach us there is a better way of life and we are just as able to live that life as others are. Educate us! Free us!

Recidivism is at about 80 percent. That means 80 out of 100 prisoners that are released will return. This is how it is. But it doesn't have to be this way. I am only one man, and as I said at the beginning, it takes something big to change a culture. Won't you be big with me?

But again, as I also said, I don't hold much hope for change. Why do or be better if all anyone sees of us anyway is the title of a convict that we all carry for life, the lost causes, in or out of prison? Why care about a society that doesn't care about us? We have to educate and inspire convicts to care about society again and to want to be productive members within it.

Remember, we are the people that have been forgotten by the same society that most of us will have to work in again. How will we do that? We won't. At least, that's what the statistics say. Eighty percent of us will fail and return to prison. This is how it is.

Now that you know the problem, and the proposed solution, what will you do about it? Convicts, will you be another statistic and part of the problem? Society, will you forget us, forget me, as soon as you stop reading this? Tell me, what will you do? Because in prison, this is how it is.



Escape

Robert M., Arizona

Acrylic and Water Color, 2016

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Iron City Magazine is seeking fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, one-act plays, and art for its third issue set to be published Spring 2018. The deadline to submit is April 1, 2018.

Who Can Submit

We welcome submissions from current/former inmates, current/former prison volunteers, and current/former prison staff. Inmates may submit work regarding any topic. Prison volunteers and staff should only submit work regarding prison-related memories, perspectives, or insights.

How to Submit

To accommodate inmates who do not have computer and/or internet access, we accept both electronic and mail-in submissions. Additionally, we accept both typed and handwritten work. There is no submission fee.

Please include your entire submission all together in a single email or envelope.

Submissions may be emailed to **ironcitymagazine@gmail.com** or mailed to **Iron City Magazine, PO Box 370, Tempe AZ, 85280**.

Manuscripts and art will be returned only with a self-addressed and stamped envelope or mailing tube.

Payment

Two contributor copies (prison policy permitting)

Guidelines for All Genres

We are looking for quality and originality. Send us your best work—writing and art that is compelling, well crafted, and attentive to detail. We do not accept previously published work.

Work must not include names or other identifying information of any actual person victim to or guilty of a crime, apart from the author.

Please make handwriting legible. Capital and lowercase letters, punctuation, line breaks, and paragraph/stanza spacing must be distinct.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Guidelines for Fiction

We accept all types of fiction. Flash fiction and short story are preferred.

We accept multiple pieces, up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages (4,000 words), total. Shorter pieces are preferred, but we will consider exceptional longer pieces.

Guidelines for Creative Nonfiction

We accept any true story, but memoir and personal essays are preferred. Tell a good story but make sure it is based in fact. We will also consider brief opinion pieces, argument essays, and humor.

We accept multiple pieces, up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages (4,000 words), total. Shorter pieces are preferred, but we will consider exceptional longer pieces.

Guidelines for Poetry

We accept all types of poetry including formal, free-verse, experimental, and prose poetry.

Please submit 3-5 poems for which the total page count does not exceed 10 pages. We do not accept book-length works. Poems exceeding 1 page should still be spare and evocative.

Guidelines for One-Act Plays

We accept all types of short, one-act plays.

Please submit up to 2 plays. Each play should be no longer than 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages.

Guidelines for Art

We accept both physical and digital artwork.

Please submit 1-3 pieces. Include the title, medium, size, and date of each submission.

For more information or to obtain copies, visit ironcitymagazine.org.



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