

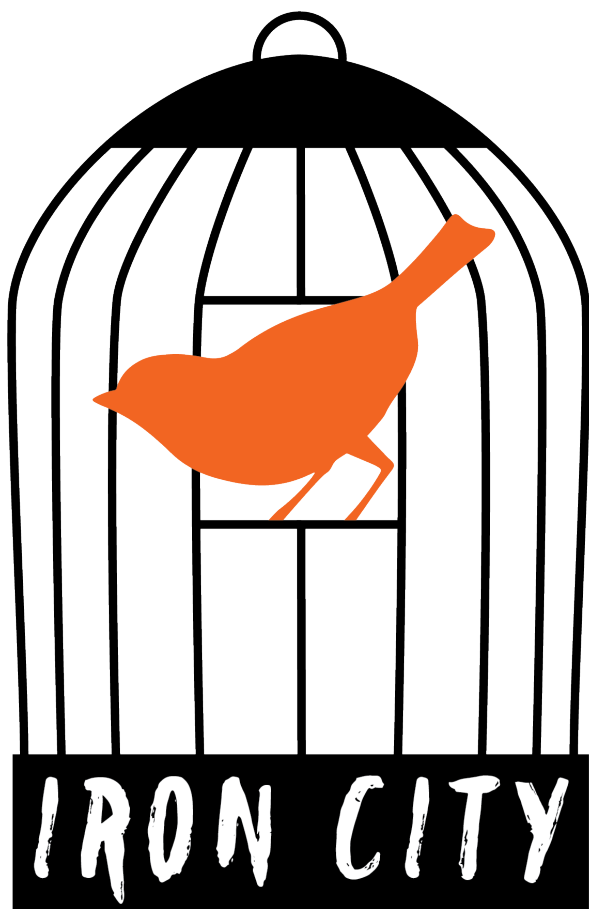


Front cover artwork, *Dawn of Conquest* by Hector Cedillos,  
Charcoal on Paper, 32"x40", 2014

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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 journal 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

We would like to thank the following from Arizona State University for their support: Barrett, the Honors College; Changemaker Central Woodside Community Action Grant; and the Prison Education Awareness Club (PEAC).





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# LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Dear Reader,

If Incarcerated America were gathered into a single state, it would be the 36th largest state in the world's largest democratic endeavor: The United States.

Creative expression both enshrines and undermines what we take to be “the way things are” from place to place, era to era, even day to day. What the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus declared more than two and a half millennia ago—*You can't step twice into the same river*—ironically still holds. You probably can't even step twice into the same cell. Change itself seems to be inescapable, even if as one of Murphy's Laws posits, “One good slogan can stop analysis for fifty years.” However fast or slow, we are always changing our futures, one expression at a time.

No one else can dream one's dreams or tell one's story as well as oneself. The essence of a democracy is the voices of the people. To honor the many individuals of Incarcerated America, we at the magazine, though we are not ourselves residents of this prison state, or because we are not and cannot accurately speak for those who are, hope that *Iron City* will function as a bit of a state capital, gathering unofficial representatives—literary and visual artists—from Incarcerated America at large to provide a forum for creative expressions of their own experiences.

May you enjoy these,  
Cornelia “Corri” Wells, Editor-in-Chief  
*Iron City*, Incarcerated America, U.S.A., Planet Earth, the  
Universe

# LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Dear Reader,

I was first exposed to prison writing as an intern for the Pen Project at Arizona State University, an innovative distance learning program for incarcerated writers. During my year and a half as an intern, I read hundreds of poems, memoirs, and essays. The submissions were all poignant, crafted, and inspiring—they merited more than to collect dust in a prison cell. The writers needed a place to publish their work and showcase their talents. So the Pen Project coordinator and I created a magazine that works with incarcerated writers and artists and their unique situations.

Through this process, I have come to realize that it is not just our privilege, but our responsibility to affirm the humanity within one another.

In this magazine you will find fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and art from current/previous inmates, current/previous prison educators, and others who have been touched by the state of mass incarceration.

Some contributors are represented by pen names, some by their legal names, and some (per prison policy) by first names only.

Thank you to the prison educators who helped us spread the word and collect submissions. Thank you to the team of editors who typed and selected work. Most of all, thank you to the writers and artists who contributed work for this inaugural issue.

Until next issue,  
Natalie Volin, Managing Editor

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## We Are Colors That Collide

*Stewart Gonzales, Arizona*

We are colors that collide  
Colors that shatter the dream  
From the mountaintop,  
That *free at last, free at last*,  
Promise—that does not exist  
In America's prison system.

We do not blend  
Like café con leche,  
The color of my brother's skin;  
Not mine, mine is bruised—  
It's what I've used  
To rationalize going back  
To the rough spots  
That can't be smoothed  
With sandpapered words.

I live with biases;  
In cubicles designed  
To appease my brotherly keepers  
Who say, You will always  
Have the poor in spirit  
The jagged minds.

My scarlet past weighs heavy.  
It's my beastly mark, the 6-6-6  
That I carry as a reminder  
Of the price of iniquity,  
As a reminder that forgiveness  
Is just another word  
For everything to lose.

## A Question for the Moon and Me

*Dominic Murphy, New Mexico*

A bird sings of his triumph over the worm as I wake to a blood-red sky from a dream where I died. Instantly, I feel the pressure of life fill me like it did God before he began to create. The concrete walls reflect the morning chill as I roll over to recapture the warmth lost in waking. I look through my prison window in an attempt to find nature's alarm. Instead, I see the moon watching the world move on without him. I feel a connection to the lunar watchman. We are both the remnants of brilliance now trapped in routines of silence and time. While the moon slips unnoticed into the end of his orbit, the gravity of the morning pushes me unnoticed into the beginning of mine.

The morning shines golden under the fluorescent lighting. I push the minutes into the hours of the day like the moon splashing waves on the beach. I sit in my room, an outcast, reading Nietzsche, pretending to understand more than the comic book version of the Übermensch.

A letter sits on my table. Its words are just moonlight; a reflection of what could be.

Trapped in my cell, I feel like the moon in a starless sky. With no one to torment but myself, I am still that child sitting in my father's chair in the house my grandfather built, feeling like the dark spot on an eclipse.

Then, I would stare at the road that slowly curved toward our house like a lazy snake slithering home, wishing the serpent would tempt me into banishment from my father's Eden before I ruined paradise. I spent my youth trying to catch the wind in a jar, always unscrewing the lid only to find emptiness. Watching the shadows that grow from the lids, I learned the possibility of more. Now I feel like a thunderstorm trying to be remembered for the bloom not the flood.

Life is hard. Even Jesus changed his mind when he rose to live it again. Oh, to be so lucky as the angel, Lucifer, to be able

to fly away from it all to create a new name.

The moon is just like silver in the sky as he stands with his back to the world. His presence cuts through the clouds not to liberate dying souls but to create them. They say death makes saints of us all and beauty turns us into sinners. I wonder just how ugly the afterlife is.

I am haunted by the question of whether I would want a pill to make me sleep or a chance to break free. Every time I wish for the latter I picture myself crawling through a hole to find the sharp-toothed grin of a prison canine. My stolen Bugs Bunny joke—*I should've made a left turn at Albuquerque*—is never greeted with the laughter it deserves.

I stare at the shadow-smothered ceiling and wonder if the stars shine as bright beyond it. Closing my eyes, leaving another day to the moonlight, I wonder if the moon sees the blackness of space the same way I see the darkness of sleep, as if it is the beginning of heaven.

## Prison Boxing Excerpts

*Leah Joki, Montana*

### *Hasya/Laughter: Old Convict*

No ... no ... nobody gets stabbed during a pie sale. That would be considered rude, Miss Joki! That's right. A lot of these guys have killed, robbed, raped, and pillaged but they would never do harm to their fellow inmates during a pie sale. They would, at the very minimum, wait until the last man got his pie before they pulled a shank, embedded in the ground for six months. They would wait until he got his pie before they dug it up and stuck their enemy. That's just the way things are: "You do not interfere with the rights of others!" Everyone has a right to get a goddamn pie! A delicious apple or cherry pie! I mean ... you gotta' be respectful! Otherwise ... what's gonna' happen to this world ... huh? We are not gonna' let these ... inmates ... destroy us convicts' rules. You don't stab someone during a pie sale! If it weren't for us convicts the whole place 'id go to hell in a hand basket. These young boys ... excuse me, inmates ... and don't ever call me a' inmate—I'm a convict! I'll always be a convict. I hate inmates. Inmates have no respect. Why these fools these inmates have attacked women guards and teachers! Can you believe that? Attacking a woman? I tell you I'm glad I got locked up when I did. Us convicts know how to do our time like real men. We're not whiners. We know how to respect a goddamn pie sale!

### *Shanta/Self: Leah*

People often ask why I worked in prison and trust me ... there were times that I questioned it myself. But ... I loved to sit down in a room full of men where I was often the only person who hadn't offed somebody and say ... "You know what, you're right. Chances are, you're gonna die in prison. Chances are, you have done some horrible things in your life but that was then and this is now. I challenge you to create something



beautiful with the rest of your life. I challenge you to ... stand up and be counted. Do something that you can be proud of. Do something with the remainder of your life because if all you focus on is what goes on in this joint you're gonna die angry, bitter and alone. Then I would ask them to close their eyes. Can you imagine what it must be like to be in a prison, to close your eyes, and have to trust that no one in the room is going to hurt you. I would ask them to think about one thing that only they could create and think what that one thing would look like. See it. Imagine it. Keep your eyes closed. Then some of them would share that one thing with the group. That was the kind of room I belonged in: A room where one could dare to be something else, a room where one could dare to dream.

Do I have regrets about working in prison? I do have a few. Ya' know ... you can't spend eighteen years there and come out unchanged. I've got a bit of PTSD. I always sit with my back to the wall in public. I lock my doors incessantly. I talk like a crazy person in my sleep, and I continue to have horrifically violent nightmares. But despite all that ... *crap*, I wouldn't change one thing about my experience. I became a ... muscular actor in prison. I actually learned to write there ... right alongside the inmates. Fourteen years of Catholic school, eighteen years of prison and it turns out that I believe in redemption. And believing in it is what enabled me to serve those with such dark pasts. I held on to the belief that one day they just might find redemption ... in a story, a song, a painting ... a piece of pottery.



## Detached Part 1

*Hector Cedillos, Arizona*

Charcoal on Paper, 30"x24", 2016

## Day By Day (6/11/14)

*Evan Sachs, New York*

[The word of the day is “senescence”]

“I’m getting too old for this shit”  
Nearing my 4th prison birthday, 27th overall  
Too young for real nostalgia  
The world’s more or less as I remember it  
Old enough to know better  
Better than I used to  
I do like the number  
A perfect cube  
Plus my cell for awhile  
Age is just a number  
Like weight and cholesterol  
To be ignored at our own peril

(An overweight student at a school for the gifted  
He is struggling to enter the building  
Despite the door clearly being labeled pull  
He is opting to push)

A conceited example perhaps  
But to those who know me, nailed it  
Smart means always knowing what to say  
Intelligent means always knowing what to do  
Clever means being able to figure out what you don’t know  
I’ve had to be clever because I know so little  
Fairly often I come to realize  
There’s something I’ve been doing my whole life  
COMPLETELY WRONG  
I used to ask mommy which sock went on which foot  
Probably wasn’t even as young as you’d think  
As senescence sets in examples abound

I hope I'm using that right

(The bell rings to roust inmate [#####]  
Arising reluctantly, he stands on his bed  
He presses the button and his cell is flooded with light  
As he waits for the officer to pass he withdraws the black  
marker  
Once he has been counted, he adds another tally to the wall  
It is number 1,342)

I don't really do this  
I'm exercising creative license  
Count's right I think, day 1 is 10/9/10  
Today is 6/11/14  
I have been in cells with these marks  
Even I can see that way lies madness  
And I love to play with numbers  
I guess there's something to taking it one day at a time  
But that would seem to draw focus to the big picture  
You start thinking about how many more marks are coming  
Not for me

## Tipping Point

*Evan Sachs, New York*

I'm sure the public wants to know  
Exactly when I chose to throw  
It all away and thus decide  
To cast my very life aside

I hate to always disappoint  
But there's no single tipping point  
No borderline that I could find  
The scales were always misaligned

Which causes me some consternation  
Lacking easy explanations  
How am I to be assured  
Disaster will not reoccur?

The answer is, as I've deducted  
Make my prison time productive  
Which begs the questions how to do it  
Me is key as I intuit

The wisdom those who know will give  
Simply put, "Just do your bid"  
I don't let others set the bar  
Well meaning though I know they are

My progress as I go about it  
Expressed through my creative outlet  
First must come new disposition  
Then begins a higher mission

I don't know how I could have missed it  
I've been growing optimistic



While tempering from lessons learned  
From all the times that I've been spurned

And if I squint, it's somewhat clear  
What separates the there from here  
Even standing here at "B"  
I'm miles away from "C" or "Z"

I pride myself as deft of verse  
But still it's hard to put to words  
What must be done if I'm to thrive  
First things first, I must survive

If I'm to profit from the joint  
Then I must set the tipping point  
Plan to wait before I shoot  
Calibrate and execute

I've never hunted buck or doe  
The CO's seem to love it though  
But like I said, it's up to me  
To prove I've earned a driver's seat

Despite my past inebriation  
A jacket stacked with vast citations  
It seems to me that I've improved  
I just hope time will bear this through

## Occupational Hazards

*Evan Sachs, New York*

If I'm found dead, suspect foul play  
If I make it out of here alive, suspect a miracle  
I don't mean prison but this corner I've written myself into  
The pen is mightier than most anything  
Well, maybe I'm biased  
I wield it as my weapon of choice  
for finding fiction in truth and lending credence to my voice  
Love to craft a narrative  
dramatic irony and self-fulfilling prophecies.

I'm torn on the question of Fate versus Free Will  
But once a given event occurs, so much becomes inevitable  
That ripple effect is instantaneous and irreversible  
Action trumps reaction  
An ounce of prevention...  
My point is, be careful out there  
Reality will bend to perception far more easily than the reverse  
This is, like, factu-ish  
History bears me out on this one

Let's go back to the pen  
Again, I don't mean prison, but you knew that  
Sorry but lame puns are my family heritage  
I find that most things I write write themselves  
Kinda like when you space out on the highway  
And poof you're there  
It seems to me that writer's block is a form of stubbornness  
A failure to see the myriad possibilities  
Copyrights aside, we don't own our characters  
Yet we put words in their mouths and destinations in their feet  
Saddle them with a short leash and our own insecurities  
Then we're mystified when they can't close the deal

Take a leap of faith  
Swerve, screech, and veer  
Just get the hell out of here.

## The White Trailer: A Visit to My Son

*Randi T. Sachs, Virginia*

I walked up the steps of the dingy white trailer. People in pairs or alone loitered outside; the solitary ones had cell phones to their ears. Three steps up then face to glass wall, with a cop on the other side. I didn't know him, but I hated him. I hated them all.

"ID," he said. I handed him the driver's license I had already taken from my wallet and stuck in my jeans pocket.

"Who are you here for?"

"Evan Sachs, that's Sachs with a 'chs' at the end."

He tapped at the keyboard and then handed me a small square of paper with a number on it, just like the deli does. I asked for one for Danny, my husband, and he grudgingly gave me a duplicate paper.

I sat on one of the four long, narrow, metal benches of black or blue. One bench was stripped of paint and stood out silver among the rest. I sat down as inconspicuously as I knew how on a bench against the wall and leaned against the wood paneling, which I noted was lighter than the paneling in my own basement, the basement that used to be filled several nights a week with Evan and his friends. They kept me up with their loud talking and laughing, but I always let them stay. That was how I knew he was home and safe. Two of his friends had even bought a pool table, and instead of taking it to one of their homes, they put it in my basement where they knew they could stay up and have fun until night became morning. Any normal parent would have sent them home, but I just asked them to keep the noise down, and they would, for a few minutes at least.

The trailer was filled with people waiting. It was a cacophony of noise in English, Spanish, and Black slang. I tried to shut it out, but the best I could do was combine the voices into one loud drone, since listening to the specifics of each sad story only made me sadder. The noise grew louder and louder. I

searched in my purse for something to do. I went through every item just to occupy myself, to focus on something other than all the sorrowful people surrounding me. I found an empty baggie and started sorting out paper, receipts, gum wrappers, old business cards—anything I could find to throw away and put that tiny part of my world in order. At least that was one thing I could do. The time stood still; I'd say "literally," but I guess I would be lying. Anyway, it certainly felt that way.

After going through every inch of my bag, zipping all the pockets open and shut and digging in the corners, I looked at my watch (which I would have to lock away in a visitor's locker) and saw that I had passed only twelve minutes. Visiting didn't start for another hour. After you are freed from the white trailer you get to go to the real jail. There you must remove all jewelry and belts. You go through a metal detector and if you are wearing an underwire bra, they don't let you through. Fortunately, I was not a fan of that type of lingerie, but I had to buy new bras that didn't even have metal hooks if I wanted to get to the other side of that steel-barred door. That's where my son was. My son who was so smart he read fluently by the age of three and was the winner of his elementary school spelling bee. My son, who starred in two sixth-grade plays, first as Willy Wonka and then as Linus in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. My son, who is kind, and funny, and shy, and brilliant. My son, who suffered with a mental illness, and in a psychotic state, stabbed a young child. They wanted to put him away for 25 years. It was unreal, and my husband and I were doing everything in our power to stop him from that inevitable fate.

I looked again at the number, although I knew it by heart as soon as I was handed it: 48. That meant four groups of ten would be called before me. With an hour until the beginning and allowing 15 minutes between each group, I had another two hours until my number was called. My husband was meeting me here, leaving work early to make it on time. I knew he was on his way, and searched for him each time the trailer door

opened. I almost wished I smoked as I watched others take out cigarettes and leave the trailer to get some relief from an activity I cannot stomach at all.

A small child began to cry and whine. The boy could not have been more than three, all dressed up to see his daddy. Like everyone else, I tried to pretend this was not disturbing, and steeled myself not to look in the child's direction. That was the worst—seeing all the babies, toddlers, and children there to see their fathers. How would they react? What was this doing to them inside? If it were killing me, a grown woman, how would it affect them? Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the child's mother first try to cajole the little boy into silence. When that didn't work the mother switched to threatening, and finally, she accepted a tootsie pop from an old woman sitting across from her who had dug in the bottom of her own purse until coming up with the bribe that would placate the child, at least for a short while.

Although I had been coming to this trailer two days a week for nine months, it never got easier. I still could not believe it had happened. I'll never forget how I found out. Danny and I were asleep on a Sunday morning when the doorbell rang. I threw on a bathrobe, and when I opened the door I was confronted by a woman holding a microphone and a man with a TV camera.

"Is this where Evan lives?" she asked.

"Yes, why?"

"We heard what happened."

"WHAT! What happened?"

"He stabbed an eight-year-old boy."

All I remember is slamming the door in her face and running to Evan's room. He wasn't there.

I woke Danny up screaming; it took him a while to gain full consciousness. This was beyond our worst nightmares. We have three grown sons, and not one had ever even been in a fistfight or so much as a small scuffle. They even got along well

with each other. Evan is our middle son. The older brother is married and lives out of state. Our youngest son was in Chicago at Northwestern University at the time. We frantically called our lawyer, president of our synagogue; he helped us from there. Now, after all this time, there I was at the trailer, waiting for my husband and for my number to be called.

After an hour, Danny arrived. We sat side by side sharing our misery, not much to say. When the second hour finally passed, the cop at the front called out: forty-one to fifty. I exhaled the bile that had built up in my throat, and we gathered up our belongings. Danny and I each clutched a precious number ticket and made our way to the front of the trailer. We walked with all the others in our group and prepared to go through the next round of indignities until we could see our son.

He's been away in a maximum-security prison now for almost four years. He plea-bargained for a sentence of fourteen years. We no longer live in the state, but we travel many miles to see him each month. He is trying to heal and to help himself. But he is on his own. There is little to no help from the people who locked him up. Our struggle is a daily one, and it does not really get better with time.

# Our Gated Community

*Kevin P., Arizona*

Our gated community of active adults is centrally located between the Superstition Mountains, the home of the Lost Dutchman Mine, and Tucson, all within the People's Republic of Arizona.

## *Highly Efficient Living Quarters*

The highly efficient, dormitory-style living quarters are suitable for active adults seeking minimal housekeeping in private rooms, including a living room, dining room, and kitchen. Each dorm has what we affectionately call "runs." Each run has efficient sleeping quarters containing bunk beds. Each room has a bookshelf and tabletop located in a 6'8" wide by 10'6" deep cubicle separated by a three-foot half wall.

The run refers to the aisle down the center of the bungalow separating rows of bunk beds. There are nine bunks per side offering a maximum occupancy of thirty-four active adults per run. Think military barracks. Our gated community consists of nine dorms (labeled 1 through 9), each unit with four runs (labeled A through D). Therefore, the theoretical maximum occupancy is 1,296 active adults. We currently have approximately 965. Should I reserve a place for you?

Management provides two blankets per active adult, made of something resembling mole hair. Made of compressed grey/blue fibers, this unknitted number is a little scratchy. Management also provides two sheets for each bed, no pillows.

Unlike some establishments where lights are left on 24/7, we have a lights-out policy at 9:00 p.m. This lights-out policy facilitates a good night's sleep.

Our management acts as our Homeowners' Association (HOA). We have a strict color scheme for our housing units. There are no variations in the exterior paint colors (Russian blue-grey trimmed with drab teal); however, the HOA does



allow us an occasional view of the spectacular pink and orange sunsets in azure desert skies.

### *Personal Attire*

In our community, we like to keep our active adults' appearance uplifting. Everyone wears a T-shirt and light denim pants. You may order any color you like, as long as it is orange.

Our clothes, which are provided, are monogrammed free of charge. The monogram says "ADC" up one leg and down the other.

To ensure we don't forget who we are, each member is issued a name tag bearing the member's picture and ADC number.

### *Dining Pleasure*

We are an all-inclusive community with several amenities as part of the membership package.

All meals are provided. These consist of a hot breakfast, a sandwich lunch, and a hot dinner. No meal is repeated for six weeks (except lunch). Guaranteed. Breakfast may consist of hot cereal, scrambled eggs, grilled potatoes, and milk. Lunch allows two sandwiches, alternating between peanut butter, turkey-ham, turkey-bologna, or white turkey breast. Lunch also includes of a baggie full of popcorn. For dinner, you may enjoy breaded chicken pieces with BBQ sauce, rice, cabbage salad, rolls, and pudding. Although the menu is a little light on fresh fruits and vegetables, we manage.

### *Recreation and Fitness*

After enjoying a filling meal, we can choose to work out at our recreation field. There we have a full-size quarter-mile track, which surrounds a baseball diamond (which doubles as a soccer field) and a paddleball court (similar to tennis with large paddles in lieu of tennis rackets).

We may also choose to enjoy Ping-Pong on one of the three

Ping-Pong tables. We have two Bocce courts and two horseshoe pits as well. For those whose pleasure is basketball, two full-size courts are at our disposal. Or we may play volleyball. Last, but not least, there are several dozen weight lifting stations to tone our muscles.

### *Medical Benefits*

Our medical benefits are second to none, a one-payer system (which is you, the state and federal taxpayer), all modeled after Obamacare. The medical benefits program is for all our active adults. All members have full medical coverage with only a \$4.00 co-pay per visit. This system covers medical care, dental care, and optical care. There's no need to pay medical insurance premiums, and all prescription drugs are free. Illegal drugs are a bit more expensive and difficult to obtain.

### *Stores for Our Shopping Pleasure*

Shopping for consumables and personal needs could not be easier in our gated community. There is no need for Internet shopping or wasting time traveling to a shopping center. We deploy bubble-sheet technology for convenience (similar to SAT test sheets). Each member simply looks up the item he wishes to purchase from the commissary list, fills in the oval-shaped box on the bubble sheet identifying the product desired, drops off his order on Tuesday, and waits one full week for it to arrive.

All items are efficiently brought to "the store" for pick up. We simply get in line, wait 60-90 minutes in the hot sun, and, voila! We can pick up all our purchases. It's that easy!

### *Personal Property*

For those who wish to own personal property, again there's bubble technology. All personal property is delivered to the "property" store room where the ADC number is etched

onto each item for identification of the rightful owner. This is our theft protection practice. It seems counterintuitive that we'd need theft protection in our gated community—since all outside traffic, riff raff, or would-be thieves have been eliminated—but there you have it.

The abundant selection of personal property may include CD players, personal 13" LCD televisions, headsets, reading lamps, and/or personal fans to augment the swamp coolers for our cooling comfort, or lack thereof.

### *Tele-Communications*

Members enjoy eighteen phones to call family and friends. Only outgoing calls are supported. Thus, we have eliminated those nuisance calls from telemarketers and political party fundraising groups.

### *Housekeeping*

Management knows what is best for you. Therefore, they periodically stop by and visit our runs, inspecting items in our possession. They throw away all items it deems unnecessary, cleaning up the area at no extra charge. No need to call Got Junk anymore.

As a side benefit of this clean up, Management randomizes our belongings between shelves, beds, and the floor to help us develop organizational skills. We get practice replacing items back on the shelf where they belong. This also provides hours of entertainment at no additional charge.

### *Education for All*

We in our gated community believe a mind is a terrible thing to waste. Therefore, to remain in good standing within our community, Management requires all active adults to be proficient at an eighth grade literacy level and have a high school or GED diploma. Management provides educational assistance at no cost.

Ambitious members may further their education level via correspondence courses with a local junior college to obtain an associate's degree. Very few of our active adults further their education, yet we have several members with a bachelor's, master's, and PhD's in our community.

### *Community Churches*

Our gated community also has churches of various denominations, including Catholic and Mormon. Services are held on Saturdays and Sundays to accommodate the spiritual needs of our members. We find even those who have never attended church before, now seek spiritual guidance and turn to God for the first time in their lives. This is an interesting phenomenon at gated communities in general.

### *Visitation for Family and Friends*

We like to keep thru-traffic to a minimum; this eliminates unnecessary visitations from troubling outsiders. We see very few solicitors, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Mormon missionaries. Management does provide a visitor center where family and friends may congregate to visit our active adults.

Cold soda is available from vending machines, and there is an outside courtyard with misters for cooling comfort, as well as an air-conditioned visitor center. All active adults in good standing may have up to six visitors at a time.

We want only quality visitors, so it is required that every prospective visitor undergo a background check before admittance. After an enjoyable visit and to preserve our pristine environment, all active adults must undergo a strip search to ensure no contraband is introduced.

### *Employment Opportunities*

We are a self-contained community offering an array of employment opportunities.

There are a variety of "porter" positions. Porters are similar

to maids. Their duties include dusting, sweeping, and mopping various areas within the community. There are bathroom porters, dorm porters, chaplain porters, and visitation center porters.

Perhaps one would like a position in our kitchen as a food prep engineer or sanitation engineer. We also have trash and trash can sanitation engineers. Some prefer a groundskeeper position raking rocks throughout the yard. There's always a shoeshine technician position. This person shines all Management shoes.

Some employment requires higher skills, including barbers, blind/Braille aides, or teacher's aides/tutors.

The wages in our community are competitive. The starting wage for a newcomer is between 15 and 20 cents per hour. After six months you might receive a five-cent raise. Completing your GED will guarantee you a five-cent increase. After years of employment, we attain the maximum wage of 40 cents per hour. All wages earned are automatically deposited into the Community Bank.

### *Banking*

We have only one bank: the Community Bank. The CB provides all the essentials. All wages and other sources of income are deposited to a member's account, and all commissary expenses are deducted from the member's account.

Active adults within our gates also employ a more direct means of commerce commonly known as the barter system. The barter system circumvents the need for currency. If you want to buy, trade, or tip for services received from other active adults, one simply trades commodities obtained from commissary. Members may think of \$1, \$5, or \$10 as being replaced by a package of Pop-Tarts, Ramen noodle soup, or a jar of peanut butter, respectively. For example, one might tip for a haircut with a package of Pop-Tarts.

One major advantage of the bartering system is that in the

event of a world-wide currency collapse, members can eat their money.

### *Demographics*

Our gated community does not discriminate based on race, religion, or affluent status. We do discriminate against women, except for Management personnel. Personnel include the gamut from laborers to PhDs, from truck drivers to medical doctors, from artists to engineers.

Based on our undocumented racial profile, our community is comprised of 1/2 whites, 3/8 Hispanics, and 1/8 blacks. A number of religious groups are found within our community from Muslim to Christian, with Christians being the majority. Approximately 2.5% of the population is Mormon, which warrants inclusion of the BYU channel in the cable television lineup. Nondenominational Christians and Catholics each have their specific cable channels as well. Management aims to meet the needs of its members' spiritual appetites.

### *A Day in the Life—Lifestyles of the Active Adults*

Our active adults have a multitude of activities and resources to fulfill their lives. A typical day in the life of members in our community might look like the following:

Rise at 5:00 a.m. to clean and freshen up for a packed day of activities. Breakfast is first on the list, served between 6:00 a.m. and 7:00 a.m. From 7:00 a.m. until 10:30 a.m. a member may:

- Go for a walk either on the recreation field or around the gated community
- Work out on the recreation field
- Read scriptures, which is always a pleasant way to start the day
- Write letters to loved ones
- Pick up “property” or go to the “stores” (Tuesday and Wednesdays)
- Visit the library (Mondays and Fridays).

Management takes keeping track of its members seriously. Therefore, at 10:30 a.m., as a safeguard against any member wandering lost in the desert outside its walls, all members must return to their respective dorms for “count time.” At 11:00 a.m. every active adult is counted. Heaven forbid if anyone gets lost. All kinds of alarms and such go off while Management rescues that poor lost soul.

Count times occur again at 4:00 p.m., 8:30 p.m., and 11:00 p.m. For those who have enlarged prostate problems and find themselves using the bathroom in the middle of the night, Management provides a 4:00 a.m. count time to ensure that members do not get lost between the bathroom and their bunk. Management is always thinking of the members’ safety and security. Management’s motto: “Not one member will be lost.”

During the reprieve between 10:30 a.m. and noon, members may relax and reflect on their morning activities. Members may take a nap (a favorite for most), read a book, or watch television. With naptime in the middle of the day, we are encouraged to enjoy childhood all over again.

At noon, members are free to explore the grounds and pick up the ingredients for two sandwiches. On Mondays and Fridays, the library—featuring approximately 10,000 books—is open from 12:30 p.m. until 3:00 p.m.

Of course, if you have not picked up your commissary order during the morning, you may do so in the afternoon until 3:30 p.m. on Tuesdays or Wednesdays.

Otherwise, feel free to go to the track, workout, read, watch television, write letters, make telephone calls, visit with family, or just about anything else you can put your mind to in order to entertain yourself in this wonderful gated community.

The hour and a half between 3:30 p.m. and 5:00 p.m., which will include the 4:00 p.m. count time, is a great time for all the active adults who have been working out to shower, or a great time to nap before dinner.

Dinner hour is at 5:00 p.m. After dinner, members are free

to do whatever is permissible according to Management until 8:30 p.m.

From 8:30 p.m. until the following morning, all members enjoy one another's company in their assigned runs. Most members watch television or prepare food for an evening snack.

At 9:00 p.m., after a pretty full day of activities, lights are out. If we wish to read after 9:00 p.m., we must use our personal reading lamps. (Weekend schedules vary slightly.)

That's it: a typical day behind prison walls. We look forward to seeing you among our membership!





Day of Sacrifice  
*Hector Cedillos, Arizona*  
Oil on Canvas, 36"x46", 2012

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## The Dragon in the Dungeon

*K.D. Falsetto, California*

I am the dragon that protects the treasure. The people of the village count on me to put my life on the line for what is important to them. But what about me? I mean, I don't even have a name. To the people I'm known as the big dragon in the dungeon. To them my lifelong mission is to watch their priceless treasure. I sit in this dungeon day in and day out. Watching the world pass me by. No substance to my own world. I feel like a listless soul. Lost in my own defeat. Nothing but my own thoughts to keep me company. I can fly, but it feels like my wings are broken. Will I ever see the ocean? Or another country? I don't know. But right now I'm a prisoner of my reality. And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow I'll do it all over again. Despite my physical circumstance, I dream of my freedom every hour. Thinking of places I would like to go. Or things I would like to see. The people bring me food three times a day. Making me bigger and stronger, but as time goes on, I only get older and weaker. The people think I'm living for a purpose. I'm alive, but this isn't living.

## Old Bones

*A. Kevin Valvardi, California*

Old bones  
begin to break;  
Young man grown old  
is quick to ache.  
Once steady hands  
begin to shake  
as life begins again.

Tender fingers  
rub the sores.  
They gently loosen  
limbs once more.  
A soothing,  
temporary cure—  
relief for one more day.

## Destiny of the Viper's Bride

*A. Kevin Valvardi, California*

I hear the clanks and jingling  
of chains as they arrive;  
each in tow of the tradesmen who  
on wooden horses ride.

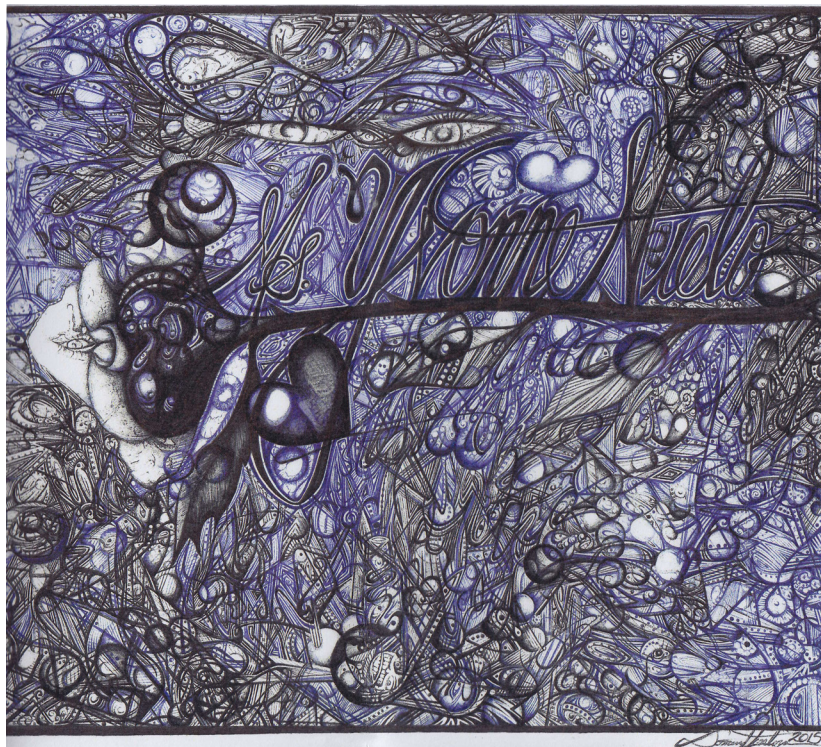
Like scavengers in search of seed,  
with eyes and mouth set wide;  
young swimmers cast into a sea,  
to struggle 'gainst the tide.

With hopes of meager offerings  
to satisfy their thirst  
for more than weathered, blood-stained hands  
and wretched fingers cursed.  
Their brothers' brew; their fathers' lot;  
none claims to be the first.  
So much like soldiers on the line,  
their glory-bubbles burst.

And day to day they watch a clock  
that marches in reverse,  
which calling out a destiny  
so easily perverse.  
Their cries for help still, yet,  
unheard  
as they grow worse and worse,  
as pointless minutes waste away  
in harsh poetic verse.

Few grab an opportunity  
and saddle it to ride,  
or see beyond delusion of  
their tainted, foolish pride.

As vipers hiss sweet words of woo  
to lure a future bride,  
and, one by one, they make their way  
to lie down by their side.



## Sister

*Dominic Montoya, New Mexico*

Ink on Paper, 8.5"x11", 2015

## My Friend “Little Bit,” the Spider Monkey

*Frank, New Mexico*

At the end of 1971, I was a soldier serving in the army in Vietnam. Our battalion pulled up to a village late one evening, and I noticed an old man cooking his dinner next to a ditch by the trail. He saw me and smiled, then motioned me over. He was cooking a frog on a stick to add to his rice bowl. I walked over with a South Vietnamese soldier, and as we began to communicate, I noticed he had some twine around his wrist that kept moving.

I offered him some coffee packets and crackers I had. Suddenly, around his shoulder, a small monkey appeared. Before I knew it, the little guy jumped onto my chest. I offered him a cracker, which he took. I had a fruit cocktail tin, so I opened it for him. He just loved it.

That was the start of a great relationship. The old man said, “He’s a spider monkey. I found him in the forest alone.” By then he’d crawled into my shirt and held on to me like a baby child would.

The old man smiled. “He’s sure taken to you! Why don’t you take him and give him a home?”

A couple of my buddies came to see what was going on. They suggested I adopt the monkey as part of our unit.

I asked the old man to come back with us to my A.P.C. (Armored Personnel Carrier), where we loaded him down with enough food to last a month. He said his goodbyes to the little monkey and we were off.

As time went on the men of my unit became very fond of our spider monkey, whom I named Little Bit. His name suited him because that’s how big he was.

He traveled with the unit in all conditions: rain, mud, heat. I made a special place for him in my A.P.C. vehicle. He adapted easily into everyday life.

Little Bit was much more than a pet, he was a friend, a

companion, one of us.

However, on January 12, 1972, late in the afternoon, there was a sudden mortar attack on our position.

We were lying about 20 feet from our A.P.C. when the attack started. People ran for cover. I was thrown to the ground.

When I saw my friend Jay running to our A.P.C., I yelled as loud as I could, "Catch Little Bit!"

I tossed him to Jay, who was now at the back hatch of the vehicle.

Jay couldn't hear me, though.

In the noise and chaos, he closed the door of the vehicle behind him, crushing Little Bit.

After the attack, I sat in disbelief.

My tiny friend was dead.

I thought by tossing him to the safety of the armored vehicle I was saving his life, but like so many things in Vietnam, the opposite happened.

At 9 P.M. that evening, 44 years ago this January, I buried Little Bit, the spider monkey, my friend and companion.

We gave him a soldier's farewell.

He's never been forgotten by the men who loved and cared for him.

Rest in Peace, L.B.

Your Loving Friend—Frank



# When Lighting Her Yizkor Candle in Her Memory

*Yitzchak ben Yehuda, Arizona*

—a Ghazal for Rachel Sarah

What words could be said for leaving me behind  
closing our life's woven passion leaving me behind.

In Spring's chosen hour, few words were spoken  
during our last moments together leaving me behind.

From Santa Monica's morning dew, my head was saturated,  
learning your soul will take flight, leaving me behind.

Your last words spoken: "I'll love you forever!"  
melted my heart in silence, leaving me behind.

My mind closed, no emotions of expressions why  
our destiny was broken, leaving me behind.

As I held your young worn out body pleading  
for your life, but my faith failed, leaving me behind.

In our backyard, Jerusalem's garden of your delight—  
we had our last soul kiss goodbye, leaving me behind.

As I gazed at your darkening blue eyes, I felt  
your spirit release its final breath, leaving me behind.

Laying your tender failed body down to rest,  
weeping for my soul mate leaving me behind.

Our burial women came to prepare your body—  
no longer could I look at you leaving me behind.

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We arrived with your sealed casket in Tel Aviv,  
heaven's judgment unfair for you leaving me behind.

When your body was lowered beneath Israel's holy soil,  
my spiritual life ended—God and you leaving me behind.

My beloved, my soul will soon leave this world behind  
for our destiny will be fulfilled never leaving me behind.

I come to light the Yizkor candle in your memory  
after four decades of regret for leaving me behind.

## A New Dimension

*Yitzchak ben Yehuda, Arizona*

I see you standing in our backyard garden  
as I gaze out my window amongst its roses  
and trees, your hands soft like your mother's  
hands suntanned and gentle, blossoms  
nourishing a young drooping plant and think,  
like Jacob's love for his water, you too grow  
stronger as your life touches the light of unity  
and purpose in its destiny.

Perhaps such light has an element of a new  
dimension for some, it may be releasing  
darkness, human torment, suffering—  
while others like myself, maintain a tightrope  
balancing which focuses that light: on persons  
behind human prison walls within the Arizona  
desert.

I see you again in the garden and think once  
more of our relationship. For each there is a  
place in time where, when found, the ragtag  
odds and ends of shapeless dreams, formless  
thoughts, unaccomplished goals that may fuse  
and come together to shape a pattern sealed  
in the celestial events to become known as  
the new dimension.

## Thirty Years In (and Out of) the Hole

*Jerry G. West, Arizona*

“Hi. I’m Jerry. I am a heroin addict and convicted felon. My crew, also mostly felons, addicts and alcoholics, and I will be spending the next few days in your house, alone with your wife and kids, rifling through your things and, eventually, taking everything you own out the door with us. You’re in good hands!”

I have been holding that mini-memoir back for the last thirty years, while working as the owner of a furniture moving company. I am a recovering addict who comes from a tradition of “rigorous honesty” but also has a healthy respect for discretion. It is what I am and it is what I do, but it also is the type of information that does not lend itself well to full disclosure. I have not hidden my background so much as not offered it. Mostly because no one asked.

I built a business based on doing an end run around background, employment, and credit checks. I went into small business largely because I was the only one who would hire me. It is exceedingly difficult to explain to a potential employer why you have a six-year gap in employment when you have been off the grid and, often, off the streets.

I found a workaround. When it came time to actually go into clients’ homes and sell moving jobs, no one asked about my credit or criminal background. I leapfrogged over that preliminary line of questioning by being the guy who hired me. My clients’ only concerns at this stage of the game, aside from “How much?” were limited to the technical. “Can you crate my chandelier? Do you move concert grand pianos?”

That business died in the last crash. A heart attack and the usual mid-50’s medical concerns drove the final nails in the coffin. I was left, after a thirty-year hiatus, to reenter the job market.

I went back to school and got my bachelor’s degree. I

translated 30 years of sales and management experience into a brilliantly constructed and academically vetted resume. I wrote a book that did not sell. I wrote *Subject Matter Expert* blogs that paid pennies. I tried an asymmetrical approach and wrote a separate resume touting my 30 years clean, sober, crime and violence free as an avenue into drug rehab jobs. I found out how much freelance writing *really* pays. I applied for an embarrassing number of jobs and prostrated myself before a host of wholly unworthy would-be employers.

I got zippo. Bottom line: I'm 58. I am way too old to get hired. I am also hamstrung by a criminal record that, despite being 30 years old, is becoming easier and easier to access. I have written this memoir less as a matter of vanity or unduly heightened sense of self-importance than as a "Why not?" since it's all out there anyway. This is the last house on a dead end street.

My story is not unique. My adventures are not particularly adventurous and my crimes are dismally mediocre, dime bag fare. If there is an underlying theme here it is not redemption, because in many respects I am back in the gutter again. It is not a story of triumph over addiction. I did not conquer my addiction, I surrendered. I said *no más!* The real theme would be *failure*. I failed addiction because of my alcoholism and failed alcoholism because of my addiction. I failed crime because of both. I failed violence. Repeatedly. I am failing in the job market, failing in health and quite likely failing at writing.

I am, unfortunately, part of a large, unrecognized, underutilized and marginalized demographic. There are quite literally millions more just like me. The only press that unemployed men in their 50's are getting is from our having the highest suicide rate of any age group.

I am not sure just where it is we are supposed to go.

\*\*\*

January 26, 1985

The psych nurse beamed at me and said, "Happy Birthday Jerry! How old are you today?"

"Forty-..... four?"

That was my best guess. When your real birthdate was part of a real identity that had real felony warrants, accuracy takes second place to subterfuge. I had developed a facility for quick head math to juggle all the ages, social security numbers, birthdays, birthplaces, and addresses that went with all the different aliases I had used, but there was always a processing lag, a moment, where I ... just wasn't sure.

The age thing was really more a matter of vanity, though. I had grown genuinely tired of hearing, "You look older than that. A lot older," when people would ask my age. I took that as a compliment in my teens, but in my late 20's? Not so much. I knew that there would eventually be a price to pay for having a face that got me into bars at 13, but I was not eager to accept it right now. I had added 15 years to my real age of 28 and started telling anyone who asked that I was 43, so that, instead, I would hear, "Wow! You look really good for your age!"

On this auspicious and revelatory day my fact juggling facility failed me, owing in large part to recently being precipitously dropped from 165 mg of methadone to 0 mg. My best modern day analogy would be that my identity had become like a password that had to be changed every 30 days. All my mental resources went into memorizing the *last* one, and pushed the original further and further back in priority. I was also a little rusty at *not* lying, so I wasn't sure what mix of fact and fiction I should be telling in my first (and hopefully last) stint in drug rehab.

I could tell the nurse wasn't buying my answer by the confused look she tried to muffle while ruffling through the pages of my chart. "Ummmmmmmmh, no sweetie, you're 29," she said, like someone grappling with how to explain what year it is to a recently awakened coma patient.

The nurse was no *Nurse Ratched* and rehab was not the

*Cuckoo's Nest* I had expected. She was young, blonde, and friendly in an effortless way that suggested she either liked her work or had not been at it long enough to become calloused and bitter from compassion fatigue. I was having a hard time getting my bearings in a place with nurses, counselors, and therapists instead of guards/correctional officers. I also had no real experience with hospitals, beyond the ER at the County Hospital, so the idea of being a patient, and a *paying customer*, as opposed to an inmate, left me pleasantly off-balance.

I had been off the methadone used to alleviate my heroin withdrawal pains for a few days when I received my birthday epiphany. I was far from well, but I was lounging in a sunny day room with open doors and windows and a patio and not shivering, sweating, and puking in a jail cell. My twenty-some rehab mates were also considerably different—and much less aggressive—than my usual cellmates. I was not happy about the high to no dosage transition, but I was tickled shitless not to have to go cold turkey in jail, and I was trying to listen to the voice that told me a lifetime of *methadone maintenance* was not going to work either.

“Methadone gets in your bones.”

That is the addict's trope trying to explain why methadone is harder to kick than heroin. Because it lodges in your bone marrow, it is more thoroughly integrated in the body, and more difficult—and painful—to detox from. I had heard it from too many friends with firsthand knowledge to take it as an urban myth. I also could not think of anyone who ever got off methadone maintenance. More importantly, most of my friends described it as “You're not jonesing or dope sick, but you're not really high either.” Fortunately for me, I didn't have to make that call, as the treatment facility I was in focused on abstinence based recovery, not maintenance programs. I'll admit though, if they gave me a choice on the first day they cut my dose.....

“You almost died in detox.”

I didn't hear this until after the 28 days. I had taken my mother, who worked as a substance abuse counselor at this facility, up on her offer to pay for my treatment whenever I was ready. She did not participate directly, as that would have been both a conflict of interest and therapeutically counterproductive. She did, however, pull an enormous number of strings on my behalf. Not the least of which was using her life's savings to pay for it and negotiating an *employee discount*, which made the whole thing possible. I had no money or insurance, and my family was not in the income bracket that could afford drug rehab out of pocket. I did get the details of my arduous detox and test results from her after completing the program.

I did not have a spiritual awakening or a lightning bolt epiphany when I agreed to seek treatment; I had simply exhausted all of my other options. The main thing that drove me to seek treatment in my hometown of Phoenix, Arizona was felony warrants in California, where I had lived for the past six years. I had two arrests for sales of marijuana, one for receiving stolen property, and two or three more for parole violations. I had been released on my own recognizance (no bail required) and was awaiting trial on the second sales charge. California had an earlier version of a "Three Strikes" or *habitual criminal* law that provided harsh minimum sentences of 25-years-to-life for repeat offenders, and I was not sure whether this applied to me.

My biggest problem with my pre-sentencing status was that I had no source of legal information beyond jailhouse lawyers (other convicts) to tell me if I was looking at the lesser category "Little Bitch," or the more serious three strikes "Big Bitch." *Bitch* in this case being short for habitual. I had a Public Defender, but you got roughly the same seven minutes with them that you get with a doctor, and you generally didn't get them until right before trial. I wasn't sure if the sentencing guidelines meant three strikes for *any* offense or three for the same offense. I did



know that when my friends and girlfriend started distancing themselves from me, with some of them saying I was “history,” it was serious. I had spent a fair amount of time locked up at this point, but nothing that could have prepared me for 25-to-life.

So I ran.

My mother bought my plane ticket from San Diego to Phoenix and told me she would pick me up at the airport and take me *directly* to the treatment facility. I don’t remember exactly what drugs I had on me at the time. Probably codeine and dordin, valium, aftermarket psychotropics, or anti-psychotics. Whatever they were, I did them all. I also opted to amplify all of this with copious amounts of vodka. This was my last go-round. My last day of everything that was killing me and everything that I had come to love.

I missed my flight.

I spent the hours until the next flight in the airport bar.

I drank myself into a blackout.

I don’t remember anything about the flight or checking into detox.

My younger brother accompanied my mother to the airport to pick me up. We hadn’t seen each other in some time. Partly because we were in different places, mostly because we were living in a white sheep/black sheep dichotomy. His description of me at the airport was “You looked like a shriveled up little old man.”

I found out afterwards that, despite being blackout drunk and asymmetrically medicated, I was in active drug withdrawal upon entering detox. I had been juggling so many addictions at the same time—alcohol, heroin, cocaine, tranquilizers, and gorilla biscuits—that I was rarely *well*, rarely in balance. Years later I would hear a heroin addicted character named *Fat Curt* on the HBO show *The Corner* describe what I felt perfectly

“We aren’t even doing dope anymore. We’re just

shooting..... *chemicals.*"

\*\*\*

But I am ahead of myself. I had been living with a prostitute named Sue Ann who I met at the Parole Office. I was out after a six-month parole violation, and she had just finished doing five years for a double manslaughter. She was a busty brunette roughly my age with a healthy physicality to her that I would later find was the result of lifting weights in prison. We lived in the same small beach town, loved slamming coke and, more amazingly, had the same Parole Officer.

I took that as kismet.

She introduced me to her doctor, who wrote us prescriptions for 200 #4 Codeine and 500 10 mg Valiums a month. Once, when we were at the pharmacy getting our prescriptions filled, I noticed that she was getting a much larger quantity of both codeine and Valium than I was. I made the mistake of asking, "Why are you getting so much more than I am?"

She looked down her nose at me like I was stupid...because I was, and answered, "Because I \*\*\*\* the doctor's \*\*\*\*, you moron! Do you want me to ask him if he will give you the same deal?"

Never asked *that* question again.

Because Sue Ann was a diabetic she was able to buy new hypodermic needles in bags of 100. Even in the pre-AIDS early '80s, clean needles were always in demand, and she traded those regularly for coke and downers. I was selling coke and weed at the time so I was always wheeling and dealing and trading for other drugs.

The part of San Diego we lived in, Ocean Beach, was among the most low-rent beach areas. Along with drug addicts (like us) the area attracted a large number of the mentally ill, many of whom were living on disability checks. I knew quite a few who were more than willing to trade their medications for pot or money for alcohol. I had a fairly steady supply of drugs

like Artane, Melloril, Talwin, and even Thorazine that were known as *gorilla biscuits*. While they were far from being my favorites, they worked in a pinch to tamp down dope sickness (withdrawal) or an unwanted cocaine wire.

On any given day, I probably could not tell you exactly what drugs I had taken.

I could, however, tell you with unmistakable certainty that they were not enough.

One guy I sold weed for, a bearded, giant biker-looking man unsurprisingly nicknamed *Bear*, always insisted on my snorting a line of crystal meth with him every time I came to his house to score. I never liked speed. He never accepted that.

"I got something for ya. Do a rail with me, bro!"

"Thanks, but I hate crank."

"Do one for the road. It'll help you to sell more."

"Nah, I don't need to get wired up to do my job. That shit just makes me antsy. I'll pass."

"You're not gonna be unsociable about it, are you? This is some clean shit!"

And that was that. I did the crank. I know part of the reason for the ritual was to establish, by way of doing drugs in front of him, that I was not a cop. The other part was a peculiar sort of pride that speed freaks have about their dope. It's not so much their wanting to share it with you as it is their wanting you to recognize that their dope is stellar, it is artisanal, it is...*special*.

I did the line. I half-wheezed/half-bellowed "Whoaaaaaa!" I stuffed the bags of weed in the lining of my Stetson. I said, "Thanks, bro," and walked out the door. I walked to the liquor store next door and muttered, "Fucking tweakers!" I bought a quart of orange juice, a pint of Popov vodka and packet of vitamins. I ran the numbers for how much profit I would make selling the weed after deducting the cost of the liquor and vitamins that I needed to counteract the crank I had to do to score from this connection. I smiled weakly as the Iraqi store owner gave me his usual disdainful assessment of the efficacy

of vitamins washed down with vodka. I walked out of the store, onto the curb, and dumped half of the orange juice into the gutter. I emptied the pint of vodka into the plastic container and shook it up. I opened the vitamin packet and washed them down with my makeshift—but beach legal—screwdriver and went off to work.

This or some variation of it was what I did every day. With the notable exception of heroin, I was rarely content with any one drug. If I was not doing one to compensate for another, I was trying to find some exotic *Hunter S. Thompson/Dr. Gonzo* combo to bring me to that perfect cruising level. From beer and wine to round off the rough edges of LSD, or amphetamines to sharpen the edges of too much beer and wine, most things just seemed to need... a little something.

I did not recognize the severity of my drug addiction prior to entering treatment. I would attribute this primarily to the fact that... I was on drugs. I was like a drunk driver totally unaware of the fact that I was too drunk to drive. I was motivated mainly by my legal dilemma, but also partially owing to medical concerns.

“If the drugs don’t kill you, the lifestyle will.”

I was averaging a fistfight, or an outright beating, every other day. Drug dealing, especially on the street level, nickel-and-dime arena that I was in, is especially competitive and violent. I had been shot at, stabbed, hatcheted, bricked, broken bottled, baseball batted, kicked in the head, and pummeled countless times by much larger, much more capable opponents. Many of these involved fighting more than one person at a time. I was not very good at it. In summation, I took a lot of shots to the head.

I was experiencing prolonged bouts of dizziness, brain fog, and a noticeable decrease in coordination. I was concerned that I was going to go out like a punch drunk fighter. This was roughly the same time that Mohammed Ali was being misdiagnosed as having *pugilistic brain syndrome*. I thought I

was still too young to be a *wet brain* alcoholic. To my thinking, my symptoms couldn't possibly be an effect of the drugs and alcohol, so it had to be the violence. If I could not—or would not—give up the drugs, maybe I could just find a new place where I could still have the drugs without the violence. I was definitely ready for a new place.

All of these factors combined brought me to a mix of desperation and willingness that got me to that treatment center. The prevailing wisdom in the recovery community is that the motivations that get you there are unimportant, so long as you get there.

My first few days in detox were a little hazy. I know I felt no pain, and that was a first. I still don't know what drugs I was prescribed in addition to the methadone, but I imagine I must have received some fairly powerful sedatives and anticonvulsants just to handle the alcohol withdrawal. As bad as heroin withdrawal is, it runs a pale second to alcohol. I generally have full-tilt delirium tremens ("DTs") complete with vivid hallucinations, crippling paranoia and a whole body type of pain that feels like my flesh is full of broken glass anytime I dry out. Alcohol and barbiturate withdrawals are the only ones life threatening enough to require hospitalization.

The first thing I remember is sitting with a group of roughly twenty patients and hearing the therapist say, "A year from now, only one of you will still be clean and sober."

That was, pun intended, a sobering statistic. That 95% relapse rate is something of a constant, even today. I had no idea the odds were that bad. I definitely did not think that one year, no less thirty years later, I would be that "one."

The next few weeks were a mix of group therapy, individual psychological counseling and tests. Lots and lots of tests. One of the basic tenets of recovery from substance abuse addiction is that the addiction is only a *symptom* of a larger underlying problem. The battery of tests sought to divine that larger problem. Many of them targeted learning disabilities, which has

been shown to have a high correlation with substance abuse.

The psychiatrist I worked with came highly recommended by my mother, who had obviously worked with him in the past. He was personable, albeit a little idiosyncratic (he reminded me of the comedian/actor Paul Lynde). I have dealt with enough of his peers in correctional settings to have a healthy distrust for the profession, and the practitioners in particular. As I was in unknown waters, trying to at least listen to new ideas, I tried to put those prejudices aside and be open to his input.

The main takeaway was that I was diagnosed with *expressive aphasia*, which he attributed as the cause of my “violent behavior.” I never could connect those two things, and it was never fully explained to me. My only interpretation, and no doubt an ironically aphasic interpretation, was that I found that “right on the tip of my tongue” inability to find the word I was thinking of irritating. I remember that feeling, but I don’t recall ever punching anyone or shooting a bag of dope over it.

The only group activity that really stuck with me was an outing to a bowling alley. I have no idea what the intent was. Maybe to expose us to more *normal* pastimes. I found it to be anything but. I had never been bowling before and, in all candor, it kind of freaked me out. This was a little *too* normal. A cartoonish hyper normal caricature. I looked at the people around me, and I could see and feel myself somehow morphing into a beer-bellied, balding, lunch pail carrying schlub.

One of my big problems with this brave new normal was that I really had no background in it. I had been inhabiting altered states and alternative lifestyles since the age of 13. I had no real point of reference to extrapolate from, no previously normal life to base my projections on. I have always been able to find some sort of constant to fix on and formulate a game plan or a course of action from. Granted, most of my predictions were woefully improbable, but they were *something*. This time ... I was flying blind.

I would like to think that I came away from this experience

with a better recall of these life-changing moments, especially in light of the fact that *it worked*. A lot happened in a short space of time, and I only remember bits and pieces of it. Maybe I was too incompletely detoxed or off balance or busy. Maybe it was too far back.

I remember the food. I had always heard jokes about hospital food being somewhere between jails and airlines in quality. I was gobsmacked when one of the staff brought me a menu to fill out for the next day's meals. The choices were surprisingly upmarket, and the food proved to be excellent as well. Moreover, the unit kept an open refrigerator stocked with sandwiches, juice, and ice cream. Patients were encouraged to eat what and whenever they wanted. I found this a far preferable way to address the malnourished state many of us arrived in than pills, shots, feeding tubes, or IVs.

Most addicts I know are opportunistic feeders. Because food comes second to drugs, and those drugs suppress hunger pangs, it is not unusual to go days without eating. For me, there were rare windows when I felt *well* enough to eat, so when I did, it was usually a game of catch up. Whenever we got opportunities for free food, we capitalized on it, because less money spent on food translates to more money for dope. Despite my "vodka and vitamins" regimen, I was generally not especially health conscious when I did eat.

Many of my friends would play a sort of revolving door plan, running themselves into the ground with drugs and alcohol, getting arrested, going to jail, getting "three hots and a cot" to get healthy again, then returning to the streets to start the cycle anew. We would joke with each other and say, "You're lookin' kinda' raggedy homes. You need to get your parole revoked so you can go back in. Get fat and happy, hit the weight pile, and get those teeth worked on."

This was my cycle for the previous six years.

I was tickled to be in this place instead of jail, but it wasn't an entirely smooth ride. I couldn't sleep for my first few weeks

or so off the methadone, at least not until the wee hours of the morning. I am so geared to passing out, as opposed to falling asleep naturally, that I probably have done some permanent damage to my internal clock. I had the same problem in jail. I would lie awake for hours and hours after “lights out” with my mind racing. Usually thinking about cocaine and some newer, better, safer way to do it and not get caught.

In detox I tried reading myself to sleep, but I shared a room with another patient, a stocky cowboy type from a more rural part of Arizona, who complained that my light being on kept him up. I tried to take into consideration that he was probably just as on edge and cranky as I was, and turned the light off. The following day I got a small cassette player and some books on tape. Problem solved. I thought.

That night, within a half hour of lights out and my listening to the cassette, he flipped his light on, glared at me and said, “I can HEAR your tape player!”

“That’s impossible. I’m wearing headphones.”

“I can hear the goddamn wheels turning. Turn it OFF!”

“Look dude, I’m trying to meet you halfway on this thing, but I need this.”

“I DON’T CARE! TURN IT OFF!”

I don’t know that I had ever heard a grown man screech like that before. His voice sounded like some bratty kid crying their way into getting what they want. This outburst moved things well past the *consideration point*. I thought it was some sort of challenge, like we were gonna box, so I replied, “You must be a sensitive motherfucker. You know what? I tried to make some concessions here, but fuck you, punk. You should look into finding a new room before I knock your punk ass out!”

He didn’t say a word. I tried to remind myself that this wasn’t jail and he wasn’t going to shank me in my sleep, but I still kept an eye on him for most of the night.

The next day one of the counselors asked me about the incident. She said my roommate had complained about my



“threatening” him. I was reminded of the fact that I very definitely *could be* thrown out of treatment. I explained that I tried to deal with it in as rational a manner as possible, but my efforts were rebuffed. I suggested we would get along better in different places, as his demands were untenable.

“We can’t just move people around because they haven’t developed proper coping skills.”

“Understood, but if he comes at me like that again, I’m gonna fuck him up.”

She tried to hide a wry smile, regained her composure, and said, “Part of your therapy is to embrace new conflict resolution skills. Preferably ones that don’t include the phrase *I’m gonna fuck him up*.”

That comment, at least the humorous part, stuck with me. I did not see my hypersensitive roommate again.

Whatever I learned in there seemed to do the trick. I think the most effective thing was the combination of four weeks to heal up and detox around less toxic personalities than I found in jail and then being guided me directly into a 12-Step program. Rehab is just the beginning of a long process that requires hard work and consistent maintenance.

I also think I was fortunate to do this in what I consider “The Golden Age of Rehab.” I came in a few years after *The Betty Ford Clinic* opened and before the whole celebrity rehab trend started. Rehab had yet to become a punch line, and insurance companies had yet to sour on paying for serial rehab patients.

Now, I read a lot of negative press that attacks the presumed sacred cows of rehab centers and abstinence based 12-Step programs. The main argument is that both have a 90-95% relapse or failure rate. Those are daunting numbers, but the attack pieces never present any alternative treatment methods that offer higher success rates.

Rehab is big business, and one of the things they do now to assuage those dismal statistics is to substitute a policy of *harm*

*reduction* for abstinence. Abstinence means what it sounds like, *no* drugs. Harm reduction is a part of the *controlled use* school of thought that says a heroin addict who now only smokes pot and takes pills is improved, that the harm they do to themselves is reduced. The rehab center that uses this as a yardstick can now boast (and advertise) a much higher success rate.

It sounds good. It certainly sounds easier. Unfortunately, it has an absolutely abysmal track record. I know a large number of people who have tried it and cannot name one who did not relapse.

I know I am prejudiced. I am one of that 5% who made it. I am, at 30 years, probably the 5% of that 5%. I practice a program of complete abstinence from drugs and alcohol. I have adapted my personal program to add crime and violence to that list.

I owned a furniture moving company for most of the last 30 years. I kept beer in my warehouse refrigerator for my crews after they finished work. I got to hear the abstinence/harm reduction debate up-close and personal all the time. There would always be that one new guy who would spot me drinking a Diet Pepsi and ask, “Ain’t you gonna have a beer?”

“No, no thanks. I don’t drink.”

“Really? Not even one? Shit, it’s your beer, your warehouse and you’re the boss!”

“I’m not a “one beer” kind of guy, thanks.”

“I don’t get it.”

“OK, here’s the deal. I don’t miss beer. I miss heroin and I miss hitting people. You know how when you’re sitting in a bar and there’s a dude you can’t stand but you know you can’t whup him, but every beer you drink you start thinking maybe you could? That’s how it works with me. Every beer I drink is gonna bring me closer to thinking maybe I can whup someone I can’t—or shouldn’t—or that maybe I could go out and shoot just one bag of dope and call it quits.”

Not the most cosmic philosophy, but it has worked for me.

## Lotus Flower

*Carlos Delpalacio, California*

The lotus flower cultivates strength and courage to fight its way  
through the muddy water.

It has adapted to its environment and learned to survive under  
its circumstances.

The lotus flower has created an armor to protect itself from the  
toxic water.

As it reaches the surface it begins to open and spread its petals,  
pushing all the filth from off itself.

The lotus flower exposes its beauty and embraces the light the  
sun has to offer.

When the sun begins to set the lotus flower closes to protect  
itself before retracting back into the muddy water.

Through all the toxins and impurities it finds the nutrition that  
it needs.

I am the lotus flower that comes from muddy water.

## Feeding the Squirrels

*Kevin P., Arizona*

I headed to the rec field for my morning walk around the track. As I walked by the northeast corner, I saw two cute baby squirrels. They were so cute, running and dashing and propping themselves on their hind legs, looking as though they were praying, perhaps begging for food.

"Sorry, little fellows. I don't have anything to feed you," I said as I passed them by. They gave chase for a couple of feet before retreating through the chain link fence.

On my second lap, there must have been a dozen of them watching intently as I passed by. It was as though I had my own cheering section. As I approached, the largest squirrel started chattering in its high pitched, squeaky voice. They started jumping through the fence one or two at a time and heading straight towards me. How adorable.

I couldn't resist. I had to stop to watch these critters. As I stood before them, they approached more closely, eyes full of curiosity. One by one, they began gathering at my feet, all in begging positions with little hands raised.

Then one of the squirrels jumped onto my shoe and started to ascend my leg. Then another joined him.

"This isn't cool!" I shouted.

I smacked one of them off my leg, causing my knee to buckle under. I lost my balance and fell to the ground, planting my face hard into the sandy track. I felt the squirrels jumping on my back, some rushing towards my head, others scurrying towards my face. The first bite by the larger squirrel ripped deep into my cheek with razor sharp teeth. The others joined in: biting and tearing. I instinctively covered my eyes to protect them from these monsters.

The squirrels were eating me alive. Could anyone see me? Would anyone come to my aid? I heard a faint voice from afar as I lay in agony, listening to these monsters gnawing on my

flesh, feeling the pain, blood flowing freely into my eyes. I heard the voice again. Was someone coming to rescue me? I heard the voice a third time, almost discernable now. I thought it was an officer, coming to save me. Then, finally, I heard an authoritative voice yelling: “Hey! You! Stop feeding the squirrels!”



## Chiefs (Unfinished)

*Hector Cedillos, Arizona*

Graphite on Paper, 22"x18", 2016

## Pre-Packaged

*Dominic Montoya, New Mexico*

A boy born in a box

No door, no key, no locks

No light, no switch, no clocks.

His only friends, four walls, cold floor, and  
abuse that never stops.

Blind eyes, punishment words pool salty tears

The pain overflows.

Naked no clothes, nasty raw soul

Cold feet, no socks, no one knows how he

Suffers alone in his box

Laid bare, body broken

Can't breathe, intense emotions confused

Shame leaves him choking

Swing, the sting of the cord a substitute

for a mother's caress, never a gentle

stroking

Won't be held, born only to be hit

Not a kind word, or a soft kiss

The child's screams drowned out, by the hiss

Slap, crack wet leather strip

Snap the boy begins to lose his grip.

No sense of time the dark days continue

To flow, a young disturbed man has grown.

He has a new friend, none truer, rage,

Emotions river his hate filled sewer

No dreams his love lost heart pumps

Fewer and fewer.

Inside his rage rises, protecting  
The child's sick, raw soul  
No more neglecting, rejecting, it's time  
For the reckoning

They harvest the hurt, no more room  
For love in his broken heart.  
To survive the mind splits  
What goodness left in his soul now sits  
Apart

Insanity fearless to embrace the  
violence is the only way he was  
Able to exist, sadly the boy in the box  
forever lost, alone never known, by whom  
Would he ever be missed?

So much time passed at last alone  
The man in the box lived life two  
guns cocked try as he might the sick  
Child could never by him be forgot  
Body beat, stabbed, shot  
The sickness kills, blood spills  
So much destruction in search to feel.  
Razors, rigs, needle sticks, skin sliced slit,  
peeled.

But all the physical pain heals  
It's his mental state with or without the dope he  
can't cope  
Struggling to deal  
I often think wouldn't it have been  
Better for the boy in the box to be born still  
Or maybe just maybe I'm already dead  
And none of this is real.



## Momologue

Terry G., Arizona

I am at a loss for words, Mom. I am sitting here quietly because you have just thrown a lot of assumptions out about me. For whatever reason, you have built your whole perception of me based on these presumptions, and I am trying to figure out if I can actually explain to you how far off base you are without having you crumble under the guilt that your prolonged absence in my life has caused.

You say that I am cold and distant. That I am institutionalized and that it is your fault I am the way I am. You say that you don't know how to talk to me.

What am I supposed to say to you? I haven't seen you in over seven years. Did you know that physiologically we change every seven years? I am changed.

You say that I am cold and distant. That hurts. Especially coming from you. Would you believe that I am sought out for my advice by a great number of people? Would you believe me if I told you that I have a very rich and fulfilling life here in prison? That I have more friends who value me for my laughter than I ever thought possible? Yeah, you say that I can't have real friends in prison, but I disagree.

It all started with me. I made peace with myself, Mom. I've become my own best friend. All because of the advice you gave me when I was starting high school: *Be yourself, love yourself, and you'll have far more friends than you'll know what to do with.* I guess you forgot that advice somewhere along the way, but I haven't. I am far from being institutionalized, Mom. I am actually a fairly well-adjusted human being full of love and light, laughter and joy, and best of all—I am at peace. If all that is what being institutionalized is, then I guess prison need not be so darkly painted as a wasteland of zombies and throwaways.

Maybe I am cold and distant, Mom. Maybe it is because the life I have found while being incarcerated is such that you

cannot understand because of the guilt you carry within you. Because you aren't at peace with yourself, I am foreign to you. I am distant. I am, Mom, because as it stands right now, I do not recognize you!

I love you. Please think about what I said.

## Street Raised

*Ronald Lusk, New Mexico*

From the womb, to the street, to the cell, to the grave  
I'm a slave to the pen as it bleeds on this page  
Who can feel the pain and the rage that I feel  
And maybe tell me why all my homies bleed from the steel  
So many mothers cry at the graves of their young  
That died in the street, from the blaze of a gun  
Slugs hit the skin, then they tore through the flesh  
Bloodshed was caused, that resulted in death  
Now we gotta ride so we load up the straps  
Dress in black clothes, black gloves and black masks  
Go and hit the Block until the target is found  
Squeeze on the trigger until that fool hits the ground  
Now retaliation's done, homies please just rest in peace  
But I don't understand why I'm losing my OG's  
I should be the one that they're putting in the ground  
Not the little homie He just liked to hang around  
He ain't ever done no wrong, he ain't ever hurt nobody  
So why's he in the street twisted laying there all bloody  
His mama had to see it and his daughter saw it too  
And as they're crying out in pain, I know exactly what to do  
I'm contemplating murder, while I scheme a master plan  
I gotta hit them where I find them. I'm gonna kill them where  
    they stand  
And if I gotta die for my homies staying true  
Then hurry me a "G" that's exactly what I'll do.

In a black Dickie Suit and a turquoise flag  
Sean Jean hat and my Nike Cortez  
Rolling through your hood, trying to find another "jack"  
You'll never catch us slipping, cause we always keep a strap.

## Letter to my Nephew in Prison

*Sue M. Kenney, New Jersey*

Dear Kevin,

Last night I dreamt that your dad and I went to visit you at Brown Creek. It was different than the way he described it to me—you know, seeing you on a TV screen while you were actually in a building ten miles away. In my dream we could see each other face to face, except there was a plexiglass window between us. And instead of talking through a phone or speaker, we had to type everything out on something that looked like a little kid's piano. We could read what we had just typed, but it all seemed to come out jumbled—like gibberish. Somehow, though, you knew what we meant. It was as if you had become adept at interpretation—like you had learned a whole new language.

When I woke up, I thought that on some level, the dream was kind of true. You *have* had to learn to interpret what people mean when they speak, even if it doesn't always come out right. You have to see beyond their words and know that even if they're just talking about work or the weather, what they're really saying is, "Are you okay? We love you. Please be okay."

You've also had to learn the language of sobriety, which is a tricky one. If you don't practice all the time, it can easily slip away. I want you to know, Kev, that addiction is not a moral weakness (as some would have you believe). It's a disease—a disease that runs in families, even loving families like ours. I think you know that my mom (your grandmother) is a recovering alcoholic. It wasn't easy for her, Kevin; the process took time. But she didn't become an alcoholic overnight, just like you didn't become an addict overnight. It took years.

I know you think you've lost us. You haven't. That's just a trick of the substance. It makes you feel like your only true friend is in the drink, the pill, the needle. Everyone is still here,

still loving you. You say you're afraid you've lost the ability to think, to feel, to create. I've read the poetry you've written in prison. I can see the sincerity and the intelligence in it. I also see a strong sense of sorrow and regret for hurting those you love. This isn't the end of your story, Kev. It's the beginning.

It might seem strange getting a letter that speaks of sobriety from a person who's never had to struggle for it. That's true – but only because I never went down that path. I'm fifty years old, Kevin, and I've never had a drink or gotten high. That's because I was scared to death that I would follow my mother's lead. It's not that our lives were terrible, ruled by fear and depression. They weren't. My brother (your dad) and I grew up in a fairly normal household, as far as we knew. Macaroni and cheese on Wednesday nights, Mrs. Paul's fish sticks on Fridays, and steak once in a blue moon. The thing is, when someone is drunk or high all the time, they're not themselves. They become someone else. And you know in your heart that beautiful, funny, loving person is still there inside somewhere. Lost. It's so damn sad, and so damn frustrating.

It's kind of like in the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. Try to see it as a metaphor for drug use. Dorothy goes from her mundane, black-and-white world to one full of color and strange, wonderful creatures. But there is evil there too; evil with the potential to destroy her. All she wants is to go home, to have everything back to the way it was before the tornado ripped her from her family. The craziest thing is, she had it within her power *the whole time* to go home any time she wanted. She just didn't know it. It's almost like she had to go through that storm to believe in herself again.

You have the power too, Kevin. I know you understand that now. You've been through a hell of a hurricane. We all make mistakes, but it's what the mistakes teach us that shape who we are. I hope you can hold on to everything you've gained from this experience. Being in jail is scary. Coming out can be scary too, because of all the choices that await you. Choose family,

Key. Choose life. Choose your *self* and your sobriety above anything else.

So, I'll end by saying that work is good (*Are you okay?*). And the weather has been rainy and cold here in New Jersey all week (*Please be okay*). Today the sun is shining (*I love you—we all do*), and they say it should be a nice weekend (*Please be okay*).

Love,  
Sue

## Comfort's in the Sorrows of the Unconscious Mind

*Joshua S. Martinez, New Mexico*

I am a mirror  
to those who  
lack the ability  
to self reflect.  
A voice to those  
without words.  
A visionary  
for the ones  
who can't see.  
Guidance  
for the blind  
and unaware.  
A flame  
that lights the way  
through the dark  
paths of life.  
I'm not divine  
but experienced.  
A holder of knowledge  
to the unknown.  
Wit, to the secrets  
of Hell on earth.  
Victim to the  
shadows of sorrow.  
The one who can relate.  
Give unto me your pain,  
find comfort in my embrace.  
See that you are not alone.  
For I've seen what you have seen.  
Felt what you have felt.  
Been where you have been.

For I am your unconscious mind.  
The enabler to your conscious,  
which brings forth the skills  
at bay, to speak for those  
who cannot speak  
for themselves.  
To shine a light on the forgotten.  
To give forth the lost souls  
Come to me  
and embrace the comforts  
in the sorrows of  
the unconscious mind.  
For I alone  
will show the way.





## Untitled

*Memo Vera, California*

Graphite on Paper, 8.5"x11", 2014

## Early Morning Hell

*Roosevelt III, California*

The pain starts as soon as I open my eyes.

It's never easy settling incarcerated limbs.

3:59 A.M.

My internal alarm clock mimics an actual alarm clock.

"Get up!"

Without question, I rise. My TV stares at me. I choose the news program anchored by the prettiest woman. I watch her, mind turning. Occasionally my eyes scan the confines of this cell, my permanent encampment.

I remember a time I wanted to cry. Every day. When I wanted to get a good one in before breakfast and then not even bother to go eat. I stayed back, swallowed by the reality of my life sentence.

I'm paying for the decisions of a seventeen-year-old miscreant.

I'm forty-one.

Aging inside and out, as my neck, back, and knees ache. Sometimes, even my toes got a funny thing going on.

There's no release for me. Every morning my cell asserts its dominance.

I meet it with a deep breath and return my attention to the Pretty News Lady.

\*\*\*

6 A.M.

I lift the blankets from my body and fold them up. My morning stroll to the chow hall is an hour away. I can't explain the sound the door makes as a correctional officer buzzes it again. It stays with you like a tagging sibling.

My first steps into the tier, I'm accompanied with my homeboy, Cup of Joe. Last name: Folgers.

I recall hearing on the news one day that coffee protects or prevents Alzheimer's disease. The information is pointless; the

matching point, if there is one, explains my life.

Still, I try to make the best of it.

I paint my eyes on the white line the COs are vehemently barking about: "Find the white line....."

They press their authority.

My eyes sting, adjusting to the brisk morning chill.

6:57 A.M.

I've already skirted sixteen different confrontations.

## Milk and Cookies

Deborah Tobola, California

The poets perform in three classrooms, riding Neruda's river on a little boat of nostalgia, on a craft of black pride, in a shipwreck of loss and longing. Some poets make the other prisoners laugh, some cause the teachers to pause and look up. We pass the guard shack with its metal detector the prisoners must pass through daily. *What about us? What if we want to hear poetry too?* one guard asks. Still high on performing, the poets look anxiously at one another, step back. Slowly, they form

a semi-circle around the shack, each stepping forward when it's his turn. The new student paws at the ground, fairly snorting his contempt. Like a prizefighter, he delivers his punches with fluid elegance, reciting from the Che Guevara: *Don't think that they can make us tremble, armed with gifts and decorations. We want a rifle, bullets, a stick. Nothing more.* A guard raises his eyebrows. When another poet exhorts the guards not to *go gentle into that good night*, silence hangs on to *night* and for a split-second, the business of prison—inmates shouting, a barked order, wheels and welding torches and prison intercom—fades to this silence held by guards and poets, who have never talked, never listened this way. Stiff thank-yous and the poets turn away, relieved to be done. *Wait a minute* says a guard, and bending down for a big box, he invites each poet to take a carton of milk and a cookie. Recalling the lines he's just recited, the fighter cries *I don't want no milk and cookies! I ain't their bitch!*

The other poets pull him aside, tell him to eat. Later, he will christen himself Big Bad Ass Poet,

walk the yard reciting his own words, taking his listeners  
to the raw wilderness he discovers inside. But now he takes  
one bite of cookie, an uneasy communion in the chapel  
of the metal detector, guards watching as he eats.

## Lockdown

*Deborah Tobola, California*

Rage pulses through the skin of  
his working man's frame. Razor gets  
\$50 a month in the welding shop  
but he'll take a cut in pay  
to read poetry, police the prison's  
art department, memorize whatever  
beauty he can find here.

One of the inmates on your art crew  
tells you Razor is angry because  
he has 10 more years. *But he's lucky.*  
*He got off easy.* What did he do? you ask.  
Double murder. *He killed his wife,*  
*got in his truck and drove 300 miles*  
*and killed her lover.* You can see him  
speeding down Highway Five,  
murder in his heart.

You release your art crew for chow,  
go to the prison records office,  
look him up. For lunch, you take in  
Razor's crimes, details killing  
the appetite for anything  
a body could desire. Is this the right  
file? You check the photo  
in the back to make sure.  
It's Razor's bull-dog face, younger  
and with more hair.

You turn to the police report:  
short story, third-person omniscient  
cop-narrator. All the action happens

in the tight frame of Razor's arrest,  
with frequent flashbacks. The past  
foretells the future. If only  
his father hadn't ... You know this story.  
Reading, you become him, shamed, afraid,  
begging, bullying, bribing  
his step-daughters, daughters. Caught,  
he confesses everything.

You step out of the records room  
and into a neon noon. Everything is dead,  
the yard eerily quiet. You unlock the gate  
and then the building and then your office.  
It's a ghost prison, inmates disappeared  
into dorms. You call the guard, who confirms  
a lockdown. What happened? you ask.  
*Somebody saw a guy in blue jeans and  
a work shirt walking along the highway  
so they called an emergency count.* As if  
any man in blue jeans and a work shirt  
could be one of ours.

## In the Lieutenant's Office

*Deborah Tobola, California*

Beyond the Lieutenant's window  
in the heart of this barbed city  
clouds gather like geese,  
untouched by razor wire, ringing keys.  
We are not, but the clouds  
are free. The Lieutenant pages  
the prize-winning poet to  
his office. He must be a lifer  
who's spent his time paying tribute  
to the poetry of dead white men,  
adopting the style of each as  
he describes them. I expect  
a graying prison scholar with  
fading Aryan Brotherhood tattoos.  
But it's a careful red-haired kid  
who doesn't look old enough to vote.  
*What did he do to end up here?*  
He explains that he came to poetry  
by way of history, almost an apology.  
The Lieutenant bears witness to  
our small ceremony, as the changing light  
throws the boy's pale face into relief.  
I hear E.E. Cummings whisper *and how*  
*do you like your blueeyed boy Mister Death?*  
Does the Lieutenant hear him too?  
The poet looks down at his shoes.  
The sky is closing up, clarifying light.  
A bell sounds. There's a wild  
beauty here, if you can believe in it.  
The Lieutenant says it looks like rain.



## Superluminals

*Angelo Niles, Arizona*

Geothermal dynamics might have explained the eerie circular void that hovered over the house next door. Or maybe it was just some freakish rent in the ozone layer. Or perhaps Miles had finally gone batty after hours examining distant star clusters and nebulae and phantasmagoric gas clouds named by stodgy astrophysicists. Yet a faint echo of primordial alarms urged caution as he persisted in scrutinizing the phenomenon from the safety of his porch. The neighbors, an odd trio of rustic tree-huggers or some such, lent credence to his disquiet and xenophobic suspicion. Not that he had a modicum of ethnic bias toward any soul. He regarded all of Earth's progeny as equal in biological merit, if not ethical virtue. All but those Slög eco-tourists.

Nay, these three denizens evoked a dark aura of, well, who the hell lived in a spacey, otherworldly habitation like theirs anyhow? Nobody from our planet, if you asked Miles. And they were rarely ever seen interacting with the rest of the species. To top it all off, this trifecta of reclusive Newcomers had the gall to don angelic faces when they graced the world with fleet excursions beyond their surreal abode. Yes, a more lovely vision of near-identical clones few in Nova Scotia had ever laid eyes on. And given this remote alcove newly erected by Skyline Properties, it was unlikely that any of the peculiar triads venturing outside, would be noticed now, olive skin aglow.

Scientists, retired geniuses, eccentric authors, and pseudo-hermits like Miles made up the entire census of Darwin (not named for the English naturalist but rather someone's pet lemur, Miles felt sure), and a few cultists from South America, forest-people-turned-environmentalist-monks with iPads and solar panels on their multimillion-dollar yurt shrine. Neighbors all, none elicited incongruous wonder like the fates who lived in the silvery, dark window-paned *earthship* grounded directly

below the cloud-eye and bewitching his sense of logic. “What in Sir Isaac Newton’s name is that?” Miles uttered to his withering plants.

Not that their desiccated stalks bothered acknowledging his query. The near-dying weeds had long succumbed to his faulty energy or lack of sincere love for potted flora. He’d only gotten the wretched ferns to appease Cynthia’s ghost—that umber-skinned vision that haunted his nightly reveries under the stars: *They’ll give you the Nobel Peace Prize the day you actually nurture life rather than study under a microscope, Miles Keehan.*

So sue him, people. He was a xenobiologist on hiatus after that cataclysmic meltdown on Io. After they’d gotten so close to isolating the gamma-aminobutyric acid in that volcanic hunk excavated just days before Cynthia’s demise. So far from Mother Earth ...

As if conjuring his dead fiancé’s corporeal form, one of the clone triplets emerged from the futuristic domicile dressed in Amish attire. *Like, enough already with the period-dressing antics*, he fumed, unable to help being enchanted by her unearthly green eyes, olive skin, jet black coiffure, straight off the *Plymouth*, svelte physique hardly shrouded by the puritan dress and Quaker footwear. It didn’t seem to bother the woman that Miles openly gawked at her from his porch, cloud-eye phenomenon all but forgotten. He gulped, stupefied and a little uneasy as she smiled thinly and came across the perfectly groomed lawn to his shamefully dismal patch of real estate. He really deplored yard work or gardening of any sort. Old, decrepit people fawned over shrubs and rosebushes.

Not Miles.

“Hi there,” came his lame introduction. First contact with an alien species is never easy. Or contact with an angel in Sixteenth Century garb. That get-up didn’t belong anywhere in this time zone, brother. “At last we meet, neighbor. Miles Keehan, on hiatus from Laguna Beach.”

"Where on Earth is that?" she whispered like a dream. "Is it far from Darwin?"

"California, actually. And you?"

She indicated the aerodynamic house she'd just debarked from. "That is my abode. And my calling is Faedra."

"Oh, hey. Quite an interesting name." On account of his deep russet complexion, Miles couldn't tell if he was blushing. But no doubt she caught the ironic edge in his tone and the wary glint of his ebony eyes. "That's gotta be, what? An Icelandic appellation, maybe?"

"Not hardly," she said, not offering to clarify. The emerald orbs took in his disheveled ferns, the dead leaves strewn on his porch—and the inept Terran who'd let the poor plants fall to such ruin.

"I'm really bad with foliage. Honestly, I meant well enough." His weak demur must have offended her empathy for all living matter—or just a disgust for mortals like Miles.

Faedra scolded him with those gemfire irises just briefly, then set about inspecting the half-living organisms drooping nearby. He swore the wind sighed some profanity at him when she brushed by his perch. DAMNED HOMOSAPIENS AND YOUR CRUDE CONCEPTS OF HORTICULTURE! IT'S NO WONDER THIS PLANET SUFFERS FROM GLOBAL WARMING, OVERABUNDANT CARBON DIOXIDE, AND DYING OCEANS. IF THESE FERNS ARE ANY INDICATION OF YOUR CONCERN FOR LIFE, PERHAPS HUMANITY DESERVES ITS FATE.

All right. So Miles had a soft spot for cautionary yarns like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. We Earthlings have had it coming for eons, if you asked Miles Keehan. Darwin may have proved a perfect ground zero for invading body snatchers and hostile chondrites like those embedded in that ALH 84001 meteorite NASA had hidden away. Weren't the Slögs from Kepler?

He checked his runaway thoughts before hysteria took

hold; after all, Faedra was busy casting some enigmatic spell on his sporophytes. She held a limp frond delicately, uttering an incantation beyond mortal comprehension. The fern at once grew alive with vivid verdure and succulent vim. All that she touched grew invigorated with preternatural energy. Even the dry, lifeless twig she swept up turned vibrant green. Like real ferns might have looked on their natural habitat deep in the Amazon. Green as Slög cilia.

“God resurrect Lazarus!” Miles cried, bemused by Faedra’s alchemy. “How the hell d’you—?”

His incredulous outburst was silenced by a thunderbolt that flashed down on his lawn. Loamy scents mingled with charred ions and ozone and burnt grass. He tasted copper too, not from blood but utter trepidation and abrupt realization. She’d conjured the elements. She’d revived those ferns with but a touch of her dainty clone hands. Right there on Miles’s porch in broad daylight, without the slightest regard for his psychological fallout—or belief in the metaphysical realm.

Sure, miracles are easy to stomach when enshrouded in scriptural metaphor and occurring in Noah’s time. Moses wept and blessed baby Jesus; this wasn’t happening right there in Darwin. “What ... what exactly are you?” he demanded.

“Respite.”

“For me alone?”

“For all seven billion plus of your fellow denizens of Earth.”

“Respite until when? And from what?”

“Evolution’s logical culmination. When such precious life ceases to arouse compassion in the human species. When this planet can no longer tolerate your reckless misuse of its resources. When that day comes no respite shall you enjoy, Miles Keehan.”

Okay, this had floundered into truly spooky waters. Amish angels living in some galactic ark that displaced the very ozone in Earth’s fragile atmosphere. Maybe Faedra and her reclusive sisters weren’t angelic manifestations, after all, but

the personification of our planet's cry for compassion and conservation. Maybe those Brazilian cultists had joined this colony in Nova Scotia after their rainforest at last despaired of humanity's voracious blight. *Maybe you've gone plain batty with grief, Miles old boy, and Cynthia sent this figment of your imagination to chide you for abusing them ferns.*

But the Amish angel didn't dissolved into thin air when he blinked forcefully, trying to wish her from his porch. She eyed Miles critically. Almost with pity. "Another species might have perished sooner," she asserted in a motherly tone. Was she more than twenty summers old? Doubtful she knew herself or even considered such matters. "Yet you've attempted to nurture this world back to optimal inhabitability. That is enough to warrant your fate's delay. Provided the damage is curtailed in time."

Cryptic to the nth degree, she left her abomination at that and retreated back across the now charred lawn to her own immaculate domain. Back to that eerie space-faring chateau (for he refused to believe anyone from planet Earth built that thing) and vanished inside, once again retreating to some hermitic existence.

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Weeks went by before Miles glimpsed the three ephemeral fates, Faedra, Cedrina, and Elyssa, all adorned in Amish finery and angelic splendor, each with identical lambent green eyes and jet black locks. Spring had come and gone all too fleetingly and Nova Scotia's air smelled sweetly of brine, ambergris, and coniferous pines. Woodland nymphs must have choked on envy as the trio swayed over their lush green lawn with potted plants in hand. Although Miles had spent umpteen years researching extraterrestrial life and scrutinizing microbes and chondrules on Jupiter's moon, Europa and Io and Ganymede, their vision arrested his senses anew. Alone each triplet possessed devastating beauty; as they closed the distance to his porch, he swore the very heavens shone with aurorae born of the Afterlife.

He gasped, "Surely you've come to deliver me to the Pearly

Gates. All three of you?”

“We have a gift,” Elyssa spoke.

“*Gifts* to be sure,” Cedrina amended, proffering her own seedling. “Harvested from Patagonia and Brazil. Mostly a housewarming gift to keep the ferns company.”

“Provided you accept the responsibility,” said Faedra sweetly enough. “We realize your thumbs may not be altogether green. So we thought we would offer offerings.”

Offered offerings, oh boy. Talk about chilling allusions to primitive rituals and the occult. Did they next expect him to burn incense while conjuring spirits of nefarious myth? Were they... *witches*, then? Sorceress aliens bent on preserving Earth's flora one twig at a time? Oh dear quasar birth, if they meant to seduce Miles with their fecund offerings, was he being prepared for a blood sacrifice to their nature deity?

“I accept,” his loins replied via his suddenly dry lips. “With all my power and will, I pledge faithful adherence to this responsibility. Day and night if you'd like me to.”

“In time,” Elyssa assured him, “you'll saturate the stars with your lustful genes. But for now we shall accept your pledge, Miles Keehan.”

“To water faithfully,” teased Cedrina with her chlorophyll eyes on his ferns.

“To love tenderly,” purred Faedra as if aroused by his carnal muse.

“And hold enduringly,” Elyssa completed as twins did, “till death do you part. Or until evolution takes its course, anyway. So long as the soil has sufficient nutrients, they'll thrive with but a kiss of rainfall or mist. They are sturdy and resilient saplings. Give them minimal nourishment and sunlight and they'll flourish for decades.”

One by one, they placed their offerings on his porch, adding color and aroma to the makeshift nursery. Leafy hints of lilac, lavender, and wild azaleas rioted amid the loamy scents caressing his sinuses. And something else. A subtle rumor of

fungi and peat moss and damp sagebrush and pussy willow. That last emitted from Faeda's exotic orchid. Aphrodisiac nectar from nether rainforest Miles would never probe except in his most ardent dreams.

Then with robes aflutter, the Amish space beings retreated back to their silvery, aerodynamic lair. Darwin's summertime breeze stole their enchanting aroma into a distant orchard far, far from his porch. Miles sat and sat in hopes of glimpsing the lovely fates one last time, but day after day he was left with only those ferns and exotic herbs. Cynthia would have smiled at the irony of his newfound green thumb, too. Nothing wilted or otherwise withered on his watch. No sir, Miles brother. Not a single sorus or tendril or calyx went neglected whilst he endured those windswept hours, days, and weeks marooned on that forested porch in Darwin.

Until one nondescript morning in late August, he yawned awake from a vivid dream of Jupiter's torrid Io and went out to tend to his ferns and herbs. A light had gone. The air grew abruptly stale with realization. The eerie starship habitation had up and left without a whisper. Only a strange geometric pattern lay on the lawn in its wake. They'd gone without ever saying goodbye or healing what Miles needed most. That wilted morsel in his bosom, yes, the pain of being uprooted from all he loved and coveted in the universe. Echoes of Faedra's angelic whisper caressed his soul from light-years away:

*Never forget.*

And how could he ever erase that empyrean vision of olive skin, green within green eyes, raven locks, and Puritan guise? No, not in Darwin, he wouldn't. So hastily one afternoon, Miles gathered his scopes, texts, and sketches and raced to the airport, took flight home to Laguna Beach, and tried to dismiss the entire Darwinian episode. He worked. Did anything to forget. Studied the local Kepler migrants. Got hitched with a new interplanetary exploration mission. Discovered the wonders of the cosmos anew, and eventually forgave himself

for letting Cynthia fade from his thoughts and dreams. Saturn's rings took his breath away as the orbiter dashed towards Titan. More chondrules and microbes held his focus, though too little proof of higher life forms anywhere in the Solar System. Pluto, however, might offer promising probabilities now that astronomers once again considered it the ninth planet.

*Never forget your promise, Miles Keehan. Give those ferns all your energy and love and care. Give your planet time to heal your species in kind. And one day, life will flower anew in the void between the stars.*

Life went on, of course, with humanity proliferating the far reaches of outer space. Our probes hedged deeper and deeper into the Milky Way's heart, explored distant gas giants and planetoids and asteroid belts rich in life and promise. Miles gazed longingly into the heavens, trying one final time to conjure Faedra's eyes. Dainty fingers touched his bosom. Time fell silent then, almost as thunderous quiet he'd not known since Cynthia's life force fled humanity's fold.



## The Temple

*Kevin P., Arizona*

—A Latter-Day Saint Ghazal

When I was a very young child, eager to please,  
my mom always said, son keep your eye on the Temple.

I grew learning to read my scriptures daily,  
remembering what my mom said about the Temple.

I learned to pray and ponder the things of God eternal,  
always focused on my mom's words about the Temple.

In my youth I grew to become a worthy young man,  
to receive the Priesthood, ready for the Temple.

The day came to perform baptisms for the dead.  
With ancestral names in hand, I went anxiously to the Temple.

The seasons wear on and on as I prepared for my mission,  
A visit was needed to make covenants in the Temple.

What great blessings had come by serving God's mission,  
teaching moms to teach their sons about the Temple.

So I fall in love with a worthy young lady;  
time to make everlasting vows in the Temple

Happy are we with a beautiful child of our own,  
I hear my wife say, son keep your eyes on the Temple.

## At First Glance

*Alexandra Lord, Arizona*

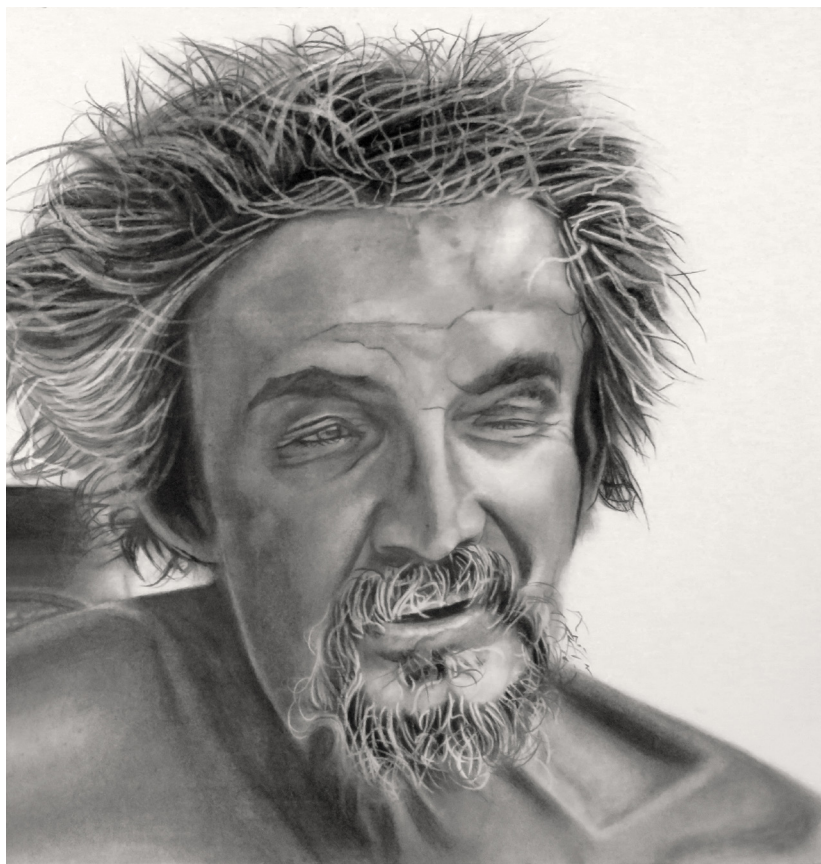
If I told you about someone who routinely shoplifted from local stores, what would you think? What if I told you that same person was living on the street and only stole food to feed his children? We compartmentalize people just as we do everything else. We tend to believe that suicidal people are crazy and broken, that prisoners are inherently bad and always will be. But these black and white assumptions only serve to undermine others and drive a deep wedge between us. The fact is, mental illness does not equal insanity, and there are a plethora of reasons someone might end up in jail, some of which have nothing to do with a person's character. I didn't fully realize the consequences of assumption until I met Jerry.

Jerry worked with children in the hospital. He was the kind of person who made you smile no matter how terrible a day you were having. The sparkle in his eyes and crinkles around them were reminiscent of Santa Claus, and if I hadn't heard it from Jerry himself, I wouldn't have believed his life history bore significant differences from the jolly, old elf's. If there were a person I wouldn't mind being woken up by at 4 AM, it'd be him. Something about the way he said, "Sorry, darling, this will only take a second," made being woken up at such an ungodly hour bearable, even pleasant. Even though it was protocol, and I know it was his job, he still managed to make it personal—like he had gone out of his way to check on me simply because he cared. And if you ever woke up in the middle of the night, afraid of your unfamiliar surroundings and homesick, all you had to do was peek your head out the door, and there was Jerry, as he always was.

One day Jerry sat us all down and proceeded to tell his life story. He'd grown up in an orphanage and was cast off as unadoptable—potential parents never failed to choose cooing babies over dispirited children; and as the years passed, he lost

hope of ever belonging to anyone, of ever finding a family. His life unfolded before us like ancient scrolls; he told us about how he'd attempted suicide and nearly succeeded, how he'd struggled with drug addiction, and how he'd spent years in the juvenile detention and prison systems. The hardest thing he ever did was choose to change. Climbing out of the hole he'd dug himself was like trying to scramble up a precipice during a rainstorm. Every job interview was the same: "We don't feel comfortable hiring someone with your record." He said it took years to convince the hospital that he was fit to work anywhere near patients, on the pediatric wing, no less.

If I'd just told you about a suicidal druggie who'd spent time in prison, you'd probably have written him off without a second thought. But I told you about Jerry, and that's a different story altogether.



Homage to Cezanne's *Portrait of an Old Man* (Detail)

*Hector Cedillos, Arizona*

Pastels on Paper, 18"x24", 2015

## The System

*Irate, New Mexico*

The system. Now listen here's a product for sale.  
They call it the system, you can order it through the mail  
on the phone, internet, or any street corner.  
In fact you're already living in it, my brother.  
Look around and you'll see that the system is free.  
In fact you're locked in the system without any key.  
You see you can't get out of the system, my friend,  
and it looks like we'll have to roll with it till the end.  
But what pertains to me may not pertain to you  
depending on whether you're red, white, or blue.  
You see the system is designed to serve you by color,  
and it benefits some more than it does others.  
Now most would say, "This statement is pure exaggeration."  
Without ever experiencing the next man's situation  
of being trapped in a system that keeps him down  
with a shear stereotype that is commonly found  
in the majority of homes where the system is praised  
for its cunning, conniving, and so evil ways.  
This system is law, so we live by it  
and to fight against it, Well I wouldn't suggest you try it.  
It's mean, and it's ugly, and it will chop you down,  
and if you jump in the system you're promised to drown.  
Now you're probably saying, "What about those who benefit  
from the system?!"  
But look at the big picture, and carefully listen.  
Even those who use the system for power  
will drown in the lake of fire in the Lord's hour.  
Soon, my friends, everyone will be judged as an equal,  
and those who benefit will be God's people.  
So live it and love it, but please look and learn  
that if you give in to the system you're sure to get burned!

## Back Then...

*Kevin D. Sawyer, California*

I used to be just like them

College graduate

Had a job

Drove to work

Stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic

Paid the bills

Took vacations

Avoided temptations

Up and coming

A rising star

But daylight darkened

Destruction soon followed

And I was swallowed

By the penal system

I used to be just like them

But no longer am I one of those indifferent strangers

Not the passerby avoiding danger

I'm more important

A commodity of hate

That's my fate, product of the state

I'm very important now

Go ahead, ask me how

It's because they work for me now

And they're still stuck in traffic, year after year

While it costs \$60,000 each year

Just to keep me here

In this place of pain and fear  
In a cage made of concrete and steel  
Long after I've exhausted my appeal

They're told they should fear me  
Erase and disappear me  
I forgot about me back then

Yes, I used to be just like them

## Indifferent

*Kevin D. Sawyer, California*

Indifferent on the sojourn after my abduction  
Witnessing decadence on the eve of our destruction  
Desperate days, conflicted are the hours  
Scorched earth and burned flowers  
Dreams blown asunder run over a cliff  
Rules of society set adrift

The first lie was the pledge of allegiance  
A fraud and a farce for all seasons  
Something was said about redress and grievance  
Obeying the law as good citizens should  
Through illusions of jurisprudence misunderstood—by power  
While Knight Riders wear sheets and hoods in dark hours  
Cleansing the souls in bodies with filthy minds  
Oppressing the blessed, like your people and mine  
Those who contemplate and wait for civil unrest  
Drinking Molotov cocktails from machine gun nest  
Rapid fire—tat, tat, tat; followed by a boom  
Day turns to night, hope turns to gloom  
We're all doomed, but still pressing on  
Yet another Emit Till, one more brother gone  
Half a century later, people still marchin'  
Saying: "We want justice for Trayvon Martin."

Homegrown terror in the face of it all  
Waiting, hating, hoping the flag will fall  
Still no answer to pleas for redress  
Kalashnikov invented a 40-round solution  
Called violence, payback, and retribution  
So betray your Faith, and then your brothers  
Send tears home to your mother  
From the other side of the prison gate—where hate looms



A place where more injustice and violence blooms  
File appeals, but it's too late  
No one is going home, so we all wait—for three judges

Desperate days and desperate hours  
More and more funeral flowers  
Nowhere to go, and a lifetime to get there  
These are the days of our despair  
Where the only Black lives that matter are the ones that matter  
Unlike the victims of shotgun scatter from a 12-gauge  
Fostering more rage in urban areas  
Among lives that never saw a day of fairness or awesomeness  
Not the just of the so-called free; all they've known is misery  
In days where truth delineates treachery  
So with all that said, leave me the way you found me—  
indifferent!



## Dark Night

*Hector Cedillos, Arizona*

Pastels on Paper, 18"x24", 2011

## The Soup

*Boyd Edwards, Arizona*

I hate being compared to an envelope.

“Soup or an envelope,” they’re always saying.

Are you kidding? I am bad food—something in big supply around here. But still, I am sustenance if not nutrition. My name is Chili Lime Shrimp, and I’m a sodium bomb. Some facts: If you dump my entire seasoning packet into your micro-baked water you will be consuming 1820 mg of salt—over 75% of your RDA—in one shot. And not good salt. I’m chock full of monosodium glutamate, something you shouldn’t be eating at all. Neither should you be eating my noodles for that matter.

But I know you want to know more about the envelope thing, so I’ll tell you. It all started last year when I was shipped out to a warehouse in Des Moines, Iowa. I wound up being housed there for more than nine months before they threw me into the back of a semi and transported me to where I already knew I was headed—prison. I expected the worst, but I never imagined I’d be compared to an envelope.

Food or family is what it boils down to, and I suppose I can respect that ... to a degree. I’m still food. And when you get the munchies, which happens here often, you can’t eat an envelope. But I guess I should just be satisfied with my status as an economic elite among my ramen soup brethren. Most of my kind are doomed to a dull life lived on some grocery shelf where they are bought and sold for a quarter. In here, my value is 60 cents—the exact cost of a preprinted ‘Forever’ envelope. I can be purchased at the corporate store that runs a monopoly in this joint for 59 cents; the cons must also pay a penny tax to their captors for the luxury of my purchase.

Plus, coming here is like joining the army—it’s full of adventure and you never know when you might find yourself in the middle of a fight. Unlike the ennui my grocery store compatriots are subjected to, my life is full of excitement

and mystery. They learn at the point of purchase who will be consuming them. I have no idea where I'll wind up or who will be eating me.

Things start when I'm tossed into Smitty's net sack along with nine of my cohorts. He immediately takes us across the yard to another guy, sets me and two others on the gunmetal grey counter, and says: "Here's those soups I owe ya, Red."

"Thanks, bro," Red says, holding out a fist for Smitty to bump. The word PRIDE is tattooed across the freckled knuckles of Red's left hand. As soon as Smitty leaves, Red hollers over his shoulder: "Hey, Chino! Got them soups for ya!"

Chino is the default nickname assigned to any inmate of Asian heritage. In this case it's a Vietnamese cat who does lots of hobby craft. Typically I don't know what I'm being traded for—the inmates talk in code, a special language that I'm still trying to decipher. "Paying debts" is usually all they let me in on. But I'm a quick study.

"Thanks," Chino says, collecting us from Red and retreating to his cubicle where he promptly stuffs us in his locker and shuts the door. Apparently, Chino doesn't have any immediate debts due. I sit in the dark and wait, wondering if Chino will be the one to eat me. Maybe with some soy sauce (\$1.30 for six ounces of liquid salt).

A few hours later this string bean fella they call Slim stops by and asks: "Need some glue?"

Inmates used to be able to purchase glue from the store. Until some chucklehead built a life size replica of a sword using popsicle sticks and a copious dose of glue. Now both items are considered contraband and glue is a hard to come by commodity.

Chino says he does, and out I come. Me and a partner—Texas Beef. Slim stuffs us into his pockets and takes off, obviously on a mission. Outside he meets up with his buddy, Country, who is bald and built like a rhino.

"How many of 'em we got now?" Country asks.

"Six," Slim reports. "We need two more. Gary said he wants five bucks. Says it's some really good shit."

"Better be, for eight friggin' soups."

A few minutes later Gary's got me. I couldn't see what he handed Slim, but he and Country took off in a hurry, wearing big grins. Gary packs the eight of us into his crowded locker next to a tall stack of honey buns. At \$1.12 per, these glazed gobs of bad fat are another popular form of currency around here.

I spend three long and boring days confined to Gary's locker, waiting to be "stored out." In addition to selling unmentionables, Gary also runs a "store" where inmates can get the items they want when they feel the need. Like a prison mini-mart. Gary charges a "tax" for providing this service. For example, if Gary "stores me out" to a guy, he is expected to repay a soup along with another item of lesser value at some agreed upon point in the future. A typical tax for a soup is a two-ounce plastic packet of yellow-orange goop that resembles nuclear waste—a "squeeze cheese"—that costs 25 cents. If you drench my noodles in an entire packet of this stuff, the sodium bomb goes atomic, exceeding the RDA.

Eventually I'm liberated by this Chicano named Cholo who shows up and says: "Hey bro, I need five soups. I told this *vato* I'd pay him today. I got you on the next bubble."

He means a "bubble sheet," which resembles one of those answer sheets they use for administering standardized tests in public schools. It's how inmates order things from the corporate store. They fill out bubbles every Thursday and then wait a week for their orders to arrive.

"No problem," Gary says, handing me and four others to the stoic Mexican.

"Whaddya want for tax?"

"Let's see," Gary says, studying a sheet littered with coded names of the inmates who owe him. "For you, Cholo, just make it a honey bun."

"You got it, bro." They bump fists and Cholo promptly takes us next door to this wiry little black dude called Capone. Capone thanks Cholo for the payment, sticks the other four soups into his steel cabinet and heads out the door with me.

"Hey Chief, still doin' three for a soup?" Capone asks this giant Indian with a feather tattooed on his cheek.

Chief nods solemnly, extracting three hand rolled cigarettes from a Ziploc bag and exchanging them for me. I hang with Chief for about an hour before he takes me over to this scuzzy looking cat named Sal.

"Got any pouches?" Chief asks the rotund middle-aged man. Pouches of tobacco, he means.

Sal nods. "How many you need?"

"Gimme two," Chief says, sliding him ten soups. Sal tosses us onto his bunk, too busy filling in a Sudoku puzzle to bother securing us in his locker. A little while later this black dude with a pimp in his stroll stops by.

"Got some CDs you might be interested in," he says, placing a stack of jewel cases on Sal's counter, inches from his logic puzzle. Snaps runs one of the yard's two used CD shops.

"Hey Snaps," Sal says, looking up from his work and pushing his prescription lenses up his acne-pocked nose. He begins thumbing through the stack, sliding one free that catches his eye. "No shit? Pink Floyd, *Animals*? Is it in good shape?"

"You know my policy," Snaps says. "I always listen to 'em before I take 'em. You can't be too careful around here. Go ahead and check it out."

Sal lifts the disc out carefully, checking it for obvious scratches in the daylight bleeding through the narrow window of his cubicle. "Looks alright. Whatcha lookin' to get for it?"

"Seven bucks."

"So that'd be what, twelve soups?"

"Or envelopes."

"Grab them soups off the bed," Sal says. "I think I got a couple of envelopes in my locker."

Snap stuffs us into a half full net bag, tucks the envelopes into the back pocket of his bright orange pants and hustles off. Halfway across the yard, he's stopped by this lanky white dude named Kentucky who's carrying a painting of a wolf.

"Y'all wanna do my powerball?" he asks Snap, holding out his artwork for closer inspection. "Soup or envelope a square."

"Nice work," Snap says, rummaging through his sack for a soup. He snags me and forks me over to Kentucky who stuffs me into a pocket he's cut into the lining of his oversized orange jacket. "Seventeen still open?"

"Lemme see," Kentucky says, pulling a bubble sheet out of his pocket and unfolding it. "Nope. Looks like 19 is the closest one I got left."

"Nah," Snap says, scanning the sheet. "Gimme 33. When you runnin' it?"

"Saturday, if'n I can get 'em all sold by then."

A prison powerball works like this. If someone's got something they want to sell but are having trouble finding an interesting buyer at their desired price, they "powerball" the item by affixing a price to each of 39 "squares." In this case, if Kentucky sells all 39 squares, he'll earn \$23.40 for his painting. When the national Powerball drawing is held on Saturdays or Wednesdays, whoever owns the square that corresponds with the Powerball number wins the wolf.

A few moments after Kentucky takes temporary custody of me he is flagged down by a youngster with matted, shoulder length blond hair who says: "Hey Kentucky. Pizza for chow tonight. Give ya my tray for a soup."

"Deal," Kentucky says, extracting me from his coat. He hands me over and I'm satisfied with the exchange—food for food. A whole tray of it no less. Not some lousy piece of folded paper with dried glue on its lip. It's nice to be in such demand.

The kid takes off and heads for dorm E with purpose. Once inside, he makes a beeline for Carlos' cubicle.

"Got any new ones?" the kid asks at a hush, glancing

apprehensively over his shoulder.

Carlos nods and scans the dorm for any sign of the guards. Figuring it safe, he pulls a nondescript folder out of his locker and pushes it towards the youngster.

"Sweet," he says, opening it with eager eyes. "Still two for a soup?"

Carlos nods again and says: "Be quick about it this time, *sí*?"

"Yeah, sure bro." The kid begins thumbing through a prodigious collection of pictures that have been clipped from porno magazines. Iowa is one of the few states that have created a policy that prohibits inmates from possessing pornography. After selecting two particularly gooey photos, the kid hands me over to Carlos and jets out, excited.

Carlos slides me onto the top shelf of his locker, where I mellow until after dinner when a frail and fidgety white dude with shifty eyes drops a new pair of pants on Carlos' counter.

"All hemmed up," Jimmy says.

Carlos hops off his bunk and unfurls the pants, inspecting them. "You do good work, Jimmy," he says, reaching into his locker and grabbing me and another soup, Spicy Vegetable. "Two soups, right?"

Jimmy nods and accepts his payment. He exits the dorm briskly, eyes darting left and right. He remains vigilant of his surroundings as he slinks over to the poker table where the buy in is four soups ... or envelopes, of course. He trades me Spicy Vegetable, and two Chickens to Jack for a stack of chips.

Jimmy's luck runs hot, and after 15 minutes he's up two soups. That's when Ice shows up and interrupts the game.

"Hey Jimmy, I need to talk to you," he says, nodding over his shoulder, a subtle suggestion that the conversation will be a private one.

Jimmy looks around the table, his eyes pleading for someone to spare him. No one does.

"Go handle your business, Jimmy," Jack suggests calmly, hoping to avoid a scene at his table. "Need to cash out?"



Jimmy nods and Jack hands him six soups, including me. Back in Jimmy's pocket, we follow Ice behind dorm B to a place known as "blood alley"—a narrow strip of gravel that's hidden from the roving eyes of both cops and cameras.

"You got my money?" Ice asks, his tone threatening. Everything about this hulk is intimidating. He's 6'3" with arms like barrel cacti after a spring shower. Evil tattoos escape from the collar of his skin-tight t-shirt and crawl up his neck like poison ivy.

"Yeah bro, I got it ... I mean, I got some—"

"How much you got? You owe me 25."

"Six soups."

"Six soups? That's it? I'm tired of fuckin' around with you, Jimmy," he says, his breath hot with fury. "I know, Ice, it's just ... I ran into some problems," Jimmy stutters. "I'll have the rest on state pay."

"You said that *last* state pay. I'm tired of your fuckin' excuses, you worthless punk. You been owin' me for over a month and every time I see you, you're at the fuckin' table. You got money to gamble, but you can't seem to pay your debts. Big Mike tells me you owe him 20 bucks too."

Jimmy casts his eyes to the ground, refusing to rise to the challenge. By prison code, Jimmy should've swung the moment Ice called him a punk. But if he had, it would've ended badly, maybe with a trip to the hospital. Better to bite his tongue and hope Ice will be patient, wait for state pay. State pay is the bi-weekly pay cycle for inmates fortunate enough to hold a prison job. Jimmy works 30 hours a week in the kitchen and earns 30 cents an hour. Which means he must work two hours just to purchase one soup. He's hoping Ice is bad at math and doesn't realize that Jimmy's state pay—\$18—won't cover his debt.

But Ice isn't the patient type. He smashes his balled fist into Jimmy's jaw, nearly knocking him down. "Let that be your warning, you punk ass bitch," Ice growls. "If you ain't got the rest of my money by Friday ..."

The unfinished threat hangs in the air like rotten smog. Jimmy thrusts one hand up to soothe his mangled mandible while the other fumbles through his pockets, pulling out soups. He slides me out last, a fat drop of blood spattering on my cellophane skin as he hands me to Ice.

“Worthless piece of shit,” Ice says, stuffing me into his waistband and turning away from his victim. He takes me back toward his dorm and stops at the house of a scraggly looking kid engrossed in his television. Ice sets me on the counter and waves to get his attention.

“Crazo, I need you to take this soup over to Charlie before the yard closes,” Ice instructs, pulling a thin strip of paper from his pocket and setting it beside me.

“Right now?” Crazo asks. “But *Big Brother’s* on.”

“Yeah, right now. I gotta get my picks in tonight.”

Crazo briefly entertains a protest but wisely capitulates, lifting the headphones off his neck.

“And wash that blood off before you go,” Ice adds, walking away.

Crazo does as directed and a few minutes later tosses me on Charlie’s counter. “Ice’s picks for this week,” he says, handing him a slip of paper.

Charlie unfolds it and snickers. “Sucker took the spread on Denver. Tell ol’ Ice it’s always a pleasure.”

“Right,” Crazo says, leaving me with Charlie, who stocks me in a locker crammed full of store—coffee, tobacco, sodas, Pop-Tarts, honey buns, nacho chips, and of course, soups. It appears these cramped quarters will be my home for the night.

Next morning, I hear a familiar voice: “Hey Charlie, got any soups?” It’s Smitty, the guy who picked me up a few days ago.

“Whaddya you think?”

“I slept through breakfast, and I’m starving,” he says. “I got an envelope.”

The dreaded exchange is made, and five minutes later, I’m cooked.



## Bronson (Detail)

*Hector Cedillos, Arizona*

Strawberries, Grapes, and Make-Up on Paper, 12"x40", 2015

## The Decay Love Hastens

*Michael Zinkowski, Oregon*

Out in what's left of the ancient forests,  
where we scaled rocks clothed in goatsbeard,  
this new love of ours, the mushrooms  
we were on, stirred me to dismantle

a crumbling, rotten stump. With red palms  
wedged between the clefts, I snapped  
the sapwood, muscled each severed clod  
downstream. To crack the central heartwood,

though, would take my whole body.  
At first, I felt the bristles slip, and so I slid.  
Like the sword in the stone, I pretended;  
whatever was protected would not give

until I gave up. I would have to  
let love upset the interlacing fibers.

## Nothing Without Fear

*Michael Zinkowski, Oregon*

After swinging his fists in the other's face,  
a miner's axe into a cave's black rocks,  
Adrian hit the boy with the quietest ire again,  
this time with his foot, for good measure,

the way you'd pass a soccer ball to someone  
who'd shouted at you to share. The other boy  
couldn't follow the nurse's fingers. The tiny light  
they shone in his pupils showed nothing.

Around here, some stupid missions get  
accomplished. They shove Adrian out,  
in plastic, zip-tie cuffs, scolding him with  
assault charges, like this was the mistake

that might crack the crystallized look  
of the face that faces nothing without fear.

## Spook's Tale

*Dusten L., Arizona*

I have never been a "cat" person. That distinction goes to my wife. In our many years of marriage she adopted a plethora of kittens, it was her thing. She just loved cats. Personally, I could take them or leave them. Let me start at the beginning ...

We had been cat-free for several months, then one day, while I was at work, Pamela found an eight- or nine-week-old kitten in the alley behind our house and, of course, she had to take him in.

When I got home that night, as soon as I walked into our room, I knew that she had adopted another lost soul—I could smell the dust from the cat litter. I looked at Pamela, rolled my eyes, and said, "Where's the cat?"

She giggled and produced the black hairball from behind her back. It was a black, short-haired male. "Okay," I said. "But you clean up after him. He's your cat, not mine."

Pamela squealed, set the kitten on the bed, then ran off to get my dinner. Steak, taters, and coleslaw. I cracked open a beer and flipped on the T.V. A few minutes later Pamela returned with my plate and set it on my nightstand next to me. As soon as I cut into my steak, the kitten decided to join me for dinner. He kept trying to crawl over my shoulder to get to my food. I just kept gently shoving him back with my elbow, time after time, telling him, "This is mine. Go get your own!"

Finally, I picked him up off the bed and gently tossed him towards his food dish. "Yours is over there!" I told him. Big mistake. Now he was in my lap trying to get to my plate. I gave in and cut him a small square of meat. He scarfed it down and wanted more, so I shared my dinner with him. He ate everything that I did ... including the taters and coleslaw.

From that day on he became my cat. He followed me around like a dog would, and he ate whatever I ate, no matter what it was. If my wife was eating the same dinner I was, he'd

stick his nose up at her plate: he'd only eat from mine.

Spook slept in only two places: either on my chest or above my head. Once he weighed 20 pounds he mainly slept above my head on my pillow ... which I was happy for, 'cause sleeping with an additional 20 pounds on your chest isn't very comfortable.

I had Spook a few years. Then one day, on Pamela's 35th birthday, Spook showed up after a four-day absence. He had lost half his weight, he was sickly. I could smell the antifreeze on his fur.

Spook came home to me so I could put him down. He was my familiar, my one and only cat, I understood what he wanted.

My friend was visiting. I asked him to get Pamela and my young son out of the house before they saw Spook. He met them outside and sent them to the store.

I took Spook into my room, cuddling and petting him, me crying like a baby, as I put my hands around his neck and began to squeeze. Spook didn't fight, didn't claw, didn't hiss, he just looked me in the eyes with a grateful look on his face as I took his life.

My friend was in our backyard digging Spook's grave, crying in sympathy for my loss. I wrapped Spook in my favorite T-shirt, carried him out back, and placed him gently in his grave.

## As I Drift, As I Wonder

*Nick James Gonzales, New Mexico*

As I drift in and out of consciousness self-induced in order to escape my reality, or better yet this dreadful nightmarish place. This place where the loneliness haunts me and the prison walls surround me, where the nights are cold and the days so long. This place where there's nobody to hold me or comfort me, and nobody there to trust.

As I drift off, I am able to escape these prison walls, to a place where no gate confines me, no prison guard is around to assault, deprive, or abuse me. I drift off to a place, where the only spotlights I see are the moon and stars gleaming down upon me, where everything seems lovelier, livelier, escaping these twilight feelings into a place where the birds chirp and sing with a whole new purpose, and a different, more beautiful hymn.

As I drift I can see the rivers flowing and the thunder crashing. I drift off into this place where the wind whispers to my soul, calming and soothing all my fears and all my worries. I drift to this place where I have never actually been but know it's the only place I would rather—always be.

When I've drifted back into my dreadful dark and lonely place from which there is no escape, I am left longing for that special place. In time, I am left even more empty than I was feeling before.

My mind begins to drift and wander off daydreaming, yearning for something more. I'm left to wonder about anything, anything but this place. I wonder how amazing the universe and galaxies are, how things burst into existence in fiery flames of glory or why some stars merely die out.



I daydream about anything, anything at all to help me escape my hell here on earth. I wonder about places where only my imagination could take me.

I am left to wonder about all that inspires and all that captivates, the things that take breaths away, or how the beauty of the morning decorates the sky. I wonder about anything to keep myself out of this hell on earth.

I wonder if perhaps, I am not merely drifting, but caught between the realms like a ghost trapped in a spot of unrest. To be trapped helpless and hopeless only compounds the feelings of seclusion and suffocating.

Perhaps there's a lesson to be learned or a purpose to fulfill but it doesn't seem so, just one blurry day after another, nothing making sense, no puzzle fitting together.

And after all that wondering, I am left wondering about God? I want to believe, then again I do not. If there is a God who is all knowing and who can see the depths of our hearts and see how regretful broken up I am, how can He not step in—and rescue me? I've heard of water being turned into wine, about the blind man made to see and the lame made to walk and given a second chance at a simple life. A chance to see and experience all that I am left to wonder about.

Some would say, “You’ve made your bed,” “You get what you deserve,” etc., but things happen, mistakes are made, we all wish there were times we could erase.



## Coatlicue (Single Panel of Triptych)

*Hector Cedillos, Arizona*

Oil on Canvas Board, 14"x22", 2016

## What If?

*Mr. Moord, California*

Often I wonder, *what if?*

What if I had heeded the wisdom and insight my mother shared? What type of man would I be?

What if I took responsibility for my actions, mistakes, and misjudgments? What if I used them as teaching tools for others? What type of man might I be?

What if I *loved* people and *used things*, and never the other way around? What type of man could I be?

What if I out-loved the hate and chose not to discriminate, accepting people for who they are as opposed to what or whom I wanted them to be? What type of man would I become?

What if I owned my faults and embraced my fears? What type of man would emerge?

What if I remained teachable, coachable, trainable and humble? What type of man would I be?

What if I refused to allow my past to define the future? What if I turned my weakness into strength?

## Molto Forte Con Brio, Second Movement

*Michelle Ribeiro, New Mexico*

He would rather be ashes than dust!  
He would rather his spark burn out in a brilliant blaze  
than it should be stifled by dry rot.

He would rather be a superb meteor,  
every atom of him in magnificent glow,  
than a sleepy and permanent planet.

The purpose of man, he insists,  
is to *live*—not simply to exist.  
Martin Eden used his time.

Mr. London, you were always one of my heroes.

It was the heat of your molten convictions;  
the heavy, lucid hammer of your prose;  
the grand adventure that was your life.

Blue collar shackles could not hold you.  
You escaped the prisons of ignorance, poverty, despair.  
You lit your own torch of freedom, fleeing

to Alaska in search of the gold I panned  
from your stories, trying on college—and socialism—  
for size and splitting the seams, dropping out to pursue a life of

writing on your own terms, exploring  
the contours of your cold white logic, entertaining  
guests on the ranch in Glen Ellen, building your beloved

Wolf House—which did go up in a brilliant blaze, just as the  
dream was realized.

How many words penned for posterity, how many glorious  
explosions?

How many people did you burn in the inferno that was your  
life?

I still have that beautiful scar.

As a young writer you told me:

If you have something to say,  
nothing in the world is stopping you from saying it.

How you crushed me with those words!  
You flattened me, dared me, challenged me  
back to life.

I was a scared, mute little girl  
unable to find her own voice,  
brooding over her own black plague of silence.

Your words knocked me into the ring of living,  
breathing poets. Your words pummeled me into  
speech and song.

Now I can say with absolute certainty, Mr. London,  
that you were as right as  
you were wrong.

Once upon a time, I opened my mouth to respond and  
out came the horror of dead empty space, though I  
was full of stars.

The lesson was there all along,  
in the story of your life.  
I devoured your fire—but that is never enough.

We must learn our own language, endure the agony  
of teaching ourselves to speak.  
We must *earn* our right to burn.

I'm back, Mr. London. And thank you.  
I have something to say, and nothing in the world  
will stop me from saying it.

I have become that superb meteor, my once-sleepy atoms  
ablaze in magnificent glow. I wanted you to know that  
I have used my time.



## Iron City

*Nick James Gonzales, New Mexico*

Pen on Paper, 8.5"x11", 2015

# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

*Iron City Magazine* is seeking fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and art for its second issue set to be published March 2017. The deadline to submit is December 31, 2016.

## 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 **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.



# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

## CONT.

Please make handwriting legible. Capital and lowercase letters as well as paragraph/stanza spacing must be distinct.

### 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 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  
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\$8