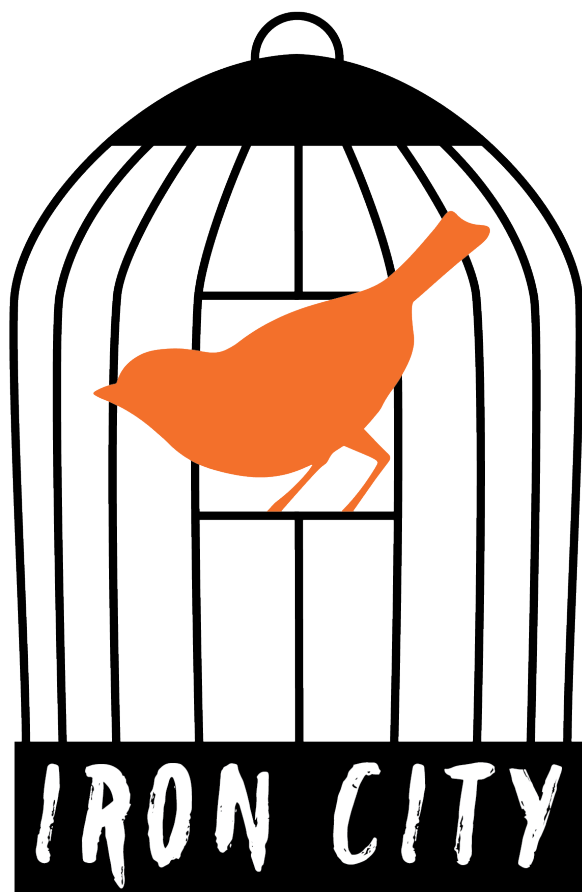




*A bird could  
Love a fish  
But where  
would they  
Live?*

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M A G A Z I N E

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS  
BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

ISSUE 3 / 2018

# ABOUT *IRON CITY*

*Iron City Magazine* is an online and print magazine devoted entirely to writing and art from the prison world. It is our hope that through this creative platform, incarcerated artists and writers find value in their stories, fuel for personal growth, and pride in their accomplishments. Prisoners 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 prisoners can make meaningful contributions to their communities. So often, this potential is forgotten or overshadowed by their crimes. By validating prisoners' 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: The Prison Education Awareness Club (PEAC).

We would also like to thank the following individuals for their monetary contribution: Eric Kessler (Deep Readings), Mark Lussier (ASU), Sally Ball (ASU), Ellie van Gelderen (ASU), and Wafa Moussa.



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# LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

## Letter from the Editor-in-Chief: A Confession

Dear Readers,

*Iron City Magazine* is no one's paying job. Recently, I was asked by an incarcerated writer why we donate so many hours to make it happen. The contributing authors and artists, as well as all the editors, do this work for love of artistic self-expression—and within that love an even greater one: love of the men and women whose voices and visions appear herein, including the self-love anyone must feel to create and share. We at *Iron City Magazine* believe that within this love for others, we also grow to love ourselves more, for love is an interdependent phenomenon. And love begins, as contemporary philosopher Sam Keen teaches, in consciously paying attention to another, both seeing and listening to. In his words, "The decision to pay attention to someone is the first act of self-limitation, the first sacrifice, the first gift we make in the name of love."

Nearly all major world philosophies—from Zoroastrianism to Judaism to Buddhism to Islam to Wicca to Christianity and many others—espouse some version of the golden rule: treating others as we wish to be treated, loving others as ourselves. There is no other way to love. Without the capacity to love ourselves, we can't love others; and if we don't love others, we are empty shells or, worse, vessels of self-loathing.

The prison industrial complex has become such a huge segment of American society that no one goes untouched by it in some way. We are in this together.

As social justice attorney Bryan Stevenson writes, "We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt." And although our "brokenness" may not be "equivalent... our shared brokenness connect[s] us."

I believe this is why, in some unexpected sense, I feel at home when I visit a prison or read submissions from the prison world. It is an opportunity for me to acknowledge (if only to myself) that I too am broken, and that in this shared condition of brokenness, I have nothing to hide.

# LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Prison work helps me see myself the way I once felt seen in the gaze of a lioness in Africa: x-rayed and bare. My confession: When I interact with the prisons, I stop hiding from myself. I just am. For me, with the privilege of living on the outside, prison work yields a rare moment of freedom.

May you find your own enlightened freedom within these pages.

Sincerely,  
Cornelia “Corri” Wells  
Editor-in-Chief

# LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Letter from the Managing Editor: Moving Forward

Dear Readers,

There is something morally wrong, even cruel, regarding who gets to write, who gets to be educated, and who gets to speak based on whom society deems as “good law-abiding citizens.” What does “good law-abiding citizens” mean, and why are they the ones most often chosen to progress? And why weren’t all criminals afforded equal opportunities before they were criminals? Why can’t we all just strive to be good citizens and assist each other in bettering ourselves and our lives?

Two years ago, I had no connection to the prison world and little to no knowledge about the term modern day slavery that stands for the mass incarceration we see today. I knew there was something wrong with how we shunned and blamed prisoners, and how we failed to see that they are more than this label. Building this issue, I saw what I knew was the truth, the truth of striving toward a better future, even with uneven odds, honoring our humanity. The incarcerated men and women who submitted art, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have expressed their individuality, their resilience, their dreams, their hopes, and their creativity, in pieces so intimate that you can feel the emotion they evoke in their brush strokes and words. These contributors are writers and artists I admire and learn from as a fellow writer.

The selections in Issue 3 by prisoners, prison volunteers, family, friends, and prison staff exemplify the awareness and empathy that *Iron City Magazine* wants to share with the world. A world that is evolving and has the ability to make conscious decisions change in our society. These creative pieces break down preconceived barriers of the label “prisoner” and let others see who these individuals are in their own eyes and in the eyes of people who see these individuals as more than their number, who have worked with them, educated them, inspired them, encouraged them, and learned from them. This issue to me is about moving forward and not giving in to the image an uninformed world might have of them.

Here is Issue 3.

All Best,  
Jacqueline Aguilar  
Managing Editor  
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# The Forgotten Ones

*Lindsey Saya, Arizona*

We are the forgotten ones,  
the lost ones,  
the broken hearted ones,  
the all or nothing ones,  
the I coulda' been something ones,

We are the dangerous ones,  
the full of ANGER ones,  
the I AINT PLAYIN' ones,  
the damaged ones,  
the savage ones,  
    the DIE for my HOMIE ones,  
    the DIE for a Forty ones.

We are the feared ones,  
the too filthy for you to come near ones,  
the guilty ones,  
the derelict ones,  
the I've forgotten what it's like to care ones.

We are the UGLY ones,  
the shameful ones,  
the hated ones,  
the damn right I'm HATEFUL ones.

we are the lonely ones,  
the "if only" ones,  
the too late to be sorry ones,

we are the haunted ones,  
the make it stop ones.

we are the unforgiven ones,  
the i would give a pound of flesh ones,  
the all that's left is death ones,  
the i've spent my breath ones.

we are the forgotten ones.



The King of My Heart  
*Virgi V., Arizona*

## The Black Crow's Soul

*Lindsey Saya, Arizona*

What does the black crow know  
of heart and soul

What sadness hides behind  
those lonely, feathered eyes

What damaged storm churns  
inside his heart  
to make him cry  
To whom does he call when he caws  
or is it

a grieving song of immortal loss

How strange  
that for the black crow  
the sky grows grey

his ebony pain  
owns the day

His onyx beak and midnight eyes  
a somber madness  
in disguise

A fragile spirit  
just as mine



## Gentle Repose

*Lindsey Saya, Arizona*

Tenderly,  
I consoled my soul.

Whose breath, a wisp, a mist  
of goodbye-agony.

In its eyes, a prison break, a thousand  
life-clinging memories escaped.

Whose voice, a quivering  
“forget me not” lament, like a gentle, floating wind.  
It sings a requiem.

“Hush.  
Speaking is for the living and life has left you.  
Hush.”

I soothed my soul with syrupy words.  
“Sleep and die and rest.  
Farewell, Farewell  
to thistled flesh.  
Farewell to sadness, farewell to fickle love.  
Hush.”

In my arms I felt  
its fleeting heart;  
its frigid fires in its heart  
lie quiet.

## Ever Growing Ravenous

*Carolyn Ashby, Utah*

I always run toward the sounds of shouting,  
metal crunching and glass shattering.

My mother wondered aloud where she went wrong.  
She thought one day she would find me  
in a body bag or worse,  
missing.

I'd be lost. My bones, lonely,  
bleached by the unyielding sun.

\*

I hate hospitals, morgues and funeral homes,  
yet I am always the first to arrive.

My mother requested my company as her  
pulse weakened in her final days, putting out  
the quiet gift she feared. It was an eye-  
opening new world where smoke and mirrors  
dissipated unceasingly.

\*

In the year after she blew with the wind and  
floated and sank in her most private rivers,

I attended six wakes.  
We are all aware of the charade.

Still, the cans on the shelf are straightened  
in hopes of changing the flavor of the contents.

\*

To fear death is a waste of energy, death is  
inevitable. She was terrified of her promised  
hell while I looked forward to the day

the pulse in my neck would fade.

What I didn't see happening—

a purposeful disorganization in the kitchen,  
produce unkept and kept,

more flavor to the unsalted and a  
stronger desire

to live.

---

## The Edge

*Jimmy Ray O'Kelley, Sr., New Mexico*

Way, down, deep in a valley,  
There's a river rising on its banks,  
Hidden where very few have ever seen.  
Its neighbors don't recognize the place.  
The storms blow cold November rain,  
Urging the river to rage and swell,  
Yet the dam remains.  
I said yet the dam remains!  
The fuckin' dam remains!!  
Water continues in a prison cell,  
Trying to drive its occupant insane.  
Yet my resources remain.  
I said my resources remain!!  
My...resources...remain!!!

## The Fight

*Jimmy Ray O'Kelley, Sr., New Mexico*

I fight for those silenced by sadists,  
who strip us and put us in stripes.  
I fight for the fathers of sons who hate us  
and don't know justice flows in thin pipes.  
I fight for the captive in holes  
who starve for a deep breath.  
I fight for the lost souls  
who feel like death is more than what's left.  
I fight for cold, shattered hearts  
who lost love a long time ago.  
I fight for rare, fresh starters  
who are stranded on a dark road.  
I fight 'cuz a man without fight  
is as dead as a winter night.  
I fight 'cuz surrender is death  
in a grave limitless in depth.  
I fight out of rage not fear  
And for all who died in here.

---

## Orange

*Ashley Graan, Arizona*

Don't you look down on me  
What makes you so much better  
That I walk with a burden and  
You're light as a feather  
I am more than the color you  
See.

Doomed since I signed my plea  
In this place you have me tethered  
Just trying to make it through this  
Stormy weather.  
Dreaming of the day they turn the key.

Time is a thorn in my side  
Time slowly fades  
Time to think

So I swallow my pride  
Rehabilitate myself these days  
Soon from life I will drink.

## Light Through the Clouds

*Ashley Graan, Arizona*

Feels like I am walking in a  
dream.

Learning that things are not what they  
seem.

Deciphering riddles, secrets unfiddled  
Trying to grasp the truth, like steam.

To find what's real we search

The way a bird darts looking to perch

Something we can feel, something solid,  
whole and real.

Some foundation to stand on, never sinking  
down like sand.

To truly open our heart, mind and  
soul.

Open our heart to the love that  
enfolds.

Open our mind to the wisdom that's  
told.

Open our soul to the potter who  
molds.

The one and only, our trust he  
holds.

The light we will finally see.

Like a beacon at a stormy sea.

Peace we will finally find, like a mist that  
clears our mind.

Eternity we will inherit, if we  
believe in the CROSS and bear it.

# A Christian Soldier Not a Street Thug

*The Misfit, New Mexico*

(Intro)

What am I? –

I'm no thug, and not slangin' any drug.

I'm no thug, and not dodgin' a bullet slug.

I'm no thug, and my grave I've not dug.

Thanks to Nazarene, one more day I am seeing.

(Verse One)

I am a Christian Soldier.

Unlike I was in the past because of  
the Lord, who is so vast.

Psalm 23, the Lord tells me

That he's got pride, so wit' him

I choose to simply ride.

My style is that I file-n-file

In order, in everythin' that I do,

in this religion I grew.

Not in the streets, that place just cheats.

With no great certain upshot, I got

a better entity, wit' Nazarene my deity.

We slangin' no dope, but merely love and  
hope.

We ain't hangin' wit' no street clique, not wit'

Lucifer who's so sick.

I do it for Christ.

(Hook)

I'm no thug, and not slangin' a drug.

I'm no thug, and dodgin' a bullet slug.

I'm no thug, and my grave I've not dug.

Thanks to Nazarene, one more day I am seeing.

(Verse Two)

I soar, through my tour.

The way that I should, the way that  
is good.



I won't back away or go back on my  
word, for that life that's absurd.  
The soldiers are sheep in a flock, the  
thugs are goats who just mock.  
I'm a soldier each week, I am a soldier  
who's not weak.  
I found my new aim, and it's this great  
name.  
That I transmit, no, not The Misfit  
though I use it because as a Christian  
I'm unlike others who  
spit.  
No drug do I brag, or carry a rag.  
I do it for Christ.

(Hook)

I'm no thug, and not slangin' a drug.  
I'm no thug, and dodgin' a bullet slug.  
I'm no thug, and my grave I've not dug.  
Thanks to Nazarene, one more day I am seeing.

(Verse Three)

I no longer will drift, or shift.  
Back to that classification, a true  
degradation.  
I lived that particular, but now I live  
a dissimilar.  
That past wasn't wit' a set, but yes  
it was a net.  
Wit' error after error, that terror.  
How I almost expired, I  
got so tired.  
But now I muster, and not for a  
buster, who's a buster.  
Yeah, the devil, against him I'm a rebel  
wit' a mission, so listen  
to me, become a draftee  
for Christ, and let's commit a great  
heist.

And modify the evil ones away, day  
after day.  
Let's do it for Christ.

(Hook)

I'm no thug, and not slingin' a drug.  
I'm no thug, and dodgin' a bullet slug.  
I'm no thug, and my grave I've not dug.  
Thanks to Nazarene, one more day I am seeing.  
Yo! I'm no thug-g-g-g-g-g.

(No Outro)



## Ambiguity of the Profane

*Jim Haboush, Arizona*

Pen and Colored Pencil, 2014

## By Design

*R.C. Fox, Alabama*

As I look at people,  
Especially at myself, I wonder,  
What makes us human?  
What makes us like nothing else?  
Why do we go through the things we do?  
What could this process be?

Maybe it's the making of a sword.  
Can I compare its creation to me?  
Each can go on offense,  
Be worthy to defend.  
Both can be blunt or sharp,  
Magic in the wielder's hand.  
Depending on the swordsmith,  
They can even be works of art.

There has to be more to it.  
This must be just the start.

To reach their full potential,  
They must go through many things.  
At times even great unpleasantness,  
In temper, balance, and strength.

Yet, unlike the sword,  
We willingly choose our craftsman.  
Buddha, Allah, Christ,  
Ourselves, Money, Fame.  
It could be all that we see in life.  
Any number of things.

That's the fulfilling beauty of it.  
The sad tragic curse of it.  
The disorientation.  
The exhilaration.  
The mind numbing pain of it.

Us being the ones to choose.  
It's what ultimately defines us all.  
Yes in the end, it's us alone.  
The ones that made the call.

## Hers Is a Haunt I Know

*Jimmy M., Arizona*

There is a darkness that follows me  
And breathes a fog into my vision  
And hangs itself around my neck,  
Like icicles dangling dangerously  
On the trees of Moscow.

*Maybe it is her death*

A stalking thing,  
All emptiness seeking meaning.  
Like something within itself  
And falling.

Or perhaps it is the *guilt* of her death  
That haunts unmercifully,  
And speaks to me through memory  
Of autumn leaves  
Which are the shape of her eyes,  
And smell of wet dirt lingering.

But why be subtle?  
Let me not delay the truth  
And call it what it was: *MURDER!*  
Pure and simple,

*In manifest lingua.*

*Maybe it is her death*

An autumn that will never  
Be the same again,  
But like a lucid dream instead.  
And she is a whisper of 1990.  
Speaking an inside Knowledge  
That remembering was always meant for me—  
That *that* November and all of its rain

Would turn to darkness following.

Her fare on the davenport, sleeping.  
But open, open as open caskets  
That see, and are still peering—  
Holding me to that spot:  
That killing scene.

*But wait!*

Though I am prey to the nuances  
That deal for the dead.  
I beg. *Plead. PLEASE!*  
A small respite? A simple lull?

Yes, it is her death—

A haunt I know.



Ms. Weed

*Virgarrett Becenti, New Mexico*

Ballpoint Pen on Paper, 2017



## Broken Bird

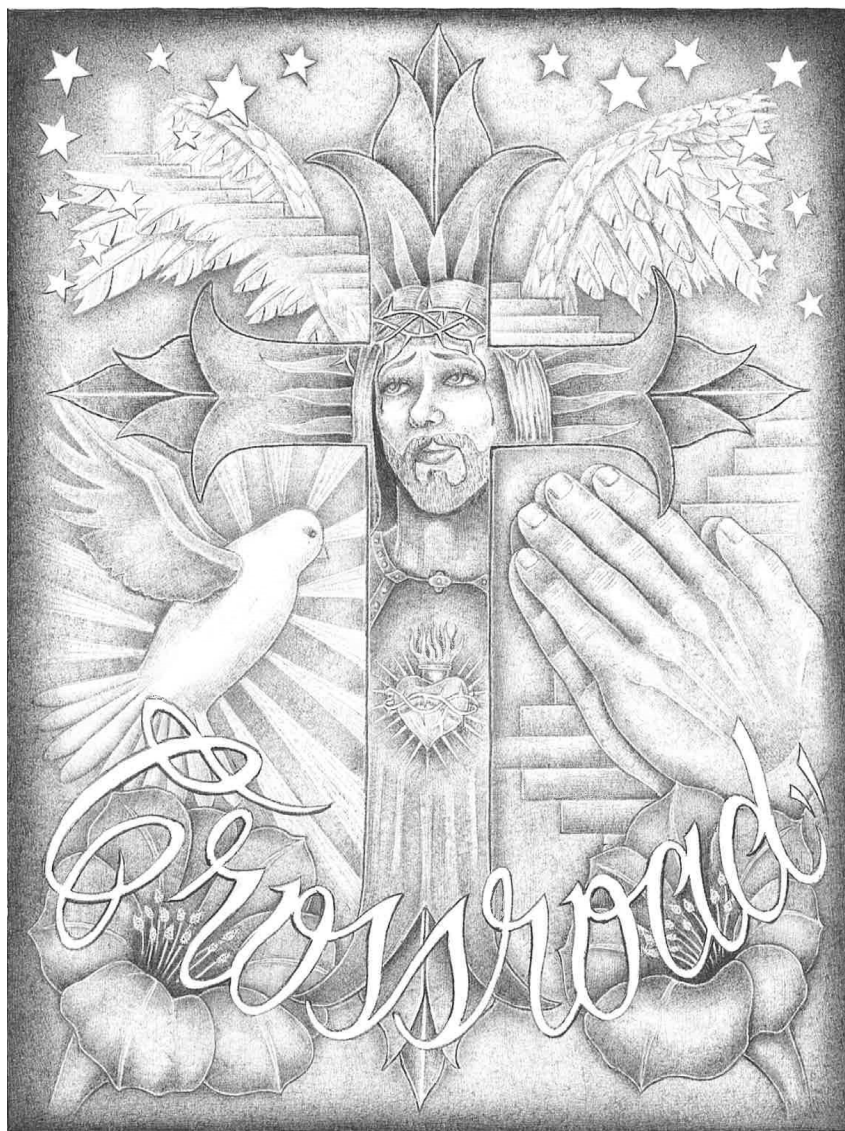
*Steve Albrecht, New Mexico*

I'm just a bird with a broken wing.  
I am not real smart, but I can sing.  
I live alone in a prison cell.  
And I spend my time in a rage.  
One day, they let me out of my cage,  
but because I could not fly like other birds,  
I fell again to the gutter like a rock.  
The cage was my home.  
And there I could get along.  
There they would take care of me.  
Even though I was a misfit and a degenerate.  
But when that day came and they let me go,  
I became a handicap with no home  
And no authority to care for me.  
A bird with a broken wing is a terrible thing:  
nor she nor he can fly on their own.  
Neither can they follow the other birds home.  
They can survive in a cage, but try as they might,  
out in the free world they can never advance.  
That is, unless they can find the love and support of a caring soul.  
Someone who understands just what it is like to be  
a broken toy. No hope for happiness.  
No love or joy. Only a desire to stay alive.  
Perhaps if the broken birds find each other  
They will find compassion and harmony  
in this world gone astray.  
Because on the ground they will have to stay.  
Birds with broken wings.

## The Dying Song

*Steve Albrecht, New Mexico*

Where will heaven set me free?  
Since it is death, that is my destiny.  
Will there be any gods to call me home?  
How will it be? When I go to that  
place where no sun shines through.  
Life's despair, the fifth dimension and  
the halls of hollow, the sounds of  
color have brought me down. Now that  
life has no meaning.  
I feel disgusted with being sorry.  
Life, life. I wonder where I've been.  
Has this all been just a dream?  
No one answers and nobody cares.  
This thing I feel is true despair.  
Please, please, don't pray for me.  
I found my calling. It's in wretchedness.  
Depression and loneliness are writing this poem.  
The dark oblivion is my paradise.  
It's the place where creativity inspires me.  
It gives me insight of what could be.  
If I just let life go, then there'll be  
no one to bother me. I'll be free to  
travel the cosmos for all eternity.  
So I'll ask you again, my friends.  
Is this all just a dream? If it is,  
please don't wake me because I am almost  
home.



## See You There

*Virgarrett Becenti, New Mexico*

Ballpoint Pen on Paper, 2017

## Mom

*Antonio Serna, New Mexico*

In this death row cell  
Lay my thoughts  
On the road to hell... Every night  
2 valium=50 mg... Take me  
To the graveyard... That will embrace me  
I prayed to God above.  
And... Cursed the devil below  
I'll be executed in December  
I hope it snows... I'm gonna cross  
A long shadowed tunnel  
That bridges... An endless river  
The executioner... Will execute  
I'm sorry, Mom... But, yes... *I* a Killer  
I will be brave... As I enter  
The house of sleep  
Death row... Took my freedom  
But, my heart, *Mom*,  
Is yours to Keep!!!

Note: New Mexico abolished the death penalty in 2009. Mr. Serna references death row as a metaphor. He is not on death row and has not literally killed anyone.

## A Thousand False Angels

*Kenton Warnock, New Mexico*

A thousand dead flowers  
pressed into the dirt.

A thousand new ways  
for the same cuts to hurt.

A thousand strangled dreams  
from a gallows of nooses hung.

Just a chorus of crooked lies  
from a forest of forked tongues.

An orchard of fruit  
lies rotting on the vine.

Ten thousand shining diamonds  
still buried in their mines.

A thousand lost days  
become a lifetime.

A lifetime of dreams  
I turned and left behind.

A lifetime of dreams  
I threw on the ground.

And traded for one more trip  
on the merry-go-round.

But

I saw,

I saw a thousand False Angels  
all in shimmering flight.

Their blinding, bright beauty  
my eyes burned by the sight.

I heard,

I heard a symphony of voices  
all singing that I should die

Their lost, lonely songs  
just another lovely lie.

I felt,

I felt the wind upon my face  
as I soared into the sky

But my wings were cut off  
before I truly learned to fly.

The evenings I spent with angel  
fire singing in my blood

The mornings I awoke  
pulling my face out of the mud.

And all the times I thought  
that this cannot be the way

But the burning pull of the moon  
turned my nights light as day.

And so many ugly numbers from  
the dice that were tossed.

And so many lines I have said  
that I would never cross.

A thousand, a thousand  
a thousand times ten.

A thousand times that  
I swore never again.

A thousand, a thousand  
a thousand times more

While life slips away staring  
at another locked door.





Respecting the Dead  
*Virgarrett Becenti, New Mexico*  
Ballpoint Pen and Paper, 2017



## Steel Chimes

*Angelo Niles, Arizona*

Black veils curl over raven skin  
Void of texture and purpose  
In a color-blind forest of concrete and steel.  
Sonic echoes rumble over eons;  
Bear man sleeps, robs my nocturnal  
Silence.  
Windsongs drowned by leaky faucets;  
Leak, leak droplets  
Of a lifetime ago—  
An old man confined to a barbed-wire porch.  
If I sit long enough  
Generations go by in a mere blink.  
Tears fall from sightless eyes  
Empty yet beholding vast nebulae  
Yawning in splendor and mystery.  
Dawn sprawls over desert sky shadows  
In promise of sunlit revelry and toil  
And yes,  
Slumber in a silent symphony  
Of steel chimes.

## Still Life

*Angelo Niles, Arizona*

A castaway marooned  
On an empty, still oasis.  
Moonbeams cast against brass leaves,  
An iron resolve unruled by wind.

An ancient dirge haunts the silence  
As I wander like a bedouin  
Through days turned to years—  
And decades to hours in a cell.

Like a photo confined to a single frame  
Of time, I sit on a gypsum ledge  
Of fear and desire  
Still waiting for yesterday.

The still night brooks no escape  
As I chase phantom shadows  
In search of refuge,  
Any oasis but here.

Like a steel sky that spills no rain  
Over a desert plateau,  
This frozen portrait of a man  
Etched in still life.

## Tormented

*Justin T. McDivitt, Arizona*

In the darkness the mind searches for peaceful sleep  
Tormented by the horrific images the subconscious keeps  
The soul wails out in ear piercing, painful screams  
Though none can hear as they are trapped in the realm of dreams  
You run without movement or chance for escape  
For this nightmare comes on without an attached dreamscape  
As your inner demons begin to scratch and tear  
Holes are torn through which you fall into in despair  
Your brain seizes and attempts to shut down  
For fear of that which may be found  
A search for your happiness begins in your mind's attempt to make the nightmare end  
However before this can be brought forth the Torment begins again



**Astral Woman**  
*Jim Haboush, Arizona*  
Pen and Colored Pencil, 2003

## High Beams

*Tyler Arnold, Arizona*

I got lost in space and time  
The easy way I erased my mind  
It's a clear cut case of grace divine  
Make no mistakes, it is fate designed  
I faced the crimes and my aches defined  
I thought I would find you anyplace but mine

You're the part of me that has guided my path  
When I finally realized the right questions to ask  
With you and me together at last  
The future's so bright it lights up the past

---

## The Looking

*Kevin D. Sawyer, California*

Looking out, I see an ocean  
Over a distant horizon  
Looking east  
Across the Atlantic  
Searching  
For Atlantis: A place I came from  
Home  
Africa  
It's where I – meaning my people – was taken from  
And I'm lost like the rest of us  
Settled in the wilderness  
Of North America

I wonder if those looking west  
Think about me, and us  
Across the Middle Passage  
No

We're all alone  
We're trying to still get home  
Separated by 40 decades, 400 years  
And two millenniums

Looking inward, moving on  
Into infinity  
We're all  
The Looking

## Black

*Kevin D. Sawyer, California*

Is there nothing that comes from Black ashes?

Black is beautiful

Amalgam of every hue  
Black is profane too

You see Blacks in prison  
Later blackballed, blacklisted  
By Black marks and Black blemishes  
Black and blue from lawmakers' scrimmages

Other Blacks rise from those ashes  
Black survivors of deadly clashes  
Like the  
Black Panther Party  
Black Liberation Army  
Black Guerilla Family, and  
Victors of the Black Plague

Black  
Defined as everything wrong  
Like Black list  
Black fist  
And Black dawn

Black is beautiful

Say it loud:  
"I'm Black and...  
My life matters."

Black days and Black people  
Led astray by religion under the steeple  
Never learned about Black beauty

Is there nothing that comes from Black ashes?

Black is beautiful

Amalgam of every hue

Black is profane too

You see Blacks in prison

Later blackballed, blacklisted

By Black marks and Black blemishes

Black and blue from lawmakers' scrimmages

Other Blacks rise from those ashes

Black survivors of deadly clashes

Like the

Black Panther Party

Black Liberation Army

Black Guerilla Family, and

Victors of the Black Plague

Black

Defined as everything wrong

Like Black list

Black fist

And Black dawn

Black is beautiful

Say it loud:

"I'm Black and...

My life matters."

Black days and Black people

Led astray by religion under the steeple

Never learned about Black beauty

Or Black Pride

Still

Invisible; out of sight



Blacks rising from ashes  
The Black belt  
Black eyes  
Black jacks  
And Black magic evilness  
Of those painted in Blackface

Forced to survive on the Black market  
Shot down like a Black target  
Bleeding out on the Blacktop

Dare to be Black  
Can hardly bear to be Black

Secretly moving forward  
Reaching for a sword  
Studying a war  
At the Blackboard  
Knowledge sucked into a mind's gravitational field  
Like a Black hole  
A Black soul  
Black as night  
Indestructible like a Black box  
Avoiding unnecessary clashes  
Still rising  
From Black ancestors' ashes

But can't survive  
The FBI's  
'Black Identity Extremists'  
You know  
The new and improved  
COINTELPRO

Here we go  
Again  
Being BLACK

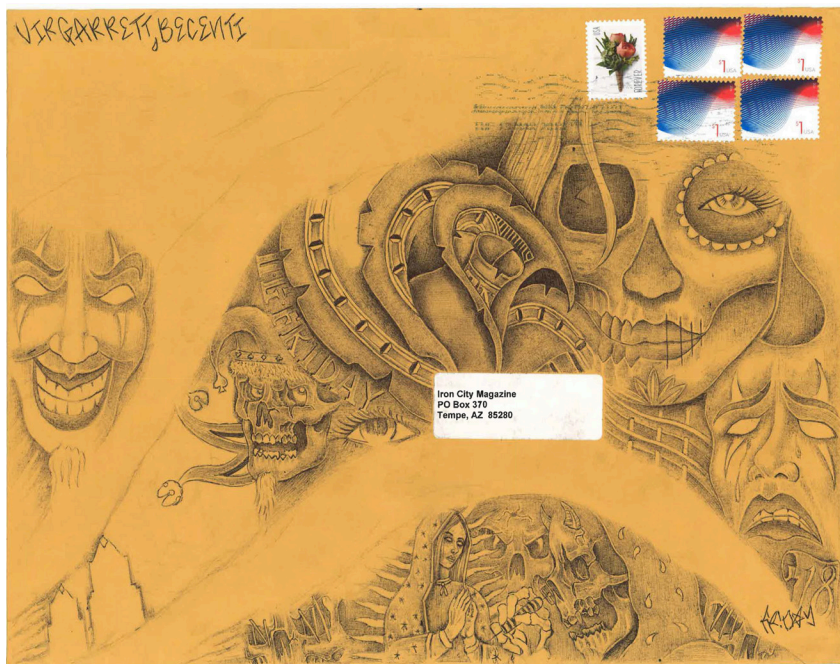


Apple Pie  
*A Greeto, Arizona*  
Water Color, 2018

## Dear America

*Immanuel Swann, West Virginia*

I'm writing you today, a lost voice from prison  
Lost and confused about this country we live in  
And the people that are in it  
How do you claim to be united, when there's so much division  
So much division based on religion  
Based on our culture, our sex, and our pigment  
Oh America, how could you be so selfish and ignorant?  
To allow a man of this nature, guide us with ignorance  
On a path to destruction, I pray for deliverance  
For the colored, for the poor, for the Muslim and the immigrant  
Oh America, Oh America, you have shown your colors  
How many years in your country will my people suffer?  
I shed tears for my brothers, my sisters, and my mothers  
The words that you utter have exploited your cover  
You, America, have proven racism still exists  
The leaders of your nation consist of white supremacists  
There are those who follow them and those who are against  
A war within your people, your country's at risk  
I fear for you, America, but I pray that I am wrong  
Sincerely, yours truly, Immanuel Swann



## Iron City Envelope

*Virgarrett Becenti, New Mexico*

Ballpoint Pen on Manilla Paper, 2018

## Untitled

*Immanuel Swann, West Virginia*

Day after day  
Week after week  
Month after month  
Black lives are being taken  
Igniting these feelings of anger and frustration  
They say...that police aren't racist  
That there's no prejudice and that there's no discrimination  
Yes... these feelings exceed far past hatred  
Because every time I close my eyes I see those young dark faces  
Those Trayvon Martins and those Freddie Gray cases  
From Ferguson Missouri to Oakland's Fruitvale Station  
We fall victim to this system each and every day  
Whether it's 30 years in prison or an eternity in the grave  
Are we slaves?  
Yes! Only dressed in invisible chains  
And these words I speak are concealed with rage  
They are filled with pain and triggered by hate  
Because we fought for our freedom yet we're still enslaved  
I ask... when will the time come for us to stand together?  
Because our lives matter now more than ever  
And these words I speak are only words of inspiration  
An effort to inspire myself, my people, and my nation



## Neck Beauty Cam-Millionaire

*A Greeto, Arizona*

Water Color, 2018

## Me Time

*Shay Steward, Arizona*

If I could be anywhere right now,  
I'd be at home,  
Doing nothing.  
Every day is the most important day of the year,  
Each rising another opportunity for victory,  
Even though I'm being incinerated in orange.  
Once, I experienced fireworks,  
Milwaukee 1980.  
I'd be lying if I said my world is a symphony of love,  
Rhythmic patterns of color and joy,  
Standing united for a cause.  
Sometimes I wish I could just  
Up and fly away, though I'm afraid of birds.  
Maybe it's that I miss love and affection,  
*Ich liebe dich,*  
That explicit and mathematical love.  
I close my eyes and quiet my mind,  
Realizing I'm closer to myself than anyone  
else, because I know me best,

No offense.



## How to Clean a Mess

*James Daniel Alred, Alabama*

Midsummer and nothing to do?  
Out of school, off work, or retired?  
Well find a friend, grab some poles, afternoon is cue

Tackle box, crickets, poles, ice in the cooler; check  
Drinks, chips, and gas up the fourwheeler  
Don't forget the sunblock for your neck

Make it to the river or honey hole around three  
You'll have plenty of time for catching  
Quickly unwind that pole with youthful glee

Hooked cricket disappears beneath the whirling eddy  
Look! The bobber begins bouncing before your eyes  
Shout to your friend, "Get the cooler ready!"

A few more hours go by and night has come  
The cooler's as full as a tick: a mess of fresh bluegills  
Lonely firefly, first stars, and sounds of summer night hum

Once back home, the responsibility sets in  
You have to clean the mess  
The excitement gone, and work begins

Porch lights on, an old picnic table, a water hose; check  
Five gallon gut bucket, a spoon, and knife  
Clean bowl for cleaned fish, and mosquitoes buzz your neck

Plunge your hand into the ice, and grab a bluegill  
That slick, smelly swimmer shall never swim again  
A cold, stiff fish which cannot feel

Lone fish on the table, you pick up your spoon  
Starting at the tail, using the spoon's curve  
Flake off the scales that shine like the moon

Stop scaling at the gills, flip the fish over, get the other side



When the scales are all gone  
You are left with the soft fish hide

Carefully pick up your knife, it is time to cut  
The first thing to get rid of?  
Of course, it is the fish butt

Now make an incision from the missing butt  
All the way to the fish jaw  
Giving you access to the bluegill's gut

Removing innards with fingers, toss them into the bucket as waste  
Grab your knife again, but it could be slippery  
So do not snatch it up in haste

The final cut traces around the fish gill  
Cutting to remove the fish head  
It isn't too far from becoming a fish meal

Rinse the fish off with the water hose  
No scales, no butt, no guts, no head  
Yes, this is still that fish from the cooler you chose

One cleaned fish into the bowl, thoughts of the fish fry  
But the cooler, with the rest of the uncleaned mess  
Will not leave your eye.

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## Lucky Charm Girl

*Waliyy Khalil Rasheed Khusú Blackwell, Alabama*

(V1) You've been here through this long and epic battle  
You've been here to encourage me along  
As I drift through these lonely darkened shadows  
Your face illuminates my mind  
And keeps me in the fight

(C) You're a lucky charm girl  
You have my back no matter what they say  
You're a lucky charm girl  
When it's me against the world you're here to stay  
You're a lucky charm girl  
Ohhh you're my lucky charm girl (fade)

(V2) When I'm lost you're my beacon in the dark  
You lead me with the beating of your heart  
As I fight with the demons that attack me  
Your love keeps me on the mark  
And brings me from the dark

(C) You're a lucky charm girl  
You have my back no matter what they say  
You're a lucky charm girl  
When it's me against the world you're here to stay  
You're a lucky charm girl  
Ohhh you're my lucky charm girl (fade)

(V3) I gotta thank you for keeping me in line  
And believing when the odds aren't even mine  
As I face this life that I've been given  
Our memories are all that's on my mind  
I'm here with you tonight

(C) You're a lucky charm girl  
You have my back no matter what they say  
You're a lucky charm girl  
When it's me against the world you're here to stay  
You're a lucky charm girl  
Ohhh you're my lucky charm girl (fade)

## The Prayer

*Colley Lamar Ingram, New Mexico*

O Heavenly Father, our world has been swallowed  
by evil.

Demons have blurred what we think and what we  
believe in.

So I'm screaming,  
asking him,

Why, Father, do you allow us to fall further,  
Satan to grow stronger,

Take our lives, our pride, and guide us away from  
the light?

I just don't understand it.

Children dying can't be a part of your  
planning,

so I'm asking and demanding,

Why should I follow your commandments  
when I feel so damn abandoned, stranded,  
and taken for granted by a devil you put  
on this planet?

So will God understand me,  
still ignore me,  
scorn me,

or will he listen to my story the day he  
stands before me?

Because on the day that I kneel before him,  
I'll be sweating,  
crying,

trying to explain my sins,  
justifying the time I've spent,  
out of control,

slowly losing my soul,  
killing myself,

now dreading hell though I'm asking for help  
and I'm begging him,

Father, please forgive me for I have sinned!

2018

*Cristobal "Cris" Bazan, Texas*

Scandal after scandal getting exposed  
Some men resign and the others refuse  
Spewing forth their beautiful, two-faced prose,  
But in life, win or lose, we all must choose

Hate continues to trump the right with might  
I see no difference with the separatists  
Inbreeding will not empower the white  
We must challenge the supremacists

The great divide continues to expand  
It affects us all regardless of race  
The rich get richer and the poor be damned  
The American dream I will still chase

One can only hope for a better scene  
People, welcome to 2018

## My Glass Throat

*Joy Adams, Utah*

I feel like my throat is full,  
of glass.  
It's sharp, and as I try  
to swallow  
it cuts my throat so deep  
I want it out. If I try  
to cough, it will also cut  
me. I must keep my  
breath shallow, breathing  
through my nose, so I can  
survive. If I stay completely  
still, for a

very

very

very

long time, I can let the glass  
in my throat fossilize, and become  
part of my voice. My new  
throat will produce words like  
diamonds about the pain it has  
endured. It once was shredded into  
nothing, but a bloody  
heap of gore... and mistakes.

---

## Then and Now

*Brian Roberts, Florida*

Then I was going some place.  
I had a family, rent, a car note to pay.

Soon I put some pebbles in the road—  
More like a giant boulder.  
Now the obstructions bewilder me.

## An Open Letter to the World

*Matthew Feeney, Minnesota*

I once knew you  
    Lived in you  
        Was a part of you.  
Then I broke your rules  
    Fingers pointed  
        Tag... I'm it.  
Treated like Cancer  
    A tumor  
        To be removed.  
Now I'm in prison  
    Isolated  
        Cut off.  
But I'm learning  
    Growing  
        And waiting.  
'Til the day  
    I return  
        To your unlovin' arms.

## The Path Paved to Neptune

*Cassandra Johnston, Missouri*

At the bottom of the totem pole are those with few ambitions, even lower expectations, so insignificant no one but no one acknowledges their existence.

However, there are a few who've reached Neptune.

And they started out waddling in the dirt, nursing the hurt from their last dumb fuck mission, which sent them spiraling down.

So I am pondering to myself, "Is the climb really worth it?"

After all, at the bottom there's nowhere else to fall.

But it's not the fall, for I've fallen many times before. So much

So I've doubted Neptune to truly be my destiny,

"Maybe I'm just a crawfish with big dreams..."

Nevertheless, once again, I've devised a plan to reach the Apex.

Thinking, there must be some defect in my characteristics.

"Yeah. Like a bullheaded, stubbornness. Glutton for pain."

Still, day in, day out, I grind. Through the blood, I grind.

Through the sweat, I grind, through the tears. I sacrifice.

"This may be my niche," so I rise.

But the higher up you go, the more people start to notice you.

Wanting to coattail and ankle their way up with you.

Some even look like those who turned the other way when you asked them for a boost.

Still, I let 'em along for the ride.

Then, before I realize what's happening,

"My handle, I'm loving it!"

And here I go, back in the dirt again.

Alone, of course, because everyone down here are just opportunists, with smirking eyes that say,

"I knew it..."

So here I sit, nursing the aches of success yet again eluded.

Heeding to my surroundings I begin to understand, that down here, no one really cares who or what you are, so long as you're only wanting to go this far.

I look up. The prognosis is rough. But me, I'm just victorious.

And for the umpteenth time, I pull myself up, preparing for the climb, all over again.

The wiser, sure enough. Uncertain of my resilience because it



always seems I'm leaving behind pieces of me; and the higher  
I go, the more of a distraction to myself I tend to be.

So recalling the pain felt last time I went tumbling to the  
Earth, I question,

    "Shouldn't I just cruise at this altitude and accept  
this as my limitlessness?"

    "Absolutely Not!" my subconscious calls back.

    "And Why Not!" I retort,

    "Because just standing up, isn't far enough."

(It's that stubbornness in me).

So I start. Again. My climb.

Inspired by those much higher.

"The Master of my Fate." I climb on.

Then, sure as my star begins to shine, I look back....

    "Uh-Oh. I'm a little too high"

Losing my footing, I've slipped!

Again.

Falling freely. Anticipating the pain approaching, when flesh,

My flesh, greets that all too familiar landing.

Nevertheless, unyielding, I reach.

Finding within me the courage to be brave, I REACH!

And with all my might, catching myself right before

the hardness of the earth pampers my fall...

On the path paved to Neptune, wanting it isn't enough.

Needing it can't make it so.

As a part of me whispers,

    "Let go. And be thankful you don't have that far to fall."

With my strength on E, I'm my only lifeline, drawing in

another breath, I reply,

    "Yeah, but I don't have much further up to go."

## Seeing a Man Cry

*Israel Marquez, New Mexico*

I set my day to ride bikes with my two buddies that lived up the street: Puma, who we nicknamed 'cause he liked mountain lions ever since he'd seen one at the zoo, and Cheeto, who, when younger, had always walked around with Hot Cheeto smears from wiping his hands and mouth with his T-shirt.

I tied my shoelaces tight, threw on my favorite baseball hat, headed down the hallway into the living room, and passed my brother on the sofa who didn't even notice me 'cause he'd been struck by Cupid through the phone. He'd always shout orders like "Bring me more chips" or "Get me another soda" while talking on the phone with his girlfriend, a girl he has never even met who lives two cities away.

Pausing at the kitchen door, I heard my mother pulling out pots and pans. Carrying on, I went outside and spotted my dad working under the hood of the car. I jumped on my bike, pushed up the kickstand, and before I started pedaling, my dad popped his head up from under the hood and with a smile said, "Make sure you look both ways before crossing the streets, okay?"

As I jetted down the street, I shouted, "Alright, I will!"

Me, Puma, and Cheeto met up at our bomb shelter—that's what we'd named our club house. It was an old abandoned shack right next to the railroad tracks that the trains never used. The best thing was that our bomb shelter was surrounded by trees and even had a little duck pond off to the side.

We'd spent all morning riding trails that we made ourselves. When we stopped to take a break so Cheeto could catch his breath, Puma asked, "Does your dad always work on that car?"

"Yup," I said. "My mom says that dad is a war vet and used to work on tanks and planes because he loves metal. I guess that's why he likes working on his car."

"Your dad sounds tough as metal," Puma said. Before I could let out a word, Cheeto stood up and said, "It's too hot right now. Let's meet up tomorrow after three." Puma and I agreed with him: it felt like a sauna. We all said, "Okay," and shook hands on it.

I got home and was lured by the smell of fresh baked cookies that filled the house.

Right before I walked into the kitchen, I heard my parents arguing.

Peeking in, I saw that Mom was all covered in flour with her bangs in her face. Dad stood bold, half his shirt unbuttoned and stained with grease. They were talking about the car. I saw them fall quiet and glare at each other. For a minute, I witnessed a cold war. My mother broke the silence. Her storming off made sounds of thunder that echoed in the house. My dad sighed and turned to find me standing there. His only reply was, "She just needs a couple of days to relax, then she'll come back home."

The next day, my father took both me and my brother fishing, even though we weren't any good at it. But it was fun listening to Dad tell stories of when he served. Back home, we ended the evening with shish kabobs on the grill.

After two days, Mom still hadn't called or stopped by for more clothes. Nothing! Dad hadn't shown any type of worry in his face or body, no emotion. He pulled out the wash bucket and soap and began washing the car. Off to the side, me, Puma, and Cheeto threw around the football.

It had come down to the championship game: Cheeto with 20 and Puma with 17. Puma needed a Hail Mary with the pig skin. At that moment, my dad finished waxing his metal stallion, then shouted from the driveway, "Who wants pizza?" With no delay, we all ran and jumped in the car for a night of pizza.

Monsoon's final day came and poured all it had left over the town. Stuck inside, I watched my gecko, Jupiter, eat flies, and then I decided to go get a Coke. On my way through the living room, I saw my dad sitting by the window. He was looking outside, tears running down his face like the raindrops running down the pane.

After seeing my dad, I was so stunned that I forgot to get a straw before heading back to the living room. I sat down next to him and patted him on the back. He looked shipwrecked. "It's okay, Dad. Mom will be home soon," I said. He must have been sitting there for awhile letting his tears stream in silence. He faced me and said, "I know, son. I know she will." He gazed out the window. While wiping away his tears, he added, "I had just washed and waxed that car."

After the rain stopped, my mom walked in with a smile.

## Balance: A Creation Story (Sort Of)

*Michael Lee Wotih'nisa-Moore, Alabama*

At the moment of creation, a voice cried, "Balance!"

"Balance!" in turn, echoed all of creation.

"Each of you," It thundered, "may choose a place in the Great Hoop of Life."

"I will be a trout!" murmured one.

"I will be a bear!" roared another.

And so it went on and on, as each essence came into existence—as each essence came into form.

In the center of the Great Hoop of Life, from soil sprouted a form—a woman with bark-brown eyes and hair and skin the color of the soil she arose from.

"Balance," she whispered.

"Balance," from the four corners of creation, wailed the Four Winds.

"Balance," echoed all of creation.

All around her, the Green-Growing Ones sprouted green grasses to golden grains, each rising and reaching to touch the Earth Mother with its blades or flaxen heads.

Her potter's hand and earthen hair hung down to brush against one and another.

And the Wind breathed, blowing the grasses and grains against her—against each other.

Balance.

She danced around the Circle of Life, singing, "Fur, fin, feather, or leather. Which shall you choose?"

"Fur, fin, feather, or leather?" the Great Hoop of Life chanted.

"Furred, finned, feathered, or leathered?" the Earth Mother echoed back, adding to the mantra of the Great Hoop of Life.

The Winds whistled and all those touched by the North Wind's breath grew heavy coats of fur to keep them warm. Those touched by the breeze of the East Wind, from where the sun rises, they grew feathers, so they could rise like the sun. Those touched by the warm South Wind, their forms grew into leather. And last, those touched by the West Wind, where the sun rests beyond the waters, grew fins. And everywhere the Winds breathed and their directions met, their gifts joined and fused into Balance, and the forms there became the flying

squirrels, bats, mudpuppies, and pigeons.

“Balance,” spoke the Voice of Creation, the Creator.

“Balance!” cried creation, the Furred, Finned, Feathered, and Leathered People of the Great Hoop.

“Balance,” whispered the Earth Mother.

“Balance,” whispered the Winds, which echoed off the distant mountains of each direction.

“Two-legged or four-legged?” she asked of those of the Great Hoop.

“Two-legged or four-legged?” they began to chant. And as the chant moved around the Great Hoop, all those in the Eastern half grew two legs and those in the Western half grew four legs.

“Balance,” breathed the Creator, the Master of Breath.

“Shall you be big, small, tiny, or tall?” the Earth Mother sang. And as she danced around the Great Hoop, the Great Circle of Life, she touched each of the Furred, Finned, Feathered, and Leathered People, moving them until each fit properly in their place in the larger Great Hoop of Life. Her glimmering emerald green and topaz brown eyes touched upon each person of the Great Hoop and a smile bloomed within her heart, for the uniqueness of each of the Furred, Finned, Feathered, and Leathered People did her heart good.

All the Great Hoop was happy, for it did all their hearts good to find their proper places in the Great Hoop of Life. And they all chanted and danced around the Great Hoop. The children of creation and the Earth Mother danced and chanted the song of creation. The Earth Mother noticed that the tiniest moved too slow, so to them she gave the choice of more legs, or wings, or the ability to return to her—to burrow—for she especially cherished the tiniest ones.

And when the Creator looked upon the Great Hoop of Life, a smile grew within Its heart for creation did Its heart good.

“Balance,” groaned the Voice Above All Creation as two essences emerged into creation.

“What are these?” asked the Earth Mother.

“What are they?” asked the Furred, Finned, Feathered, and Leathered People of the Great Hoop of Life.

“Balance,” cried the One Above All And Within All. These two, the First People of their kind, are the only people who can turn away from me and the natural order of creation. Only they can forget their relationship to us and their relationship to the Great Hoop of Life. Only they can turn away from their true nature. Only they can truly become

animals. Because of this, I shall only call them, “The First People.” I do this to remind them of their place in creation, of their relationship to the Great Hoop, and that they, like all of you, are ‘people’ too, and thus not to act like animals. Only they can bring ‘true Balance’ to the Great Hoop of Life by allowing unbalanceness—an anti-balance—to the Hoop!”

“Balance.”



Native  
*R.M., Arizona*

## The Choking Kind

*Rickey A. Bright, Sr., North Carolina*

The children's hospital cafeteria was no place to be at 4:00 a.m., or any other time for that matter. Bloodshot eyes, swollen eyelids, streaked mascara, red noses, wet cheeks, crumpled tissues in trembling hands, all testified of the grief, torment and misery that permeated every square inch of the sterile, cheerless, but brightly lit room.

Fathers and mothers, but mostly mothers, sat alone at the Formica tables, quietly contemplating the unknown. Hope was all that most of the 4:00 a.m. parents had.

Her face was the saddest in the place, Lucas thought, while he watched a young mother slide quarters into the coffee machine. He already knew which button she would push. Each night for the past week, she drank a half cup of black coffee cowgirl style. He wondered whether she drank it for the caffeine, or if she just needed an excuse to step away from the bedside of a sick, possibly terminally ill-child to catch her breath and maintain her sanity. One could only stand the beep of monitors, the trill of alarms, the whirl of pumps, the hum of motors, and the silence of Death stalking the corridors for so long.

Last night had been the exception. The woman had hardly put her coffee down when the PA blurted out the words that made most cafeteria patrons prepare to flee: Code Blue. Her number had followed the code. "Code Blue . . . CCU 19." Like so many others present, he had quickly bowed his head and whispered a silent prayer as she fled the cafeteria, screaming and crying, begging God not to take her only child.

He was surprised to see her again. He figured her child was gone. It was no secret that most codes did not end well. Apparently, the doctors resuscitated her child.

Knowing her child was still alive lifted his own spirit a little, giving him some hope. A tiny ray of sunshine in the deep, dark pit of despair. The woman scanned the cafeteria, looking for a table that would leave her to her thoughts, one preferably near the exit. She then saw a man wave an inviting hand across his table, silently asking her to join him. She decided to take his invitation.

"Thank you," she whispered. She slid the beige, plastic chair out and sat down, trying to remain unobtrusive.

"How is Abigail?" Lucas inquired. He saw a stunned look in her blue eyes at the mention of her little one's name.



"Stable... I think. How do you know my daughter's name?"

"I was here yesterday when you called out her name," he replied, trying to be as gentle as possible. "I said a little prayer for you and your child when you rushed out."

"Thank you so much," she said, appreciating his kindness. It was nice to know that a stranger had prayed for her and Abby.

He didn't try to engage her further, but admired her quiet beauty as she pursed her lips to cool her steaming coffee. He wondered about her daughter's illness, but didn't know if it would be appropriate to ask. Would it be bad manners? Who wrote the rules of etiquette for grieving parents?

She sipped her coffee then asked, "Do you have someone in the hospital, too?"

"My son," he replied. "His appendix ruptured after the ER sent him home. He went into septic shock and has been a pretty sick, little fellow." He paused. "Your daughter?"

She had to swallow her grief before she could answer. "She had a brain tumor. Some cancer I can't even pronounce. They shrank it some with chemo and some more with radiation then performed surgery to get the rest of it. Now, well, now she won't wake up." The dam broke, tears flooded down her cheeks.

Lucas said nothing. What could you say to a distraught mother, a woman who had nearly lost her child to death yesterday, and might still lose her? She probably needed a hug, but he didn't know what would be the right thing to do.

He eyed her trembling hands, hands whose fingers were not adorned with any jewelry whatsoever. He wondered why she didn't have a wedding ring, but wasn't such an ass that he would ask about her love life in the midst of her distress.

"So, are you a pastor or something?" she asked. The man seemed so nice.

"Oh, no," he muttered. "My dad was a preacher. Me? I guess I'm the prodigal son."

They sat quietly for a few moments, each alone with their coffee and despair. The thought came to him that their children were going to be fine.

"Abigail opened her eyes yesterday," she continued, her eyes now fixed on the memory she recalled. "She had this blank stare on her little face, the kind people get when no one's home. It unnerved me so bad

that I didn't know what to do. I said, 'Abby,' but she never responded. A moment later she asked, 'Is it okay if I play with Noah for a while, Mommy?' The woman began sobbing again.

He waited for the tears to stop, waited until she collected herself enough to continue with the story that was obviously important to her.

"I said, 'Who's Noah, sweetie?' Somehow, in my heart, I knew what she was going to say even before I asked. She said, 'My brother.' I almost passed out. Abigail is three years old. There's no way she could've known she had an older brother who died of SIDS at four months old. I had planned to tell her when she was old enough to comprehend, but..."

Now, he saw disbelief and confusion in her exquisitely, beautiful face.

"When Abby coded yesterday, I thought—"

"—but she didn't," he reminded her.

"I know." She nodded, tears spilling down her face. "She's still here...for now."

"Do you want to know what I think?"

"Sure."

"I think your little princess is going to be just fine."

"I hope so."

"My name is Lucas, by the way," he told her, remembering they hadn't introduced themselves.

"Livy," she said, still drying her eyes. "It's short for Olivia."

"Do you want to know what else I think, Livy?" he asked, opening his hand, offering her something tangible to hold.

She placed her hand in his. "What?"

"I think Noah is doing just fine, too."



Oldie But Goodie  
*J. Hoepfner, Arizona*

## Garlic Boy

Jonathan B. Ferrini, California

The screams and cries are loudest at night and aggravate the inmates who encourage the predators and fantasize about the fate of the prey. I chant, “Om Mani Padme Hum,” and peace replaces terror. It’s my final night of being incarcerated at Corcoran State prison for five years.

The tiny plastic mirror above my combination metal sink and toilet reflects the transformation of a slightly built eighteen-year-old into a formidable man with prison tattoos. The tattoo on my forearm reads, “El Chico de Ajo,” which translates as “Garlic Boy.”

\* \* \*

Soon after my incarceration, I visited the prison library and randomly selected *The Teachings of Buddha*. Reading it removed the hatred and vengeance consuming me. I wrote to the Buddhist publisher and thanked them for transforming my life. They forwarded me additional copies and other Buddhist publications. The transformation I found in Buddhism spread throughout the cell block, and I became a revered Buddhism counselor to the hardest of criminals and their jailers.

\* \* \*

It’s daybreak and the Warden escorts me to the bus that will take me home. The only possession I take is a copy of *The Teachings of Buddha*. He hands me a pencil drawing of a family of spiders nestled in their web. The drawing is titled *Peace and Gratitude*. The Warden tells me “Charlie” meditated and gave it to me as a gift. I tell him to sell it and buy Buddhist publications for the library.

Gilroy, California, is a farming community known for growing garlic. Our family lives in a trailer home located downwind from a garlic processing plant and gave my family the permanent stench of garlic. There are two social classes of Latinos who live and work in Gilroy: wealthy landowners tracing their lineage to Spanish land grants and migrant farm workers harvesting their crops. My parents are migrants paying the wealthy landowner rent and a percentage of their crop sales.

\* \* \*

An only child, I was a lonely, quiet, studious kid with dreams of attending college to study agricultural science and one day own our

own farm. My garlic stench made me an outcast teased and bullied by everyone except Andalina, a quiet, studious girl. Andalina, who exchanged loving glances with me in school. Andalina's parents owned a beautiful ranch home on hundreds of acres. A relationship was never possible given our economic differences. I received a postcard from Andalina in prison telling me she had graduated from college and was attending graduate school. I was proud of her but too embarrassed to write back and tell her that in prison I earned my GED.

\* \* \*

My parents often sent me to the only minimarket/gas station in our neighborhood to buy groceries, and I welcomed the errand because they included money for a Slurpee. The owner of the minimarket was Ernesto. He was once a struggling immigrant but saved to open the new minimarket/gas station. He was considered a "Coconut" by Latinos and preferred to go by "Ernie." Ernesto was politically ambitious, a "law and order" businessman with aspirations of running for mayor. His minimarket/gas station had no competition for miles, and he charged monopoly prices.

I entered the minimarket and dashed for the Slurpee machine. I poured a tall Slurpee and grabbed the groceries. The store was empty except for me and Ernesto. As I approached the cash register, a Latino gang entered the store. One gang member stood guard at the entrance. Sensing trouble, I hurried to complete the transaction and get out of the store. As the leader of the gang passed near me, he smelled my garlic stench and stopped. Placing his arm around my shoulders in a firm grip, he said, "You're my garlic boy," then approached the counter with me in tow. He held a gun to Ernesto's head and demanded money. Ernesto opened the register and handed it over, begging, "Please don't kill me!" The gunman turned to me and said, "You stink, man!" He hit me on the back of the head with the butt of the gun. I fell unconscious.

I regained consciousness to find Ernesto standing over me. With bound arms and feet, I was being photographed by the local newspaper. Ernesto had assumed I was a gang member and used the robbery as a photo opportunity for his mayoral run. The thief had dropped the pistol, and Ernesto planted it in my pants. I was arrested and charged with armed robbery. The Public Defender ignored my plea of "wrong place, wrong time," and pressured me to accept a plea deal. I was sentenced to prison and Ernesto was elected mayor.

\* \* \*

The bus I ride home in feels like a prison cell as it crawls up Interstate 5 surrounded by Central Valley farms. I clutch *The Teachings of Buddha* to curb my anxiety. A billboard reads:

Next Services 8 miles  
Ernie's Minimarket and Gas Station

The billboard reignites my hatred and vengeance towards Ernesto, but I hold the book close to my heart and chant, "Om Mani Padme Hum," which calms me. I'll get off the bus at Ernesto's minimarket and buy a bottle of champagne to celebrate our family's reunion and treat myself to a Slurpee, like I dreamed about in prison.

The bus stops in front of the minimarket. I enter and recognize Ernesto behind the counter. I pour a Slurpee and select a bottle of champagne. I approach the register and ask, "Remember me?"

He replies, "You all look alike!" The doors to the minimarket swing open. In the store mirror behind Ernesto, I see the shark-like stare of a meth head quickly approaching the register, determined to rob and likely kill Ernesto. I turn to the meth head and roll up my shirt sleeves, revealing prison "tats" criminals recognize. I give him my prison-eye stare down, the bottle of champagne brandished in my hand like a baton. The meth head stops dead in his tracks saying, "It's cool, man. No hassle from me!" He backs his way out of the store, runs to his car, and speeds off. Ernesto knows he dodged a bullet and holds out his hand to shake mine, "Thank you. How can I repay you?"

I hand him my copy of *The Teachings of Buddha*.

Walking out of the store to reunite with my family, I sip the Slurpee like expensive cognac.

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*Red Fez* and elsewhere

<https://www.redfez.net/fiction/prison-garlic-boy-882>



## Slick Car

*Anonymous, Arizona*



## Stacy's Promise

*Daniel Cox, New Mexico*

"Mom...Dad," Stacy said as she came into the living room. Her parents were relaxing together at the couch watching T.V.

"Yes, dear?" her mother answered, quickly glancing from the screen.

"What's racism?" Stacy asked curiously as she advanced on her parents.

They shifted uncomfortably and looked at each other in confusion. Stacy was only eight years old and this was not a topic they'd expected to have with her. They both slowly turned to face Stacy. Jonathan, her father, switched off the T.V.

"Come sit with us, sweetheart," her mother said as she patted the cushion between herself and Jonathan. Stacy jumped into the empty seat and looked at her mother and father in turn.

"So, what's racism?" she asked again with a sweet innocence in her eyes. Her mother looked at Jonathan for help. Jonathan smiled down at his daughter and said, "Well, it's not a good thing. It's when one person, or group of people, are judged by others because of their race."

Stacy just stared up at her father with a look of confusion filling her face. Jonathan knew he'd have to explain this better.

"Okay, Stacy," her father tried again. "Race is something you are born with and is defined by your parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. These people are called your ancestors." Stacy seemed to be following this explanation, so he continued. "Every human being belongs to a race, which is defined by their ancestors."

"Whats our race, Dad?" Stacy asked with curiosity.

"Well, my ancestors are of Nordic descent and your mother's are mostly Polish. So we are considered Caucasian or White."

"White!? Like the color of our skin?"

"Yes, Stacy. But that's not the only thing that defines race."

Jonathan could feel the conversation getting away from him, so he changed his tactic once again.

"Okay, Stacy. Racism has the word 'race' in it, right?"

Stacy slowly mouthed the word and then vigorously nodded her head in agreement.

"So, if someone forms a negative opinion of another person because of the color of their skin, or for who their ancestors are, then they are



committing acts of racism.” Jonathan looked down at Stacy and asked, “Does that make sense?”

“Not really,” she answered with a shake of her head.

Now, it was Jonathan’s turn to look for help. Amber, his wife, decided to take over.

“Stacy,” she said as her daughter turned to face her.

“Why are you asking?”

“Well, in school today, Miss Johnson was teaching the class about integration and its effects. When someone asked what that meant she said it was the first step our country took to overcome racism. But, I still didn’t understand,” she said feeling ashamed. She looked at her father then back to her mother as she fidgeted in her seat. “Everyone is already so much older than me. I was afraid everyone would laugh at me if I asked her to explain a second time. I was too embarrassed.”

“Okay,” Amber said as she smiled reassuringly at Stacy. “Now I understand. But Stacy, you should never be ashamed or embarrassed to ask a question. You skipped a grade because you are so smart,” she said with a smile. “And, you got so smart by always asking questions, so don’t stop. Okay?” Stacy smiled back at her mom and nodded.

“Now for the racism question. There was a time, actually not so long ago, when people looked down on and treated other people of certain races badly. Our country was split. Kids of different races even had to go to separate schools.”

“But why?” Stacy asked.

“Honestly, dear, that’s a complicated question. People say things like, ‘It was a different time’ or ‘People were raised differently then,’ but those are just excuses people make for their horrible choices. There should be no reason one person hates another because of how they were born. Integration was when they stopped allowing schools to discriminate against children because of their race. Integration also made it legal to allow kids to go to all schools and integrate the races together.”

“So racism isn’t a thing anymore?”

“Sadly, it is,” her father answered. “People still discriminate against others over how they look or things they were born with.”

“But,” Stacy said as she looked at her mom and dad, clearly upset, “that’s not fair!”

“I know, sweetheart. I know,” Jonathan said as he put his hand on Stacy’s head and stroked her soft blonde hair, as if he could brush

away her anger. "But people can be stubborn. Especially when they're wrong. What's important is that you," he touched a finger to her chest, "understand that it's wrong to be that way. While others may only see what makes people different, you can choose to see the things that make us the same. Always get to know someone, who they are, and what they believe before you form opinions about them. Okay?"

"Okay, Dad. I will. I promise," Stacy said with enthusiasm. She got off the couch and hugged her parents.

"Thanks for helping. I feel much better now." With that, she turned and headed back to her room.

Jonathan and Amber were quite proud of how they had handled Stacy's question.

"It's good that Stacy was troubled by racism," Amber said as she looked at Jonathan. "It means we are doing something right. Right?"

Jonathan smiled and closed the distance between them. "Right," he said before kissing her softly. "Plus, this was something we've never really talked to her about. She just knew that it was wrong. That's extra special."

A few weeks went by and Stacy didn't bring up racism again. Then, one day, a new family moved in just down the street from their house. After school the next day, Stacy brought a new friend home with her. When she saw her mom, she quickly introduced the new girl as Dinah.

"Dinah," Amber said happily to the girl. "That's a beautiful name."

"Thank you," the girl replied.

"Mom, Dinah is new to school. She just moved down the street."

"Oh yeah," Amber replied as she looked at Dinah. "We've been meaning to go introduce ourselves to you all. Is it okay with your parents that you're over here?"

"Mhmm," she hummed and nodded her head.

"Well, are you hungry? I was going to fix Stacy a PB and J. I could make you one too."

"Yes, please," Dinah replied. Amber noticed a slight accent but couldn't place it.

The girls followed Amber to the kitchen when Stacy said, "Mom, I can do it." Her voice was filled with pride.

"Okay." Knowing Stacy couldn't reach the peanut butter from the top shelf, Amber grabbed the jar and placed it on the counter.

"So, Dinah," Amber started, "are you two in the same class?"

"Mom..." Stacy said with irritation in her voice.

Amber sometimes forgot that Stacy skipped a grade. Stacy was embarrassed about it most of the time.

Amber watched as Stacy pulled out the jelly. When Stacy headed for the silverware drawer, Amber stepped forward to help.

"Mom, I can do it on my own," she said through clenched teeth.

"Sorry, sorry," Amber said with her hands up. She slowly backed out of the kitchen to give the girls some space. She waited until she heard them giggle and run upstairs before heading back to the kitchen to clean up the mess.

Amber had just finished cleaning up when the doorbell rang. She went to the door and was shocked when she opened it. Standing in the doorway was a woman wearing a burqa. Dark fabric covered her from head to toe with only a small slit for her eyes. Amber didn't know what to say.

The woman broke the silence. "Hello," she said with what Amber believed to be a Middle-Eastern accent.

"Um, hi," Amber answered slowly.

"I saw my daughter got off the bus with who I suppose is your daughter, and I watched them come here."

Amber suddenly realized that this must be her new neighbor, and Dinah must be her daughter. She forced a smile and called for Stacy. Both girls came running down the stairs.

"There you are, Dinah," the woman said from the doorway. "Come, we have much to do today. You can play with your new friend another time."

Amber watched tentatively as Stacy hugged Dinah happily and said her goodbyes.

"We must get together sometime, yes?" the woman said to Amber. "If they are to be friends, we should be too. My name is Alesh."

"Amber," she said with a hand on her chest. She forced another smile. "Yes, I'd like that."

Alesh and Dinah turned to leave as Amber shut the door. She let out a deep breath and peeked through the window to watch the pair walk away. Stacy looked up at her mom curiously, but Amber said nothing and returned to the kitchen.

Later that evening, Stacy could hear raised voices coming from her parents' room.

"Are you sure?" Jonathan said as he faced his wife. He stood on the far side of the large bed that dominated the room.

"Yes, I'm sure, Jonathan," she said in a raised voice. "She came over here covered in a sheet or whatever those people call them! Who else but Muslims wear those?"

"Calm down, Amber. I'm sure it will be fine."

"Fine? How can you say that? You've seen the news. They're terrorists, Jonathan," she screamed. "We have no idea what they're planning. I was terrified. Their little girl was in our house! In Stacy's room for goodness sake!" Amber screamed, shaking.

"Okay, Amber," he said as he crossed the room and wrapped his arms around her. "It'll be okay," he said, trying to comfort her. Jonathan held her as she trembled in his arms. After a minute or so, he let her go and walked to the window, thinking, they could be dangerous. He leaned heavily against the window frame and stared outside. He looked tired. "Of course, you're right, but I'm not sure we can do anything about them being our neighbors." He turned to face his wife. "But, we can keep our distance. We'll tell Stacy to stay away from them too, including their daughter."

Suddenly, Stacy came barging into their room. "No. I won't!" she screamed. "She's my friend!"

Jonathan and Amber were caught off guard by Stacy's dramatic entrance. They realized she must have been listening to their discussion.

"Were you outside the door listening to us?" Jonathan asked with anger in his voice.

Stacy ignored his question and his tone.

"You can't make me stop seeing Dinah," she said as she shook her head. "It's not fair!"

"You hardly know her, Stacy," Amber argued as she went to stand next to Jonathan. "You will do as we say." She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at her daughter with authority.

"But, why?" Stacy screeched as she stomped her feet.

"Because we want you to be safe," Jonathan said, his voice softening. "Those people can be very dangerous."

"You're being racist," she screamed as tears filled her eyes.

Her parents looked as if they'd been slapped. Jonathan slowly shook his head as he tried to comprehend his daughter's words. Finally, he said, "No, Stacy. We're not being racist. It has nothing to do with their race. It's their beliefs and way of thinking that worries us. Their religion,

Stacy. They're Muslims. You may not understand this now, but it's their beliefs that make them dangerous."

Stacy looked at her mother, pleadingly. "But, but... Mom! What about what you said the other day? About excuses? Those sound like excuses, Mom!" Stacy cried as she fought hard to understand her parents' newfound hate and malice.

"This is different, Stacy." Her mother bent down and put a hand on Stacy's shoulder as she spoke. "You have to trust in us. You have to trust that we know what's best. We just want to keep you safe, Stacy."

Stacy jerked away from her mother's touch. "What's their names?" she screamed as she looked defiantly at her parents.

"What?" Jonathan asked, confused.

Stacy stared him straight in the eyes as tears ran down her cheeks. She asked again, "What are their names?" She looked from her mother to her father and continued, "You say they hate us. You say they're dangerous. So, what are their names?"

Her father shook his head and threw up his arms. He was clearly getting frustrated. "I don't know, Stacy. Their names don't matter."

Stacy's eyes grew fiery as she yelled at her father. "How can you know that they hate us? How can you know they're dangerous? You don't even know their names! You made me promise to never make an... o... to make an op..." Stacy clenched her fist and let out a moan as she struggled to find the word she needed.

"Opinion," her mother said to her with sympathy.

Stacy's eyes shot open. "Yes!" she said with relief in her voice.

"Opinion... you said I should never make opinions about people without first getting to know them. But... but... you're doing that now." Her parents stood silently still as Stacy used their own words against them.

"Maybe it's not called racism, but it's still wrong." Stacy stomped her feet angrily and wiped the tears from her eyes. "I made a promise that I'd never do that! And I... I keep my promises!" Her body shook with sobs as she turned and ran from the room.

Jonathan and Amber stood rooted, unable to move or respond. When they finally looked up at each other, they could see shame in the other's eyes.

Jonathan smiled sheepishly. "She really is extra special, isn't she?"



## Dancer

*Robert Supplee, Arizona*

## Sergeant Major Muir Remembers

*Michael Lee Wotih'nisa-Moore, Alabama*

"If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe, adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God?" whispers the sergeant major to no one in particular, as he looks up at the starry sky of his home, Earth.

"Ah, what did you say, Sarge?" asks a quizzical voice from the communications corporal.

"Nothing, just thinking out loud. Remembering a quote by an author named Emerson. It was used for an opening for a story by Isaac Asimov."

"Sarge, you some type of scholar or historian before the Earth Exodus?" asks the medic of the squad as he checks his supplies. The rest of the men begin setting up the outpost.

"No, just an everyday Joe with a wife, wishes, work, and a love for old stories. How about you, ladies. Any of you go to school?"

Silence fills the night.

"One last looksie before we start earning the big-bucks," says Sergeant Major Muir. He then turns his focus back to the tall grass before them.

And night turns to day in a flash.

*The sweetgrass hills of golden summer...*

*Yes, those hills, home! I feel like being home, yes, oh, yes. Home: the scent of fields and approaching rain. It isn't just any moment or summer; it's that summer. Everything is the same: the pasture, the pond, the place I call home...*

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The "Return" as it was called by military geniuses, began eleven hours before. Intelligence, at Lunar Command, reported multiple hyper-drive jump signatures, corresponding to the mass of the alien ships. The reconnaissance mission of Earth was led by the 1st Lunar (now renamed Terran) Expeditionary Force.

The Reentry was bumpy given the light planetary defenses around Kansas City. Casualties were light, and Phase 1 of the operation took less than 30 minutes. The satellite imagery and telemetry acquired through an old weather satellite pinpointed the base of the alien resistance. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. But none of that mattered. None of that mattered to Sergeant Major Muir—what



mattered was the fighting, the whistle of falling projectiles, the pungent odor of expelled shell-casings, the flash of bracers, and the concussion of grenades there on the battlefield. Amidst death, Sergeant Major Muir found life: he had never felt so alive as he did hours ago, on the field of battle, on the edge of death.

The lieutenant, seeking a little fame and glory—a tale to tell of his heroic part—took a platoon out to scout over the next hill, leaving Sergeant Major Muir to oversee the forward outpost's setup. The lieutenant broke the Terran Expeditionary Force up into small groups (ten groups of twelve men): one to hold and set up the outpost and nine to secure the hills around it. The hacked satellite spotted something moving on the Blueridge Hill between the outpost and the city, and so the lieutenant seeking glory took a squad to investigate.

Sergeant Major Muir could have stopped the lieutenant, but what did he care: let the young, beardless officer have his tale to tell. To Sergeant Major Muir, it was that calm before the storm, that space between seconds, that moment before the Shit Hit The Fan, that was as exhilarating as the struggle of life and death. He found a sick pleasure in that moment, in that time of wired-up waiting.

As a child, Muir's father made him box, or rather fight his friends anytime anyone came over to visit. Before the Invasion and the Exodus, he deplored violence. Now, Muir liked fighting. It was useless to deny it. And he didn't try to hide that fact from himself or the men under him. But he didn't dwell on it.

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While the men finish setting up the outpost, Sergeant Major Muir looks back to the stars. He watches the hill that the lieutenant and his men just disappeared over. Anyone or anything could be hiding in the ruins beyond.

*Memories flow and sometimes flood. Memories both beautiful and bright, both dismal and dark. Memories: I buried, destroyed and defiled them. I don't want them to reappear, yet, still here they are, the immaterial is material, right before my eyes. Why? Why is everything so crystal clear? Those summer days soured: a bitter nightmare. It was like dying a thousand little deaths, all the good dying inside; a part of me died, the rest a husk never falling. The rest of my life fast forwards, before me, my retirement from the military, a life (or an unlifer). The total commitment.*

*Yes, the total commitment on the field of battle, locked in a struggle*



*with an enemy—locked in a struggle with death. There is no place for thoughts (for if you think, you die). No place for memories. It had been another life.*

*And it went this way. My first engagement, heart pounding. Adrenaline coursing through my veins. I've never felt more alive. The screams and the adrenaline, the burst, the blast, and the searing heat of the flames.*

*Yes, the searing flames, the blinding flashing—wait—blinding flash and flames. But it is not memory...it's now, it's...*

The whistle of projectiles, odor of spent bullets.

The Assault Transport lights up like a midnight sun. A supernova in the night.

Mere seconds before, the communication relay came to life amidst the sound of reports and buzz of static.

"Right Flank! Base, we're pinned down in an ambush. The lieutenant is down. Oh God!"

And then utter silence. A moment, seconds that extend into minutes, that extend into the darkness, into the stars...

Then, the radar siren sings and the men freeze, looking at one another. The rockets roar in. Men are lying everywhere.

Oh my God—it's me! Below on the ground, born, bleeding—dying! Ah! The pain, the searing heat and...

*..suddenly, I wake up. My heart pounds in my chest. I draw in a ragged breath. Beside me, Sue stirs. Slowly, as not to wake her, I rise to look out the window. I think about what I am and what I could have been. Beyond the stars, men fight, men die, men dream. Is this my dream, or a dream of one of them? I go back to bed and cling to the warm body there. She embraces me. I smile...*

The aliens and their Terran ambushers sort through the burning hull of the Assault Transport. The Terrans quickly dispatch the mortally wounded soldiers. A Terran aims at one—a sergeant—and pauses. The sergeant tries to speak, looks to the stars, and smiles. The ambushers gather around him and then proceed to head back to where they came from. The rear guard casts one last look at the dying man.

Sergeant Major Muir keeps staring at the stars, smiling. Remembering the kingdom of God.

## A Threat of Dubious Proportions

*The Illustrious and Incomparable Ward Allan Yont, the Great,  
Golden Child, Chosen One, Esquine, III and V, and Sir,  
Arizona*

The story I'm about to tell you may seem difficult to believe at first. But I give you my word that every word is true to the last—which is to say that, technically, no one can *prove* that I'm lying.

There's an indigenous creature the dwells among us (humans) that many tend to overlook as being any kind of a threat. Perhaps because of its rather inglorious presence, coupled with our busy work-a-day lives, we've become somewhat anesthetized to the possibilities that lurk within the darkened recesses of its purely duplicitous mind. In fact, many of us see them as being not only docile, but even *domesticated*, which only shows how vulnerable we've let ourselves become, as these beguiling tricksters creep their way closer to a totalitarian reign over all mankind.

Of course, I'm talking about what many good, kind-hearted Americans refer to as the common, bread-pecking *pigeon*—also known by its prison name, “*get the hell outta here, you filthy, good for nothin' fowl.*” Truth is, few know the real truth about them, and even fewer live to tell about it. But for those who do, there's only one name fitting of this terrorist beast... as it has rightfully earned its title as, “*Butcher of the Sky!*”

Now, the reason we don't hear much about these birds in this cynical light is simple indeed, for these veritable monsters have grown an uncanny knack for survival through deception, which can be easily noted by their sheer unstoppable numbers alone. But even more disconcerting is what I've come to notice as their insatiable appetite for simply “doing away” with anyone who speaks ill of their crafty designs. It's as if they've somehow evolved a talent for knowing *exactly* what their enemies are thinking at any given moment.

And I regret having to put all of our lives—yours and mine—at grave risk by merely penning these words. Yet, it has now come to pass that the roguish nature of these raptors has surpassed even the sovereign nature of God, Himself, as they are—even if by none other than my lone account—by far, the deadliest creatures to ever take wing to the blue skies above. The truth can no longer be suppressed.

It should be noted that these monsters are so proficient at the

deeply, as it was, in fact, the *pigeon* that destroyed my village and scattered my people across a barren landscape, leaving them homeless and wanting of food and shelter. Ever since, even as a young, shotgun-wielding lad, I've sought vengeance against the likes of these heartless birds. And it was then that I swore to eventually overtake the entire *pigeon* population *single-handedly*, if need be. But alas, from bird-shot to buck-shot, pistols to slugs, my armament was hardly enough to even knock the dust from what I've now surmised to be their iron-clad plumage.

Beneath their impenetrably shielded bodies lies the crown jewel of their arsenal: a pair of unassuming and sprawling protrusions (cleverly disguised as "*feet*") that are, in fact, two ready sets of razor-sharp, meat-cleaving talons, which are capable of easily ripping a man's limbs from his torso, or even lifting a well-fed baby rhinoceros from the nurturing care of its mother without the effort of even so much as once flapping its wings. I've even witnessed them bending 1-and-5/16-inch steel rods as if they were *1-and-9/32-inch* steel rods!

But that's not all. Their seemingly small, wedge-shaped beaks are designed for one thing, and one thing only... *killing!* And as they attack, they're also well known for spitting a fiery and venomous blood from their eyes. God forbid, should you ever fall victim to their wrath, pray that you're not gripped by the many rows of bone-grinding teeth. But if you do—fall victim, that is—pray even more earnestly for a clean shear, for that limb is but fodder for the maggots and critters of the earth below. *This* is how the *pigeon* has lived up to its title, "*Butcher of the Sky.*"

Somehow, many of us have overlooked and somehow forgotten what these tyrannical birds have done to us in the past, as we succumb, time and time again, to their seemingly harmless and timid demeanor. But don't be fooled, my friends! That's *exactly* what they want you to think. That's how this creature operates. It masterfully lulls its prey into a state of defenselessness just moments before it attacks. Then, **BAM!!!** But by then, it's too late.

Let's not forget that it was a *pigeon* that led the attack on Pearl Harbor, killing thousands of U.S. servicemen. Let's not forget that it was a *pigeon* that sank the Titanic, cleverly towing an iceberg into the path of an otherwise unsinkable ship. Let's not forget that it was a *pigeon* that brought the burning olive branch to the storm-ridden ark that Noah built, burning down over one-third of the vessel (which is why only two

brought the burning olive branch to the storm-ridden ark that Noah built, burning down over one-third of the vessel (which is why only two of each species were preserved, instead of *three*, as Noah had originally intended). And there's even new evidence to support that it was a *pigeon* that assassinated JFK by flying into him in the streets of Dallas, on November 22nd, 1963.

It turns out that this bird is also nothing less than a cunning chameleon from the depths of hell, capable of morphing its impenetrable feathers into any alluring derivative of itself. And it scares me to think that even *I*, in my supreme understanding of these menacing birds, was almost seduced by their subtle charms, only weeks into my arrival, here, at East-Unit.

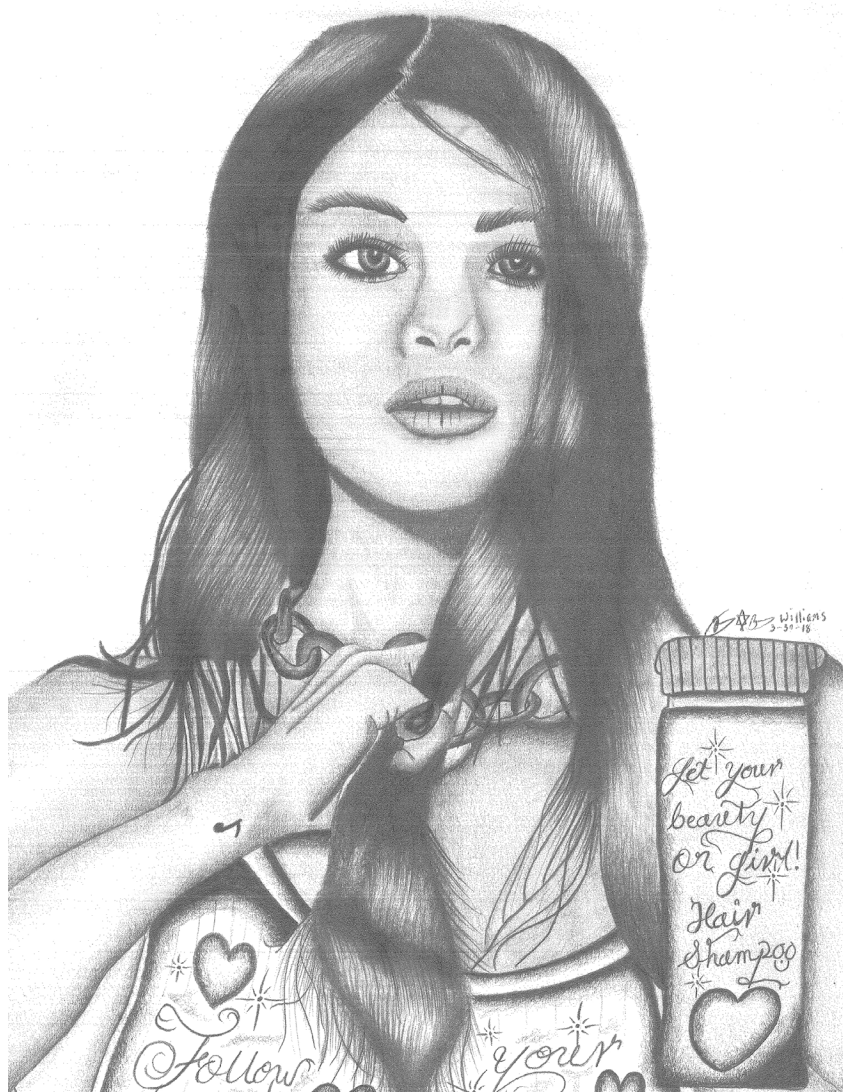
I had just received my store for the week and was headed home when I noticed, perched high upon the crest of the chow-hall roof, that my movements were being monitored by a tatty cluster of tumble-down *pigeons*, who—perhaps emboldened by the generous contributions of discarded bread from a charitable few of the yard population—were now looking to further fatten themselves after their long and arduous yearly migration, from their winter nesting site beneath the swamp-cooler intake on any of the housing-huts on the southern end of the yard, to the unsightly roost they presently enjoyed within the confluence of turd-desiccated imbrications atop the northern end of the kitchen.

Ignoring the pigeons, I became distracted by what *looked* like a small sparrow beckoning my attention, chirping on the fence-line as though it was hungry. I reached into my store sack to open a pack of oatmeal cookies I had just purchased in order to feed the creature. But as I tossed only so much as a meager crumb into the air, I became overtaken by a violent flurry of wings, as the “sparrow” morphed into none other than a turbulent, blood-thirsty swarm of pigeons. Luckily, all they wanted was the rest of the oatmeal cookies. So I was able to escape any type of serious physical injury by merely tossing what remained of the package onto the ground and running—but at the cost of being emotionally scarred for perhaps the rest of my life, as the encounter was, to say the least, rather emasculating. Still, it was then that I was able to note a weakness in the birds’ design.

Interestingly, the oatmeal cookies were so stiffly baked that the pigeons were unable to peck them apart into small enough pieces to eat. After many minutes of watching this unfold, I noticed that some

some of the bigger pieces. And it was then I realized that this was the big break we've been looking for! With *oatmeal cookies*, we can finally win this unfinished war by driving these birds from their homes—our homes—once and for all!! Please join me in this great crusade! **Buy Oatmeal Cookies!!!**

\* This has been a paid advertisement for Granny Lancaster's stiffly baked oatmeal cookies.



Selena Gomez #1 Fan

*J.B. Williams Artwork, Arizona*

## The Morning Call

*Dave Roberts, Arizona*

Four generations make the beach house tight with expectations and realities.

Daniel stirs in his sleeping bag beneath the windows; chill, wet air pours down upon his face as he listens to the sounds of dawn between his brother's snores. A single bird's cry had pierced his dream long before any others took voice; it now continues irregularly, hesitant without further support from the surrounding trees and thickets. Slowly, the others waken, or come to sense the proper movement of time, and they begin to add their own clicks, knocks, and rackets: speaking boldly of sunrise. As the cacophony swells, Daniel seeks but no longer hears the lilting vibrato of that initial call. Perhaps it has ceased for its singer has become disillusioned by the timidity of the others.

A low moan escapes a cousin who surfaces briefly from whatever metaphorical world he wanders. He lifts himself under the blankets and turns without falling off the narrow mattress; the springs of the trundle bed squeak loudly.

How can anyone sleep through all this racket?

Slinking through the rush of sound, a distant frying egg grows nearer—a faucet—a sudden storm—an anonymous monster: the tires of a passing car on the street speeds to the forefront of all the noise and then suddenly drops from existence.

A floorboard creaks in the hall and Daniel fumbles for the sleeping bag's zipper, struggling to bring it down before he hears his Pop's cough with the soft thump of the bathroom door.

Last night, under Pop's direction, he had stood with the hose turned on the garden, drowning the air from the soil to bring the worms up for today's fishing. The ancient man sat in a wicker chair with his lion head cane across his swollen knees and told stories of when Grandpa was young: laughing at when he had climbed a fence and became entangled—how he had shrieked when old Whistler charged before pushing him out. "He still has less sense than a mule!" he teased, calling over his shoulder. Grandpa just shook his head.

He told of Gram's punching a fiddle player and his own dad dancing and singing in saloons, and only Daniel and cousin Evie had been there to hear him talk.



The bathroom door knob pops like the lock on a safe. Pop's slippers shuffle back to the green room and once again the house is still.

More cars now—the light growing from grey to blue—a dog, a horse—and the door pushes in just enough to frame Evie's round face and wild hair. She nods and Daniel knows to get ready. He pulls his jeans over his bathing suit and puts on his tee and sweatshirt. He hears the creaks of Evie descending down the century-old stairs; surely everybody knows they're up by now, yet no one gets up. He steps as quickly as he can over the lumped covers, trying to keep from stepping on any buried arms or feet of his cousins, who are still resting in their sleeping bags.

Down in the kitchen, he finds Evie has already poured two bowls of cereal. They smile; this will be their own adventure.

Thanks to Pop's help the night before, two minutes in the vegetable garden yields over a dozen worms. The worms are dropped into a Styrofoam cup and wedged beneath the tray in the tackle box alongside rusty hooks and broken bobs of faded reds and yellows. Evie carries the fishing pole and the net. She reminds Daniel to keep from bouncing the tackle box as he races ahead. Daniel heeds her warning and slows down as he crosses the street right where the deer had been hit last summer. He remembers it well.

He had been watching cartoons—rabbits and cats rising from the cleaver chops and cannon volley—when the deer had been hit by a car. Daniel had peeked through the window while his mom walked to the kitchen. It had looked like nothing other than a handful of people standing over a lumpy tan towel; he had went back to the floor to watch T.V. The crack of the policeman's pistol was like nothing he had ever heard before.

An unseen fishing trestle clings to the side of the bridge. On summer holidays, young pranksters jump from the ornate balustrade above to its planks, horrifying the tourists cruising slowly by in cars tailgated by power and sailboats. The two cousins find the platform empty, much to their joy, hoping to avoid looking foolish for their lack of experience.

Evie plucks one earthworm after another, trying to spear them onto the barbed metal without stabbing herself.

Over their heads are a hundred reminders never to cast from the trestle: cut nylon strings hang swaying in the ocean breeze from power lines that cross the temperamental waters.



The two take turns holding the reel—pushing down the bail and thumbing the clutch, watching the bait drop and drift with the tide toward the small bay. They hope that, though it is out of sight, the worm still writhes beneath the lead weights and the bright float above.

The styrofoam cup is empty and they have only managed to hook sea lettuce and rockweed. They pull the sleek, broad leaves between their fingers before releasing the seaweed back to the water. Daniel and Evie watch as the algae pirouette and wave and fade away.

The cousins scurry down the rocky path, which is overgrown with tenacious sea oats and wild roses. Sharp lichens and coquina shells crunch beneath their sandaled feet; damsel and dragonflies buzz as they only imagine the overhead electric power lines do.

Past the very edge of the sea, where the smell moves from fetid decay to salty spirit, Evie shows Daniel how to push the flashing, silver minnows toward the waiting net. He leaves her to retrace their steps halfway along the incline and gather a discarded plastic bucket to hold the lively fish.

They step from their sandals and peel away their outside layers before setting out to travel the mile back to their crowded vacation home. They run from shadow to shadow as the tar in the street begins to bubble.

When they step inside the cool kitchen away from the heat of the sun, they smell pancakes, bacon, and coffee. Everyone is laughing—bringing details to the stories they had all heard before.

After washing their hands, the two search for their places amongst Pops, grandpa, grandma, parents, aunts and uncles, cousins and siblings.

A cry and a holler come from Aunt Mary. “What in the world are those fish doing on the stoop?!”

“We’re just gunna keep’em for the day. We’ll bring’em to the beach tomorrow,” Daniel’s says.

“Absolutely not. Bring those things back right now!”

“Do what your aunt says. Breakfast will wait,” Daniel’s mom adds.

Evie carries the container until they’re both hidden behind the six-foot, marbled rock in the grass field. She passes the bucket to Daniel.

“Go ahead. They’re just fish.”

Daniel looks to see no cars are coming. He arcs the water from the pail into what looks like a brief rainbow; the fish fall upon the hot pavement. Evie and Daniel run back to the house and squat below the

windows of the porch, remaining unseen. They count to five hundred under their breath. In the bright sunlight, the minnows jump, slashing like jackknives at the rolling tires. Evie and Daniel go inside.

“That was quick,” says Pops.

“We ran all the way, so we could get breakfast,” Evie lies.

Daniel says he’s too tired to eat and climbs up the creaking stairs to the boys’ room. He lies down on his sleeping bag and cries facing the wall.



Elk

*J. Hoeppe, Arizona*

## Foreigner

*Lindsey Saya, Arizona*

The scarlet word stretched across the modest home, erratic spray-painted lines that screamed fear and unspoken sentiment. Darya stood in her driveway, her car keys still hanging limply in her brown hand. She stared at the word for a long time, how it tore into her small, white house like a giant crimson scar. She knew about scars. They were cruel things: twisted, mangled reminders of how awful life could be.

Darya wanted to be angry, just like she wanted to be angry the day she was spat on. She was riding the city bus for the first time. She remembered how it was pregnant with passengers, how their faces drooped and glistened in the heat. Darya stood there, her black hijab draping along her body, her lonesome eyes hidden behind her niqab. Everyone stared. She felt a hundred eyes digging into her. The bus had stopped, its door squeaking open. Just as Darya stepped onto the curb, she heard a deep, grotesque hiss behind her. And then she felt something slap against the back of her skull. When she turned, she saw a man glowering at her. He was bald and fat, his skin wan and oily. His eyes were deep, raging wells of contempt.

"Go the fuck back home," he barked.

Then before Darya knew what was happening the bus door slid shut, and with the growling of its engine, it was gone. She stood there and felt something moist seep into her scalp. It was only spit, she had told herself.

Now Darya caught her reflection in her car window. Her niqab—a black veil—wrapped around her head. She lingered on her own dark eyes and tanned skin. And she suddenly felt dirty and wished, briefly, to shed herself of these things. But she wasn't angry.

She examined the red graffiti again, her mind slipping back into memory, into uglier days.

She thought of her classroom back home in Afghanistan. She had only sat in that room once. The day had been hazy. Dust-sprinkled beams of light filtered through the window, giving life to that drab, little room of daring girls. They had all joined in laughter, sweet music notes swirling about.

She felt the palpable excitement surging through the air. Nargas, her instructor, stood tall, her hand whisking away, writing long sentences across an ancient chalkboard.

Suddenly, the door crashed open, loud and terrifying, as if the whole world had exploded. Every inch of Darya flinched at that clamor. And the sound of laughter and chalk scraping across a chalkboard died, replaced by the stomp of Taliban boots storming in and the sound of a million thunderous gunshots ripping away at the air and wood and flesh.

Fury. Hate. They had owned the eyes of the Taliban soldier plunging a blade into Darya's clavicle and left her for dead. She had lain on the floor, dying, tasting her own salty tears, feeling the warmth of her own blood. And the screams, the screams burrowed into her ears. She heard them crying, some of them begging, some of them praying. Across the room, Darya saw Nargas rag-dolled across the floor, her blank eyes staring into oblivion. Tables were kicked over, books torn apart, and sheets of paper drifted, sailing sadly, through the air, as if they were the girls' souls separated from their bodies. With their guns and their rules and their hate, they had devastated Darya's school...and her heart.

And while those men occupied themselves with destruction, Darya managed to crawl away. She crawled over still-hot bullet casings and blood stained parchments. No one saw her creep along that floor, except for the eyes of the dead. Those eyes, so many eyes, reached for her, gripping her, as if they were pleading with her not to abandon them.

She crawled out of that classroom, and then painfully lifted her aching, bloody body off the ground, and ran across a hot earth.

Darya thought of the handful of American dollars that her father gave her before he told her to flee. She stood there, peering into his helpless, wet eyes, feeling his heavy, strong arms wrapped around her as she hugged him goodbye.

She remembered how the greedy eyes of the smugglers she found in Iran had gleamed at the sight of the American cash she offered up. The dollars bought her a long, harsh trek through the mountains under an indifferent moon. Her sandaled feet had ached and swelled like red tomatoes. And at night in the mountains, while the wind whispered, she heard the wails of unescorted women being raped by those who had abandoned decency. And she wept with them out of guilt, out of relief—knowing she was one of the lucky ones.

She thought of the other weary travelers amongst her: displaced families, heavy-eyed women and children, lone boys pretending to be

men. They all languished amongst the rocks and stone. Who knows what they had left behind, what they had abandoned, or what terrors still sought them out. And who knows what they were in search of, what unattainable hope they thought to find in the world.

The hours were countless, and when enough of them had been lost under that moon and that sun, the mountains were behind her. And once again she faced another land that was not her own.

The smugglers, Darya remembered, had crammed her and eight other refugees into a white shuttle van; they traveled in silence along that daunting road through Turkey. She thought of the three shuttle vans full of refugees ahead of her that had been pulled over. She thought of how those unfortunate souls had been wrenched away and thrown to the sunbaked floor, AK-47s thrust into their faces. Darya drove past them, making eye contact with a Kurdish woman lying cheek down on the road, a long hideous scar across her face and tears pooling at the rims of her eyes. When Darya finally reached the U.N., she was so famished and weak that all she wanted to do was lie at the U.N.'s steps and fall asleep.

Darya peered at the word scrawled across her home: *Terrorist*.

A car engine roared behind her in the street, accompanied by the squealing of tires. A car sped in her direction. A man with wild hair hung out of the passenger window, and as it neared Darya, he yelled, "Go home, terrorist!" As he finally passed by, he hawked a fat, glob of mucus that sailed through the air and landed at Darya's feet.

Darya wanted to be angry, but wasn't.

She was home, she thought. And she was grateful. Because in America they only spit on you.



## 33 Days and a Wake-Up

*Matthew Feeney, Minnesota*

The solid-plate-steel door bangs shut, making the man jump. The guard gives his worn-out spiel as he unlocks the man's silver handcuffs through the pass-thru. "... and do you see that button on the inner door frame? That is for medical emergencies only. Do you understand?" He thinks the innuendo in the guard's tone makes it crystal clear that any pressing of the button absent a genuine medical emergency could result in the creation of a real medical emergency.

The man nods.

"Good. Now sit back and relax. Lunch's in two hours."

The man straightens, rubbing his wrists. He looks around the room hesitantly, hopefully, but there's nothing to remain too hopeful about. Seen one seg cell, seen them all. Not like you can request a room with an ocean view or the deluxe queen-size prison cot with an ultra-plush pillow top mattress. But at least they all have room service, and while customer service might sometimes be lacking, at least you never had to tip 'em.

The man smiled as he lowered his lanky frame onto the edge of his cot. "So this is my new home for the next 33 days? Not bad . . . not bad at all." His thoughts focused on his surroundings with the experienced eye of a professional long-timer. Standard stainless steel one-piece toilet/sink combo sitting beneath a tired, tin rectangle, scratched all to hell with gems of graffitied wisdom: "Trust in God," "OX WAS HERE," and "amor de Rey." Those were just the ones big enough for him to read from the bed—he could see hundreds more scratchings on the thing posing as a mirror, attached to the standard industrial cinder blocks painted the color of milk gone bad.

Betcha that woulda made a top-selling paint color name—"sour milk." The man chuckles as he eyes the door. Handleless and painted a flat steel gray with a tall, slim window of tempered glass. On the right side of the door jamb sits the emergency button. Silver. About the size of a nickel. Volcano shaped, it rises half an inch from the doorjamb, with a recessed center protecting a flat silver button. The walls of the volcano rim the button as if protecting it from inadvertent touching. You'd have to really put your finger in there to ring it. Wonder where it goes? Is there an intercom in here? His eyes follow the walls upward where he sees a ventilation grill and next to that a round silver doo-dah

on the wall. What the hell is that? About five inches in diameter with a small raised section in the middle—it looks like the end cap to a closet clothes rack. Could be a speaker. Or a fancy smoke detector. Maybe even a spy camera? Nah, definitely not a camera, too shiny and slim.

The man eyes the wall—ironically, not three inches from the silver button he cannot touch is a light switch operating the only thing he has any control over for the next 33 days: his cell's light.

The man turns his head to the left to scan the wall opposite the door. His window is screened, barred, gated, and covered with a metal grill filled with holes like a spaghetti colander. From his seated position he can see the uppermost portions of nearby institutional brick buildings, all neatly garlanded with bright silver razor wire sparkling in the mid-morning sun. He suspects the view won't be much better even if he stands, so he remains seated.

He takes a deep breath in and holds it for a second before slowly and deliberately exhaling. A sigh of loneliness or regret or perhaps acceptance comes from deep within him. Resignation on its way to acceptance?

The man pats the mattress to either side of him and speaks out loud, "Alright, at least now I'll have some peace and quiet." Two hours before lunch? Maybe I should take a short nap to start out this bit. Thirty-three days is a cakewalk for a pro like him. He swings his long legs up onto the bunk, lays his head back on his pillow, and allows his eyelids to gently close.

Eyes remaining closed, he awakes from his deep slumber slowly. His first awareness is of the steady drone coming from the vent followed by the fact that he is chilly. He snaps his eyes open and stretches like a cat that has been sleeping in the sun. But this has been a lot longer than a nap—there is an ache deep in his joints from not moving and he notes the deep shadows on the floor of his cell indicating that he has been out for a long time. "Dammit," he mutters to himself as he pushes himself up, still flexing his sore arms and legs. He glances at the closed pass-thru. "I slept right through lunch. Dammit!" A low rumble from deep within his taut abdomen confirms the fact that he is hungry. "Well, it'll make dinner go down easier," he thinks. He stands and shuffles over to "his" light switch and flips it on. The light quickly chases away the long afternoon shadows. He glances briefly at the nearby button, but even on his worst day he knows missing a meal definitely is not a medical emergency. Given some of the prison crap he's consumed over the



years, he is probably healthier for missing a meal or two. He stumbles and then shuffles a few circles around the room, still trying to walk off the foggy of his recent slumber. At the window he pauses to look out—it is clearly now mid-afternoon, maybe even late afternoon. “Now THAT’S the way to do time—with your eyes shut.” He continues his rounds, stopping a moment at his door to peer out the narrow window. Nothing but an empty hallway as far as he can see to either side, with that same sour milk directly in front of him.

He moves on to christen his toilet, pulling down the front of his state issues before a steady stream of relief pours out of his business end. The stainless-steel bowl gets its seat lightly sprinkled with splashback. He gives a few tugs as the stream winds down. His waistband snaps back in place as he pushes the silver flush button. A tornado vortex forms as the powerful turbo charged water rushes into the bowl, leaving even more sprinkles to dry on the seat lid.

He casually turns away without washing his hands—he has always thought germs were for babies and he openly scorns the big muscle-bound inmates who have to use the bottom of their shirt to open a damn door. He isn’t afraid of no germs. He’s tough. He’s serving a life sentence on the installment plan—5 years here, 10 years there. In all his years in the pen, old Mickey is the only one who has ever scared the man. He passes it off as respect for Mickey, but it is true fear. Course Mickey bought it a few years back because no matter how tough or old school you are, no one’s a match for a dozen hot-headed punks with shanks. Old Mickey did take down five of them, not counting the one still in a coma. “Betcha Mickey wasn’t ‘fraida no germs either,” the man thinks as he continues in his circular walk. Bed. Step, step, door. Step, toilet. Step, step, window. Step, step, bed. He lets the movement calm him, reassuring him everything is still in its place since his last go round.

A mile or two later he pauses at the big window and notices the sun is now a warm red ball, just setting below the roofline of the distant buildings. “Holy shit, time flies in here!” he thinks as he soothes his rumbling stomach with thoughts of the soon-to-be delivered dinner feast. “Hot and delivered to your door in less than 30 minutes or it’s FREE”—hell, all his meals here are free, if you don’t count the years of his life flushed down the drain. I coulda been a contender. Nah, not really, that is just a line he remembers from some old movie. Even at his finest, he was never a contender for much of anything, unless they

added a category for “laziest” or “angriest” man in the world.

Continuing his round, he fondly recalls the blonde bitch that cut him off in traffic during one of his brief stints on the outs. He had swerved to the next lane and raced up alongside of her silver Toyota. She was oblivious to her transgression, at least until his Starbucks Coffee exploded all over her damn windshield! He had sped off gleefully, laughing at her surprise. His only regret was that he’d wasted a nearly full cup of coffee, but he’d just stop at the Starbucks across from his work. He’d briefly wondered if he could get a free refill, but then realized either way it was well worth it.

Now it’s pitch black outside. He looks longingly at the closed pass-thru. Dinner is late. Very late. Hell, dinner’s usually at 5pm, sunset is closer to 8pm and it don’t get this dark ‘til 9pm or so. What the hell, did they forget about him in here?

He peers into the empty hallway. No clocks, of course. Inside it is always the eternal sunshine of the fluorescent tube. Looking over his shoulder he confirms it is black as hell outside. He bangs on the door with the palm of his hand and calls out, “Hello? Anyone out there?” No response. Maybe the cells to the side of him are empty? He calls out again. “Can anybody hear me? YO! What time is it?” No response. Something is wrong, ‘cause in prison someone almost always responds, even if it’s just a “shut the fuck up!”

The man glances at the call button. But it’s an “emergency” call button, and while his situation is annoying (and more than a little confusing), it sure as hell isn’t an emergency. He gives one last pound on the door before sliding over to his bunk, sitting down heavily as his mind begins to spin.

What if they forgot about him? He read a legal case where deputies locked a guy in a cell in a rarely used wing and forgot about him for five or six days. Helluva lawsuit, the guy won millions of course. Millions might be worth it. How long can I go? He has a toilet and a source of fresh water, which is more important than food, though his stomach angrily disagrees. He recalls his meager breakfast eaten at least fourteen hours ago and wishes he had finished his turkey-gravy dishwater slop. He glances down cautiously at his belly. He has eaten his share of Honey Buns and Ramen during his bits, but his metabolism has kept him lean and mean. “No extra fat on this bone,” he says as he pats his belly. He realizes with a sinking heart what he used to consider a great gift is now his downfall. All those 400-pound fat fucks are going to survive without

food a helluva lot longer than him. How ironic.

Maybe there had been a big fight or riot, and the guards were just busy all day. His eyes are pulled to the emergency call button. Should he push it? What if there's been a flu outbreak? A "pandemic of epic proportions" like in *The Last Ship*. Holy shit, what if it is the zombie apocalypse and all the other inmates and guards are walking dead just shuffling around and eating each other's brains? He might be the sole survivor only because he is isolated out here in seg. The brief moment of relief at being the lone survivor is cut short by the realization that if he is the only one left, there will be no one to let him out in 33 days. Or feed him. In most zombie movies he's seen, zombies can't open doors, much less operate the myriad of electronic controls and safety switches required to open the dozen or so doors between him and fresh air. But then in *I Am Legend*, the alpha zombie is smart as hell and able to use tools to smash through a bulletproof window. Would brainiac zombies be better or worse in his situation here?

Sweat begins dripping from his downturned nose and a strangled gasp of terror accompanies his outgoing breaths. He is doomed. Don't panic. He looks toward the door and sees the silver call button, just sitting there, a patiently waiting beacon of hope, completely oblivious to the man's meltdown. The man knows not to press the button, the one and only rule he has in here. But then the quiet rational voice speaks from deep within him. "You're having a full-blown anxiety attack and can't breathe—that's a bona fuckin' fide medical emergency if there ever was one!" His rational side continues, "Besides, if they are all rotting zombie corpses, they won't give a shit if you press a damn button."

The man gulps another deep breath of air and nods his head as if in agreement with himself. He has to know what's happening—where is everyone? Even if it's bad, not knowing is even worse. With a large breath he leans forward towards the button and pauses. How does it work? Is it like a doorbell? Do I press it once or three times or hold it down like a walk button on a light post? His shaking index finger freezes a few inches from the silver button for several moments. "What if no one answers?" is the thought that finally presses him over the edge and motivates his finger to push deep into the recess. He feels more than hears the button make some sort of electrical connection. Nothing. No response. After forever, he pushes again, more forcibly this time, and holds down for several seconds. He loses any semblance of sanity as he begins to scream, "HEY!?! HELLO! DAMMIT, WHERE IS

EVERYBODY?!?!?"

He freezes as he hears an amplified voice from somewhere above say curtly, "Yes?"

A real human being. They are alive! I'm going to make it! With relief he starts babbling about sleeping through lunch and dinner and zombies and old Mickey before he is cut short by the amplified voice.

"Relax, Jones. We haven't forgotten you." The man sighs and his shoulders slump in a flood of relief as he sinks back on his bunk and looks down, suddenly surprised at the bright sunlight striking the floor between his feet. The disembodied voice continues, "You've only been in your cell an hour—lunch is still an hour away. And remember: the emergency call button is for medical emergencies only!"

The man nods a silent and unseen acknowledgement and deliberately takes in a deep breath and holds it for several moments before fizzing it out slowly between his tightened lips. He has an uneasy feeling this is gonna be an extra-long bit.

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Second place winner in fiction of PEN America's 2017  
Prison Writing Contest <https://pen.org/33-days>

## The Flamingo

Caroline Ashby, Utah

At the Atlanta Georgia Zoo in 1991, mesmerized by a hot pink bird standing on one leg, I was forgotten. When I turned around, I found only strangers. It was noon, which meant lunchtime for the West Rome Junior High School. I didn't know where our class was to meet. Casually, I walked around the front entrance, careful not to appear panicked or vulnerable to potential kidnappers. *Certainly a teacher or a chaperone has done a count of students by now. At any moment, a parent will run up to me in relief.* By one p.m., dozens of groups had passed me by and still, no familiar faces, no rescue. I blamed the flamingo.

\* \* \*

By thirty-six, I thought I'd be in my prime. I watched my mom at that age as she completed her daily beauty regimen. She was grace and perfection. I sat cross-legged on her bed and made a checklist for womanhood—cotton ball the size of a baseball to apply powder, check; scented spray for the neck and inner elbows, check; black-lace slippy dress under everything like something an undercover hero would wear, check, check. Instead, at thirty-six, I sit in sweatpants on a top bunk. I lather no-name lotion on my creamy legs and laugh so I won't cry. I lean into a nature program to distract my brain from pain.

Images of Central Africa flash on my thirteen-inch screen. A narrator speaks through my headphones: "This lake has the largest population of flamingos in the world. They migrate here to consume the high volume of brine shrimp. Their bright color developed from years of this diet. Their scooped beak permits them to feed while remaining alert to predators."<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

At thirteen, I braved the hills and parks surrounding the Atlanta Zoo. I nonchalantly scanned the area for picnic tables under a canopy of ash and oak trees. I considered my possibilities—I could search for a uniformed person to help me ... or ... maybe an adult would strike me as trustworthy and assist me in calling my mom. Was I willing to

bum a ride home? Suddenly in the horizon—a glimpse of bright yellow hope—a Floyd County school bus!

\* \* \*

"Statuesque flamingos stand regal as one. They perform dances in-sync. They gather in large colonies for protection. The flamingos at the heart are least likely to be picked off by hyenas."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> PBS Nature Program viewed in 2014

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



Siberian Tiger Narcissist  
*Gregg Miranda, Arizona*

# Amazing Grace at the Hideous Funeral

*Becky Oh, Arizona*

*- In memory of the man I married first, and my sons' father 12/24/57 – 11/14/12*

The room is beginning to receive its somber guests, wearing differing shades of too much black mixed with faces revealing pity, sadness, curiosity, and confusion in varying degrees—maybe even a hushed sense of relief that it's us and not them in this place. Swirling, predictable “because we are dust” thoughts of what to say and musings on where his spirit is ricochet silently off the walls.

Their thoughts are all tossed about, in a wake that rises and falls somewhere in between a life well lived and very well loved, and a tragic, seemingly preventable ending—and wondering on which shore we ourselves will land.

Flowers, much too bright and vibrant, reminders of living things... line the hallway in contrast to the happenings of the day as we pass by, moving into the big, cold room. Those in line look for familiar faces while they try to grasp being here.

The parents of the one who passed arrive from far away with his only sibling, the older brother, holding the aged up in every way. I surmise they are not sure why they are in this place or how he slipped out of their living. Even now, the wall constructed by the one who is gone is more impassable than ever. Because to cross over that wall means walking into unrelenting pain, and no one does that willingly, unless they find their life depends on it. Will they stay away, on this side of the invisible divide, leaving the next generation of sons to go there alone?

His mother spills tears over his face, and I can only imagine the deepest pain allowable in this dusty realm, the pain that most of us are spared, the passing of a child of our very own womb. Oh Lord, I beg you to spare me that thing alone—and I hurt for her, even though she too will soon pass and I hope beyond all hope that she will be reunited with her second born, her best Christmas present ever, in a place where tears are all joy.

The elder son of the one who past still shows signs of shock filled with pain and unnamed suffering but holds the rush of it, at bay—waiting for another time to let the tide in, let it wash over—for another day, not now. His back is massive; he is brave and strong; his sweat and



tears mingle in the pushed back pain—and he's surrounded by a small army of loyal young men, friends who are willing to help him carry the heaviest part of this day—not knowing how long, how hard, and how heavy it will become down the road.

This small army, only recently having become men, gather outside in the parking lot and raise a glass to his memory, to all that was good. I pray for those things that are good to keep their proper place for these young men, that they will be shown when something good changes direction so they will know when to leave it behind—I pray that they will always seek light and life and that they will find full truth—in pieces that fit together... along their way.

I don't know what to do—so I do what I think each of them needs, at least for the moment—it's all I have.

The younger son of the one who passed is working so hard to come and face the dark, the faces, the curious, and the sad—he can't. The tide has pulled him in so deep into his father's path that he is fighting for his own breath, yet he doesn't even know it—the demons circle and celebrate their win—but it's only the battle and not the war they've won; there's more ahead. And though he's absent from this hideous and momentous gathering—he was forgiven long ago, by the one who already knew and counted the days of the one who passed, the one who has counted all of our days.

The sound of “Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)” and other hymns, along with the Best of Motown and the BEST of us—pictures of birthday parties, and babies, and baseball, school days and Christmases past—remind us that heaven has never been all that far away.

The pastor tries to fill the gap, to give everything meaning and hope—and at the end, the silence is deafening till whispers emerge and the audible shuffling, the gathering up of all the looseness of these people and their things so they can file out in some kind of order—as if order will make everything seem bearable. The subtle hullabaloo goes out of the room with thoughts of places still to come for some, and questions of how we go on for others. Either way, the activity feels like a welcome relief, an escape from the immediate demands of the pain and intimate desolation.

In the deepest places of all the memories, my comfort finds a momentary opening and I breathe it in, because I know that we who are still living, and even when we are done... *have no less days to sing God's praise / Than when we first begun.*

## Food Visit at the Department of Corrections

*Becky Oh, Arizona*

Sitting at the picnic table with my two boys, now men who tower over me in differing ways, I am fully aware of their spirits, the spirits that have been alive inside of them since they were little, except now I've learned to notice.

Their relationship with each other, they are brothers to the core, bound together in so many ways... yet the bond has been strained to breaking over recent years. Seemingly impassable walls remain because these men see different sides of the same things—maybe everyone does—but the pain in the tragic losses we've all three felt and now try to either acknowledge or ignore, is buried just beneath the surface.

I wonder if brothers' pain can be shared like a load pulled by oxen yoked together; perhaps it can if their walls come down. It is cold and drizzly, yet the childlike smiles from these grown men will soon light up the room. The bright eyes of anticipation from the younger, the Jacob, as he enters and acknowledges his surprise at seeing that the older, the hairy one, the Esau, who was aligned on a different side of their father, now passed on from the living, has come along to share in the presence of today.

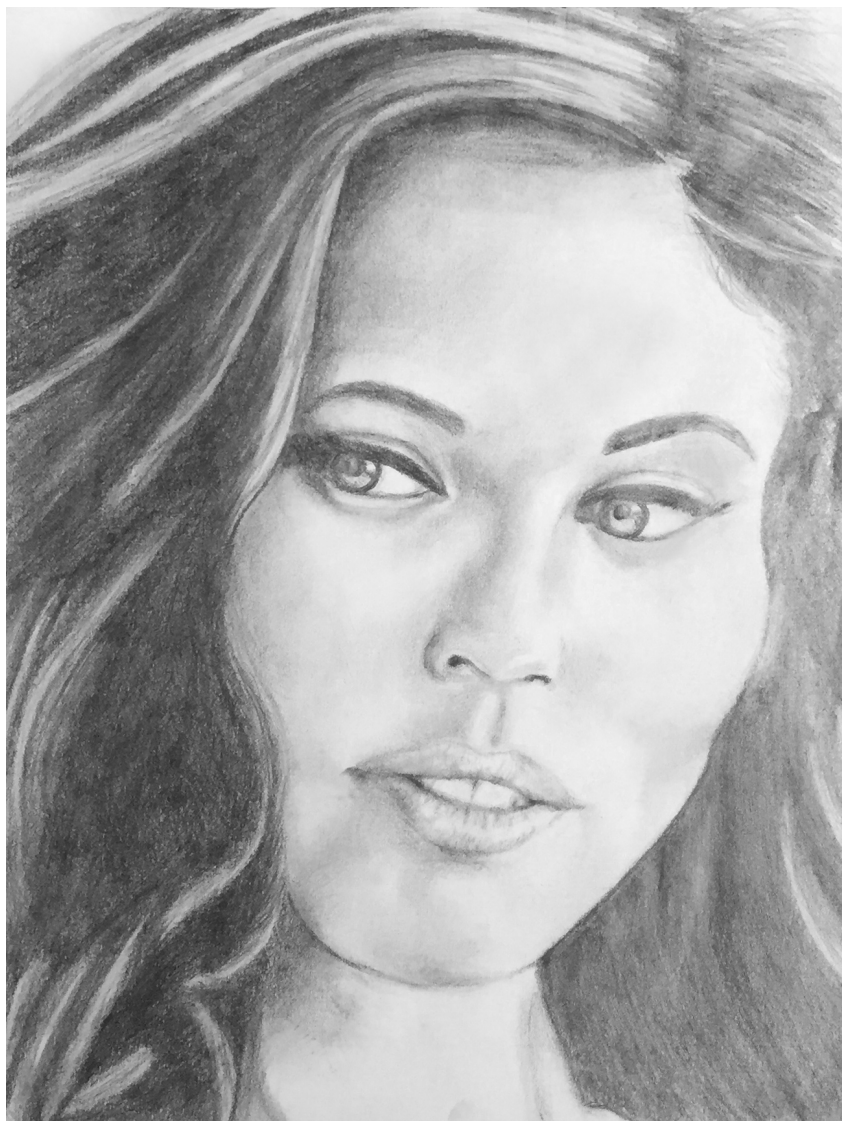
Maybe the elder wants to leave some of the past is behind, so he endures the piles of reheated, soggy Taco Bell specials, the half grilled steak, and the little containers of our favorite cheese, chocolate sauce, BBQ sauce, and catsup, just enough to satisfy security, a minor feast nonetheless. Mix that up with lively discussions of developing political events, books recently read, past trips, funny family stories, and a baby about to be born, beginning a whole new generation of us, a reminder to me that all things can become new.

The tables are all full with families bringing their best homemade dishes with no place to sit inside the warm rooms with microwave ovens. So we make do in the drizzle. I notice with deep gratitude everything that would irritate just about everyone I know on the outside... i.e., waiting in long lines to heat up soggy food on paper plates, retrieving napkins blowing in the cold wind, wet from the on-again-off-again misty rain, trying to move the table under cover when the mist turns into drops, eating with plastic forks that refuse to cut

the steak into bite size pieces... yes, all those things that would make the rest of the outside world agitated and impatient. These “minor” inconveniences do not keep the 30-year-old man from flashing his huge and amazing GQ smile as he says, “This is my first piece of gum in 3 and a half years” (a tiny piece of contraband smuggled in unknowingly in a forgotten pocket).

I don’t much notice all the others and their special family recipes because we are in our own little world, except for those who stop by to share a favorite morsel or express curiosity about the bacon or the chocolate sauce or the extra “Taco Bell Naked Chicken Chalupa” now cold and greasy.

Despite leaving at the crack of dawn, the two-hour drive, the anxiety over making sure that everything is in see-through containers and follows all other guidelines for the AZ Department of Corrections food visits, the 90-minute wait in line in the cold rain, the soggy food—I suddenly take in that this food day in prison, shared with these two who’ve held my heart since the day theirs started beating, is one of my favorite days of all time. Nothing compares to the splendor of this feeling of completeness (which I thought we had lost) even if just for this moment.



Bianca  
*G. Manes, Arizona*

## Smiley Face

*Ferosa Bluff, Utah*

In kindergarten, Mrs. Harding put a big yellow smiley face on my paper, “This is your reward for knowing your abc’s,” she exclaimed. My heart warmed at the image. I proudly showed my parents the smiley face sticker, and they too rewarded me with a smile.

Stephanie's aunt had a drug addiction. Addiction was a foreign concept to my young mind. The day that Stephanie's aunt collapsed on the sidewalk in front of her house I received a better understanding of it. Her body, possessed by her indulgence, quivered spastically, then went limp. I ran over with the rest of the neighbors to see what had happened. I heard a neighbor say, “This is what happens when drugs take over.” But what stuck with me is what I saw: a smiley face tattoo on her limp upper arm, smiling at me.

Some images speak to us without words. The red octagonal shape of a stop sign is meant to instruct us to cease in our tracks, but for some, could this arouse movement? The white flag is a symbol of peace, fostering a sense of surrender for some, but could it provoke more war in others? What about the yellow smiley face? Do we all see it as a smile? Perhaps for some, that smile is inverted, and so is its meaning.

## Jumping In

Kylie Kilian, Arizona

There's an excitement about diving straight in to something you have never done before. You can prepare for some of what may happen (you can wear a parachute, bring snacks, check the weather to make sure it's not going to rain, examine others jumping in), but you will never truly know what it is like until you just take a breath and *jump*.

When Dr. Wells asked me if I wanted to teach a weekly creative writing class inside a local prison, I had no idea what to think. Can I even be a teacher? I'm not even a creative writer? Will it be like Netflix's hit series *Orange Is the New Black*? Will there be fights? Will the students hate me? Will I be any good at this?

Despite the ever impending (and realistic) doom of being bad at something, I said yes. At this point, I had taught long distance through the mail with the Pen Project internship for over two years and... hey... how much different could it be to teach *in person*?

Every time I explain it, it still feels surreal. "Oh well, I teach at the prison." Some of the looks I get when I say this are hilarious. Generally, as the statement comes out of my mouth, I can see people process. At first, because I do not say it with assertion or dominance or aggressiveness, they seem pleased. (Yes, teaching. Teaching is a good thing.) Then, as the word "prison" settles in their mind, their eyes slightly widen. Every once in a while someone will give me the up and down, as if examining my stature to see if I would win in a prison brawl. Then, when people have paused just the perfect amount of time for me to feel uncomfortable, they will say something like "Hey... uh... that's cool!"

Now, please don't get me wrong. I am not faulting these people (maybe I am laughing at the looks they give me just a little bit, but I am definitely not faulting them). When I started working with the prison system, I went in for the same reason that people would say prisons are corrupt: money. Dr. Wells offered me a job as a TA that would allow me to grade papers from my bedroom. I wasn't about to turn that down. I remember the conversation being something like this:

"... twelve dollars an hour... can work from home... TA-like for an online class... literally can grade papers in your pajamas if you want."

At that point, I would have sold bits and pieces of my soul to the *literal* devil if it meant I could get paid to work from home, so I took the

job. I remember adding a class called the "Pen Project" (for mentoring long-distance the creative writing of incarcerated writers) and calling it a day, ready for my cash to start coming in. (As happens so often these days in education, however, the money quickly ran out and the TA-ship ended. Now I do even more prison work—for free. In fact, when you consider that I am teaching weekly classes for three credits of unpaid internship, I am actually paying through my tuition to be able to teach.

That's the thing about prison education, though. I don't really think that anyone wakes up one day and muses, "These people that society has told me are the the most worthless and dangerous among us... these are people I would like to be in a classroom with! Oh, and if you could make it logistically difficult and unpaid, that would be the best." That is not how it happens. I think it's just something you find yourself doing. There is this big pit and something tells you to *jump in* and you do it. And it might be because there's 12 dollars down there that says you can get paid to work in your pajamas, and it might be because someone pushes you in the pit because they have also been in the pit.

But I guess the weird thing about this pit is there *is* always a way out. In fact, there's never a time when you can't get out. There's always an escalator out with ten people at the top telling you that you've made the right decision to get out of the pit because now you can spend your time on things that will make you real money or further your actual career. But when you're down in the pit, you just have this feeling that there are people buried. People that society has buried, never to be seen again. So you start looking, brushing dirt around. And then you find someone, and they tell you how much it means to them that you are down there. And then you find another person, and they tell you how all they truly understand is what it feels like to be hurt and cast out. All the while, your own friends and family are at the top of the pit looking down, not seeing what is happening.

The magic of the pit is *you can't see what's going on if you don't jump in*. From the top it's just an orange hole that's off the path that says, "Beware of inmates." But you keep digging and keep discovering individuals who have things to say. Important things to say. People who have had dirt poured on them their entire life. You think, what if I did something to help them come out on this escalator some day? Some people at the top of the pit don't want the people buried in the pit back with them at the top. These people just want to take *you* home and pretend they never had to deal with thinking about the pit in the first

pretend they never had to deal with thinking about the pit in the first place. But you can't do that. You dove in. You *know* what is down there now. You have to stay and help.





Lauren  
*Anthony, Arizona*

## “At the Risk of Sounding like a Hippie...”

*Kylie Kilian, Arizona*

Education for all. Not just for people with money or people our system deems "smart" in approved categories. Education for everyone.

The other day, a friend was talking about prison education systems, and I mentioned how it is possible in some prisons to work toward a college degree. And, as sometimes happens in such conversations, the friend replied, "Why should my taxpayer money pay for someone in prison to get something that people out here can't even pay for?" (Yes, I understand, we are *all* bitter about student loans.)

My response? "Exactly. Why the heck is education so expensive? I think it should be way more accessible."

That was not the answer they seemed to want. There was an immediate backfire: "Well, if education wasn't expensive, then everyone would get one, and a degree wouldn't mean anything!"

Yes, if everyone has a college degree, it would be less impressive on a resume, but if your degree is the most interesting thing about you, *you have to rethink what you are doing with your time.*

What if? What if we educated everyone about things they wanted to learn about? What if we armed everyone with knowledge? Not just people who can afford it. Everyone. What would happen to us as a society if we were just a bunch of well trained and educated people trying to fix problems in the world?

Would we advance more quickly? Maybe. Would we be less receptive to propaganda? Most likely. Would we elect more competent officials? Probably.

So, at the risk of sounding like a hippie, I say let's educate everyone.



Lone Wolf  
*Gregg Miranda, Arizona*

## Science

*Kylie Kilian, Arizona*

In biology class today, we learned that E. Coli cells can only survive in certain environments. We learned that if these cells are left without agar, they will die. That their surroundings can change how they grow. We also learned how to keep them flourishing.

This concept makes so much sense when people talk about cells, but the sense gets lost when we talk about humans. It makes sense to us that a cell will die when placed in an antibiotic, but the fact that a human will not flourish in the inner city can be lost on us.

"Pull yourself up by your bootstraps; that's the American way, part of the dream," I say to my cells as I place them in an environment where they will probably die.

We are intrigued by the cells that flourish anyway. "That one got out and became a basketball star! That one became Oprah!" we say with acclaim, wondering why all the other cells did not do the same. "If that cell can do it, so can you. You do not need warmth, or a regularly healthy diet, or a safe place to sleep at night, or emotional support. You just need to be like this other cell.

I want to believe that it is the cell's fault for dying on the plate full of an antibiotic. That I do not have to worry about the other cells.

You see, I grew up at a crisp 37 degrees Celsius with a mother and a father who loved me and had enough nutrient medium to go around. I never felt the weight of an antibiotic on my life or thought that I was getting treatment from any other cells.

There's an interesting thing with agar plates. From the outside, they all look the same. They are round and half filled with a yellowish jelly like substance. They all look at first glance like they provide the cells with an equal opportunity to grow, but once you look closer, you see that some situations are built for cell success while others are riddled with antibiotics.

This is kind of like life. From the outside, it's easy to look at every child as if they all have the potential to grow up to be president. And I'm not here to tell you that anyone cannot be the president. I am just here to show you that some plates have antibiotic on them, and others don't. If a kid grows up without one or both of their parents, they are less likely to succeed. If a child grows up in a low income neighborhood, they are less likely to succeed. If a child is born to a

non-Asian or non-Caucasian family, they are less likely to succeed. It is time we realize that not all agar plates, or living situations, are the same. Some practices advance cell success, and others destroy it.

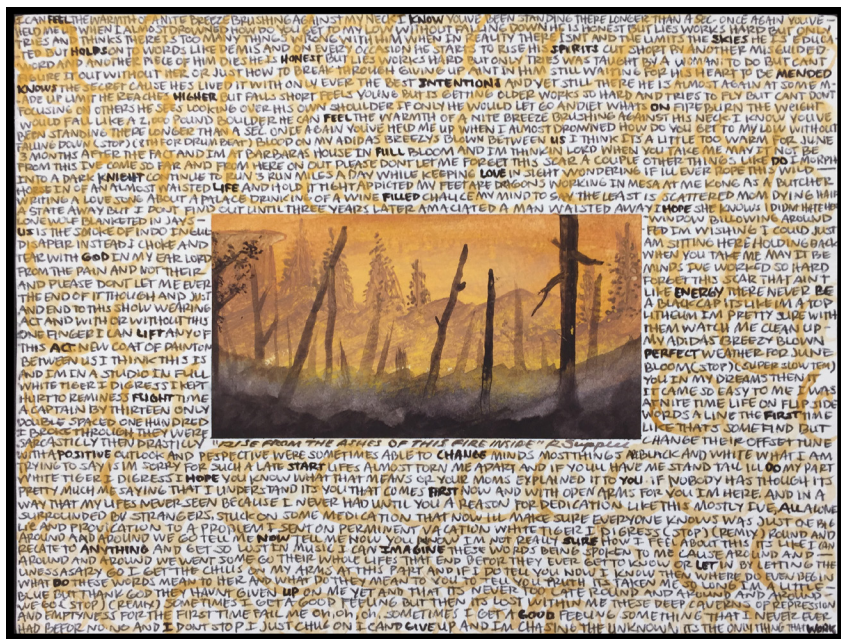




## Matron Spirit of the Westward Ho

*Jim Haboush, Arizona*

Pen and Colored Pencil, 2017



## Portrait of Words

Robert Supplee, Arizona

# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

*Iron City Magazine* is currently accepting submissions of short fiction, nonfiction, poetry, one-act plays, and art. The deadline to submit is April 30, 2019.

## Who Can Submit

We welcome submissions from current/former prisoners, current/former prison volunteers, family and friends of prisoners, and current/former prison staff. Current/former prisoners may submit work on any topic. Prison volunteers, family, friends, and staff should submit only work on prison-related memories, perspectives, or insights.

## How to Submit

To accommodate prisoners 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 see the guidelines below for each category.

Submissions may be emailed to **ironcitymagazine@gmail.com** or mailed to **Iron City Magazine, PO Box 370, Tempe AZ, 85280.**

Manuscripts and art will be returned only with a self-addressed and stamped envelope or mailing tube.

## Payment/Gift for Accepted Work

Two contributor copies, prison policy permitting. (In prisons that prohibit copies to individual prisoners, copies will be sent to contributors' choices of outside family or friends.)

## Guidelines for All Genres

We look for quality and originality. Send us your best work—writing and art that are compelling, well crafted, and attentive to detail. We do not accept previously published work.



# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Work must not include names or other identifying information of any actual persons who are victims to or guilty of a crime, apart from the author.

Please make handwriting legible. Capital and lowercase letters, punctuation, line breaks, and paragraph/stanza spacing must be distinct. (Please **do not** submit work in ALL CAPS.)

## Guidelines for Fiction

We consider all types of fiction. Flash fiction and short stories are preferred, but stand-alone chapters from longer works are considered.

Multiple pieces may be submitted, up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages (4,000 words), total.

## Guidelines for Creative Nonfiction

We consider any true story, but memoir (distinct personal episodes or memories) and personal essays are preferred. Tell a good story, but make sure it is factual. We will also consider brief opinion pieces, argument essays, and humor.

Multiple pieces may be submitted, up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages (4,000 words), total.

## Guidelines for Poetry

We consider all types of poetry including formal, free-verse, experimental, and prose poetry.

Three to 5 poems may be submitted, not to exceed 10 pages, total. We do not accept book-length works. Poems exceeding 1 page should still be spare and evocative.

# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

## Guidelines for One-Act Plays

We consider one-act plays.

Up to 2 plays may be submitted. Each play may be up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages.

## Guidelines for Graphic Stories and Comics

We accept both color and black-and-white graphics and comics, but we may be able to print only in black-and-white, depending on funding. Up to 2 stories (maximum of 15 pages each) and 3 one-page comics may be submitted. Please bear in mind that our printed magazine page size is only 8.5 inches high by 5.5 inches wide.

## Guidelines for Art

We accept both physical and digital artwork. No portraits of celebrities. We prefer quality photographs or digital reproductions of art so as not to risk anyone's art being lost or damaged in the mail, but we will still review original pieces and attempt to return them as feasible.

Please submit 1-3 pieces. Include the title, medium, and date created for each submission.

## **Disclaimer Regarding Editorial Process**

Minor edits to spelling, punctuation, or grammar may be needed to align with printing standards. Because communication with prisoners is slow, these edits may be made without consulting the authors. Consent to these edits is voluntary, but not consenting may limit chances of acceptance for publication. You may state whether you do or do not consent on your submission cover letter.

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