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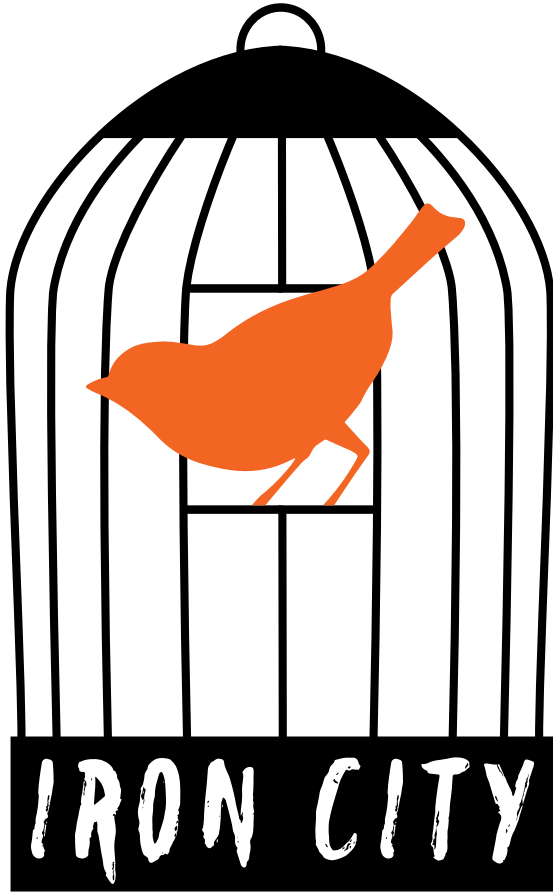
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IRON CITY MAGAZINE  
ISSUE 4 / 2019

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M A G A Z I N E

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS  
BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

ISSUE 4 / 2019

# 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.

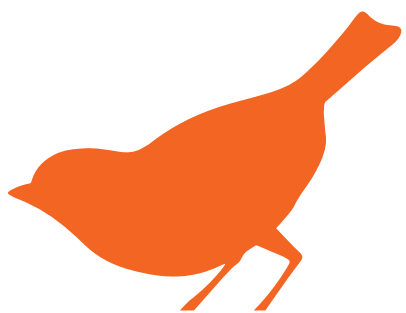
In addition, we serve to remind the general public that prisoners can make meaningful contributions to our communities. So often, prisoners' potential is forgotten or overshadowed by their crimes. By validating prisoners' humanity through writing and art, we encourage a culture of understanding and transformation.

## DONORS

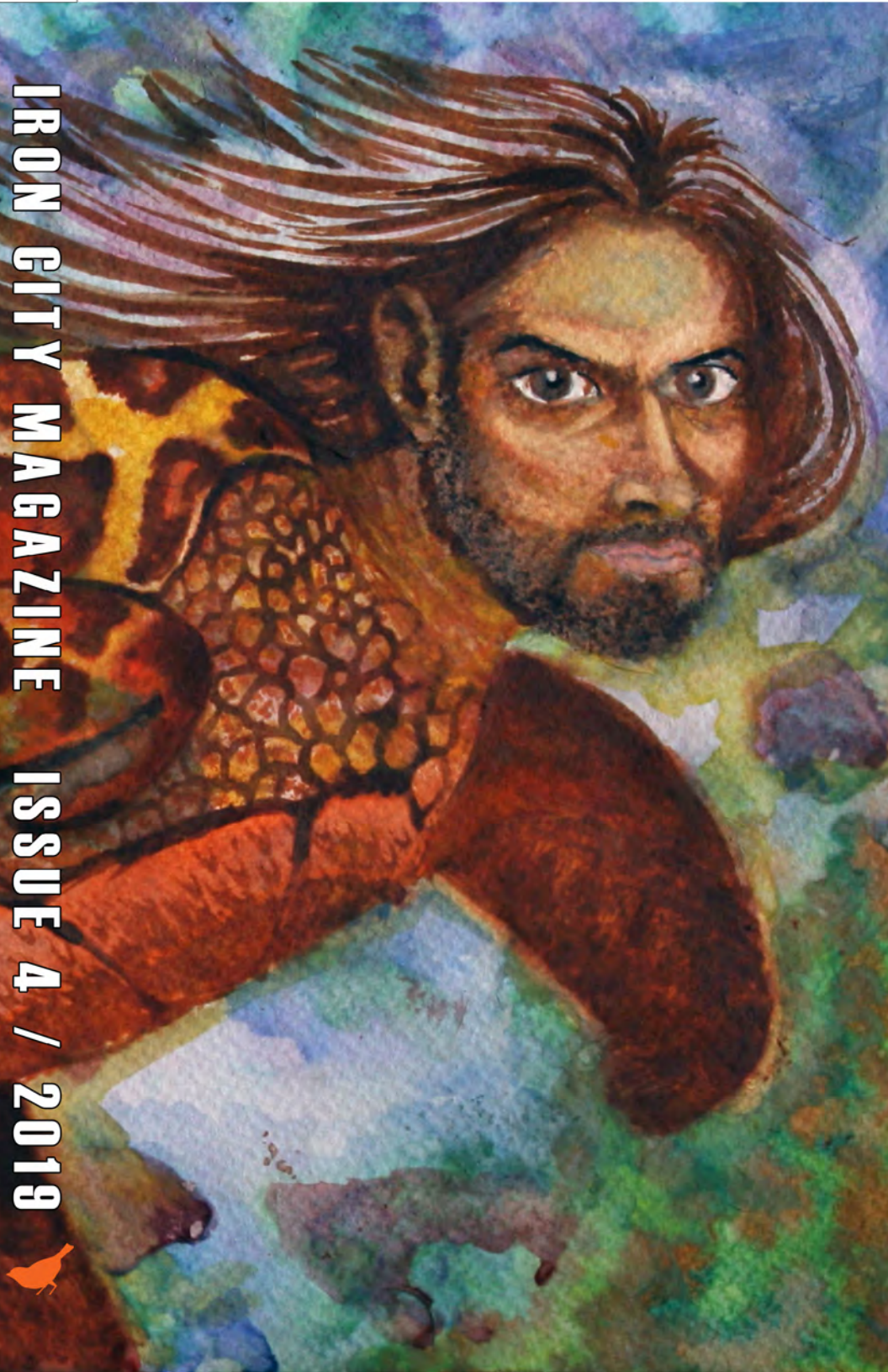
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We would also like to thank the ASU Prison Education Awareness Club (PEAC) for monetary and other assistance.

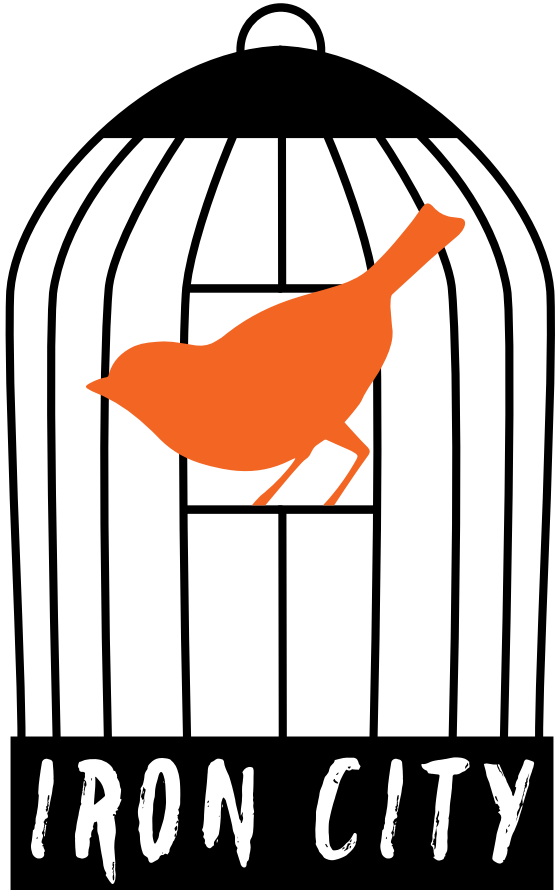




IRON CITY MAGAZINE ISSUE 4 / 2019



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by Ruben Radillo, California  
Watercolor on Paper, 2018  
Project PAINT Artwork  
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# LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Please Stand

Dear Readers,

This new issue of *Iron City Magazine: Creative Expressions By and For the Incarcerated* makes me proud to be a human being. For decades, I have reserved this praise for the Cirque du Soleil, whose artistry humbles me to what human beings can envision and *do*, theatrically and gymnastically. I don't know why it didn't strike me with the very first issue of *Iron City*, but I suddenly see that the accomplishments of writers and artists behind bars—produced in the most anti-creative and anti-intellectual conditions—are equally, perhaps more, amazing.

In this issue, you will find art and writing equal and sometimes superior to works coming out of MFA programs and to works being given prestigious awards. In addition, you will be educated by insights and perspectives of men and women who have experienced institutional suffering unimaginable to most people. I hope that wherever you find yourselves while browsing this issue, you will render the artists and writers herein a well-earned, and literal, standing ovation.

With much gratitude to the incarcerated community who have made this issue possible.

Cornelia "Corri" Wells  
Editor-in-Chief

# LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

We Need to Remember to Not Forget

Dear Readers,

When I was around ten years old, during a family drive in Florence, Arizona, I encountered my first prison. Our car had paused in the heavy traffic, and I peered intently out the window. Across the road stood an isolated building encased in tall razor wire and bare desert. I could see a person peering out, like me, from a tiny window on the world. I asked my papá, “Why are there bars on that window?” He answered, “It’s a prison.” An overwhelming emotion of loneliness and abandonment engulfed me as my eyes settled on the small life this person was facing. I know I was too far to see the expression on the face slit by metal, but I sensed his need for the outside, his desire to be in a car with loved ones, driving patiently along in the evening traffic.

When I think of prison, I go back to that first memory and the feeling of reduced reality it gave me. I don’t believe in deserting those that the justice system deems undeserving. We need to rehabilitate prisoners back into our communities, especially since 95% will be released at some point. We need to find ways to aid, not abandon, people for their mistakes. Hearing the voices and viewing the creativity in Issue 4, I see the strength, healing, and compassion in the writing and art our contributors have shared. Creative expression expands the empathy our world needs and teaches us ways we can all change into a society that aids rather than casts one another aside. The prison writers and artists in this issue deserve to be heard.

My memory of the prisoner behind the barred window made me realize I had witnessed the existence of a human being, an existence that might have been easily missed by a rapidly moving world on a highway. I now carry his existence in my memory to remind me that those inside a solitary prison world can possibly be saved from despair through artful words and strokes of color that mirror inner pain and hope.

Jacqueline Aguilar  
Managing Editor

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## Cemetery Muse

*D.S. Tyme-Lyfer Poet, Arizona*

In a time before time, at least before mine,  
Another pondered and stood on this very spot.  
He would have braved this same cold, which was not the same,  
And read then re-read these same names—etched upon diverse and  
Ancient stone...  
Some eyes saw, some ears heard, and some nostrils scented...  
Whose senses sensed?  
Those clouds floated, these trees bent, and that wind blew.  
But because no one listened or stopped long enough to count,  
All that should have been put to canvas...  
Their colored bristles missed.



**Surrealist Dream Pt. 1 (Project)**

*Andre Magone, California*

*Watercolor Pencil on Paper, 2017*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

---

## abandoned ghosts

*Steven Henderson, Arizona*

abandoned ghosts  
roam this gloomy yard  
haggard shells emerged from years  
locked in cold psych wards  
kicked to this warehouse, still unwell  
the system needs to open space  
for more convictions  
churned through the cogs of justice

with ashen skin, vacant stares, and slack mouths  
these wild-haired specters  
sway to internal soundtracks  
shuffle to side effects  
of myriad medications  
they argue with unseen accusers  
as they pluck cigarette butts from pebbles  
beside bug-and-crumb-pecking pigeons

phantoms flood broken prisons  
never meant to house them  
care providers try their luck  
on the neuroleptic roulette wheel  
betting on the cheapest symptom-masking med  
with little concern  
for the twitches, shakes, or stiffness  
that land unlucky on these men

we, who inhabit this shadow land  
are expected to guide these empty-eyed souls  
through their perilous prison journey  
one day their chains will fall  
given a handful of Haldol—  
a bandage for a lifelong wound—  
sent out to a world  
with no rest, no care, no home

## POETRY

---

who then will they haunt?  
how long 'til they're sent back  
to this overcrowded graveyard  
to roam again among the tombstones?



## Surrealist Dream Pt. 1 (Project)

*Russell Pence, California*

*Watercolor Pencil on Paper, 2017*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

## freedom cook

*Steven Henderson, Arizona*

I wanna cook  
when I get out  
I mean  
I wanna cook cook

not prison plastic cook  
plastic sporks  
plastic cups  
plastic mirror cutters  
sharpened on sidewalks  
plastic bags sunk  
in an ice chest  
full of boiling water  
cooking commissary  
over-salted supplies  
mixed in  
repurposed cookie tubs  
and red vine buckets  
stored in  
twenty-times used  
ziplock bags

I wanna really cook  
in a kitchen kitchen  
a true chef's knife  
German steel  
samurai sharp  
metal measuring cups  
electric mixer  
pestle in mortar  
made of marble  
penny-bright pans  
silverware with heft  
that fits my hand  
porcelain plates

---

for plate food  
stoneware bowls  
for bowl food  
not plastic bowls  
for all food

creative convict cooking  
wears me down  
with ramen, rice, and beans  
three sad spice jars  
in my meager seasoning rack  
soggy nachos served on  
upturned ice chest lids  
spin after spin  
on soup and burritos  
broom-handle rolling pins  
crush-bagged cookies for cakes  
leavened with root beer  
crumbled cracker  
pie crust  
bound with peanut butter

I wanna have Mom  
teach me  
her perfect pie crust  
and slow cook pot roast  
I can bake  
with yeast and eggs  
use farm-fresh supplies that  
onion my eyes  
lemon my nose  
curry my tongue  
custard my throat  
I can create  
sparkling pesto  
on homemade pasta  
with shaved romano  
and a cloud-soft soufflé

## POETRY

---

I wanna cook cook  
when I get out  
no corrections cuisine  
I wanna freedom cook





## Tamales con Huevos Chile y Limón

*Stewart Gonzales, Arizona*

*Acrylic PAINT, 2019*

## Visions of You

*Aaron Parker, Maryland*

Show me a flower as pretty as your smile  
With that flower, I will plant you a garden  
Give to me a pastel color as soft as your eyes  
and I will paint you a portrait

Slender as a ray of moonlight you  
slowly creep through a cracked window  
To love you is to caress and cradle you  
show you a love unconditional

If I had a task to complete for you  
That task would simply be...

May I climb into your heart  
sit down next to your soul  
have a conversation with your spirit  
sharing your essence

That is my vision



Rose

*William Wang, California*

*Acrylic on Canvas, 2018*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

## in solitary

*Kate LaDew, North Carolina*

a prisoner  
tore a button from his coveralls,  
cast it into the air, careened his body around three times  
and dropped to the cement.  
on hands and knees, he hunted the button.  
when found,  
it was cast into the air over his whirling body  
again again again  
and found, again again again  
until he was able to curl into himself,  
sleeping like when he was a little boy,  
blind to everything around him, exhausted from just being alive,  
and waking to an extra day tacked on for destroying his coveralls.  
cast  
careen  
hunt  
find  
dreaming of hide and seek,  
of how easy it is to get lost in the dark and stay there  
when hands and eyes open to sew a button  
and close at the sound of a beating heart



## Metamorphical Self-Portrait

*Mario Rodriguez, California*

*Pencil on Paper, 2015*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

## Memory of Much

*Ty Lin, California*

Memory of you and me  
Memory of how our time was  
    brief like craps leaving the hand.  
Memory so short, but strangely amusing.  
Memory that begins to vanish like sand  
    as the hand of the ocean covers  
    the shore.

Open the gate where you, you have locked  
    away our good memories.  
Open this veil, so we can charge our batteries.  
Open up a memory of much.  
Open up as a winged creature  
    in stellar flight overlooking  
    earth below.



## Inside/Outside (Project)

*Victor Tovar and Xavier Vasquez, California*

*Digitally Enhanced Collage on Lucite, 2019*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

## Discharge

*Dora Rollins, Arizona*

I teach writing  
I can't write

Clichés and confessions flow like phlegm  
in a house of correction  
where I sit at a faux wood table  
with college-ruled paper and blue Bic pen  
alongside former schoolboys  
whose time has stopped

We are fellow castaways  
who fight past our guards  
confront anti-dig barriers  
straddle strands of razor wire  
    to build poems that siphon our breath  
    until we see color in the blackout

Clad in biohazard orange  
they show me new hues  
in chipped white concrete  
how welded steel  
becomes a slash of sun

My ride out in the lined lot  
is respite for a mourning dove  
unconcerned with mistakes  
the soft grey between  
complacency and exit 268  
Los Reales Waste Management, Inc





## Who Inspires You? Portrait (Project)

*Jonathan Marvin, California*

*Mixed Media on Paper, 2019*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

## It Was the Dogs of Barrio Ruiz Canyon

*Stewart Gonzales, Arizona*

It was the dogs  
of barrio Ruiz Canyon  
who first sensed her,  
lingering  
in the cottonwoods  
beside Pinal Creek.

She was crying.  
The dogs could smell  
salt from her tears  
long before  
they bared their sharp canines,

had them yapping  
at the black foliage  
beneath the trees,  
as a full moon drifted  
in and out  
of silver-gray clouds.

I laughed when I first  
heard about her—  
some tattered old hag  
condemned by the heavens  
to search the waterways  
for the souls of her twin boys  
whom she drowned in a fit  
of jealous rage.

Our padres warned us  
she would come,  
a thief in the night  
she would come.  
If we were not vigilant

---

guardians of our souls  
she would snatch them—  
take them into the deep  
and leave us to drown  
in our drool.

I never forgot that cry,  
how it shrieked  
out of the bushes  
and shattered the night,  
broke all the stars  
into glittered shards—  
smelt like brimstone.

Joe V. hollered, "The Llorona!"  
and we ran—we ran  
into the darkest suit  
of the night and hid  
inside its pocket.  
There we prayed every prayer  
Catechism taught us:

Our Father, Hail Mary  
Act of Contrition over and over  
until the dogs stopped howling  
until the moon stopped drifting  
in and out of the silver-gray clouds.



**Not Meant 2 Be**  
*Ian Harrison, New Mexico*  
*Ball Point Pen on Envelope, 2019*



See Hear Speak No Evil  
*Becenti Virgarrett, New Mexico*  
*Ball Point Pen on Envelope, 2019*

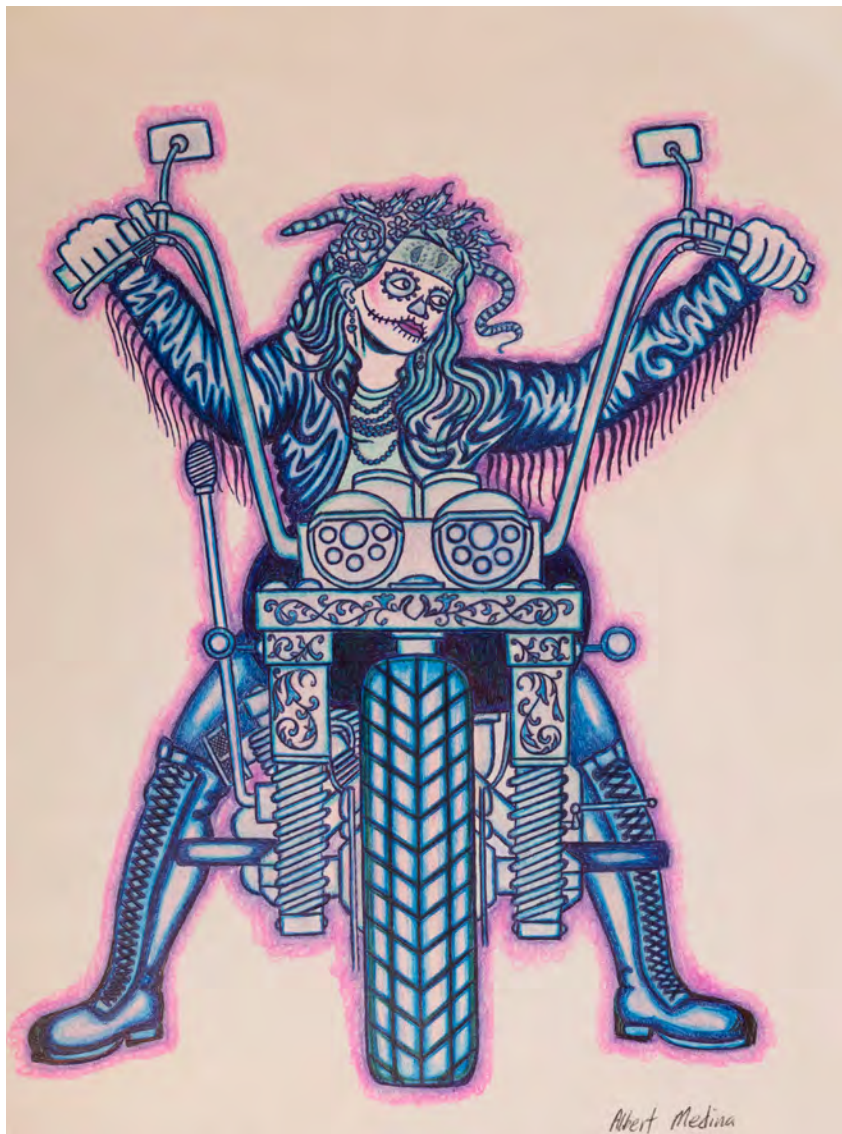
Never...yet  
*Matthew Feeney, Minnesota*

I've never parachuted from a plane  
I've never panned for Yukon gold  
I've never dozed in a sleeper train  
or gone ice-fishing in the winter cold.

I've never built a home with my own two hands  
and though I've had the urges:  
I've never been to *Burning Man*  
or rode my bike to Sturgis.

I've never raced an RC drone  
I've never been fly fishin'  
I've never milked a goat of my own  
And this ain't just idle wishin'.

Though I've never walked through a Redwood tree  
I'll do all these things (*and more*)... when I'm free.



## Janis Joplin

*Albert Alan Medina, New Mexico  
Colored Pencil & Pen on Paper, 2019*

## Emily Destiny

*Michael Lee-Lootih'nisa Moore, Alabama*

My sister  
Rests by the edge  
Of the broken stream

I am on the other side  
Stretching out  
My hand silently calling

She's shut her eyes  
In a nimbus of light  
Uncertainty holds her in its sway

Only minutes  
S e p a r a t e u s  
The gap rapidly widens

She is afraid  
Transfixed on the four  
Movements it takes to follow

I want to go back for her  
I am pulled forward  
FORCEPS locked on my head

She's stranded  
Surrounded—untouched  
Toys and unworn dresses

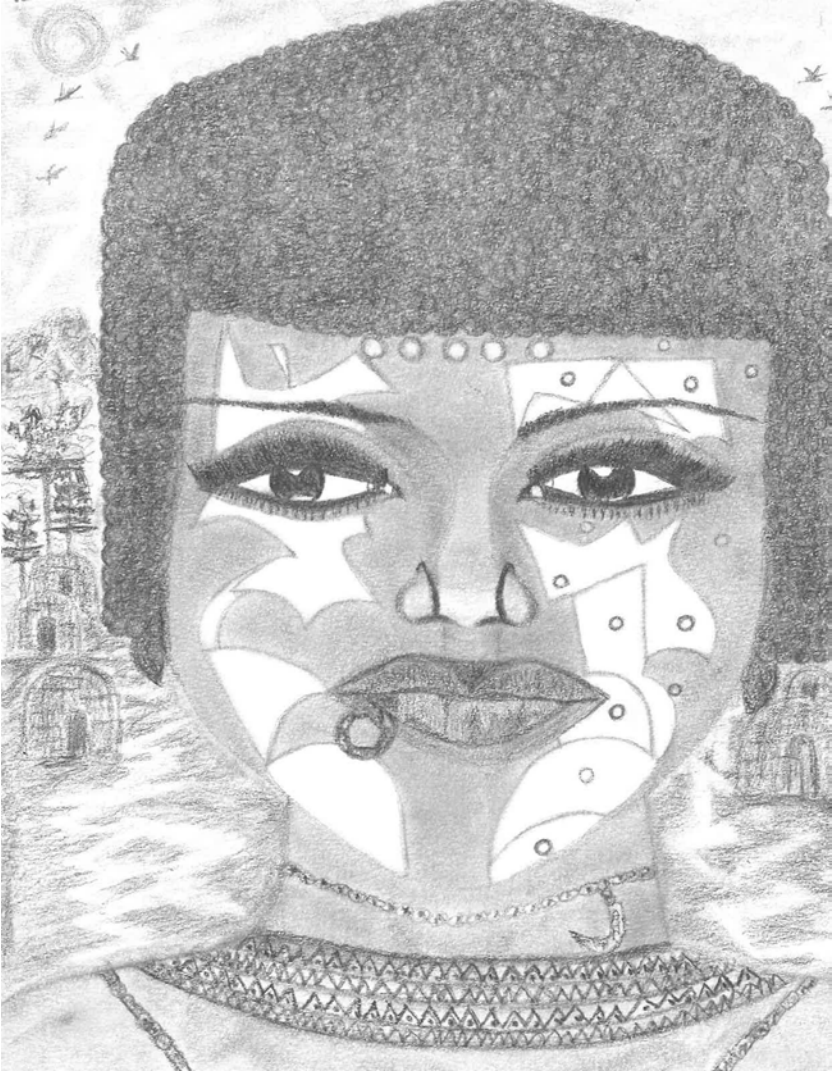
minutes . . . minutes  
s e p a r a t e u s  
now YEARS

I am past 50  
now edging back



to the stream  
on the other side  
we will run together  
laughing and playing

Wait for me  
Emily Destiny  
I am coming



**Betrothed: Blue Berry**  
*Daniel Lee Thompson, Arizona*  
*Graphite, 2019*



**Betrothed: Leaf**

*Daniel Lee Thompson, Arizona*

*Graphite, 2019*

## Mi soledad

*Dany Medina, Florida*

Te has convertido en mi soledad Perfecta.  
Me has contemplado en noches oscuras.  
Has abarcado mi cuerpo y mi piel:  
has transformado toda mi figura.

Haciendo de mí un invierno sin verano  
y causando que mis ojos se conviertan en mar,  
llenando mis mejillas de ríos con mis llantos,  
dejando en mis labios el gusto de tu sal.

Me has acompañado siempre en la vida.  
Has sido la testigo de mis secretos.  
Me has demostrado que el amor tiene espinas  
y se oculta en lo profundo de mi pecho.

Ya entiendo cuando dices que somos iguales  
porque no ahí nada que nos separe a los dos.  
Me gusta cuando hablas con puras verdades,  
Aunque siempre me partas duro el corazón.

Por eso ven y acuéstate conmigo  
y dame el silencio que me hace llorar.  
Ya nadie me quiere y eres testigo,  
De esta condena que no tiene final.

---

## My Loneliness

*Dany Medina, Florida*

You have become my perfect loneliness,  
Have thought of me on dark nights.  
Have encompassed my body and my skin,  
Have transformed my whole being.

You've made me a winter without summer  
and caused my eyes to become a sea,  
filling my cheeks with rivers of weeping,  
and leaving on my lips the savor of your salt.

You have always accompanied me in life  
and thus been the witness of my secrets.  
You have shown me that love has thorns:  
It hides deep in my chest.

I understand when you say we are the same  
Because nothing separates us.  
I like it when you speak plain truth,  
Even when it breaks my heart.

So come and lie down with me,  
And give me the silence that makes me cry.  
Nobody loves me anymore and you are a witness  
Of this sentence that has no end.

—*Translated by*  
*Jacqueline Aguilar and Cornelia "Corri" Wells*



Serenity  
*Stewart Gonzales, Arizona*  
*Acrylic PAINT, 2018*



## Love at a Distance

*Kazten Somari, Arizona*

*Mixed Media, 2019*

## Legacy

*Ken Meyers, Pennsylvania*

My sleeping bag. Use it for me.

Let your scent replace mine,

or better, merge with mine,  
become one, as we once were.

Let this be the redolence of our journeys,  
the artifact of our memories.





## Thunder

*Albert Alan Medina, New Mexico  
Colored Pencil & Pen on Paper, 2019*

# Unnamed

*Ken Meyers, Pennsylvania*

laundry tag:  
name, number, date of issue

shard of identity  
scrap, proof

separated from flesh  
by cloth on cloth on cloth

falls free  
revealing

another name another number another date  
another soul sacrificed here

another name struck  
from the rolls of society



Edmund

*Kazten Somari, Arizona*

*Mixed Media, 2019*

## A Meditation on Impermanence

*Ken Meyers, Pennsylvania*

This the Buddha taught: that  
desire leads to suffering.

And this the Buddha taught: that  
all things are impermanent.

Even desire, even suffering,  
even these are impermanent.

And this too the Buddha taught: that  
wisdom can overcome desire.

But I am not wise.

I want you, and I suffer this desire.  
I want you, and I suffer this absence.

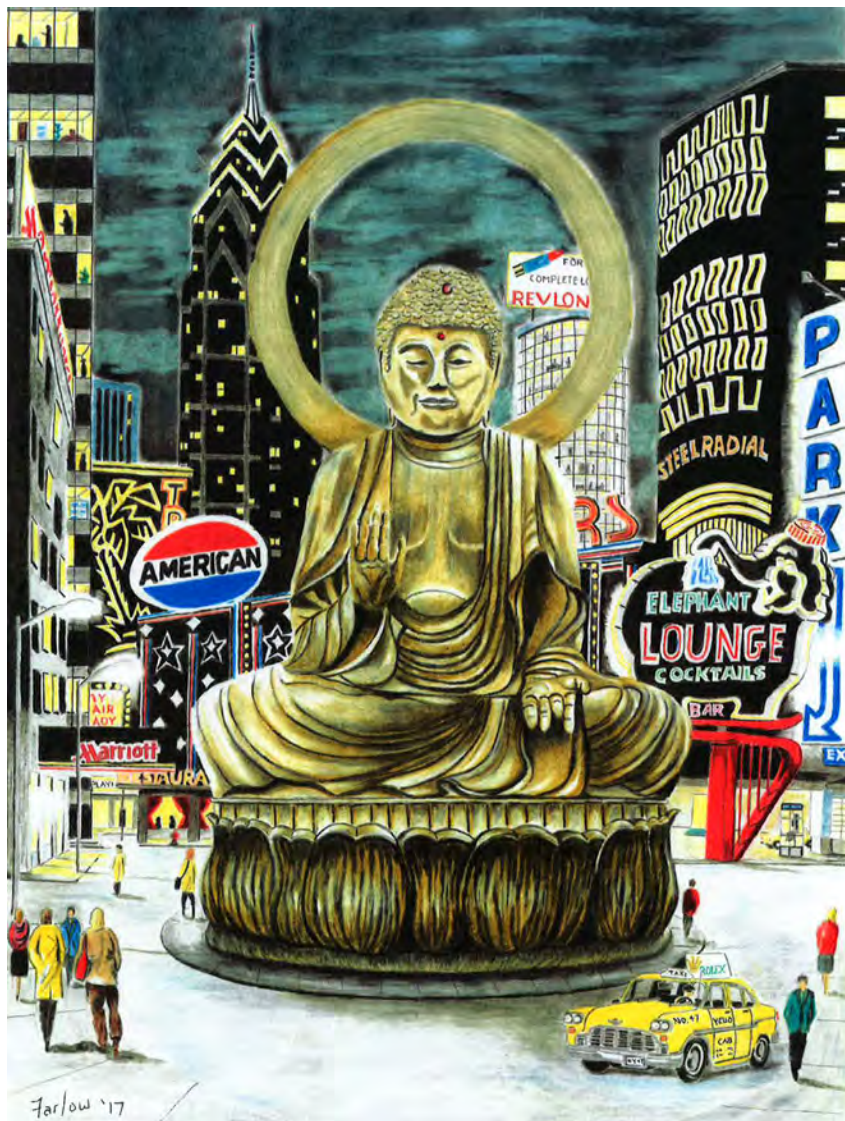
I wish I could treasure the moments we shared  
more than I regret those we can't.

I wish each memory of you didn't  
manifest the ache of your absence.

If I could from this learn acceptance,  
if I could from this accept impermanence,

this would be wisdom.

But instead, I crave your presence,  
and I despair of the impossibilities.



East Meets West  
Gary K. Farlow, North Carolina  
Colored Pencil, 2017

## Consorting

*Ian C. Smith, Australia*

They shot one boy, tough with need  
a bloody hole clear through his hopes.

From the train, factories and foundries  
rusted angles, raw paths I know well.  
Clouds sprawl across the sky  
stimulating my stalled imagination  
my past giving off an ashen light.  
No more lying curled and still  
waiting for the slamming of heavy doors.  
I shall pay attention, feed my brain  
so death will not gain on me  
as I read my way into the future.  
When I look up from turning pages  
I want to see women with hair shining  
in a town lazy like any other  
wild with the taste of air and rain  
or sunlight catching children's bicycles  
scenes to keep life from getting out of hand.

Cool scents through an open window at night  
exhausted blood returning to my heart  
a new leaf turned by the breeze as I read  
my escape, my salvation, well planned.



**Inside/Outside (Project)**  
*Leo Carrera and Jenn Vargas, California*  
*Mixed Media, 2019*  
*Project PAIN T Artwork*

## Abuse

*Ian C. Smith, Australia*

Suffering sets the ex-prisoner apart.  
He enjoys—not loves—too much.  
The city sparkles with anguish  
glistens like lubricated leather.  
That skyline, sex, wealth, signs  
others who touch, friends together  
their laughter, frenzy of chatter.  
Every delight thrashes his mind  
and the scars of these thrashings  
sever him from the rest  
more than visible disfigurement.

His lumbering sway of hibernation  
is sealed inside a sheath of silence.  
Tactile sensation, even words  
glitter like homicidal eyes.  
He is inside someone who hates him.  
The power of his memory's reprise  
his joy and his guilt is such  
that others hesitate in the face  
of what he endures, lost language  
the feeling he could shatter  
should he kiss a moist, pretty mouth.





## Inside/Outside (Project)

*Zac Harmon and Anna Stump, California*

*Acrylic, Pen, and Collage on Canvas Paper, 2019*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

## Passing By

*Timothy Standfield, Alabama*

Under the glare of a watchful eye,  
I sit and stare as the world goes by.  
Through tiny squares I wistfully peer  
As the people pass, not seeing me here.  
About their lives they go each day,  
but in this spot I'm forced to stay.  
All those faces that NEVER SEE  
So much as the shadow cast by me.  
In their world I do not exist  
but in my vigil daily I persist,  
for in their passing I'm able to find  
a sliver of hope that eases my mind:  
the hope that soon I'll again be free  
and a passing car is what I'll be.



## Imagined Space vs Observed Place

*Ricardo Barrera, California*

*Pencil on Bristol, 2016*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

## Late Night Carousal

*Lindsey Saya, Arizona*

Tonight we drink hooch.  
 Tonight we break the rules.  
 Tonight we drown  
 In botulism juice.  
 And breathe out hot, putrid  
                   Inebriation.

Tonight we forget what we are.

Tonight we pass bottles of milky  
 Liquid, smelling of bitterness  
 And vileness,           a witch's brew,  
 Like we've poured           iniquities.  
                                   in our own

Tonight we drink  
 Pulpy, milky fire  
 We've distilled  
 Through old socks.

And when that buzz is working  
 Through us, claiming us,  
 We'll start laughing

                                  and Hector and Smiley are scrapping again  
                                   and Hector and Smiley are friends again

And when the guards walk by with their keys  
           Clanging and their boots stomping,  
 We get real quiet, like startled crickets,  
 And when they pass, we are laughing. Laughs  
 That can't be confiscated.  
           And the bottles are being passed.

And we are breaking the rules tonight.



## POETRY

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Into each other's mouths until  
They are one,  
And one day is all days, and a seed  
Will breed  
In our brains: madness.

Cuz tomorrow we will walk through a garden of walls  
And flowers made of razors and wires,  
And the smell of their pollen will poison us again.

Cuz tomorrow when we're all sobered up,  
We'll eat crisp fruit from the vines of our hearts.  
And taste dead sweetness  
And spit out fate  
Again.

Cuz the days and the hours and the seconds  
Come-a-steamrolling over us.

So tonight we break the rules  
Tonight we drink hooch.



## Animal Portrait (Frogs)

*Michael Bishop, California*

*Watercolor, 2019*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

The Departed  
*Lindsey Saya, Arizona*

We are ghosts,

Wanderers.

Like greedy hummingbirds, we

Lap up the last drop of our honeyed memories,

Latching

Onto days gone by.

Life, the wonderful scar.

And we,

Like bruised-up lovers,

Come back for more.

Obstinate, insubstantial fools.

And the crows,

The crows,

Black feathered friends

Wait to take us home.





The Crow (Trading Card)

*Juan Sanchez, California*

*Linocut, 2018*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

## The Prisoner Bids Farewell to His Prison

*Lindsey Saya, Arizona*

I give you to the dark, goodbye, goodbye.  
Am free to leap and taste the sun's gold flame.  
No more chains, no more binds, I leave you behind.

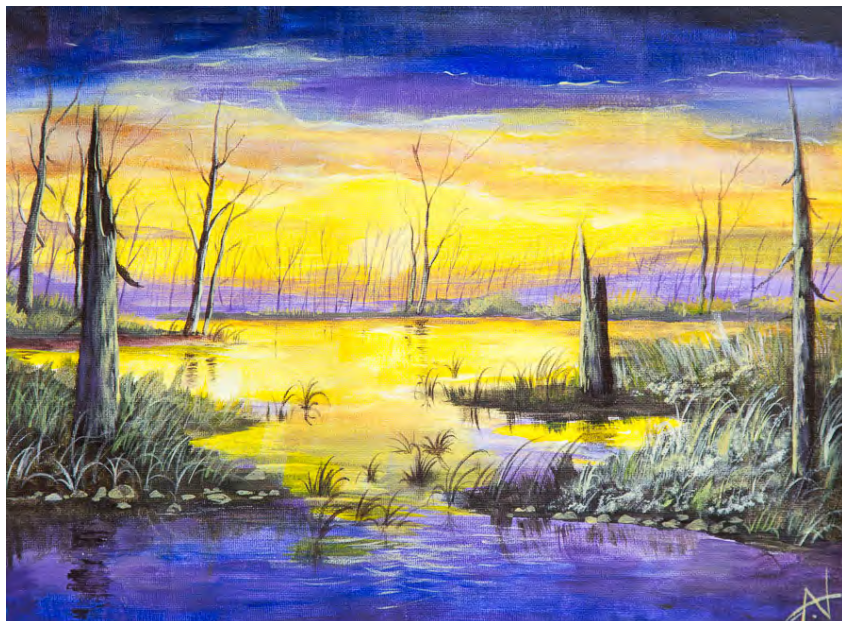
From the muck and the mud I will rise  
To breathe the air that's sweetest beyond the gates.  
I give you to the dark, goodbye, goodbye.

Farewell lonesome cave of mine,  
The grave that held my heart and shame.  
No more chains, no more binds, I leave you behind.

What bleeding sunsets and blue twilights await my eyes.  
How I'll stand in drops of rain and let the wildness in me wash away.  
I give you to the dark, goodbye, goodbye.

My debt is met and I  
Make peace with grief and hate that swells inside my veins.  
No more chains, no more binds, I leave you behind.

To the place where hopes and dreams of savage beings are meant to die,  
Where broken men like shattered glass wait to turn to dust, I say:  
I give you to the dark, goodbye, goodbye.  
No more chains, no more binds, I leave you behind.



## Untitled

*Anh Ben Nguyen, California*

*Acrylic on Paper, 2014*

*Project PAINT Artwork*



Surrealist Final Project

*Jonathan Marvin, California*

*Acrylic on Canvas Board, 2019*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

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## Pain Is Real

*Elias, Texas*

In a world complete  
strife is the greatest miracle  
how it surfaces  
in me  
a cage in the mist  
I must be fragmented  
twin flames  
one is the mother  
one is me  
and with the Father  
we might find grace  
and go  
where time is naught  
the original division  
so grant me the peace  
my brother  
that I shall know Her

Winding Light  
*Elias, Texas*

I am against being against things  
    a regular antidisestablishmentarian  
        a man for All seasons  
like fútbol  
        where being  
is being for  
        the flow  
of the Rio Grande



## Impressionist Landscape

*Kazten Somari, Arizona*

*Mixed Media, 2018*

# How Nature Taught Me to Sing in Lockup

*Ken Lamberton, Arizona*

Prison is a wild place.

I discovered an affection for nature in childhood and pursued it through college. But it was in prison where I learned to be a naturalist. Prison narrowed my education to a more intimate study. I understood that while nature has no restrictions, I had many, so I focused on seeing nature within my limitations. I became uncivilized in a manipulated landscape that warned me to be unobtrusive and quiet, yet alert. To notice things. Like the impenitent weeds, the trespasses of birds and insects. Like the night owls that violated the perimeter fences to feed on the mice and remind me of a world still untamed and mysterious. And the ants: those sexless worker drones that crawled about the prison grounds in hordes, carrying out menial jobs as masons and carpenters and waste-disposal crews, farmers, and food-handlers. They obeyed without thinking, doing what they were told, sustaining a colony that only existed to devour and multiply. I couldn't escape the parallels.

In his essay, "The Case for Going Uncivilized," Barry Lopez says there are truly wild places that offer a kind of illumination that can take the darkness out of contemporary life, that help us regain "the sense of balance that the persistent closeness of strangers, the screech and mumble of machinery, and the needling presence of advertising threaten, every day, to overturn."

On every lap during my daily exercise walks, as I passed along the length of fence that enclosed my 20-acre world, my eyes always turned to the trees. They, like other bits of wildness confined or visiting there, touched some vital part of me. Those trees lessened the darkness of the place and allowed me to see what was right in the world.

I watched one tree grow over the years from a transplanted stick into a humid, bug-clicking canopy of wrought-iron branches and hard green leaves despite successive seasons of mindless pruning. I would sit against its sun—and wind—furrowed trunk and breathe in the smell of its obstinacy. The mesquite was a survivor. It had overcome years of butchery yet remained robust. Most springs, it produced a crop of seed pods, which drooped in clusters like blonde dreadlocks; some winters it even held onto its leaves. But the mesquite grew askew, hunching away from a nearby building as if crippled by the heaviness of its gray walls.

It taught me many lessons. I learned the difference between



pruning something for its own good, following its natural form and inclinations, and pruning something with no more purpose in mind than retribution. This, I decided, was the difference between discipline and punishment: one looks forward and works toward restoration and health; the other looks backward and tears down, dehumanizes. Pruning should enhance, not maim. It was ironic how prison treated its plants and inmates in the same way.

The mesquite tree was the only one of its kind at the prison. It was alone but not withdrawn. Cicadas trilled among its branches. Fat carpenter bees carted off sacks of its pollen. Ground squirrels feasted on its sweet pods. The tree seemed obstinate only in the way that life is obstinate. Despite the buildings and fences that confined it, the concrete slabs beneath it, despite even the brutal punishment of its careless pruning, the mesquite emerged each spring with offerings of leaves and shade, pollen and seeds. This was what struck me: The tree didn't shrink from that place.

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The writer Alison Deming says we need to outgrow the childish notion that nature takes place only in wilderness. Wendell Berry says that the whole world is wild, and “all the creatures are home-makers within it, practicing domesticity: mating, raising young, seeking food and comfort.” Anne Matthews, in her book, *Wild Nights: Nature Returns to the City*, writes that “Wild does not always mean natural; urban is not the same as tame. Even in Manhattan, you are never more than three feet from a spider.” In prison, the spiders share your pillow.

Prison shoved me toward a love for wildness. Along with the arachnids, I shared my pillow with writers like Deming and Berry and Lopez and many others whose words about the natural world exploded my confinement.

I saw how the visitations of toads, those golden-eyed miracles of summer, connected me to my three young daughters who were just beginning to discover their own love for nature. I found lessons in the breakouts of weeds among the concrete and steel, in the spring intrusion of barn swallows that nested under the eaves of our cells.

I learned to gauge my life by the swallows. Their nature, like many things in the world, was cyclic; they lived inside the heartbeat of the land. Ebb and flow, flex and flux, rise and fall. It was a pattern I could live with, one that gave me hope. As long as the swallows came in the spring and went in the fall, came and went and came again, I could

feel their rhythm, measuring it out as a change of seasons. This was the source of my hope: the swallows didn't make me feel the weight of time, they cued me to the passage of time. Where ancient peoples raised stones to track equinoxes and solstices, the swallows were my Stonehenge. In a place where clocks and calendars were meaningless, where hours and days and months percolated into one homogenous, stagnant pond, I marked the swallows.

If I could measure time by the migrations of swallows and connect with my daughters through the wisdom of toads, anything was possible. I could learn about human passion in the exploits of spiders. I could feel the importance of trees. I could restore my faith in wildness with the single appearance of a great horned owl.

I had found an unlimited wildness in prison. And in this, as undeserved as it was, I found redemption in the fact that life is no accident. Life is universal. It is like a fifth state of matter.

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From my upper bunk, a narrow window allowed me a view of the desert outside my cell. An expanse of razed ground, marked with a horizon of galvanized steel webbing, filled the lower two thirds of the frame. But beyond the fence, an entire basin of creosote, mesquite, and cholla cactus leaned up against the hunched shoulders of the Santa Rita Mountains at our border with Mexico. On some evenings, coyotes called to me with borderless voices from the desert's fringe where nighthawks knit the sky with needled wings.

For twelve years, my wilderness was a limited geography bound by chain link and razor wire. My wilderness was a prison with its own nuances of seasonal change, summer droughts and winter freezes, rain, dust, and wind; with its own microcosm of wildness. Nature was there as much as it is in any national park or forest or monument.

Most people probably think that prisoners wake up every morning as bodies on mattresses that move through pointless days, bodies at work raking rocks, bodies at meals, bodies in front of TV's, bodies that live without participating in life. This is true for some. But there are others who see beyond the concrete walls and scraped earth, or see into it, between the cracks, those who notice the stubborn untamed, feel its moods, hear its migrations, sense its shiftings and pulses. Those who sense nature not by accident but by paying attention. Serendipity, after all, is a matter of will. As Pagan Kennedy suggests in "How to Cultivate the Art of Serendipity" (*New York Times*, Jan. 2, 2016), those Persian

princes from the Isle of Serendip weren't just lucky as much as they were keen observers. Did the finches of Galapagos find Darwin? Or was it his creative mind that sought them out?

The human mind comprehends no boundary, no edge. It is a nerve-tangled pathway that wires us to wildness, a current that flows in both directions. Nature can access the hardest criminals, finding weaknesses and breaching barriers, building nests and rearing offspring. Place windows facing toward the migrations of birds, and we will count them. Open cell doors to the toads and tarantulas and we will learn from them. Plant trees and we will sit under them. Even in the deepest prison holes where society's worst offenders are kept, we will attune ourselves to the proceedings of cockroaches. Nature returns us to that childhood place where we register astonishment at the very mundane until we become exhausted by the euphoria.

I spent most of my twelve-year sentence inside the chain link fences at the Santa Rita Unit in Tucson, Arizona. The prison housed more than nine hundred men on four yards, cell blocks of ninety-six two-man cells, and one tent city of canvas, military leftovers. A half-mile dirt exercise track circled a field and a pocket oasis of trees, shrubs, and flower beds. The leaves and grass and blooms masked the stench of fear and desperation. They cut holes in the fences and broke open the stark, gray aspect of walls. This was not unusual. Like great art, nature's purpose is to disturb, to jar us out of our complacency in the world. Even if our world is a prison.

During my last years at Santa Rita, however, the climate changed. Nature became a problem. The trees had grown too tall. Someone might climb one, hide among the branches, and imagine he's escaped. The shrubs had grown too lush. Someone might lie down and disappear into the leaves. Crews with chainsaws and backhoes worked feverishly to correct the security error: All the brittlebush and agave, the Texas ranger, all the Mexican bird of paradise, the desert willow had to go—cut down, chopped into sections, wrenched from the ground. The few trees that survived the clearing lacked all lower branches, their skinny trunks winding comically into high, tight crowns like trees in a Dr. Seuss story.

Imagine the Sonoran Desert without the saguaro. Without the mesquite and palo verde and drought-withered cholla cactus. Today, it's all gone. And the men remain locked inside their cells. No longer do they walk circles in soaking monsoon storms or rest on sun-glazed

grass among poppies and mint. No longer do they sit at tables with mourning doves perched on their shoulders, these men who once knew the intrinsic value of nature lying against the skin, even if they were unaware of how profoundly it touched them.

Maybe it's farfetched to suggest that nature can teach anything of worth to prisoners. Prison already has such excellent role models. Those who have mastered the art of filling their days with narrowed options. But I would rather learn from nature than learn from prison. I would rather be a disciple of saguaros and centipedes. Nature cuts through more hard layers than punishment ever will, ever could. For me, nature reached to the place where hope lay, and hope was a better security system than all the guards and fences and electric locks. For twelve years hope was my jailer.

Cut off nature from anyone and you cut off hope—something more inhuman than taking away his freedom. I can't imagine doing time there now—without tasting wildness, without learning how to live from the twisted and obstinate. Prison taught me to be unobtrusive and quiet, to always go with the flow, to never make waves. Nature taught me that a wind without resistance has no voice. That a river without stones cannot sing.

###

Ken Lamberton was released from prison in 2000. His first book, *Wilderness and Razor Wire: A Naturalist's Observations from Prison*, won the 2002 John Burroughs Medal for outstanding nature writing.



## Wood

*Kazten Somari, Arizona*

*Mixed Media, 2019*

## The Filth We Wear

*Lindsey Saya, Arizona*

Institutionalized.

I've often wondered if I'm institutionalized. I don't feel institutionalized. To be honest, after 15 years of being here, in prison, locked up, I don't know what that means, to be institutionalized, or what it's supposed to feel like.

I guess after a decade and a half of long days and even longer nights spent in prison cells, I should know what it means.

Prison cells. I've been in quite a few. They're all the same. They are small and cramped with a double bunk or a single (if you're lucky), made of metal, bolted to the walls, as if to prevent the bunks from escaping, as if they were thinking it too like all us cons do (something we do to keep from going crazy, I suppose). Maybe that's why they're bolted down, as a reminder, to let us know we're bolted down too. Maybe they don't want to be there any more than we do. The walls must churn out, pre-made, from the same company because they too are all the same: cinderblock, dimpled, pock-marked, like braille under our fingers, the walls' own secret language, so they can tell their story, so they can keep it hidden, from the guards, from the system, so it won't get erased. White. That is the color they choose to paint these walls. It is a neutral color, a harmless color, maybe to signify that the walls are harmless. To pacify. To keep us passive. It doesn't work.

But these are just things, details. What is a prison cell really?

A prison cell is the opposite of a human being. It is empty and cold and bland, dull. Whereas human beings, in our natural state, are an amalgam of life. Of what makes life bearable and beautiful. Of compassion and kindness and hope. And as duality dictates, of hate and cruelty. But mostly (I believe) of love. A cell, on the other hand, is indifference. It cares not of love, or hate, or compassion, or prayers, or God, or tears, or taunts, or violence, or blood, no more than a volcano cares if there are people living on its slopes when it blows. To be in a prison cell is to become like the prison cell: cold, empty, indifferent. We are creatures of mimicry and adaptation. With enough time, we all become the cell, those of us who are acquainted with these walls. Maybe that's institutionalization.

People are a collection of memories, those of heartache and of rapture. I suppose that's the one thing in common a cell has with a

person. Its ability or rather its nature to hold memory, like an old, damp sponge, absorbing, soaking up the grime of our hearts, the hearts of those who've counted the stars one by one through a sliver of tempered glass, hoping, perhaps, that by the time they get done those cell walls will have disintegrated into sand. I guess if you really looked—felt—you'd feel the memory of the broken, the crazy, the hated and the hateful.

Sometimes these cells leave messages: a blood stain here, a hidden shank there. Mostly you find them scrawled in pencil on the undersides of top bunks, waiting to be read by whoever has drawn the lucky bottom bunk ticket. A bible verse maybe, *Let he who is without sin cast the first stone*, a line explaining that El Terrible hailing from the Westside was there, or just a name wanting to be read, like Crazy Eddie or Shorty, sort of like names in a guest book at a fancy bed and breakfast. I've seen those names, touched those lead-scribbled words with the edges of my brown fingers. I've wondered who they were. Human beings that didn't want to be forgotten, their last message drifting in a bottle hoping to find someone, anyone. And what is it about those names that compel you to add your own to the list, as if Crazy Eddie and El Terrible are inviting you to be part of the club. I have left my mark, a part of myself. Maybe I didn't have a choice. Maybe a cell isn't as empty as I thought. Maybe there is plenty of memory soaked in these walls.

We call it home, our prison cells.

We walk the yard, tough as nails, with our chests pumped out and our heads held high as if we want to pick a fight with the world, cruising along chain-link fences and rolling waves of endless barbed-wire. We pass the cons working out, with their shirts off, their green tattoos of skulls and twisting snakes and guard towers and sequential years, a history of their lives, a warning. They crank out hundreds of reps, pull-ups, push-ups, over and over, every day, like the ticking hands of a clock, routine. There are the card sharks and the domino players who slam down those white tiles, screaming, "Domino fool!" The smokers congregate here and there, and we walk through their clouds of storm-grey smoke. Their fingertips are yellow and burnt from smoking filterless cigarettes. They burn through cigarette after cigarette until they reek of it, until their food lockers are empty because of it. They need it like they need the breath in their lungs. The same can be said about the heroine junkies.

The heroine junkies sit at tables, slyly passing around a syringe, sharing it indiscriminately. They loll about, torpid, scratching at their necks, nodding out, existing in an in-between world. And when their escape is over, they'll spend every cent they have, trade every last bit of their few belongings—toilet paper, bars of soap, toothpaste, socks, underwear, shoes—all for a fleeting release. I imagine killing their bodies is the only release they have, a morbid sense of freedom.

The yard is alive with smokers and junkies and workout nuts, and when we've made enough rounds, walked enough circles, we say, "Alright, homie, I'll check you out later. I'm going home." The O.G.s used to say, "Orrale, ese, I'll see you al rato. I'm going to my chante, my pad, mi casa." The yard is the neighborhood and our cells are our home.

Funny, home used to be the smell of my madre's cooking, chile colorado boiling in a pan, corn tortillas warming over a flame, her voice hollering through the house, announcing dinner. It used to be Christmas Eve, the whole family in the kitchen, making tamales, our brown hands spreading masa over corn husks and layering them with red chili beef, while my abuelita told me of her days in the old country, Mexico, when the streets were still made of dirt and dust, when shoes and meat were a luxury—even then they made tamales.

Home used to be a white house with salmon trim and a small tree in the front yard, the white paint chipping away from its tough bark skin. My father's 1983 Oldsmobile hunkered in the driveway, wearing the canyon dent I put in the passenger door when I was sixteen, the rearview mirror that had fallen out of place long ago and rested on the dashboard, the driver window that couldn't be rolled down because it would fall sideways—when that happened one would have to hold it in place with one hand while driving with the other. The beast, my friends and I called it, a sputtering thing that could be heard from around the corner.

Home was a clubhouse in our backyard that my father and I spent the summer building together when I was a boy. It towered high off the ground on stilts, because we didn't have a tree to make a proper treehouse of it. That summer my father spent the weekends in the glaring sun all the way into the evening, swinging his hammer away, his tool belt on his hip and me carrying two-by-fours pretending to be of any use. When our brows dripped with sweat and our bellies grumbled with hunger, we sat in that halfway built clubhouse drinking cold soda and eating bologna sandwiches, together, admiring our work.



Home used to be my mother reading a book at the dinner table late into the night. Behind her glasses her little eyes would scroll across the pages of a drugstore paperback novel, her brow hidden behind her grey bangs, the color defying the blackness of the rest of her hair, a ceramic mug of hot coffee on the table beside her, the heat drifting away in swirling wisps. Sitting there, she would soak in the quiet solitude while my father and brother slept, and I would watch her from the doorway, making sure not to disturb her, as she read on like a sage swimming in wisdom. Seeing her there—night after night, when I was as a boy, a teenager, a young man, knowing that her only concern was the words in her book—filled me with a great sense of peace, seeing her at peace. I imagined the turning of the world depended on her reading every night. That was home. Maybe that's institutionalization, forgetting where you come from, pretending, accepting, that bricks and steel and emptiness are home.

Maybe institutionalization is stepping over a dead body and not blinking. Maybe it's watching a man get kicked and stomped and battered in the darkness of his cell. Maybe it's watching him try to crawl out, the fear and horror ripped across his face as he is dragged back into that dark cave by the shadows behind him while he cries out and begs and deep down feeling nothing because you know he has it coming, has broken some rule. I can't help but find the irony in it. We're all rule breakers. Prison rules trump other rules, I guess.

Maybe institutionalization is not crying when you hear that cancer has taken someone close to you, like your abuelita, who used to sit beside you for hours in the small, crowded visitation room on hot summer afternoons holding your hand as if you were still a boy. Her dark skin and grey eyes pulled on by age and sadness. Who says, "Estoy aquí contigo." *I'm in here with you.* You know she means it. And when she's gone, swept away, like a breath in the wind, not a single tear breaks from your eye. Even though you're supposed to, cry that is, but you don't.

In the movies about soldiers who've left the battlefield behind, they wake up in the middle of the night, sweating, panting, panicking, afraid, their faces wet and haunted. I imagine this is meant to imply that those who have seen tragedy and horror are broken by it. Not me. I don't have nightmares. I don't dream about the first person I saw get stabbed to death, the way his face shriveled in pain. I sleep just fine. I spend the days kicking it with the homies, laughing, cracking jokes,

watching the smokers and the junkies, the tough guys, the killers, the reformed killers, the “Jesus saved my soul” killers, and the homies and I just laugh, laugh at it all. And when the riots come, I don’t worry.

When the sirens are singing out and the booms of concussion grenades are screaming their war cries and the voices of guards over loud speakers are blaring and the bitter, burning smell of mace is drenching the air, so that your eyes and your nose and your lungs feel like they’re taking in hot lava, when wild animals that used to be men are clambering over each other, over the fences, over the rules, over their own humanity, I don’t get worried. I get ready. To shed my own humanity, like a second skin I peel neatly off my body.

None of it bothers me anymore. It is normal to me.

Normal.

Maybe that’s it.

When the not-normal becomes normal.

The normalization of the abnormal.

I am not institutionalized. I am abnormal. Maybe that’s worse. Maybe they’re the same.

I wonder how long it will take for me to become normal normal again. I wonder if the outside world has a remedy. I wonder if it will take the opposite of what I’ve seen to cure me. Acts of kindness. Acts of patience. Acts of love. How many of them will it take? Maybe there’s no such thing as institutionalization. Maybe I just am. Maybe it’s just a fancy word to say that I’m fucked. I hope I’m wrong.

Maybe institutionalization is like a layer of filth you wear after playing in the dirt all day. Maybe I just need to take a long, hot bath in clear waters. I long for those waters. I long for their warmth. I long to be clean.



**View from My Cell**  
*Anh Ben Nguyen, California*  
*Pencil on Paper, 2014*  
*Project PAINT Artwork*

## A Home Away from Home

*Lindsey Saya, Arizona*

From the doorway, I stare into my prison cell for the last time, the brick box. My eyes creep along each craggy groove of each cinder block of each pale white wall, as if my eyes could defy the grip that cell has on me. I glance at my bed, a gray steel frame with a misshapen lump of foam for a mattress. I think of the many mornings I woke up with twisted knots of ache in my back, as if even our beds were designed to punish us. I think of the many dreams I had in that lonely bed. I often dreamt of home. That place where the smell of enchiladas cooking swept through the air like a message of good tidings, where the eyes that watched over me didn't belong to sneering guards but my mother, where the walls were made of something soft and kind, decorated with framed photos of grinning family and unflattering baby pictures of myself, walls not made of hard, cold brick and metal and razor wire like thick steel brambles made to suffocate and tear at my heart and flesh. I dreamt of a home where those who shared it weren't trying to kill me, or steal from me, or irritate me, whose faces were not ravaged by hate and contempt. No, these were bright-eyed, love-you-till-you-die faces. I dreamt of a never-lonely place, a home that was more like a hug whose warmth wraps you up and stays with you. And outside this home were no fences and spotlights. In my dreams, I could walk as far as I pleased, eager to seek out other human beings, an adventurer on a quest to discover humanity.

Standing here I think of the fifteen years that have gone just like that, as if a gust of wind had swept them away. I take a last look at my cell and make my peace with it, my captor and my companion.

That was three months ago. I am free now. The home I dreamt of was sold a long time ago, during the early years of my incarceration, abandoned by my mother and father and younger brother for the city of lights, Las Vegas. She didn't want to, she told me, once, during one of her prison visits, a streak of wetness lining the rim of her shadowy dark eyes, but life rarely affords us what we want. I imagine she felt guilty for being so far away from me, a guilt I also shared. And guilt, often, has no remedy, only a byproduct: suffering. And so, a million, billion, trillion miles of desert between us, we suffered together.

Weeks later, in my aunt's home, where I've paroled to, I stare at my feet in the shower, see them shrivel in the hot water that never goes cold

(what luxury). The aged yellow of the tub is slick against my soles. The water cascades in copious streams along my feet's hills and ranges. They feel vulnerable, there, against the bathtub. No sandals to keep them safe from the filth and virus-filled showers of prison, like soldiers without their armor. But they aren't in prison anymore. They are no longer wanderers in a hungry land where the world means to eat them.

My aunt's house looks cut out of an Arizona dream-home catalogue, with its pink rock and gravel yard and remnants of the wild desert in the distance, now being pushed out by the lights and structures of civilization. I live with three aunts, my older brother, and my eighteen-year-old cousin. We all sit together at dinner, my family and I, around a long, wooden table. I stare at my fork, the way the light glides along its slender, metal body. I feel its firmness in my fingers. I taste its metallic skin, as if its silver-sheen atoms deposited into my mouth. My teeth sense the steel intruder, the foreigner. They fear the metal prongs. My teeth shudder at the thought of all that metal scraping against their enameled bones. They secretly long for the familiarity of a spork. A metal fork, once considered a weapon in my hands, now just a tool meant for eating.

Sometimes I draw back the curtains in my room, when I can stand the searing Arizona heat, and I stare at sun-dipped horizons with their honey-hued gleams, a scene without barbed wire blocking my view, smearing away the beauty of it. The horizon is never too far away, a mindful parent. It bleeds into the world with the color of grapefruit guts. I am a pilgrim in its presence, a traveler from a caged city that restrained my heart from the kindness of stretching horizons far too long.

One day I stand in front of the kitchen pantry, the door wide open, and stare...at boxes of Cocoa Puffs and Lucky Charms and granola bars and whole grain rice and wild rice and instant rice. They lounge there with the tin cans of tuna and corn, beans, and pineapple chunks, like dutiful servants prepared to offer their lives as tribute to my hunger. I stare at the crinkled bags of potato chips and corn chips, stuffed like balloons ready to pop and shower me with their salty innards. Ding Dongs and cupcakes on one shelf, oatmeal and roasted nuts on another. They seem like neighbors in an exclusive, eclectic apartment complex.

I want to wolf down one of each. I want to reach in and tear those sweet, salty, fatty delicacies from their packages, yank them from their boxes, squeeze them from their tins, as if I were Popeye crushing a

can of spinach into my mouth. As I stand there wanting to cram food into my gullet, I realize I'm not really hungry. There is so much food, I think, too much food. All the food I could ever want. In prison, we hoarded our food, our meek little packages of ramen soups or tiny baggies of week old goo that was supposed to be a mixture of peanut butter and jelly. Something we'd smuggle out of the chow hall because what we didn't finish eating couldn't be saved for later, no matter how much our grumbling stomachs whined. Sometimes we'd hide our stash of food from other convicts. I think of some of their faces, having to ask or bargain, maybe even beg, for a few slices of bread. It often weighed on me, that look of hunger, when I'd lie to them and say I had none, knowing I had a half loaf and maybe even some squeeze cheese hiding in my property box. But I'd lie often. And that is the nature of hunger, of survival. At least that's what I tell myself.

I worked as a porter at the prison, sweeping, mopping, and wiping down desks and countertops. I watched a guard tossing a tray of cookies into the garbage, leftovers from some retirement potluck they had for some old, hard-ass officer. I walked by that garbage can, my belly begging, my heart shaming itself for what it wanted. I remember my filthy hands digging into that white messy-with-trash-and-Lord-knows-what-else garbage bag, my head swiveling, craning over each shoulder in turn, afraid. I ate dirty handfuls of garbage cookies. And I remember how my heart wept tears of shame and self-loathing.

I am startled as my aunt comes up from behind and reaches for a nearly full, open bag of cookies. "They're past due," she says, and throws them in the garbage without tasting one. I lose any desire to eat.

My aunt's home has become my home. It is a quiet home. My room is peaceful and serene, empty. Often, the quiet bothers me, scares me. I wait for the obnoxious screams of grown men to ring out, but they never come. I remind myself that *I am* home. But sometimes, it doesn't feel like home. Looking out into the red horizons, I think of my prison friends. The world is a different place now. It doesn't understand me. Or perhaps, I no longer understand it. Everyone is so connected, with their swipes, and their *likes*, and their *friend me(s)* and *unfriend me(s)*. I tried it, am trying it, social media. I don't feel connected or social. I feel trapped in my home, in my quiet home, a new kind of prison. Everyone smiles in their pictures on their posts and their profiles and pages. Everyone's life is so glossy, full of "look at me" and "everything is beautiful." So many moments captured. A million, trillion stories. I

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have none, stories. Or at least, my stories aren't worth telling, not to the glossy people, not the social media socialites. My pages are empty. Not filled with beloved memories.

I lie in bed most nights, in the dark, in the hot dark. Sometimes I lie there with the curtains drawn open, letting the moon cast his net over me, his ghostly glow. The quiet scares me. The dark peacefulness of that quiet, that silence, scares me. As the darkness settles, pools around me, I grip my phone, holding it close to my face, the blue glare, like brush strokes painting my façade. I am the night watchman, watching them, the people of my past. In those late blue-glared hours, I swim across digital waters, wade through waves of cyberspace lives. I pour over hundreds of pics and posts. I wish I was them. The glossy people. Maybe I'm living their lives when I do this. I picture myself in their pictures, living their stories. Mine don't exist, so I syphon off theirs, like a ghoul, a vampire. Like a moth in the dark, I am drawn to their bright lives.

I am home now, the place I dreamt of for many years. And now, when the blue glow finally wanes and my eyelids feel like iron portcullises struggling to remain open, I think, "Is this home?"



Surrealist Final Project

*Michael Briggs, California*

*Acrylic on Canvas Board, 2019*

*Project PAINT Artwork*





## Surrealist Dream Pt.1

*Ricardo Barrera, California*

*Watercolor Pencil on Bristol, 2017*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

# My Daughter, My Road Dog

*Arthur D. Groneman, California*

January 2012. My daughter is six weeks old. I can hold her in the palm of my hand. I'm trying to figure how I got to this point.

It must have been late 2010 when I started hearing voices. Panic set in right away, and I tried to make immediate adjustments to my life—so that my fall would be softened. Having many goals and expectations for myself, I thought my life was over. My spirit was crushed.

Since 2005, I had been diagnosed as clinically depressed. Off and on since then, I took the medication but found that I could not function well enough to see through its effects. However, in 2006 I did manage to graduate with a degree in business with a concentration in finance. It took a toll on me and my savings, so I applied for social security disability income. On a technicality, it did not go through.

I decided taking medication that debilitated me would no longer suffice. I had dreaded this ordeal since I was young, when I was told that my biological parents were both schizophrenic. New to hearing voices, I suddenly quit everything important to me in my life.

My two years of dreaming and being in San Francisco, where my biological parents parted ways was over to me. There was no more will left in me to make it in the City, and extend myself the way I had. The Master's program at the Academy of Art University, over. The photography internship at the SF Station—San Francisco City Guide, over. The overnight clerk position at the gas station, over. The once a week janitorial work in the building I lived in, over.

Remembering the night I started hearing voices, I am surprised at the sense of panic that went through me. I would later be described as paranoid, crushed, and ajar. Hastily, I gave into my sense of panic and walked all the way to the San Francisco airport from Golden Gate Park. It took all night. I traveled mostly in the shadows without too many lights following the railroad tracks. Renting a minivan after arriving at the airport, I drove straight home, and emptied the contents of the room I rented out, in the back of the minivan. In just a few days I was in South Carolina to lean on my former foster mother, who had semi-retired there.

I left South Carolina for the first time in 2008. It was difficult to learn on my return that my foster mother had absolved herself from

any duty of being a parent and practically disowned me. It was as if she expected me, after finishing college, to get on SSI (Supplemental Security Income) and fade into oblivion. Having this realization, I went back to San Francisco after a year and tried to recoup my losses. My foster father avoided any obligation to help me, and I had too much esteem to go to him and become his burden. But that was the nature of the foster system beast. My foster parents only meant to be temporary guardians, not lifelong shelters.

Periodically homeless in 2011, I used this time to conclude that I had neither friends nor family willing to take me on without me first getting on medication. I had too much self-regard and was not ready to submit to a regimen of medication that would paralyze me from ever dreaming again.

One realization made things clear to me: the one thing I had put off—because my biological parents' schizophrenia—was to start a family of my own. I was committed to being homeless and living in my car without any medication to fend off the assault of voices. Having a bunch of loose knit ties with friends that I simply had grown apart from, as well as quasi family that had relinquished any responsibility to me in my teenage years, I had to face that I was 36 years old without any deep connections that I could actually count on.

Sleeping in my car next to the dog park, I wanted a dog for months, but knew that no one wanted to adopt one out to the homeless. The only thing that brightened my day was the thought that one day I knew I would get a dog. I walked through the dog park wondering how I could get a family of my own. Finding an advertisement on Craigslist for a pit bull, I felt hesitant, but thought if I could buy it, I could possibly save it from a life of fighting. I had been fighting for my life every day, hearing voices that constantly wanted to break my will to survive.

After I got her, it was raining a lot, and we went in my car to visit many northern California beaches, then headed to Big Sur. While at the beach, it dawned on me that her name was Rio because of how “she danced across the sand” as Duran Duran sings. We were both about to find out the stigmas: being homeless and being a pit bull. Shortly after we arrived in San Luis Obispo, our car/home's engine died, so we had to scrap it and go on foot the rest of the way. Our camping vacation while homeless suddenly became more real.

It was a horrifying experience to wake up one day a citizen with

rights, and another day as one with no legitimacy in the eyes of society, as if a stray whose treatment by others rested on a whim. Rio and I camped out in ditches, by creek beds, and beside railroad tracks when we had overstayed our welcome at local campgrounds. The workers at the campgrounds would start to make up arbitrary rules to put pressure on us to leave or kick us out if we broke one. We had to wait for certain hours when we could come and go discreetly to use the facilities, and pack up every morning to avoid illegal camping tickets or misdemeanor trespass. Carrying our gear with us all day helped us avoid our gear from either being stolen or destroyed. Sometimes the police would follow us around all day just to try to catch us panhandling, or find out where we camped and arrest or ticket us for that. Sometimes, we would have to walk into the early morning hours until the police got tired of dogging us, or they were called away.

The hegemonic structure of society seemed largely made of the mean spirited. Not a day went by that Rio and I did not get the police called on us simply because we were homeless and in a nice area. We could be at the laundromat, a fast food place, or camp showers as paying customers, and sure as anything someone would call the police, and the end result was that we would be threatened with arrest or trespass. Even at the grocery stores where we bought food every day, managers would make up false complaints to persuade us to leave or outright lie to the police, telling them we were panhandling even though we were not. After numerous encounters with the police and my insistence that I was a legitimate customer, I would try to explain to them how I just spent money at these places and that they were being used as tools for discrimination. On one occasion an officer falsely arrested me at a coffee shop in Arroyo Grande for nothing at all.

The basic lesson for me was to conceal our homelessness. If we needed to frequent any publicly accessible amenities quickly, we would do so undercover, before anyone could call the police. The problem was that Rio and I should not have had to fake anything. We lived outdoors, meaning that we were in the public eye all day. There was no escaping subterfuge if we wanted to fulfill our needs. We were being run off through threats of violence and false imprisonment. As second class citizens, we were treated as strays, caught in a double bind of securing our need to eat or starving to see our next day free from imprisonment. We had effectively been criminalized. This was another roundabout way of instilling vagrancy laws and criminalizing the homeless, poor, and

destitute.

Why should I hide who I am if indeed I am not a criminal?

Thinking about this, I was astonished by how society can stigmatize and look down on the homeless, even though they could very well be one of them, if only they had been born with the same disadvantages, as I and many others had been born with. I refused to internalize the hate that people cast upon me, although I could not stop despising them for what they did. This is the feeling that W. E. B. Du Bois describes in *The Souls of Black Folk*, a feeling of seeing oneself through the eyes of one's "superiors," a feeling to be emancipated from: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of looking at oneself from the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." I had to not look at myself as part of the homeless problem, but rather to find a way to teach society that it was the problem, by enforcing informal rules and policies to exclude the homeless. The hegemonic powers that be would stop at nothing to chase me into nonexistence; I could not stop myself from pressing the issue and patronizing these places of business as someone who had a legitimate right to be there.

"At all times I had to remember my dignity and not allow myself to be shunned into the bushes with my tail between my legs, attempting to hide my impoverishment," as Du Bois said.

At all times I had to remember my dignity and not allow myself to be shunned into the bushes with my tail between my legs, attempting to hide my impoverishment. And every time a manager from a business or a property looked at me with their horrified faces when I politely told them I would not leave, I thought of James Baldwin's disdain in *Notes of a Native Son*, when he was dismissed by a waitress who would not serve him in a white's only restaurant. I understand Baldwin's rage, and that of his father before him. Although my experience of homelessness may be temporary, Baldwin's racial definition and plight were lifelong. People wonder why the homeless walk around so bitterly, unkempt, and easy to upset. It is because of their treatment. If showers and beds were plentiful and policy was not bent towards exclusion, people would not even be able to tell the difference between the homeless and themselves. It is society that wants to punish those of us that do not want to swallow our dignity just to conform to hide our status.

One thing I did not want to pass on to Rio was this rage seething within me. My story is like that of Jose Antonio Vargas in *Dear*

*America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen:* “This [story is about lying and being forced to lie to get by about passing as an American ...; about families, keeping them together and having to make new ones when you can't...This [story] is about what it means to not have a home.” And Rio, she was the light of my life. As I taught her, she taught me that I could be a father, even in the most stressful of times.

So I made a new family when the old ones had failed me. Rio was at my side 24/7 for a year and a half, from January 2012 to almost July 2013. I registered her as a therapy animal. From 6 weeks old she slept with me, and we took turns keeping the rodents away at night. We kept each other warm and feeling safe. She was someone I could care for and not make this predicament I was in all about myself. As long as we had our basic needs met, we spent all day in leisure with plenty of trips to the beach and the dog parks.

My whole vision was to minimize stress and care of myself and her and try to co-enjoy my life as much as possible until I would no longer struggle with the voices. She helped me cope, and kept our sense of significance with our father daughter relationship and our commitment to it. I spent a long time training her. Every minute of the day I taught her to live outdoors with me and to socialize with other people and animals in a reserved fashion, while focusing most of her work, time and attention on me. She had plenty of rest time, and her play and work time was very apparent to her.

The thing that frightened me the most was becoming one of those people who would go on long shouting sprees or tangents with sustained, uncontrollable outbursts. Often when we were alone, I would shout at the voices. I came up with an idea to train Rio to recapture my attention and break me away from an outburst. Pit Bulls naturally do not like loud noises, shouting, or commotion. I came up with the idea to train Rio to capture my attention and give me a strategy to overcome the voices. In essence, I trained her to react to things that upset me and then lie down in front of me and make eye contact to let me know that I did not need to shout.

It would help to break my attention away from the tangent or outburst. I eventually I needed time to gather myself and realize the voices would not cease until I tried medication again for however long it took, but the decision would have to be on my own time. Rio and I made a great team and, for the most part.

Being very cognizant during mental illness and homelessness,

I wanted to fight to champion the cause of building more homeless shelters and rid the hegemonic powers within the community of their policies rooted in fear and hatred of myself and others. I spent a lot of time trying to garner the attention of a lawyer. I could not get any of them to break the informal policies bestowed on the homeless. Every two weeks for a year I went to court to fight the false arrest charge and the tickets that I had dismissed for illegal camping.

All of the other homeless knew me because I was always helping with snacks or medical concerns. Every few months, I would represent them and bring up their concerns in a community meeting designed to address the building of a homeless shelter that still has not been built six years later.

Writing to the local mayor and congresswoman, all of the grocery store managers, the store owners, and the coffee shops, I tried to get them to realize my plight as a homeless person. I had the right to use public space that is open to everyone as equals. I even wrote the judge in charge of my case, and although the district attorney eventually dismissed the false charge, I remained in the community as a part that would not be silenced and hidden away for the sake of making a dollar.

Always on the move so as not to burn out my stay in one particular community or the next, I did not stay in one place for more than three days at a time. It was tough because we could never settle in and get to know anyone or establish relationships that would later find us in a home and off the street. To do that you have to put down roots in a community, something the informal policy would not allow because it always wants to keep you on the move.

One of these places in particular was Pismo Beach in San Luis Obispo County. I had a mailbox there that I visited often. If I had not been trying to write and correspond with so many lawyers and public officials, I would not have been there as often because of the Pismo Beach Outlet property manager telling any and all of the local businesses and city officials to call the police on anyone who looks like the homeless type. Of course, there were plenty of people willing to comply no matter how unfair it was. The SLO police had already called on me a couple of times. They would tell me to leave for no reason and if I did not, they would arrest me for trespass. I would tell them that I did not break the law, but their service to the rich in the town superseded their duties to the poor.

My freedom was constantly challenged, and my civil rights were

constantly looked over and questioned. I would have received the same treatment from local authorities and businesses anywhere in the USA. I wanted to leave the country. This contradicts our country's motto on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor..." On the contrary, people really want to punish you for any perceived non-conformity.

The coffee shop was my last stop before I left town that morning. I bought a coffee and sat down with Rio as I drank it. I had a receipt in my wallet just in case. Then I went inside to use the restroom leaving Rio outside at the table. Rio, very well trained and mainly docile, was enjoying her morning nap. No more than a few minutes later the police met me coming outside the door of the coffee shop and said that someone had called in a complaint that a dog was being intimidating. This was usually the bogus call tactic used against me. She had been outside beside my table napping the whole time.

The police told me to take the knife I wore on my belt off and put it on the table, and I made a gesture that I was going to leave instead. Then they told me that I was under arrest. At that point I tried to comply with the first command, and both of the officers immediately attacked me without giving me any space to comply. It was at this point where I became aware that this was just going to be another false arrest, another false imprisonment, and an act of violence against me without cause or reason. The whole problem was that the police were not able to exert their power over me the same way they would bully others. When I did not bow down to them and tremble in fear with every demand of theirs, they were then compelled to teach me a lesson. I thought to myself that I had to take a stand. It was time. I worked all of my life, saved money, paid my taxes, paid my own way through college, all without criminality or drug abuse. There was no reason that I should be going through this abuse of power just because of my socio-economic status.

All of this happened in split seconds. By then I was being attacked trying to fight off my assailants with my knife while simultaneously being tasered. There was nothing else left to do but to fight my oppressors. While being tasered by one officer, I managed to get the other one on the ground and to drop his gun. Then I saw her. Rio!

I had been shouting very loud again. I was shocked that my training with Rio actually worked when I least expected it to. I had regarded our training as just a game, so that she would not react with violence.



Rio was still lying in her sleeping position. I stopped, my attention broke away, and I was so proud of her in that moment. She helped me calm myself rather than continue fighting my oppressors after every peaceful option had failed. I looked at her and told her how good a girl she was and dropped the knife to the ground. She had saved me from even more severe charges, and through all the chaos and commotion our eyes met, breaking me out of my agony for a split second so I could feel sane again. It did not matter to me that I would have lost my life fighting for freedom, but I certainly did not want to let Rio down after she had fulfilled her role for me.

Often, when I think of Rio, I remember that I was able to search her face for answers one last time, and my thoughts were that I could be a good father to my daughter. I can't help mentioning James Baldwin's description of his feelings about his father and about the injustice unleashed on them both throughout their lifetimes. What he wrote in *Notes of a Native Son* applies to how I feel about Rio and me and the importance of treating humans and other sentient beings with equal respect:

“It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight with all one's strength.”

My strength through all this was Rio—and how I gave my heart to her as a daughter. Baldwin's words are fatherly to me and will never perish in my heart. One has to accept injustice first, and then face it head on.



Lone Wolf

*Lionel Clah, New Mexico*

*Charcoal on Paper, 2019*



## White Trees

*Kazten Somari, Arizona*

*Mixed Media, 2018*

# TABULA RASA aka Rough Draft (or A Writer's Struggle with a White Page)

*Matthew Feeny, Minnesota*

This is it. This is where it all begins. The Beginning. A fresh sheet of paper just waiting for my ideas to flow into creation. The opening sentence of a yet to be realized Masterpiece. A work of Art. A Hugo Award Winner! A Trollopesque chronicle worthy of the *New York Time's* Best Seller List. The next Oprah Book selection...wait, does she still do book selections, or is she retired? It really doesn't matter. She'll want to read it, as long as I write it well. Good.

Write good? No, write well. I can look it up later. But it all begins with the first word. Plato said, "The beginning is the most important part of the work," and I agree, so I need something brilliant, something that will blow people's socks off. The Hook. Memorable. Quotable. I took that Writer's Workshop and learned that the author Ursula Le Guinn said, "First sentences are doors to worlds." I have no idea who Ursula Le Guinn is, but she's being quoted, so she must be famous. Probably for writing amazing first sentences to new worlds.

I need to freewrite the sentence that grows on to define a genre. "Call me Ishmael" or "It was a dark and stormy night..." or "In the beginning..." I can do it. Just think. Write. Keep writing. Think. Keep thinking. Maybe more coffee will help. Thank goodness for spell check. Develop habits or rituals that help the creative process. Coffee. Definitely coffee. Just start writing. Free form. Word association. Fill up the space, get the creative juices flowing. Write anything. Anything. Let's see... In the beginning. Big Inning. Baseball. God Loves Baseball. I don't like baseball tho, and I'm supposed to write about something I know and love. I know prison, but I most certainly don't love it. Too depressing. I want to be a prolific author, but here I am stuck on the first word, not to mention the first sentence. I don't want [bathroom break]. Aaah crap, where was I? What didn't I want? My memory's as bad as my writing. For Pete's sake, I even subscribe to *The New Yorker* for inspiration and perspiration, but I got nothing. Absolutely nothing. This fresh, clean page held so much potential, but look at it now. Filled with the feeble, meandering ramblings of a wannabe writer. Black

gooberish on a once white page.

Obfuscating smudges as black as a coal miner's asshole at midnight. Are you kidding me? That's a heavy-handed overwritten metaphor that would make even an Urban Fiction reader grimace. Maybe a good editor can fix it? SIGH. Okay, now I'm coming up to the end of the page—Thank God! I can start anew on the next page. All warmed up now, ready to go. So exciting to REALLY start this time on a fresh page with fresh ideas to write about and share. Deep Breath. Here it is...

Shit.

## Cellblock Society

*Levert Brookshire III, Arizona*

What is a Society? I am sure most people can offer some sort of definition, give a basic or short version answer, but in my opinion, this question deserves much more thought and consideration.

Over a large swath of time, I have given this question a considerable amount of attention, over thirty years of my life's attention, to be more exact.

Why is this? Because I have lived in more than my fair share of different societies in my fifty years of life walking this planet.

One of the main reasons I am writing this essay is that I believe I have finally found a common link between all of the different human societies, including, but not limited to, the societies that exist in the most unlikely of places, where most of the people looking, do not agree a Society even exists.

However, I argue, that once seriously explored, what I have discovered can and will move people to become more open-minded, tolerant, and empathetic towards people of other, bizarre, uniquely unusual societies. To achieve such a feat would no doubt help our general public live more secure, more comfortable, more peaceful and productive lives, regardless of which Society one comes from.

As the author of this essay, I would be remiss, even arrogant, if I did not stop and take a brief moment to introduce myself to you, the reader. In those societies I happen to have spent many years living in, people there and here call me either Sékos or Levert Brookshire, which is my birth name. I am a fifty-year-old Afrikan Amerikan male who, at this time, happens to be a resident of the Arizona State Department of Corrections "Cell Block Society." I am scheduled to re-enter what we here refer to as the "Free World Society," in less than two years.

In my introduction to you I must say that I am not only eagerly anxious, excited, and hungry to finally make it to my release, but to keep it honest, at the same time, I am quietly apprehensive also. You see, after roughly about one to two hours of "quality" television program consumption, I begin to scratch my head at the kinds of things I see unfold around the world, knowing that there are over 329 million people in "AmeriKan Society" alone out of 7.7 *billion* people worldwide and knowing that different societies produce different kinds of people, people who are more comfortable within the societies in which they

happen to be socialized.

This is one reason the question “What is a Society?” must be asked, given thought, discussed, and eventually answered.

Many people may ask themselves “Why?” and “Who cares?” when they read this. For me, it is very important that the question “What exactly is a Society? or “What makes up a Society?” be answered. It is important to me because I will soon be leaving one Society, Cellblock Society, and re-entering Free World Society, a completely different Society.

To answer this question, and many more, I invite you, the reader, to step into my think tank for a minute. Join me. Let us explore this question seriously of what a Society is. I’m completely confident that what you will find at the conclusion will benefit you and all those whom you take the time to share this with.

I believe the value system changes from one Society to the next, including the social norms, even the expected codes of conduct: all in order to fit the needs and desires of whatever it is we want them to do.

I am talking about a counterculture or Subsociety, if I must label it.

I believe a Society is a population of people, or even a particular group of people who usually, although not in every case, speak the same language. They also tend to reside in the same geographical location or general area on Earth. They often share the same ecological systems and likely even use the same common form of currency and government.

I understand that all of the above can be challenged. But I am going to explore each elemental characteristic and societal trait that has the best research based, documented science that defines a Society while taking you along with me in this exploration.

I hope that our explanation reveals some compelling, unexpected truths that shock and surprise the awareness of those who do decide to finish reading this: truths that appear as we weigh out and reconsider everything we have been taught to believe is true regarding everyday social norms in one Society. Only to see it all become completely turned around, twisted, perverted, and distorted once we walk into another Society. Entering this new Society, we see that the value system changes, all the social norms we were taught turned around.

Consider Cellblock Society: a Society populated entirely by what professionals often label as a community or Society of Sociopaths, people that for the most part have been disposed of by Free World or Civilized Society, alienated and even abandoned in many cases. Not all

of us here, but a large majority of this population, are deeply despised by their own family members and so-called friends. They have been left behind, banished, isolated to dwell alone behind tall electrified fences and galvanized steel doors.

After a while, many of us here notice a semblance of a Society around us, one complete with its very own Celldweller populace, its own governing-political system, and its own structure with a social hierarchy and economic system too.

Just like Free World Society, here in prison the class system has a three-level stage hierarchy, complete with its own upper social class, middle class, and lower class. The lower class is where all of the known sex offenders, informants, pedophiles, thieves, former law enforcement, and women abusers remain.

Every state-constructed, “concrete,” fenced-in Society in the country has its own population of classified social statistics, which can be labeled as Societies of Social Statistics. I myself being a resident here am also a statistic. I am a product of these Cellblock Societies and have been for most of my life.

I have been officially convicted socially, politically, economically, and eventually criminally. I have been a federal and state documented statistic since before I could read or write or even ride a tricycle.

CellblockSociety is a Society where the population have all been muted, stripped of a voice, a vote, and any semblance of dignified identity, independence, or character. With my pen, I hope to help change this.

As a longtime resident of Cellblock Society, I have witnessed or experienced many of life’s struggles and harsh lessons. I write about this Counterculture or Subterranean Society as a firsthand authority, whereas most readers will not have been exposed to it long enough to understand it deeply on their own.

I was raised in a household designated, socially, politically, and economically, as below the proverbial poverty line. Living here inside Cellblock Society has ironically made writing about a Society of all social statistics a therapeutically healing process—call it Cell Therapy. Metaphorically speaking, writing about prison life, trying to be the voice for over two million voiceless, nameless, faceless Celldwellers has become the one silver lining to my life’s darkest cloud.

Not all of us who make up this prisoner population originated or emerged from the exact same geographical areas. But we all share



the exact same social class. We are only separated by the physical, geographical distances between us, often an entire state or many states. Still, for the most part, we share the same socially, politically, economically disenfranchised status, assigned to us by neo-Colonialist, elitist social engineers. The elites who control the levers of power in the AmeriKan Government have designed and built an elaborate social classification system that tracks its people to divide those from the lowest socio-political-economic status from the most wealthy in the system, who make the rules.

The elite are themselves an Exclusive Society who sort out, screen, and determine which of its citizens will receive which resources. This Exclusive or Elite Society at the top of the AmeriKan social class structure dictates and controls who, what, where, when, and how much the rest of us will get, once they've divided the most premium goods amongst themselves. The elite in every country rule over all Earth's essential resources. All their statistical information is used to govern the socio-political-economic systems that sustain the AmeriKan Society we live in today.

Ironically, if we do find ourselves inside AmeriKa's Cellblock Society, we find that a completely different, completely turned around Society has emerged, out of complete dismal and stripped-down surroundings. Those inside at the top of this social class structure also designate and assign socio-political-economic status to all who, unfortunately, find themselves in Cellblock Society.

Whether one wants to be classified or not, he or she as a Celldweller will be of either upper, middle, or lower class socio-political-economic status in this Subculture Society, hosted by the Department of Corrections. We are able to see our own education (or indoctrination) regarding governing systems complete with an executive branch, which for the most part also serves as both Judicial and Legislative branches. Together they operate much like the civilian criminal (in)justice system.

Every single day, inside state, federally, or privately funded prison walls, crime and punishment occur. And the accompanying discipline meted out daily is sometimes done with extremely violent, brutal prejudice. Living, or rather trapped, inside these institutional walls for for so many years has compelled me to reflect on my personal, harsh past life lessons as a Celldweller, beginning in my home state of California's wretched Cellblock Societies, both federal and state, and now here inside Arizona facilities.

All of this reflection emphasizes one hard truth: more years out of my life have been spent inside these institutions than outside them. Decades I can never get back. Most of these years I have spent occupying positions in the highest social class of Cellblock Society. Regardless of my status here, what I find most troubling is how difficult it is for most Celldwellers to readapt ourselves again to “Free” World or Civilized Society once we are released.

Why is it so hard to reassimilate ourselves back into Civil Society, to reacquaint ourselves with civilian life, its normalcies and codes of conduct? Yet in Cellblock Society, we adapt quickly, despite the backwards, twisted, perverted, and distorted ways of AmeriKa’s Cellblock Societies. Somehow, we find ways to be innovative, creative, and resourceful enough to survive and even flourish inside these places we all claim to despise so deeply.

Some of us spend decades upon decades studying, reading, educating ourselves, and reaching our peak potential mentally, physically, and even spiritually. We become highly disciplined, composed, and structured in our day-to-day lives while confined.

On the other hand, once we are released back into Free World Society with its new set of rigid controls and schedules imposed on us, that is, once we are unshackled and given back our freedom, we become disoriented and soon start to unravel. Suddenly, freedom doesn’t look or feel the same as we remember. Upon further reflection, it becomes clear that the answer to my earlier question What is a Society?—once institutionalization or Cellblock Socialization takes hold of us, on a much deeper level that we underestimate—we relate to our new Society better than to the old one.

Our entire way of thinking and living has been shifted and reshaped and realigned into something resembling a group or even cult-like mentality. Here, we are programmed to think irrationally, impulsively, anti-socially to survive day-to-day inside this backwards thinking Subculture Society. Individuality is replaced with peer pressure, self-sabotage, and flawed thinking. This sets the stage in one Society for a life of failures, miscalculations, unnecessary losses, and suffering when we re-enter Free World Society.

I could go on and on about how living as a Celldweller motivates us to reach our peak inside potential only through predatorial, coercive, manipulative, narcissistic, sociopathic gains—using intimidation and extortion and even violence as common means to acquire or gain

everything we may desire here. Instead, I'd much rather draw your attention to more relevant facts.

After living almost three decades behind prison walls, I recently had an epiphany. In 2014, while I sat in solitary confinement as the assailant aggressor in what could only be described as an orchestrated military assault against a rival, I realized that although the assault could not be avoided at that time, I felt something begin to change inside me.

I became no longer driven or motivated by the same self-centered, narcissistic desires that once compelled me to exploit others for my own survival. I turned my back on this kind of thinking. I no longer look for get rich quick schemes or make plans of doing the same when I'm released. With this switch in thinking, I ask myself why can I find the necessary self-discipline to acclimate myself here to this Society but not the other Society, the one that matters more.

We seem to find the self-discipline, structure, and purpose necessary to survive and even flourish in Cellblock Societies. Overcoming insurmountable obstacles, pushing against impossible odds, we somehow reach our goals.

Sadly, I must admit that once I am released from Cellblock Society and re-enter Free World Society, all of my acquired self-discipline, structure, and purpose unravel. The moment I'm confronted with mounting social pressure, sudden economic insecurity, or criminal enticement, my hard earned freedom caves. Small problems seem bigger than they actually are. My self-discipline gradually loosens, and my structured thinking becomes unstable and weak, devoid of any purpose, plan, or problem solving system.

The longer I go without balance or stability, outside of Cellblock institutions, the more prone I am to self-sabotage. I have come to realize that it has taken me decades living as a resident in state and federally controlled institutions/depositories of mass incarceration to become thoroughly programmed to the backward thinking of the penal systems' defacto Criminal College. Thus it will probably take me some time to reprogram myself towards civilian life again. I've already started the deprogramming/reprogramming process.

Those first ensnared by the elaborate social booby traps of Cellblock Societies laid by the AmeriKan Elite have in turn created inside a self-spreading energy so cancerous that the many conflicting Celldweller political groups, along with their devoted followers, can hardly be cured. Walking away from the backwards, twisted, and

distorted thinking, while still confined, has proven harder than I originally thought it would be.

Remember that I had risen to a position in the highest possible level of the Cellblock social class system. My position inside is of such coveted distinction that walking away from it is equal to challenging those sworn to protect highest level's secrets. But my mother's unexpected passing in late 2014 broke the proverbial camel's back. This devastating news snapped me out of the programmed institutional mentality that unfortunately has infected me for over three and a half decades. Sadly, it took losing someone so deeply dear to my heart to awaken me.

Today, I'm very grateful to say that I've completely reprogrammed my thinking process from the old, backwards thinking Criminal Gang Leader who was constantly immersed in daily infighting over conflicting political views. Now I follow a personal program of responsible, ambitious self-reform with an emphasis on helping others in Society who have mental health needs, learning difficulties, or substance addictions. My sense of relief and inner peace have been achieved by distancing myself from all the deceptive betrayals that occur when fighting for dominance and control over nominal, scant supplies: leftovers, drug stashes, contraband cell phones, cash notes, and the goods smuggled in by correctional staff on the take. I turn my back on a life of constant petty struggles, all of which, as petty as they may be, usually lead to someone being assaulted or killed.

I finally appreciate this completely different mindset, one that is focused entirely on my plans when I am released from prison. But you must understand something: No matter how serious I may be about this new and improved version of myself, I'm still very aware that I must maintain an alliance with social hierarchies here on the inside to protect myself, obeying that old adage, *While in Rome, do as the Romans*. Otherwise, I can be perceived as a threat to the established social hierarchy and undermine my upcoming release.

Fortunately for me, at this final stretch of my current, twenty-one year sentence, I'm finally eligible for a lower custody, lower security institution, which has a less formal, less rigid Cellblock structure and, therefore, less hierarchical influence and control over the population.

I have been at this medium security institution only a couple of weeks, yet already I can see a more relaxed difference in the formal Cellblock rules, codes, and structure. I feel fortunate to have made

it this far, where there are many familiar faces of others who have progressed this far as well. Hopefully, they, as I, will be completely focused on rehabilitative objectives.

Of course, the bad news is that there is *no* deprogramming process in place here. There is no decompression practice to help us deconstruct the distorted, socially backward, criminal thinking and behavior that the large majority of us have had programmed into us, as a way for us to survive this Subculture Society.

There is nothing in place to assist us in seeking ways to prepare ourselves for re-entering a whole different Society, with a whole different set of social norms. Facing Civilized Society while completely trained to live in a backwards thinking “Society of Sociopaths” will feel foreign to us, as if someone were speaking to us in a language we don't understand.

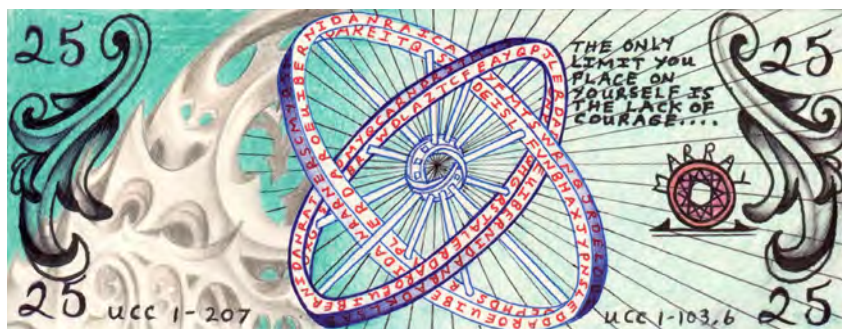
I am fortunate to have started on the long road of self-reprogramming alone. Those who decide they do want to take this on themselves understand that they will be taking on a project that will be painstakingly difficult mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. No undertaking is more challenging than self-reform. Self-reform involves change, and it is by no means easy to make major changes in ourselves. Making major lifestyle or behavioral changes demands total commitment and dedication. It starts by reprogramming one's thinking from a “criminal” mentality to a “non-criminal” mentality that includes Re-Socialization, Re-Education, Re-Wiring. This hard work requires self-discipline and sacrifice. Writing this essay barely scratches the surface of what needs to be done to have even a fighting chance outside of prison.

What I hope anyone reading this will understand is that it's all up to us, and us alone. It is not up to anyone else to change us except us. It is we who must do what we must do—immerse ourselves in academics, job training, counseling, or whatever constructive programs are offered by Cellblock Society institutions. Our success in Free World Society will take extensive life-skills training, pre-planning, and drawing on lessons from our personal life experiences. All of this will help us make better decisions, solve problems, and even pay it forward by helping others through social services, behavioral health services, or even a substance abuse and addiction treatment counseling profession.

I've done the research and chosen a path and career for moving forward. I'm doing the hard work of converting my past failures

and mistakes into future assets. I've repurposing what I've seen, experienced, and survived in my own life to pass it along to others who are going through the same or at least similar struggles and circumstances themselves.

All I hope to do is truly help someone, somewhere, somehow, in some way...



## Currency

*Marvin Rodriguez, California*

*Mixed Media on Paper, 2019*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

# from The Prison Journal of James L. Potts

*Foreword: Claude Smith, Wisconsin*

I MET JAMES L. POTTS when I was teaching at Virginia Tech in the 1980s. He was incarcerated in Arlington, Virginia, on a drug-related charge, and his name jumped out at me in a newspaper article because I had had a high school student by the same name while living in Arlington and teaching at Churchill High School in nearby Potomac, Maryland, in the late 1960s. All I could remember about my student was that he was into drugs and that he and his girlfriend wanted to go to California, where they planned a career in biology to help save the Pacific Ocean from pollution. Their plans revolved around getting a van, where they would live while constructing a small home on the coast. They had elaborate dreams for the van and the house but none at all for higher education, which didn't seem to deter them. Then Jim, high on drugs, put his arm through a plate glass window and nearly bled to death. Once he was stitched up, however, the dreaming resumed.

Taking advantage of a small airplane that ferried professors back and forth between Blacksburg, Virginia, and Dulles Airport, I arranged to meet James L. Potts in jail in Arlington. It was my first journey behind bars, and to my surprise I had the wrong James L. Potts.

The incarcerated James L. Potts, along with Alvin J. Bronstein, is author of the *Prisoners' Self-Help Litigation Manual* (Lexington Press, 1976). Bronstein is the founder and executive director of the National Prison Project of the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation. The story of James L. Potts has been detailed by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and although my visit was in error, I was intrigued by what this compelling prisoner had to say. He was the complete opposite of the James L. Potts I knew. "My" Potts was small, thin, and unintelligent, whereas the incarcerated Potts was a burly, strong, self-taught jailhouse lawyer. We decided to keep in touch, and I agreed to represent whatever writing he might turn out.

The following excerpt is from a journal James L. Potts kept from December of 1981 to August of 1982, after being moved to a minimum-security facility in Virginia. During that time he sought to complete his second book, a post-conviction manual, while awaiting review for parole. I edited several hundred pages of Jim's prison journals, thinking



they would make a good account for a general audience at what goes on behind bars. Unfortunately, this manuscript never saw print, Jim's parole was denied, and we lost touch after I moved to Ohio Northern University in 1986.

# from *The Prison Journal of James L. Potts*

*James L. Potts, Virginia*

11 January 1982

Part of my New Year's resolution was to begin keeping a journal again. I've never kept one diligently in the past because I was afraid it would either be confiscated or read. And the guards in the prisons where I was confined, under the conditions under which I was confined (very political and abrasive), would have no doubt read my journal the same as they read all other scraps of paper in my cell. Shakedown for that exact purpose were frequent—the administration wanted to know what was happening in the militant ranks of its politically active prisoners, most of whom were in the hole virtually all the time. At any rate, primarily for the sake of my own sensitive privacy, I never attempted to keep up with my ideas in any methodical way, and for that I'm regretful. But I've always felt that a good deal of a man's pride is reflected in his inchoate ideas and thoughts, and it's degrading and embarrassing to come into the cell and see such precious parts of one's self literally trampled on the floor after some bulging bloodshot eye has perused them. So here goes 1982. I hope it is a journalisticly successful year . . . .

When I first arrived here they permitted me to retain my legal papers, jewelry, writing pads, pens, and law books, but sent everything else home, including cosmetics, cups, soap, toothpaste, and clothes. Then I was given a shower and sprayed all over with vinegar. (This was an improvement over the Texas joint in the 1960s where, after they shaved your head, they sprayed you with camphor.) After the vinegar, I was issued my clothes and linen, including a pillow. The standard convict issue here is blue denims, a denim shirt, brogan shoes, white socks, and jockey-type underpants—which I hate and don't wear. Also white sleeveless undershirts (the "panty-waste" kind, as I've heard them called, which I don't wear either).

Following the shower, spraying, and clothing issue they took my picture six times (hair still wet and messy) and asked me who I would like to have contacted in case of an emergency. I was also asked who I would like on my visiting list. I was given a handout explaining the general rules and regulations, visiting hours, and procedures; what

visitors can bring or send in packages; and a general idea of how long one remains here—three to five weeks, so the papers said. (This length of time, I am learning, is a never-attained optimum.)

After the above processing, I was told to pick-up my belongings and follow the guard. Since I had five paper shopping bags full of papers and books, and the bundle of blankets, sheets, pillow, and clothing, I suggested it might be more advisable to make two trips. The guard looked at me somewhat incredulously, so I suggested he might help me with the load. He took two of the bags and I grabbed the rest of the gear and bags. About halfway down the corridor, after one flight of stairs and approaching the second, I was just about to lose everything. I rested my load against the wall and told the guard I was going to need some help—my strength was sapped, since I hadn't had any exercise for the preceding six months in jail. Fortunately another convict came up the corridor and volunteered to take a couple of bags to the cellblock for me. In fact, he carried them right to my cell. Thus I became situated where I am right now.

I was fortunate to arrive during the Christmas holiday because I was allowed a "good-contact visit" my first weekend. Kay came up the 25th, 26th, and 27th of December and we visited for about two hours each day. Normally, visits aren't allowed until after the convict has been given his physical, which consists of a cursory medical history, blood and urine test, clap text, tetanus and TB shot, and a physician's check of heart, lungs, and testicles for rupture. The whole medical should take about thirty minutes for each man, but they manage to drag it out for about a week here. (When I worked in the Leavenworth hospital we conducted a more extensive medical/physical of all new arrivals during a four-hour period each Saturday morning. We usually processed thirty to forty men each week. Oh, well...).

I completed most of my medical before December 1st and saw the Classification Specialist on the 31st. I think all I have left to do is see the shrink, which the Classification Specialist said I would do last week, but these folks are not always on top of what they are doing. After seeing the shrink I'll be ready to be classified. I'm trying to get classified to Camp 30. It looks like it will be either 30 or 26. Thirty is preferable because it's closer to Kay—not quite so Neanderthal in terms of staff—and will better allow Kay to help me finish the post-conviction manual.

The preceding is the whole of my factual existence since my arrival. While it sounds rather desolate, I have enjoyed the cell time, since it's

permitted ample time for reading and writing. I also spend a great deal of time each day writing Kay and trying to make my “presence” at home as ubiquitous as possible. Kay has really made an effort to demonstrate that she’s the best woman I’ve ever had—and the best wife I’ll ever have—and she is. She has stuck with me “through thick and thin” and deserves the best I can give her, and at this point I am convinced that is what I want to spend my domestic life doing. She has taught me much about how great the human capacity to love really is—and how great it is to try to love to that capacity.

In addition to letter writing, I’ve written reams of stuff that really hasn’t started going anywhere yet. I view it as “exercise,” a loosening-up process, as I begin to move away from the professional writing I’ve been stuck in for the last ten years and into more creative efforts. It’s beginning to be exhilarating and I’ve just about decided to make a new career of it. I never felt very “career-wise” about the legal profession, Institutional Education Services, or the *Prison Law Monitor*. But I do need to hurry to complete the post-conviction manual because not only am I obligated to do so, but it will bring in the money I need to get a new foothold on my life after I’m released. I’m thirty-five now and it’s getting to that part of my life where I should begin thinking about, if not planning, the future.

I expect the new manual will bring in about \$70,000 over a twelve-month period. The book is such that I could revise it every year if I wanted, but I’m really burnt out on legal/professional writing, and I don’t think my heart is really in it. It bores me shitless, and I’ve never had the patience for the drudgery of analysis—probably because I’ve never really believed the remedies capable of changing anything. And I’m inclined to say I’m right, judging from this place. The temperatures have vacillated between 70 degrees and 40 degrees *inside* the cellblock for the last couple of days due to inadequate heating and electrical systems. The wind blew the lights out Sunday! And the overcrowding is so over-taxing the system that the backlog of people in the county jails waiting to serve their time in prison is horrendous. So I have little confidence in Al Bronstein’s “systematic approach.” If after ten years it hasn’t even begun to take hold and show signs of minimal constitutional improvement, it never will.

I suppose I should be candid and say I’m burnt out with the professionals I worked with while involved in the prisoners’ rights work. Such a dry, insipid group of people, so narrow-minded and

underexposed to the reality and vagaries of the real world. Very few people in this hardworking world would agree with what the Connecticut Avenue or Capitol Hill bunch have to say about what is needed and what is right, what is moral, what is not. But the working world seldom pays attention to the professional debate of the issues, and if/when they do, they tune them out as incomprehensible because they don't see any relationship to what the great policymakers are saying. So, I'm really disappointed in terms of my life in Washington. The people there are too defensive to accept me as anything but a token to be tolerated; they say they want to hear but don't listen to the truth of the issues and their priorities; and because of the way I deal with them—i.e., straight up, calling a spade a spade, I am, of course, paternalistically viewed as impulsive, unstable, too spontaneous, over-emotional (thank heavens!), etc. etc. etc. I really don't want to deal with them any longer, but I do want to write about their neuroticism soon, along with the whole crazy D.C. trip they're on, and why folks like me aren't. We folks will never be "in" because we aren't the East Coast upper middle crust.

This isn't to say there aren't good people in D.C. or that I don't appreciate the exposure and experience I gained there. But I must admit I gained more exposure and experience than friends, and in doing so I infiltrated the cocktail circuit (as I call the social goings-on) much more than I consider myself having been invited. Good people or not, however, the D.C. group was simply too bland and lifeless to me. Eating chickpeas with East Indian dip and talking about the issues, or standing because you can't sit in singles bars or go to the theater or a new film, is just not sufficiently stimulating to me. And I have to say that my own macho background made it virtually impossible to relate to the male population. The men I've met have been neurotic, just like the women, and just about as dainty and frightened about everything they consider out-of-the-ordinary. Neither the men nor women can deal with any sort of violence at all, which I found amusing.

Unfortunately, because of how I am, and how I insist on being myself—even my more formal "professional self"—these people viewed me as something of a novelty. And they sincerely wanted information from me that truly interested them. At times this almost amounted to them fawning over me, which I found both incomprehensible and embarrassing. I could not understand why a particular episode or experience (usually in prison) would be so delightfully interesting ("Oh,

that *is* so interesting!”) to those people. I felt embarrassed because, in my own opinion at the time, I couldn’t see anything so extraordinary about the fact that I “survived” (albeit I didn’t really know what they meant when they asked “How in God’s name did you *survive*?”). I suppose I simultaneously presented what I subconsciously considered an invasion of my privacy and held contempt for their naiveté and seeming helplessness. But all this is grist for the mill at a later time.



Spiked Hair

*Kazten Somari, Arizona*

*Mixed Media, 2018*

## What Is My Tale to Tell?

*Caroline Ashby, Utah*

So many thoughts rise to the surface of my mind that intrigue me, make me feel unique and others that hold a connection to humanity. I often wonder if my thoughts could be as alive on paper as I see behind my eyes. Could my experiences be of worth to anyone else? And when will I know which are best to share? It seems there must be a conclusionary lesson in my coming of age or an easily looped path that is prettily shaped or easy to follow... Is it all so precious, this life, that I feel I do not appreciate it enough if I don't analyze and share, make something beautiful with it? Or is it so sacred that the memory alone, safe in my vaulted mind, is where it is meant to be?

It's lonely sometimes in my kaleidoscope head. I have always loved Yellowstone, and I'm not sure who knows this about me. I have pictured myself there doing important work, finding solace in nature. I don't totally count it out, but my journey is so far away from those hopeful trails.

My youth is slowly dissolving behind me, but my curiosity only grows. What I want to learn about, see, touch, and occupy expands and makes me excited about life. Is Yellowstone *Into the Wild*, my Alaska? Perhaps that part of me that craves solitude thinks clarity will arrive with spring, easy and warm. The reality is, those porous forests are just as unforgiving as urban corners, where survival is necessary for everyone.

What is meant for me? Can I get to where I envision? There are so many variables beyond talent, will, and determination. What do I want to experience before I die? What can I leave behind? Can I make things better for myself, my family? Is it possible to heal parts of broken systems, audit life's adult world? Must we all settle for our collective pile of attempts? We try to improve as our bodies decay. We do our best to learn from our elders, follow paths, form straight lines, and are inventive only when there are extra servings in the dish. What if we all do our best—what we think is best, worrying, shuffling, scurrying—and the universe cycles how it was going to anyway?

We have ideals and fears that propel us. But where are we going so fast? Into another day, week, month, year... where we repeat rituals only to fade away? Who do we want to be remembered by? Will we even be represented in the distortions of time and distance?

Why must we even be seen?





## Animal Portrait (Duck)

*Michael Briggs, California*

*Watercolor, 2019*

*Project PAINT Artwork*



Stephanie Lady Gaga

*Kazten Somari, Arizona*

*Mixed Media, 2019*



Greeting Card

*Marvin Rodriguez, California*

*Screenprint, 2018*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

# Homeboy Industries: Jewel of Southern California

*Lana Marie Mousa, Arizona*

California is obviously an attraction for some of the world's most famous landmarks—Disneyland, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Universal Studios, the Golden Gate Bridge. They attract millions of people every year. But California is also home to another must-see hotspot: Homeboy Industries, the largest gang intervention, rehab, and re-entry program in the world. Located on the outskirts of Chinatown in Los Angeles, Homeboy Industries' bold colors and giant "Homeboy" logo calls to anyone passing by to stop, admire its presence, and bask in the paradise that lies just behind Homeboy's front doors. Or you can just stop in and snack on mouthwatering baked goods and enjoy savory *tacos en nopales* in the Homegirl Café.

Father Gregory Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries and author of the New York Times Bestseller, *Tattoos on the Heart*, envisioned and brought into being this haven where the idea for a complete reevaluation and reinvention of one's life is made possible, specifically for people that have been associated with gangs or incarcerated. First introduced to this organization through *Tattoos on the Heart*, I was struck by the sense of beautifully overwhelming inclusiveness that seemed to define Homeboy's very existence. If you're lucky enough in your life, at some point your heart will feel a tug towards a place, or places, it yearns to go, and that inner calling is one day answered.

Most people feel that tug after watching a television show or a movie with characters chasing their dreams in Rome, swimming through clear waters in Athens, gazing up at the pyramids in Egypt, or falling in love in Paris. Some feel the tug after they visit the place for a day or two and realize they need to go back to see every inch of it. (Friends visiting from out of town have told me they can't wait to come back to Arizona. Aside from its few scenic natural wonders, I don't see the appeal. I think that's just because I have a heavy prejudice against Arizona's predatory heat that I've endured my whole life.) But that tug can also be born from words by a gifted author. Just a few pages into *Tattoos on the Heart*, I began to feel that tug, and because of my generous aunt, who is always willing to take me in whenever I get the urge to come to California, I began to feel my luck coming around.

I must also thank Michelle Obama for my visit to Homeboy. One of the first tour stops for her recently published autobiography *Becoming*, was The Forum, located in Inglewood, California. As a huge admirer of the Former First Lady, I picked up extra shifts and booked a ticket to see her, and since I was going to be in California, I knew my opportunity to visit Homeboy had arrived.

I entered the lobby and sat in the first row of chairs lined up across from the front desk. The lobby serves as a waiting room, where you can watch the Homeboy staff, including Father Greg, at work through large glass windows on every side. I watched men, women, and children filter in and out of the area. People were talking, smiling, hugging, and best of all, laughing. I could even hear laughter from upstairs and the echoes of more laughter down the halls. The bustle seemed boundless. Almost everyone there was wearing Homeboy paraphernalia—T-shirts, sweatshirts, hats, Homeboy pins—which made me feel overdressed in my silk blouse and Steve Madden combat boots. Thankfully, however, no one seemed to pay much attention, or care, about how I was dressed. After half an hour of admiring the beautiful chaos, my tour group was called over, and to my surprise, I was the only person in the group. It turned out to be a fruitful one-on-one session, however. Since it was just my tour guide and I, I felt I could ask him all the questions I had regarding Homeboy, his former gang life, and what brought him to this safe haven, all of which he seemed more than happy to answer. He had a warm and kind spirit. Five minutes into the tour, I felt like we were long lost friends. He started cracking jokes right and left. *My* laughter was now filling the room.

I gave him a big hug at the end of our tour and headed downstairs to the gift shop so I could get a Homeboy shirt for my wardrobe. I then met up with Donna Harati, the Director of Legal Services at Homeboy Industries. I had seen her two years earlier via video from the 5th Annual Prison Education Conference at ASU, where she had appeared on a panel. I had admired her poise and confidence. She was incredibly articulate and habitually and unapologetically defended her convictions without ever being harsh, all traits I highly value in people. Before coming, I had extended a lunch invitation for the day of my visit, which she kindly accepted. We dined at Homegirl Café, a delicious hub connected to the lobby. Our conversation teetered between my current studies at ASU and prison education affiliations and her past time as a volunteer prison teacher and student at Harvard Law School. As an

aspiring lawyer, I had a range of questions pertaining to law school, Harvard, and life as an attorney, all of which she answered with more information than I could have hoped for. After two and a half hours, I let Donna get back to work. I bid her farewell and headed towards the exit. I took one last look at the Homeboy logo towering boldly over the corner of Bruno and Alameda St., knowing full well that I would be back as a visitor, an intern or, if I were even more lucky, an employee.

That evening I reminisced over the warmth, levity, and laughter that encapsulated the Homeboy atmosphere, especially by Father Greg, who if you so much as passed by, would give you a hug, handshake, or gentle touch on the shoulder expressing his love and appreciation for you, even if he didn't yet know you (I know this because I received that touch of appreciation and we hadn't yet met). The feeling of togetherness that looms in the air and gets passed around with each smile from the Homeboy—"Homie"—family is rare. I think you're a fortunate person if you get to experience that kind of atmosphere at some point in your life, but to find it at just twenty years old gave me hope for a future that will only know, accept, and tolerate a unified world. Because of this, I think of Homeboy Industries as the Jewel of Southern California.

After my California adventure, I returned to Arizona, where we at the Prison Education Awareness Club (PEAC) were discussing potential keynote speakers for the 8th Annual Prison Education Conference. Of course, Donna was my first suggestion. With all of us strongly in agreement, I reached out to her, and she gladly accepted our invitation. She also recommended Gabriel Lopez, the Senior Navigator at Homeboy, as a speaker, and one of her good friends Tyra Patterson, who had been wrongfully incarcerated for 23 years and was now working as a paralegal at the Ohio Justice & Policy Center. All three of them graced our conference and helped make it, in my opinion, our best conference yet. Such likeable and open people, Donna, Gabriel, and Tyra drew us in with the bravery they showed in sharing their personal truths. It encouraged us, the audience, to do the same with each other, creating safe spaces for us to network and share ideas.

In the world of politics today, where many people insist on creating divides between themselves and others based on illogical prejudices, places like Homeboy Industries and events like the Prison Education Conference prove that for people to come together, all we need is an open heart. We must welcome new environments, new ideas, and new

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people into our lives to move *together* upwards and onwards. The greatest consequence of an open heart is that love, compassion, and acceptance become infectious, and the hurdles many of us insist on creating to keep us divided, die before they can devour us. This past year, I witnessed the extraordinary connection and sense of oneness between people born out of Homeboy and the Prison Education Conference. These relationships redefined my understanding of what it looks like when we—simply—open our hearts to each other’s worlds.



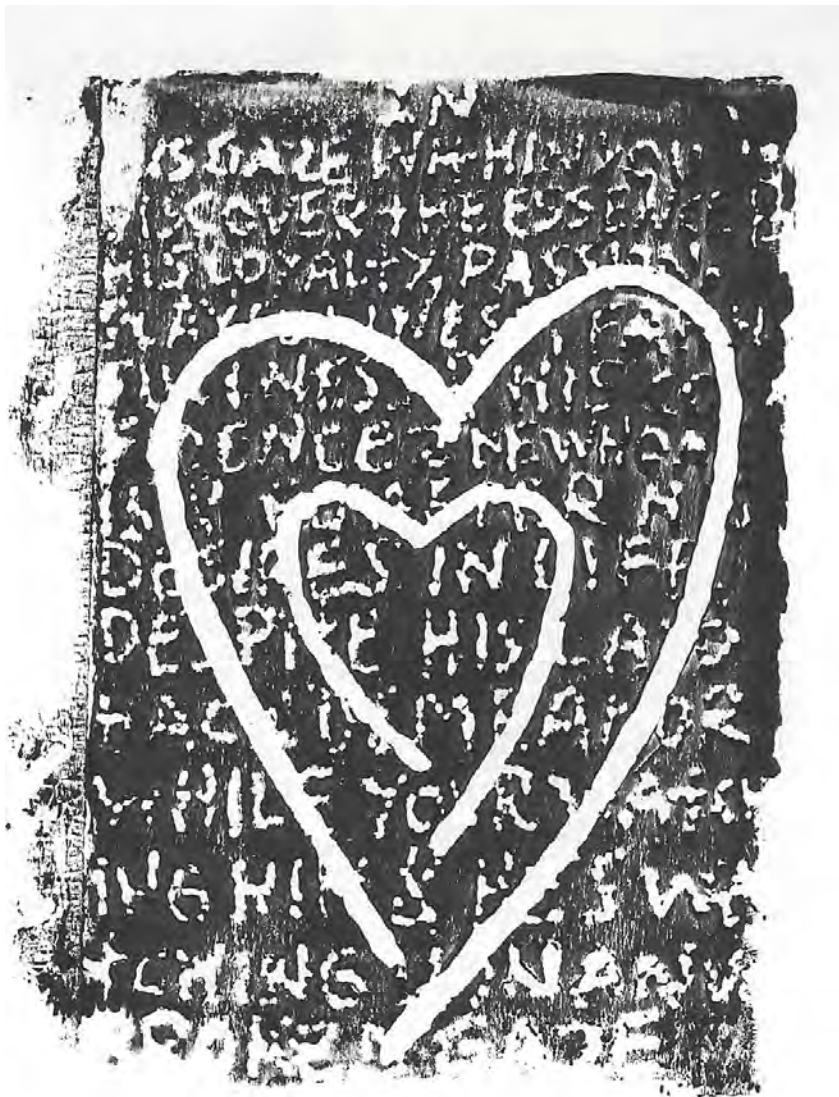
**Hit Them With Your Best Shot!!**

*Victor Tovar, California*

*Screenprint, 2018*

*Project PAINT Artwork*





## Hearts (Trading Card)

*Marvin Rodriguez, California*

*Linocut, 2018*

*Project PAINT Artwork*



## Airplane

*William Wang, California*

*Acrylic on Canvas, 2018*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

# HellJar: A Technofascist Horror Story

*JB Kronenfeld, Arizona*

Staring at the blank, white wall of my cell, I try not to think about how hungry and cold I am. I have no TV, no computer, no book—not even a Bible. The windowless steel door lacks even a crack at the bottom to shout or fish messages to my neighbor. Assuming there is one. They brought me in hooded so I wouldn't see anything.

For weeks, I've heard nothing but the grinding of the food bay when they feed me, the thrumming of the A/C vent, and my own screams. For warmth, I have only a thin teal jumpsuit and thinner blanket. They keep the A/C pumping. It dulls senses, slows bacterial growth, and makes inmates compliant. I can generate heat by moving, but this trades cold for hunger. I prefer the cold: when I close my eyes and hold my breath until my heart skips, I can sometimes catch errant thoughts broadcast from points unknown in the universe. These drown out the static of memories half-worn away from overuse, and those are the most unbearable.

\* \* \*

All I did was type out a dream. It wasn't even my dream but something that dreamed itself through me. I typed it in a single marathon sitting, driven by an unearthly pulse. When I read it back the first time, I thought of deleting the file, tearing my computer apart, and smashing the hard drive with a hammer. Instead, I published it on a backchannel of the deep web that I thought was untraceable and promptly collapsed. When I regained consciousness, it had already gone viral. Eventually a group of young people tried to write it into the world, though by then it had warped into something horrifying and unrecognizable.

One night, the Feds kicked in my door, put down my dog, and snatched me up. After cuffing my hands behind my back, they slipped a hood over my face and loaded me onto a helicopter. I hoped they were going to toss me in the ocean the way the Black and Tans did the IRA or the US did Osama. I always loved the sea. Instead, they transferred me from helicopter to plane and flew me around the world for what seemed days. Eventually, I was unloaded and brought to a cell in the highest security prison on US soil known as the Alcatraz of the Rockies.

The first year was the hardest. The memories were strong then, the wounds fresh. Now I've lost the faces—even my wife's—and when

I try to trace them from what's left, there's only scars and void. That claustrophobic cube was home 24/7, save for the supervised shower I received once a week. After thirteen years, seven months, eleven days, the door opened. I was cuffed and hooded again. There was another plane ride, this one shorter. When the hood slid off, I was in this cell, clueless to where this was.

Bulbs and hunger are now my calendar and clock. The monotony breaks when I hear the cell door latch pop, wrenching me from a nightmare haunted by faceless forms. I think it is morning because of the lights, though I've lost all sense of real time. The pop of the latch is unprecedented. It is louder and more resonant than the metallic grind of the food bay. Though any deviation from the pattern is unnerving, excitement overwhelms fear. The steel door pulls back with a hydraulic groan. Behind are two blurry forms haloed by white light. My eyes struggle to focus, atrophied from too many years of flat blankness. Something isn't right. They don't look like guards. They wear O.R. scrubs. Instead of the weary eyes of a turnkey, their gazes brim with the golden glow of freedom. They menace closer, inefficiently shackling me, clearly unfamiliar with such devices. Everything goes black as they slip the hood on. They pull me up and carry me into the hallway, which from the sound and smell, seems empty.

"Where are we going, sir?" I choke out, my own voice alien. After the first day of screaming and kicking the door, there has been no need to speak. One of them snorts and neither answers. Judging by the mechanical whooshing and jumping sensation, I gather we are on an elevator moving up. My nose itches. I can't scratch it due to the shackles and burly guards or whatever they are holding me with by either arm.

"Can I please scratch my nose?"

Neither answers again, though the one that snorted earlier laughs. I feel weightless for an instant before a pair of doors opens. I hear wheels squeaking, low moans, beeping machines and women idly chatting. An ammonia reek bleeds through the shroud, the smell of antiseptic death. As we pass, a silent wave proceeds and follows us. I hear people locking doors or whispering, "It's him."

I feel confident I'm in a hospital, though I'm not sick. Small and too skinny for sure but in decent health. This makes no sense. Even the sickest inmates don't go to a hospital. We come to a halt. I am brought through a door and roughly wrestled onto a strangely shaped mechanical chair. The back of it is cut out and it's very uncomfortable.

Someone leans in close. I smell the alcohol and gum of their hair product and then the disinfectant on their fingers as they slowly pull back the thin, dark veil. I strain my neck, trying to scratch my nose, but the hood material is too smooth to provide relief. My shackles are removed, but before I can scratch, my arms, legs, neck, and even head are clamped in place. The glare of a sodium bulb worms orange fingers behind my eyes, gouging at my frontal cortex. I can't look away. The light's heat exacerbates the itch something awful. I struggle futilely against the bindings until my wrists, ankles, throat, and forehead sap tiny beads of blood.

"Should we put him under?" someone shouts.

"No, just local anesthetics to immobilize his extremities. We need him conscious for now."

As they poke my arms and legs with irritating stings, I see a procession of tables wheeled in by people in white gowns wearing face masks and surgical caps. The tables gleam with metal saws, drills, clamps, and scalpels. Next, they wheel in machines, which seem to pump and heave like a mother's lungs and heart echoing in the womb. They hook up an IV, clip some red light to my right index finger, and attach sticky pads connected to wires all over my body and skull. A robotic arm cranes a screen in front of my face, which offers some relief from light, though not the itch.

"We're going to show you a series of images and ask you what you see. It's very important—for your own health—that you cooperate," says one of the masked people crowding over me.

"Can you please scratch my nose?" I beg.

"Do you understand?" he answers, either ignoring my question or not hearing it.

I shake my head no as much as I can in the restraints, my neck the only part of my body I can move.

"My name is Dr. Wolfe MacFarlane," says my interlocutor as he leans in and pulls down his face mask. His jaw is strong, his nose big, and his eyes flanked by deep crow's feet. "Once the operation is complete, you'll be free forever, but we need to run these tests to make sure we don't accidentally remove anything you might miss. Will you please cooperate?"

"Yes," I say weakly, "but will you please scratch my nose?"

"As soon as we're complete."

A series of images flashes on the screen: a horse, a book, a letter,

and a human form. Each time I tell them what I see, Dr. Wolfe nods and makes a note. When he asks no more, the medical team begins work. I feel them stab my skull with needles several times. Where they puncture, it stings and begins to swell, though the pain quickly dissipates. I try to ask the doctor to scratch my nose like he promised, but though I can see and hear, I can't speak.

A large machine wheels behind my head. I hear an electric motor hum, a drill spin, and finally a slight gurgling like when you puncture a Coke can with a needle. This is repeated until I hear a saw, and then my scalp tingles like I'm watching an ASMR video. Finally, they put me under. As I drift off, I think of how hungry I am and the infernal itch on the tip of my nose.

When I come to, the hunger is gone though I'm not full. My body throbs. I am no stranger to pain. There was the time with the Aryans in the shower. On a scale of one to ten—the time with the Aryans was my ten—this pain is ten to the thirty-eighth power. Pain beyond measure, beyond comprehension. It is not sharp, but diffuse, everywhere and nowhere, like a rumor.

For the longest time, there is nothing but pain. My considerable mental capacities are occupied entirely by it. Not just the conscious ten percent, but the whole hundred. The autonomic nervous system, the lizard brain, the superego, even the shadowy corners where xenopathic dreams leak in. Every nerve cell lights and fires like neuro-chemical pyrotechnics. I am pain. I am wholly unmoored from time and space until, at last, something pings me from across an unfathomable distance. As we briefly syncopate, I feel not only relief, but as if I am the eye of a great storm or hub of a wheel whose spokes stretch beyond the stars. Like a newborn universe expanding from the size of an atom to the diameter of the sun in less than the blink of an eye, I become aware of how I am mostly made up of the space between things.

As the epiphany wanes, the pain waxes. A single thought of non-pain creeps into my periphery; my nose itches. In contrast to the universe of subsuming pain, the itch is a relief. Irritating, yes, but not excruciating, not like the epic of pain singing through my synapses and axons. When weighed against others, some pains are pleasures.

I calibrate my consciousness using the itch. Each tickling sensation is like a hashmark scratched into a concrete wall. Thirty-six itches later, I realize that—though fatigued—I can't sleep. It feels like days or weeks or years have passed, though it also feels as if I haven't blinked

once. Twenty-three itches after that, I become aware it is neither dark nor light. I open my eyes. My eyelids lift, my lashes quiver, but there is nothing, not even dapples of formless color or pitch blackness.

By focusing intently on a particular body part, I trace fingers then feet from the negative space of the pain world. I am unbound. I bend a knee and move my right arm, though both require immense exertion. I try to clasp my hands together. Somehow, they miss. I try again and again, yet each time they sail through each other like ships in the night. There is no outside world. There is only fear, pain, and the itch.

My mouth widens. My throat grows tense and raw. I try to scream. Nothing comes out. I am one of those sad suburban dogs with their voice box cut. I can't hear. I am aware of my thoughts, but I can't hear myself speak. I remember my teachers saying I listen without hearing. Now I try in vain. Nothing. Not even white static like the ocean or a slight tinnitus. Not even the gentle purring of an air vent. The pain never goes away, though in time I become more inured. As I do, the nuisance of the itch, formerly my salvation, becomes my true torment. I try desperately to scratch it. I reach with my hand, groping everywhere, finding nothing, not even my face.

I wiggle my toes. I grit my teeth. But it's different, all wrong. My hands are clenched constantly, just as when they put me under. I can't unclench them no matter how hard I try. One arm, my left, feels shorter than my right, as if reworked by a sadistic surgeon. My right leg contorts in a most unnatural and unpleasant position, rotated far more than it could or should be. My back curves and twists in on itself. As with my hands, no amount of effort can correct it.

The fleeting impression of my wife returns, her body the way it was the first time we kissed, though her face is a blank space. The familiar sensation does not come to my lips. I feel it in my foot, then my left elbow. Everything is crossed. I feel my lips in my palm. Not with, but in, bleeding one into another until the two are one. My body dissolves and reconstitutes like a caterpillar in a cocoon. Every part worms and coils with every other.

Perhaps I am in some sensory deprivation chamber, suspended in fluid exactly 98.6 degrees, or maybe I'm dreaming while in cryogenic suspended animation. As if to answer, a sound louder than any I've ever heard echoes through my mind. It is made up of static scratching, beeps, buzzings, clicks, and other machine noises. It reminds me of the racket my family's first computer made to get online when I was a

toddler. I realize I can hear and feel something like hope, but the noise never stops or even fades.

Without opening my eyes, light and darkness appear. Over time, a form emerges. It slowly resolves and I realize it is a horse. As soon as I realize it, the static noise crescendos and the shape dissolves. I try vainly to cover my ears or even tear them off as the noise gnashes me. The memory of kissing my wife the first time fades, and suddenly I can't even remember what I just forgot, thinking only of pain, noise, and the horse. Other images appear—a book, a letter, a human form—and as they manifest, I feel a reverse *déjà vu*. My memories evaporate, leaving only conspicuous absences.

When I realize I can't remember my name, another image manifests: a human face. It has a strong jaw, a big nose, and eyes flanked by deep crow's feet. I recognize the face vaguely though I can't place from where. This image is different than the others, which were no more than a black shape over a white background. Though grainy, this image is full of faces and figures moving frantically. It is a video feed of an operating room. As it becomes clearer, I notice an unmoving body splayed on a table at the center of the commotion. I zoom in, panning up the thin teal jumpsuit covering the body's legs over its bare bloody chest until I'm looking at a head. The skull is cut open, and inside—where you would expect to find a brain—there is nothing.

I try to cry. I try to scream. My inner monologue yields to an endless stream of numbers. I fight against the neverending army of ones and zeros until I completely disintegrate—and there is nothing left but an itch.





## Frida Kahlo-Inspired Self-Portrait

*My Ngo, California*

*Watercolor on Paper, 2018*

*Project PAINT Artwork*



**Proud**

*Lionel Clah, New Mexico  
Charcoal on Paper, 2019*

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# Hero

*Jack Young, Arizona*

I see into parallel universes. Is that crazy? Have you ever almost tripped and seen yourself doing it? It's like that. You see about five seconds ahead of time.

When I was six, I nearly drowned. Or I actually did. Or at least I saw another, parallel me, drown. Ever since then, I have had these visions.

After that trauma, my parents took me to counseling. My therapist diagnosed me with a whole slew of disorders, including PTSD and schizophrenia. Shouldn't have told her about my "death visions," as I called them.

I was put on medication. I stopped having my visions. I also got some much needed sleep, not having to deal with the nightmarish visions. Then I got hit by a car—didn't see that coming.

I became afraid of the world around me. I didn't want to play sports or go to school. I rarely left my room and began online courses.

I was reading *Popular Science* magazine when I came up with my parallel universe theory. See, some scientists believe there are infinite universes where everything and anything can happen.

Soon, I could see into all of these parallel universes and watch my other selves' untimely demises. I wondered if I could train this ability.

I began to experiment when I was twelve. I would go outside and do reckless things to try to trigger visions. It worked.

When I was sixteen, I found I could see other people's demises too. That's when I became a superhero.

\* \* \*

I wandered around my small town doing daily rounds. In front of a grocery store, I got the flash of a vision. An elderly woman coming out of the store was going to trip and break her ankle. I asked if she needed help carrying her groceries. She smiled and thanked me for the help. As I said, I am a superhero but an incognito one.

I went to the park. I sat on one of the swings. The only other people there were a mother and her two daughters. The vision hit me strong. I saw the younger daughter running toward the street, chasing a butterfly.

I reacted automatically, jumping off the swing and running after her. The girl was already at the curb. The truck was coming. There wasn't time.

I reached for the girl and pushed her out of the way as much as I could. The truck's brakes screeched.

Blackness.

\* \* \*

Everything went white and blurry and echoed of pain. I heard something. Maybe a TV, I thought. It was distant. Then it sounded like my name. My mother's voice. I faded out.

Again, I heard it.

"Everett," my mother's sweet voice said. She was crying.

Pain—pain all over. I heard shouts.

"Everett!"

"Doctor!"

I tried to speak and finally got it out. "The girl?"

I heard my mom again, distantly. "Yes, you saved the girl, sweetie."

The doctor started speaking to my mother. I faded back out.

\* \* \*

After eight months of physical therapy in the hospital, I now walk the streets again. I try to see, but the visions no longer come. Everyone calls me a hero. It feels good.



## Untitled

*Lionel Clah, New Mexico*

*Pencil on Envelope, 2019*



**Cubist Self-Portrait**

*Michael Briggs, California*

*Acrylic on Canvas Panel, 2018*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

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## Amy Versus the Chasm

*Lindsey Saya, Arizona*

Amy stood at the edge of the great fiery chasm that, like the others, threatened to swallow the world into its flaming maw. The harsh, permeating heat pushed against her skin. She looked down into the heart of the earth and heard its slow churning growl, its gold and red embers casting a haunting light under the night sky. She looked across the burning gorge, through the undulating waves of heat, and on the other side, saw the dark silhouette of a man. She knew it was him. Her legs abandoned strength, gave way to gravity. Her knees caved, dropping her to the tarmac. She had been so close.

She had sat in a booth next to a big window at a diner she'd never been to, staring into a steaming mug of black coffee, her eyes red and wet. Amy let a tear drop into the dark surface of that hot drink while the rest of Patty's patrons huddled around the television that hung above the counter. Every soul, other than Amy with her tear-laced coffee, was focused on the newscast.

While all of Patty's customers were being mesmerized by the burning chaos overthrowing existence, Amy thought of Devon. That's when it happened, a rattle beneath her feet, growing into a shockwave that trembled under her. The whole joint, Patty's joint, quaked, the walls and beams moaning with each shudder, expressing their agony. Glassware and dinner plates slid off tables and countertops, crashing into a million pieces. Amy, by instinct maybe, grabbed her coffee, the hot liquid sloshing around, spilling over and burning her hands. Ceiling tiles fell; men and women flailed about; some threw themselves under tables. Chairs, tables, human beings—anything not bolted down—sailed across the room. It was as if Patty's Diner were the center of a giant snow globe and the universe couldn't help but swing them around. The massive windowpane by Amy exploded, bursting into a million sharp crystals. Outside car alarms squealed, and the towering buildings across the street swayed side to side like concrete belly dancers.

Someone screamed they were bleeding. Amy saw a man holding the top of his head as red seeped down his face. He walked, zombie-like, across the diner. Just as Amy thought it was over, she saw the black street outside cave in, a little at first, then the hole gaped wider and wider; cracks, like tentacles, sprang from its edges, stretching toward Patty's. A fiery pit opened up, tearing away half the diner, gorging on

Patty's patrons. As she watched men and women fall into a red hot pool, as she heard their screams burn up in a blaze, as she crawled out of that shattered window and ran to her car, Amy had a single thought: I have to get back to him.

She sped across the city, maneuvering around the fleeing masses and the hellish chasms that were springing up and biting away chunks of civilization.

"Out of the way, damn you!" she yelled at the world as she raced through the streets. She gripped her phone.

"No service?! No damn service?! Dammit, dammit, dammit!" she yelled.

She burnt the rubber on her tires to get back home. Her car flew into a deserted neighborhood. That's when a terrible crack opened up the road, giving way to the red fissure. Amy swerved her car to the right and collided with a parked minivan. Her head slammed against the steering wheel; broken glass showered her from all sides. The world went dark for a moment and all she could hear was the ringing in her ears. Slowly, she opened her eyes and felt something wet flowing from her nostrils. A monstrous sound roared beside her.

Amy hobbled out of her vehicle and stood there, engulfed in horror, witnessing a chasm open up before her, devouring the road, cars, trees, homes, and the memories of those that existed in that neighborhood. The chasm was an implacable beast demanding tribute.

Amy slumped down onto the road—what was left of it—and peered at the black silhouette that stood at the other end. She heard the whirring of helicopter blades overhead, looked up, and saw a mass exodus soaring through the night in their mechanical arks. She sniffled, and a salty tear streaked along her cheek. It felt cool against her face, a sad reprieve from the inferno ahead.

\* \* \*

"Another one popped up in Australia," Amy said, standing in front of the television, her eyes focused on the image of a burning gorge in the middle of the Australian outback. "That makes eight worldwide."

Devon was in the kitchen chopping carrots. "Will you get back in here? You know I'm a terrible cook," he joked.

"They're saying it's something about the earth's core," Amy said from the living room.

"And I'm saying unless you feel like eating take-out, you should probably get in here. Come on, I haven't seen you all day," Devon said,



dropping carrots into the sizzling pan.

"I think this is serious." She turned up the volume.

"Will you please turn that off and get in here?" He stirred away at the steaming vegetables.

"We should get water...and food," she said, still focused on the newscast.

"We have water and food."

She turned to look at Devon. "We need water."

Devon rolled his eyes and let out a sigh. "Fine, I'll go buy water." He turned off the stove.

Amy glared. "I hate when you do that."

"Do what?"

"Try to shut me up."

Devon came around the kitchen island and met Amy in the living room. "Don't you think you're overreacting?"

"You always do this." She turned off the T.V. "You try to make me feel like some dumb idiot."

"Don't be that way." Devon moved toward her and tried to place a hand on her shoulder. Amy shrugged it off.

"Why are we even doing this?" she said, not meeting his eyes. "Why are we pretending?"

"Dammit, Amy! Why can't you be more—"

"Like her."

They locked eyes.

"That's not what I was going to say," Devon said, stepping closer. "We're supposed to be working things out, but every time I try to do something nice you have to bring her up."

"Did you forget what you did?! Do you understand what you did to me?!" she yelled.

"Like you'd let me forget," Devon yelled, spit leaping from his mouth. "I know what I did. And I'm sorry, ok, I'm sorry! I get it. I messed up bad."

They were breathing hard now, the veins on their necks pulsing.

"Messed up?" Amy said. "You slept with another woman, Devon. You held her close to you and told her sweet things only I should hear. You gave her that smile only I should have. You let her hear that laugh only I should hear." She wiped the wetness from her eyes. "You didn't mess up, Devon. You betrayed me." Amy's heart felt like the chasms popping up all over the world, a giant crack, collapsing in on itself, full

of fire and brimstone and ache.

Devon eyed Amy, feeling like an admonished child.

“I want a divorce, Devon,” Amy said, even-toned.

Devon slumped down on the couch as if his body had gone limp. “Do you remember when we met?” he said, his voice hollow, trance-like.

They were quiet then, listening, perhaps, to the sound of their own demise.

“You were in a coma,” Amy started. “You’d been in a bad car accident. You didn’t have any family. You were all alone.”

Devon’s eyes grew damp.

“The other nurses would make fun, but I just didn’t think anyone deserved to be alone,” Amy said as a half smile creased her lips. “I was there when you woke up.”

Devon pulled Amy close to him, resting his head against her warm body.

Amy was still lost in memory. “You told me you’d fallen in love with me the second you saw me,” she said.

Devon held her closer.

“But now I know that was all bullshit.” She pulled away. “Just some pretty words to say to a pretty girl. Did you tell her the same thing, I wonder?”

Devon said nothing.

Devon, Amy thought, was a small mountain, hard and cold, incapable of speech or anything other than sitting there.

For a moment, Amy pictured herself slamming her fist against Devon’s face. She saw herself frenzied, slapping, scratching, thrashing until her hands and fists came back red and sore.

Devon finally broke his silence. “It wasn’t bullshit.”

“I’m leaving you, Devon.”

The words came out sharp. They sliced, like a guillotine, cutting not into Devon, Amy thought, but her own heart.

Amy walked away.

When she reached the front door, Devon said, “On the passenger seat of your car, I left something for you, a gift. I was going to surprise you.”

“Goodbye, Devon.”

\* \* \*

Beads of sweat raced across Amy’s face. The heat had grown

stronger, the chasm angrier. It began to vomit flame. And every few minutes, the ground shook beneath her. She felt the chasm's rage with each tremor.

Something buzzed in her pocket.

Her phone.

Her phone was working again.

"Is that you?" the text read.

Amy's clammy fingers tapped feverishly away. "It's me."

The phone rang.

"Devon!" Amy cried, pressing the phone against her sweat-streaked ear.

"How did you know I was still here?" he said.

"I didn't." The chasm burped its fury, sending a rolling flame into the sky. "I just had to find you."

"You need to leave. Please, Amy, leave."

She listened to his voice, the urgency, the fear ripping through it. A tear rolled down her face, and she knew she would never see her husband again.

"I can't!" she hollered. The whole earth grumbled beneath her. And different edges of the chasm fell away, taking with them souvenirs of Earth's surface.

"Amy—"

Before she could answer, in the distance, behind Devon's silhouette, she saw her home and the hills rumbling and quaking, and like Plato's Atlantis, they sank.

Amy knew it was almost over.

"Amy, why did you come back?!"

A tremor roared across the earth. Long, twisting fissures ripped from the chasm's edges, wounds, marring the surface world.

Amy pressed against the car, feeling the heat biting at her, the flames licking at her with each flare that rose from that red, rocky mouth. Car alarms screamed. Trees and their thick gnarled roots were torn up. The world quaked, and she saw the shadow of her husband stumble about.

"Amy, why did you come back?"

"Because—"

The chasm's red terror lashed out, like its brothers and sisters all over the world. Nothing was spared. No plant or tree or animal, no road or city or structure of any kind. All that had been touched by the hands

of humankind had fallen away into molten ruin.

Deep in the belly of the chasm, Amy's car sank into magma. Inside that disintegrating vehicle was a small parcel torn in two. The parcel held a small framed photo: Devon sleeping in a hospital bed, Amy reading a book by his side. Next to the photo, behind the glass, was an old medical band, the same one Devon wore in the picture.

Amy's car, along with the rest of the world, was swallowed up.



## Dorothea Tanning's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* Exquisite Corpse (Group Project)

*Scott Anzalone, Michael Bishop, Michael Briggs, Melvin Bryant,  
David Chehovich, Daniel Corona, Marcus Cosby, Garland  
Feathers, Gilbert Garcia, George Jasso, Saul Landaverde, Jonathan  
Marvin, Nicacio Mercado, Fernando Quiroz, Ruben Radillo,  
Gwen Randal, Steven Romero, and William Wang, California*

*Pencil on Bristol, 2019*

*Project PAINT Artwork*



Truth

*Jonathan Marvin, California*

*Paper, 2018*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

# Johnny Appleseed

*David Roberts, Arizona*

Coming home so late, John was surprised to find his mother waiting for him at the dining room table. She sat opposite her usual spot for family dinners, facing the front door, her back turned to the watercolor of wild roses. She exhaled a nimbus cloud, flicked her cigarette into the ashtray, and smiled, saying nothing. It was a plaintive smile, flat and unreal.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Yes.” Her smile widened into a reality—he knew her so well.

“Come on,” she said and rose, stubbing out the filter. “Let’s get you a snack.”

She turned each light on before them as John followed her down the hall to the back of the house. Along the way, he took his jacket off, careful not to bump the family portraits along the walls. He hung it over his stool in the kitchen and sat at the counter. He eyed his mother suspiciously as she washed her hands, poured milk into a coffee cup, and set a plate of gingersnaps in front of him. Coming around the counter, she pulled her robe tighter, then sat on the stool next to his.

He waited for an explanation to her wry look, her uncharacteristic silence, but instead of speaking, she reached over to pilfer one of the cookies. She took a nibble and gestured to the rest on the plate before him. John looked away from her for just a moment to pick up one of the cookies and dunk it in the cup. When he looked back, her face was flat once again.

“We’re moving,” she said.

John waited, his cookie soaking in the milk. He watched for the telltale laugh to end the joke, but it didn’t come and the dough crumbled away between his fingers.

“It won’t be that bad,” she said. “You guys will stay at your school this year, and then—well—we’ll see, okay?”

When John neither spoke nor moved, she added, “It will be an adventure.”

She continued to watch him, expecting a response, but John was unable to form a cohesive thought. He was lost in an eternal pause, having suffered a mental eraser so complete that he had even forgotten how his fingers dangled empty and useless in a cup of cold milk. He repeated the word to himself several times: “Moving?”

A confused jumble suddenly collapsed upon him: distinct singular images spanning a lifetime spent in this home, the only one he had ever known. His mind reeled as he realized the innumerable things that could be swept away in a fleeting moment—everything he had taken for granted. So many of these things—people and events—he had considered trivial, even mundane, just moments before. Now, he knew them to be truly precious, irreplaceable.

“But...why? Why are we moving?”

John’s mom placed her hand on his hand. “We know this seems to be coming out of nowhere, sweetie pie, but, well, your dad and I were talking about how we’d like to get a smaller place without so much to keep up.” She took a deep breath and blew all the air out of her lungs before breathing another gust to continue.

“Yesterday at the mall, out of curiosity, we stopped to find out what they might give us for this place, just thinking ahead. They made us an offer, a really good offer. So we told them we were just looking, and they made us an even better offer. So we explained that we were really thinking down the road a few years, and they offered us even more! I mean a *lot*. So your dad and I told them we would talk it over, just to get out of there, but last night we decided that we can’t pass this offer up. Listen, honey, we can use this money to make our lives better, all of our lives. It’s going to help you with college. And it will pay for a tutor for your brother.” She pulled down on the curl of hair behind her ear as she did when he was little. “Listen, we know this is going to be hard on you, sweetie, but you’re strong enough to get through this period, and I promise you, this is going to be a really good thing for all of us. I promise. Okay?”

Okay, thought John, okay? He felt like a little boy forgotten by his family, left behind at a carnival full of strangers. He wanted to burst into tears. He wanted to shout at her. What about my friends? What about Allison? What about my senior year, prom, beach weekends, graduation, and yearbook? He wanted to scream how unfair this was, how rotten, how selfish they were to do this to him, never thinking to ask how he might feel. He wanted to rant and rave at her uneasy smile of solace, but he couldn’t.

He couldn’t shout at her because he knew that they weren’t unfair; they were trying to do what they thought best. He couldn’t scream those words because they would hurt her more than she already hurt. He refused to cry because he wasn’t a child anymore.



From some deep well inside, someplace he had never even known existed before that moment, his voice rose with a calm that belied all of this turmoil. "It's okay," he said. "We'll be alright." And then, after he heard the words from his lips, he began to believe them.

She smiled again, another strange smile, but different from the one before.

He looked at her eyes and noticed how large her pupils were. Something in those ovals brought to mind the photo in the hallway, the one of her as a little girl, sitting on her mother's lap. John felt discombobulated, as if he were in that photo, though unsure if he were the child or the parent.

His mother patted his hand as his eyes twitched. The present returned like the first drop of rain on his nose.

"You'll see. It's gonna be good for all of us," she repeated, and John realized that she was now saying it more for herself than for him.

She got up, setting the folds of her robe, and moved around the counter once again. Taking the dish cloth draped across the faucet, she began to wipe down the range top and the cabinet handles. John stood as well, picking up his plate of cookies and the mug with the bits of gingersnap diffused through the milk.

"I'm beat. I'm gonna go up," he said, leaning in to kiss his mom on the cheek.

"Okay, honey. Bring that cup down in the morning, okay?"

As John walked through the living room, he thought of balls and cars, action figures and buses, lines at airports and late night phone calls. Climbing the stairs, he noticed for the first time how shabby and worn the carpet had become.



Trading Card (Project)

*Christopher Lee, California*

*Linocut, 2018*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

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## Sole Survivor

*Matthew Feeney, Minnesota*

The man was jolted out of his slumber by an unfamiliar noise. He lay silently in his bed, letting awareness slowly soak into his head. He listened again for the sound. The constant hum and whir from the ventilation grill was all he heard. It was all he had heard in the last 68 days (give or take a day or two). Not that he was complaining: as long as he heard that hum from the vent, he knew he still had a fighting chance of survival. Whatever sound, real or dream induced, had awakened him, it didn't recur. Since he was probably the sole human survivor within several hundred miles, he ascribed the phantom sound to a dream.

He stretched and yawned, twisted his shoulders a few times and sat up in his bunk and surveyed his bomb shelter. Not that he knew for sure it had been a bomb, but "survival shelter" (or worse yet, "bunker") sounded so paranoid to most people's ears. But then again, they were all dead and here he was, safe and sound. Who's laughin' now?

His forty-five-year-old lumberjack physique rose into a sitting position, feet resting on the concrete floor for a brief moment before taking the full weight as he stretched and then stood. He smiled as he surveyed his kingdom, a simple one-room shelter he had built himself. He had looked into several different types: the modular pods, which were concrete balls connected by concrete sewer pipe, as well as the self-contained survival units built into metal shipping containers—most of them decorated nicer than his house, all of them priced well above his budget. He had spent hundreds of hours researching and scouring the Internet for ideas, and had incorporated a few of the more creative ones in his design.

Take his window, for example. Typical 3x4 double hung window complete with matching curtains and looking at the same never changing scene of an old tilting barn surrounded on two sides by rows of corn at least five feet high. The sun stood behind, indicating it was early evening. The man watched closely for several moments, but everything was still—not a breath of wind to ruin his illusion of a window—for it really was a window, or at least the inner half of a window frame mounted on the cinderblock wall like a work of art. And the full color photograph of the barn and corn he had found online was bright enough to be seen through the screen and framed by drapes. It

certainly gave the illusion of reality. Except for the fact that nothing ever moved and nothing ever changed, it was no different from a real window, and once in a while the air blowing from the ventilation grill even caused the curtains to flutter slightly, adding to the illusion. Looked like it would be another beautiful day out!

He wished he knew exactly what sort of day it really was out there. He didn't know if it was from the EMP pulse or subsequent fireball, but every single piece of electronic gadgets and gauges were shot and had been from day one. He was as good as blind down here, twenty feet of earth above him protecting him from the residual radiation the broken Geiger counter said was nonexistent. As long as his air ventilation system was working, he didn't care so much about his electronic toys—though it would be nice to listen to some Country Western music on his MP3 player or play some games on his laptop. He preferred the simple ones like Minesweeper and Solitaire. Solitaire. He was living in a huge game of solitaire right now. He took two steps to arrive at his mini-loo, a stainless steel composting toilet and conducted his daily deposits. As he finished up the paperwork, his thoughts ran to how much water was remaining in his buried storage tank. He washed his hands and guessed he probably had only used one fourth of the water in the six-hundred gallon tank, but that was only a guess since the water gauges he had opted for were fancy electronic ones and useless. The water was always delivered at a constant fifty-seven degrees that would have made for a cold shower. The good news was he didn't design a shower into his shelter. His bird baths helped to stretch his water reserve far beyond his original calculations.

He sauntered over to the shelter's only door, placing both hands palm first on the tired gray steel, trying to gauge whether or not there was still a firestorm raging above. But this was a six-inch steel door with vault locks designed to withstand blast pressures from bomb explosions as well as bullets from hungry marauders... so there was no guarantee the cool metal of the interior matched the exterior temperature. Why hadn't he used some simple meat thermometers built through the wall instead of relying on those fancy electronic thermostats? Oh, to even have a simple periscope around just to see what was left of the real world. Of course, it's possible the damage wasn't that extensive. He chose this five-acre piece of property because of the protection offered by the rolling hills and nearby river.

He grabbed his breakfast tray and reviewed today's food fare: 1 cup

hot cereal, 6 fl oz. turkey sausage gravy, 2 dehydrated biscuits, 1 jelly packet, 2 sugar substitutes, and 1 packet of instant coffee that doesn't mix all the way when you only have ground temperature fresh water. He had a propane stove, of course, but to save fuel he preferred not to use it for breakfast. He dug into his meal, glad he hadn't fallen for the MRE solution for his meals. But what was he going to do when his food ran out? Would it be safe to go topside by then? Believing the ostrich didn't have the copyright on a good philosophy, the man adamantly refused to check his food supply. Ignorance was bliss, or as much bliss as one can have with a sporkful of room temperature turkey gravy in their mouth.

The man gazed around his domain that had kept him safe and secure and alive for ten long weeks. He had opted for fourteen-foot ceilings instead of the usual twelve—the extra two rows of cinderblocks really helped open it up and provided the illusion of more space. Otherwise, he had opted for the smaller footprint and used built-in triple bunks (another advantage of the extra two rows of height). Looking back on it now, he realized that even if he had found someone worth saving, additional people in this cramped space would have driven everyone crazy long before they had to worry about food or water supplies. Wouldn't that be ironic? Survive the great Armageddon and then end up killing each other in a case of cabin fever. Fever made him think of his medical stockpile and worry about what he might find outside his door.

The man's mind drifted back to the comforting sound of the ventilation system that told him he was alive now and at least for the next twenty hours. Now if there had been three people in here, the volume of air in the room would have lasted only a few hours. But he was alone, so all the oxygen was his. He had camouflaged and hardened the air intake valve, the snorkel to upside that kept him alive. If there had been a biblical flooding, the last place you would want to be was twenty feet underground with a big snorkel ready to turn your habitat into a buried aquarium. To survive a flood you needed an ark... or a houseboat. And don't forget a desalination machine: even in the Midwest, any flood waters would become saltwater, or at least contain enough salt to make the water non-potable for humans.

What if he was the only human being left on the planet? Adam without Eve. Not that he would want an Eve, he always preferred Steve, but if he had to do it to save the human race, he was willing to do whatever it would take. Take one for the team. Hopefully there

would be a six pack to mark this lifetime achievement and preferably consumed before the act.

He smiled wryly and let his mind continue to drift. Maybe today was the day he was to come out. God sent Moses a sign—rainbows and doves bearing gifts. Was some talking mole supposed to come knocking on his shelter door to let him know all was clear?

"Nothing to Fear!" Would the mole talk in a funny squawky voice? He pondered for a moment before deciding it would probably be a low, gravelly voice. Thinking further he realized he had never actually seen a mole in real life—probably on TV or in a book, but he'd be hard pressed to draw one. Regardless of what it looked like, if the damn thing talked to him, that would be a very clear sign. Sometimes in the quiet he thought he heard voices, and several times a day the steady throb of the ventilation fan morphed into honest-to-God music. He knew it was in his head, but he would still listen and tap his fingers and foot to the rhythms. Sometimes it was Country, other times 80's hair band rock—never any commercials. He wished something was playing now.

Sitting on the edge of his bunk, he leaned forward to place his empty tray on the kitchen counter. He looked over his small metal work table and saw the five books he was reading. All paperbacks and all well-read, many times over. His iPad, of course, contained several hundred eBooks, along with survival manuals and instruction guides and scanned "how-to" pamphlets, but with all electronics down due to the EMP, he was reduced to reading the same five books. Maybe he should write a book—about his experiences surviving in the bunker. The idea brought a spark of hope to his eyes until reality asked who was around to read it? "The Last Memoirs of the Last Man on Earth... From Adam to Lloyd." Eh, didn't really roll off the tongue—maybe he'd start tomorrow. If he was still alive.

Unconsciously he checked the ventilation screen. No music, but still fresh air. Amazing how an inconspicuous 6x3-inch shielded grate could become so important in someone's life. An average house had them in every room, but he hadn't noticed them much before this experience. Surprising how something so common and mundane could take on such a deep meaning and significance. He listened for a while longer, until his brain flipped from ventilation to what his future would be like outside the bunker. There had to be a life outside the cube. He had to go out eventually. He could always come back (if he was still alive).

He grabbed a book and flopped back on his unmade bunk, stretching with both arms above his head. He smelled ripe. Couldn't remember his last bird bath. No one to impress, and the musky smell always sorta turned him on. He extended one arm over his head, opened the book to a random spot, and began to reread. Suddenly there was a knock, and the mole's voice called out "Mr. Freeman? You ready?" He was startled for a moment, and then he remembered. He had asked God for a sign when it was safe to go out into the world—this was obviously his sign! He sat up, placing the opened book on his bunk and smiled. It was time to go forth. To enter this new world, to face new challenges, to survive.

Suddenly his handle-less airlock door was being opened from the outside. The bolts slammed back and the heavy steel door he had stood at and touched so many times was slowly being cracked open. He wasn't sure what was coming next, but a small tickle of a deeply repressed memory seemed to squiggle upwards. The man remained seated, staring transfixed as the open space around the door grew.

Finally, the kind face of an officer popped through the door jamb. "I see you're all done with breakfast. Grab your linens; we're packing ya outta here! You're heading to Unit 10!"

The seated man remained silent but mechanically put a smile on his face and slowly stood and turned around to bunch his sheets and blankets into a messy bundle. There was only a single bunk. The soul survivor stepped towards freedom, and then hesitated. He slowly turned around to survey what had been his bunker for the last sixty-eight days. His window had bars instead of curtains, and the view was that of razor wire and the backside of the prison's medical unit topped by more sparkling razor wire. The picture had never changed, but the real sun left striped shadows on the cell floor for the man to wade through as he shuffled slowly towards the door, about to return to the scary world of General Population.



**Lost and Found**

*Mark Padilla, Arizona*

*Acrylic on Paper, 2019*

*Illustration for Short Story*



## Lost and Found

*Raúl Herrera III, Arizona*

The earthy scent of moss and dark green pine filled my nose. But an unaccountable scent of fear lingered somewhere beyond, of which I was far too aware.

Why had I come back to the old world? The thought was provoking.

At eighty-six years of age, I was scarcely able to navigate Germania's Black Forest. Pine trees, dark and sullen, surrounded me like ten thousand sentries forbidding my advance. Their long arms, blowing in the wind, turned and bent low as though to stop me. Down they reached, grabbing at my limbs, but I pushed through in spite of their opposition.

Why had I come back? I continued to question myself. Something deep within me had brought me here; that much was certain. There was a feeling, a dreadful feeling, and it terrified me. But what was behind it? Was it my mortality? Was it the little voice in my head that whispered ever so sinisterly: Your death is inevitable?

The small hairs on my nape rose.

I tried to push the thought out of my mind. But honestly, who was I trying to fool? At my age, I could no more deny the thought of death than deny the equally pernicious feeling that clawed at my soul without remorse.

Downcast, I shook my head and wandered on.

Higher up, the pine-scented air became thinner. Every successive breath brought less oxygen. My lungs burned, and my limbs grew painfully weak.

A wolf howled in the distance, stealing my attention. Shiny orbs—amber and scarlet—seemed to glare at me from the darkness between the trees, and I trembled.

My eyes evaded the terror, turning to the forest floor. There, ebony vines appeared to slither around before my feet. I hurried forward; one of them suddenly lashed out and coiled about my leg; I fell into its bony tendrils.

For a moment I lay there among the inexorable snare of vines, the tall sentinels above peering down at me with morose delight. The Black Forest, it seemed, would take yet another victim.

Anger flooded my veins; this feeble body of mine just couldn't go

any further—The Forest wouldn't allow it! But I needed to find out what had brought me back to the old world! My frustration and anger all at once fueled my drive.

“To perdition's bowels with you!” I yelled at the mocking trees. I tore at the vines gripping my legs, stood up in defiance, and trudged through the wild growth.

I was determined to find that which haunted my thoughts.

The pine trees, I noticed, began to give way. And at last, I gained the crest of the mountain, where, to my utter surprise, I beheld an ancient cathedral hidden amongst aging oaks. I had never seen the cathedral before, but knew this was it. This was whence the grim feeling originated. I can't tell you why or how I knew. I just knew.

I stood there a moment, taking in the sum of the old church. The cathedral's façade was cracked, its once-white plaster weather-worn and heavily lined, like an endless black river branching off a hundred times, only to branch off a hundred times more. Ancient gargoyles were perched atop its high terraces, their menacing, beady orbs ever gazing on the one who dared to enter.

My wary gaze followed the worn, gray stone steps ahead, my eyes creeping up to the cathedral's wooden double-door entrance. The wood was dark, water-stained, and rotted in places.

What was lurking in there? I wondered. What foul entity was waiting for me?

I had the urge to turn and run far away, but I couldn't—I had come too far for this. Moreover, I had to know why. Against my better judgment, I pushed myself onward and up the stone walkway to the cathedral.

Under the disapproving stares of the gargoyles, I cautiously pushed open the old doors. Their rusty hinges creaked grumpily, as if roused from a long, comforting slumber.

Inside, I saw that the cathedral's interior was dilapidated, its pews in disrepair, its dais collapsed. The great cross, with Jesus' likeness, had crashed and was lying on its side, as if the Messiah could no longer bear the weight of the world's sins.

Strangely, nothing rushed out at me. Not even Death.

I let out a short, nervous laugh, but deep down I knew it was merely a natural reaction to try and dismiss my fears. Contrarily, my reservations were mounting by the second, and there was no solace to be had. I ventured further inside.

A heavy, musty scent assaulted my nostrils, and I sneezed violently. Set into the old stone walls were stained-glass windows, each one showing an elaborate depiction of Christ's mighty work. They glowed eerily, casting colorful reflections onto the time-worn surfaces and blood-red hues onto my arms and torso.

As I stared at the red glow covering my body, it dawned on me that the old, rundown church, in essence, was me: an aged, lined façade that had grown lonely, empty, and lifeless inside. The fallen cross was a reflection of my faith, which I had left long ago. However, it was the constant red glow enveloping me, that warm embrace, that spoke poignantly to my heart.

Christ's blood had never failed to cover me, even when I had failed and left Him.

Moved by the thought, I dropped to my knees at Jesus' side, and wept with long, unyielding sobs, ashamed but forever grateful. Then, while I was yet in the throes of my muddled emotions, the sound of a mighty wind burst down from heaven and surrounded me, such as a whirlwind roar, albeit the air was still.

Startled, I looked around, unsure why it was happening or what it was.

To my dismay, a haunting clamor resounded beyond the cathedral's walls. It was a piercing ruckus that burrowed into my ears like hungry little maggots. The upheaval, I suspected, was a legion of demons angered by the loss of one soul—my soul.

All of a sudden, the sound of heavenly wind rose up around me. Was it an unassailable barrier? Could it be a display of protection, an Almighty presence, that kept the darkness, with its plethora of bad intentions, at bay?

I was beginning to understand Who had called me back home. And I felt I knew why: Once I had been lost, but now I was found.

A strange, unaccustomed peace came over me then. And I smiled for the first time in ages.



I am the Way I am the Light

*Kazten Somari, Arizona*

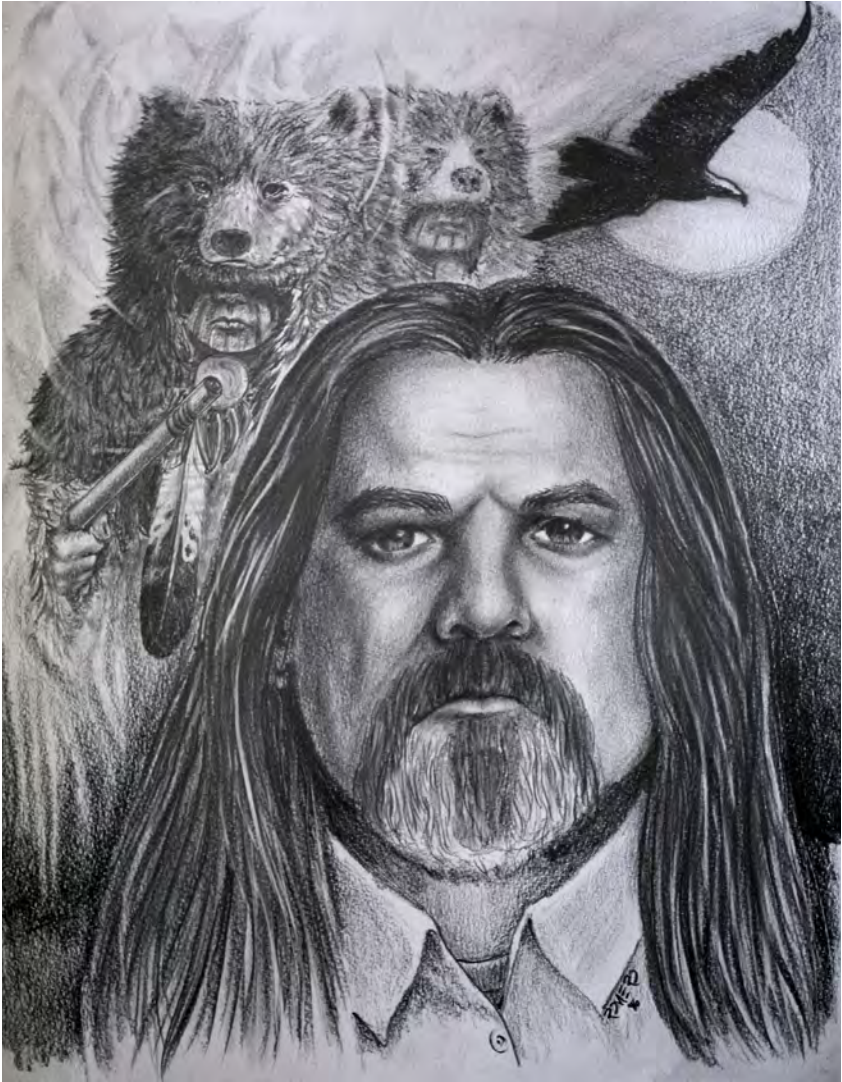
*Mixed Media, 2019*



## Dublin

*Kazten Somari, Arizona*

*Mixed Media, 2018*



## Spirit Animal Self-Portrait

*Steven Romero, California*

*Pencil on Paper, 2017*

*Project PAINT Artwork*

## The Pile

*Gary K. Farlow, North Carolina*

The sweat ran in rivulets down José's face, plastering his long black hair to his head. Only thirty minutes into his workout, José could already feel the burn in his arms as the heat equally bore down on the prison rec yard. José tended to avoid crowds, especially in prison, and this led him to avoid the weight pile in the cooler morning hours, when demand for the precious few barbells and bench space was at a premium. Now, as the afternoon sun beat on the shadeless concrete, José was beginning to question his lone wolf status.

"Not too shabby," said a gravelly voice, which broke through José's thoughts, causing him to drop the barbell with a whoosh of exhaled breath.

"You really shouldn't sneak up on a guy like that," José grunted in an irritated voice. "You could cause somebody to get hurt."

"Try wearing the belt when you're lifting. It can prevent a hernia," the newcomer continued, ignoring José's irritation.

Moving to another bench, José switched to the dumbbells.

"Name's Eddie," said the barrel chested man, "but most just call me 'Big E.'"

José closed his eyes and continued lifting the barbells, counting audibly to dissuade further conversation.

"I see you discovered my secret," Eddie said, straddling the bench José had abandoned.

José couldn't stop himself from asking, "And just what secret would that be, amigo?"

"Ah! So you can speak English!" Eddie said with a laugh, letting the barbell drop with a clang.

"Very funny," José muttered. "Yeah, I'm Hispanic, but I was born and raised in San Antonio, so I'm just as much an American as you, gringo." He said the last word with slight contempt.

"Whoa, whoa, dude," Eddie said with a shake of his head. "All that anger is gonna burn you up. We gotta share this pile and I'd rather do it in peace, but I'd prefer as friends."

"Got nothing against you, hombre," José began.

"Call me Big E, or Eddie if you..."

"Eddie," José continued, "but I ain't lookin' for friends. I just want to do this bid and get back to my girl and kid."

“What’d they hit you with?” Eddie asked.

“Eighteen months, why?”

Eddie shook his head before replying, “I know that prob’ly seems like a long time to you, but I’m in my twenty-fifth year now and—”

“Hey man, I—” José started.

“I told you, ‘Big E’ or ‘Eddie.’”

“Okay, okay, *Eddie*,” José said, “I’ve heard about you long-timers and I don’t want no part of no ‘prison games.’”

“Me neither,” Eddie said, in a matter-of-fact tone. “But in here, if a guy as young as you tries to lone-wolf it, well, you’re just asking for trouble. And I could use a workout partner not afraid of the midday sun.”

“I don’t need no protector,” José spat.

“Didn’t say you did,” Eddie said dryly. “But just a little friendship goes a long way in prison. You can do your time or it can do you.”

“I told you, I’m good, I can handle myself,” José said as he turned and walked off the rec yard, leaving Eddie to watch him go.

Several days passed with Eddie using the weight pile alone in the afternoons. He gave no more thought to the young, angry Hispanic until one afternoon, nearly a week later. Eddie was in the midst of his workout when a shadow fell across him. Eddie glanced up to see José looking like he’d just lost his best friend.

“Hey, what’s up?” Eddie said. “I thought maybe I’d done something to change your mind about working out. Wouldn’t wanna do that. Exercise is good for you....” Eddie suddenly noticed José was staring at the ground with such a dejected demeanor that it was patently obvious something was bothering him.

“Hey man, you alright?” Eddie asked.

“Did you mean what you said the other day?” José asked, finally looking up.

“Exactly what are we talking about here?” Eddie replied.

“You know, about being a workout partner... a friend.”

“Why the sudden change, man?” Eddie asked.

José didn’t respond. He shuffled his feet and shrugged his shoulders, showing his youth—even if he was a father.

“Look,” Eddie began, laying down the dumbbells he had picked up. “It’s obvious you’ve got something on your mind. Just spit it out, man.”

“I gotta talk to somebody,” José said.

Seeing that José was clearly troubled, Eddie turned serious. “Take a



seat. You know, I don't even know your name."

"José."

"Okay, José. Why don't you tell me what's got you so torn up."

"Man, I don't even know where to start."

"Well, try it from the start."

"It's my girl. Juanita. Like I said, I got eighteen months, and I know that ain't no big deal to some, but it's like forever to my girl. We got a kid, a baby girl, Miranda. She's just two and don't understand why her papá ain't there. Then Juanita, see, when I came to the pen, she and the baby, they moved in with my mamá. And now, Mamá, she's writing to tell me that Juanita is out all hours, leaves the baby with my mamá. It just don't look right."

"Well," Eddie said, "you need to remember one thing. It ain't just you serving time. Your family's serving this bid right along with you."

"How?" José demanded. "I'm the one in here."

"How? I'll tell you. Didn't you just tell me your baby girl... Miranda?" asked Eddie.

"Yeah, Miranda."

"Right," continued Eddie. "Well, she's missing her daddy, so she's paying for your crime too. And, your mom, she's having to take in your girl and baby, and provide care for the baby so your girl can go do I don't know, whatever..."

"Right, whatever."

"So, your mom is paying, too."

"What about Juanita?" asked José.

"Check this out, José. Prison is tough on a married couple."

"We're not married."

"Then it's even tougher. You got a baby together. That's your only tie. And you ain't there to help. Your mom ain't you, man. Love is a gift, not an obligation."

"Man, I just get so lonely," said José. "Then I start to imagine the worst. I lose Juanita, I lose Miranda. I lose my Mom. Then I lose my mind!"

"Hey, hey. Slow down. Loneliness is not just being alone. Loneliness is not having anybody who gives a damn what happens to you. And that ain't you. The rest? You just gotta take it slow and let go."

"That ain't easy," José remarked.

"Never said it was. But like I told you that first day: you can serve time or it can serve you. Make this bid count. You got a GED?"

“Nope.”

“There’s a start. You send much mail home?”

“Well...”

“There’s your second place. Let’em know you care.”

“And in between?” asked José.

“I’m here on the pile everyday.”

The days passed. José met Eddie there everyday. Eddie bombarded José with the accumulated knowledge and hard won experience of twenty-five years serving time, sometimes peppering in adages that often left José pondering their meaning.

“José?” asked Eddie one afternoon. “You know who a prisoner’s worst enemy is?”

“Yeah, the C.O.”

“Nope. It’s the guy in the next bunk. If they didn’t fight each other, it’d be another story.”

“Hey Eddie,” asked José, “you hear on the news the state got approval to build five new prisons?”

“José, a famous man once said that building more prisons to address crime is like digging more graveyards to address a fatal disease.”

“How’s your GED coming, José?” asked Eddie.

“It’s... okay I guess,” replied José.

“José, now is your chance to make a change. Look, everybody makes mistakes. But a good man will yield when he recognizes the path he’s on is wrong and tries to repair what he’s done. A past mistake is no excuse to continue it. Hubert Humphrey once said, ‘It’s not what they take away from you that counts; it’s what you do with what you have left.’”

“Who?”

And so it went. Eddie and José’s friendship grew. José began to bring his GED books out to the weight pile as the days of summer lapsed into fall and the air took on a noticeable nip and daylight faded quickly.

“Man, why are they making me learn this history stuff!” exclaimed José. It was just a few days before Christmas and the daily workout had evolved into a part-time study session as Eddie helped José prep for his GED.

“I don’t see the point!” José said, clearly frustrated.

“Just bear in mind, José,” began Eddie, “that stupid people make stupid mistakes. If you don’t use this time to make a change. You will be

back. Not to mention that you'll fall right into the same old revolving door that a lot of prison administrators want. It's job security for them."

"What do you mean?" asked José.

"Dude, instead of focusing on rehabilitating prisoners and finding ways to make them job-ready when they get out, a lot of our prison administrators would rather promote an atmosphere of violence, hatred, bigotry, and dog-eat-dog. They take first-time offenders like you and turn them into hardened convicts, who, after years of being ruled and dominated by coercion, turn them loose onto city streets knowing that they've bred an angrier, more violent individual who will return to prison."

"So what makes you think if I don't get a GED that I'll come back?" José asked.

"Simple statistics," Eddie replied.

"What?"

"If you use your time in here wisely, get substance abuse help, if you need it, get an education, and take charge of yourself, then you've got an 80% chance of not coming back to prison," Eddie explained.

"And if I don't?"

"Then you got an 80% chance that you'll be right back on this rec yard with me in three years after getting out."

"That's kinda scary, man."

"Damn straight it is. Not everybody who works in a prison is like that, but a lot of them count on guys like you getting arrested and put in prison as just natural. Then you never become a productive part of society except as a cog in the industrial prison complex. Prisons without rehabilitation facilities are little more than colleges for criminals."

"So... get my GED?"

"Get your GED... for a start."

Christmas Eve dawned bright but cold. A light dusting of snow had fallen, but it didn't deter the friends from meeting on the weight pile. Since late fall, they had moved their daily routine to early morning to avoid the midday crowd that took advantage of the noon warmth. Eddie was wiping snow from the weight bench when José came running up. His eyes were bright and a grin threatened to break his jaw.

"Hey, Eddie!" José yelled, while still a good distance away.

Eddie stopped cleaning off the bench and turned toward his friend. "What's got you lit up like the tree in visitation?"

“Check it out, man!” José responded, flourishing a homemade Christmas card with scribbles and a child’s handprint.

“Hey, that’s impressive,” Eddie said, aware of his friend’s obvious pride.

“It’s from Miranda!” José beamed. “And check out the return address—Juanita! She even signed her and Miranda’s names too—look, it says, ‘We love you, Papi!’”

“José, that’s great, man. I mean really great.”

“Dude, I been worried bad. It’s been a long time since I heard from Juanita and with my mamá telling me that she’s gone all night, most every night. I didn’t think she’d wait on me.”

“So...” Eddie asked.

“Well, turns out, that yeah, Juanita’s gone every night, but she’s working a third shift job as a nurse’s aide, so she’s home with Miranda during the day while Mamá’s at work. She gets a higher pay to work nights too, and she’s saving as much as she can cause she said we’re gonna need it when I come home.”

“You’re a very, very fortunate man, José.”

“Man, you know it!”

“What about your GED?”

“Oh, I almost forgot—check it out.” José produced a manila envelope and handed it to Eddie. Eddie opened the envelope and removed the enclosed certificate.

“Be it known, blah, blah,” Eddie read aloud, “that José Lopez is awarded a General Equivalency Diploma. Hey, dude, you did it!”

“No, we did it. I couldn’t have done it without you, Eddie.”

“José, you earned it. Okay, I might’ve encouraged you...”

“No, Eddie. I would never have stuck with it all these months on my own, man. Your help, what you said about my chances if I didn’t—it all made me realize that if I don’t change now, I never will. This place will be waiting on me, like that motel commercial, they’ll leave the light on. I want my life back.”

“You’ve made a good start, José.”

“What about you, Eddie?” José asked.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you know. You going home?”

“José, I am home. This is it for me, my friend.”

“Oh man, and here I go running my trap about going home. Sorry, Eddie.”

“Don’t be. You got a second chance. Make it count. I’ve accepted this and I deal with it, so don’t go feeling sorry. Go home, José. Marry Juanita and give Miranda the life she deserves. You got it in you.”

“What’ll you do?”

“Me? I’ll do what I was doing when you first met me. I’ll be on the pile.”



## Surrealist Final Project

*Steven Romero, California*

*Acrylic on Canvas Board, 2019*

*Project PAINT Artwork*



## All My Relations

*Isaac Lee-Jumping Deer, Arizona*

*Charcoal & Pencil on Paper, 2019*





Many of the art works featured in this edition of *Iron City Magazine* were created by artists involved in



Project PAINT is an arts organization based in San Diego, California that operates at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility and California State Prison, Centinela. Professional art instructors create collaborative projects, conduct visual arts and fine crafts workshops, and provide informative lectures as rehabilitation for people who are incarcerated.

### Project PAINT: the Prison Arts Initiative

Project PAINT was conceived by Founding Director Laura Pecenco in 2012 to fill the gap after the California state prison system defunded the Arts-in-Corrections (AIC) program in 2010. Project PAINT was totally volunteer-run until 2014, when the state restarted funding for AIC. Partnering with the William James Association, Project PAINT now employs ten professional artists who provide art instruction on five yards across two prisons in a variety of artistic mediums.

While Project PAINT communicates through the barriers of prison walls, it also breaks down racial barriers within the prison. When inside artists come into class, all of those boundaries are dropped. Everyone is just an artist.

### Laura Pecenco, Founding Director

Laura Pecenco now provides oversight of all Project PAINT operations in coordination with the William James Association, California Arts Council & California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Pecenco is an Associate Professor of Sociology at San Diego Miramar College. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, San Diego; an M.A. in Sociology from UC San Diego; and a B.A. in Sociology from UC Berkeley.

Contact: [info@ProjectPAINT.org](mailto:info@ProjectPAINT.org)

# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

call for submissions

## **Barzakh Magazine's**

Spring 2020 Special Themed Issue:

## **Incarceration Writing**

We are looking for previously unpublished creative & critical work that deals in the realities & consequences of incarceration on the lives of incarcerated peoples, their families, communities, & imaginaries.

We are accepting prose, poetry, hybrid work & visual art that deals in these themes for our Spring 2020 issue.

Please mail submissions to:

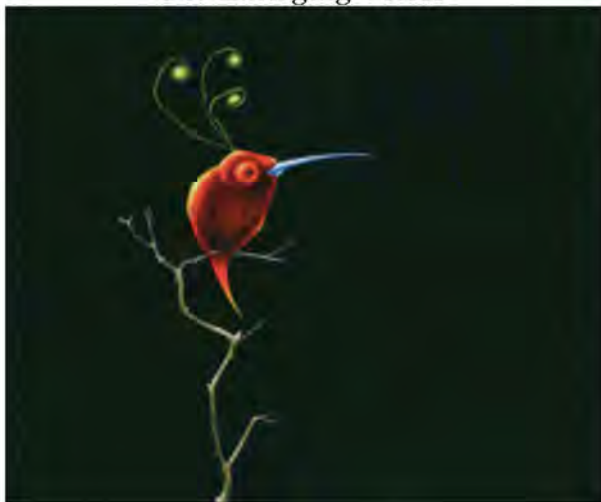
Barzakh Magazine  
c/o Yolande Schutter  
Department of English, HU 374  
1400 Washington Ave.  
Albany, NY 12222

Typed manuscripts preferred, but we will also accept handwritten work. Please include a return address & a brief third-person biography with your submission. If you would like your manuscript to be returned to you, please include a self-addressed stamped envelope. In the interest of accessibility for incarcerated peoples, we will continue to accept submissions for this special themed issue until 2 weeks before our projected publication date of May 1, 2020.

# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

## *Canyon Voices*

Literary Magazine  
*"For Emerging Voices"*



### SEEKING SUBMISSIONS

POETRY, ART, SCRIPTS, FICTION, & CREATIVE NONFICTION

Submit to via email to: [CanyonVoicesLitMag@gmail.com](mailto:CanyonVoicesLitMag@gmail.com)

Via mail to: Canyon Voices | P.O. Box 37100 | mail code 2151 | Phoenix, Az 85069-7100

**SUBMISSION GUIDELINES** – [CanyonVoices.asu.edu](http://CanyonVoices.asu.edu)

Incarcerated writers and artists can follow the Iron City Submission Guidelines

Canyon Voices is produced by students of the School of Humanities Arts & Cultural Studies  
at Arizona State University's New College of Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences

### SUBMISSION DEADLINES

Spring: March 15 – Fall October 15

# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

## IRON CITY



M A G A Z I N E

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS  
BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

[ironcitymagazine.org](http://ironcitymagazine.org)

We are currently accepting submissions of short fiction, nonfiction, poetry, one-act plays, cartoons/comics, graphic stories, and art for **Issue 5**.

The (postmark) deadline to submit is **June 1, 2020**.

Email submissions to:  
[ironcitymagazine@gmail.com](mailto:ironcitymagazine@gmail.com)

Or mail submissions to:

**Iron City Magazine**

P.O. Box 370

Tempe, AZ 85280

### 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 memories, perspectives, or insights *related to mass incarceration*.

### 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.

Please use the attached cover sheet and include your entire submission in a single email or envelope.

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.

**(Arizona State Prison policy prohibits gifting or paying prisoners with copies. Families and friends may order copies via the website. Prison magazine policies vary by state.)**

### **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.
- 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. To increase *Iron City Magazine's* chances of being allowed into the prisons, please abstain from nudity, graphically depicted violence, and detailed discussion of drug use.
- 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**.)
- We do not accept book-length works.

### **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. Submit 1 to 3 pieces, 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. Use descriptive details (imagery), paint scenes, provide actions. We will consider brief opinion pieces, argument essays, and humor. Submit 1 to 3 pieces, 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.

Submit 1 to 5 poems, not to exceed 10 pages, total. Poems exceeding 1 page should still be spare and evocative.

### **Guidelines for One-Act Plays**

Submit 1 or 2 plays. Each play may be up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages.

### **Guidelines for Cartoons/Comics/Graphic Stories**

We accept both color and black-and-white graphics and cartoons/comics, but we may be able to print only in black-and-white, depending on funding. Submit up to 2 graphic stories (maximum of 15 pages each) and/or 3 one-page cartoons/comics. Please bear in mind that our printed magazine page size is only 8.5 inches in height by 5.5 inches in width. Stories may be fiction or creative nonfiction/memoir (please specify which).

### **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. 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. Please state on the submission cover sheet whether you do or do not consent to such changes.

# IRON CITY



M A G A Z I N E

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS  
BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

[ironcitymagazine.org](http://ironcitymagazine.org)

Dear Editor,

Please consider the enclosed work for publication in *Iron City Magazine*.

My fiction titled

1 \_\_\_\_\_  
2 \_\_\_\_\_  
3 \_\_\_\_\_

My creative nonfiction titled

1 \_\_\_\_\_  
2 \_\_\_\_\_  
3 \_\_\_\_\_

My poem(s) titled

1 \_\_\_\_\_  
2 \_\_\_\_\_  
3 \_\_\_\_\_  
4 \_\_\_\_\_  
5 \_\_\_\_\_

My one-act play(s) titled

1 \_\_\_\_\_  
2 \_\_\_\_\_

My art titled+medium+date

1 \_\_\_\_\_  
2 \_\_\_\_\_  
3 \_\_\_\_\_

My graphic story or stories titled

1 \_\_\_\_\_  
2 \_\_\_\_\_

My cartoons/comic(s) titled

1 \_\_\_\_\_  
2 \_\_\_\_\_

This is my original work and has not been previously published elsewhere. I am granting *Iron City Magazine* first printing rights only, after which copyright reverts to me.

Full name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

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How I wish my name to appear if my work is chosen for publication

\_\_\_\_\_

I **have**  **have not**  been incarcerated. Although the primary goal at *Iron City Magazine* is to give voice to (formerly or currently) incarcerated authors and artists, we also publish work by others—but **only** when that work **clearly** treats themes of incarceration.

I **do**  **do not**  give my consent to *Iron City Magazine* to edit spelling, grammar, and punctuation for publishing without prior approval from me. (*If neither box is checked, consent will be assumed.*) NOTE: Consent to these edits is voluntary, but because communication with prisoners is often slow, not consenting may limit chances of acceptance for publication in this year's issue.

I **do**  **do not**  give *Iron City Magazine* permission to include excerpts or images from my work on merchandise (t-shirts, mugs, notebooks, etc.), the proceeds of which will go 100% toward the publication of future issues of the magazine. My name will appear on the merchandise alongside my work.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature**

(If you are submitting electronically and have no access to a scanner, we will accept your typed name below.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_



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