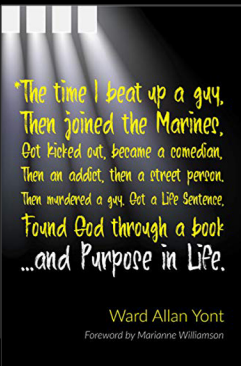


Included in this issue:



An interview with Ward Allan Yont, author of "*... and Purpose in Life.*"



Recent creative nonfiction and photography by a John Burroughs Nature Writing award-winner, Ken Lamberton



An interview with self-taught, incarcerated artist Kazten Somari

Inspired by Freedom, 2020



\$15 USA / \$20 CANADA



IRON CITY MERCH

IRON CITY MAGAZINE ISSUE 5 / 2020 



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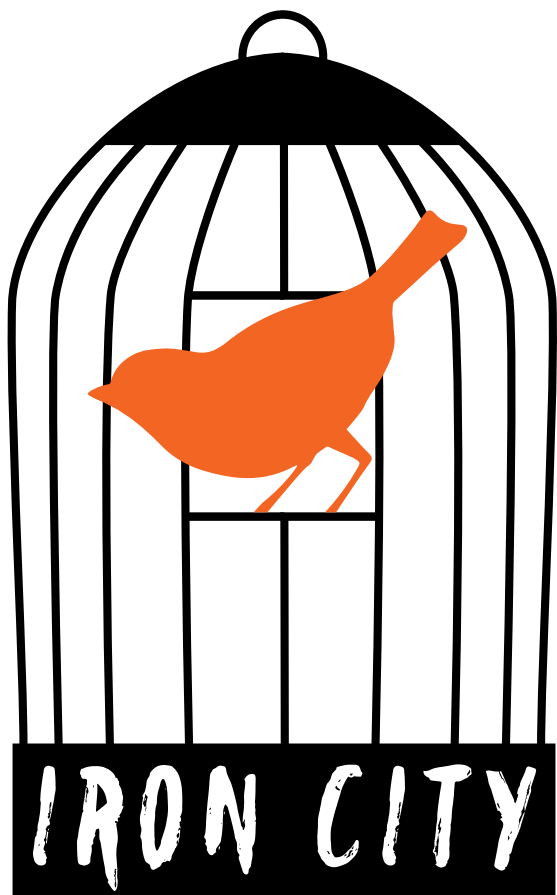
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California, Acrylic on Canvas Board, 2019
Project PAINT Artwork

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M A G A Z I N E

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS
BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

ISSUE 5 / 2020

ABOUT *IRON CITY*

Iron City Magazine is an online and print magazine devoted to writing and art from the prison world. It is our hope that through this creative platform, incarcerated writers and artists 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 sharing.

Too often, prisoners' potential is forgotten or overshadowed by their crimes. *Iron City Magazine* reminds us that prisoners make meaningful contributions to our communities. By validating prisoners' humanity through writing and art, we encourage a culture of understanding and transformation.

DONORS

We would like to thank the Ibis Foundation of Arizona and AZ Humanities for the grant awards that made the publishing of this issue possible.

We would also like to thank Elly van Gelderen at Arizona State University and Eric Kessler at Deep Readings for their generous financial contributions.



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LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Mercy in the Time of Mass Incarceration

Dear Readers,

Life is messy, and I do not believe in justice. There are no magical scales that make things right. The weight we gain or don't gain must register. The pain we cause others, and the pain we cause ourselves, cannot be taken back. But we need not dwell in the pain forever.

We abide in a mean time, the meantime, a lean time. Darkness teaches us to feel for the light. Life blesses us through challenges and trials, the raw material to grow from and through. Light outmaneuvers dark and is ultimately more abundant. The play of light on dark yields the dual vision of looking through a window and seeing ourselves in the world outside. And the world outside in us.

I don't believe in justice because it isn't real; it's not even possible. Justice is an idle wish, a false god, an idol.

I believe in something more redemptive than measuring and meting out: I believe in forgiveness and mercy, in the cup spilling over. The idea of justice diminishes; acts of mercy and forgiveness multiply.

Justice is a bit player in the tyranny of ideas, small-time theater. Yet we build societies, governments, departments on "justice," the fantasy of control.

Love your god with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. Love yourself. Love your neighbor. Love god. And forgive everyone. These are the big principles. Few other generalizations need to be made. Mainly, there are individual stories to tell. In art, poetry, fiction, and memoir, the inhabitants of *Iron City Magazine* tell theirs. Through soul-wrought imagery, dialogue, and metaphor; through brave acts of imagination and of sometimes painful remembrance—stories enable readers and listeners to say, "I totally get that. I've been there, at least emotionally. I understand." And everyone involved feels a bit less lonely. Gathering around the metaphoric campfire to share our stories, we not only learn empathy; we also feel connection and hope.

May you enjoy hope and feel joy in perusing this issue.

Much love,
Corri Wells
Executive Director

LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Creativity in Times of Change

Dear Readers,

We are all facing a global pandemic and the devastations that have come from that. Unfortunately, the pandemic has brought more uncertainty to the lives of those marginalized from society. In prisons, COVID-19 cases are 5.5 times higher, the rate of death 3 times higher, than in the general US population.* I cannot imagine the terrifying and helpless situation prisoners currently face. Because of that, I did not expect the impressive number of submissions we received for this issue. It reminded me that they are fighting through these difficult times with their own creative freedom, not giving up their voice to despair.

The writing and art in this issue show that our contributors survive through imagination and reality. Not only are they dealing with current horrors but with confinement and the traumatic aftermath of confinement. Putting oneself out there in a publication is also challenging, especially when it comes in the form of the creative work we have let define and change us.

I admire *Iron City Magazine's* Issue 5 contributors because they fight against the everyday and the unexpected to pursue and exhibit creative expressions that offer us readers a small piece of their broken and healed lives. They lean on creativity to move forward even when everything appears stagnant and hopeless. The beauty of creativity is that it reminds us not to abandon ourselves. I genuinely believe our contributors strive for that.

My hope is that we all embrace and applaud these pieces forged during this time of change, and remember that a human life has permitted us into their creative mind. Let us not take for granted the value of that permission.

We give you Issue 5...

Jacqueline Aguilar
Managing Director

* Saloner B, Parish K, Ward JA, DiLaura G, Dolovich S. COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in Federal and State Prisons. *JAMA*. 2020;324(6):602–603.

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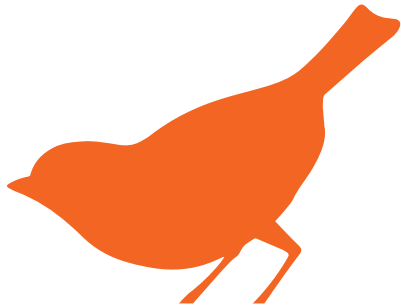
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Moon Away
A. Xander, Virginia

Moon, so close, reminds me
life is out of reach.
My soul howls, but I stay silent,
staring far beyond belief
at slow circles circling circles—
how apt, the universe,
how full of nothing—
feeling the gravity
or maybe something else,
trying to feel the nothing,
but still feeling the distance.





How Far Away is Yesterday

Samson Loynachan, Texas

Watercolor, 2020

Of Trees and Fences Outside My Window

A. Xander, Virginia

The trees peek over
the man-made hill and call
to me, imploring that I notice,
seek, remember, attend
to their simple majesty.
They call, but not
so loudly as the fence,
linked and razor sharp, cutting
through my awareness:

“Apart and never a part
of the world beyond the trees;
you are where you belong,
and you belong to me.”



Not Meant 2 Be

*Ian Harrison, New Mexico
Ball Point Pen on Envelope, 2019*

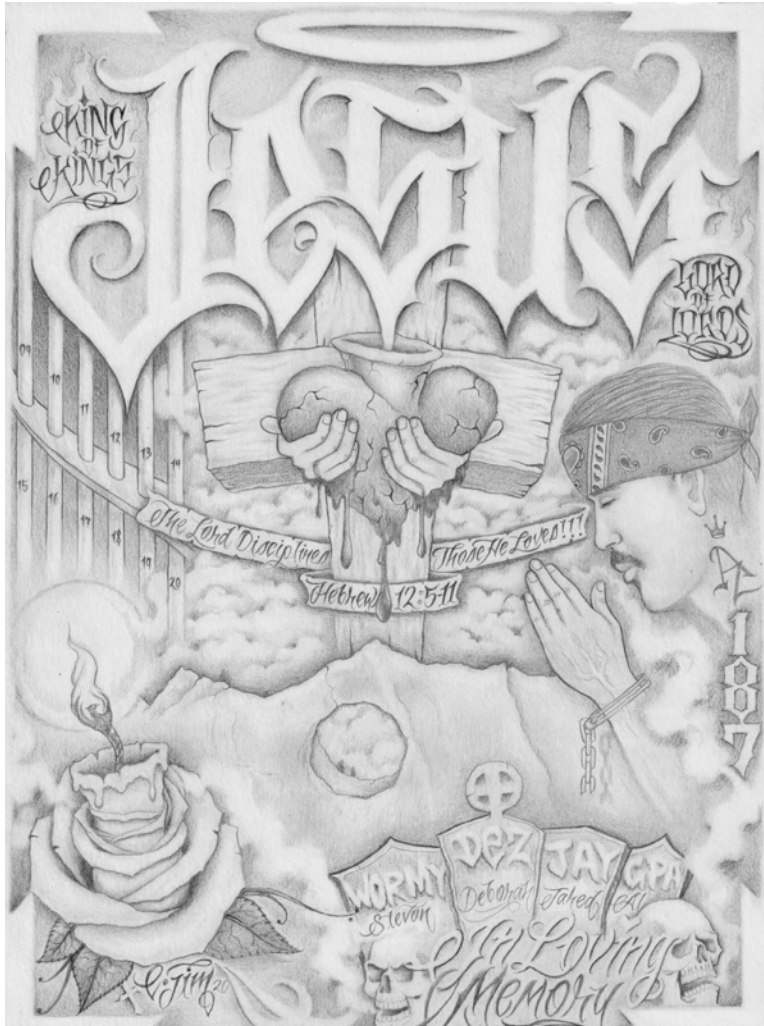
The Hollows

Scorpio A. Scott, Arizona

What can you see?

For a prisoner, the invisible is sometimes sweeter than the visible. See for yourself—close your eyes—see what you can before opening them. Behind the pink, fleshy skin of your lids is a gift, exquisitely wrapped, waiting to be discovered in the dark. Let me help you open it. Careful. The strings of the bow are twisted strands of barbed wire, but if you pull it just so in your imagining—it becomes an endless piano string spreading out three-dimensionally in sound waves. Beauty beyond prison, beyond desert, beyond forest, beyond the black sea. What I see when I close my eyes is a strange beauty from the inside of a concrete box. Early in the dawn, when everyone else is asleep, I close my eyes while awake and silence the visible gray world around me to see the unseen of human possibility. Everything becomes soaked in a warm, wondrous, midnight sun that nourishes the empty hollows of my heart. But how hopeful am I? I have only the hollows of my heart to navigate me through the dark nature of being human; yet I am aching with hope towards the highest human good. If you could see what I see, you would witness the woman on my right, my left, the one in front of me, the woman in between, each with infinite potential. You may not know her, but I do. She's someone's daughter, mother, grandmother, wife, friend, loved one—my sister in orange. She is exquisitely wrapped, waiting, longing to be seen, yearning to be heard. Can you hear the living red of her heart through the concrete walls? Can you see her beauty through the fields of razor-bladed wire?

Now, open your eyes.
What can you see?



Trials, Tribulations, Testimony

Jim Casey, New Mexico

Graphite Pencil on Bristol Vellum, 2020

Rahway Prison Turns Off the Phones

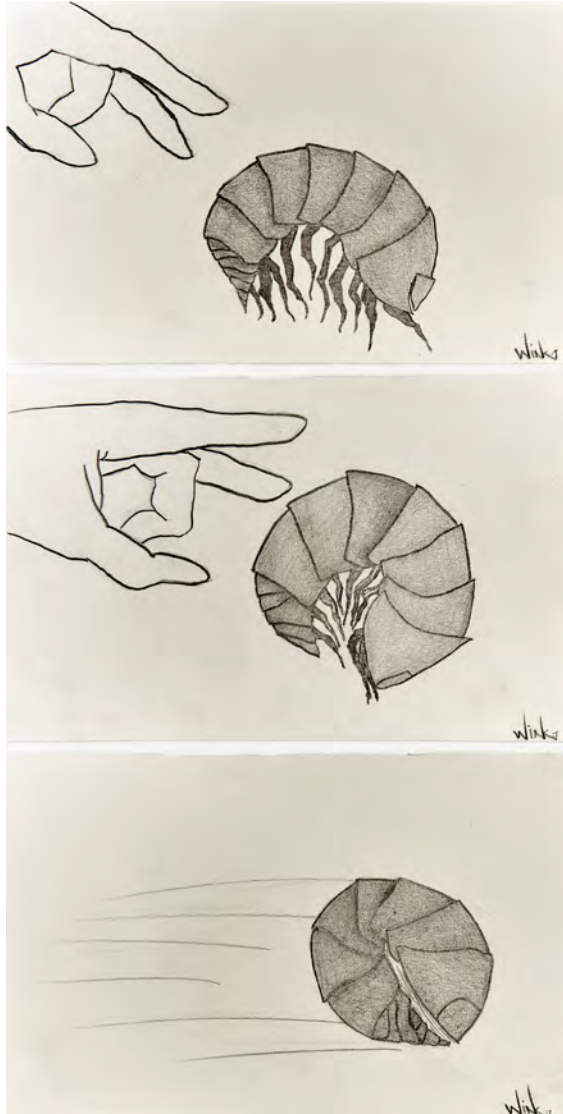
Rogan Kelly, New Jersey

My brother and I can only mouth, *I love you*,
glass and bars between us. I read his eyes,

touch the barrier where he touches, see my
hands in his hands; both of us too thin

at the wrist. The man next to me wails
his phone against the glass. Faceless

sentinels drag away his boy in pantomime;
the father's wild mourn fills the muted cry.



Metamorphosis

John Winkleman, California

Pencil on Bristol, 2017

Project PAINT Artwork

Sweating

Colleen Molloy Farrelly, Florida

Sweating

We sit in the hot seats, sweating while we wait for his case to be called in the summer heat. We're in our Sunday best—me in a Jackie O. ensemble and him in a funeral suit. There aren't enough seats, and people spill out the door. The public defender with a full stack in his arms slips as he pushes past.

a case laid out

Summerdark

Claude Kelley Kirk, Texas

In the headlighted pitch
 summerdark, flitting
 wingless moth-priests of disaffection
 we were
 on broken shoulders
 of a broken town.
 Dropped out
 and out of tune,
 wearing halogen halos and
 waving red-tipped Marlboro censors,
 drinking from bootlegger baptisms
 Spirit of St. Louis
 pop-top pisswater.
 Proud to be American,
 and breathing the last
 corn-tasseled air
 because there's no money
 to save the farm
 from bankers of poverty.
 Living little on the little
 mom and pop have left,
 and choosing not to make the choice
 of convenience store or coal mine.
 Hell of a choice if you ask me,
 but since you didn't,
 I'll tell you anyway.
 To earn your keep
 by death of the dream
 or death of the body,
 by blackened hope
 or blackened lungs.
 You might live longer
 hustling cellophane covered cupcakes
 and glossy centerfold surreality
 to those digging the diamond dust
 that pays the mortgage

and buys the boat.
 Long enough to see their
 shiny, new Chevy's
 pass you by;
 on their way to the same end.
 Only faster, with A/C and power steering.

But what the hell do I know?
 I'm just smokin' Marlboro's
 and drinking pisswater
 with broken shoulder brothers
 on the edge,
 of a broken shoulder town.

Bluebitter

Claude Kelley Kirk, Texas

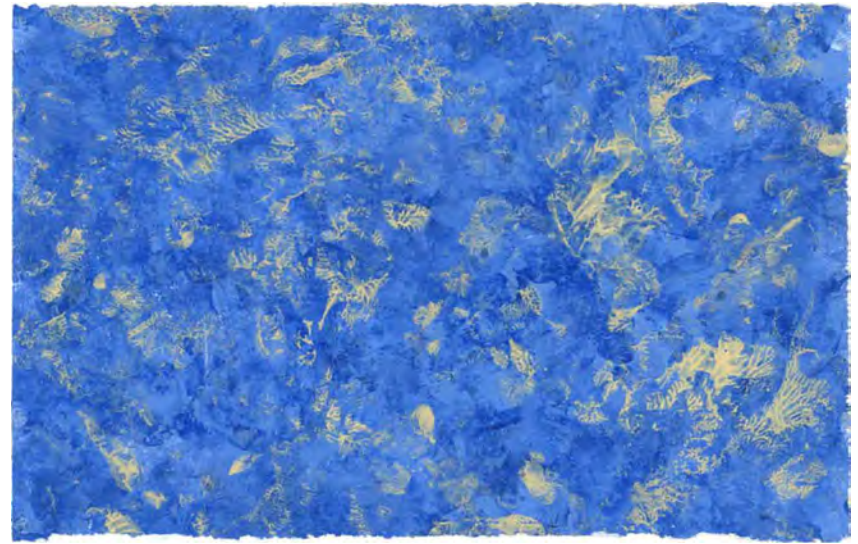
I'm kept here where I'm kept.
 To dream of lost things, little trinkets of you.
 In this bleak of distance, empty wilds of the soul
 where you still live,
 and move through me, like you moved through rooms
 where love was once sown in little pots on the sill
 and grew,
 under many-fingered oak leaves that sieved shadow from sun.

But, we too,
 had our solstice.
 Leaves fell.
 In the bluebitter of wintered hearts,
 astray in sidelong silences,
 we found our love ailed us.

Now, through so many hours
 so many pens speak
 so many images of you,
 in black and white swirl-snow of words
 at the dark edges of your uncollected light.
 Aloud, when I read these words
 and in silence, touch their scars on the page
 the static of lost things sparks,

then gutters.

I've come to know not, the day from the night.
 I know them just the same.
 And if a new day were to break,
 would I find it broken?



Creative Heart Art (Blue)

Amber Louise Hayes, Arizona
Paint on Canvas, 2019

IMPOSSIBLE

Cassandra Johnston, Missouri

I dreamt of being the change this world needs, like Ghandi said.
Change, it starts with me. —IMPOSSIBLE

Deep with mysteries. An intellect beyond all others, Einstein revealed
his secrets: “Give back to the world at least what you’ve received.”
Perhaps retribution to ancestors or down payment for prospect.
—IMPOSSIBLE

Rare beauty confined her wits. The Marilyn of Men, spoke truth on the
strength I possess, comprehended only when . . . being strong is all you
have left. —IMPOSSIBLE

How far can I see? For Newton restored sight to me. So “If I have seen
further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Maya, do tell why the caged bird sings. Does he rejoice in our
similarities, or is it the ancient wisdom that, “The best of men are but
men at best.” —IMPOSSIBLE

For what is piety, Socrates? Is it not treating my sister as she treats me?
Requiting wrong with wrong, or banishing evil by hateful deeds? Then,
should I only look down on her to pull her up? —IMPOSSIBLE

“Behold, I do not give lectures or little charity. When I give I give
myself. . .” For this is Whitman’s sieve. So when all I’ve given is my best,
then what more is there left?

Heartfelt Thich expressed, “Our love is not contingent upon the other
person being lovable.” —IMPOSSIBLE

“Parton” me, Dolly, there’s a storm a-comin’, yet calm must be kept, for
it’s the “storms [that] make trees take deeper roots.” —IMPOSSIBLE

“By nature we are all alike.” Is this confusion, Confucius’ plight? So
when practice refines our differences, I close my mind to see with my
heart, the God whose essence is abiding in me, brilliantly shining

from your souls’ “Gates” and I say, “I choose to act from love today.”
—IMPOSSIBLE

Enlightened as the Budhi under the ashram tree, Audrey Hepburn
shouted from a rusted file cabinet, and her words resonated: “Nothing
is impossible. The word itself says, ‘I’m possible!’”
For it seems that word, Impossible, contains our endless possibilities. . .
IM POSSIBLE.



The Committee in My Head

*Salvador Lopez, California
Acrylic on Canvas Paper, 2019
Project PAINT Artwork*

Melanin

Seven Forson, Maryland

M-E-L-A-N-I-N
so beautiful the way it falls off my lips.
My smile has sunk oh so many ships.
When I speak honey drips from my lips
leaving pure stains of intelligence—
light brown dark,
melanin, is what we are.
My mama told me black girls were God
taking his time to color us in;
that's why our personalities are so big.
We brighten any room we walk in.
When a black girl is born flowers bloom;
that's just one of our superpowers.
We have the moon in our hands and the stars in our eyes.
When we die, black girls are there to teach black girls how to fly.

Black black beautiful black.
Black is strong. Black is brilliant. Black is resilient.
Black girls carried the weight of strong black men when strong
black men were not strong.
Strong black men touched our skin and kissed our lips,
then found a way to move along.

Black black beautiful black.
We carry the weight of the world on our backs.
You look at our hair and see naps.
But I see history wrapped in every curl I decided to pull back.

Black black beautiful black.
We wiped the tears of our past
and comforted the minds of our future.

When black women come together, we can weather any situation.
Together we figured out a way to build a nation.

Black black beautiful black.
Your blackness is beautiful.
When black women stand together,
together black women become unmovable.

So sista girl, get up again.
Black women need to see a melanin girl love the skin she's in.

Black black beautiful black.
Black women are what we are.
Little black girl, never stop reaching
for the stars.



My Body

Jose Garza, California
Acrylic on Canvas Paper, 2019
Project PAINT Artwork

At Their Mother's Breast

Sean B. Neal, California

Suckling at their mother's breast,
they rise to become strong and intelligent
without much effort; they become the best,
no matter the chatter or censorship.

Suckling at their mother's breast,
young Malcolm, young Martin, young Huey P.
reaching back for those wearing blindfolds,
to lead them to the light shining bright for liberty.

Suckling at their mother's breast,
beautiful jewels like pearls and diamonds,
rubies and jade, and emeralds flawless.
Nina Simone and the Queen of Soul,
and the daughter of Nat King Cole
sing songs that echo slave ship moans.

Suckling at the mother's breast,
creativity's embodiment, heavenly scent,
breathing life into what was dead.
Long ago, we landed here
with our uncrowned heads,
defiant, self-reliant, and resilient.
Oh, did I mention, also brilliant?

And who can deny this truth?
Who could possibly hate such awesome traits?
Who would dare reject gifts from God?
Suckling on their mother's breast.



Always and Forever

Jim Casey, New Mexico

Graphite Pencil on Postcard, 2020

The Things They Carried in Musicland

Sean B. Neal, California

Big Shot was a music executive who carried big weight at his record company. He brought in some heavy hitters who all carried something to make his music label highly successful. J-Rock carried a degree in music theory, which he used to help artists write songs and produce beats. Larry, also known as L-Dogg, carried major street cred' DJing at the clubs, so everyone wanted his special touch on the tracks. Don Juan carried a pen and a folder full of raps, and he needed Larry's help to make a hit. Suave carried a strong baritone that caused all the girls to swoon—a skill he honed in the church choir as a young boy carrying that gospel sound. Jerry carried a saxophone and a lit cigarette in his mouth. He also carried a pack a day. It's a wonder he could even play. Jodie carried a torch for his dream girl, Shanna, and for him she carried disdain. Her heart belonged to another man, handsome and dark, who carried A-1 credit and was known to make it rain. Tommy carried dreams of really making it one day. Meanwhile, he also carried hope that he could find a place to stay. Big Shot's a swell dude. He took pity on the man and the responsibility of lending a helping hand. He told him not to worry, "Here's a place to lay your head." Tommy thanked him. He shrugged it off and said, "Don't mention it." That's the way it all started with what Big Shot carried in his head—dreams of doing big things in the place called Musicland.



Broken Skull

Cody Blasingame, Mississippi

Colored Pencils and Ink on Notebook Paper, 2018

TIME OF MY LIFE

Old Man Jody, Ohio

Once upon a day of yore
 when I knew everything and more,
 and there was nothing you could say
 to turn me from my chosen way,
 I opted for a life of crime.
 The hours were good and afforded time
 for such pursuits as smoking pot
 and chasing girlies hot-a-tot-tot
 and hanging out in smoky bars
 and starting fights and wrecking cars
 and leaving havoc in my wake
 while I took all I could take
 from any sucker in my path.
 They gave it up or dared my wrath.
 Life was a blast. I had a ball
 until one day I took a fall.
 It wasn't much, a year or two,
 and time was something I could do,
 for I was young and studly tough;
 I had wild hair and liked it rough.
 In court I pleaded *kiss my ass*
 and verily it came to pass
 that I maxed out on that first bit
 and did not learn one thing for it.

When I got out I jumped back in,
 déjà vu all over again.
 Swaggering down those same mean streets,
 I did not miss a single beat.
 I knew the schemes, I knew the scams,
 I had the moves. I was the man.
 That lasted for a little while,
 and then I stood another trial,
 accused of being who I was
 and doing what a crookster does.
He's innocent! my sister lied.

Guilty as charged! the jury cried.
 The judge's gavel pounded down,
 and I was back-to-prison bound.
 At first it seemed like old-home week.
 I had new stories, pals to seek,
 and lots of crap to catch up on;
 none of which took very long.
 Time then did the oddest thing.
 It ceased to pass, though seasons changed,
 and for the next decade or so,
 I sat and watched my toenails grow.

When I went free next time around,
 the streets had changed while I was down.
 Things moved at a quicker pace,
 seemed like folks were in a race.
 I was out of step, out of sync.
 I didn't quite know what to think.
 I'd lost my timing, lost my knack,
 lost the beat of my own soundtrack.
 So I got caught off-base, and then
 there I went, back to jail again.
 I filed some writs that did not take.
 I couldn't catch a freaking break,
 and so I hit the prison yard
 once more again, still stepping hard.
 I got bump-shouldered. I did not give.
 Kid called me *Pops*. I let him live.
 My old rapdogs were mostly gone,
 the few still left just hanging on
 and going bald and turning gray
 and getting wrinklier each day.
 The same, they said, was true of me,
 but that, I knew, was jealousy.
 I had my own teeth, front and back,
 and I could still bench-press the stack.
 I felt its pressure bearing down,
 so I procured a walking cane
 to cope with onset aches and pains.

Next thing, I needed reading specs,
then vitamins, a B complex.
Blood pressure pills and diet fare.
A prostate test. Enough said there.

Then came a day, to my surprise,
a sight appeared before my eyes
that left me stunned in utter shock
at what was wrought by life's timeclock.
From the mirror in my cell
peered a face that I knew well,
and no mistaking who I saw.
It was the face of my own grandpaw.
I had turned into my grandpaw.
I had become my old grandpaw.



3D Cubist Portrait

Russell Pence, California

Mixed Media on Cardboard, 2016

Project PAINT Artwork

I Am A Cloud

Dominic Murphy, New Mexico

I have grown into a cloud
tormented by days past, days yet to come
and days that will never be.
I have grown my walls to stop the daylight,
only succeeded in living in the shadows.
I have become lost in daydreams of what I could be.
As I slowly evaporate and become my parts,
I send silent prayers to the heavens
and listen to the echo of god's loneliness.
I wish for the strength of a dandelion seed
to move the earth and ride the wind,
to be able to deny the emptiness of space
and only believe in its open skies.



Caged Bird

Joel Robledo, California

Watercolor and Pencil on Paper, 2019

Project PAINT Artwork

Chica of the Unknown Goddesses

Stewart Gonzales, Arizona

It seemed they loved each other—
an old-fashioned, muy macho love
common in the fifties and sixties,
when some men sported wife-beaters,
grabbed their crotches and shouted
profanities from beer-can-infested porches.

Beautiful Chica wore her defiant black eye
with a sense of pride among her comadres,
who thought she was “bravo” to stand up
for herself, although they cautioned her:

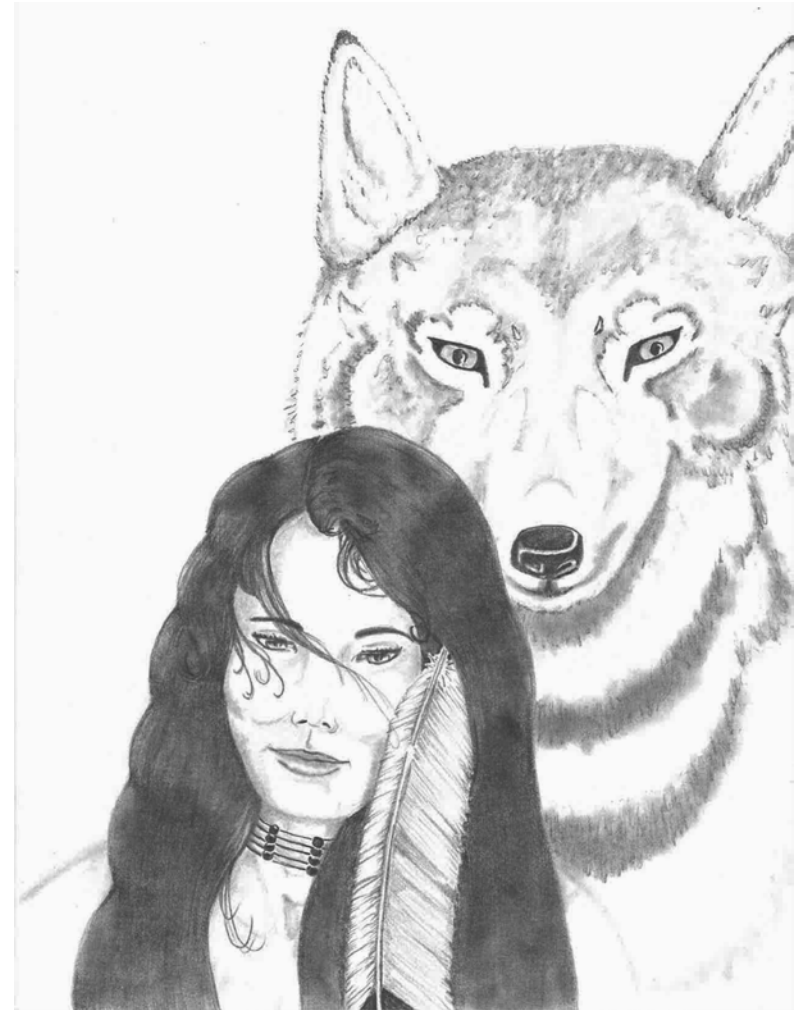
“Ay Chica, you don’t know when to be quiet,
that hombre is going to hurt you bad someday.”

But beautiful Chica of the Unknown Goddesses
wanted to be treated with respect—though respect
for women had not evolved that much back then.
I mean, some men gave, but some men took away.

I was ten when the ambulance came in
screaming through the barrio. They took her away.
The screaming stayed in the trees for a long time.

For years that hombre walked back and forth
to the liquor store hoping Jim Beam would
drown out the screams, but they stayed
in his head as an act of contrition.

Each time my abuela saw the broken man
stumble up the road, she crossed herself
like she did whenever we passed by the church.
I made the sign of the cross every time
I passed by the screaming trees.



The Wolf Woman

George Dominguez, Texas
Graphite Pencil on Paper, 2020

Homograph

Sean J. White, Wisconsin

how did I wind up [ay] here wind up [ay] informal end up in
 a particular state situation or place SYNONYM breath informal
 puff breathe all alone a high picture window with the
 view of another window frosted revealing only day and night
 it doesn't matter what wind [ih] carried me I already indeed
 the responsibility tightly wound [ow] seeking time in a world
 without clocks pace the floor to pass the time how many
 names can we devise for the wind [ih] nomina agentis winders
 [ay] despoiling hours and minutes moments heaped in silos
 winding [ay] razor wire malignant polyps infecting interstates
 diseased homonyms words spelled differently but sounding the
 same (but what are words spelled the same but sounding different)
 the wending walk of shame I walk unrepentant the aggressive
 interrogation of a clown tickles my ears the painted smile
 you can't expect me to take seriously my own smile and a belly
 full of wind [ih] I wrestle laughter handcuffed carried by the
 blue agents of Zephyr a walk to a metaphorical needle full
 of strange chemicals shot to stop the body fear worse than
 the prick silent bricks and tiles jail within a jail here
 I lacked [past completed] the humanity of watching shadows
 seventh floor swallow across the street buildings pace the
 floor to pass the time to count the hours and minutes wound
 up [ow that hurts what a wound [oo]] the illusion of
 control a light switch my finger's whim on and off the other
 side of the sliding cell door thick steel overpowered the
 winds [ih] of mercy better than benighted Alcatraz cell sight
 removed popping buttons to play hide and seek the wounds [oo]
 darkness strikes our toes binding feet in fear and ratty deck
 shoes all the buttons stripped from my soul replaced with
 an orange jumpsuit blazing anger to wind [ih] is to make
 someone unable to breathe easily for weeks at a time once
 upon a time punishment stripped of my clothes my humanity lay
 crumpled on the floor outside the cell and I became [past] the
 animal and in the quiet under the camera I thought [past]
 about a woman I had known and shot my load against the wall
 and lying again on a deli-thin mattress I think about thinking

about that woman the ease with which I found myself in the
 hole the sounds of isolation the wind [ih] of a vent and
 later what is the sound of one man screaming three cells down
 if no one cares pace the floor to pass the time delineating
 the graphic detail of sensory deprivation step by step the
 hours and minutes unwinding [ay] thread by thread sailing
 close to (or near) the wind [ih] informal come close to being
 indecent dishonest or disastrous bare feet blackened from
 miles met five steps at a time I wend alone winding [ay]
 twisting turning bending looping curving a zigzag meander
 verbalizing a nominal tigering my enclosure the invisible
 uncountable degrees of an arc poke and prod the threads of my
 sanity and the winded [ih] growl of my eyes disembowels every
 uncommon passerby agent of Zephyr pace the floor to pass the
 time little window and locked glory holes brush-bottomed doors
 to slow the casting of lines night fishers of strange waters
 their voices sail cell to cell cargoes of trauma carried to
 other victims an exchange of winds [ih] that will continue
 long after my departure a continuous reenactment of the
 Twilight Zone episode with the toys trapped in a bucket and
 the molting seabird days plume routine three times a week
 showers and exchanges of clothes sleep and sleep breakfast
 lunch and dinner now and again piss pings the streaky stainless
 steel waves roll on the wind [ih] pace the floor to pass
 the time



Personal Symbol Collagraph Print 2

Andre Magone, California

Ink and Watercolor Pencil on Paper, 2020

Project PAINT Artwork

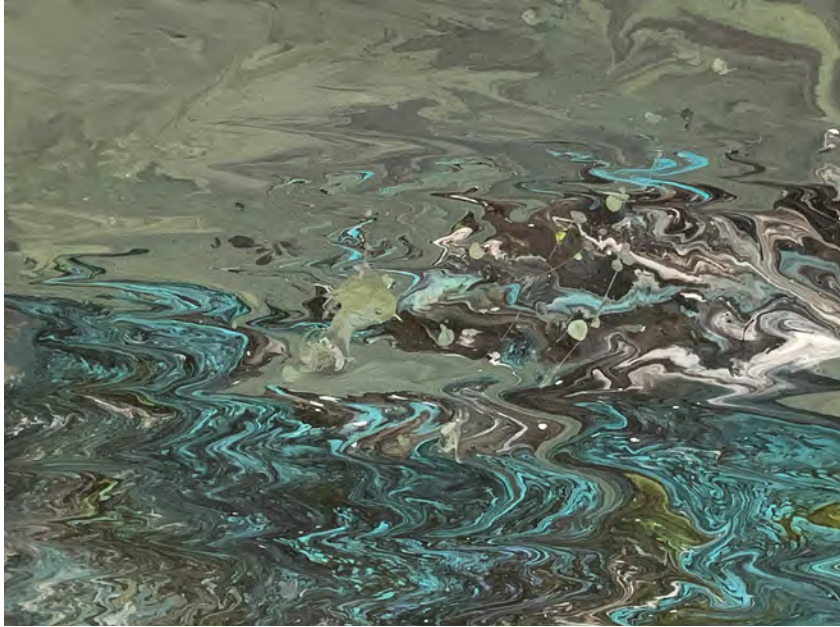
Metamorphosis

Aycee Cynthia, California

Unknown, the world wonders
 What can be in times of departure
 Unexpected from the familiar

The stripping force
 Out of element
 Hear them cry in storms of dread
 Cocoons weave across naked bodies
 Hidden in secret
 For treasure to form in blackness
 And covered with mercy's gold
 Lullabies are sung
 Over cradles gently rocked

Another arrival
 For what to become
 In the break of strongholds
 Like the breath of new spring
 No hell shall conquer the fields of green
 Through dancing breeze
 Fly away
 Where the rest of sleep is unrelated to death



Two Face

*Jason Wirick, Michigan
Paint on Canvas, 2020*

Where I'm From (I AM FROM IRAN)

Azadi, Colorado

I am from planet earth,
a brilliantine diamond in the universe with a future unsure,
from the Shah and Ayatollahs, revolutions.
I am from the foothills of snow-capped peaks whiter than clouds in a
sky azure,
rolling tundra, sands of every shade in an osprey's feather,
aromas of crisp, salty sea breeze.
I am from the high-up, glorious fuchsia and crimson poppy fields
whose likeness shared my favorite, flowered hijab
embroidery matching around my skirt.
I'm from where the spoken word is as good as gold
and from a line of archers in ancient times, who rode their beloved
steeds bareback
standing upright and firing their arrows while galloping full speed into
battle
with a prowess fierce enough to make their enemies blood turn cold.
From names I can never say aloud out of respect for the dead—
the beautiful ones, the thousands swallowed up by war,
red tulips placed by an altar.
I'm from smiles, kindness, modesty—
waiting for an ant to pass first because he had the right of way,
and people who aren't afraid of dirt, the smell and feel of it against
our feet.
From Shiite ~~and~~ or Sunni.
I'm from my brother's sunbrowned hands covering a little girl's eyes, so
I wouldn't see.
I'm from the sound like heavy hardback books falling in rapid succession
onto a stone floor, an image of silent bodies beside me,
cardamom tea boiled up dry, warping the pot,
harissa and na'an gone cold at the table.
From summer's emerald pastures secretly hiding UIDs
(Unmanned Incendiary Devices)
and broken glass,
absent of even butterflies and little red foxes

gone someplace more discreet, away from screams
now silenced in the grass,
the rustling leaves of a Cedar become my mother's arms waving a
welcome.

Her voice is the whisper on the breeze—
5,000 miles, oceans; continents away, bones are now most likely dust
of those here still living safe in memory.

Nothing and no one, no memories I have or care to possess
that could again be taken from me.

This life is only a song to sing
in harmony with those whose present company we keep



Personal Symbol Collagraph Print 3

Andre Magone, California

Ink and Watercolor Pencil on Paper, 2020

Project PAINT Artwork

Surviving the Lake in the Basement

Ann Bracken, Maryland

If these brick walls could speak, what stories would they tell?
Would people point and shout “Liar” at the tales, impossible to fathom?
As we descend into the bowels of the prison,

I shudder and hesitate—it sounds like a fight brewing.
Instead we see men in gray prison garb wielding wet vacs and wringing
out sodden towels.
Brown water fills an endless row of buckets.

The lake in the hallway is finally being drained, after
water-logged, gray mop-heads walled it off for over two months.
Fetid water that pooled and grew,
courtesy of a leaky pipe behind a crumbling, cinder block wall.

Weeks before, an employee confided, “Officials tell us it will cost
\$100,00 to fix the leak.”
When I talk to him about slipping or the dangers of what grows in the
water, he tells me,
“It’s easier to work here if you just pretend not to see things.”

But now, my friend and I smile as we step around the shrinking puddles
on our way into the school.
The men in the cleaning crew nod in recognition, perhaps happy
to be out of their cells, to be of use.

Two hours later, when my friend and I leave the school,
after working with the only man who showed up for our writing group,
the lake has reappeared.

Outside, murky water pools in the low-end of the blacktop driveway.
Two geese paddle slowly past us, dunk their heads, and
shower us with water
as they shake their feathers clean.



3D Cubist Portrait

John Winkleman, California

Mixed Media on Cardboard, 2016

Project PAINT Artwork

Lock Me Up

Ann Bracken, Maryland

out here in Elsewhere
 & I won't ask you
 to reconsider how living
 90 miles away from home
 burdens my family by design.

Respect the rules,
 a mantra the guards repeat.
 I am strip-searched after each visit.
 Respect isn't a duality
 in my world
 where a tossed dish
 lands me in the hole
 which feels like a cauldron of pain.
 The fire of one more submission
 sears my heart with a fresh rage
 yet I have no place to scream.

I am slowly learning that no exposure of who I am
 OR
 who I am becoming
 can erase the dark contours of my past.



Personal Symbol Collagraph

George Oseida, California

Mixed Media on Chipboard, 2019

Project PAINT Artwork

Sandbags Against the Flood

Ann Bracken, Maryland

When the writing teacher asks,
Where's Marco?

Daryl tells her, *He's in C.L.E.P.*—
Character Literacy Awareness Project—

a class where the old guys teach the young ones
what it means to be a man.

When a writing teacher
asks the men,

*What do you need to prepare you
for life outside. . . besides a GED?*

The answers pour out
like a Greek chorus—

*It's overwhelming to leave here—
I came in when I was 16.*

*How do I rent an apartment?
Housing, driver's license, job—*

*I don't know where to start—
The men's needs stacking,*

sandbags against a flood.
Daryl adds one more thought

before he returns to the tiers—
We don't know how to be citizens.



Shiprock

*Lionel Clah, New Mexico
Charcoal on Paper, 2020*

Florida Vote

Jeff Schwartz, Connecticut

*In 2018, Florida's Amendment 4 gave 1.4 million
former felons the right to vote.*

A year ago
before the legislature

imposed fines
that looked suspiciously

like a poll tax,
we were elated

that former felons
in Florida

were now able
to vote. Slowly

as the impediments
are removed,

we're hearing from those
who for years

could think of nothing
beyond surviving

their time, the violence
in the yard, the racist

guards, the drugs,
the food, the empty

visitation room.
The years of waiting.

One says the government
changes nothing

and he'll never vote.
Another says

to vote is
to be given his voice

back & who
knows? This

is Florida.
One vote

might change
the world.



Freedom

Lionel Clah, New Mexico

Charcoal on Paper, 2019

Blessings

Brian Warner, California

A spirited "God Bless Your Day!"
greet me on my walk to work,
on the six hundred sixty yard track
that defines the orbit of our world.

Hands twisted by arthritis grasp a cane
that accompanies lively swagger.
His ready smile is framed by stories
penned in blue and red,

that tell of losses so searing
their images barely remain affixed.
Grace alone binds the pages
and breathes life into benediction.



Personal Symbol Collagraph Print 2

Russell Pence, California

Ink and Watercolor on Paper, 2020

Project PAINT Artwork

Gathering on C

Brian Warner, California

We gathered at the chapel last night
to pray and sing and remember,
to reflect on our brief time together,
on your courageous faith and wonderful smile,
to reflect on emptiness.

We gathered to witness
to a greater truth,
a certain future,
a glorious journey.

For today, remembering will do.
Silent prayer will have its effect.
For today, we live as community
confident in a shared future.
Because God doesn't care if
you live on C Street or the C Yard.
He cares only that you love.

Being Alive: An Interview with Kazten Somari

Arizona

At *Iron City Magazine*, we receive lots of art submissions from all over the country. This is impressive, because in prison, art materials are often very scarce, and art instruction is extremely limited or non-existent. When we received dozens of pieces from a single person, two years in a row, our interest was piqued.

To be this prolific, Kazten Somari has to be resourceful. Many of his works are painted on corrugated cardboard, file folders, envelopes... just about any surface that will take paint. His work explores several different techniques and styles, from representational to cubist to surrealist.

Our Editorial Staff wanted to find out more about his artistic process. So we contacted Kazten and asked him to give us some insights into his background, his motivations, and his ideas about “art on the inside.”



Childhood, Acrylic on Paper, 2018

ICM: Let's start with the broadest question: Why do you paint?

Somari: Perhaps due to my current state and station. I struggle, attempting to find my way in modern times. I can't really explain it, at least not in words.

My spirit flows as my mind simply “wonders.” I follow a feeling (into) a space that is mine. As I create, I get trapped in it. It pushes and pulls on me, and I do my utmost to be PRESENT.



Lover's Lane, Acrylic on Cardboard, 2020

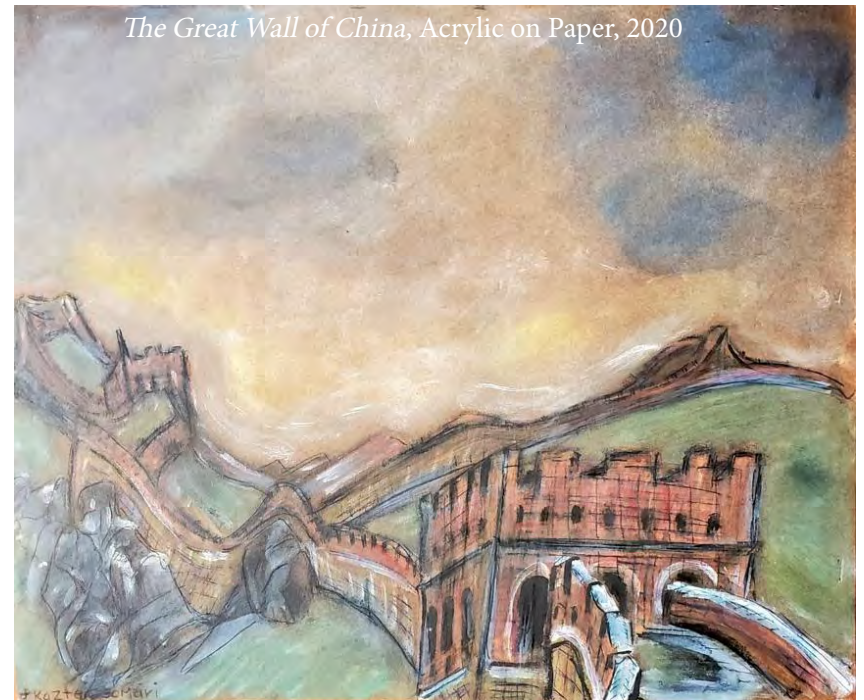


ICM: Have you ever had any formal art training?

Somari: With great humility—no. I have not had any formal training. I do my best to find my way in the dark.

ICM: What inspired you most in becoming an artist?

Somari: Perhaps a necessity to express an honest and deep vision—to radiate my love and pain, to transcend my state and status, and at their end, show a bit of my humanity.



ICM: What is the most difficult aspect of doing artwork “on the inside?”

Somari: We are limited. We (or I) constantly struggle in projecting an idea, a thought, or a contradiction through a visual format. I try to remain an explorer—never losing my sense of curiosity and wonder in this ugly and dirty place.

ICM: What advice do you have for other incarcerated people who want to create artwork?

Somari: Explore your passion and find your authentic voice. Display a real reflection of you—a glimpse of your uphill battle.

ICM: What do you do when you can’t get the art supplies you really want?

Somari: Prison makes you resourceful. So create, innovate. Just figure it out.

ICM: What do you think art does for the soul of the artist?

Somari: Art has become a bridge between my current existence and the life I aspire to. It liberates a profound feeling of *being alive*.

ICM: How powerful can artwork be for those who experience it?

Somari: Art is something you feel. It is meant to move you. It makes you feel discomfort, or it pleases your senses. It makes you think or forget. Art is a voyeuristic journey as you peek into the world of the artist—and his true heart and soul.

ICM: If you had the opportunity to spend a month with a noted artist, who would it be? What would you hope to gain from that experience?

Somari: Perhaps Cézanne, Picasso, Gauguin, Matisse, Monet, Klimt, Kiefer, or Turner.

I would love to listen to the man talking about what moves him. What drives him. What truths he learned. What changes caused him to innovate and create. What sacrifices he made. What beliefs informed his art, and when and how they affected its growth.

I simply would talk less and listen more. I would be silent. Listen. And learn.



Janus, Acrylic on Cardboard, 2020



Conquistador, Acrylic on Paper, 2020



Azucar
Kazten Somari, Arizona
Acrylic on Paper, 2020



2nd Movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 4
Kazten Somari, Arizona
Acrylic on Paper, 2019



Love

*Kazten Somari, Arizona
Acrylic on Paper, 2018*

Common Threads

Christina Chilelli, Arizona

Falkers

The sound of sirens outside piqued my interest. The flash of red and blue across my white walls signaled the approach of emergency services, not a rare occurrence in this run-down neighborhood. I pushed aside Fern, the pitbull lounging across my lap, and clicked the pause button on the remote, before making my way to the front window. Across the street, I saw cop cars, their sirens chirping, as the emergency lights bounced off the walls and illuminated the dark. Two officers got out, and two remained behind. A moment later, they returned with a woman in handcuffs, her face obscured by the dark. I didn't recognize her. When I moved into the rental house with my girlfriend, I made a point of having a dog and a gun. I rarely socialized. It was that kind of neighborhood.

A few minutes later, I returned to the couch. Fern barely moved her big grey head as I reseated myself. The heaviness of sleep nearly claimed my body, but I wanted to see Haley before I went to bed. Bartenders always work late, but tonight, Haley would be home early. Tomorrow was Saturday, which meant I had to get up an hour early and drive to the DOC facility to assist with volunteer religious services.

I heard Haley's key in the door and sat up straight.

Hernandez

The sirens rung out through the street, sending chills down my spine, reminding me of how Ama must have felt that night, two years ago, when they came for her. Possession with intent to sell. A drug crime. They locked up my baby girl—just twenty-three years old with no priors—for having a few ounces of weed that she was planning to unload at a college party. So young, so smart, and just trying to pay her way through community college with a full-time job as a dishwasher. She only sold weed on the side.

The shaky sound of her voice asking for bail money so she wouldn't have to spend the night in jail still haunts my quiet moments to this day. The lawyer assigned to her case was just out of law school and barely able to keep the length of her sentence to a minimum. But, he did, and Ama surrendered a week later. It was the hardest day of my life, watching my baby girl walk into that concrete fortress, both of us trying

not to cry for the other's sake. The moment she was behind the metal doors and couldn't see me anymore, I let loose all my tears.

Now, I watched as someone else's baby was being taken away, probably for a similar crime. I didn't know what my Ama had felt that night, but I knew what I felt when she called me: fear. Now, I felt it again. All I wanted was to go and see her, to make sure she was alright. At least I would see her tomorrow during visiting hours, and then everything would be okay.

Chesterfield

Damn mattress, if it was even worth calling it that. The inch-thin foam they passed off as a mattress didn't even take the bite out of the metal springs. But, it was all they gave us. That, and an inch-thin pillow to match.

My bunkie rolling over caused the bed to squeak, which grated on my brain. Then, she let out a loud snore, causing me to grit my teeth. Damn woman didn't know how to sleep on her side so she wouldn't hinder my sleep. If she could just learn to be a bit more considerate, maybe I wouldn't have such bad insomnia. But, then again, they said most people got insomnia around here. Maybe that was just part of the deal. You do bad things, you get punished with awful food and insomnia.

Was decking a guy for groping your girlfriend really a bad thing though? It didn't seem like it at the time, but they all said it was. Assault? It was self-defense, but that didn't matter. No one likes a chick who stands up for someone they love. Or, in my case, someone I loved, but who didn't deserve it. Dump me after I defended you? Bullshit.

At least there are plenty of other options around here. Most are gay for the stay, but some are lesbians on the outside too. Either way, a little bit of companionship here and there won't get passed over by me.

Falkers

The alarm blared in my ear at 7:30 a.m., eliciting a well-deserved groan. Haley reached over and patted my back as I rolled out of bed. I knew she was just making sure I actually got up, but it still felt nice, a little reminder that she cared. I smiled, then leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"Go preach about how God loves everyone, even dykes," she muttered, her face buried in the pillow, her dark, short hair the only

visible feature.

"You know it," I answered, snatching my slacks from the closet.

A few minutes later, I was on the road, coffee in hand and a bagel balanced on my leg. The commute was long. The sleep deprivation didn't help, but the Poldark audiobook I borrowed from the library did. There was definitely going to be a nap this afternoon, no matter what Haley said. Once I arrived, I could barely remember the commute, a clear sign I needed more sleep.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and started in, lanyard already around my neck. I figured that if I wore my DOC badge, I wouldn't get a ticket for speeding, but given my poor driving skills, I would probably get one soon. Not that I ascribe to a lot of gay stereotypes, but this one was true for me, as was being bad at math. But, being an atheist? Not true, at least not for me and Haley.

Preaching was my way of spreading God to those who needed it most, the ones society has all but forgotten. Certain groups, if they knew more about the prison population, would hate prisoners for reasons entirely separate from a criminal record.

Hernandez

I understood the drive to see family all too well, but it was strange to watch as people came in, knowing how many wanted out.

Every Saturday, I line up, let the guards bark orders at me, and stand against a grate while a dog sniffs me. I follow their every rule, even the strictest of dress codes, all in order to see my Ama.

When I first started coming here, all the policies, practices, and regulations confused me. Why couldn't I wear brown pants? Why couldn't I bring a purse? But, I learned I had to comply, or I wouldn't see Ama. Given what I experienced, I would not be surprised if she was, at the very least, mistreated on occasion. She never said much about prison life. She was always the quiet one and never liked to talk about her feelings or thoughts with me. It wasn't until she dyed her hair green that I suspected she was gay, and she didn't come out until she had been dating a girl for six months. I always told her I would accept her, but she still never talked about it.

Chesterfield

Breakfast. Religious services. Visitation. This was the schedule most of the prisoners adhered to every Saturday. My obvious lack of religious

practice makes my schedule even shorter. Ma always comes by every week, even when I've told her she doesn't have to. A stupid woman, and so stubborn too. I like to see her, to talk to her, but to drive out here every week is wasteful.

At least I get to see her. Liz's family never comes, which I guess is why I became the closest thing she has. We aren't a couple by prison standards; we are just hookups, but she likes to get all deep about her thoughts and feelings. Bullshit, too much like my Ma, but I guess they say you pick someone like your parents, so maybe it can't be helped.

Hearing my name on the intercom, I push myself out of the bunk and start towards visitation. At least I'm in a minimum security facility. Those with higher security got a phone and a window of glass. No touch. At least I get to hug Ma, for her sake if not for mine. I have survived well enough, but I knew it was hell for her. In here, time just sort of stopped, refusing to move forward, leaving me to watch as the world changed while I remained completely stagnant. Not that I would tell Ma, but I was terrified at how I would survive when I was back on the outside. This place—it changes you and makes it hard to think beyond the moment, the day, or even the hour.

Falkers

I made my way through the yard, my radio tucked under one arm and my notes under the other. Some of the prisoners watched and some started to follow, knowing where I was heading. One of the COs unlocked the chapel for me just as I arrived. I made my way to the front of the room and began to organize my papers. Women in orange started shuffling in and I glanced up occasionally. There were a lot of familiar faces and a few new ones. The service drew in women of all ages, races, and backgrounds. Since I was in a minimum security yard, I knew most of the women were here for drug crimes. Despite this, everyone I told still thought I should feel unsafe. It was just me with a bunch of convicted felons. I hadn't felt that way since my first meeting, and even then, the fact I was in a prison preaching pretty quickly melted away.

I know Haley wants to come and help, but between grad school and her job as a bartender, it just isn't an option at this point. Plus, I doubt the DOC would want us teaching a class together. I keep my personal life personal, per their policy, and if I ran the same class with Haley—even if they didn't know we were together—her short hair would give us away. I pass as straight, long hair and a more feminine style. Haley does

not.

Hernandez

Soon I was sitting across from Ama, my hands folded in my lap. I watched as a young woman with red hair headed to the yard.

"Who's that?" I asked, recognizing she was not a guard.

"She's a religious volunteer. Runs a non-denominational service every Saturday."

"And you don't attend?" I scowled at Ama, shaking my head as I answered. "Shame on you. You must keep up your faith."

"Please, Mama, we've talked about this. I know my faith, and I don't need someone tellin' me I'm going to hell just 'cause I'm gay. That part about me is not going to change. Besides, I've got to see you and this is the best time for you."

"We could make another time work, and don't judge her too quickly. You don't know."

Ama had always been obstinate when it came to religion, thinking everyone was going to judge her because she was gay, which they often did.

"You really think they'd let some girl in here to teach us about religion if she was not going to tell us being gay was wrong? I may not know everything, but I know they wouldn't do that. They don't like them gay for the stay girls."

"Just keep your mind open," I sighed, rolling my eyes. "For me."

"Okay, Mama, I will."

Chesterfield

I was one of the first to arrive at visitation, and my Ma and sister were early as usual. I sat down running a hand through my short hair as they took a seat across from me. My eyes scanned the room, thinking back to the first time I sat down in this rundown, grey, dreary place. I had thought Meg was going to come and see me, but she never showed. I called her five days after my self-surrender and she delivered the news: she wasn't going to be waiting for me on the other side. Some girlfriend she was. Not that I blamed her, but it really was messed up for her to dump me after I got locked up for defending her. It was my own choice, she said. My anger had always been a problem. Meg didn't get into the kind of trouble I did because she knew how to control her emotions. Though that was bullshit, given she was always more emotional, I still

didn't hate her. We weren't soulmates; we were just together, like me and Liz now.

"How are you doing?" Ma asked, starting this visit the same as all the others.

Falkers

The service started late, as it usually did, given how long it takes to get an outcount, wait for a decent number of inmates to show up, and get everyone quieted down. There was always one girl who insisted we wait for her friend or prison family to arrive before we could start. I tried to wait as often as I could, but sometimes I just wanted to get going, due to all of the material I wanted to get through. I rarely got through everything because prisoners like to ask a lot of questions about scripture. Sometimes they like to debate it, even when I clearly don't want to. Not that I can blame them, they're just bored and can actually discuss things with me as opposed to the COs.

Most of the prisoners have bibles. Their families may have spotted them the money, or the bibles were donated by local churches. Despite having bibles, a number of women walked around with holes in their shirts or rips in their pants. The state incarcerated the women, but did not invest in their living conditions. That was the despicable nature of the system. Not all the locked-up girls were innocent. Most of them had committed crimes for little things like drug possession. But did that justify locking up these women for years without proper care?

Hernandez

Our visit was short today. I wasn't sure what Ama had planned, but I think she must have found a girl. Usually, she only got distracted from our visits when there was someone distracting her. I never really minded, although it hurt a little bit that she needed support from her peers here. Even if her relationship was more romantic than platonic, it was support, which was something I knew she otherwise lacked, even with me coming out every week.

It was just the nature of this place. It seemed to take and take, destroying the lives of everyone who entered the system. Even when she got out, she would have a permanent mark on her record from being convicted and serving time. It was a mark she could never wipe away. I got up from the plastic chair, putting a hand on my back. Standing off to the side, I watched her return to the yard, her curly dark hair pulled

back in a ponytail, hanging down in stark contrast to the orange of her jumpsuit. Watching her go was always the hardest part. I knew I held an important place in her routine, but mine entirely depended on hers. That was what mothers were supposed to do, modify their lives to revolve around their children.

Chesterfield

"It's fine, Ma, same as always," I answered, crossing my arms on the table. "Just more of the same."

"You look good," she replied, her eager smile making me want to roll my eyes. "Have you been working out?"

"No more than usual."

"Well, it's starting to show. How are things? Are you getting enough rest? Enough to eat?"

"Them givin' us food is never the problem. It's whether or not I actually want to eat the food," I answered with a smirk. She rewarded me with a glare. "They give us shitty food, you know that, but I'm fine. I get enough to eat."

"What about sleep? Are you sleeping enough? You sounded so tired the other day."

"It can be tough to sleep around here, but I'm fine. Stop worrying."

"You know I can't."

"I know you should."

As much as I appreciated her visits, her insisting that I was not taking care of myself or was joining some kind of prison gang was a bit annoying. She seemed to have this fear that I was not going to come out of prison alive, which of course, was nonsense. She never listened to me. She just wanted to fret.

Falkers

The prisoners always said I was crazy to voluntarily run a prison's religious service when I had so many other options. Why here? They asked that question a lot, but honestly, I never had a good enough answer. I just want to be there, to offer them some sense of reprieve, some hope, in this dreary and distasteful place. They made mistakes, just like Haley and I had, but unlike them, my mistakes weren't illegal. That was the only difference.

As I was about to leave the yard, some of the inmates told me that the service was a good one. They shouted that they would see me next

week and to enjoy my freedom. I smiled, nodded, and turned in my radio, thanking the COs as I went. Soon, I would be home. Those ladies inside didn't have the same luxury, which is why I always said a prayer as I left them behind. I knew I would see them next week, but for them, time will have barely passed.

Hernandez

Watching her walk away always sent a dagger through my heart, but I had to go. I always let her go when she wanted to, even if it meant I spent more time driving than seeing her. There was no point in asking her to stay longer; she was done visiting me for the day. At least she had something to do, something to live for. That was all that mattered. I headed to the exit while trying to hide my emotions. The hardest part—always—was leaving while she had to stay.

Chesterfield

Eventually, the COs called for time and I said goodbye to Ma and my sis. They always seemed to take it hard, but it was routine for me. An endless, unwavering routine. However, it was a routine that kept me from going crazy and kept me getting up in the morning. Maybe I would go spend some time with Liz. Although I was trapped in this place of punishment, I had someone to lean on, even if it was only for a while.

The Journal

Matthew Feeney, Minnesota

Transcriber's Notation: I cannot take credit for writing this. What follows was transcribed from a barely legible set of loose-leaf papers I found stashed under my sink in Moose Lake Prison Segregation Cell D-214. While I discovered the journal on May 15th, 2016, none of the pages are dated, so I have no idea when the journal was actually written, nor who wrote it. I have typed this as accurately as possible, only correcting the most egregious typos while trying to retain the voice and intent of the actual author. To the author, whoever you are, thank you for sharing your journey and I wish you good luck!

—Matthew Feeney

Day 1

When I first woke up, it took a minute to remember where I was and how the hell I got here, lying on my bed with a big bump on my head. Time is different in prison and way more different in seg. Seg sucks. My cell is ten by ten and it is a dirty dust-colored paint that must've been on sale. Got a metal sink-toilet that's ice cold on the ass, just like county jail. Damn window is barred, screened, and chained, but I learned that if I moved my face back and forth real fast, the screen holes disappear and I can see outside pretty good. Bed, table, and mirror all bolted to the wall, like we ain't learned our lesson about stealing already. Whatever. Five random books, toothpaste, and soap. Maximum security brand? What happened to my old pal, Bob Barker brand? I got sentenced to 130 days of this seg bullshit and I was innocent, until I got caught.

Day 2

Slept a lot. Didn't know I was so tired. Meals on Wheels rocks—breakfast in bed, just like they got in them fancy hotels in the movies—nothing like the cheap motels I crash at with a number or the word “view” in the name.

Day 3

This ain't so bad. Best thing is no need to listen to Sgt. Simon barking on the PA all day long. I can sleep all day if I want to. Lots of pluses to being in here instead of gen pop. Time flies when you're doing

hole time!

Day 4

Read one of those harlequin romance type books. Lots of girlie stuff like kissing and hot, dripping passion, but the story was still decent enough. Wonder if the cover is missing because it showed Marietta's much-talked-about boobies? I dig her—she was set-up and framed for things she didn't do—just like me. Pisses me off.

Day 5

Days are starting to blur, but worst thing is it seems to be slowing down. Damn, where's life's fast-forward button like in that silly Adam Sandler movie? I was just told I filled out my canteen order form wrong, so I don't get canteen for two weeks. This sucks monkey butt.

Day 6

I've read all the graffiti scratched on the walls. What the hell did they use to carve it? Because this four-inch, flex pen is a joke. Don't know no King Ox, but glad to read he was here before me. Bored out of my mind. Time to nap or read another book.

Day 7

There were 378 cinder blocks used to build this hellhole. I've checked and triple checked. That ain't including the twelve red bricks along the floor of the outside wall. From a distance, I can see outside, but when I stand closer, all that comes into focus is the metal grate. If I stand here in the sun, will the grate give me a polka-dot suntan? That would be cool. Maybe I can shrink down like Ant Man and crawl my way out of here through one of the holes. Knowing my luck, I'd run into an anteater or something stupid like that. Maybe I could write a crazy story about that. Thank God there ain't clocks in sight. Time is all I can think about because I'm reading a book about time travel. Enough writing, back to my book.

Day 8

Almost finished *The Mammoth Book of Time Travel* and it's now my favorite book. No boobs, but the short stories still give me lots of thoughts and take my mind off being stuck in this box.

Day 9

Okay, so catch this. I just finished a cool story about a tribe of prehistoric cavemen who survive the dangers of droughts and ice ages by jumping in time. Wish I could do that, though showing up buck naked outside my cell would probably catch me a fresh charge.

Day 10

Still can't stop thinking about those cavemen, Heidelbergensians. I had to check the book to make sure I spelled it right. How the hell did the authors come up with details like that if it ain't true? Is there really a group of pre-Neanderthals called Heidelbergensians? Ain't that the name of the meth-dealing dude in *Breaking Bad*? What if it's true? I mean about Heidelbergensians, not *Breaking Bad*. Fuck the ice age. I'd zip myself forward and get out of seg. Why stop there? Might as well go for my SRD date. Hell no, I can zip forward past my expiration date, no paper, no parole, no ISR. I'd be free at last!

Day 12

Read another cool story about time travel. Well, there's like fifty different stories in this book and they're all about time travel, but this might be real. Wonder what it would take to make time travel happen? Worth a try.

Day 13

No rec time for me. I ain't left this room for a week. I don't even talk to COs as they deliver meals and do bed checks, but I do talk to the sunset. I talk about how my day has gone and my thoughts on time travel. So many thoughts, too many to write down. There's a strange and annoying clicking in my right ear, which is either air pressure or maybe a killer ear beetle.

Day 14

I read this freaky book called *Bringers of the Dawn: Teachings of the Pleiadians*, which is written by some chick who says she's channeling the wisdom of the Pleiadians, a group of enlightened aliens from the Pleiades Galaxy. She's talking about frequency modulation, cosmic light, the twelve chakra centers, extra DNA strands, and empowerment of the enlightened. It's pretty cool.

Day 15

The Pleiadians say we should eliminate the words “should” and “try” from our vocabulary, that anything is possible because I am an enlightened pillar of light who volunteered to take on this human form for an assignment. I wonder what made me volunteer for an assignment that required prison time, especially seg time. But I guess once I’ve learned my lesson in this life, I can ascend to the mothership and start over. Maybe if I’m still a little weak on the big payout, I could get cool superpowers like shrinking myself or speeding up time.

Day 16

I am practicing time-shifting through temporal meditation, deep breathing to oxygenate my DNA, and focusing on the sacred spiral. I’m not sure how this all works, but there it is in black and white. Even if it’s not true (but it must be), what have I got to lose? I have the time to practice, and practice makes perfect, so what the hell. My ear is still clicking, but it must be from all the silence.

Day 17

I’ve almost got it. While meditating for fifteen minutes, I time-shifted ahead at least an hour. I know it. Just no clocks around to prove it.

Day 18

I found the missing link: spinning. The book says to, “move from left to right while spinning around and focus your vision on your thumb while counting.” It says to build up to thirty-three spins a day, then try doing that three times a day. The Pleiadians say once I can do that, I’ll be able to leave this planet, dimension, or time stream.

Day 19

I woke up on the floor. I pushed too fast. I don’t remember exactly what happened, but I must have gotten dizzy and passed out. No blood. Not that I care, because the book says I can control bleeding with my mind frequency. I wish I could shut off the annoying clicking sound; it’s louder now. I have got to build up the spinning without falling.

Day 23

I made it to thirty-three spins. I learned the hard way not to try spinning after eating dinner. The chow mein was bad enough going down, but the puke made a crazy design on the walls, which might mean something. I studied it for a few hours before wiping it up. I hate chow mein even more now.

Day 28

I’m still working on my spins but discovered that the clicking in my ear is actually an implanted communicator starting to turn on. It might be some transmission, translation, or power issues. There is a lot of static, but I think I hear some words coming through faintly. They’re telling me I’m on the right track if I only believe. I want to believe.

Day 35

Sat all day on my bunk listening to the Pleiadian transmissions in my ear. This is better than radio since the only two stations we get here at Moose Lake are Country or Christian and I ain’t neither. This is space alien talk radio!

Day 42

The aliens are mad at me for not obtaining the holy number of ninety-nine spins yet. I can almost do two sets of thirty-three, but they say that’s not good enough. They’re a funny race. They tell alien jokes, but they’re so advanced that I don’t always understand them, but I laugh when I hear them laughing. The spinning seems to help clear up the static issues, so the crystal-clear harmonics come in loud and proud. I’m so glad I altered my frequency to pick up their transmissions. I could listen to their words of wisdom all day, except for when I’m spinning of course. I might look like a fool, but there’s no camera in here. Who’s going to be laughing when they come to check on me and I’m gone? Empty tomb just like Jesus H. Christ on a popsicle stick.

Day 50

I have been so focused on meditating, channeling, and spinning that I’ve forgotten to eat. After my second meal tray went untouched, the CO (who is actually a black-shirted lizard person from Galgross 6) asked if I was okay. What a joke. Lizzies don’t care about humans at all. Good thing he doesn’t know I’m not a human, merely a spirit-being of

light and love from another galaxy, wearing this body like a shirt. Good thing he doesn't recognize me for who I truly am... yet. I've got to keep up my cover until I get to the holy number of spins in the right amount of time and speed. Then my DNA will be centrifuged into the original twelve-strand-helix DNA that will make time travel possible. This is taking longer than I thought.

Day 55

I'm up to two H cycles of spins. I am not eating, but just throwing my food in the toilet and flushing. It saves time and my reformed energy soul doesn't need food. Plus, prison chow ain't considered food on any planet. No prisons in the other galaxies. How awesome is that?

Day 68

I have achieved ninety-nine spins and feel like I'm getting closer, but I need to do them faster. I spent all day listening to the Pleiadians. Time travel is just around the bend. I can actually feel the warmth caused by the DNA changes in my cells. The Pleiadians remind me that my time is growing closer and closer.

Day 75

Still spinning. Sometimes I wonder why I'm even wasting time writing this journal when I could be spinning my way to intergalactic freedom. But then I realize I'm like Captain Kirk and it's important to keep a captain's log to document my explorations for future generations.

Day 88

I have temporal shifted several times now. While lying there in my trance, hours are flying by. I wish there was a clock I could see to prove it, but it would just prove what I already know: I'm shifting time. I just need to perfect it, watch my speed, and avoid dizzy spells.

Day 104

I discovered my implanted communication chip is actually a two-way radio. If I talk to the Pleiadians they actually talk back. It's just like those little walkie-talkies but this sucker's built right into my ear, and my soul is the battery. I asked what was for dinner and they told me. Then I asked if I was bending time and they said "yup," so I know it's true.

Day 106

They just told me I need to do my ninety-nine spins in sixty-six seconds. The book left that part out.

Day 107

So close. I haven't eaten in a long time, but I'm still not hungry. I receive nourishment and energy from the stars, even through the window grill. I guess you could call it grilled star juice.

Day 108

I passed out doing my spins but didn't hit my head. Thankfully, the implant still works.

Day 109

I jumped at least a day in time. Got the spins down too, but had to add placing my palms up, like a TV antenna, plus the frequency modulation of chanting the sacred ohm. It worked! I'm sure I moved through time, but I'm just not sure how long or in what direction. I'm going to soak up some cosmic star energy tonight and try again in the morning. Time travel is possible. I just need to focus. If cavemen could jump time, an undercover alien agent from another galaxy like me shouldn't have any problems. Tomorrow I'm going to do it until it works. Goodbye segregation, hello freedom. It will work. It has to work. I believe so much I'm going to hide this journal for the next solar traveler.

Day 1

When I first woke up, it took a minute to remember where I was and how the hell I got here, lying on my bed with a big bump on my head. Time is different in prison and way more different in seg. Seg sucks...

Transcription Postscript: The remaining pages were duplicates of the previous journal entries. I had Ms. Becky, the Moose Lake Prison librarian, look up *The Mammoth Book of Time Travel* and *Bringers of the Dawn*. She confirmed both are actual books from the Moose Lake Prison library. They were assigned to the seg book cart a few years ago. If you know the identity of this inmate, please contact me so I can give proper credit for this journal. I'm not sure I believe or understand what

happened. It got me thinking if I ever dabble in time travel, I'm going to make sure I know what direction I'm going. I can personally attest that being in seg is bad enough the first time around. Yes, as stupid as it seems now, I did try spinning. What did I have to lose?

—Matthew Feeney



Metaphorical Self-Portrait

Kenneth Flannery, California

Pen on Paper, 2015

Project PAINT Artwork

Ramen Noodle Time Machine!!!

Antonio L. Serna, New Mexico

It was a crazy morning. I was late for work and forgot my lunch. I crossed two wires and got a good electric shock, which might explain how I traveled with a ramen noodle time machine. Anyways, I barely made it to the one p.m. med line. I took my medication at the nursing station. On the way back, I had a strange feeling that I was here but not here.

So, I got back to my cell for the next count. And, man, was I starving. I looked in my tote box and noticed a ramen soup. It was a brand I had never seen before. But, tired and hungry, I didn't give it much thought. When the count was over, I headed to the hot pot and filled my bowl with hot water. Next, I threw in my soup, heated it up, and went to sit at my table.

I grabbed my spork and put a little soup on it to make sure it was not too hot. As soon as I put it in my mouth, I saw flashes of a bright light across my field of vision. I was tripping but starving. The more soup I ate, the more reality bent. This was the ramen noodle time machine.

Finally, after eighteen years in prison, I had found a way out. As I traveled the future world, I walked the streets of Paris speaking French. I ate another spoonful and heard a popping sound. I was traveling through cities, countries, and mystic lands.

Slowly, I found myself back at my metal table all alone, my bowl empty. I felt lightheaded. At nine p.m., I headed over to the med line for my next round of medication. When it was my turn, I went to the window. The nurse asked, "Are you feeling okay?"

"I feel fine, why?" I answered.

"Well, we mistakenly gave you the wrong medication earlier," she said.

So much for my ramen noodle time machine. Now, it's time to figure out what kind of medication they gave me.



Journey from Dark to Light

My Ngo, California

Oil Pastel on Paper, 2018

Project PAINT Artwork

Dark Sky (Excerpt)

Daniel Ramirez, California

The sky was gray, as was Eli's Spirit. Life had lost its color, it seemed, since Angela.

Eli pushed the thought from his mind and tried to focus on navigating through the eerily silent forest. Folks in the nearby village called it the Necromancer's Forest and shunned venturing into it. Eli was grateful for that much. Life as a fugitive had made him wary, and he avoided people whenever he could.

The past few months had changed him. A once happy man in what could have been the prime of his life was now a bitter, suspicious outlaw. The memory of his near capture haunted his mind. "You're wanted for the murder of the king," his sworn brother had said as a semi-circle of men closed in on him, their long black blades clearing their sheaths. The way the words hung in the air set warning bells ringing through his senses. Eli knew he would not be given a chance to plead his innocence. They were there to execute him.

As Eli continued to trek through the lonesome forest, dark thoughts swirled around him. The way he'd been framed and how all his acquaintances had turned on him. The worst was the image of his wife writhing in the flames. A memory impaled him in that moment of anguish.

"Why did life have to be so unfair?"

It was as if those words were spoken behind his ears. Eli stopped and turned, half expecting to see someone there. He was weary and alone. He hadn't drunk any clean water or eaten in days. The gray sky promised rain, but it was a promise unfulfilled. Eli felt overwhelmed and sank to his knees, head bending low. A legion of black thoughts circled like vultures. He put his hands over his ears as he choked back tears.

"Lie down and rest a while."

It was that voice again. It cleared away the madness tearing at him moments earlier. He raised his head, and something caught his eye. Water.

"See? Rest. Drink. Stay there and start a new life," the strange voice said.

He had been hearing the voice a lot lately and it sounded like himself. It seemed so rational, but...

Eli stood and headed toward a rock at the edge of a small pond. He peered in and saw that the water was clean and clear as diamonds. Eli closed his eyes, and through the darkness he saw her smiling face. He missed how those eyes used to look into him. How those lips would laugh or say, "I love you." Eli kept this image of his wife safe in the locket of his mind the way lovers keep one around the neck.

Then he heard her voice.

"Get up. Don't Stop. Leave this place!"

It was as if Angela were near. Eli's eyes snapped open and he saw her lovely face fading from the surface of the water, giving way to his own forlorn reflection. He was stunned to see that the water was no longer clean, clear, and beautiful. It was foul, murky, and dead. Eli lifted his head and realized there was no sign of life around. Nothing could live here.

Eli stood with renewed verve and backed away from the treacherous water. He pushed on through the forest until, at last, he came to a clearing. In the distance the sun was dipping behind rolling hills. The horizon was alive with color.

Eli stood for a moment reflecting on his journey and what he must do. He could accept death if it meant succeeding. He took a deep breath and began walking toward the rolling hills and the coming dusk.

Today I Will

Daniel James Gallant, Arizona

Today I will awake with a positive mindset, eager for the day to begin, excited about its possibilities. I will decide that I am happy and count my blessings. I will pray for guidance and seek wisdom in all that I do. I will engage in uplifting self-talk. Today I will decide that today is going to be great and then spring from my bed setting my feet firmly upon their path.

Today I will make many choices. I will choose which thoughts to hold and which ones to dismiss. I will choose kind words, kind deeds, and genuine smiles. I will choose love over hate, right over wrong, hope over despair. Today I will decide to learn from the mistakes of my past and strive for a better future. Today I will make great choices. Today I will choose progress.

Throughout the day I will pray. I will talk to God and seek His counsel. I will ask and He will answer; I will seek and I shall find; I will knock and doors will open; I will have faith and the mountains will move. I will search for my God within and then look to the heavens thus finding Him above. I will place at the altar of forgiveness all of my grudges. I will exhibit tolerance. I shall not judge. Today I will honor my God.

I will fill the stores of my mind so that I can become a chef, financial adviser, accountant, insurance salesman, or small business owner. I will read a book, watch a video, or take a class. I will fill the stores of my mind with meaningful information so that I can become a chef, financial adviser, accountant, insurance salesman, or small business owner. I will polish the keys to my enlightenment and share them with others that are willing. Today I will learn.

Today I will slow the hands of time. I will free myself from stress and break the bonds of addiction. I will eat right, and I will exercise. If I play sports, I will lose with grace and win with humility. Today I will choose a healthy lifestyle.

Today I will be more positive, say an extra prayer, go out of my way to show kindness. Today I will read an extra chapter or do an extra set. I will make someone's day. I will be a positive role model. I will be like a city built upon a hill. Today I will overachieve.

Throughout my life I have squandered my most precious resource because of my pursuit of frivolous endeavors. Blindly I groped for ill-

gotten gains or chemical happiness. Enthusiastically I followed a path to nowhere, reveling in my own self-destruction. The past will never cease to exist, but it will always remain behind me. Today I will turn the page.

One choice at a time, one day at a time, I will become a better me. I will raise the bar. I will push the boundaries. My imagination will carry me beyond these walls to the future of my dreams. I will pursue with a sense of urgency all that my past has neglected. Today I will be a great citizen within this community so that tomorrow I will be an even better citizen within your community.

Trouble on the Inside Passage

Ken Lamberton, Arizona

It started with Jenny, our blonde expert of all things Alaskan. She was one of our guides for two weeks in southeastern Alaska. “Everyone must stay behind me,” she said. We were standing at the forested trailhead to Chilkat State Park outside Haines, a small port town surrounded by snow-capped mountains and hanging glaciers in the state’s northern panhandle, home to the world’s first and only hammer museum.

“If you want to lead, get a job with Uncruise.”

She was concerned about bears. Not black bears, the relatively docile, 150-pound root-diggers I was familiar with in Arizona, but brown bears. Alaska Peninsula brown bears. The salmon-slurpers weighing in at 900 pounds. The grizzly.

Jenny, who had a special love for all things ascomycetous (lichens and mushrooms), carried the pepper spray.

The day was cool and wet; a light drizzle pattered my rain jacket and hood. “There’s no bad weather in Alaska,” Jenny had told us. “Only bad gear.”

“Famous last words,” I muttered. I had wanted to wear my Danner hiking boots, but she suggested rubber galoshes, what she called the



Amanita muscaria

“Alaska sneaker,” which offered as much traction on the trail as a pair of flip-flops. And were just as squishy. She should have mentioned not to tuck my rain pants into the boots.

Jenny pointed out bacon-barked western hemlocks and Sitka spruce, whose trunks were clothed with what looked like burnt potato chips. She identified electric orange (and deadly) Amanita mushrooms that erupted through thick blankets of mosses at our feet. I began to drop back from the group.

I was here because of Richard Shelton: My 86-year-old friend,

writing mentor, and traveling companion, whom I met exactly 30 years ago when I walked into his prison writing workshop at the Cimarron Unit in Tucson. (I became his traveling companion after my release from prison.) We’d recently driven the length of the Baja Peninsula, visiting with giant cardon cacti and whimsical boojum trees like something out of a Lewis Carroll poem concerning Snarks or Jabberwocks (from which Dick was happy to recite from the passenger seat ad nauseum). Twenty-one days in Baja and I still don’t know Dick. But Alaska was also on our bucket lists, and when he said we should go, I jumped.

Today, Dick remained on the boat, the 232-ft. Safari Endeavor, where he could tuck himself into our warm cabin and write stories about writers he had known, people like Robert Frost and Allen Ginsberg. He left the slogging through Alaskan rainforests to me.

With the noisy crowd moving on, I figured I’d have a better chance at encountering wildlife. I slowed. Waited. Then stepped off the trail to lose myself among the giant trees. So much padded green—it sucked light and sound right out of the air. This was the kind of place that masked the approach of the heavy-footed. Better not to see it coming, I always say, after claiming that it’s not real wilderness unless something can kill you.

But it’s also the places that can kill us that show us mysteries and wonders we cannot find elsewhere. Places that lift us to the heights of awe.

I didn’t encounter anything more awful than a wood frog, which I showed the others after I rejoined them. “They know how to survive here,” Jenny said, after admonishing me not to wander off. I set the dark, thumb-sized amphibian in the leaf litter. “They have glucose in their blood and can freeze solid then revive. NASA is studying them for space travel—everything in them stops... heartbeat, digestion, brain function—makes you wonder about the definition of death.”

“Our guide at Denali said they make great pets,” I added. “When you go on vacation, you just pop them in the freezer...”

* * *

What Jenny began at Chilkat State Park, Marika escalated at Glacier Bay. Marika was our lithe, dark-haired guide of everything kayak, and she looked as confident on the water in her red Necky Looksha as the sea otters and harbor seals that skirted around her.

We were the only boat in Glacier Bay, it being so late in the season. As we approached Johns Hopkins Glacier, an enormous wall of carbon-swirled, blue rock that formed our horizon, Marika announced they were putting kayakers in the water.



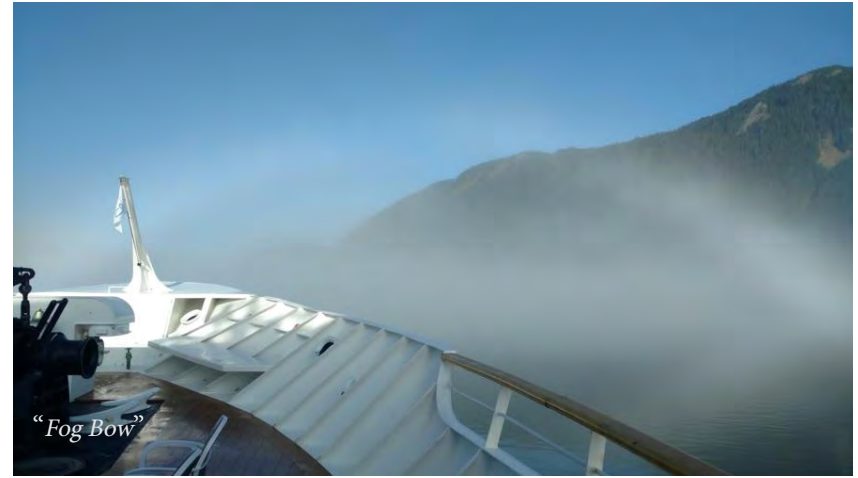
“We’ve never done this before,” she said. “We’re the only group to kayak here this season. We’re asking for those with experience... and those who will follow the rules.”

Well, I do have experience, I thought, heading for my cabin to suit up in Merino thermal, sweatshirt, Humvee gear vest (for the camera), and, since it was sleeting, Marmot rain jacket. There’s no bad weather in Alaska... as what would become standard for me on this trip, beneath all this I wore only shorts and Teva sandals. On the stern deck, one of the crew fitted me in a spray skirt and PFD and strapped me in. Once Bill was ready in the bow—although I had asked for a sack of sand as a counterbalance instead of a partner—they

launched us into the berg-choked sea. Dick watched from the forward lounge, having an aversion to ice even in his tea.

Awesomeness! We paddled among drifting ice toward a cliff face that roared as great chunks of it collapsed into the bay, raising swells that lifted our kayakers. Harbor seals poked heads out of the gray water to watch us pass. Others gazed at us from their frozen perches like seared bratwursts on china plates.

This was a first for me. Like the milky “fog bow”—imagine the perfect arc of a bleached rainbow—I photographed the previous morning. Or like that midnight, when the captain woke us with an announcement



of Northern Lights off the starboard bow. I dressed quickly in sweats and went forward, the only passenger on deck. Beneath Ursa Major, the Great Bear, twin shafts of green light shot out of the horizon. Then another pair, like iridescent folds of a curtain.

And now thunder and waves and crashing ice.

Then I heard Marika. “Ken! Get back here!” And, as if I hadn’t heard her the first time, multiple voices began shouting my name. I recognized the other guides, Willy and Mike. Why were they shouting my name? This was a tandem kayak. Bill was the one powering us out in front of the others toward the calving glacier... I was only steering.

Only four days in, the crew had already singled me out from the 26 passengers and committed my name and face to memory—probably after posting a photograph of me in the staff lounge. I imagined the guides’ late-night meetings outside their quarters, the Aurora Borealis shimmering across the northern darkness, as they shared warnings about who to keep an eye on.

* * *

What Marika escalated, Mike proclaimed.

Admiralty Island has the highest concentration of coastal brown bears in the world. The native Tlingit called it Kootznoowoo, the “Fortress of the Bears,” and at one bruin per square mile I was eager to see one, like the smaller inland grizzly I had just photographed in Denali as it hovered blueberries on a tundra slope. The tour guide had let us off the bus to view an astoundingly clear mountain while he kept his eyes

on the bear. “It’s my last day,” he said, “and I’m retiring. But don’t tell I’m doing this and get back on the bus if anyone else comes.” While the others were busy with their cameras taking selfies with the snowy peaks, I joined the guide. I asked him how long we had to get on the bus if the grizzly took an interest in us. “They can sprint at 35 miles per hour, faster than a racehorse,” he said. “We’d have about ten seconds.”

Now I was thinking about what my wife had said after I told her this story. “Reckless are you? Easy to bury you if you are inside a bear.”

Bear poop, she figured. No burial necessary. Chock full of cooked berries and whatever else got behind those teeth. Where the skiff brought us to shore on Admiralty Island, great blue mounds of scat outnumbered the stones.

Mike led four of us on what he called a “bushwhack.” Long-haired, bearded, and bespectacled, he was the kind of “nature boy” who understood and could communicate with wildness.



Devil's Club

“You don’t want to touch the devil’s club,” he warned us after I’d already burred my hands with tiny brittle spines. A part of Alaska I’d take home with me under my skin. In pelting, sideways rain, we had climbed through the lichen-hung trees at the water’s edge, over lichen-spattered basalt of wild geometries, and into a moss-draped forest where the devil’s club rose ten feet into the air on spiky stalks. It was impossible not to touch it. I asked about a machete. “Use your sleeves to push it aside,” he advised, as he navigated a pathway up a forty-five-degree incline into a more open forest of leafy blueberry and huckleberry. I followed the berries, stopping

to strip the tart fruit and stuff it into my mouth. “Leave some for the bears,” Mike suggested, but his tone seemed more like a warning. Maybe it was my berry wandering. Or maybe it was my comment that a machete would be more helpful than the giant can of bear repellent strapped to his chest.

On our retreat from the forest, I jumped ahead to search for a route that avoided the dense swath of devil’s club.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, Ken,” Mike said, “but don’t get ahead of me.” The practiced line was obvious, designed by its creators to be patronizing. One used only for people like me. Troublemakers.

“I’m right here,” I said, turning around only ten feet away. He didn’t say more, but I was sure he was reaching for his pepper spray.

* * *

Looking back, I admit I was behaving like an ass. Was it the feeling of being corralled and treated as a novice to the outdoors? Or was I miffed at being pegged a troublemaker from the start? Maybe I shouldn’t have told the crew at boarding that I was hoping to kayak with orcas. Or come face-to-face with a grizzly bear. Why did I find it necessary to correct Marika’s spelling of “mosquitoes” during her evening slide show? Or question Willy’s identification of a ladder-backed woodpecker as being out of range for southeast Alaska? Or suggest, instead of a presentation about “apex predators,” that Mike show us *The Revenant* with Leonardo de Caprio so we can really learn who’s at the top of the food chain?

Perhaps I was jealous of their youth, of their lives lived among splendor and wildness. Because, the truth is, I really liked these people.

It was like the paradox that is the Alaskan wilderness. So much of the place repels—the icy, soaking rain and bone-gnawing dampness that only mosses and liverworts could love, the aggressive nature of its life from the thorn-shackled devil’s club to the “conflagratory imaginations” (thank you, John McPhee) brought on by its great mammals, both landform and sea. Yet Alaska is so attractive (those marbled glaciers of metamorphic snow poised alongside temple forests out of the Devonian!), even in its indifference to one’s presence. Alaska could eat you alive... and that would be the most pleasurable act on the planet.

Burial by bear scat, indeed. The quintessential “Inside Passage.”

* * *

On day 12 of our peristalsis through the 1000-mile sea route, we made the San Juans and dropped anchor at Sucia Island. Back in the



Kayaking with Richard Shelton

lower 48. By evening, the wind had died and Marika called for an “open paddle”—kayaking without guides. Dick donned his floppy hat and sunglasses, and Mike and Jenny fitted him with a PFD and lowered him into the bow of my kayak. Then the pair shoved us into the flat water. I noticed he had no paddle, which was Marika’s idea, I was certain. “You’ve worked out the social nature of the tandem,” she shouted to me when I complained.

Dick leaned back into his seat and settled into his sandbag duty as my counterweight.

“Queen of the Nile,” I said.

“That ended very badly,” he replied.

I paddled for an hour, sliding us past darting cormorants and rhinoceros auklets and fat, lumbering harbor seals basking on the black outcrops. “Rock sausages,” I said, repeating a comment by one of the boatmen. I paralleled the shoreline of the island and soon we lost sight of everyone. The evening was perfect. Warm and pleasant. Seals poked dark wet heads out of the glassy water and stared at us with astonished eyes.

Then, as a sinking sun began to set the trees aflame, a skiff appeared around the island and shot toward us. “Come back around to the other side,” the crewman ordered me. “You need to stay in sight of the Endeavor.”

In his wake, I smelled pepper spray.

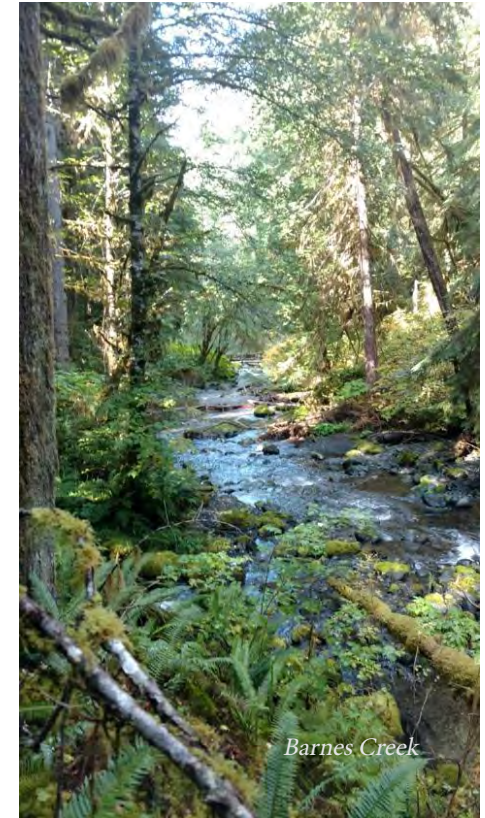
* * *

For our final adventure, we hiked along Barnes Creek in Olympic

National Park. A small group of us opted for a more extreme excursion in an old growth, lowland rainforest of enormous western red cedar, Douglas fir, and hemlock, their great size nourished by the salmon who ended their lives along these drainages, according to Mike and Jenny.

Spotted towhees rummaged in the creekside alder while water ouzels genuflected at pour-offs. The orange funnels of chanterelles poked through mosses so thick and vibrant that if you laid in them you risked becoming another lump on the spongy ground. I settled in face first.

At four miles, we broke for lunch—turkey wraps and a dessert special, cookies,



Barnes Creek

courtesy of Mike. My nose dripped into my sandwich in the cold and wet, and I thought about Julie, our cruise barista, who offered to fill my water bottle with Jameson’s.

This was the realm of the banana slug, and when I finally found one, Jenny asked if I wanted to join the club.

“Banana slug club? Sure.” I followed her directions while she photographed me licking the pale finger of mollusk.

“Do you feel a numbness moving through your mouth?” she asked.

“No, but I have a thick blanket of slime on my tongue that won’t come off. Do you have any potato chips? Sandpaper?”

Farther down the trail, the guy in front of me spotted what he

thought was a snake and stopped mid-stride.



“A newt!” I said, excited about the find. I lifted the slick, blood-red and amanita-colored amphibian into my hand.

“Wow! A rough-skinned newt,” Mike said, and everyone gathered around. On his two-way radio, he called Jenny, who had moved down the trail with part of our group.

“Don’t let anyone lick it,” her voice crackled.

“The only one in danger is Ken,” he told her. He then told us the story about two trappers found dead in their

cabin after drinking coffee that a rough-skinned newt had crawled into.

“Skin excretions,” he added. “Toxic. Very toxic.”

Mike reminded me of a similar story about a man from Oregon who had been drinking in a bar and on a bet swallowed a rough-skinned newt. He was dead before the bar closed. Apparently, there’s no known antidote for the poison, something called tetrodotoxin or TTX, which is found in poison-dart frogs and pufferfish.

I placed the newt on the ground. From his pack, Mike removed a bottle of hand-sanitizer and squirted a gelatinous mound into my right hand. “You should wash your hands in the first creek we come to.”

Later, when he passed out cookies, he paused when I held out my right hand. “Good luck with that,” he said.

* * *

On our way back, the group decided to detour to Marymere Falls. I took a detour to pee, and when I came back down the trail, Jenny was sitting on a stone at the turnoff. “You waited for me?”

“Of course,” she said. “Didn’t want to leave you behind.”

“Especially since I may have licked a deadly newt, right?”

We walked together toward the falls, and I asked her if she was headed back to Boise after the cruise. She and Dick had hit it off, sharing stories about Idaho and the place where both of them grew up, though separated by sixty years.

“Some places never let go of you,” I explained, showing her the devil’s club spines in my fingers.

She extended her palm. “This is one from a month ago.”

After climbing the stairway to Marymere Falls, we joined the others for a group photograph, the nine of us a half-circle of smiles and poses with a narrow shoot of misting water behind us. Jenny and I gave a thumbs up.

I thought about how Marika had told me she lived in Tucson on the same street where I grew up, and how she went to the University of Arizona and then studied environmental education at Northern Arizona University, both schools I attended. How we both had the best fish tacos of our lives at the same restaurant in Mulegé, a tiny Mexican village in Baja where she was headed next. And I thought about how Mike had asked to contact me before their Baja Peninsula cruise for books and info I could share with him. “You know the desert in that part of the world,” he said.

I realized how Mike and Marika and Jenny and the crew have responsibilities, and I’d made their lives interesting if not difficult. They’d given me one of the most memorable adventures of my life.

Months later, Alaska still had its claws in me. I typed this with three fingers, wincing at the devil’s club spines embedded in their tips.

Photographs © 2020 Ken Lamberton

The Big Yard: Birdwatching in a Time of Quarantine or The Evolution of a Lister

Ken Lamberton, Arizona

It didn't start with the pandemic.

Before the hand washing and social distancing, before the supermarket shelves emptied of toilet paper and rice, there was the failure and loss of my online bird list for my yard:

“HTTP 500 error...the website can't display this page.”

Ten years of birds I've seen from my window—including some once-in-a-lifetime species like that single appearance of an elegant

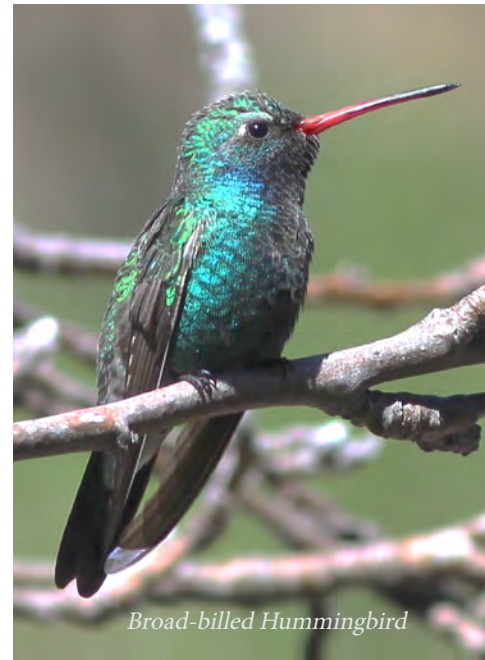


Elegant Trogon

trogon and later a female yellow grosbeak calling from the juniper. Twelve species of hummingbirds like the extraordinary light-bearer with the long curl of a beak. Four kinds of wrens. Three different tanagers and those eye-candy orioles. The clown-faced woodpeckers and quail. Every. Record. Gone.

I have an astounding three-acre yard, tucked into an oak-draped

canyon in the Mule Mountains near Bisbee in that birdwatcher's paradise of southeastern Arizona. People from all over the world come here, often to get a glimpse of only one bird, a “rarity” that suddenly appears along a roadside hackberry thicket or someone's backyard. In 2009, the blue mockingbird at Slaughter Ranch, twenty minutes from my home and 600 feet from Mexico, was only the third one ever seen in Arizona. Over the three months it visited the normally quiet borderland ranch, three thousand visitors threw money at the caretaker for the chance to mark a check next to it on their “life list.”



Broad-billed Hummingbird

Such is the obsession of the so-called “listers.” Always waiting for the next Sinaloa wren or Aztec thrush to make itself known when somebody posts a report to the listserv and the rare bird alerts land in your inbox. I have to admit that I've chased a few, like that roseate spoonbill that showed up looking out of place in a farmer's bullfrog pond. And there was that chicken-like “Jesus Bird,” a long-toed, lily-pad-walking northern jacana that caused a stir at a golf course water hazard. But mostly, I just kept track

of the new birds that came to my home. One hundred forty-two species at last count, if I remember correctly.

So I turned to *eBird*.

I'd been resisting this online database of bird observations of everyone from ornithologists to citizen scientists to simple enthusiasts for feathered-kind. No reason, I guess. It just seemed like too much effort in documentation for a simple yard list. The crowdsourcing website, a joint project by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Audubon,



Hooded Oriole

allows users to track their bird sightings while others watch in real time, and it has many tools for organizing your lists by world, state, county, date, location, and species. And there are even data administrators,

volunteers who are expert local birdwatchers, who review posted checklists for accuracy to “help make sure that *eBird* can be used for scientific research and conservation.” Like the email I got after listing a common moorhen instead of a common gallinule, not because I misidentified the bird but because its name had changed a decade ago.

The thing sucked me right in.

My yard list (at 20 species since I had to start over) led to other lists.



Lists in an old, outdated Peterson's guide. Lists of dated bird photos on my computer. Lists tucked into journals. Lists written into journals—journals going back 25 years. Two months and 17 fat, rubber-banded journals later, I had submitted 88 checklists with 47 photos. My life list, all the birds I'd identified since 1995, stood at 402 species.

It gets worse. I get daily email alerts of birds the program now knows I “need” (or *need*) and conveniently maps out where I can find them.

I've started visiting all the birding hotspots in my area, adding to my “county list” to go with my “yard list,” carrying my binoculars, camera, and guidebooks. Three times to Whitewater Draw for sandhill cranes, snow geese, greater yellowlegs, and least sandpipers. Four times to the San Pedro House and trails for Chihuahua ravens, common ground doves, and Mexican ducks. Twice to Murray Springs, and I still haven't gotten a Crissal thrasher, so I'll return. Soon, elegant trogons

will be arriving at Scotia Canyon...

I spend more time looking out my window than at my computer screen—is that a painted redstart? Yes! Yard bird number 44 for the year.

I had been considering doing an Arizona Big Year when the coronavirus spiked in the US, now, all 50 states including this one. Then I thought maybe I should accept a limited self-quarantine and see how many birds I can see this year in just the county. My wife (who wrote a pandemic plan for Tucson in 2007 and knows this stuff) and I started practicing social isolation (not with each other—yet), shrinking our lives to



minimum public exposure, so I'm considering lowering my expectations to a Big Yard. My goal: 100 species.

I'm setting out seed and suet feeders, mixing sugar nectar, and slicing oranges for the birds. For the two humans, the quarantine garden pushes up leafy stalks of kale and cabbages under its blanket of wire mesh—no veggies for the hooved wildlife. The chickens are fine as long as their blue-green eggs keep appearing in the straw boxes. Six inches of rain have topped off the wells. It wasn't part of some plan for the End Times, but the freezer is heavy with last summer's tomatoes, peaches, and the brown trout I caught while fly fishing Arizona's mountain streams. If we get desperate, four whitetail bucks visit the yard every day, although I don't own a gun, so I'll have to Rambo one of the six-points with a kitchen knife. Messy, but doable.

For entertainment we have the library with its hundreds of books—I'm devouring the apocalyptic plague titles of Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte (currently, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Jane Slayer*). No cable TV, but scores of DVDs, including the complete Marvel universe and *My Life as a Turkey*.

And, of course, there are the birds.



Phainopepla

Hiding Places

Adam Anthony Maestas, New Mexico

According to certain support groups, once you're an alcoholic, you're always an alcoholic. However, there are two different types of alcoholics: an active alcoholic and a recovering alcoholic. So basically, you're either a drunk or you're in remission.

I wrote the following narrative to myself, really, with the underlying idea that it might help someone else who is afflicted with alcoholism, or perhaps to let a family member who is engulfed by it, know that they are not alone in their struggles.

I lost my wife and my best friend to alcoholism in March of 2016. That was four long years ago. Although I continue to breathe, to function, to exist, I am not the same person. Not even close. My wife used to light up a room with her laugh and her smile before the drink got ahold of her. Alcoholism extinguished it all and my life has not been the same since.

As a husband, this disease has made me feel like an utter failure, haunted by "maybes." Maybe if I'd loved her a little more, the disease would have gone away. Maybe if I had given her a little more attention, she would have beat that evil spell. Maybe if I didn't decide to share her pain and drown my sorrows right alongside her, things would have improved.

To this day, I can't seem to forgive nor forget the situation, and I have found it impossible to protect myself from my worst enemy—ME. Maybe that's not my job, but I feel as if I must try. Alcoholism is a cruel disease; it does not discriminate. It hits the wealthy and the poor. It can afflict any race, religion, or beliefs. It affects men and women, young and old. It first robs you of your judgement and senses, and then it goes on to work on your character, your drive, and your desire.

It will erode your self-esteem and, eventually, it will claim your soul and spirit. In extreme cases, it will send you to an early grave. First, it ruins your life. Then it will take it, as it did my wife. It has no concerns. It has no remorse.

While I believe in God, it sometimes feels as if He is not hearing my prayers. While we mere mortals lack the ability to understand how a "just" God could allow bad things to happen to good people, it is apparent that God doesn't work on our time. He works in His time. God operates on a plane that is unrecognizable and mysterious.

My wish is that I can somehow rid myself of this dreaded disease and quit hiding at the bottom of every bottle I consume. I'm tired of running from situations and individuals that I refuse to deal with. I'm tired of hiding in a cold and lonely prison cell. Most of all, I'm terrified that I am beginning to find comfort and solidarity in being locked away, merely existing in a world I can't seem to understand. I must eliminate this dark cloud that hovers over me and save myself before it's too late. I am a widowed husband who feels he has failed, and a father who feels his children no longer recognize him, but whose collective love continues unabated and unconditional.

The collateral damage that this disease causes is enormous, spreading like ripples in a lake. It affects everyone around the individual who is suffering.

I pray that God will one day grant me the strength to say: "No. Enough. I will no longer succumb to alcoholism. I am bigger, better, and far more powerful than this disease ever dreamed. I am surrounded by people who love me and depend on me, and I have a lot to live for."

I have no absolute control over anyone or anything else. The only person I can govern is my own self. Prison has taught me that. Prison is where I found God, as many people often do. Prison is also where many leave God behind once they are released. I must break that cycle and carry God with me everywhere I go throughout all the remaining days of my fragile and vulnerable life. It must be through His love and grace that I avoid a six-foot hole to be my final hiding place. I am literally faced with a circumstance that involves the consequence of life or death. I've seen first-hand the end result that alcoholism has to offer. And I choose life....



Paleolithic Art-Inspired Positive Affirmation Hand Print

Russell Pence, California

Mixed Media on Paper, 2019

Project PAINT Artwork

I Miss You

Brandy Lea Barber, Arizona

I miss the way you pronounced words with your old-fashioned okie accent.

I miss the smell of Tabu on your clothes.

I miss your jokes and how you shared your love with all.

I miss painting your nails and watching *The Price is Right* with you.

I miss your voice calling my name and hearing your laugh.

I miss our family meeting at your place, you're the glue that filled the space.

I miss your recliner.

I miss how you'd mix our names up sometimes cuz there's so many of us, but it didn't matter—you loved us all the same.

I miss you teaching me about life.

I miss us kids hanging at your place, watching *Green Acres* or *Ma & Pa Kettle* or *Judge Judy*... Mom & Diane singing, "Green Acres is the place for me, Green Acres is the place to be." We'd be giggling.

I miss the love that radiated from ♡ Grandma's house cuz you were in there.

I miss those candy carrots only you could make so delicious.

I miss coming over to help you clean; I just miss all the opportunities to be with you.

I miss how mom would cook and do everything for you when you no longer could for yourself, and you didn't want anyone else.

I miss your red lipstick.

I miss bringing my friends to meet you.

I miss all the time I should've spent with you, and I miss being able to rely on you, especially when mom and I would argue, and somehow, you brought us closer and got us through.

I miss feeling connected to the earth when you were around.

I miss how Charlie would hop on your lap, lick you, and not move an inch while he was on your lap.

I miss how you kept us together.

I miss your life; I miss everything about you.

I miss not feeling how life is so short.

I miss your kind, loving, creative, tough, always sweet, and funny Grandma dedicated ways. But when I think about it, I don't miss it too long cuz your ways and your spirit live in all of us and through us every single day.

We love you, Grandma.

Till we meet again.



Eye of the Dragon

Jason Wirick, Michigan

Paint on Canvas, 2020

Elephants Such As I Prison Relations: Politics or Preference

J.L. McGill, Arizona

- I. Through my elephantine eyes, I see what you see. We're all the same to a degree. Prison is a lifestyle. The hustle and bustle. But we are and tend to be separated and distinct beasts as well. Can you guess where our similarities end and politics begin? *Or* is politics just a cover? I won't say it. *You* know it. *We all know that* elephant in the room... *I AM THAT ELEPHANT!!!*

Black as the night.

In this incarcerated setting, I feel conflict and laughter drowning me in the joke that is *FAMILY*. Or maybe it's just a me thing? But like a misrepresented cousin relegated to the sidelines, somewhat erased or somewhat ghosted, I'm forced to ask myself: *who are you?* What a question, right? Would that be considered existential-ish? Or do I have to exist first?

Now, what I am is marginalized and fixed in the psyche of my "kin" as an elephant of extreme taboo. I know this. *I HATE* this. *Unlovable*. I'm seen as incapable of being in a sustainable relationship with profound growth and substance... or so I'm led to believe.

It's funny, but it's not.

But it's true.

Doing prison time. Yea, it's an agonizing task to undergo. Yet, more often than not, whether for good or bad, one ends up finding his truest self within these cages, which secretly become home... *especially* if, like me—an elephant in the room—you *FEEL!* And I'm not talking about anger, revenge, or other hostilities. *NO!* I'm talking about love, empathy, and all other corresponding feelings that go with what's found when eyes open to the depths of oceans.

- II. My surface is superficial. We don't all come wrapped in the most super-politically-correct attire. But, this superficiality is all that's seen. It doesn't amount to the sum total of who I am as an individual. It was never meant to, yet elephants such as I seem unable to escape this very burden.

I may be anything and everything anyone has ever said about me and more, but because who I am has been mired in lurid mythos, I'm red-flagged and generalized. A sad thing. *HUMANIZE ME!* It's not an impossible thing to do. Shields down. No walls. It's a scary thought, right? We don't look alike, you and I. We come from different walks of life and backgrounds... but we share the same struggles, and at some point in time, we've shared the same shame. We share the same desires and loneliness; we share the same ache to be seen. To share our depths. *Our fears. Our dreams.* We desire to be *KNOWN!* Our histories share the same D.N.A. We stem from the same branch, but think we are from different trees. Yet, we call each other *Family*. Yea, it's a joke I don't get... and a bad one.

- III. Elephants such as I have long memories and are truly loyal, which is why we are often hurt and, yes, at times tend to rage: an emotional rage, though rage nonetheless. And I look around at all the two-faced and friendly hypocrites surrounding me, and I find myself resentful. I'm resentful. I'm resentful because I, as an elephant of taboo, must live just to endure. And I'm also resentful because *I* am becoming as two-faced and hypocritical as those of whom I speak. They say *Hi*, and I say *Hi* back, but more often than not, we wear our plastic smiles and walk right past each other. It's what we do. It's who we are.

I see this—*feel this*. All of it. It is a growing thing, a cancerous resentment. You know, resentment isn't always formed overnight, like one might imagine. Look, I know there has to be a consistent imbalance for a justifiable form of resentment to build. Resentment that is not just the pettiness of envy. Well, that imbalance has been building my entire life.

- IV. FAMILY!?! I'm baffled. I sigh at the joke it has become and cry for its memory, knowing that I am that joke, and that there is no longer any place in this family for elephants such as I.

Boomerang

L.O. Brown, Arizona

Somebody is addicted to something somewhere. Like the lady who just sat down to watch T.V. She does this every night and accompanies it with bad soda pop and junk food. The irony is that while she's feeding herself to cope with the lack of attention from her husband Shawn, she misses the flat-eye stare of her own niece across the room. But she does happen to glimpse something else going on outside the window. A conversation between two men—one old and one young. Another meeting of the minds. One's been there and done that, while the other is well on his way.

"Hey there, old-timer, here's some dollars for your next bottle. Everything still good?"

"Oh yea, young gun, nothing but fire in the sky."

"Well OG, let a brotha know when the heat hits the ground."

Down in the alleyway right beside them, the money is coming and going. Pockets, pipes, and points. Whatever your vice is, it's flowing. Just like the couple that's already down there. He's hitting the pipe, she is too. Even though he's still standing, she's busy wearing out her knees. Whenever these two come together, the only thing they know how to do is release each other.

The man in the window across the way watches and knows. He's waiting for his turn. Not for a hit of the pipe or even a swig—but to lay it and give it. He's got it all set up in his room already. *So hurry, hurry my little white dove*, he thinks. He wants to push play. *Let the lens zoom in and upload us to the internet. Let the whole world have a full view.*

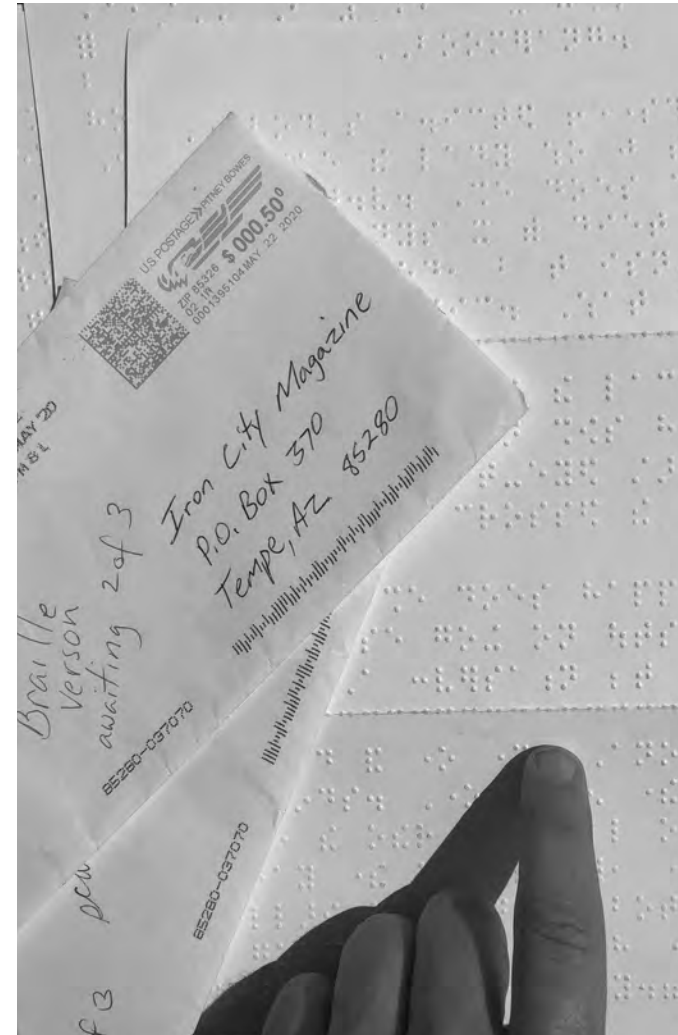
Another old man makes this true. Locked away in his man cave, sweating profusely, clicking away, he flips from screen to screen. A full ashtray on his right, a half-empty jar of vaseline on his left. *Click*, just over. *Click*, half done. *Click*, just starting. Moving his icon to real-time. *Click click click*. After 30 minutes of watching "A man next door and a white dove," the old man hears a *bang, knock, tap tap* at the door.

"Uncle Shawn, can I talk to you?"

"Not right now!"

She's disappointed, she always is. Nobody wants to listen. Nobody wants to hear her cries. So she turns away from him and her aunt who stuffs her face every night. Neither of them know she's become a cutter.

But this time, for the last time, in the tub under the shower—with each pulse of life, she's draining—they're all draining away together.



Braille version of L. O. Brown's writing

SPACE INVASION

D.S. Tyme-Lyfe Poet, California

From where he stood, peering across the lot at his shack, it was obvious something was wrong. He felt it rather than saw it.

“Damn it, not again,” he hissed.

There were unspoken rules governing the homeless, an understanding. Rule #1, which was almost always adhered to: You don’t violate another person’s camp.

He couldn’t recall having any enemies. That’s why he believed whoever had been raiding his camp had to be an outsider. Nothing else made sense.

He’d been taking precautions. Prior to leaving each day, he would set booby traps, wanting to scare the intruder, or at least make him aware his trespasses hadn’t gone unnoticed. He’d become increasingly frustrated, hoping the intruder would get the message and move on, though wondering whether his camp was somehow being targeted by this interloper.

It frustrated him that none of his efforts had worked. All the traps were always sprung when he returned, with no sign of how the intruder came or went. He started leaving later, coming back sooner, or randomly popping up at the lot. Nothing. No sign. But this time, he could hear the bastard.

Assuming his camp was being watched by the raider, he doubled back shortly after sunset. This time, someone was inside. Rule #2 came to mind: If Rule #1 is violated, defend your camp at all costs so it doesn’t happen again. Set the precedent.

His camp sat deep inside an overgrown 2.5 acre lot. On the west side, the lot was bordered by a 12-foot cyclone fence, a salvage yard, and three ridiculously-huge guard dogs with magical powers. Somehow, the dogs materialized whenever he had food. The north end bordered the rear of an auto parts store’s parking area. South of the lot was a seldom-used street. East, where he stood, another fence separated a small 12-unit apartment complex from the field he called home. Briar bushes, acacia trees, willow trees, tumbleweed, and mutant sawgrass kept the camp well hidden from the average passersby. Only someone familiar with the area could enter the field without alerting anyone inside the shack or without making the dogs bark. He was baffled that the guard dogs weren’t tearing the fence down to get at whoever was inside.

He crouched low, not just to keep from being seen, but to find something in the gloom to use as a weapon. The lot had long been used as a dumping ground by locals, so it took mere moments to find what he needed: a broken Louisville Slugger.

Quietly, he maneuvered his way to the shack. The noise inside grew louder and more insistent. He heard his belongings being tossed and ripped. Adrenaline surged throughout his body. Checking his grip on the bat, he took a deep breath and began inching forward... SNAP!

“Damn!” he cursed. The shack went silent. Realizing he’d lost the element of surprise, he shouted, “Come on out!”

More silence. Too much silence.

He steeled himself for the coming encounter and snatched the plywood serving as the door. It had been booby trapped, but the trap wasn’t sprung. The glass jar full of tacks that was perched inside shattered when he grabbed the board. Nothing moved inside the shack. After he had eased his way in, he lit a candle on top of an upturned speaker box, which had been serving as a makeshift coffee table. *Gone*, he thought. Then, it hit him. The smell! Strong, recent, ammonia like...

“Piss! Really!?”

No one was inside. He was baffled. He neither heard nor saw anyone run out the back. Hell, no one could without taking the whole shack down. *So where’d he go*, he wondered. Searching for another candle, he reached under the truck seat that he had been using as a makeshift sofa. He snatched his hand back. The seat was wet and muddy. Using a lighter, he looked under the sofa seat and saw the candle box far back. While stepping around the speaker box, he felt something squishy under his foot.

“You gotta be fuckin’ kiddn’ me,” he spat.

He retrieved the candles and hurried to light one, so he could properly assess the damage. He still wondered where this specter had gone.

He saw torn bags, shredded food containers, scattered clothing, overturned items—but like before—nothing was missing.

What’s he looking for, he asked himself. *Always the same, only this time, the bastard took the time to piss and shit all over the...* Stopping mid-thought, he pulled the candle closer to the poop pile.

Upon closer inspection, he realized who had been ransacking his home—Damned Rabbit!!

“Home is where you make it!”

William D. Lasley, California

Growing up left me with a confusing concept of home.

When I search through the madness I call my mind, I wonder what home means rather than recollect fond memories. After many years away from my beautiful, rural hometown that I felt so close to, I am left questioning where home is exactly. I’ve tried to pin down a single spot, but there is no one location I can call home. Memories only leave me scattered.

In Ozark, Alabama, you are either working to provide for your family or working on creating a family. No matter what, all of my memories of home include work. Nothing in life worth having comes without hard work. Or so I was taught at an early age by my grandfather. On warm summer nights, we used to sit on the carport, watching the flashing fireflies dance and the buzzing street light luminesce the freshly mowed lawn.

After daydreaming to be the one behind the wheel of that Snapper lawn mower, I finally sat with the sunburned operator himself and listened to how important it was that he got his day’s work finished, and finished right, before he’d enjoy the beautiful show of nature with his loving wife and most favorite grandchild. That grandchild, of course, was me!

That was the last of those surreal memories because the next recollection I have is with my mother in a tiny, railroad town called Rural Retreat, Virginia. Everyone knew each other, and there was limited opportunity. Everyone either worked at the train station or the General Dynamics factory, which produced aircraft wings for the U.S. Army. Most of my peers went off to fight for the country, or just simply up and vanished. What the hell happened to me you ask? Well, I developed a bad habit for stealing, which resulted in me doing a couple years in juvenile detention for multiple auto thefts. Needless to say, I kind of ruined all hopes of becoming successful in my new hometown, as well as black-sheeped my mother in the eyes of local patrons. When I was at the ripe age of seventeen and expecting a child of my own, my mother left me behind and went back to Alabama to be with her aging parents.

My new child’s mother and I moved to another town close by in southwest Virginia called Wytheville, and we began to prepare our

future for the little one. I was employed at McDonald’s, or as I called it, the “french-fry factory of hell.” I also dealt drugs on the side, literally on the side of McDonald’s. Sometimes I would even deal through the drive-thru window. At first, all was good, but then, slowly but surely, the addictions began consuming our relationship and most of our finances. We split up after I got out of jail for distribution and found out she was involved in a “serious” relationship. I was devastated by this newfound reality, so I decided to purchase a one-way ticket to Santa Ana, California.

After many, many long miles and nights of struggling, I ended up somewhat settling down in Long Beach, California. Of course, my establishment there was gang—and drug—related so everything was just a matter of borrowed time. Needless to say, once again, I ended up in prison for dealing drugs and a robbery. I was sentenced to sixteen months, caught four extra years along the way, and ultimately ended up doing four years and eleven months. After my release, I met my soulmate, Dawn, and life was never the same. I started to slow down so much, and, for the first time, felt like I had a life worth living and trying for. Once again though, like so many times before, addiction became an issue and led me right back through the revolving door to prison.

When I think about it all now, it is hard to understand why I chose this miserable path of constant, struggling chaos, but, at the time of the events, I always justified my actions as trying to do the right thing. I tried, in my mind, to get a job and be a father. I tried to provide for myself. But now that I’ve gotten older—and sober—I have realized my immature rationalization of things; I am trying to piece together the wreckage. I now take responsibility for all of my mistakes and have a much broader view of just how many I’ve made throughout the madness. This has not been an easy or pleasant task.

So as you now know, home has a lot of pain associated with it for me. That is why I create my own home every night in my unending thoughts and just look for that beautiful, calm peace of mind that helps numb all the pain. After all, like the saying goes, “Home is where you make it!”

Sing*

Ashley Johnson, Maryland

When the lights shut off and it's my turn
To settle down, my main concern
Promise that you will sing about me...

— Kendrick Lamar, "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst"

#

My dad wants me to sing about him. Before I do, he gives me instructions. He tells me to read. Check out Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and Carter G. Woodson's *The Miseducation of the Negro*. We go to the Museum of African-Americana. After I do my reading, he tells me a story. He never reaches the end...

Sing about the prison industrial complex and the plight of marginalized blacks. Don't forget the hundred-to-one cocaine-to-crack ratio and mandatory minimums. Sing of black excellence.

He thinks (I am not a statistic of justice). I see flesh on a scale, marked chattel. A system dehumanized my dad—intelligent black male.

#

He has never been known to sing—my father. His condition of addiction was incurable. He played a solo elegy inside a cell. His vibrato intensified in the hole. From debut to platinum status, the ideas for his song never change.

Strip. Squat. Cough. (Survive in here.)

Run that back. (Survive.)

Open wide. It is unacceptable to sing.

Tongue up—pressed to the roof of your mouth. *Tongue down.*

Tongue out.

Put these on. Welcome home.

You sleep here. *Stay in here.*

An inmate's refrain sounds like: Figure out who you are. Read. Keep your head down but walk proud. Keep your head up but stay humble.

#

The sentence repeats. Another is added, over and over, time and again. Again. (Run that back.)

His soundtrack is distorted. Heat-warped the vinyl grooves until whole parts went missing. I try to concentrate on echoes of crooked crooning.

Holding parsed notes, I mumble through melody.

Revise words. Rehearse sounds.

I am ready to record his record (for the record), but—when I open my mouth—he stops me.

Once more he says. Repeat after me he says: *I was at Howard University (The Black Mecca) in the '80s. I am worthy. I'm the color of the brown paper bag. I passed the test. I been to Howard Dental School. I had plans...a private practice. I know black-bourgeoise and black poverty.*

I hear him, I have heard him. I can recite it from memory. It goes...

My daddy—a God-fearing, woman-loving, wanting-for-nothing, black middle-class-family-having, countryside-visiting, city-living, suburban-dwelling, black boy—became an addict. For a long time, he frequented buildings with bars and places with rehab in the name. But the buildings didn't make him better.

An applause for my freestyle, my father is pleased.

I am not.

#

My pitch is off. I've been singing the same song, the same riff, but there's something missing. The rhythm? Perhaps...

Maybe it's me... (Maybe it's my voice.)

Nah—His notes are wrong. He never finished telling me the story.

I ask him for the melody. *Just hum. Cut the words, just hum.*

Vibrations. *Pour soul in it. Give me a reference track.*

(I will get it together, and then I will sing.)

He gives me what I ask for, but it is more than one song. My dad's untitled magnum opus, unmastered:

Track 1. Intro—You were born, I was there	(18 months)
Track 2. Prince George's County Correctional Center	(3 months)
Track 3. <i>Mountain Manor Treatment Center</i> [Interlude]	(1 month)

Track 4. Cecil County Detention Center (feat. Light Skin Mike)	(6 months)
Track 5. Lorton Correctional Complex (feat. Bunkie Al)	(4 months)
Track 6. Eastern Correctional Institution	(27 months)
Track 7. <i>Second Genesis Rehab</i> [Interlude]	(12 months)
Track 8. Maryland Correctional TC/Hagerstown New Jail	(10 months)
Track 9. <i>New Life for Youth Rehab</i> [Interlude]	(12 months)
Track 10. Seven Locks Detention Center (feat. Randall Horton)	(14 months)
Track 11. <i>TROSA</i> (feat. Randall Horton & Big Wayne) [Interlude]	(24 months)
Track 12. District of Columbia Central Detention Facility/DC Jail	(2 months)
Track 13. Federal City Treatment Facility	(2 months)
Track 14. DC Jail Pt. 2	(4 months)
Track 15. <i>Langston Lane Halfway House</i> [Interlude]	(2 months)
Track 16. Clarksburg Detention Center	(2 weeks)
Track 17. Jessup Pre-Release	(3 months)
Track 18. Eastern Correctional Institution Pt. 2	(34 months)
Track 19. Southern Maryland Pre-Release	(12 months)
Track 20. <i>Maryland Reception Diagnostic CC</i> [Interlude]	(1 week)
Track 21. Patuxent Institute... Return to Seven Locks	(1 week: 18 hours)
Track 22. Outro—Hope House TC	(17 days)
Oxford House (Snippet) [BONUS TRACK]	(? months...? years)

I study the track listing and check the time stamps. I'm thirty-three-years old. I had my daddy for four-and-a-half years (51 months). My father spent 127 months in centers, facilities, and complexes, for correction and detention. Detained for 127 months, nothing was corrected.

Our bids together were not consecutive or concurrent. My location was a pit stop on his road tour from this jail, to that prison, and some rehab. I waited on him doing time.

I want to sing it right. I prayed to God—on my hands and knees, like Grandma showed me. But prayers are not wishes and God is not a djinni.

(I think) I liked him more when he was locked up than when he huffed and puffed crack. He made the clearest sounds when he was clean—at home (not running). Every relapse and scrape happened when he was outside of a container. I feared for him when he was free; I feared for him when he was incarcerated. The worrying turned me into a parent long before I birthed my first son.

Though I am too old for parenting now, I am never too old for his advice. For a long time, we've been in the round. Taking turns. Trading tracks.

When our metronomes click clack in unison (when we're synced up) we chop it up.

I refuse to pen lyrics until his timing aligns with my beat.

These songs already exist, have existed, will continue to exist. There are many covers and renditions—for my father's version, I know the notes and I can sing.

I can revise; try a different pitch. Go an octave higher. My dad just can't add no more tracks.

END

**This piece first appeared in Glassworks of Fall 2020*



Prisoner Tattooing on Another Prisoner

Marvin Rodriguez, California

Pen on Paper, 2019

Project PAINT Artwork

Prison Horseradish Sauce

Wayne Snitzky, Ohio

“How do you make horseradish? That would make these bagels bangin'.”

I was breaking bread with my crew: Dave, Dan, and Hollywood. After our workouts we ate together—gotta feed those muscles. Dave started our meal off by bringing summer dogs to our table. Dave is as close as a human being can be to a sasquatch, so he hunted the meat from his locker box. Dan hustled up some Velveeta. His stated religion is anti-establishmentarian, and he claims to be perpetually broke. That didn't stop him from bringing the most expensive item to our meal. Hollywood brought the bagels. He got the nickname for the purple glasses he wore for an eye condition. Even though we all knew that, it didn't stop us from making inappropriate jokes about Hollywood, Jewish control, and bagels. I was the actual broke member of the group, so I supplied the labor and the BBQ sauce.

All the supplies appeared at our table, and I got to work preparing our meal. Dave, the sasquatch, if left in charge of our food, would cut wildly at all the ingredients as is his wild nature. If Hollywood didn't have time to prepare the food, everything would be rushed. Dan would just toss everything into a bowl and have at it. So I went about cutting the summer dogs into even medallions and let them marinate in the BBQ sauce. My secret was to add some black pepper to give the meat a little extra kick. Before the meat was heated in the microwave, I had to make sure the cheese was ready. Plastic butter knives are not capable of slicing Velveeta cheese to the proper thickness, so I used dental floss to make perfect cuts. Only then can the meat be taken to the microwave. I have to keep a close eye on the medallions to make sure the fat just begins to render. Any less, and even though the meat is pre-cooked, it tastes uncooked. Any longer, and the meat becomes too tough for sandwiches.

When I get back to the table the four bagels are split open and sitting on paper towels. I fan the medallions around the bottom bagels, slightly overlapping them. You eat with your eyes first. The cheese is laid over the meat, but before the lids are placed on top each one is ringed with the leftover sauce and rendered fat—a surefire way to make sure there is no raw bread taste to our meal. The completed bagels are warmed up just to the point of the cheese beginning to melt. Dinner is

served, and Dave has brought out a bag of pretzels for us to share.

Tearing into my bagel, I get a strong memory of a similar sandwich my father used to make us kids when responsible for dinner in a rush. This was far from the first time I made these bagels, but this was the first time it brought me this memory. Dad's version was always topped by horseradish sauce. In our home, there was always a little glass jar of the stuff in the door of the fridge. He got it from our butcher. It wasn't a creamy sauce that squirted out of a bottle. This stuff was pulpy, and you only needed a smidge to set a sandwich off. My moment of revelry prompted the question to my friends: Does anyone know how to make horseradish sauce? The blank stares I received back gave me my answer: Nope.

A few moments of savage eating passed, and then Hollywood interjects that he knows a guy with a garden plot who is growing icicle radishes. He says they are all white, so maybe that's what the sauce is made from. He lets us know he'll ask his buddy if he can have a few.

Later that night with radishes procured, our group gathers and begins to formulate a plan to make our prize. The first problem is how to shred the radish. A prison grater can be made by poking holes in a thick plastic jar lid. It works surprisingly well. The next problem is whether horseradish sauce is pickled or fermented. The answer has to be pickled, because there is no way we could ferment anything. Keeping a jar in a cell cooking was too close to making hooch; no one thought it was a good idea to have to explain what we were doing during every shakedown. Making small batches and using it relatively quickly was the only way to go.

We add the mash to an empty peanut butter jar and pour in the leftover juice from a pickle. Dan thought it would be a good idea to add some salt, mostly because it couldn't hurt. We sealed the jar, and I put it on my shelf. Pictures of all the delicious sandwiches I would soon be eating filled my head.

After a couple of days, we check our jar. Looks like the mash has softened. We decide it is time to check the experiment. I make a big production out of getting ready to sample it, because why not? If this was successful, all our meals would be much, much better. Our potential radish supply was huge. We all gather sampling spoons and crowd around.

I feared there might have been a bit of pressure built up. So I burp the lid—open and close—real quick. Just a little insurance in case it

wants to explode. But there was no explosion. Big let down.

Before I can reopen it and scoop my sample, the guys at the next table start yelling, "Oh my god, what the hell is that!?" and "Oh come on, my mouth was open!" Followed by, "Put some water on that shit!" They all believed someone in a nearby cell was using the toilet. Their heads were swiveling around trying to find out who bombed them to cuss that person out. I didn't smell anything, but I suspected it might be the jar in my hand. I popped the lid again, just for a second. Again, cursing came from the next table and the table beyond that one. Then someone from the top range came out of their cell cursing, "Da fuck! Is someone changing a colostomy bag?"

Ok, it was definitely our jar causing the commotion. The air current was pulling the funk away from us, but I had to know. I pop the lid and leave it off. It felt like my nose caught on fire. I got an image in my mind of someone shoveling hair onto a dumpster fire—if the dumpster was filled with soiled diapers—both baby and adult. Guys in the block started to dry heave. I closed the lid.

Hollywood, bless his little antagonistic heart, lifted our experiment and asked, "Anybody want to sample our horseradish sauce?" I thought we might be getting ready for a fight, the smell was that bad, but guys came up to us more curious than mad. Dan took the lead in explaining what our jar of funk was supposed to be, and we started getting laughs about how horribly wrong it all went. One guy shared he didn't think he would ever smell anything worse than this hobo stew an old guy made when he was at Trumbull. He told us this guy collected uneaten food from each meal, all day, and put it in a bowl by his window. At night, he would warm it up and chow down. But it wasn't the food going down that was the problem—it was when it came back out. It cleared the entire cell block. He told us our jar of death was much, much worse.

Another guy just shook his head. And while walking away said, "Only you group of assholes could turn radishes into ass." His comment became the new name for our experiment: Ass Radish.

Prison is a place of scarcity, hence the need to make our own horseradish sauce. Everything gets used and reused. It was not even a thought that our ass radish could be discarded. The question was: What would we do with it? Our cell block's rivalry with the merit block came up.

The merit block was filled with guys who come across as a bit entitled. Our sports leagues had been trading titles back and forth

between our blocks for years. It was friendly, mostly. These were guys who sorta act like their poop doesn't stink. Well, sitting in front of us on the table was some stinky poop we could share with them. We began plotting how we could deploy our chemical stink bomb as a grenade in their block. Just rolling it in with the lid off was too obvious. We wanted it to simmer for as long as possible. *Spread the funk* for as long as possible. Dan thought of the perfect spot to leave our gift to them.

Each block has a box of chemicals for guys to clean their cells with. The merit block stored theirs right next to the door leading to the main hallway. And, there was just enough room to slip our jar behind it. Now that we had the plan set, we needed to decide who would execute it.

Every group has a mission man—a person who does the crazy stuff for the group. My group of friends had Petey. Poor Petey had patches of hair falling out from all the psych meds he was on. He was like our mascot. A mascot that would do just about anything for cigarettes. One could believe we were taking advantage of Petey, but we truly did look after him. But everyone has to carry their weight. Petey would deliver our ass radish bomb.

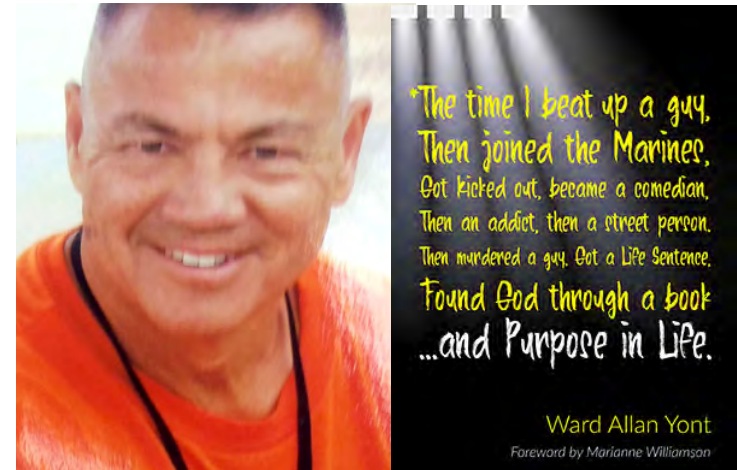
At the next day's recreation call, we executed our plan. With the hallway full of movement, Hollywood and Dan stepped into the merit block and struck up a conversation with guys near the door to create a distraction. Dave and I hung back to create a bigger distraction if needed. Petey loosened the lid and slid it behind the chemical box. Then we kept on moving to rec. Success.

The next day, we heard how well our plan had worked. The guys in the merit block spent hours thinking a sewer pipe broke, until someone finally found the jar. Their chemical box quickly found a home further away from the door.

Then, we waited for retaliation. What would the arrogant pricks come up with? They weren't as devious as us, so I was not worried. Plus, if need be, I still had the ass radish recipe on file, and a few ideas on how to make it worse.

Turning Heads and Pages: Ward Allan Yont's Book Publication

Arizona



Madi Margolis

Ward Allan Yont, previously published in *Iron City Magazine* Issues 2 and 3, is turning heads and pages with the publication of his first book, a memoir. The title is a feat in itself: *The time I beat up a guy, then joined the Marines, got kicked out, became a comedian, then an addict, then a street person. Then murdered a guy. Got a life sentence, found God through a book... and Purpose in Life.*

... and Purpose in Life shares Yont's lifelong spiritual odyssey. In his own words, the story is "an entertaining mix of psychosis, addiction, and comedic mishap that leads first to tragedy, then to a most profound and ironic awakening unto meaning and purpose in life." The foreword is written by **Marianne Williamson**, former democratic candidate and seven-time best-selling spiritual author. Williamson posits, "We can easily focus on the tragedies in Yont's story, but there is no need to dwell there. For this is a story of resurrection and love—of darkness turned into light and the transformation of the human heart. Yont is not a victim, but a teacher. He has lived his own story and now he illumines ours." If you can't wait to read the rest of Yont's comedic, poignant,

and hopeful book, visit the publisher website ArchStreetPress.org or Amazon.com.

* * *

Iron City Magazine is honored to feature an interview with Ward Allan Yont conducted by our current Operations Director, Jessica Fletcher.

* * *

JF: *First off, wow. I am incredibly impressed and awed by your writing and personal growth shared in this memoir. How was the process of choosing which stories to include? How was it revisiting these memories on the written page?*

WAY: Writing this memoir was just as much an experience in personal growth as it was learning to write (on a professional level). I first put pen to paper on the memoir ten years before its publication. And even that was after some fifteen years of reaching a complete enough understanding of my conscious self to begin “professing” and disclosing things about the broader nature of (our) existence, as well as my subjective experiences within it.

It was indeed difficult to revisit several stories while writing. But I told myself at the outset that I wasn't going to hide anything, that this was going to be as naked a truth about what I went through as anyone has ever read. My desire to create a cogent roadmap from psychosis to sound-mindedness fueled the writing and established a story arc.

Recall was not difficult for me. In fact, I'm incredulous toward any who say “(they) don't remember” the details of their crimes. Many of (us) have pathologies, and if we “didn't remember (them),” they wouldn't exist as compulsions to do one thing or another. It's only continuity and mundanity that we tend to overlook and forget... not deviant and felonious acts.

The cacophony of thoughts that was the prelude to my having pulled the trigger was, by far, the most difficult chapter to write, mainly because what was going on in my head was much less comprehensible than what made it to print. To piece together such a labyrinth of nonsensical rationalizations would be exhausting for any reader. So

choices had to be made.

Strangely, it was the chapter depicting the string of thoughts and events that led to my arrest that was not only the easiest to write but perhaps the most vivid and accurate account rendered in the book. I had achieved immortality in my mind, and who would forget the details of such a once-in-a-lifetime moment? Please forgive me if I'm being crass.

And as for remorse... (though you didn't ask)...

This topic has come up a few times in feedback—readers concerned that I did not satisfactorily delve into any explicit phase of remorse... even in the end. This was intentional only inasmuch as it was consistent with the truth. Such disordered thought is often forged out of a lifetime of repressed and aberrant emotion. Spiritual growth is the arduous task of facing fears and working through them, over and over again, to the point of becoming well-practiced in thinking otherwise—#Neuroplasticity (I think I actually used “hash-tag” correctly).

Writing memoir imposes an element of empathy, starting with the first word. But to imply that I had reached a point of “miraculous” wholeness within the timeframe of the story alone, to me, seems disingenuous. I left my reader assured that I now had the proper tools, and that I was dedicated to the lifelong journey ahead, regardless of time. In the end, I'm not just saying I'm sorry... I'm DOING I'm sorry.

* * *

JF: *No stranger to comedic expression, you demonstrate thoughtful and intentional uses of humor throughout the book. You were able to balance the use of hyperbole and subversion to showcase earlier states of mind without trivializing mental health or minimizing the suffering of others. That's quite a feat! In the Christmas “snow” and Cardboard Cyborg scenes, you also demonstrate how powerful light-heartedness and glee are, especially in places shrouded with stigma and shame. How did you go about balancing humor while being mindful not to trivialize? What recommendations would you give to other writers exploring humor, especially in memoir?*

WAY: Humor, in its purest, is derived of a consensual union between

two parties—one defining the moment, and the other willing to be defined. If the exchange is defiled with ignorance, then the experience will be insufferable. If it is liberating, then it becomes a foundation of joy and laughter—an intercourse of spirit, in the most superlative sense.

At many points throughout my story, the humor is the juxtaposition of absurdity within the context of a sound-minded narrator. Once the narrator and reader have mutually agreed to these terms, many things can be disclosed, enjoyed, appreciated, learned, and even tolerated.

We all share a collective consciousness, so there's no fearing that anyone is incapable of achieving right mind. But it is the author's responsibility to at least be of right mind first; otherwise, whatever is expressed will be more repulsive than liberating.

* * *

JF: *Let's talk about the women making eyes at you. I am weary and wary of the hackneyed ways men write women, so I was ecstatic to see how you approached this with humor and self-awareness (at least after the fact in writing!). Again, humor cues the reader to recognize a grandiose perception and state of mind. Allowing people to be people, rather than mere instruments for plot, can be difficult when writing fiction, though possibly even more ethically and creatively challenging to traverse in memoir. How did you go about the process of characterization while showing empathy toward the very real people described in the book?*

WAY: I love how you worded this question, Jessica. You didn't actually say that I dared to "write [the] women" in the storyline, but rather "how [I] approached this with humor..." Great job! The simple truth is, I'm a sucker for a pretty face, and I wanted to highlight this as just (another) way disordered thought and emotional imbalance can play out, even in innocent ways.

Typically, women are ascribed ideals of fantastical relationships and romance—and just as typically, guys are not. But I'm a helpless (and often Quixotic) romantic in my own right—which must mean that this (too) must be disordered thought. I wanted to see if I could capture that on paper, is all, depicting my enamored and silly rationalizations.

The trending "conflict" or disparity between masculine and feminine forces at play in our society opens up a broad discussion that I shall not indulge right now. But I do like to think that my lofty regard for women—I grew up under the auspices of my older sister—has not gone, and will not go unrewarded.

* * *

JF: *With an incredible call back, you redefined and revealed a new brand of "heroism." Early on, you write, "The hero's journey is a lonely one. Set apart from those living a common existence, his destiny lies with the exertion of his skills against the evil forces that threaten the continuity of life itself" (p. 60). The hero's loneliness shifts to a calling for love and interconnectedness. Carl Jung's hero archetype is not what it appears either, but rather is a metaphor for the arduous, often lonely, psychological journey. Did you have additional insight into your journey during the writing process? Also, who are your favorite literary and non-literary heroes?*

WAY: For the archetypal hero, it can be, and often is, a lonely plight. Even if we were to ascribe the general definition of a hero as being one who merely maintains a standard above the status quo, there's still a degree of implicit disconnect from "everybody else." And this alone can be disadvantageous regarding personal struggle (leading, for example, to disassociation and exclusivity).

I wanted my readers to question with me this all too familiar but impractical notion of resolving disparity (even emotional and psychological disorder) through fear-based postures, such as with weapons or even through fighting and/or contention.

These baser-level vehicles present ongoing philosophical challenges in the mind of the archetypal hero, in that a hero is not a hero if there's no one that needs saving. There isn't always going to be someone to fend off with "counter-violence," which renders the classic hero without purpose and identity in times of peace—the very basis for my deviance from the Marines (and likely the basis for many veterans who struggle with the issue of purpose and identity in the civilian milieu). I (too) thought I would be applying my trade—my expertise in weapons—in what I thought was a glory-filled lifestyle. Instead, I grew disillusioned,

because it wasn't wartime.

In this sense, many of us who are searching for meaning and glory through such fantasy waste enormous amounts of time and energy on superfluous concerns and fears, when there are so many other more practical inner-matters that can be proactively addressed on a daily basis (our emotional and spiritual growth being the foremost of these concerns).

So, the inference I was making is that the attributes of love have miraculous ways of transforming the archetypical lonely hero template into something altogether magnificent, when deployed both correctly, and correctively.

There's no such thing (anymore) as the lone hero. And if you don't believe me, go watch the *Lego Batman* movie—funny as hell, and a great parody that addresses this concern. (I glean most of my deepest insight from cartoons and animation characters). Am I even kidding?

* * *

JF: *Your rendering of what it means to be a hero also comments on beliefs about “good” vs. “evil.” Even your author bio details how quickly the shift from lauded hero to demonized other occurs in our society. In your pivotal conversation with Mike, you come to learn another belief about good and evil: “Deep down, these people aren’t necessarily dangerous because they’re inherently bad. They’re deranged because they’re so lonely. And if you can come to appreciate this simple truth, you’ll have understood the human drama in its entirety” (p. 149). What are your thoughts on the idea that writing helps people understand the “human drama”? What responsibility (if any) do you believe writers and artists have when partaking in this creative and restorative space?*

WAY: There is some overlap between this question and the last. In order for there to be a hero, there must be a villain. But ascribing people villainous qualities can be a subjective and arbitrary decision that often leads to... wait for it... VILIFICATION!!—which is a type of social injustice, by today's standards. And rightly so.

In this current need to depolarize our society, we're still left with the

arduous task of making good decisions without being (too) judgmental. Judgment, like any other intellectual tool, can be used to help or to harm, to hurt or to heal.

In the true template of our collective conscious selves, we ALL have the potential of being heroes, with respect to our interrelations with others. Only some of us—namely the incarcerated population—have either lost sight of this seemingly lofty vision of ourselves, or more likely never had it in the first place. So because of our emotional wounds and dysfunctional upbringing and/or peer setting, we remain fooled by our fixation upon less meaningful affairs, trying to reclaim whatever it is we think we lost, while not even knowing what it is we're looking for or where to find it. The outer-world search becomes futile. Life becomes meaningless. We then seek relief in addictive patterns—the most prevalent of which is drugs—which gives us merely a temporary but costly glimpse into “who we were really meant to be” (that is, spiritually whole and happy), which is so compelling that we'll do almost anything to feel that way again and again and as often as possible, even if it means sacrificing everything (else) unto the acceptable result of returning to prison... (INHALE!!)

This accounts for at least 80% of us in here, by my conservative estimation. We're not evil. We're stuck. So society says, *Okay, well, until you get yourself UN-stuck, why don't you stay (here) for a while...* which is a reasonable judgment! I mean, hey—we all know what the consequences are for poor choices.

What it takes to turn this tide is the subjective experience of evoking the willingness to change! But to re-evolve meaning into the lives of (guys) who DON'T want to know the meaning of life is futile and exhausting, to all parties involved. I'm just someone who learned this much later in life, and under grave circumstances.

I have tremendous respect for the role of the artist (and cartoonist). They are truly at the cutting edge of thought. And it's not an easy life by any means—I say this as though I am one (a cartoon, that is). Sadly, even the mocked-up role models and “superhero” movies we see today have less to do with the “REAL” human storyline, and much more to do with impractical and fantastical scenarios with endless amounts of

guns and missiles and bombs, and fighting... all under the pretext of “meaningful” entertainment. But very uninteresting, in my opinion, and certainly not remedial, is “the modern day hero.”

* We're not unhappy because we're in prison... we're in prison because we're unhappy.©*

One thing that remains constant in life is that everybody wants to be happy. So instead of a formalized objective curriculum that “teaches (guys) how to do one thing or another...,” they must, instead, be influenced on an informal level—so that they understand experientially the subjective experience of “how to be happy,” which naturally undermines the outer-world search for fulfillment. There are few things more gratifying (to me) than seeing “hardened criminals” laughing and smiling... with joy, not psycho-malice.

This applies to the entire “human drama” in or out of prison. Only I'm doing it from within. If you want to learn more detailed steps as to exactly how to do this, you may have to wait for a second book (hint, hint). Meanwhile, the world shall suffer!!! (diabolical laugh...)

* * *

JF: *Before your sentencing, you reflect on the psychological evaluation: “I'll be forced to face the fact that I've committed one of the most deplorable and heinous acts of all, for what amounts to completely nonsensical reasons” (p. 84). Later, what appears nonsensical shifts as you are able to transform coincidence-chasing into meaning-making. How would you define “nonsensical” now? Do you draw any parallels between the craft of writing and synchrony in the universe?*

WAY: Let me answer the second part of your question first—yes, I've noticed startling correlations between writing and synchrony in my outer-world experience. Because our minds (not our brains) are the First Cause catalyst for what transpires in the physical realm—the brain is merely the conduit between mind and body—if one pays close enough attention to his/her deeper intentions, correlations can be noted (often metaphorically). This shouldn't be confused with the magical idea of arbitrarily conjuring self-conceived designs, but rather coming into a broader awareness of our truer selves—that our outer-

world experience is but a manifestation of our dominant wishes and emotions, but only as they relate to the designs of spirit—i.e., Healing and Creating.

The Universe is an inseparable extension of our consciousness—that is, it is “self-aware” through us—and this is the proper “taxonomy” that renders validity to the definitive subjective mystical experience, instead of the antiquated belief that God is separate from, or outside of ourselves, as maintained by many formalized religions. This latter concern is derived from the fear of fully assuming responsibility for the power of our thoughts otherwise. It is a travesty in understanding that has been perpetuated for centuries and millennia... and has been the basis for many lives lost under the spell of heretics, sorcerers, witches, and the like...

However, now, even in the newer sciences—such as field theory, quantum theory, and a variety of other daring schools of thought incorporating metaphysical philosophy—not only can we no longer ignore subjective inner-world experience, but we are forced to rely on it to answer paradoxical and philosophical challenges encountered in (especially) westernized schools of thought. And because writing happens to be an intimate, subjective undertaking, it cannot help but be an important spiritual catalyst.

As for me, this new paradigm becomes a precarious argument when discussing the deeper psychological and philosophical issues of my crime, as it pertains to what is “nonsensical” and what is real. If I defend the validity of this paradigm, it may seem that I am merely clinging to the same grandiose and delusional belief system that landed me here, rendering my condition unfit for reacclimation back into society, should that day arrive. And if I merely dismiss the whole network of this circuitous philosophy as being nothing more than some meaningless drug-induced hallucination, then I rob myself of all the sense of purpose, meaning, and awareness that was gained by my “awakening.”

Fortunately, there is a palatable resolve to this conundrum, and it is found within the dichotomy mentioned in the memoir—love versus fear. The messages and synchronicities (whether or not one

believes them to be “real” in and of themselves as intrinsic feedback properties) are still subject to the dualistic nature of our perception and interpretation of them. If interpreted through the lense of fear, our perception will be false and hallucinatory. If interpreted through the lense of love, our perception will be true and align with “reality.”

Ergo, because my decision to pull the trigger was based upon delusion and fear—I can reasonably dismiss it as being the tragically unfortunate hallucination it was while still keeping intact the metaphysical experience itself. This is not a careless rationalization, but a necessarily well-thought-out resolution to maintain the integrity of my beliefs in the healing process.

* * *

JF: *The scene in which your father takes the stand at your trial moved me to tears. I can only imagine the process of revisiting these memories in your writing. In that initial trial scene, you write: “It was a feeling that I hadn’t felt in a while—years perhaps. And suddenly I wasn’t so sure that I hadn’t misjudged him entirely. It was as if he still had the utmost regard for me despite my wayward activities. It was as if his opinion of me had never been compromised at all—ever. It was as if he still loved me” (p. 107). Later, you hear from Mike: “The better you perceive him as a father, the closer to a father he’ll become” (p. 155). What have you learned from writing about relationships?*

WAY: Maybe you don't know this, Jessica, but I actually teach self-awareness and personal enlightenment classes here in the prison. The main tenet of my curriculum emphasizes the importance of human relationships. In class we explore phases of evolution from pure dependency as a child to interdependence as mature adults, and everything in between. The goal of the curriculum is to help liberate students from lower-level emotional affliction—even if that affliction is an aberrant philosophy. But the actual practice of this teaching is applicable only within the informal relationships that we carry on with others. And being that I have to live with, near, and around the very guys I teach, I have to practice what I preach.

This has been my home for the past 27 years, so much of my empirical knowledge of relationships has been gathered from the prison

environment (though in “reality,” relationships extend far beyond these walls).

As for my father, he passed away five years ago, but I can say that our relationship was closer than it was when I was out “on the streets.” Sadly, there were plenty of times when his efforts toward restoring our relationship were much more admirable than mine. I'm still immature in so many ways. I think that not only was I not emotionally abused as a child, but more spoiled than anything else.

The interesting thing is that now, I get to watch myself grow into the likeness of my father, both in disposition and personality. So, he didn't really go anywhere at all, as far as I'm concerned. The use of my middle name, Allan, in any publicized bylines is a small tribute to and acknowledgment of my endearment toward my father. I hadn't used my full name until he passed away. But whenever I catch myself thinking of and/or acting like him—which is literally every few minutes—I realize I'm maturing into a really great guy... which is just as much a testament as to how great a guy I really am!

As for the mechanics of thought within the dynamics of relationships, I've already said too much while responding to previous questions. So I'll have to task you with sifting through some of that yourself. :-).

* * *

JF: *One of my favorite literary devices that you use frequently is anaphora. The two examples below appear at pivotal points of insight and transformation:*

“Maybe I was starting to feel the ruinous effect I’d had upon other people’s lives. Maybe I was beginning to catch a glimpse of the pain I’d caused the victim’s family and others. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was a little insane. Maybe I did need help.” (p. 118)

And again, at the end of the memoir:

“Maybe it was just another lesson in forgiveness (although admittedly, I’m not quite sure whether I was forgiving him or he was forgiving me). Or maybe it was just another demonstration of

God's astounding way—if not his sense of humor. Or maybe it was all of the above.” (p. 189)

The repetition felt to me like a willingness to sit with and consider. In what ways do you believe the writing process can be used for reflection and the introspective concept of “sitting with?”

WAY: My first reaction to this question was another shift in perception. Writing is more of an aspect of the Creation phase—differing from the Healing phase, where the idea of “sitting with” and contemplating is perhaps more applicable. I’ve organized my class curriculum into these two broad and progressive phases, and I emphasize the importance of addressing the Healing first, lest our “creations” be convoluted with errant designs. I also alluded to this in an earlier response when I made the inference that the author should be of right-and/or sound-mind FIRST, since he/she is being relied upon to define the moment at hand. This doesn’t mean that the author has to be without fault or beyond reproach... but it does mean that the author has to be without fault and beyond reproach when he/she is writing—kinda like I’m being right now.

* * *

JF: *Your writing of grim realities was just as salient as your humor. In one haunting sentence, you wrap up the scene following the chow hall fight with the line: “Soon afterward, a porter emerged from the sidelines to mop up the blood and everyone resumed eating” (p. 127). What have you come to realize about how people navigate the grislier aspects of incarceration? What are your thoughts on writing and sharing these experiences with others currently incarcerated and in the community?*

WAY: Recounting such grisly encounters as fights, and stabbings, and killings, etc., is an unbecoming pastime in the prison culture. Technically, it’s a subtly aggressive, self-aggrandizing ploy to win over acceptance, favor, and camaraderie, and just as regrettably instills more fear, guilt, judgment, attack, and condemnation than it does love. In fact, this is often what passes for love in the prison culture. But in truth, this type of storytelling only solidifies the types of dysfunctional bonds that comprise the supposedly tightly-knit social fabric of the prison culture. And I say “supposedly” in the sense that, by definition, these

bonds are spurious and capricious at best, and can be easily subverted.

One such way to weaken these unhealthy bonds is to refrain from participating in the dynamics (and stories) that over-glorify them. And in this sense, the author (and everyday hero) has a burden of responsibility when giving account of prison violence, if at all.

Incidentally—almost ironically—many of us in here are both anesthetized by the sometimes frequent violence and unmoved by such worn-out accounts of past crusades, mostly because we ALL have our own “war stories,” which are always so much better than the jackass’s we’re listening to. In short, it gets old fast.

What the general public doesn’t usually take into account when hearing of prison violence is that most of the instances aren’t just “innocent people” getting randomly attacked and victimized without provocation or cause. Most of the time there are identifiable contexts, which make it easier (for us) to accept as something that we shouldn’t get involved in, or invest too much emotion in. We shrug it off, knowing (they) likely created those circumstances for themselves, even after knowing better. We don’t have to know that “they had it comin’...” to reason that it’s simply “none of (our) business” anyway.

There are other ways to alter the disposition of a prison yard, ways too extensive to discuss here. But it starts with not putting oneself in a position of disfavor among (your) brothers without the ability to openly express yourself to them. Functional social networks have to be established from within (on an informal level, as discussed before), and as certain platforms are created, one can begin the art of expression in whatever form it may take. There are several effective forms that can permeate the informal networks.

* * *

JF: *I believe your memoir illustrates the power of treating others as fellow humans. You write, “... it seemed more and more an indisputable truth that almost everybody responds to the subtleties of kindness in one way or another, especially when they’re deployed without prejudice or fear” (p. 174). You later add, “It became evident... that everybody wants to be accepted, to be understood, and to be loved.*

Even in prison. No—scratch that, especially in prison...” (p. 175). These sentiments exemplify what Iron City Magazine hopes to share with the community at large—by bringing voices like yours to the forefront. Are there any final thoughts you would like to share about your experience and memoir?

WAY: The incarcerated culture is merely an accumulative cross section of the “ails” of our society. As I’ve only briefly alluded in several of my responses, there are ways to address these ailments, but the solution(s) are found within a shift in perception. Sadly, a shift in “society’s” perception alone is not enough, only because it is not (they) who are in need of healing. Humility is a lesson for the ego, not the spirit (Helen Schucman, *A Course in Miracles*). In other words, a doctor doesn’t see those who are well. Or, in yet other words, the solution must be administered at the level of the affliction. And the affliction is one of a hidden emotional and spiritual nature... not just behavioral. One came first.

In coming to understand how the true problem arose over the time it took to become what it is, there’s no escaping the seemingly grim realization that it’s going to take almost just as long to reverse the trend. In the end, we are all heroes in this endeavor to mend the human spirit. And as the problem was created one dysfunctional relationship at a time, so must the solution be administered one functional and corrective encounter at a time. It sounds impossible. But it’s actually probable, and even inevitable once you understand how “miracles” work. Besides, can you think of anything better or more meaningful that you should be doing??



Natural Beauty

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



My Other Half
Valentino Amaya, California
Acrylic on Canvas, 2018

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We are currently accepting submissions of short fiction, nonfiction, poetry, one-act plays, cartoons/comics, graphic stories, and art for **Issue 6**.

The (postmark) deadline to submit is **June 6, 2021**.

Email submissions to:
ironcitymagazine@gmail.com

Or mail submissions to:

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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.

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Two contributor copies, prison policy permitting.

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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.

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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.

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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.



M A G A Z I N E

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BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

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Signature

Date

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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