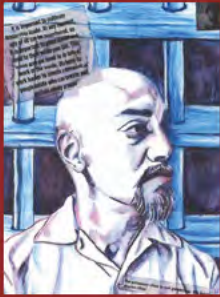


Included in this issue:



Art and poetry by J. Terence Schelble



Art by Juan Hernandez



Art, comics, and reflections by
Steven Westcott



\$15 USA / \$20 CANADA



IRON CITY MERCH

IRON CITY MAGAZINE ISSUE 7 / 2022



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Cover artwork, *God's Creation: The Human Race*
by John W. Zenc, California
2020
Justice Arts Coalition Artwork
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M A G A Z I N E

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS
BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

ISSUE 7 / 2022

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 AZ Humanities for the generous grant award that made the publishing of this issue possible.



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LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Why *Iron City Magazine: Creative Expressions By and For the Incarcerated*

Because I was lucky, certainly blessed, to work, though mostly long-distance, with incarcerated writers and artists at the Penitentiary of New Mexico in Santa Fe

Because an inspired full-time educator there, Michelle Ribeiro, initiated the Pen Project for her students inside and invited Arizona State University in Tempe to help direct it

Because her colleague Leah Weed continues the Pen Project in her wake

Because it seemed silly to spend so much time cultivating so many valuable voices without providing a venue to amplify them for others to partake of

Because a dedicated and compassionate ASU Honors student, Natalie Volin, devoted eons of time to help me envision and create this nonprofit journal

Because caring and talented ASU student interns kept the Pen Project alive for nine years and helped expand it to incarcerated writers and artists in Arizona until, separately and for undisclosed reasons, ASU Tempe and the Arizona Dept. of Corrections withdrew their support for this inspired and inspiring work a year prior to Covid

Because by then *Iron City* had sprouted wings, and writers and artists as far as Australia have submitted their work to the magazine

Because this work is life-changing, for those who submit their creations to *Iron City* and for the all-volunteer staff who bring the magazine together

Because Changemaker Central at ASU, a funding source for innovative student projects, funded our first two issues

Because The Ibis Foundation of Arizona supported us with seed grant money two years in a row

Because AZ Humanities has supported *Iron City* with generous grants for the last four issues

Because a friend of a friend hooked us up with Laura Pecenco, Founding Director of Project PAINT, an inside prison arts program in Southern California, and because Project PAINT has submitted a lion's share of art for our most recent four issues

Because, magically, we suddenly were communicating with Wendy Jason, Founding Director of the Justice Arts Coalition (JAC) in Maryland, who led us to another cadre of talented, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists working in various genres, represented in our most recent two issues

Because Ann Black and her colleagues at I-LEAD, a larger, more established

LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

nonprofit, in their generosity and vision will continue the magazine after the New Year (Because we at the helm now, through advancing age and retreating health, must limit our loads)

Because—*most important of all*—writers and artists behind bars continue to create against dismal odds, continue to shine and enlighten from the shadows of a relegated space in society, continue to inhabit their humanity

Thank you, *everyone*—contributors and volunteers both—for this gratifying opportunity to work with you! It was a heart-opening journey.

—Cornelia “Corri” Wells, Executive Director

LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Dear Readers,

The cover of this issue *God's Creation: The Human Race* by John W. Zenc is composed of huddled individuals in Picasso-esque shapes staring in unison through bright, patterned eyes. The artwork, to me, reflects the many volunteers who have come and gone but stayed a while, to contribute a part of their time and life to free and inspire expression into hands tied by consequence and misfortune. Currently and formerly incarcerated contributors have entrusted us for the past seven years with pieces of themselves engraved in ink, lead, graphite, and paint. Our editorial team is both honored and grateful for the chance to read and see such honest and vulnerable stories.

In my eyes, *Iron City Magazine* never failed to discover the resilient and unique minds that this world often shadows through labels and walls, seeing only a number instead of a human being. We at *Iron City* found humanity and grace in submissions that flooded in like hands, waving “I am here.”

For the past five years, I have not been able to look away from those waving hands. They have become part of who I am. Though I am moving on, I won't forget to wave back.

I, like the rest of the *Iron City* team, am passing down this magazine to another huddle caught by the sight of this magazine's spark. A new group of people who will continue to spread the stories of incarceration and hope. We are a community of storytellers and humanitarians, striving to listen and witness.

Nothing is without reason and nothing grows on its own. In everything lives a spark of hope.

I wish you all the best,
Jacqueline Aguilar, Managing Director

LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Grief and Gratitude

My therapist told me that one of the greatest tasks of being human is mastering the art of grief. She said: we are perpetual mourners in life. I sat stunned and thought, defiantly, I *refuse to cry again*. My face was already wet.

Our beliefs about death, change, endings, goodbyes, loss, sadness, and disappointment inform how we grieve. Some of us interact with grief as though we were watching a horror movie through splayed fingers and squinted eyes. Holding on to any semblance of control, some perception of protection. Some of us pretend the grief isn't there. And some of us are so used to its horror, we are desensitized to what has become mundane and matter-of-fact.

Collectively, we are grieving much in the world right now, and it seems as if just as we begin to catch our breath, another tidal wave comes. While I don't believe in silver linings, I do believe in meaning-making, connection, and transformation. I do believe that the world of art and creative writing allows us to tap into the most beautiful parts and the ugliest parts of our humanity. I believe that empathy will save us. And I believe that choosing to interact with our grief, with intention, is transformative.

I deeply respect not only all the contributors published in the pages of this issue, but also all the artists and writers who have ever taken the chance to submit and share their work with us. In my capacity with *Iron City* over the past seven years, I have felt honored and privileged to bear witness to the stories and creative expressions of those affected by incarceration. To those who are no strangers to grief and loss. To those willing to engage with all of their humanity and share it with others.

Having been part of the magazine since its birth, I am now saying goodbye as I step back from my role. I am eager to see how the magazine transforms, grows, and expands beyond its original vision. With any change—even timely goodbyes—comes loss. I mourn knowing that I have been part of something worth missing.

Thank you to all the contributors who have shared your meaning-making, your craft, and your feedback.

Thank you to all the volunteers who have brought this vision into reality.

Thank you to Corri and Nat for inviting me to join in this journey from the very beginning.

With gratitude,
Jess Fletcher, Operations Director

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Appeals to the Bowerbirds

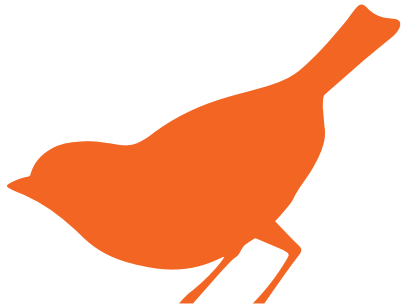
Charles Tooker, California

All of my friends are murderers, dear;
But I welcome all the drama and polish the veneer.
While Cain loved Abel, he was born to die;
With promises of heaven—fly, bowerbirds, fly.

Everybody wants to rule the world
With a borrowed crown and flags unfurled.
Stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea,
I lure a mermaid queen to take confession from me.

Never had an inkling I'd end up in Sing Sing,
Scratchin' these loose-leaves—what comfort they bring.
And nature moves on like I was never there:
At times touched by the wind, icy fingers through my hair.

While suffragettes cry and mourn each day,
Tears mixed with rain in April dry up come May.
Appeals to the bowerbirds, colored with song;
Welcome June and July, days passed and forever gone.





Razor Heart
Corri Elizabeth, Arizona
Photo



Human Dog
Tom Applegate, California
Acrylic on Canvas Paper, 2022
Project PAINT Artwork

Dark HAIBUN

Michael Lee Bankert



Dark Haibun

Michael Bankert, New Mexico

Forever

Michael Bankert, New Mexico

Life is good with a full bottle of wine and rags piled high to sit on. Isabel says that great pleasure is the same for all, though what gives it differs for everyone. Mary smiles toothless and agrees, says that living with her in the alley is their heaven. She stares into Isabel's withering face and wonders why she is getting so skinny, why she has a never-ending hangover, why she has no energy to panhandle anymore. Isabel's eyes grow vacant, and she says that a person is lucky if during the course of their life they can find one true friend.

A journey from birth
To death, made valuable
With friend, hand in hand.

The free clinic answers the why. There will be no expensive operation, so no cure. But there is a full bottle of painkillers given to ease Isabel's final days. Mary's diagnosis of a solitary homeless life after Isabel looms as a crushing emptiness, a wasting worse than what is terminating her best and only friend. Without discussion, Isabel takes half of the bottle of pills, surprising Mary, who considers briefly, then puts the other half in her mouth. They share a last bottle of wine. Mary clasps Isabel's hands, knowing eyes stare into the other's, no words need be spoken.

A person's lucky
If what happens after life is
With friend, hand in hand.

Vacancy

Michael Bankert, New Mexico

The front yard is barren of life; only dried weeds and dust are company for the dead willow tree. The scraggly wooden fence marks the borders, sections still standing sporadically, slats missing, white paint long since flaked away. The porch of weathered boards overlooks, and on it: a rocking chair with an ancient man. He gazes into the yard with eyes as vacant and empty as the yard itself.

The glass of ice tea
Sits forgotten near him
Warming for hours now.

Behind the watery eyes, he sees lush grass with children playing kickball—he is one of them, laughing. The lilacs with purple blooms and dark green leaves perch just inside the pristine, white picket fence. This he sees from seventy years ago, the memory clear with sharp detail, every nuance recalled.

The last few months, years
He does not remember happening,
Not one thing at all.



Tree #3

Ruben Radillo, California

Pencil on Paper, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

They Come

Mr. Kevin D. Lewis, California

They come happy and full of love.
 They come to see their favorite
 son, beloved uncle, brother, and father.
 They come with tales of missed
 cousins, nieces, and nephews,
 tales of inspiration and mirth.
 They come reluctantly relating financial woes.
 They come with smiles
 even though my being here makes them sad.
 But still they come.
 They come when they can.
 They don't come nearly as often as I'd like.
 They come with wigs and weaves
 and hastily pulled-back ponytails,
 wearing wireless bras and pants
 that don't fit or match their outfits
 because they belong to Friends Outside.
 But still they come.
 They come out of love, duty,
 and familial obligations.
 They come with crisp dollar bills
 and clear bags full of quarters.
 They come solo and in groups of threes,
 fours, and fives.
 They come wishing they could take me back,
 teary-eyed at having to leave me behind.
 They come in rented cars
 and on off-schedule buses.
 They come with children of absent fathers
 with relatives I've never met.
 But still they come.
 They continue coming,
 and for that I'll be forever grateful!



Liberacion

Juan Hernandez, Illinois

Watercolor, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

Dreams During Incarceration

Daniel Senior, Utah

After being arrested while in Jail:

I'm at a park, playing with family.
We're all very happy and well,
and everything's good until suddenly
I realize I'm not in my cell.

I know I'm in lots of trouble,
but don't even know why I'm out.
Police appear on the double,
I run an evasive little route.

I duck in a building that's trash.
Each door I attempt then to lock;
a gap remains between each door and its catch.
They don't shut. I awake, much in shock.

After a few months in jail:

I'm walking with children,
presumably my sons.
Hyperness rouses the little men,
inevitably they run.

Chasing them with all my might,
I fall behind these boys.
Soon they are out of my sight.
I don't even hear any noise.

Gone! They are gone; it is over:
I never see them again.

On receiving an orientation in prison:

A tunnel appears behind my bunk
that leads me to strange hallways,
to other cells that I spelunk,
by count returning always.

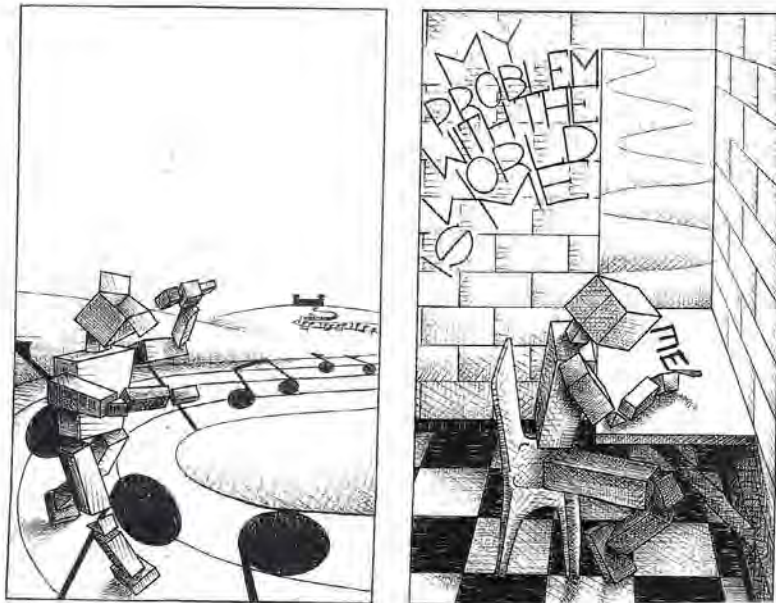
When first in general population, in an open-dorm, top deck:

From the roof, beyond the wire,
I've flown over the fence,
but things turn out dire
when more fences pop up.

I can't stay in the air,
and I see I'll never make it,
never make it...
They don't find out about my exit.

A few years away from society:

I look across the yard and see
a fast food restaurant instead of housing.
We buy by swiping our ID.
To have such food is rousing.

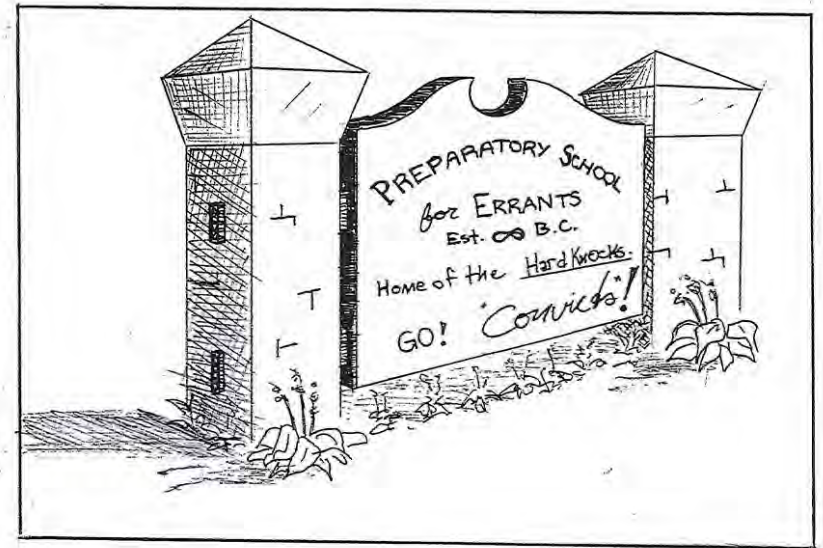


My Problem with the World is Me

Leo Cardez, Illinois

Ink, 2022

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



Home of Hard Knocks

Leo Cardez, Illinois

Ink, 2022

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork

Kippered

Ken Meyers, Florida

Twin laundry lines,
shoelace after shoelace knotted one to the next,
anchored, stretched from window bar to stout vent grate,
hung with rags torn
from worn boxes, from worn t-shirts, from worn thermals,
hung to dry like strips of salmon at creekside,
and for a moment perhaps they are,
the stale vent air and acrid fumes of desperation-smoked deuce
and cool breeze, creek spray, damp earth,
the last wisp of smoldering cedar
from the dying coals of my last campfire.



Driftwood

Brian Hindson, Texas

Acrylic

What We Know That They Do Not Know

Ken Meyers, Florida

What do they who see only what is to be seen
know of us,
we who grow low to the ground
our roots tenacious, burrowing,
deep-delving, seeking sustenance
and hard anchors too,
roothold wrapping, spreading, grasping the narrowest cleft,
clinging to what we are—
impervious to fire? of course not—
but resilient, resurgent.
Burn us to the ground.
We will feast on our ashes;
our roots wring life from dust.
Bloom again we will.



Here's My Hand, Here's My Heart

Steve Fegan, California

18' x 24', Acrylic on Canvas, 2021

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork

Hibiscus

Johnny L. Wooten, Texas

In a place so utterly dark
I find little rays of light.
Sometimes I feel I am in a park
that comes from my own plight.
I see God and cannot make a fuss
when I look on the Hibiscus.

I find little rays of light
when I look at flowers in this place.
It's such a beautiful sight,
brings a smile to my face.
Something so simple, something so wondrous,
there's something about the Hibiscus.

Sometimes I feel I am in a park
looking at wonderful flowers.
Around them the contrast, stark.
In them is majesty and power
so large, so bright, so voluminous,
nothing so grand as the Hibiscus.

It comes of my own life's plight
being in this place, set apart.
Each day I wake, each day I fight,
loving my God with all my heart.
There's nothing more sumptuous
than seeing the Hibiscus.

I see God and cannot cuss
for He has made everything you see:
arguing with Him is fatuous.
Because He created you and me,
when I question things, He's generous,
looking at me the way I see the Hibiscus.

When I look upon the Hibiscus
blooming, it takes away my pain.
I see something so helpless,
but God cares for it with sun and rain.
Wondrous, sumptuous, generous,
I see the Hibiscus.



Face of God

Steve Fegan, California

18' x 24', Acrylic on Canvas, 2022

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork

truthiness

Steven Henderson, Arizona

my son ambles across the grass
 plastic pail swings in his hand
 cornsilk hair escapes his ball cap
 tiny toddler tracks mark the damp lawn

he is a brave hunter of blackberries
 hidden amongst menacing thorns
 on vines arising in backyard woods

eager eyes scan dense leaves
 tiny fingers dance between barbs
 he captures his ripe prey
 raises it high in the morning sun
 pops the prize with triumph
 into his ravenous mouth

he retraces his steps
 t-shirt and overalls
 fingerpainted purple
 once-white cheeks
 a Pollock canvas
 splattered with pulp

he hands me his pail
 ten tiny berries
 sit lonely at the bucket's bottom
 small shoulders shrug
 elfin hands upturn
 soft seal-pup eyes
 gaze earnest at me
 "Daddy, that's all I could find"



A Cowboy & A Tomato (like they do...)

Jonathan Marvin, California

Watercolor on Paper, 2022

Project PAINT Artwork

cerebrovascular accident

Steven Henderson, Arizona

it wasn't an accident
 I didn't
 stub my toe
 spill my soda
 crash my car
 a clot cut the blood
 to my brain
 it was stranded and starved
 like a wild-eyed fish
 fighting for breath on a dock

now I lurch like a puppet
 with crossed-confused strings
 my left hand ragdolls at my side
 I smack into corners
 appearing from air
 tricky words fry the fuse
 in my short-circuited tongue

how do I fit
 in an unbroken world?
 if I live looking at loss
 I'll stay stuck

instead I'll look at what's left
 once my left side
 has skipped out on me
 I can still love and laugh
 see small gems I rushed past
 when I flew on two feet—
 cinnamon sparrows monsoons

I survived my own death
 view the world with new eyes

grasp each dawn as a gift
with my agile right hand

that's my stroke of brilliance

Bindle Bum Haikus

Jerome Berglund, Minnesota

further, its character becomes protean

lucidity in
a nightmare makes less startling
more interesting

if nothing else, Black
Maria's a difficult
wagon to stray from

not much stimuli
in holding cell, small arrow
points Mecca, pray there?

headed somewhere important and exciting

hovering near windows
watching folks drift past, picture
self alongside them

in secluded places

sermon following
my release is 'bout Jesus
going off to reflect



From Frustration
West Isle Virus, Texas



To Joy
West Isle Virus, Texas

Entering Moon

Demetrius Buckley, Michigan

When your father passed in April—no funeral
or ceremonial goodbyes.
As if a boxing match had ended
and the fighters who had challenged each other
were breathlessly receding into their respectable corners,
further and further with hands
still guarding face, the opponent
sitting or standing or swaying for a 6th round—

back when a wife prepared a table
and said her father was visiting, and
for you to get along with him,
which was an obstacle because he acted
like your old man, his slurring
and telling of war stories growing up
in the Black Bottom neighborhood, where
seeing a dead body was a rite of passage,
the humid motel of a trick
who preferred to smoke first.

You told her father everything you feared,
stood up without the uneasiness
of a backhand or a challenge to be taken
out of a world he so brought you into.
Her father laughed and jokingly waved you off,
did the opposite of heavy stumble.
She didn't see the hint
of resentment as you cleared the plates,
the kitchen light complementing
her perfect family in a frame, lined up
exactly on holidays and grandson events

—back when you tucked your son in
and thought of him as just being all hope,
a doctor or fireman who walked his son to school,
teachers approving the guff

and Vaseline on the child's face
to shine like a new penny

—back because he had a resemblance
glinting in his quiet gaze, not knowing
if the tainted gene would pass to him
and you brushed a quiet hand through
coarse hair, an unforgiven brush, as if
to reverse whatever had been done to him,
to be undone.

Back where light was the sun gleaming
on a belly big for twins, a father's hand
orbiting backwood mumbo jumbo,
after a father's plea and love for a mass of membrane,
before leaving for his second tour.



Self-Portrait

*J. Terence Schelble, Arizona
Pen and Ink on Paper, 2021*

Copasetic

J. Terence Schelble, Arizona

Beautiful wet weather. Big bright moon. Welcome the deep down in my bones lips tongue toes calm that I'm swimming in. Life's never been this easy. Odd.

2011

Loss Unrelated to Gain

J. Terence Schelble, Arizona

The kind of loss unrelated to gain. Greater than the loss of a zero sum game. The afterimage of something I wanted to see. Of translucent kneecaps and black skirts full of hips and promises and kisses and tears and gladness and the moon and the clouds and thumping hearts and squeezing hands and flashing teeth and staring eyes and pale legs beating the greasy night water. And regret so strong it buckles your knees and chokes you to sleep.

2011



Inevitable

Cedar Annenkovna, Colorado

Graphite Pencil, 2021

Baby Boys into Melvins
(An Ode to Baby Boy, the Movie)

Demetrius Buckley, Michigan

Momma always go for the Melvin type,
the broad-shoulder felon brother,
big scars across his chest like a rusty chain

and his eyes...

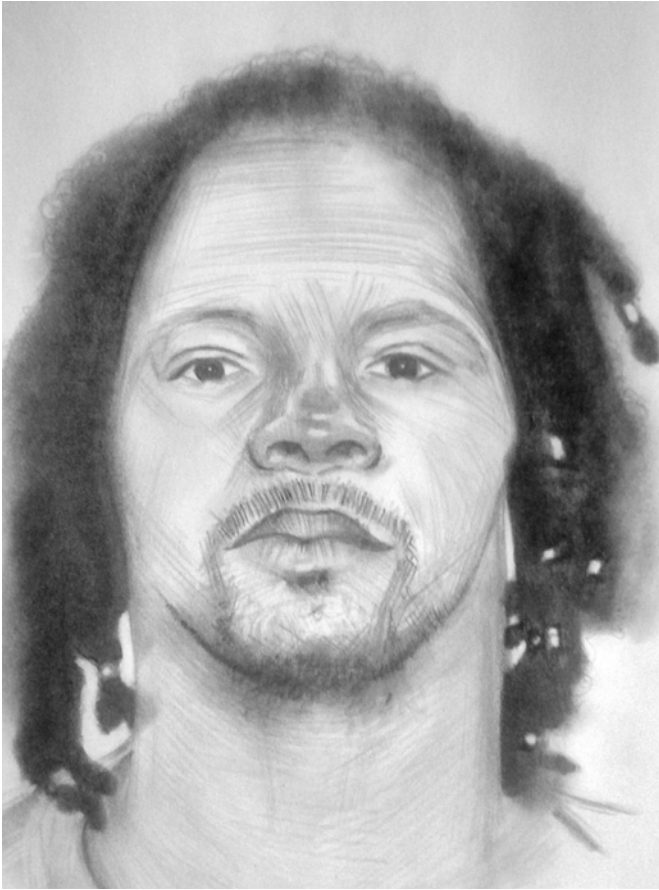
He's seen war-worthy trauma
done under brotherly oath,
so now, he leans with every step
as if whatever he lost
is forever calling him to change
from the inside.

With that, he looks down into the woman
known as Mom, her dress
a dazzle crimson
(the right amount to relapse) going
somewhere you'd have to know people to go,
them knowing the unforgettable terror
to where a simple nod
means "All Respect." Mom shuffles against
his knowingness like shadow or shank,
before leaving a third-tier prison unit or after chow
or a big yard or before sleep
because what he's seen must be there too.
And only fear arrives when losing someone
touches the consciousness
like a person does before excusing themselves
out of small encounters, when
needing a physical approach vocalized. Momma's

love-don't-live-here-no-more stride
is heaviness.

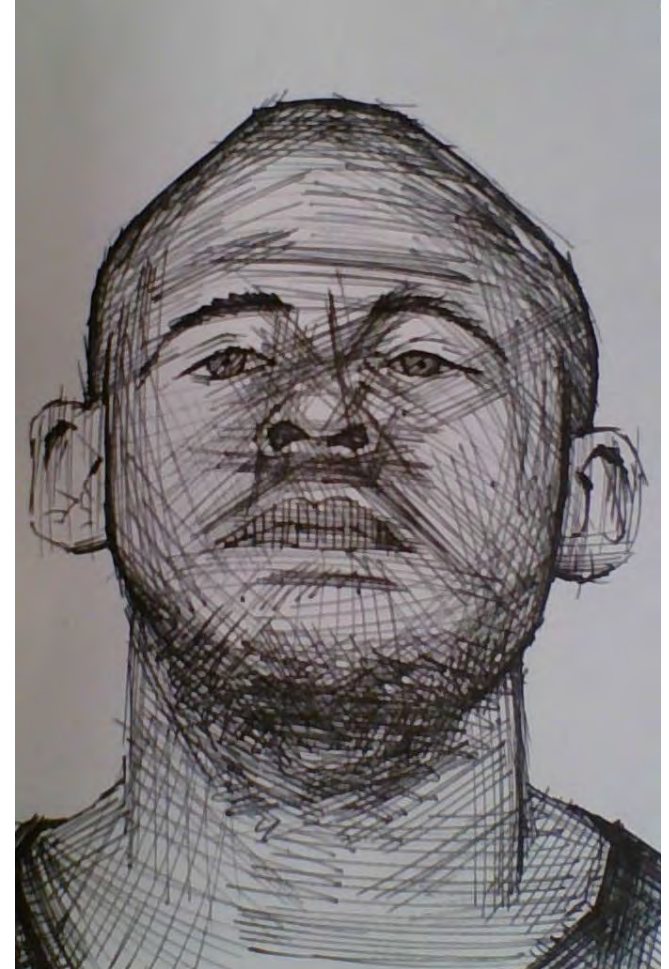
After trial and error, transgression with triumph,
those same calls that men careen to—now
you hear. You've been where Melvin's been,
fingered the onslaught of flesh and
grief, scarred, gone too far off,
which ends the wondering in wilderness,
and still going strong.

Momma can't look at you the same,
and Melvin is concerned for the unrecognizable
aura that's supposed to be destruction,
a relinquishing tyranny out the bloodline
prison couldn't change. He
don't talk that Gunz and Butter mess,
that dumb chump he used to be
because those eyes ain't of a broken man,
but of a monster being made.



Michael

*J. Terence Schelble, Arizona
Graphite on Paper, 2021*



Jacob

*J. Terence Schelble, Arizona
Pen and Ink on Paper, 2021*

At the Reentry Center

Rosemarie Dombrowski, Arizona

Week One

C walks me to the gate
after poetry class.
He asks me if I feel it, and I do.
He points and says,
*a girl hung herself in that bathroom,
another one on the chain-link fence.*
I want to wrap my arms
around their ghosts
and make it easy this time,
but there is no such.
I wouldn't be here if there was.

Week Three

T's funeral is Saturday.
AJ leaves for Navajo country
at 7am tomorrow, Greyhound or bust.
I can see the worry in his face.
He doesn't know what's next,
and that scares him.

I stay for five hours today.
I wrap my arms around AJ
then crawl home through traffic.

Time doesn't feel the same in there.

Week Five

I had to drive around a body
on the I-17 this morning.
His bike was at least
a hundred yards away,
and I could see the blood
pooling on the asphalt.
He was surrounded by a dozen people,
like a freeway prayer circle.

I'd never seen anything like it.

A few minutes later
I was walking toward the gate,
not knowing who would be alive inside.

Week Seven

They're lined up at the door,
nearly a dozen today.
I'll never remember their names.
It's impossible to start on time.
Someone steps on my mat
because there's no such thing as etiquette.
Sometimes, I forget that I have to
teach them things.
I forget to put up walls.
C says they can be far away,
but once they're crossed
they're crossed.

I hear what he's saying,
but I don't have an answer.

Week Nine

I read an excerpt from George Jackson's
prison letters:
*This camp brings out
the very best in brothers
or destroys them entirely.
But none are unaffected.
None who leave here are normal.*

The classroom has never been quieter.

We tour G's garden after class.
We stand in the sun
and talk about weed
while he waters the lettuce.

For a few minutes,
it feels like we're living
on another planet.

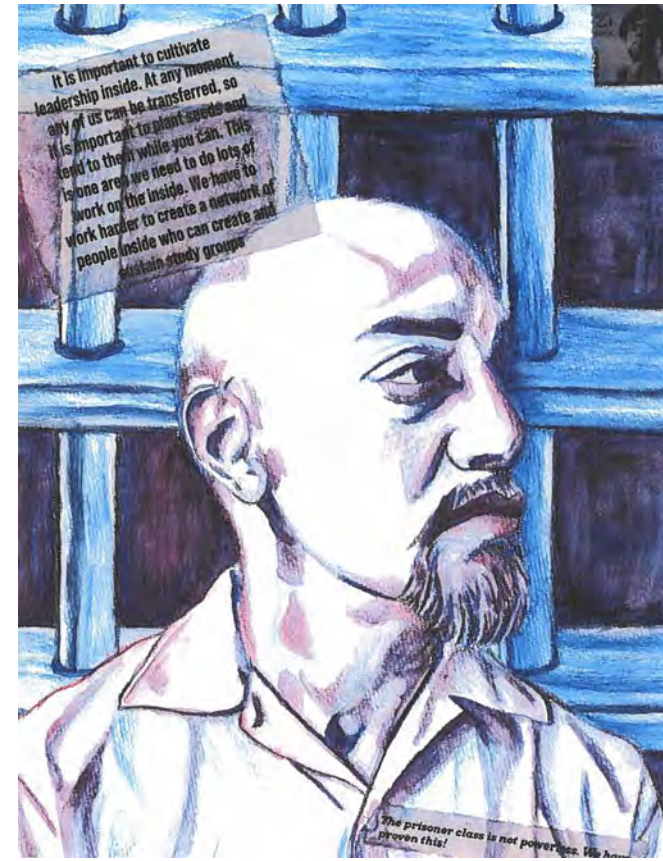
Week Eleven

There's no Pepto Bismol,
no toilet paper or paper towels.
No jobs and nothing to work on.
No one has taken their vitals
since they arrived.

SK's poem is long and filled with gunfire.
Only his dog, Rockstar, survives.
He speaks to the ghost of his father
in a Safeway parking lot.

We embrace him when he finishes,
try to take a sliver of his pain.

No matter what I do,
it never feels like enough.



Self-Portrait

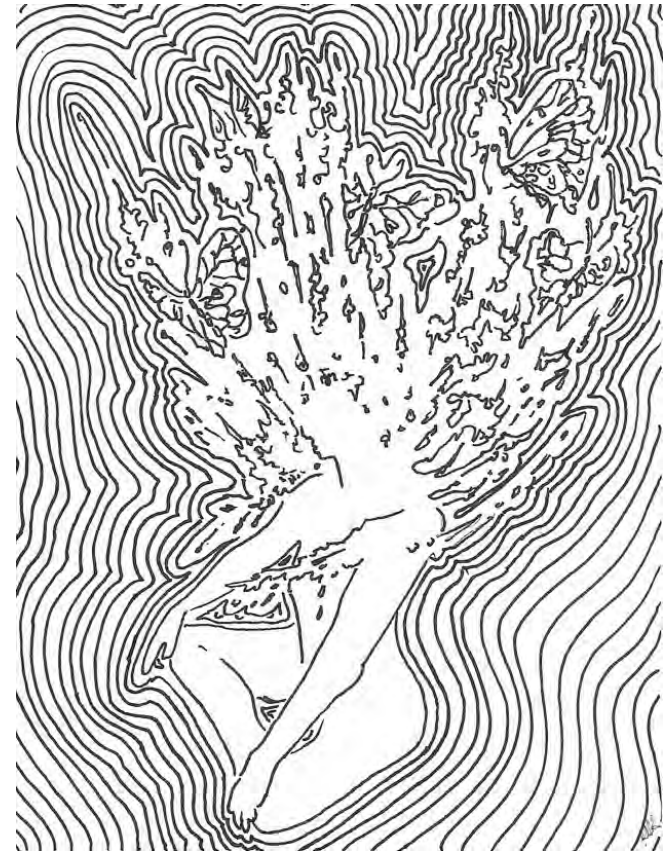
Juan Hernandez, Illinois

Watercolor, 2021

Hope

HL Tapia, Ohio

Sometimes there's a divide
between you and your higher self.
A step is taken
towards mending.
There will be many rocks
along the trail—
each a source of rest,
a new perspective.
Turning up stones is a source
of newfound hope—
a healing of old beliefs,
an awareness of new views.
Each step leads you forward.
Each look clears tears.
Each hand offers help,
a brighter future to be found,
a deeper connection—
true self achieved—
a journey, not a destination.



Butterfly Tesseract

Jonathan Marvin, California

Pen on Postcard, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

I Am Rain

Stewart Gonzales, Arizona

The wind brought chaos
from the Gulf Coast,
across the Sonoran Desert,
over flowering saguaros,
their arms raised to praise
Tlaloc for his Aztecan pledge.

The rain followed, falling
on our tin roof
like beans into a canister
my abuela kept in the cocina
next to the fridge.

The ground trembled.
Tlaloc's thunderous voice
spoke the words, "I Am Rain!"
and day darkened into night.
Lightning etched a name
for itself across the sky,
flashed its face
in the forming puddles.

Tlaloc, the forgotten god,
pledged to reinvent his deity
and baptize the descendants
of Aztlán every sultry summer
one torrential storm after another.

The road to Ruiz Canyon
flooded. We were stranded,
biding our time
while the rhythmic tapping
persisted on the tin roof.

When my abuela decided
enough was enough,

she sacrificed a sprinkling
of salt for Tlaloc;
a dash in the wind
for the god who promised
rainbows;
and a splash in the noisy
beans to season them
with a taste of rain—
then the chaos subsided.



Dragonfly Shadow Box

Jonathan Marvin, California

Mixed Media

(Real Found Butterfly, Glitter, Paper, Acrylic Paint, CDCR Documents), 2020

Project PAINT Artwork

Flight Plan

Stewart Gonzales, Arizona

Like Cool Hand Luke
I shook a bush
a time or two,
threaded an escape
route through the eye
of a needle.

Seven times seventy
days spent in solitary,
I sweated beads
into rosaries,
chanted penitent prayers
catechism taught.

To navigate unnoticed
beyond barbed wire,
I conjured dreams
of ladders,
tall steeply ladders,
to leap from, then rise
like Lazarus
from this grave.

One night I dreamt
I was Icarus,
devised a flight plan
at dusk.
My clever dream
ended in disaster
when I plummeted
head first from my bunk.

Others tried to cross over,
piloted by a flame
of hope,
into the district

of dreamers, innovators,
flanking the fence
on stilts.

Some stacked themselves
ten men high,
shoulder upon shoulder,
a wavering totem pole
prowling ever so close
to emancipation.

While in the hushed
hours of night,
renegades,
exhausted with dreams
of Icarus, ladders,
stilts, retire
in the dim light
of their respective cells,

anxious to return
to their dog-eared
portals, hidden
inside pages
of publications
that catapult
them anywhere
they wish to go.

Overture to Virah in Z Major

P.M. Dunne, New York

*Once you have tasted flight,
you will walk the earth
with your eyes turned skyward;
for there you have been,
& there you long to return.*
—Leonardo Da Vinci

Every story lies under a page
turning to dust.
I know it's hard to believe,
but it's true. One day,
my dear, when decades flicker
across your eyes,
your shadow will shed—free
of its moonlight,

& then we'll truly be naked,
like lovers in Braj—
the dewy fields beneath us
writhing with bliss.
Forgive me for forgetting
which season I am—was.
Most nights, while staring
between branches

at the great expanse of darkness
above, I lie to myself
knowing I'll never see you again.
I twitter among leaves,
letting the wind carry each note
into tomorrow. Nobody
ever stops to listen. As I ascend
in a moment—one heaven

has been so good
to grant the veins of gravity
working to keep you

grounded in its undertow.
 Today I dreamt of
 drowning with you in an ocean
 of stars, like a sari.

I was human again; you were still

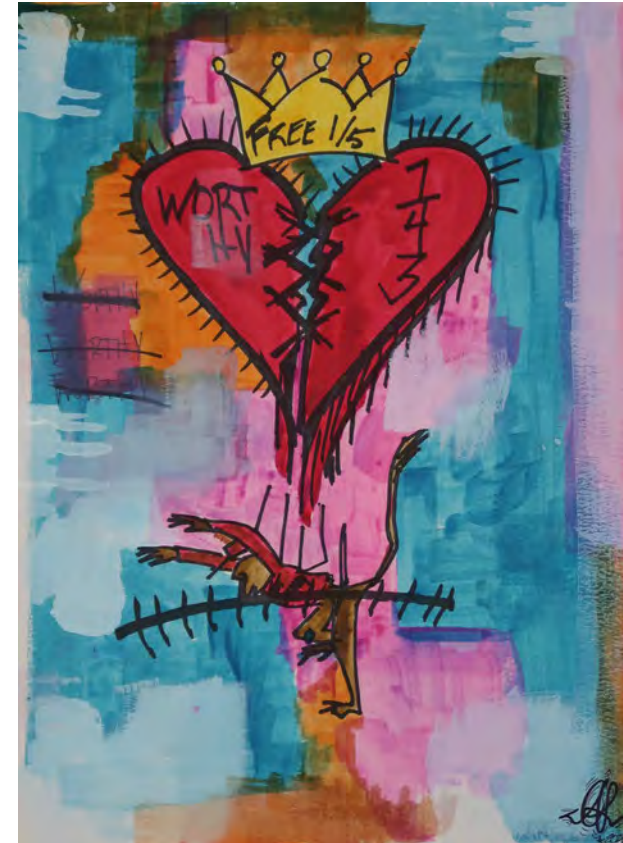
a goddess. You placed a feather
 in my hair, twisting it just so:
 “Our hearts found
 their rhythm long before
 our bodies knew.”

I may have heard this in
 another life, perhaps
 read it in a book. I can't recall

much except waking
 to find the wind enveloping me—
 a full moon, a school of
 clouds, a rug of evergreens,
 & a barbed wire fence.

I wish you could've been there,
 nesting with me
 in a spire or perching on

a windowsill. You would've seen
 things for what they are.
 But then again, my dear, it's not
 too late, it's never too late
 for a change of perspective. Even
 now, as I bleed myself of
 this nocturnal cadence, I feel it
 is not my song, but ours.



Basquiat-Inspired Project

Jonathan Marvin, California

Watercolor on Paper, 2022

Project PAINT Artwork

Ace and Bam

Mr. Kevin D. Lewis, California

“Bam, you know you can’t support him in this, right?”

“Yes, I can. That’s my homie, Pops. I’ve known him since junior high school. Way longer than I’ve known you,” came the knife-cutting reply.

Ace was silent, contemplating what to say next and how best to prevent his only son from going down such a terrible path. He looked at his watch. Less than an hour until yard release. So little time, so much at stake.

The father and son had been cell mates for a year and a half on the level-four maximum-security prison yard. During this time, Ace, just a few months shy of forty and down for fifteen years, tried his best to protect and school the twenty-year-old Bam, who was less than four years in. He was feeling his way around prison while groping his way into manhood.

“But, Bam,” Ace resumed after a few minutes of tense silence. “You know how this shit go! You read paperwork yourself. Right is right, and wrong is wrong. All the other Damus have decided he had to go. There’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

“Maybe not, but I can stand by his side and ride with him,” came Bam’s defiant response.

“What about me? What am I supposed to do? Just sit by and watch you get stabbed, maybe even killed. I’m not doing that. You’re my son. If you go, I go, and if I go, the whole Bay Area goes. So what? We gonna have a big ass Damu-Boy riot over a proven snitch?” Ace continued to reason.

“Cut it out, Pops. Yeah, you’re my dad, but we ain’t even known each other for a full two years. Before that, you didn’t even know I existed,” said Bam, lashing out.

“Does that mean I’m supposed to love you less? Or not care what happens to you? How can you even say some shit like that to me? You know damn well that wasn’t my fault. It was your mama’s decision to move to Sacramento without even telling me she was pregnant, not mine!” came Ace’s heated reply as he stared unwaveringly into eyes that so much resembled his own.

Tension and silence again engulfed the tiny cage as both men weighed their options. As the seconds turned to minutes, Ace recalled

the day he first met his son. He had introduced himself as Lil Bam, Bam from Sac. Being new to the yard, he continued to fill Ace in on how he had been in prison since he was fifteen and had come straight from the California Youth Authority. As they did their dips and pullups, the two men shared the prison versions of their bios. After learning Ace was from West Oakland, Bam shared how he had family from the West and began to inquire whether Ace knew a woman named Peaches. Ace responded with a few questions of his own, to be sure, before admitting to not only knowing but messing with her back in the day.

To Ace’s surprise, Bam chimed in, “That’s my mom.”

“For real? That’s crazy. It really is a small world,” came Ace’s response. “How is she?”

Then things began to get surreal. Bam informed him that Peaches was dead, having hung herself in her prison cell less than a year prior. Ace probed further, learning Peaches had received life for a gas station robbery. She was simply a passenger, but it turned into a double murder during the getaway when her male friend killed a police officer. The friend was, in turn, killed by the police. Having heard a thousand tall tales like this since coming to prison, a skeptical Ace offered condolences but silently wondered how much of what he just heard was true. By this time, the yard was over, and the two men, housed in different blocks, went their separate ways.

Back in the present, Ace, in a softer but still serious tone, reopened their conversation.

“Look, Bam, this is not up for debate. Before T allows you to wreck forty or fifty men, I’ll take you down myself.”

Closing the short distance between them to look his seed in the eyes again, he continued, “I need your word before we leave this cell that you’re not getting in that shit.”

With the threat hanging heavy in the air, father and son retreated to their thoughts, fully aware of what the next words uttered could cause.

During their second yard together, Bam had brought pictures of Peaches and a newspaper clipping on her arrest and eventual conviction. Ace was shocked. Bam’s tall tale was true. As they again worked out, they learned even more about the other. Before long, the gun tower announced that yard time was ending. After a few pounds and one-armed hugs, Bam pulled a small envelope from seemingly

nowhere.

Handing it to Ace, he awkwardly said, “Check that out when you get back to your cage.”

Reluctantly accepting the envelope, Ace asked, “What is it?”

With the envelope successfully passed, Bam had begun walking away, so his response was over the shoulder.

“Just read it for me,” he said, cryptically adding without stopping or turning around. “I don’t want anything from you.”

As intrigued as Ace was, he saved opening the envelope until after chow. Doing so, he noted the name in the upper left-hand corner, written in what appeared to be the cute, delicate cursive of a woman. A big red “prison mail” stamp marked the envelope. Even before he opened and unfolded the two-page letter, he knew it was from Peaches to Bam.

Sitting on his bunk, Ace read how much Peaches loved and missed her son. Even though she didn’t say it, the letter had the eerie feel of final goodbye. Peaches implored Bam to stay strong and take care of his sister. She apologized for not telling Bam more about his dad, and added that she had never told his father about him either. She went on, to Ace’s confusion, to include Ace’s full government name and the nickname that most people in the West knew him by: “Ace in the Hole.”

Stunned, open-mouthed, Ace read Peaches’ description of him and her reason for telling Bam about Ace now, in case the two happened to meet during the nineteen-year sentence Bam had just started. By the end of the letter, tears flowed freely down Ace’s cheeks.

Ace emerged from his reverie. Seeing his long-lost son move about the tiny cage, Ace wondered if he could do what was necessary and if Bam would force him to find out.

“Attention in the unit. Yard has been canceled for the day,” they heard the tower announce over the PA system.

Both Ace and Bam breathed a silent sigh of relief. Their conflict had been averted, at least for now.



Prymachenko

*Gwen Randal, California
Acrylic on Canvas Paper, 2022*

Project PAINT Artwork

The Visit

P.M. Dunne, New York

On their third conjugal visit, while sleeping, Hugh struck his wife, Cole, startling them both awake. They were in a dark, quiet trailer on prison grounds surrounded by cinderblock and razor wire. Their hearts were thumping in their chests.

“I’m sorry,” he cried as she leaped out of bed and slammed the bathroom door, “I thought I was in the yard. I thought I was getting stabbed. I thought I was—”

He paused to catch his breath. Had he always felt the need to justify his actions after apologizing for them? He wasn’t sure. The past was as much a blur as the future. He rested his forehead on the molding. Eyes closed, he waited for his breathing to return to normal, and the faucet to squeal shut. When it finally did, he knocked, apologized again, and pleaded with her to come out. Then he waited, but she didn’t respond.

The door was locked.

Behind the door, leftover droplets plinked in the drain. In spite of himself, he pictured her bent over a blood-speckled sink with violet crescents under her eyes, sunburnt tresses matted to porcelain.

“Babe,” he called, “babe, you okay? Talk to me. Please, say something.”

He opened and closed his hand; his knuckles burned, throbbing beneath a decade of calloused hide. For her sake, and his own, he prayed she looked the same as she had earlier, pretty and unbruised. A black eye or a busted lip would certainly complicate, if not destroy, their relationship. The officers would never believe he’d struck her in the throes of a nightmare. Even if they did, they’d still treat the situation as an excuse to make his life miserable. They’d still send him to the box, charge him with domestic abuse, and suspend his visiting privileges for years.

He placed his back to the wall and slid into a seated position on the frayed carpet. His right hand sat at his side like a smoking pistol. A blanket and bedsheet wreathed the foot of the bed. The nightstand stood askew with an alarm clock dangling over its edge, red digits highlighting nothing. The trailer, he thought, was slowly caving in under the pressure of uncertainty, like a cardboard box left out in the rain. Technically, it was a box. But there was no rain. Rain is an insufficient symbol of tragedy. Tragedy comes with age, and reality.

And in reality, adults have greater responsibilities than staying dry, and greater consequences than getting soaked. They don’t traffic in signs and allusions. Only kids, artists, and prisoners do that.

Half humans.

As a writer and felon, Hugh knew a lot about tragedy but little about adulthood. That much, if nothing else, was clear. He cursed himself for not listening to Cole. He’d refused to take the melatonin-infused candies she’d smuggled in, mixed with a bag of gummy bears, to help him sleep. He’d wanted to prove that he was “normal,” that he wasn’t “institutionalized,” but it seemed there was little evidence to support the claim. He was, as they say, a “hot mess.” And if he had any doubts, any smoke clouds of uncertainty lingering in his mind, then history could easily satisfy that ambivalence. The first and second visit, much like the third, had its fair share of domestic blunders, too. He’d brought along commissary items, worn state clothes, and jumped when the phone rang at count. He scoured the bedroom, bathroom, living room, and kitchen for contraband. He wolfed down meals, worked out during commercials, and wore underwear and flip-flops in the shower.

He felt lucky, blessed, to have her in his life.

They met three years ago on a dating site aptly—inaptly—named Love Beyond Walls. They started out slow, exchanging photos and letters, until Cole grew interested enough to send Hugh packages of food, books, and magazines. He returned the favor with gifts from Bath & Body Works and Edible Arrangements. After that, she gave him her number and told him to call. “And if you don’t,” she wrote, “I’ll come to the prison and teach you a lesson, Mister.”

Fortunately for him, he avoided her wrath. They spoke every Friday for a year. In time, their conversations turned from flirty to romantic. Later, they met in person and shared their first kiss. They made out whenever the visiting room officer got distracted, like teenagers at summer camp. They married two months later and joined the ever-shrinking list of couples in the Family Reunion Program, which was, according to Hugh, an institutional reinvention of the term “conjugal visit.” They waited. Nine months passed before the counselor scheduled a date for their first conjugal visit, what they cheekily referred to as their “jailhouse honeymoon.”

“Life’s so beautiful and twisted,” Cole said as they lay in bed that night staring at the ceiling, bedsheets cool against their naked flesh. “It’s like a dream, a big dream, with you, me, and everybody else going

about our business. Losing and finding ourselves, others, and searching for a higher purpose.” She paused; afraid he’d misinterpret what she’d said. “What am I saying? I don’t understand life. I don’t understand anything, really. I just know I’m here with you, and everything’s perfect.”

Hugh, endeared by the sentiment, rolled onto his side, admired her profile, and licked the goose-bumped skin on her shoulder blade. It was salty and warm. She turned and smiled and kissed him. Hard. Long. Soft. A summer breeze caressed the curtains beside them. They closed their eyes, breath mingling with the air. Nothing’s perfect, he thought, but this is pretty damn close.

The following morning, while Cole made breakfast, Hugh sat in the living room watching the news. A man he’d done time with was on the run after bludgeoning his child’s mother and her boyfriend, then setting the house to flames, a smoky heap of cement, metal, and wires in its wake. Cameras zoomed in. The place resembled the jagged mouth of a moonlit cave.

The screen flashed, back to a mug shot. Hugh couldn’t help thinking it somehow resembled his own. What was it, the eyes?

“He’d been released from prison less than a month before committing these grisly murders,” the reporter said, with a stern expression, as sirens wailed in the background. “Authorities are tracking his whereabouts and ask that anyone with information about last night, please dial the number below. Also, they say if you encounter the suspect, call nine-one-one. However, keep your distance, as he is most likely armed and dangerous.” She paused, pressed two fingers to her ear, and nodded. “Okay. I’ve just received news that we’ll be hearing from—”

“Babe,” Cole called from the kitchen, “how do you want your eggs?” She repeated herself, but Hugh didn’t hear a thing as he recalled a conversation that he and the man had a few days prior to his release. He couldn’t remember the particulars, though they’d agreed on one thing for sure: a realistic reentry plan and strong support system were the keys to a successful transition. It occurred to Hugh that he’d been duped by a man who’d duped himself into thinking himself cured.

A pair of arms wrapped around him. He tensed, cocked an elbow, until remembering where he was, then eased into the embrace. “You okay, Babe?” she asked. He stroked her arm. “Yeah,” he said, unable to look away from the TV. “I’m fine.” After breakfast, they showered, made

love, walked outside, talked about their future, returned to the trailer, had lunch, watched movies, talked some more, and made love again. But that evening, after last count, she found him sitting on the edge of the tub with his face buried in his hands. He’d staggered out of the bedroom and into the narrow hallway leading to the bathroom, bracing himself against the wall. It was as if he were walking in the dark. Blind. Lost. Scared. She didn’t know what else to do, so she draped a cold washcloth on his neck and rubbed his back. In spite of herself, she felt offended that he’d run away from her instead of seeking her comfort.

Didn’t he trust her? What did he have to be ashamed of or to hide? Wasn’t she his wife?

“I’m here, Babe,” she said, kneeling beside him. “Should I call for help?”

“I’m sorry,” he gasped. “I’m sorry. It’ll pass. Just give me a minute.” He’d had anxiety attacks before. More than he could count. That one, however, had been especially severe. Like razor wire yanked between two cinder blocks.

Neither knew what was wrong with him. Perhaps it was caused by the thought of returning to hell after two days of paradise? Somewhere, maybe deep behind his ribcage, he knew his cell was waiting for him, like a dream catcher with a million nightmares quivering inside its web. Everything passes, he told himself. Nothing lasts forever.

“Time doesn’t discriminate; it buries pleasure and pain in the same plot, like old lovers.” He’d once written something like that in a short story. He’d no idea what it meant at the time, but in that moment, as she guided him back to bed, he did. He understood.

“Beautiful and twisted.”

Eventually, the door creaked open. Cole, however, did not appear in the doorway. Hugh interpreted this as an invitation, one for which he was grateful yet terrified. “I’m so sorry,” he said, his eyes assessing the damage. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” She looked down. He repeated himself. “It’s okay,” she sighed. “I’m okay. We’re okay. Everything’s fine.”

He wasn’t convinced. He brushed a ribbon of hair from her brow and examined her face in the light. Except for a small welt at her temple, it seemed she would come out of the ordeal unscathed.

They agreed it could’ve been worse. Much worse. “Nothing a little cover-up and a pair of shades can’t handle,” she said, studying his hand

in the light. The redness had subsided. She gave it a slight squeeze.

“Jeez,” he said, wincing. “You sound like a character in a Lifetime movie.”

“Sometimes I feel like I am.”

Equally confused, they stared at each other without saying a word. “Is that good or bad?”

She chewed her lip, shook her head. He smirked.

They held each other in the doorway, unsure of what to say or do. They had a few hours left. They didn’t want to waste a single minute sleeping. Sleep, after all, is for those who neglect the present. And the present, the center of wakefulness, is for those who empty themselves of everything (except others). So they, Hugh and Cole, ate a light breakfast, showered, cleaned the tub, and fixed the nightstand and alarm clock. They stripped the mattress, folded the linen, vacuumed the carpet, cleaned the living room, and parted the drapes into a triptych.

The sky was still dark though the sun was rising. Though they couldn’t see it, they could tell it was out there, far away, pooling at the horizon. It was long before the sun would turn the wall’s razor wire crown from rust to gold, then back to rust. Birds were singing in the trees beyond the prison. After ascending, the sun would jostle some clouds, hide behind others, and share the sky with its counterpart, the moon. Until that day, that moment, the window had been a necessary feature of their morning routine, a sublime escape. But now, a new ritual was forming, an unspoken, effortless collaboration between husband and wife. They sat on the couch with bags at their feet, their legs touching, holding hands. They wondered how they’d survive a goddamn decade apart, while waiting for the phone to ring and their visit, like all things on earth, to reach its end.



The Couple

John W. Zenc, California

2020

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



Ukralien

*Travis Carter, California
Acrylic on Canvas Paper, 2022
Project PAINT Artwork*

Ukraine's Manicured Irony

Robert Pariah Cooper, Texas

The antique alarm clock sat on my mahogany dresser, and by its sudden ancient sound, I awoke, relaxed.

I saw from the pillow that the sky was blue and pretty and the sun was bright. After a few minutes of taking in my morning fortunes, I rose from my bed and slowly made my way through the narrow hallway.

Near the living room entrance, I noticed the cat, the one belonging to my ex. She had promised to retrieve it but never did. I considered the cat my own now.

As I sat on the couch, the cat leaped up and took its place in my lap. It purred and stared at the television while I fumbled in the cushion for the remote. I began flipping through channels, barely interested in anything. I reluctantly settled on the news, surprisingly Fox.

The volume was low, my coffee black. I took a sip from my checkered cup and focused on the reporter with the foreign accent and small lips. Her tone seemed a cautious climax: Ukraine was being attacked by the Russians. Although the scenes of the Russian invasion appeared disturbing enough, I felt emotionally disconnected from the Ukrainians' situation since there are no black people in Kyiv.

At the very end of that thought, images appeared on the screen of Africans waiting at the railway station in Lviv trying to flee. I shouldn't be surprised. The racism in Ukraine ain't no different from the racism on our shores—bleeding inland and placing burdens on our shoulders.

So what, the Russians are coming and taking their land?

American Indians are psychologically bombed because they cannot go back to theirs. Indifferent, I sit with my thoughts. I recall when Rwandans were being slaughtered: NATO didn't give a damn.

Ukraine, Ukraine, I am ashamed that I'm not pained those bombs are raining.

I guess I'm numb to war: in the Tulsa Massacre, not even one angel came.

And in my lap napping is the cat, as black as me and abandoned. Seemingly, we're perfect strangers. We're going to be alright, I thought, as I caressed him. For now, we are not stranded at the border or getting bombed like the poor Ukrainians. War is such an awful scene.

But there is no nation of people whose situation is perfect.

And with that attitude, I embrace the ironic angles of my pen, along with the poetic cluster of satisfaction that engulfs me.

Whenever the ink runs and smears the paper, it makes room for my imperfections. It gives way to the pros and cons of incorrectness, showing that everything in life is not simply wrong or right!

Some things are an abstract black, like me and the cat, and others a daunting white.

My First Gray Hair

Ward Allan Yont, Arizona

Do I remember my first gray hair? Damn right I do. In fact, I'll never forget it.

It was late autumn, 1977. I was twelve years old, soon to be thirteen. Being a neighborhood paperboy for nearly two years, I incorporated the principles and ethics of enterprise at a young age. I was punctual and efficient. I could land a single-insert Wednesday edition onto a doormat from the sidewalk on my loaded-down Schwinn bicycle, without slowing down. I wasn't just good; I was the best. Though the part-time job had its share of duties and responsibilities, I never thought it would lead to even a single gray hair—but it did.

One Sunday morning, heavy rains had befallen my early morning plight. I had sustained harsh weather before, but this day was different. The ominous clouds indicated winter's arrival, and the double-inserts of the Sunday paper compounded my foreboding as I dressed. My father, alerted to my distressed preparedness, decided to help me deliver the papers that morning in our pickup truck. With much relief, but not much surprise, we covered the entire route in record time. My reputation for efficiency went unblemished, thanks to my father.

Our combined efforts had spawned not only my appreciation for what he had done, but also a father-son moment that drew us closer that morning. Declaring it, "The Men's Day," he and I decided to go out for breakfast. There was a Luby's Cafeteria nearby, and the portions they served seemed befitting of the appetites we had mustered. As we breached the entrance, the air was thick with the smell of hearty bacon and freshly grilled pancakes. We approached the serving counter with hungry eyes and took turns calling out our servings as we made our way down the gamut.

By the halfway point, my plate was full, but I continued to ogle everything in sight. From French toast to fruit cups, Belgian waffles to Bavarian cremes, I demanded new layers of food. Near the end of the line, one of the last stainless-steel pans displayed eggs Florentine. Behind the pan was an elderly lady, perhaps in her late sixties. She wore a wholesome smile and a nametag that said, "Ester" on it. Feeling sociable and folksy, I charmed, "What does 'Florentine' mean, Ester?"

To which she replied, "It means 'spinach.' You should try some, young man. It's good for you." I agreed and asked her to fit a serving

onto my plate.

Though the dining area was crowded, my father and I still found a table. We sat down and I began putting butter on what needed butter, and syrup on what needed syrup. I stationed my tall glass of milk near my plate where it could be easily accessed, and I began to dig into the heap of food. I ate ravenously and the mound of grub diminished quickly. I saved the eggs Florentine for close to last.

My curiosity eventually found a palate for the unventured ovular cuisine. I took a modestly-portioned bite, then savored the taste. The combination of spinach and egg made a surprising flavor. However, the experience was instantly sidetracked when I felt a suspicious strand of fiber thread itself between my teeth. I stopped chewing and reached between my lips to pinch and pull the strand from my mouth. It was a hair. A gray hair.

I deduced in an instant that Ester must've played an unwitting role in my discovery. The gray hair was about three inches long and curled almost completely around, from follicle to tip; much like Ester's hair. It was washed and well kept, I could tell, as I wiped it with a napkin. It was my first gray hair. I asked my father if I could keep it, but he insisted that I was too young to have gray hair. I argued that I was going to be thirteen soon and that it surely wouldn't be missed by its owner. I vowed to take care of it and feed it, and with that he conceded.

Everywhere I went, I carried that hair in my left front pocket. I brought it to school and I became the envy of every teenage boy who wanted a gray hair. It's true that gray hair makes you smarter and wiser. I began acing all my classes and I was soon reading at a Doctorate level, thanks to the tutelage of that gray hair. I'd often put the hair on my head and wear it around for hours.

Although it's the wish of every teacher to be outgrown by their students, I never did outgrow my affection for that gray hair. Not only was it an inspiring mentor, but it also became my best friend and close companion. Nothing could've separated me from that gray hair. Nothing.

I quickly learned that having gray hair was a rite of passage into a ranking of society that prides itself on tradition and values. It's a cultural expression that exhibits an echelon of mastery in life, beneath all the superficial layers. Every year, late autumn, I'd choose a Sunday to pay homage to this creed by dressing up as a sixty-eight-year-old lady that serves eggs Florentine in a publicly-franchised cafeteria.

By age seventeen, I'd become a full-blown activist for gray hair, leading a neo-Baby Boomer movement against the suppressive rules of the beauty and healthcare industry. For too long they had sought ways of tinting and "blotting out" my kin with their fancy dyes and tainted treatments. We weren't about to stand by and watch that happen.

The crusade took on the fervor of hate crimes whereby we'd stealthily sabotage their dye formulas. I used my silver-haired prowess to gain access into hair treatment labs and clinics to exact the retributions. Using an oxidizing agent, we were able to neutralize most of their patented active ingredients, quelling the discoloration process of their treatments. Through our impassioned efforts, we made gray hair fashionable again. But we became despised because of it.

There were still some who couldn't accept the nobility of our cause. My skin burned with fear from every evil glare that forced its way into our awareness. I no longer felt safe in public, and my feelings rarely deceived me.

One unsuspecting afternoon, I had sauntered through an empty parking lot outside a shopping mall, gray hair on head. The cracking speed of a bullet slapped the ground beside me; then came the discharge of a rifle in the distance. I looked up to see only a faint silhouette of a fleeing gunman on the roof. The bullet had missed me by a hair. A single gray hair.

What my eyes beheld as I looked down is difficult to talk about, even to this day. I was horrified at the sight before me. My gray hair had been shot dead. There were keratin and stubble grossly strewn about the parking lot. The follicle had been severed and lay beyond recognition. Both ends were now split. I was devastated.

I slogged around for weeks before realizing it was my teenaged fanaticism that had caused the dissolution of my happiness and my friend's demise. I realized that my father was right. I was too young to have gray hair. I cursed my age. My only hope for reconciling any pieces of my life was to turn myself in for the "hate" crimes I had engaged in. And that's what I did.

My hearing was held before a female judge who, not surprisingly, was an elderly lady with gray hair. It was well known throughout the courtroom that she was a proponent of hair products and a staunch sympathizer to the state's case against me. It was only when she spoke to me in her condescending voice that I noticed her gray hair exuding a luminescent hue of blue. It was this observation that took on a most

unfortunate meaning as the prosecutor laid out his case against me.

He painfully noted that the oxidizer I used in the dye solutions had a molecular half-life quality that diminished with time. Users of the product not only experienced the dissatisfaction from purchasing an impotent dye, but also awoke one morning, not long afterward, to a head of luminescent blue. With his tirade accentuated by the judge's blue hair, my fate seemed certain.

As I stood to receive my sentence, I was scorned. Had I worn more than a single gray hair on top of my head, I would've been tried as an adult. I was given a choice of punishment: three years of probation or an enlisted term in the Marine Corps. I found it too convenient that the Marines don't recruit people with gray hair, as I no longer had any.

Do I remember my first gray hair? Damn right I do. Best damn friend I ever had.



Self-Flagellation

Travis Carter, California

Marker, Watercolor, and Ink on Paper, 2022

Project PAINT Artwork

Chronicles of Robert Mikal: Coincidence or Not

N. Blalock, California

The rain fell hard. Potholes filled creating the illusion of not being there. An illusion dispelled as I ran over one after another. Had my windshield wipers been replaced last winter, perhaps I could have seen them in time. But who wants to spend fifty dollars on windshield wipers for a '69 Pontiac? I'm doing good just keeping gas in the tank. The way I see it, as long as it's running, and the tires and brakes are good, I'm good. Besides the radio or heat not working, this is a good car—a classic. It was in this car that I met him, on a night just like this one. I'll never forget it.

Blinded by heavy rain and shoddy wipers, I stuck my head out the window. Don't ask why. It just seemed like a good idea at the time. Anyway, I saw this guy standing on the side of the road. I'm thinking, what's this guy doing out here, especially in this weather? He wasn't wearing a raincoat, just a long sleeve Pendleton shirt. He was soaked. He probably wanted a ride, and I wanted company, so I pulled over. As he walked toward the car, he looked familiar. By the time he opened the car door and the dome light came on, he looked like a tanned, dark-haired lumberjack. I chalked it up as fatigue and bad lighting. He started to close the door, then stopped. He stared down the road as if waiting on something or someone.

"Hey man, you want a ride or not?" I asked, a little nervous. He slowly pointed to a large deer as it crossed the road vanishing on the other side.

"You would've hit it, or worse," he calmly stated.

He was right. He would've closed the door, I would've pulled off, and the deer would've darted into the road, resulting in an accident.

"Where to?" I asked as he slammed my door. Before he could answer, my broken headlight, which had been broken for almost a year, flickered to life.

"Must be a short," he said.

"Yeah, a short." I pulled onto the road. "So, where you heading?"

"As far as you'll allow me to ride."

As a reporter, I found that to be a strange answer. "What's your name?"

"You may call me Nic, and you are?"

Before I could answer, he was raising his hand.

"Let me guess," he said. "Peter...John...Mark...Paul...no, I got it, Robert! Your friends call you Bobby. Am I right?"

"Yeah, how did you know?" I asked glancing around to make sure nothing with my name was visible.

"You feel like a Bobby," he answered with a certain flatness.

Feel like. How does a person feel another person's name?

"You from California?"

"No, I'm not," he answered, touching the passenger's side dash. "You?"

"I was born in Michigan. My family moved out here when I was like eight or nine." "Nine."

"It was nine. How'd you—? Anyway, I've lived here since."

Wait, I'm the reporter. I'm supposed to be asking him questions, finding out about him.

"So, Nic... What are you doing on the side of the road in the middle of a rainstorm?"

He looked at me. His face was slightly unshaven, eyes light brown and full of sorrow. A deep, deep sorrow. I knew right then he was running. "What's her name?"

"Her?"

"Yeah, her. The way I see it, only a woman, or a crime would send a man out in a storm." He slowly faced the passenger window. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he is a criminal. God, I hope he doesn't have a weapon.

"You're very observant, Bobby."

"I missed that deer!" I said laughing a little.

Nic smiled for the first time since entering my car. His teeth were perfect. "Any normal person would have."

Normal person?

"What do you do for a living, Bobby?"

"I'm a freelance reporter for a couple of magazines. As you can see by the car, it doesn't pay much," I laughed again. It seemed to put him at ease.

"You want a story?"

"Got one?" He is a criminal and he's going to confess to me. God, I hope this doesn't end with me dying.

"I don't have a weapon, I'm not a criminal, and you're not going to die. At least not while you're with me."

For some reason, I believed him. As I looked at him with relief

written across my forehead, I noticed his shirt was dry. I also felt warmth around my feet. It was as if the heater was on. That wasn't possible; it hasn't worked since I bought the car. But sure enough, it was on, and it was working!

"Ever hear, 'be careful who you entertain, you could be in the company of an angel?'"

"I've heard something like that. Why? You saying you're an angel?"

"No, I'm not an angel."

"Whew... I was about to pull over had you said yes."

"I was an angel."

Okay, he's not a criminal. He's just a nutcase.

"There's a diner around the next bend."

"A diner..."

Yeah, I could ditch him there. No need in taking chances with a crazy man. But, what if? Looking at the facts, I had to admit there's some strange stuff going on here. I would just play along until we got to the diner, give him a couple of bucks, and leave him. Yeah, that's what I decided to do.

"So, you were an angel?"

"As most mortals, you find it hard to believe."

"I have to admit, yes, yes I do. Anyone can say they were an angel. Most people who do are in mental institutions next to those who claim they're the devil." So much for playing along.

"You, like others, want proof. It never changes. People claim to believe but always want proof. The headlight, the heater, and radio, not to mention the deer, weren't enough?"

"Wait, wait, wait, the radio?" Sure enough, I turned the knob and on it came. My favorite song came through loud and clear. But it could be one big coincidence: loose wires.

"It's not," Nic said, pointing to the diner.

"It's not what?" I asked, my voice cracking a little.

"It's not enough, never is."

"Oh, I thought you were—"

"—Gonna say it's not a coincidence?"

Okay, I believe he's either a mind reader, or...

I pulled into the parking lot filled with eighteen-wheelers. I got a spot right up front, close to the front doors. Another coincidence?

"You're going to ditch me? Leave me a couple of bucks?"

As I turned the car off, I thought about that. I'm a reporter. Best

case scenario, maybe I could sell his story to a gossip magazine.

"No, I'm not. You've got issues, I can see that. I can at least be kind enough to listen to your story."

We got a booth almost in the center of this mid-fifties truck stop. As soon as you entered, the aroma of onions and grilled beef slapped you in the face. Somewhere, a jukebox played "Alabama," and someone gave a hearty laugh. Almost everyone had a beard except the waitress behind the counter. She had a mustache. Not a bad one, you know, the lady kind, and her hair was two decades out of style. I was thankful a younger woman came to take our order. She suggested the meatloaf; I ordered the hamburger, fries, and coffee. Nic ordered only coffee—decaf—even after I offered to pay. In a way, I was glad. I would've been dipping into my gas money. The waitress brought our drinks. I expected something different from what I got. I expected sludge but received the perfect cup. Another coincidence?

"How long have you been a reporter?" Nic asked calmly.

"This is only my third year."

"Any notable stories?"

"Not really. I've done some local political coverage, but that's the best yet." I took a sip of my coffee. "What do you do?"

"I'm between jobs right now, but I'm a good worker. I've always enjoyed my work... when employed."

Now that was avoidance if I've ever heard it. Politicians could learn from him. Let me get direct. "When you work, what field is it in?"

"'Protection' would be the best word."

"When was the last time you worked?" I asked as my food arrived. Again, I was surprised at what I received. Everything looked backyard-garden fresh. As I bit the burger I sighed loudly. It was perfect. Just the right amount of seasoning and little diced onions like my mother would make. After the third bite, I was able to ask more questions. "What do you protect? People, a place, what?"

"People."

"People," I repeated. "Tell me about your last job."

"I see why you've never cracked a major story," he said, sipping his coffee.

I must have looked dumbfounded. "Why do you say that?"

"I'm going to give you a story, but you don't have a recorder, pen, or paper. You have next to nothing on me, no background, no likes, dislikes. You don't even really know what this story is about."

He was right. For all I know, this guy is going to tell me about the local weather, from an ‘angel’s’ point of view. But I do know I’m not buying any of this, and he knows it too.

“Okay, Nic,” as I removed my pocket recorder, setting it on the table. I pushed ‘record.’ “State your name, full name.”

“Nicanor Tibni.”

Although he answered me, he wasn’t talking to me. “I’ll get your height and all that later, maybe a picture. But for now, let’s start with dislikes Nica... Nic.”

“Nee-can-or is how you pronounce my name.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s a very old name. And Tibni was the name of the sixth king of Israel. But I was named before either of them.”

Time to reconsider ditching this guy.

“But you don’t want to know about that—you want to know my dislikes.” He faced the window. “I dislike the way people pollute the planet. How they burn, and cut, and trash the very clay they’re made from.”

“You meant that metaphorically, right?”

“Humans have polluted the very rain that gives life. How do you pollute what hasn’t even formed?”

“Okay, that’s a metaphor, right?”

“I dislike...” He paused at that moment. I took a sip of my coffee and slid my plate away. “I dislike,” Nic repeated, “the choice I made recently.”

He was still looking out the window. Using the reflection, I looked into his face. He was smiling slightly as if a minor burden was just lifted. Then I noticed a soft glow. I blinked as I blew away the steam from my coffee. The glow was gone. I said nothing, just waited for him.

“I used to leave a feather at places I worked. People would sometimes keep the feather, other times they’d leave ‘em to the wind. Then I was assigned to this, this beautiful, beautiful woman. I was there at her birth, and throughout her childhood. When she was seven, I saved her from being struck by a car. It would have been fatal, and it wasn’t her time. Sure, I bent the rules a little, but you would’ve too.”

“If I were an angel,” I interjected sarcastically. This got Nic to turn away from the window and face me. His eyes flashed and I knew he didn’t take kindly to my comment. But come on, to me this guy was sounding a little strange. To ease the growing tension, I did what anyone would do. I backpedaled and lied. “I didn’t mean it to sound

sarcastic, or condescending,” I quickly stated. “But you said, well, you know. Please continue.”

“I will overlook it, you are only human,” he said, still looking at me. Did he know I lied? “As she grew into adolescence, and then adulthood, I was there. Always protecting, always looking out for her. In her twenty-fifth year, I made myself known to her.”

Now I had to jump in. “What do you mean, ‘known?’”

Nic smiled with those perfect teeth and started laughing. His laugh was enchanting and contagious. Before I knew it, I was laughing right along with him.

“No, no, no, not in that sense.”

“So, what do you mean?” I got out between ending laughs.

“I became flesh.” He said it just like that.

As soon as I can, I’m ditching this guy, that’s what ran through my mind.

He continued, “I was in love! I knew her soul and felt she should know mine. It was a decision that changed my existence. One that gave me what I wanted most, yet took away what made me. That zenith is my story’s setting.” He looked at me, and I saw hurt, sorrow, like in the car. Crazy or not he loved whoever this woman was.

“I no longer left feathers for there were none to leave. My direct line was severed, and my flame of immortality extinguished. I’ll still live longer than any mortal, and I can still do simple things, but over time that too will fade. Then, soon after, I will die. I did this for love, gave it all up, to be with my soulmate.”

His head dropped. I took the time to signal for the check. It was time to depart. “We married. She died seven months later.”

What could I say? “I’m sorry to hear that. How, how did it happen?” Hey, that was the best I could come up with. Yeah, it was generic, but like I said, what could I say? At this point, he raised his head, and I saw a tear slide down his cheek.

“A car hit her. A car driven by the son of the same man I saved her from when she was seven!”

Now that’s a coincidence.

At this moment, I decided to make good on my ditch. Sure, I told him I wouldn’t, but that was before the “I became flesh” and that crap. I was looking at a depressed, six-foot-tall, two-hundred-pound man with psychological problems. He said he didn’t have a weapon, but how do I know that? For all I know, he could go postal at any second. It’s better

to leave and be able to write about him, then be written about after the tragedy.

I was in luck; there was another exit I could duck out of. It was out of view of our booth. I took advantage of that to also pay the bill. Imagine how I felt when the waitress told me it was already paid. Stepping back a few feet, I looked back at the booth and saw that it was empty. I searched for Nic, and assumed he had left. Wait, I thought, what if he's at my car waiting? My eyes scanned that direction, finding no sign of my mentally-disturbed, and mentally-disturbing, hitchhiker. Before making my escape, I stopped by the restroom.

As I went to wash my hands, I saw a business card. On one side was a feather; the other side was blank. I still don't know why, but I kept it. In fact, I still have it in my wallet. From time to time, I pull it out. It's as new now as it was then, and that was almost a year ago. Since then, I've been doing okay. I mean, sure, my car is almost fifty years old, but the heat and AC work. That headlight has never gone out again, and the radio picks up stations I didn't know existed. My rent's paid, and I'm not in debt. Of course, it could all be one huge coincidence. Could be.



Drawing

Paul Doucette, Utah

Ink, 2021

Evanescence

Isolation. Desolation. Abandonment. Ostracism. Left to die on the vine. These are just some of the feelings prison evokes. It's a dark and depressing place, with plenty of reasons to retreat to the solitude of our cells, and to walk around like zombies with our heads hung low in silent resignation. But it doesn't always have to be like this. And sometimes beauty pierces the shadowy veil. You just need to know where to look for it.

I spent two years at a unit located in the Permian Basin, an area of Texas that millions of years ago sat at the bottom of a shallow ocean. The water that once was is now a sea of sand—a desert punctuated by tumbleweeds, the occasional cactus, and a handful of grand mesas. Our recreation yard was located at the end of the unit and provided us with a 180-degree view of this barren spectacle, obstructed only by the chain-link fence and razor wire that encapsulated us.

One day I was standing next to the volleyball court, assembling my team, and awaiting our turn to play the winner of the current game. Behind me the sun was just starting to breach the horizon on its inevitable plunge into darkness. To my front the warm unrelenting West Texas wind was filling my nose with the smell of sagebrush and rain, as it pushed a thunderstorm across the near-distant mesas on a beeline straight for us. My vision was saturated with dark, ferocious clouds, and lightning dancing like Russian ballerinas across their desert stage.

As the storm approached and the luminous dance intensified, rain began to fall—lightly, like angel kisses upon our cheeks—while desert lions roared with thunderous applause. And just when I thought my senses had reached saturation, a rainbow appeared to the Northeast. Full and vibrant and brilliant, its ends framed the pathway straight back to my home. To family and friends and all things good and right in the world. As if to say, “Here we are, waiting for you.”

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, a prisoner named Andy is called to the warden's office to receive a shipment of donated books for the prison library he started. He discovers a record of an Italian opera. In a moment of mischief, he locks himself in the office and plays it over the PA system for all to enjoy. Everything comes to a stop. Work, Rec, Chow—it all fell silent as the inmates enjoyed a brief moment of freedom. That rainbow was our *Shawshank* moment. The volleyball and basketball games, the guys working out and the yard walkers, all of them froze in their tracks, and stood in silent worship of the glory and grandeur of *Shawshank*. And for a brief moment, we too were free. “Here men, serve the plumer ball! We only have 20 minutes left.” And just like that, our succinct yet splendorous moment passed. The games and walkers resumed, our heavenly vision vanished like sugar as quickly as it appeared, and life returned to its wonted pace.

I've had dreams about that rainbow. It is forever etched upon my soul. Along with these words I carry next upon the dirt and mud of your past. It is in it lay the seeds of regret, planted by a life of bad choices, and watered with the tears of self-deprecation. Lift your gaze to the heavens, as there is such hope and your future dwells.

—Spin 2022

Art Piece: Evanescence

Sean Fox

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork

Story: Evanescence

Spin aka Kenny Baker, Texas

Justice Arts Coalition

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Along with these words:

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-Spin 2022



Global Warming

Shelby Leco, Louisiana

4' x 5' in, Mixed Media, 2022



Nelson Mandela

Juan Hernandez, Illinois

Watercolor, 2022

Project PAINT Artwork

Chasing Dreams

Bootsie Martínez R., Arizona

Donnie looked at his father across the scarred wooden table. The old man looked the same as always. A little better, even. He wasn't drunk for a change.

Well, it was hard to get liquor in jail, although Donnie was sure it could be done. If you want something badly enough, you'll find a way to get it.

Donnie wanted something himself, and he was trying to convince his dad. No luck so far.

His father slammed his fist on the table. "What do you mean you don't have the money?"

Donnie glanced nervously at the officer. The man's attention focused on Donnie's dad. Inmates were supposed to behave themselves with visitors. The officer moved toward them. Donnie shook his head, silently pleading not to cut his visit short. The man seemed to understand, but he resumed his post much closer, leaning against the wall just behind Donnie's father. The officer gazed around the room nonchalantly, but Donnie knew that one more outburst from his dad would end the visit and probably get the old man in hot water.

He lowered his voice. "Dad, I told you. I had to use the money to pay for my uniform. I'll try to bring you some money next week. Extra, even."

"How am I supposed to get my smokes? I don't have any money left in my commissary account."

Now his father sounded like a spoiled brat. He was even pouting a little.

Donnie hated it when he felt like the adult and his father acted like the child. He wished he could be a kid sometimes and have someone take care of him. Provide for his needs. He sighed. He couldn't remember when his life was like that, even when he was little, bringing in change by collecting bottles. Sometimes, those nickels were the only thing between a can of SPAM and going to sleep on an empty stomach. He knew that he didn't have it any worse than most of the other kids on the Indian reservation, but that knowledge didn't help much when his stomach was hollow and complaining.

But now, he had a chance to do something he'd always wanted. Maybe get off the reservation. Or maybe get a job and stay. That would be even better.

Right now, though, he had to contend with his father.

He drew his attention back to the old man's sulk. He didn't look as bad as some of the other fathers he saw on visiting days. Like the guy at the table next to them. Donnie felt sorry for the man's daughter, who looked mortified to visit her father in the county jail. The man was probably no older than Donnie's dad, but he looked worse because his beard grew in patches. His face seemed dirty, but it was just stubble. Donnie suppressed a grin. That was one advantage Native Americans had over Anglos. They didn't grow much facial hair, so they didn't have to be intimately acquainted with a razor and shaving cream.

Donnie's father always reminded him that not having to shave his face might be the only advantage Indians had. His grudge against the white man was legendary. He became incensed over anything Donnie did that smacked of "the establishment." Donnie sometimes wondered if his old man knew that the '60s were over. He was still going on as if Woodstock had happened last week instead of decades ago.

"The white soldiers took our land," his father reminded him. "Don't you remember how cops killed our people at Alcatraz?"

Donnie's history book told of Native Americans who took over the island of Alcatraz. The Indians said they were trying to recapture "their" land, which had become a prison for hard-core inmates like Al Capone. However, law enforcement officers held a different opinion.

His father always brought up that incident whenever he busted on cops. Donnie secretly suspected that his father's dislike of police had nothing to do with Alcatraz and everything to do with the fact that cops came and locked him up when he got drunk and did something stupid, which happened far too often.

"Dad, I wasn't even born when Alcatraz happened." Donnie tried to hide his impatience. "I'll try to get a couple of extra hours at the store and bring you some money, but I have training this week, plus, I have to study for exams."

His father's face looked like a thundercloud.

"But I'll try. Okay, Dad?"

"I still don't understand why you're doing this cadet thing. Why do you wanna be like them?" The old man jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the officer and raised his voice. "Cops are no good. Everybody knows that. All they ever wanna do is lock up innocent people."

The officer didn't react. He probably heard the same thing a

hundred times a day.

Donnie sighed. "Dad, you get locked up, so you don't drive drunk and kill somebody."

"Never killed anybody yet," his father muttered. "Those guys are just uniform happy. Think when they pin on a badge, they're better than everybody else. Pah!"

"But, Dad, you were in the army. You wore a uniform."

"I was young. I didn't know any better. Besides, they lied to me."

Donnie couldn't bear listening to another conspiracy theory. He was thinking about getting to work, then home to study. That math exam tomorrow was going to be brutal.

His father broke in on his thoughts. "Why do you wanna be one of them anyway? That's no job for an Indian."

Donnie knew he couldn't tell his pop the truth. That the cops he knew wore their uniforms proudly. They helped keep peace in the community, were neat and clean, and had jobs. They brought in regular paychecks. He envied them because they could afford to live in real houses, not leaky trailers. Their families ate three meals a day. Their wives didn't line up to get free government cheese. But his father would dismiss his dreams.

And he certainly couldn't tell his old man how he craved the excitement of police work. His father had been on the wrong end of a billy club too many times to understand.

"I just do, Dad," he said softly.

The officer stepped over to their table. "Time's up," he said, not unkindly.

His father stood. The gray jail clothes hung off his thin frame, making him look older than he was. "Bring me some money for smokes, you hear?" He tried to sound gruff, but Donnie recognized the voice he used when he had to say goodbye.

"I'll try, Dad."

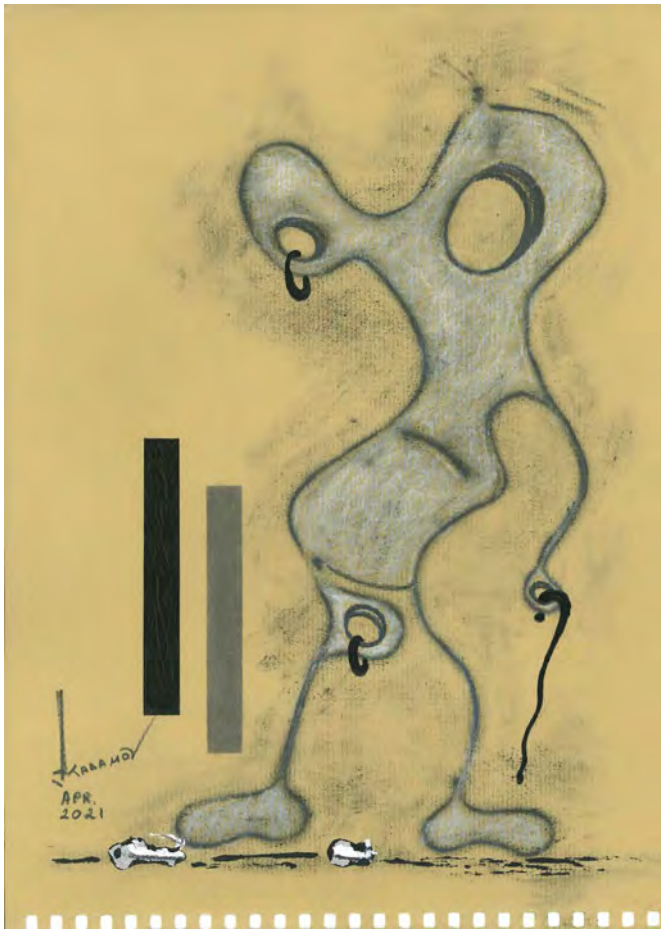
His father leaned forward and hugged Donnie as well as he could with the table between them.

"Let's go," the officer said.

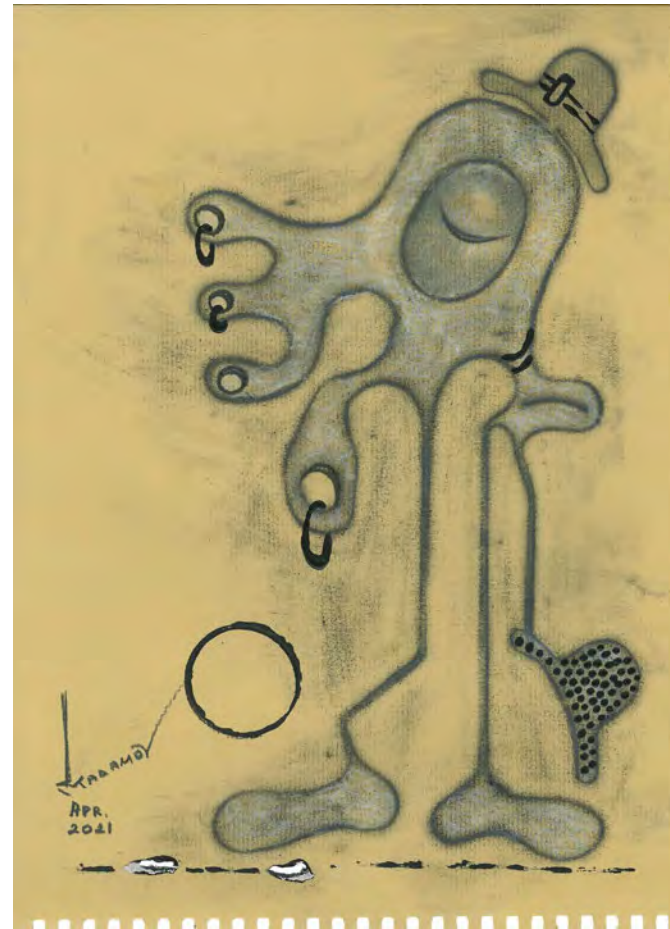
The officer followed Donnie's father as he shuffled back to his cell.

Donnie stared down at the scarred table, which had witnessed countless jailhouse visits. Someone had scratched a message into the wooden surface. "This place sucks," it said.

Yeah, Donnie thought.



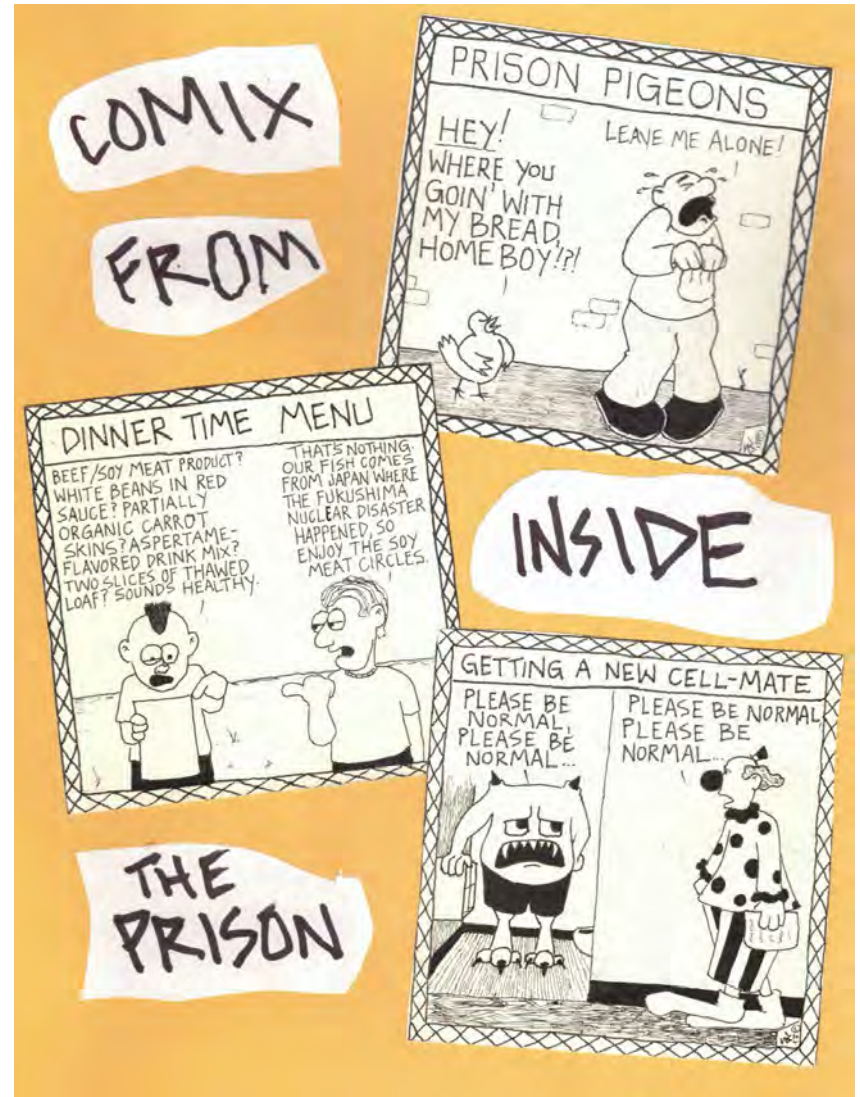
Our Kind of Society Series #3075
 Yuri Kadamov, Indiana
 Graphite, Colored Pencil, Pieces of Stucco, 2021
 Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



Our Kind of Society Series #3072
 Yuri Kadamov, Indiana
 Graphite, Colored Pencil, Pieces of Stucco, 2021
 Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



Abby in 2020
 Steven Westcott, California
 Pen on Paper, 2019
 Project PAINT Artwork



Comix from Inside the Prison
 Steven Westcott, California
 Pen on Paper, 2019
 Project PAINT Artwork



Limitless

Steven Westcott, California

Watercolor, Colored Pencil, and Cut Paper, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

Inside Reflections

Steven Westcott, California

Where Did It Go?

It was a few weeks before Halloween. My brother took my nephew to buy Iron Man gear. My nephew put the mask on, and that's where it stayed. He was three years old. Thinking on this, I wonder, "When did we lose this? When did we stop being Iron Man? When did we stop living in the imagination and why? Whatever happened to the world of pretend? What happened to being silly just for the sake of being silly?"

I miss the days when a stick became the sword and a tree the mighty dragon. I miss digging my mother's yard up looking for dinosaur bones. I used to pretend I was the Phantom of the opera. I used to imagine my toys coming alive and playing with each other while I slept, and I tried to figure out who would be best friends.

We used to get family pictures every few years, and one year my five-year-old found a pigeon feather. She carried it everywhere that day. In all the pictures she would try to hold the feather up to show the camera. The adults kept telling her to put it down. It was just a pigeon feather, right? Maybe not. What was it to her? She doesn't even remember the event as it happened thirty plus years ago. But there is one photograph of her sitting on the stairs next to another one of our cousins, and she is barely twisting her hand up, sneaking the feather into the picture. What goes through the minds of children, and where does it go?

The people I looked up to as a kid were cartoons. Cartoons could do whatever they wanted. Limited only by their creators' imaginations. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* was a big deal to me. The coming together of two worlds that exist in one. I wanted to live there in ToonTown. In the child's mind, these places still exist.

How do we get that back?

Punk at 40!

Just the idea of being "punk" at the age of forty seems strange. The scene is a young man's game, and the dinosaurs of yesteryear look campy on stage, as if we are watching the original *Dawn of the Dead*. We see Glen Danzig on stage with the Misfits again and we learn

why the baby boomers crave nostalgia. The ultimate irony in the gap between Baby Boomers/Generation X/Millennials will be the remake of *Forrest Gump*.

After so many years of being “punk,” I wonder what that meant as I turned forty. Am I desperately clinging on to the piece of floating wood I found when I jumped off society’s cruise ship? The further I floated, the tighter I held, and it got me...nowhere. Or...has it helped me?

“Punk ain’t no religious sect. Punk means thinking for yourself.” These words are shouted by

Jello Biafra at the beginning of “Nazi Punks F- Off” by The Dead Kennedys, and they still ring true to me. You see, I type these words from inside the walls of a prison. I am thirteen years into a life sentence, and I’ve successfully navigated my time drug and alcohol free, without having stabbed or being stabbed, and living a life in a constant state of change, growth, and evolution. This didn’t all happen at the snap of a finger, though I did make a major decision while sitting in the county jail. I chose to think for myself.

The girl I was planning on marrying was amazing in every way, and I could probably write a zine just about her, but I’ll spare you the details. The last thing she ever said to me was through a phone and an inch of plexi-glass. She looked at the guys with tattoos on their faces and looked at the dope-fiends and said, “don’t become one of those people.” While that may sound bad, it is the message that matters: don’t lose who you are. Through all my faults, she saw past the monster/coward I had allowed myself to become. It was those words that began the change. I sat in my cell and thought about my future in prison. I could choose to do wrong and join a gang, drink and get high, and become all the things I needed to be in order to become “a convict.” OR ... I could choose to do good. I could become a better person and show others that life is precious and that we should love each other now because we never know what can happen tomorrow.

I thought about my son. I was eighteen when he was born, and not a mature eighteen. I was a coward and a deadbeat dad. I always wanted to be in his life, but I was too selfish to grow up. I was twenty-six when I was arrested, and I decided that if he ever chose to seek me out, I wanted him to meet a good man instead of the person I was when he was born, and the person I was when I committed my crime. I wanted him to see that people CAN change.

Against the pressures of prison conformity, I chose to think for

myself. I chose to go against the grain and become proactive in my rehabilitation. School, groups, sobriety, books, art...all became the foundation of my future.

Why Art?

Without any real job/hobby/interest we are left with too much free time. This is dangerous territory for someone like me. I liken it to overactive dogs. If you have a dog like a German Shepherd, you can’t leave it home alone all day and expect it to sit and behave. German Shepherds need stimulus. They need something to occupy their minds. If you leave some dogs home alone all day, they will tear the place apart. That doesn’t mean they are bad dogs. It means they need something to do. Those are the ones who make the best rescue dogs. They are the best in the field because they have something challenging their mind. Humans are the same. This human is, at least.

At the age of eleven, I started playing the guitar. James Hetfield of Metallica was the god I prayed to for years. I wanted to be the most incredible rhythm guitarist ever. I wanted to write the best riffs and the songs that turned the mosh pits into riots. I wanted to be on the Mount Rushmore of heavy metal gods with James Hetfield, Tony Iommi, Kerry King, Scott Ian, and Dave Mustaine. I sat in my room for hours every day (because my parents never let me go anywhere) listening to tapes and records, and practicing. I subscribed to *Guitar World* and stood in front of the mirror with my guitar. Then, when I was eighteen, I was at a party when the stereo played “Gimmie Some Action” by F.E.A.R.; Dead Kennedys; The Misfits; Crass; Rudimentary Peni; The Germs; Black Flag. All are bands I began to identify with. This is punk, right? What I came to realize is punk doesn’t necessarily mean the same thing to everyone. Along with the metal bands I loved, other albums were handed down to me by my brother, or cousins, or mother. The Dead Milkmen and Mr. Bungle are two that come to mind. What is it about music that defines the word “punk”? To me, Nirvana’s *Nevermind* is a punk album. What all of this leads to is thinking differently. Doing something your way and making it the way you want without worrying about commercial success, gold records, or your face on the one-dollar bill. You do it because you love it. When I heard “Gimmie Some Action,” my eyes opened to a different way of doing things. My “art” didn’t need to be so polished to express what I was feeling. “Do They

Owe Us a Living” by Crass depressed what I had inside of me, but did so in a raw, primal way. I loved that. I loved seeing art as a Neanderthal performing brain surgery with a cinder block instead of a High Brown Ninja assassin using his sword with precision. I could do what I wanted when expressing myself. Not only did I grow up listening to the metal gods, but I loved Michael Jackson, N.W.A, Weird Al Yankovich, The Dead Milkmen, Mr. Bungle, The Soundtrack to *Phantom of the Opera*, The Beastie Boys, The Doors, Urban Dance Squad, Pink Floyd, and many others that would go on to influence me and the music I created. It was okay to like many different things. “Different” should be embraced.

Art (as in drawing, painting, writing, sculpting, photography, etc..) can be different too. And those mediums should be embraced in all their variations. Is Annie Leibowitz any better or worse than Andy Warhol or Jane Aribus? Is Basquiat any less of an artist than Rembrandt? Different is good. Without people thinking for themselves and creating art for sake of self-expression, we would be without the Sistine Chapel, Banksy, and everything in between. What a boring world. Even the article you hold in your hands now is an act of D.I.Y. self-expression. “Low-Budget/High Quality” as my friends and I used to say. Art is creation. It comes in so many forms now that it is difficult to put anything in any category without some arguing that it is more like something else. Who knows? Do you like it? Then it’s good. If you don’t like it, then...so what.

Right now Project PAINT* has given me the opportunity to create something. Better yet, Project PAINT is going into prisons to give inmates an opportunity to express themselves in a positive way. Some participants have been drawing or painting for decades. Some have never before held a paintbrush. For both of these groups, art is the opportunity to, at the very least, do something other than engage in criminal activities. But, really, it is the chance to lose ourselves in something. The way athletes lose themselves in a game. Nothing else in the world matters at that moment. It is beautiful to feel this liberation.

Relationships and Change

This, to me, means developing and maintaining our relationships with family, friends, and community.

I began to think about my purpose in life, and what it means.

I made a commitment that I would always work to help others understand that life is precious and short. That we need to *love* our fellow beings as ourselves and *tell* them that they are loved and appreciated. Tomorrow is not guaranteed. Life after you put this one down may not continue. The point being, we just don’t know what the future holds. Jim Morrison said, “The future is uncertain, and the end is always near.” Knowing this, why don’t we appreciate what we have, and see that life is a gift? We are all family. Humans are all connected. We need each other. Why work so hard to disconnect from this family? Why work so hard to disengage from the beautiful evolution of society? Life is precious. Yours, mine, everyone’s. Where is our empathy? Where is our compassion?

We need to remember the lessons we were taught as children. I make a joke when it comes to religion that I worship Elmo. That’s right. The Elmo from “Sesame Street.” But it’s only halfway joking. I tell people, “Think about it. Elmo teaches us to be nice to each other and encourages us to learn.” These are all simple concepts taught in every religion.

My purpose is also based in a strange rebellion: I want to show the world that people CAN change. Change IS possible. It’s not easy, and it is a lifelong commitment. Vince Lombardi once said, “Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence.” No, I don’t think I’m excellent or great. But I want the world to understand there are so many people within these walls who genuinely want to do the right thing. Who have changed their lives around and have committed to being better people simply because they know it’s the right thing to do. The image most outsiders have of a “convict” is a shrinking percentage of the population. Don’t get me wrong. There are still some rock-and-roll yards in the state of California, but so many guys have lived that lifestyle and realized it’s all bullshit. Decades of lives wasted on prison politics that amount to nothing. A house of cards.

I give so much credit to the guys who grew up in neighborhoods that are battlegrounds of gang violence, then come to prison for a much more intense version of warfare, and change their lives. Some guys can’t even go back to the homes they grew up in because they are seen as traitors for changing their lives around. They will be killed. Everyone they have ever known and associated with has to be cut off; some even have to cut off family members. That is a sacrifice that many outsiders could not possibly understand. We can change; many do. We’re not all

the same.

Who I Represent

One of the important aspects of punk, to me, is unity, working together to accomplish common goals, usually rebellion of some sort.

When I arrived at the county jail, I found that everyone inside is broken up by race. I thought this was stupid, but I understood. What really disappointed me was learning that people fought *within* their race. Not only are we divided by the authorities, but we further divide ourselves. For what? The punx are supposed to be united regardless of race. But on my yard, guys were fighting each other. Why do we fight? Does change have to come through violence? No. I was in prison when Occupy Wall Street began. I longed to be there.

When tours come to my yard, I am often one of the men the visitors talk to. I've worked hard to improve during my time in prison, and I think people recognize this. I always think about representation, about how I would want someone else to represent me. The people who are working hard deserve better than me acting like a fool and ruining their chance at success. I represent all incarcerated individuals here trying to better themselves and genuinely care about finding the person our parents knew we could be.

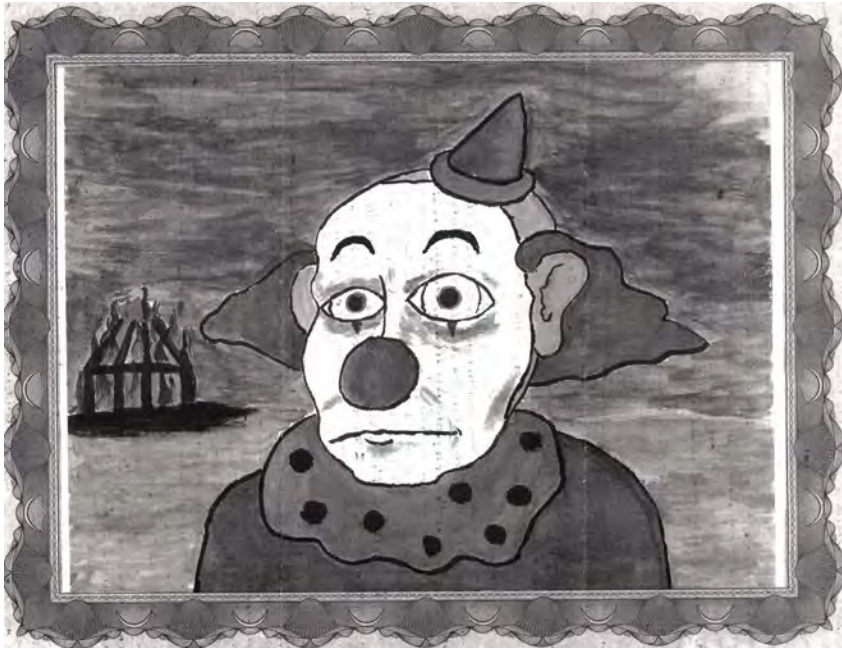
Many men and women in the prison system go to school and have the opportunity to speak before a tour. Giving an outside guest a positive experience is important because that guest will go home and tell a friend or neighbor that someone they met in prison is a hardworking individual on the right path. The positive experience will carry over to the next incarcerated person or parolee they meet, who deserves an opportunity to show who they are. The guest might even influence another person to give yet the next parolee a chance, whether with a job or other benefit, then I become a more accurate picture of what some people think "just another convict" is, not the reductive generalization of how movies and T.V. typically portray us.

If/when I get out, I will see myself as a representative of those who change. People deserve to have someone out there speaking up for them. I know people who have paroled and are still working hard. Have you seen news reports of parolees committing more crimes, where the reports make a big deal about "Why do we let these people out?!" Of course, you have. You know what you almost never see? The

person who gets out and gets a job, goes to school, and succeeds. How about the guy who reunites with his kids and becomes a good father? Where is his new report? I want to be someone who tells everyone about the men and women trying their hardest to be better people. That starts with my own recovery. I must continue evolving to talk about these things. Even in these yards, I will promote individuals who are changing.

Special thanks to: Project PAINT

*See end pages for description of organization



Anxiety #1
Steven Westcott, California
Watercolor and Marker on Paper, 2018
Project PAINT Artwork



Anxiety #4
Steven Westcott, California
Watercolor and Ink, 2021
Project PAINT Artwork

A Book Review of Albert Woodfox's
*Solitary: Unbroken by Four Decades in
Solitary Confinement.*

My Story of Transformation and Hope

Reviewed by Tamar Jacobs, ICM Interview Editor

Albert Woodfox, author of the memoir *Solitary: Unbroken by Four Decades in Solitary Confinement. My Story of Transformation and Hope*, was born and raised in segregated New Orleans. As children, Woodfox and his peers were accustomed to being chased by police, as he explains, “whether or not we’d done anything wrong.” They were always alert to the constraint and threat placed on their lives under the system of Jim Crow. Woodfox came to theft as a hungry child. He writes at the outset of *Solitary*, “It never felt like a crime to me, it was survival.” The theft of food led to more serious crimes, and Woodfox was originally convicted of armed robbery. While he was imprisoned, he was charged with crimes he did not commit, and ultimately framed for murder. Along with his friends, Herman Wallace and Robert King, Woodfox was singled out by prison administrators as a danger to the population for membership in the Black Panther Party. Wallace, King, and Woodfox would come to be known as the Angola 3. Woodfox spent over forty-three years in solitary confinement on specious grounds.

Solitary is a profound meditation on freedom, on American injustice, on the potential of the human mind to withstand torturous conditions put upon the body and spirit. It is an examination of unlikely survival, the resistance of one man against relentless attempts to subjugate and break him. *Solitary* is Woodfox’s life story, but it is also our shared American story, and to read it is to be forced to confront this reality.

Woodfox articulates systemic injustices on the part of elected officials, prison guards, attorneys, and judges that are outrageous in their overt violations of basic constitutional law and human rights. Woodfox spells out—using explicit examples from his own life—routine penal practices such as “cleaning the books,” in which inmates are threatened with charges of random unsolved crimes; the use in courts of the “hands off doctrine,” so called because judges have used the 13th amendment’s reference to prisoners as “slaves of the state” as

an excuse not to address violations and abuses against prisoners; the practice of physically gagging the defendants’ mouths with duct tape at their own trials despite their compliance with the rules of the court; and what Woodfox refers to as generally “reckless and irresponsible actions by prosecutors” in their drive for convictions at any human cost.

Solitary shines a light on the horror of Angola Prison, and by extension, the entire American carceral system, past and present. Woodfox explains how the prison functioned as a continuation of the slave plantation it was built upon, its name drawn from the African country from which its people were kidnapped into slavery. Prison guards routinely dehumanized men through systems of abuse enabled by violence, including rape, torture, and racist language and practices. Woodfox explains, “Angola was run like an antebellum slave plantation.” Jobs within the prison were designated by race. White prisoners worked mostly indoors; Black prisoners worked mainly in the field, doing brutal work, including planting crops and picking cotton. The worst job, Woodfox remembers, was cutting sugarcane. “Cutting cane was so brutal that prisoners would pay somebody to break their hands, legs, or ankles,” to avoid this torturous job.

If *Solitary* serves as a searing indictment of the prison system that Woodfox survived, it is also a paean to the elements that lifted him up through his life inside. The centrality of his mother’s love is clear from the first sentence of *Solitary*. Ruby Edwards supported her six children by any means available to her, including prostitution. Woodfox is clear-eyed in his understanding of her limited choices and the personal sacrifices she made for her family, though as a child he absorbed societal attitudes toward women who worked in bars, and lost respect for her. While he was incarcerated, through access to the teachings of the Black Panther Party, Woodfox learned to see his mother with a new lens and afford her the respect he couldn’t give before his eyes were opened to a truer context for her life.

Woodfox’s connection to his friends Herman Wallace and Robert King sustained him as much as his mother’s love. Their brotherhood over the decades provided them with strength and solace in the face of continual abuse and injustice. “There was a very strong loyalty and devotion between us.... We became our own support committee,” Woodfox explains. Together they organized hunger strikes and took united action against the rape culture facilitated by the prison administration. In the spirit of the 10-Point Program of the Black

Panther Party, they assisted fellow prisoners with self-taught legal aid and advice. Every letter they wrote to one another closed with “Never Apart.” Despite being held in solitary confinement, a so-called “dungeon” intended to isolate them from the world, they facilitated at Angola a culture of learning and discourse.

Solitary stands as a testament to the power of collective action and determination. It shows how a single person can stand as a beacon to lift up others who are suffering and draw necessary attention to a cause. It serves as a rallying cry and spur to those who think that action is futile, that the odds are stacked against progress, that those unjustly in power stand hopelessly unbudgeable. It shows us how books, conversations, education, and meditation hold keys to hope and to personal and societal change. *Solitary* makes clear that while it’s possible to lock up a person’s body, it’s impossible to lock up a person’s mind without their consent. Woodfox writes, “There wasn’t one saying that carried me for all my years in solitary confinement, there were one thousand, ten thousand. I pored over the books that spoke to me. They comforted me.”

Albert Woodfox died on August 4, 2022—he was finally released in 2016—but his words will live forever. As he said of his time confined to a tiny cell at Angola Prison, where he learned to control and elevate his own mind, “I knew I was unlimited.” *Solitary: Unbroken by Four Decades in Solitary Confinement. My Story of Transformation and Hope* shows us how we might strive for the same, how we should strive for it, for ourselves and those around us. Woodfox quotes his friend Robert King: “I think the struggle is unending....Actually it’s always beginning.”



Lion

Brian Hindson, Texas

Acrylic



We Are All Dreamers

*Arnolito Juarez, California
8'12 x 11, Acrylic, Marker, Pen
Justice Arts Coalition Artwork*

Freedom, Liberty, and Callousness

*Arnolito Juarez, California
Justice Arts Coalition*

Extensive stripes of red and white furl around my whole body to cover me. Blue spreads around the contours of my right face. Fifty beaming stars glare over the earth.

The lamp from the Statue of Liberty I envelop with my dominant hand, my chest elevated proudly, to display it for the masses.

With a calligraphy pen, my soul is inscribed with the Constitution to parade my amour for America.

But I shed no blood, America. You sentenced me to the Valley of Bones for two hundred ninety-seven years. My heart liquifies in gloom over my draconian ruling.

With the same calligraphy pen you utilized to write the superb Constitution, you wrote my condemnation.

With your prickly crown and the ominous clench of your right hand, you are granted commission to ravish me with your sweltering lamp.

Stripes of red and blue strangle the fragile hope within me. In opaque blue, you color me unredeemable. And the stars with razor-sharp blades in circular motion shred my existence from the universe.

May your bosom be an arbiter of freedom, liberty, and righteous judgements, America.

Note: A version of this poem was previously published with the *Prison Journalism Project* as "Callous America."



Here & Now
Jonathan Marvin, California
Collage, 2021
Project PAINT Artwork

Brothers in Solidarity

Charles Tooker, California

“Yo, check those clouds!” someone yelled from behind me.

Struggling against my shackles, I rubbernecked over the guy beside me for a better view out the barred windows. A storm loomed in the foothills, somewhere between San Quentin and Soledad, California, our destination for the day.

I silently implored no one in particular, “Please, let those clouds upend this bus, either killing me instantly or abetting my escape.”

After two years of incarceration, including a lengthy jury trial, I’d finally faced my fate, albeit far from content, fearful, or hopelessly defeated; I was mentally exhausted and desperate for relief by whatever means the universe deemed most appropriate.

A child of the Rust Belt, I was born in Detroit and spent my formative years in northwest Ohio. Here, I’d learned that poached orange-green clouds, while handsome, were harbingers of destruction and sorrow. Occasionally assuming funeral formations or other sinister shapes, they were wont to maim or kill you—or so I was conditioned to think. Tornado sirens and emergency weather bulletins, rudely interrupting radio and TV programming, were common. And not unlike Pavlov’s famous dogs, I’d drool and scamper toward the nearest window, a senseless automaton oblivious to my mother shouting me down in a panic. My irresponsible curiosity satisfied, I’d join my older brothers and parents in the laundry room, safe amid their shared embrace and mountains of dirty clothes.

As obscure to me then as obvious to me now, we all relished the drama of those episodes. Over the years, my brothers and I’d unwittingly continue to entertain our parents with much more frightening dramas; indeed, I have reluctantly chewed up the scenery since my 2016 arrest.

As we neared the prison, I saw its razor-wire fencing, gun towers, and obnoxious lighting. Otherwise, the low, uniform buildings, saddled between two modest yet fetching mountains, were more reminiscent of a suburban business park. Two years prior, I’d have thought this scenario impossible—the worst circumstances I could conceive. But after twenty-two months at Marin County Jail and two months at San Quentin, locked up twenty-three and a half hours a day, the prospect of settling at a state prison, with real opportunities for self-betterment,

was a profound relief...in a masochistic sense, I suppose.

I was about to script Act 1, Scene 1 of a new life, ripe for much-needed rehabilitation and invaluable education through an extraordinarily candid, immersive introduction to the human condition. I was right where I needed to be, and I knew it. A neuropsychological mess and critically astray upon arrest, I was resigned to be redesigned. Unlike so many of my “brothers in solitary,” most of them beaten down much longer and harder than I, many more deprived of loving families and friends, or of relatively safe, healthful environs, I still had to trust that I wasn’t a lost cause. I had to believe that. Any other possibility was, well...not possible.

As psychologically blind and deaf as I’d become, I’d seen the storm strengthening and heard the alarm bells for years, two thousand miles from the sanctuary of that laundry room. But I was—and am—the same good-natured, promising boy onto whom my family had centered those protective huddles and whispered encouraging words. Now, conditioned to suppress such sentiment, self-preservation in this volatile world I now call home, I’m reminded that the same robust will that landed me here is also that which will ultimately guide me to, through, and well beyond my release date.

By current California Department of Corrections estimates, I can expect to be roughly fifty years old upon release, freed from physical confinement. The stigma and overt discrimination will certainly manifest with re-entry, my felony conviction to forever dog me. At the same time, I can expect to devote the following years to positively affecting ill-informed hearts and minds. Not only those misconceptions about me personally—some justified, of course—but also the millions of similarly remorseful, accountable, hopeful convicts nationwide, fallible errands we.

There’s a familiar superstition among prisoners that warns of bad luck to those who look back on the prison as they leave, ensuring their eventual return. But alas, I intend to turn hard and stare down that gate, committing it to memory along with the myriad other long- and short-term residencies I’ve held throughout my life, domestic and abroad. Sure, it won’t be like the lighthearted superstition that had me tossing coins into Rome’s Trevi Fountain, but no less powerful or, better yet, empowering. Now living, and in many ways thriving, as the protagonist in what just three years ago still seemed a surreal nightmare, I no longer fear imprisonment or any other imaginable hardship.

I hope that my brother will meet me outside that gate. A decorated, well-respected American soldier, he’ll be wearing mirrored sunglasses and a hoodie, strategically subdued and nondescript...to all but me. He’ll give a solid hug, jarring back pats, and a swift jab to my chest before tossing his arm over my shoulder and leading me to his car, a ritualistic reunion I’ll understand and appreciate with ambivalence. As my dear friend, he’ll be excited to see me but circumspect. As an honorable citizen, he rightly condemns the acts that brought me there. As my big brother, he loves me unconditionally.

As we drive, my brother will speak of his life and wonderful son. An eternally humble, disciplined serviceman, he’ll deflect my usual interrogations about his military-related whatnots and soforths. I’ll soon relent and instead brief him on my practical, ideal, then fantastically implausible plans: at once to fulfill my obligations to the state of California, to divest my defunct businesses, and to ardently work to affect criminal justice reform.

We’ll share a comfortable silence as I stare instinctively at people in passing cars—their talking, singing, laughing—envious models of contentment deprived me for so many years. My attention will then be drawn to the horizon, fixated, expecting to see those ominous clouds and what they portend. Now, also in my own unique way, battle-hardened, world-weary, and deeply scarred, I will turn a confident smile to my brother in solidarity.



Collage

Juan Sanchez, California
 Multimedia on Paper, 2021
 Project PAINT Artwork

Prison Ink

Johnny L. Wooten, Texas

An ever-expanding number of high profile individuals sport tattoos. Worn by everyone from professional athletes to movie stars, tattoos have insinuated themselves into mainstream culture. According to the National Library of Medicine, in 2015 29% of American adults had at least one tattoo. In contrast, according to *The Economist* as reported in 2016, three-fourths of incarcerated individuals in the State of Florida had a tattoo (“Prison Tattoos: A Statistical Analysis of the Art on Convicts’ Bodies”). What is the correlation between the prevalence of tattoos and incarcerated individuals? Why would someone want to get “inked”?

I have always wanted a tattoo, yet never got one because of the social stigma that I grew up with about tattoos. When I was a child, tattoos were reviled as evil. I wonder now if getting inked might express the person rather than their crime.

So I asked some guys to take part in a survey. They were a small contingent of residents of the Eastham Unit in Lovelady, Texas. I surveyed 145 residents on the “Ham”: 104 had tattoos, nearly 72%. Even though some in society believe that tattoos indicate rebellion, many studies over the last two decades have found that tattoos express individuality and identity. The body becomes a canvas on which to illustrate one’s story.

The subjects of my survey came from all ages and walks of life. I looked at age, race, years of incarceration, religion, and other available information. I withheld names to protect the respondents since tattooing is against the policies of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Prohibiting tattooing does not come close to stopping it; incarcerated individuals just have to be creative in how they get inked. Also, incarcerated individuals must worry about gang affiliations associated with tattoos, information that can get them in trouble. I was surprised to learn that of the 104 men with tattoos, only 14% admitted to having a gang-related tattoo.

I also posed two questions to the 41 respondents with no tattoos: “Do you want a tattoo?” and “Do you believe tattoos are okay?” Ninety-three percent did not want a tattoo, which surprised me. Regarding whether it was okay to get a tattoo, they were more split. Thirty-four percent said yes, 54% said no, and 12% had no opinion. When asked

about this disparity, most men said even though they didn't want a tattoo, it should be up to each individual to decide what was best for them.

The average age for respondents was between the age of 40-49 with only three percent under the age of 29. Length of incarceration also varied, with most respondents being incarcerated between 5-10 years (42%) and only 9% being incarcerated over 20 years. Seventy-nine percent got their first tattoo before the age of 29, which suggests people actually age out of the desire to become tattooed. I also found that the older one gets, the less likely they are to get more tattoos. Most older guys seem to spend their time finishing up tattoos started years ago.

Because gangs are so prevalent in prison life, I wondered if more people had a gang-related tattoo than would admit it for fear of reprisal. When it came to religious tattoos, there was more discussion. I asked respondents whether any of their tattoos were "religious" and left it up to each respondent to decide whether a tattoo was religious or not. Fifty-six (54%) of the 104 respondents with a tattoo said they had a religious tattoo and forty-eight (46%) said they did not.

My survey was not about the righteousness of tattoos; I wanted to get a tattoo myself and to learn more about the correlation between incarcerated individuals and the prevalence of tattoos amongst them.

Primarily I wanted to come to terms with the view that tattoos signify that those who get them are incorrigible or irretrievably depraved. As Marie Griffith, religious studies scholar, claims in *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*, the social stigma that "tattoos, once reviled by mainstream Anglo-Americans as seedy, low class, and even satanic, now enjoy a refurbished reputation and are all the rage among growing segments of evangelical youth culture." The question to myself was, "If I get a tattoo, will I become a better or worse person?"

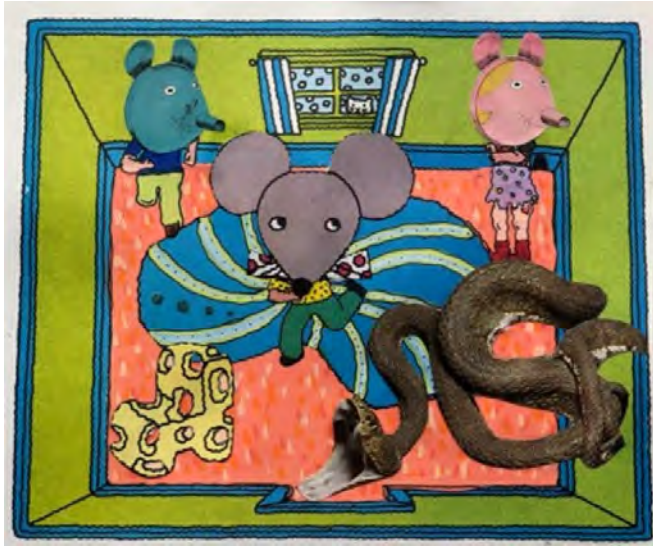
It is worth noting among those who regretted getting a tattoo, few had ever received "cover ups." Tattoo removal is growing into a big business. Removal of a tattoo can change how others see you, a prospective employer, for instance, especially in a society in which many people still look down on tattoos.

It was odd to me that most respondents with tattoos had less than 10% of their body covered in tattoos. Sixty-three (60.6%) had less than 10% of tattoos while only five (4.8%) had over 75% covered. Forty-five respondents had a word as their first tattoo and fifty had a picture as

theirs while nine had both a word and a picture. Only four respondents (3.8%) had a tattoo on his private parts.

The predominant conclusion of my survey is that I still want a tattoo. The social stigma I was raised with as a child still lingers in the back of my mind, but it has been quieted by living among tattooed guys who have become good friends. Studying tattoos has provided me with insight into why a person would get inked.

Tattoos may seem menacing at first to those who haven't seen many or who disapprove of them for religious reasons, but tattoos don't define people as good or bad.



Make a Move

Shelbey Leco, Louisiana
7' x 10' in, Mixed Media, 2022

A Smile

Mr. Kevin D. Lewis, California

I'd heard a picture is worth a thousand words, but I'd never considered what a smile, captured during a moment in time, was worth. That is, until the lesson given to me by my ten-year-old daughter.

I landed myself in prison at the tender age of twenty-four. At that time, my girls were only four and five years old. Unlike many men who find themselves in prison at an early age, I was blessed to have a mother and later a wife (not their mother) who were both willing and able to bring them to visit me two or three times a month. Before getting locked up, my whole world revolved around my family. So during these visits, my heart soared. We ran around, wrestled, laughed, and played all sorts of games. I'd set aside an hour or so to work on math and spelling with them, as well as force them to read from whatever children's book happened to be available. But for everyone involved, the best part of the visit was usually picture time.

For those unfamiliar with prison visiting rooms, there is usually another incarcerated individual assigned to take photos of the men and their families, so that during the visits everyone who wants to commemorate the day with a photo can. The photos aren't fancy. The photographer is generally only armed with a cheap digital camera. Some prisons have allowed skilled incarcerated artists that paint murals on the visiting room walls, which are used as backgrounds. Other prisons have only drab beige or gray walls for their photoshoot. Still for most, just the evidence of the day forever captured in time makes the activity an event to look forward to.

Each week our small clan would make a huge deal out of the three or four photos we would take. Part of the enjoyment came from deciding our group poses. We would take turns choreographing, ensuring everyone got an equal chance to play director. We'd also alternate who got to take a picture home each week, as we usually had more people than photos we could afford. Sure, they were only cheap and hastily printed 4x6's, but to our family they were precious.

For years, regardless of how happy I was during those visits, I refused to smile for the photos. While my mom, wife, daughters, and even nieces when they came, would be gums, my face would invariably be a solemn mask. My mom and wife both attempted to get me to smile, but I never would. Nor would I give them any explanation as to

why I refused their numerous urgings. Then one weekend, thanks to my mini-me, I was forced to finally smile.

The day began like most visiting days, with Lana and Lina breaking across the visiting room the moment they saw me emerge. “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!” they screamed over and over in unison. Kneeling, with arms spread wide, I engulfed them both in a bear hug as they reached me, almost knocking me over backward. As the day unfolded, we played, ate, did some schoolwork, and had our storytime as usual. This day happened to be my younger daughter Lina’s turn to orchestrate the pose and take her pick of the pictures home. To our surprise, when photo time came around, she claimed she didn’t want to take pictures. At first we tried to cajole her into taking them, but as we did she started to sulk. After receiving the face no real father can refuse, I sensed something deeper was wrong with my baby girl. Switching tactics, I took her by the hand and led her away from the others, and the two of us began to walk laps around the small room alone.

Knowing Lina, I knew I’d never get it out of her directly. So as we walked, I didn’t even ask what was bothering her. Instead I lightened the mood by making jokes about other visitors and the CO’s. But mostly we just walked silently, hand in hand, arms loosely swinging.

Finally, after about five or six laps around the room she said, “Daddy?”

“Yes, Princess,” I answered.

“Do you like when we come to see you?”

Shocked, I knelt in front of her and said, “Of course I do, baby. Seeing all of you is the only thing that really makes me happy.”

Looking away before asking her next question, she nearly broke my heart with “Well, why don’t you ever smile in our pictures?”

I was crushed. How could I ever give my baby that impression. Trying my best not to cry, I pulled her to me and hugged her tight in order to gain my composure.

I said, “Oh, baby, it’s not you. I love seeing you and I love taking pictures with you. Daddy just doesn’t like being in jail away from you.”

Seeing that she still didn’t fully understand, I continued, “When you take your pictures home and let people see them, I don’t want them to think I’m happy here. That’s the reason I don’t smile. Does that make sense?”

She looked at me and then down at her shoes before replying, “No. It makes me feel like I don’t make you happy.”

All my tough guy exterior went out the window. Pulling her to me once again, I hugged her tighter than ever. When I got control of myself, but with stray tears still trickling from my eyes, I looked at her, smiled as big as I could and said, “Come on, let’s go take some pictures so I can show the world how happy you make me!”

I had never known how much my smile meant to her, but now that I did, I refused to let her down. As a result of our conversation that day, I’ve happily cheesed like Chuck E. Cheese in every photo I’ve taken with her since. And I’m certain I always will!



My Wrongs

Leo Cardez, Illinois

Ink, 2022

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork

Mr. Crew Cut: An Angel Among the Monsters

Leo Cardez, Illinois

Justice Arts Coalition

There is nothing exactly like living in Hell, but there is something close to it. In my Hell, where I lived for most of 2013, there was, as Dante understood, no hope. I woke up every morning realizing my nightmare would continue through my waking hours. The loss I suffered was permanent. Life would never be the same. There was no healing, no improvement; but even more important, I believed, no possibility of any to come. The most unbearable thing about my life was I would always be forced to bear it.

In the midst of my incarceration, alone and desperate to salvage any relationships with my loved ones—and failing—I wondered if those who blamed me were watching and finding my misery enjoyable. In their shoes, I might have, if I believed everything said about me. I doubted anyone could have hated me more than I hated myself. I removed the mirror from my cell as I couldn't bear to look at my own reflection.

Cut to Mr. Crew Cut, an elderly man from the Greatest Generation, who volunteered to teach creative writing and journaling on my prison wing. When he spoke, people froze in their spots as if Jesus himself were in the room. He wore a beret, ascot, and handkerchief, matching and bold. In other words, extra as fuck. Others attended his class, good for them. I had more important things to do like watch for the apex predators seeking easy prey. I think I was terrified to crack open the mental files because then I'd have to reckon with the pain I'd caused.

Then, a pivot. Incarcerated Twitter—aka the rumor mill—was trending with gossip about a possible shake-up in our building. Incarcerated individuals would be moved into other cells or buildings due to a new directive that required mixing races among cellmates. The only guys who were safe were those currently participating in an educational program, like Mr. Crew Cut's class.

* * *

Writing was hard. My senses had lain dormant for so long I couldn't express what I felt. Prison seemed like a place where nothing ever happened. Life was elsewhere. When I did write, I was angry. Trauma lived on the edge of every story. Mr. Crew Cut asked why I swore so

much in my writing. I answered with a question: Would “Fuck Tha Police” by N.W.A. be as artistically and politically honest had it been named “The Heck with the Police”?

After all, he’d told us to write with raw honesty. If our writing was to mean anything to anyone, it must, above all, be true. Later that month, much to my surprise, he announced to the class he had changed his opinion about cursing in our writing. He told us sometimes civility and political correctness could be counterproductive, even destructive, because they could perpetuate falsehoods, while vulgarity might keep us honest. Rudeness could be useful. But only if it was honest. He was that kind of teacher. He listened to us. He respected us.

I didn’t realize honest writing can tear your guts out. Like when I remembered the pain and shame in my mother’s eyes when she came to visit me, knowing it was my fault, and worse, I could do nothing to help her. That feeling of helplessness was like being stuck in a barrel at the bottom of the ocean.

Keep writing, Mr. Crew Cut insisted to the class. *Cut deep, close to the bone.*

And I did.

* * *

Fast forward five years. I transferred to another prison, but I kept most of my writing from that class. Now, as I reread my earliest journal entries, I marvel at the hilariously flawed, petty, unhappy person I was. But Mr. Crew Cut never stopped trying to uplift me. In one of his comments on a piece I wrote about the futility of a life warehoused on the fringes of the world, he wrote, “The universe smiles on a persistent heart, so never stop trying to make a better life for yourself.” And you know what? He was right. Today, in retrospect, I can see when I did my best to make things better, every now and then I succeeded. Writing has helped me see and appreciate my circumstances.

See, writing wasn’t a diversion for me; it was my church, because it offered salvation in the promise of change. Escaping Hell is difficult, but with enough effort, grace, and the generosity of angels like Mr. Crew Cut, it can be done. On my fortieth birthday, when my parents wrote to tell me they were proud of me, I wept. I wept again after reading a reader’s note regarding an essay I had written about mental health in prison. This person wrote, “You helped me see that I was beautiful from the inside out and find what I had been searching for, though not in the

places I had been looking.”

Writing, and Mr. Crew Cut, taught me how to look inward in order to look forward once again to the next chapter of my life. I dedicate this to all the prison and jail teachers and volunteers who are changing lives and, more often than they will ever know, saving them.



Untitled

*Kisasi Aguilar, California
Acrylic on Canvas Paper, 2022
Project PAINT Artwork*

The Red Delicious Apple Is a Liar

Justin Slavinski, Florida

For as long as I remember, I have hated Red Delicious apples. I'll admit, I was a strange child—a child who would happily eat half a lemon—who preferred tarter, more complex flavors like those of Granny Smiths. There were many reasons to love Granny Smiths: crispness, tartness with an underlying sweet and floral undertone, and often size! The Granny Smiths of my childhood were massive. Red Delicious apples vary in size from racquetball tiny to boxer fist large. And Red Delicious apples, unlike Granny Smiths, leave me feeling nothing but disappointment.

Red Delicious apples lie to you. While yes, they are red, they are absolutely not delicious. These apples are bred for their market appeal; sure, they look beautiful. The gleam of supermarket lighting off their waxed, ruby skin will surely attract the eye. Visual appeal is not gustatory appeal, and a single bite is enough to convince any reasonable person that this apple is certifiably not delicious. With a bitter skin, flavorless flesh, and a texture like a memory foam mattress, Red Delicious apples offer little more than looks. Red Delicious apples are dirty, rotten liars.

Red Delicious and Golden Delicious apples are the only apples I can think of that claim quality of flavor in their names. Winesaps try, but that's a metaphorical comparison, not a claim to superior flavor. Other apple varieties may describe texture (Honeycrisp) or appearance (Jonagold, Idared, and Pink Lady) or have nothing whatsoever to do with flavor, appearance, or texture (Braeburn, Court-pendû Plat, Cortland, Gala, Granny Smith, Gravenstein, McIntosh, and Fuji), but the Red Delicious stands on the claim that it is delicious. The Red Delicious apple is lying to us. It is not delicious at all.

Apples have a variety of purposes, and are often classified as such. In many cases they were bred for their specific purpose. They may be baking apples, dessert apples, slicing apples, cider apples, brandy apples, and probably countless categories I have never dreamt of. Cider apples and brandy apples need an excess of juice and sugar for fermentation. Baking apples need to keep their integrity and stay crisp when baked. Dessert apples tend to resist bruising, have good flavor without too much juice, appeal to customers visually, and are crisp. Where, I ask you, do Red Delicious apples fit in here? Nowhere. That's where. They're

useless.

While now we enjoy the hundreds of common, and thousands of less common cultivars of *malus domestica*, all these varieties come from just one, lone ancestor: *malus sieversii*. Thousands of years ago, there weren't all these varieties of apples. You simply ate an apple. In the same way that wine once was just wine, and beer was once beer, apples were once, simply, apples. Invading armies crossing through central Asia—the region of Almaty in modern Kazakhstan, whose name literally translates to 'father of apples,' is where *malus sieversii* still grows. These armies discovered and spread early apples and their seeds.

* * *

In 1688, seventy-eight varieties were reported under cultivation around London alone. Two thousand years ago, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, hundreds of varieties were estimated in Europe. Now, seven thousand five hundred known cultivars exist. Imagine how many unknown cultivars are out in the world—a single tree in a backyard in Vermont, a pair of trees in a park in Norway, a sapling on the edge of a farm in Washington. Farmers and home gardeners discovered new varieties through lucky mutations on the branch, grafting, and crossing of existing breeds.

Those invading armies that once spread the seeds of apples discovered that apples were convenient. Apples were a source of sugar and calories that could survive for weeks off the tree, they could be dried into rations that would last for months, and they could be made into juice and subsequently fermented into cider then distilled into brandy. Apples were useful.

* * *

Red Delicious apples, however, are useless until their value as "fresh fruit" on our meal trays is taken into account. Then, and only then, can these fruit rejects be seen as *useful*. The Florida Department of Corrections' nutritionist has determined that we need fresh fruit in our diet, yet with food budgets lingering in the pennies per person per meal, Red Delicious apples are often the sorry lot we receive. Sometimes we receive flavorful, juicy, crisp apples with variety names I remember from my life in the free world—apples I would bake with or take to work as a snack. Stickers still adorn the apples, and joyous memories flood back. Some of these apples are deceptive though; their

stickers are missing and I must guess. Most common varieties can be read like a book. Sometimes a Red Delicious masquerades as a small Cameo—a much crisper, tastier variety. Occasionally, I'm fooled and take a bite only to discover I've been lied to. This has happened twice.

Sometimes we receive oranges. One week they're juicy oranges with pale, Trump-skinned flesh that taste more like lemons than oranges, the next week easily-peeled navels. Oranges are rarely deceitful. Most people can size up an orange and know right away its true character. Bananas show up from time to time, but bananas can't lie. They're brutally honest about who they are and how easily they're bruised. During a brief and curious month early in the pandemic, mangoes appeared on meal trays: mysterious tropical fruits that are puzzling to cut up, taste like spicy peaches, and fight back when they're being eaten because of the amount of urushiol in their skin.

All fruit—including the insidious Red Delicious—finds use among us in the end. Every fruit can be bought, sold, or traded. Every fruit can be turned into juice and fermented. But among us true apple connoisseurs, Red Delicious are worthless. And besides, making toilet wine is too much hassle, looks like toxic waste, and smells like a dumpster during a heat wave.

Yet, in all of this, bananas do not claim to be "tasty," oranges do not assert their "succulence," and mangoes do not insist on recognition as "yummy." Only the Red Delicious *demand*s recognition for its flavor.

Thus I call on you, citizens of America: stop the tyranny of the Red Delicious apple. Stop purchasing them. Let them molder at fruit stands and grocery stores. Stop picking them at apple orchards. Let the branches droop with worm-eaten, withered fruit. Stop preparing them. Let the many better varieties of apple have a chance in your pies.

Stop the lie.

Let truthful, honest, and truthfully honest *delicious* fruits have their moment of glory.



Tree #1

Ruben Radillo, California

Pencil on Paper, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

Journal Entry, December 2019

Lance Ryan Ward, California

Mom put some extra money in my account for Christmas to help feed those who didn't have any money this year. I asked Sgt. Bradner if we could have a spread on Christmas Day and he was cool with it. I told the guys. Chris got some extra beans and sausages. Kyle bought a bunch of tortillas. James added some more food. Soon, many guys were dropping food off at my door. Marcus showed up with a bag of Taster's Choice coffee. That's the good stuff.

We put up some tables and I'll be damned if our spread didn't come together as something awesome. We had so much food, there was enough for all one hundred of us. I walked around to every cell to make sure everyone knew about the spread and they were welcome to come. I told them it was for all of us. Pretty much everyone on the tier showed up, although I did carry a few plates to some who didn't. Everyone was mingling, smiling, and laughing. Joy radiated throughout the tier. It was electric. I think everyone felt it.

I usually spend Christmas wishing I was home. It's not usually a great time, but this Christmas was different.

Later in the night, I visited a couple of the lifers. One of them had tears in his eyes. He said he had never seen anything like this since being arrested thirty years earlier. My mom had started something special. Her spark caught and penetrated the darkness, light finding itself in and around the corners, in the nooks and crannies, regardless of race, regardless of crime, obliterating the fear that runs this place, the fear that stops us from recognizing we are all one.

The next day someone drew my mom a card and everyone lined up, eager to sign it and thank her. This was one of the best Christmases I've ever had and it was in prison. Crazy! Who would've guessed? Thanks for another lesson in selflessness, Mom. You're the best!



Tree #2

Ruben Radillo, California

Pencil on Paper, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

New Shoes

Spin aka Kenny Baker, Texas

Justice Arts Coalition

I need a new pair of shoes. I really do. ‘Cause these don’t fit me no more. You see, I’ve walked a mile or two, or three, on the path of my enemy. I’ve seen things that only he has witnessed. I stumbled in his footsteps. Kept the same appointments he has kept. And in doing so, I’ve learned we are not so different—he and I. Our steps may have different meter and stride, his a shuffle and mine a slide. But we have both arrived at this same place and time. And the man I once abhorred, I now respect and adore, and these shoes don’t fit me no more.

I’ve worn the soles and leather down, walking all over town, chasing the whims of delight. I ventured down blind alleys I had no business being in, only to find sorrow and dread, and heartbreak that left me standing cold and alone in my ill-fitting shoes. I traipsed fields of vast expanse searching to harvest peace, and joy, and happenstance. But all I was left with were holes in the souls of these shoes that just don’t fit me no more.

The laces that once provided familiar embraces—woven with strands of envy, and greed, and lust—fail to offer the comfort they once did. And now serve only as bonds tying me to a life I no longer desire.

The threads of ignorance that held together the fabric of my contempt and intolerance are now bursting at the seams, unable to restrain the growth I’ve experienced, and the new form I have taken.

The brand on the side bearing the symbol of a prestigious god of wealth and power I just HAD to have seems almost comical now. A ridiculous ruin of an ancient era. A repugnant eye-sore straining these shoes that most certainly don’t fit me no more.

Looking back on the beach that was my life, I see the footprints in the sand and the tracks of two, and sometimes one, where you carried me Lord, when I felt I could go no further. The mistakes and missteps I made were plentiful. But I have no regrets, because without them I wouldn’t be me.

And as I push off that shore to journey to a different destination—led by the shining star of my Savior Jesus Christ, and powered by the Holy Spirit that fills our sails—I leave behind the trappings of my old life. To sit there upon the sand, next to that worn out pair of shoes that don’t fit me no more.

Anniversary Dance

Spin aka Kenny Baker, Texas

Justice Arts Coalition

Your first dance partner was your father. You were seven and a fan of Charlie Brown, so you dressed up as Woodstock, the little bird, for Halloween, and he was your Snoopy. As he walked you through your neighborhood bartering for tricks and treats, he watched you fly from cloud to cloud, soaring like an eagle full of spirit and delight. Later that evening at a neighbor's party, your first dance was standing on his feet so he could show you how.

"I'm not too heavy, am I, Daddy?"

"No, little bird, you're as light as a feather."

You fell in love that night with the joy of dancing and decided to dedicate your life to it. You took classes and studied the greatest dancers until you could match anyone step for step; the word *prodigy* became entwined with your name. Your proud father watched and gleamed. Ever since your mother died in childbirth, he had parented for two, and he swore to give you everything your heart desired. But when you were fourteen, he had a heart attack—leaving you to dance alone.

Your next partner was necessity—a pole. You hated the "game" and the lust in their eyes as you paraded onstage for their desire. It was the only way you could pay the rent and afford the classes you loved. So you dressed in little to nothing five nights a week, still a bird but caged and desperately wanting to be freed. That's when you found your way to *my* dance floor.

It was the '80s and I was DJing at a progressive club, establishing my own style and sound. You loved the freedom of dancing without a partner—a brave new concept at the time—and you did so with reckless abandonment. My dance floor was the heaven you floated through with elegance and grace. I watched with wonder from my booth as I saw ballet, jazz, and modern, soft shoe, tap, and tribal blend into a celebration dance of life. You finally perched beside my booth on a stage I set for the best dancers and made it your home.

"Hi, they call me Little Bird."

"Hi yourself, they call me Spin."

"I LOVE your music. It's AWESOME!"

"Thanks, I love to watch you dance."

And with that, you found a new partner—me.

Ours was a courtship of rhythm. Hearts syncopated to our own beat. Our bodies swayed and mingled until the boundaries between us blurred. I fell head over heels for you—and you for me. We pondered how we ever got this far without one another, and we envisioned a lifelong dance together. But *life*, as it often does, had other plans for us.

"We need to talk," you said, tears in your eyes. "An old friend of my instructor saw me in class today and thinks I have what it takes to make it on the big stage. He said he could get me an audition for a show he's recasting about cats or something. It sounds a little weird, but if it hits, it could be big for me."

My heart was breaking.

"I don't think I'm ready. I'm not good enough for Broadway. And I don't want to leave you."

It was your dream, your life's passion. I saw my future slipping away. But I knew if I held you back, you would resent me for the rest of our lives. How could I deny you the shot of a lifetime?

"That's bullshit and you know it! You were born for the stage. It's what you've been training for—LIVING for—all your life."

"But what about my life with you?"

"I only have two more semesters here and then I'll have my degree. I'll come join you the day after graduation. I'm sure there are plenty of places I can spin in NYC. Go my love! Follow your dream."

The next day, my Little Bird, you took flight and never looked back.

You made the cut, but just barely. An understudy for two roles and a bit player in several scenes. A chorus line was your partner now. Phone calls and letters were weekly, almost daily affairs. We kidded about you being the cat that ate the canary. But as you sank into a new rhythm, ours grew fainter. I immersed myself in school and work to

bury the pain of missing you.

Your life wasn't easy, filled with constant rehearsals and performances. You had to hustle to pay bills and live the dream. Being in a hit show doesn't mean you're making bank—especially if you're not a lead performer. Then came your chance to shine. The principal dancer you understudied was injured. But the role went to a friend of yours who was sleeping with the director, and you learned just how rotten the Big Apple can be.

You wanted to hang up your dancing shoes, so you called me—in tears—to cry on my shoulder. I heard you, talked you off the ledge, and used every ounce of willpower I had to keep from begging you to come home. I could *feel* your pain. I knew your whole world had been shattered, but I couldn't let you quit. I swallowed my feelings and built you back up, convincing you to hold on to your dreams. You did, begrudgingly. You soldiered on.

Just as real apples have worms, so does the Big one. In your despair, you fell in with the wrong crowd and the “worms” found you. They fed on you, sucked the life out of you, and introduced you to a new dance partner, one I wish you had never met.

She was a Silver Girl, promising to restore all your dreams and lift you to heights you could only imagine. Plunging directly into your soul, she made you think you were on top of the world. All the time, you were in a nose dive, plummeting toward the ground.

I reached out in letters and phone calls, to no avail. I went searching for you, digging through the muck and the mire of the “Gem of the East” for my Little Bird. You were nowhere to be found. I returned home—fit to be tied.

Then, on the day when the rest of the world was exchanging candy hearts and declarations of love, you called me collect from a pay phone.

“I'm done, Spin. I've had enough.
I can't take it anymore.”

“Come home my love.
Come back to me and
we can build a life
where we can chase your
dreams together. Ok?”

“Ok.”

“Do you need some money?”

I can wire you some in an hour.”

“That would be great.”

“I'll meet you at the airport.
When are you leaving?”

“I have a couple of things
I have to take care of here,
but I can be home by the weekend.
I'll call you tomorrow after I buy the ticket.”

“That will be fine.
I'll be waiting for your call.
I love you, babe.”

“I love you too. Bye.”

That was the last time I heard you sing, Little Bird. I don't know if it was the excitement of coming home, the fear of facing your failures, or the loneliness of watching as everyone around you was falling in love. But you decided to have one final dance with your silver friend, and she took you someplace you could never return from.

Two weeks later, I watched as the woman I saw race through the heavens was lowered six feet into the ground. I didn't say my goodbyes to you that day because I wasn't ready to let you go.

I hate funerals and hate going to cemeteries even more. But I promised you, my love, I would return to see you again. It took me ten years to get here, Little Bird. And I am finally ready—ready for our Last Dance.

To dance on feathered feet,
To slide from side to side,
To soar the heavens like a bird,
To stretch your wings and fly.

This was your lifelong dream,
My love, one I would never deny.
I've seen the needle and the damage done,
Now all that's left is Goodbye.



Botanical Arts
Jonathan Marvin, California
Pencil on Paper, 2020
Project PAINT Artwork



Botanical Arts
Jonathan Marvin, California
Pencil on Paper, 2020
Project PAINT Artwork



Stuck in Transition

John W. Zenc, California

2022

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork

Stuck in Transition Story

John W. Zenc, California

Justice Arts Coalition

Being in prison the past 45 years, I have seen so many sad things. One that comes to mind is the males here who want to become a woman. They act the part and try to look the part. The problem is, the prison population hazes and makes fun of these people. The prison staff, or a large percentage of the staff, make ugly comments to these transgender individuals. They do this out of pure ignorance, and in some cases, pure hate. I have seen this with my own eyes. The transgender individuals are really hurt. They cry. They vent. But hazing continues all the time. All these individuals want to do is be who they are, without all the hateful, ugly comments. Many of these transgender people only want peace in their lives, and to complete their transition into the person they want to be. But in prison, transition is a major obstacle for them because of all the hazing. Over the years, I have seen some of these gentle people go into deep depression, and in one case, commit suicide.

The staff and fellow prison dwellers need to be taught more of how to treat people because to become a better person, one needs to show love, care, and understanding for their fellow human beings. Compassion is the key to this. It seems so many people only care about money or themselves. The prison system needs to train the staff in sensitivity, then make them aware of how severely simple hateful comments affect people, in prison and out.

The prison system needs to teach classes on sensitivity because many inmates, nearly all, one day will be released back into society. Wouldn't it be nice to see these individuals be paroled with a better attitude than when they came to prison?

I am not only an artist; I am an activist and advocate for better prison conditions. I want to help society understand what happens in prison.

Thank you,
John W. Zenc

Look Away

Gloria D. Nixon-John, Michigan

The walk up the wide ceremonial steps to the prison ends at a massive oak door reinforced with forged iron bolts and hinges. I think: medieval darkness and torture. Carved into stone just above the door, in a flourished script, are the words, “Abandon all hope ye who enter here.”

Do I hear a Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum?

I remind myself that I am a visitor, that I could turn and leave, could walk back toward the pristine autumn day in western Kentucky. I am visiting the maximum-security penitentiary; I have come to conduct research into the notorious 1975 murder of a child and the subsequent incarceration of a sixteen-year-old boy on death row. This is not a joyous place, but why would someone carve such a dark message (albeit from Dante) over a prison door? Why should punishment lead to hopelessness?

Before I have the chance to push the call button, the door grinds open. I step over the threshold, and as my eyes adjust to the dark hall, I am hit by a putrid mix of odors: fried food (bologna?), hydraulic fluid, ammonia, and human waste. I resist putting my hands over my nose and mouth. I notice that despite the odor, the prison reception area looks clean; the floors are buffed and polished, walls recently painted with layers so thick as to resemble set custard.

Two uniformed guards walk around a battered, L-shaped desk to greet me. One is a tall Pillsbury Dough Boy. The other, small and sinewy like Pee-wee Herman, smiles and glances sideways, eyebrows up, as if to say, *Are you sure about this?* The taller guard asks to see my driver’s license, then tells me to hand over my belongings: purse, notebook, cell phone, the gold chain around my neck, everything but my wedding ring. Pee-wee asks me to sign a document that exempts the prison from liability. My signature is shaky like a young child’s just learning cursive.

Next, a forty-something woman with a steel gray bun atop her head comes out from a shadowy corner toward me. She asks me to lift my arms and take a military stance.

Should I salute?

Seeing my confusion, she tells me to stand with my feet apart; she demonstrates the position, her hands up and to the side as if posing for

crucifixion. I imitate her stance. Her gloved hands move up and down my sides, back, and legs. Lastly, she uses two fingers to check under one breast and the other, as if drawing two big smiles with fingerpaints.

“All A-Okay,” she says in a no-nonsense monotone to all of us.

One guard stands in front of me, one behind me, my little bivouac, and we begin to move into the prison. Floor-to-ceiling metal bars roll open, then slam shut in our wake; my heart pounds, a hard three-fourth rhythm. My mouth leaches. I taste pennies, fear. I could turn and leave. Was it Thoreau who said to do what you are most afraid to do? Or was that Emerson? My father once told me, “If you go into dark places, you should expect dark things.”

I get the speech for tourists. The prison was built by Italian stonemasons centuries ago—evident in the arched window and door frames, the turrets and ornate towers that I saw as I walked up to the hulking structure. I learn that the prison has come to be called The Castle. Like Dorothy in a strange Wonderland, I have many questions. I want to ask if there’s a dungeon. I want to ask if there are ghosts.

“Does anyone ever escape?” I ask, thinking why wouldn’t they all try to escape? I am not given answers to my questions; instead, I am given details: the number of inmates in general population, the number of inmates on the row. Doughboy laughs as he tells me that the men on the row, the ones wearing the orange jumpsuits, are the best behaved, that many of them have been on the row for over twenty-five years, and yet they think that every day may be their last. Most get religion, too. His laughter echoes, drops heavily, a stone into quicksand.

“Whatever you do, don’t stare,” Pee-wee instructs. “No eye contact. You could incite anger, violence. Some even throw feces.”

“Feces is his grown-up word for shit,” Doughboy adds. His smirk is maniacal.

I wonder how I could possibly use this visit for my writing, and if I will be able to adequately describe the horror that is this setting. If I hope to eventually write a book about the notorious case, I need details. I have come for details. I have to look. Still, I am ashamed. Voyeur. User. Opportunist. I decide to look at everything but faces. I will avoid eyes.

More rolling bars, and now we are in the intake area. I am told this is where new inmates are “inspected.” I think bugs under a microscope; I think of the neighborhood bully who burns ants under a magnifying glass.

“They are shaved everywhere...I mean everywhere...inspected

everywhere too. Like, bend over Betty. Checked for lice and contraband...all cavities. Washed down with antiseptic soap, visited by the doc before they get a brand-new set of clothes, ushered to their new accommodations.”

Again, that laugh, but this time I moan, shake my head, hoping to communicate *not funny*.

We move forward into a larger room, where a series of cubicles are tucked against a wall, cubicles like one might see in any office building in America, but instead of decorative partitions, these cubicles are enclosed in wire fencing like large dog pens. Uniformed guards sit at desks behind the gated enclosures shuffling paper or talking on a phone or into a walkie-talkie. The writing over the front door of the prison makes more sense now. This is purgatory. Not too bad; not good either. I know we are going deeper. I know what comes after purgatory.

The iron gate we just passed through opens again, and two guards enter with a muscled young man, early twenties I would guess. His head shaved, his hands cuffed behind his back, his ankles chained together just wide enough to allow small steps Geisha style. One guard on each side. They pull him along by his elbows. I wish I could tell him not to abandon hope. I feel desperate to tell him I am sorry for him, I don't judge him, I am sorry, so sorry. I want to tell him someone loves him. I want to lift the impossible shadow moving over him, over us. He is looking down at his leg irons, most likely to keep balance, so it is easy to avoid his face, his eyes. I know I will think of him long after my visit here.

Next, we begin what the guard calls “our walk of the walks.” We witness one long walkway after another, witness long passageways that lead to cells on either side. The PC term is cells, but they are cages. I have to stop myself from saying, *Oh God, what is this?*

Men in cages, some leaning against the iron bars that keep them in, their arms outstretched into the walkway like unruly ivy. I think zoo. One inmate, his muscled back to us, is standing over a commode. Embarrassed, I look away.

He yells, “Jesus, can't even take a piss alone.”

The last walk is not a walk like I've come to expect; it appears to be an empty hallway until I see there are indeed cells, but instead of the iron bars, the doors are solid metal with a narrow slat about two-thirds up.

“This is solitary, the hole, containment unit. Call it what you like.”

As we turn away, I hear a loud pleading voice from behind one of those doors.

“Lady,” the voice echoes, “help me, can you help me?”

Then out of a slat come fingers, a flurry of white, like ticker tape floating up, twirling down. Toilet paper followed by a brown splat. We move away quickly. There are no visible faces here to avoid.

The guard laments that he cannot show me the lethal injection room. “But,” he says, channeling a Barnum & Bailey barker, “we can go see Old Sparky.” I am glad he has not offered a guillotine, a scaffold.

I know that Old Sparky is a sadistic euphemism for the electric chair. I do, and do not, want to see Old Sparky. I follow along for another history lesson. Before 1998, when the lethal injection became law, there were 164 males between the ages of 16 and 71 executed in the electric chair at the prison. Long ago, some were just horse thieves, some just stole chickens. The last one was Harold McQueen in 1997. I have heard Harold's story, heard he looked like a rock star. Everyone loved him. It was his decision to die rather than go on living on the row.

Doughboy says in a voice that smacks of smart aleck, “But here's a tidbit for you. In 1929, seven men were executed here in one night. The old-timers say all of the lights in town dimmed, and Old Sparky nearly burst into flames.”

The electric chair sits in the middle of a small room. A series of thick cords extends from somewhere under the chair to an open box not unlike the one in my basement, just larger. It all looks makeshift, and I wish someone would close the box.

I am told that behind the glass partition directly across from the chair is an observation room, and I can see three rows of chairs set up theater-style just beyond the glass. When I get the nerve to look closely at the electric chair, I see that it is made of rough oak shabbily cut; it looks like an oversized highchair. Thick black leather straps are positioned to anchor down the head, arms, and legs of the condemned.

“Go ahead and sit in it. Cheap thrill.” Doughboy's words are strangely light-hearted, inappropriate.

I have to stretch and hoist myself up to sit in the chair. I have to scoot back to place my head against the headrest. I look down at the armrests to notice small palm-sized indentations at the ends, small valleys worried into the wood. I can't escape thinking, *As I walk through the valley...*I place my palms into those valleys—a good fit.

A buzzing in my ears. I am on a ledge ready to be pushed over

and down, down, down. Am I going to faint? I muster toward consciousness, take a deep breath, look up and forward into the glass that separates me from the observation area. I see a face reflected in the glass.

There is no avoiding the face I see there. It is my face. This time I do not look away. A surge of adrenaline. Fear swells and catches in my ribcage. I sit stunned for several minutes before I decide I need to get up, get away, leave the chamber, leave the prison. I tell the guards that I don't feel well, that I have to get out.

They lead me back to gather my belongings.

Once the door moans open and I see the light of day, I lunge out. I don't feel safe until I am in my car driving away. A mile out, I pull over and sob, gasp for breath, sob some more.

It will be several months before I return to the prison. In fact, I return several times to conduct interviews with one of the inmates who was on the row in 1975 and has information about the case I am researching. I never go back into the prison's bowels.

Instead, I conduct interviews in the visitors' area, a relaxed place where guards mill around, and each inmate sits at a small table across from one or two visitors. I look forward to my visits.

Although the rules are somewhat lax in the visiting areas, cameras monitor every action, every word. Still, against the rules, on one occasion I reach out for the hand of my visitee, thinking human contact will do us both good. I hold on to his hand, thinking of the scene from *Peter Pan* where Wendy shows the children how to fly up, up, and away.

Over the years, I hear the life stories of the men on death row. Some come from good families; some were physically abused or raised without basic necessities. Some have special needs; others are emotionally ill. I learn about the small decisions they made that led to the larger, sometimes horrible decisions that landed them here. I learn about their worries for their loved ones on the outside, learn about their guilt, and, yes, innocence, and also their hopes for forgiveness. Sometimes the stories make me cry; sometimes I laugh.

I also know that I will never forget the young man I saw chained, shackled, and dragged along toward his punishment. I will never be free of my reflection sitting in Old Sparky. These experiences have reshaped me in some inexplicable way.

If you are thinking this telling is all too tidy, too neat, too emotionally satisfying, too wrapped up for general consumption, you

are correct. Sure, sometimes I joke about the experience, tell those who ask questions about my visits that I now have friends in low, low places. The fact is that my experiences have changed me.

I am a teacher, and now when I stand before a classroom of teens or young adults, I find myself counting the young men. I calculate (based on recent statistics) the likelihood of how many of them might be dragged into a prison, cuffed, chained, and shackled. I know that in a class with thirty males, 4.6 are likely to be incarcerated. Few of those will end up on death row. Some will wind up in cages elsewhere in the bowels of a prison. Some will wind up in cages without a view of anything but walls and a slat in one wall for communication and food.

The odors in a school cafeteria can sometimes call up the odors I smelled on the inside and lead to waves of nausea, and I have to leave, look for a door to the outside, a door that will get me to light and air.

This isn't the worst of it. I don't just have nightmares about my close encounter with Old Sparky. I try to avoid my reflection in windows and glass doors because my reflection in glass looks a bit unearthly, background and foreground all at once, making me feel in limbo: not here, not there, possibly in the chair. I can no longer tolerate those who believe in the death penalty, who feel compelled to tell me so, who believe that the death penalty is a deterrent, blah, blah, blah. But before I make myself scarce, I often suggest they contact that same maximum-security prison I visited in western Kentucky.

"It's a hoot," I tell them. "They even let you sit in the electric chair."



City of Widows
Juan Hernandez, Illinois
Watercolor, 2021



Maya Angelou
Juan Hernandez, Illinois
Watercolor, 2021



Splash Upon the Sea Wall

West Isle Virus, Texas

Anywhere Else

Alex Aldrich, Virginia

I haven't left this acre once in the eight years since I arrived, so I suppose I should have something to say about it. When I received my sentence, I assumed that punishment was all about time; I failed to consider the role of place. Time's tyranny is nothing new, but spending those years trapped in place has been a revelation. Place has become my tormentor and my teacher.

I arrived here on my birthday. It was spring, but the only plants growing on the rec yard were weeds. I was greeted through a chain link fence by the hard stares of menacing strangers. I hadn't yet learned to appreciate them, the weeds or the people, as my connections to life, my daily reminders that I am alive and not alone. I hadn't yet recognized the rec yard as a sacred space where cool wind and warm sunshine embrace all. I hadn't yet come to understand it as the open hatch to the sky. I looked down and walked silently into a world of unforgiveness.

That was eight years ago. Life persists, and it will not be silenced by steel or concrete, by shame or rage. Life in a cage is still life, and there is still much to be said. Here I've cursed God. Here I've learned hate. Here I've learned forgiveness. Here I've survived. Here I've found poetry. Here I have a voice.



KN95

*Jonathan Marvin, California
Collage on Manila Folder, 2021
Project PAINT Artwork*

Requiescat in Pace

J. Terence Schelble, Arizona

I found out today that he died while I was in prison. Often homeless and frequently incarcerated, I picture him sitting somewhere random. Like a field of dead grass. Or in an abandoned dirt lot. Or maybe in the middle of a pair of railroad tracks. Like a friend went out and found him wherever he happened to be and put a bottle of beer in his hands. Don't quit now. His voice registered somewhere between a groan and a slur. I always felt a little queasy after hearing him speak. And then there was his face. Forty-four years of self-destruction. Nose broken and rebroken and broken again. Half his teeth missing. The left half. They say he got tuberculosis in prison. And that he died. I don't know if it was the tuberculosis that finally got him or some other disease. Or maybe he just OD'd. Or lost one too many fights. I'm sure someone somewhere knows how he actually died, but I don't want to know. I prefer not knowing. He never backed down from a fight, but was always outmatched. He earned his flattened nose the hard way. Stand up and slap the chessboard off the table. Fuck your checkmate. He was like that. Couldn't help it. I don't know if deep down he was actually a decent human being or if he was just the piece of shit he seemed to be. The art of self-destruction involves endless sacrifice and propriety is its first victim. Then it's morality. And in the end it's you yourself, your body, that has to go. But along the way he got to experience things the rest of us never do. Like deliberately and repeatedly driving his car off a cliff. Did he change his mind on the way down? I don't think he did. And what shape did his death take? An apologetic friend who said it was time to leave? Or something else, something simpler, like the flashing wings of a bird or the smell of mint leaves or something important. Like forgiveness or a forgotten grief or the taste of something so sweet and so bitter that you know it has to be true. Like saying goodbye forever. But I don't really know what it meant to him or means to me, except that now he's gone and that I hope he can finally rest in peace.

2021



Mona Lisa

Kevin Smith, California

Acrylic on Paper, 2020

Project PAINT Artwork

Heroes and Kin

Cat Newton, New York

It was graduation day, but this ceremony would be different from any I had attended. There were no academic degrees being conferred, no caps, no gowns. It was the culmination of the winter cycle of a group named Raising My Voice Kin, or “Kin,” a five-week workshop for people with incarcerated loved ones. There, participants worked to express, through writing and speaking, their feelings on incarceration and the resulting trauma. On the last day of the program, participants would be honored in front of their friends and families. There would be pictures taken, speeches given, and certificates of completion awarded. I had been asked to give the first speech, and I didn’t know if I’d make it in time.

I had heard about Kin while reporting on programs that help formerly incarcerated men and women transition back into society, including one called Circles of Support. Its program coordinator, Linda Steele, told me after years of working specifically with the formerly incarcerated, Circles of Support had come to realize that the families of those they worked with needed help too. And so, Raising My Voice Kin was born.

I told Steele I wanted to write about the program. She was skeptical. Steele talked to Lila Garcia, her co-worker who runs the program, and they agreed, if I would also participate as one of the volunteer coaches.

Lila and I met during my first story about Circles of Support, and in the weeks leading up to Kin, I pestered her for details about the upcoming group. She offered few.

But I learned before the cycle started, Lila spoke to participants and volunteers on the phone, often more than once. She cultivated a sense of trust and camaraderie before they’d ever met in person. If Lila could make each participant feel they had a friend in the program before they entered St. Paul’s Church for the first time, the chances of an open and honest group would increase exponentially.

It is not an overstatement to say that the program worked because of Lila. She was a master at building confidence in others and set the tone for everything we did. She believed when you spoke about someone’s story, you needed to consider their mindset. Lila said on the

first day that criticism wouldn't work; it would make them take a step back.

Early on, Lila developed inside jokes with each participant, but in a way that let everyone else in on the fun. She teased one participant, Jose, for being the only man in the group, and everyone laughed and followed suit. She addressed Tina, the shyest participant, exclusively as "Tina Girl." Lila had the ability to make people feel at ease, to feel vulnerable yet welcome, if only for three hours each Saturday.

On the first day of the program, Lila went over the agenda for the afternoon's exercises. Jose asked her for clarification about what would come in the weeks ahead. Lila, shaking her head, laughed and told him he already had all the information he needed to complete the day's work.

Lila explained to Jose and the others that sometimes you needed to approach life one day at a time, or even one minute at a time when things get hard.

She said, "I was doing one second at a time for a while there."

Lila's husband died at the end of 2019, leaving her with five school-aged children to take care of. She'd missed work for a while, and this was her first cycle back since her loss. She never spoke of her pain with the group. She always stayed positive, to make it about the participants, and not herself. Once, in a group discussion about how to best give a speech, someone suggested that making eye contact with the audience was important. She admitted she used to hate when people looked her in the eye during a tough time. When they did, she felt they could see what she was feeling. She wasn't wrong; her eyes had a habit of exposing her sadness, in spite of her best efforts to hide it.

Nearly twenty minutes late, I rushed up the steps of the church. I looked around, breathless, then sighed with relief. I may have been behind, but so was everyone else. I was one of the first to arrive.

I looked across the auditorium for Lila, as I had on Kin's first day. As always, she was there, standing next to the rows of metal folding chairs set to face the stage. I rushed over, and we embraced. I asked her how she was, and she smiled.

On the seats of the folding chairs, Lila had placed the graduation programs she'd designed and printed. Each program listed the names of the six graduates on the cover, with photos of four of them displayed

underneath. The faces of two participants, Sharon and Kaushion, were missing. She explained both women had ignored her requests for pictures.

Tina entered the auditorium first with her family. They sat in the second row, behind the graduates. Tina's son chose a seat directly behind his mother.

The first day of the program, Tina could barely make eye contact with me and the others. As we went around the room and introduced ourselves, Tina said, with some effort, "I want my testimony today to mean something....It's not going to mean anything if I don't share it."

Around the room, heads nodded encouragingly in Tina's direction as she blushed and looked down at the table.

"If you don't have a test, you don't have a testimony," said Carlyn, one of the volunteer coaches and a congregant of St. Paul's. Fingers snapped around the table.

As the weeks progressed, Tina shared bit by bit why she decided to participate in Kin. Years before, her son had fallen in with the wrong crowd. Despite her pleas and best efforts, he began to run with gang members in the Bronx. He had been beat up in the park so badly one day that quiet, reserved Tina had grabbed a baseball bat, intent on bashing those who'd harmed her son. She recalled that she had to be physically restrained by her family to keep her from leaving the house and finding the men. But her son didn't stop running the streets.

One night, she had a heart problem and was rushed to the hospital. She'd checked in and was under the care of doctors when her cellphone rang. It was her son. He and his friends had been arrested and were being held on felony charges that could yield a sentence of twenty-five years in prison.

She didn't think. She rushed out of the hospital against her doctor's orders and ran to her son. At the bail hearing, her son was released into her custody. She remembered after the proceedings, the assistant district attorney came up to them and asked her son if he knew why he was being released when none of his friends were.

"Thank your mother," said the ADA.

She had been the only parent to show up for any of the arrested minors.

Their ordeal wasn't over. Her son acted out in school and got

arrested again. Because he was still awaiting trial for the previous incident, there was no bail hearing. He went straight to Rikers Island, and she began fighting for his release. She called anyone and everyone involved in the proceedings, and argued on her son's behalf. After 31 days, she succeeded. Her son was released and placed on probation for the remainder of the seven-year sentence.

Today, quiet Tina was one of the group's two keynote speakers after being nominated by her fellow participants. She would talk about her family's experience with the criminal justice system in a speech she titled "A Mother's Undying Love."

I went up to her, and we hugged. I congratulated her and asked how she was feeling about speaking. She was nervous. I told her she'd be wonderful. She blushed, and asked if I wanted to meet her son.

I walked up to Lila, who was waiting by the door.

She said, "Have you heard from Kaushion?"

I hadn't. Kaushion had missed group the week before, but she told Lila she'd be coming to graduation.

Lila sighed.

I hoped she'd show up. Kaushion, whose given name was Celeste, and I had gotten closer in the past weeks. She'd even had me over to her apartment to talk about her life. When the elevator let me off on her floor, I let blaring gospel music lead me to her door. The hat she'd worn to the first meeting of Kin—baby blue and fitted with bold white lettering that said, "SOUL NOT FOR SALE"—hung prominently on her living room wall.

The first day of the program, participants worked with volunteer coaches to write about a memory they had of someone that was or is currently incarcerated. I noticed her and her hat then. Everyone else was taking notes on their worksheet, but her page was blank. When it came time for the participants to read what they'd written, I wondered if she'd get to share her story. She did, and she commanded the room.

Kaushion explained she didn't like to write things down because she worried this would ruin the authenticity of her story. She wanted it to feel alive, she said. So she stood at the front of the table and introduced herself as a reformed gang member. She explained she had many brothers and sisters, though they weren't related by blood. She had heard that a friend's friend—one she'd never met—was locked up,

and that he had no shoes or appropriate clothing to wear inside. So she went to visit him and brought him the things he needed. She said she left with a new brother.

The next week, she didn't write anything down. Nor the next.

In her apartment, I asked her about this.

"Oh, you noticed?" she said, laughing.

She repeated that she liked things to be natural. But when I pushed her, she admitted that in the past, she'd been belittled at work for spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. She decided then that she was done with writing, work-related or not.

The third week of Kin, she seemed reluctant to speak. Other participants had given her "strength-based" feedback on how to improve, telling her to stay still, to make eye contact. She had shrugged it off and said she hadn't wanted to come to group that day.

At twenty-six, she was the youngest participant in Kin, and she'd had a rough life. She'd had two children already, but neither lived with her, and in both cases, she'd been physically assaulted by the child's father during her pregnancy. She relayed this information calmly, as if it were normal. And, for her, it was.

As I was leaving her apartment, a package arrived. She told me it was the outfit she had ordered from Amazon for graduation day, and she showed me a picture of how it looked on the model.

On graduation day, Lila asked me to text Kaushion, to see where she was, and ask if she was still coming. I kept thinking back to the dress. I hoped she would make it in time.

I opened my phone and went to her name. Our last message was from the previous Saturday. She hadn't come to that final session, and I had texted her to see if she was okay. She didn't text back. I asked Lila if she had spoken with Kaushion since last week, and she nodded. Kaushion had stayed home because someone in her family was killed.

I didn't know which family Lila was referring to. Kaushion had said repeatedly she considered her fellow gang members family. She would say "brother" or "sister" or "mother" to explain someone's significance in her life, but frequently I'd have to stop and clarify if it was her biological family or her gang family. More often than not it was the latter.

As I went to text her, Lila stopped me. Kaushion had answered. She had been counting on her mother, her biological one, to pick her up and take her to graduation, and to be there for the celebration. She

waited, but her mother never came. Kaushion told Lila she was on her way, presumably alone.

Sharon arrived next, entering the auditorium by herself. Her tiny frame was enveloped by her baggy clothing.

I was Sharon's assigned volunteer coach. She spoke low and soft, and sometimes worked through ideas out loud, with no indication if what she was saying was meant for herself or the person listening to her. That first week, Lila had asked the participants to tell a two-minute story about a time they had spent with an incarcerated loved one.

Sharon was stumped. She hadn't come to Kin to deal with the trauma of a loved one's incarceration. Instead, she was the one who'd been incarcerated. She'd only recently been released and was still finding her footing.

I suggested she write about a time her daughter had visited her while she was incarcerated. She liked the idea. She wrote slowly, painstakingly etching each sentence before pausing to show it to me for validation. I told her she was doing great. When time was up, Sharon shot her hand in the air to share first.

Her story was set years ago, when her daughter was still a child. Sharon remembered that when her daughter came into the visiting room, she would exclaim, "Mommy!" and run into her arms. Sharon said that the hardest part of her time was watching her daughter leave after the visit ended.

By the second session, Sharon had come down with a cold, and had trouble concentrating. The third week, she was even worse, and she essentially slept through the group altogether. That session, Lila asked the participants what their favorite part of Kin was so far. When it was Sharon's turn, I nudged her to wake up. Lila repeated the question for her, and Sharon, with little hesitation, answered that her favorite part of the program was coming and seeing everyone for those few hours every week.

Sharon lived alone, in a single-room occupancy building on the Upper West Side. When she entered the auditorium each week, she'd call out, "Hello, family!" For Sharon, the program wasn't just about learning to speak, or learning to process her feelings. It was having somewhere to be, and people to be with.

Rhonda had been planning on bringing her two youngest children and a cousin to the graduation. But nearly an hour past the designated start time, they hadn't arrived. While we waited, Lila told me two days ago Rhonda had written her a note about how much the group meant to her.

Rhonda was the first Kin participant I spoke to at the program's start. She was immediately warm and friendly, showing me pictures of her many home renovation projects, and videos of her children's dance routines. She was, outwardly, the most forthcoming participant. But Rhonda never let herself forget that I was writing about the group, even for a minute. She was the participant I spoke to the most, and the participant I knew the least about.

Rhonda tended to stand with her hand on her heart and smile when she recounted uncomfortable memories, her body language completely disconnected from the stories she told. It was clear that she had endured a difficult childhood, and Rhonda spoke of the trauma she'd experienced with no specifics, referring to it as "abuse" and nothing more. She had an uncanny ability to discuss deep feelings with no context, leaving listeners to draw their own assumptions about what might have taken place.

Rhonda often called herself the black sheep of her family. She said she had been betrayed by trusted family members on more than one occasion and left to fend for herself. She said she had no trusted male role models because her male family members on both sides had been in and out of prison all her life. When I asked about her family dynamics, she said women had been holding down the fort for decades.

Rhonda had first been placed in foster care when she was seven years old, and she had been in and out of that system until she was discharged at twenty-one, with two children and nowhere to go except the shelter system. She said from that moment on she never asked anyone for anything.

When I visited her at home after the program ended, I sat in the living room. There were large cans of paint on the shelves, and multiple empty fish tanks that had once lined the walls for decoration.

While I was there, Rhonda brought up the note she had sent to Lila before the graduation. She referred to it as a poem, and I asked if she could send it to me. As I left her apartment, the text went through. It was a picture of a lined piece of paper, on which she had written a little

rhyming paragraph. The last sentence read, “I’m thankful for my new family, and the new chapters we will build together.”

As I walked toward the elevator, she called out to me from her apartment doorway. I ran back, thinking she had decided to let me in, that she might be ready to tell me more than the surface story. Instead, she asked me about the weather, wondering if a light jacket would be an okay choice for the day to come.

An hour after the graduation ceremony was scheduled to start, Lila decided we had to begin, even though Rhonda and Kaushion had yet to arrive. I took my seat, and Lila sat beside me as Father Hamblin of St. Paul’s got up to perform an invocation. We bowed our heads and prayed together. Lila stood and welcomed the participants and their friends and families to the graduation. Then she introduced me.

I walked towards the front of the room and as I looked out, I could feel my hands shaking. I’d given speeches before; I’d spoken in front of large crowds. But here I was, more nervous than I had ever been before.

The participants had dressed up and brought their families to this event. They had traveled to Flatbush, mainly from Uptown and the Bronx, braving the February winds and weekend train delays because it was important to them. Because they wanted to share this experience with their loved ones and tell about the work they had done. Because they wanted to share their stories.

In the second week of the program, Lila passed out worksheets describing and illustrating how to tell a story with a basic beginning, middle, and end structure. She talked to participants about how their stories needed a hook and a kicker. We went over storytelling techniques and narrative building blocks. When I had begun to think about what to say at graduation, I realized that I needed to apply what Lila had talked about to my own speech.

Joseph Campbell, the comparative mythology scholar, believed across all differing mythologies, archetypal heroes embark on the same journey as one another. Though the specifics might change, the structure of their story remains essentially the same.

People envision heroes as individuals in capes fighting off enemies to save the world. Our society is so used to defining our heroes by their external foes and abilities that we’ve forgotten that battling internal struggles and unseen demons is just as noble a feat as battling an

archnemesis.

The participants of Kin are the heroes of their own journeys. They have struggled and fought, and by making the decision to join and participate in Kin, they actively faced their demons and confronted the tribulations placed along their path. But the key to understanding their ordeals couldn’t be discovered in an old book or an old storytelling philosophy.

Steadying my hands, I smiled and began. I talked about the principles of catharsis and fellowship. I talked about how many of them were the collateral damage of this country’s incarceration politics. But mainly I talked about them.

I addressed each of the Kin participants, speaking of their growth, tenacity, resilience, and strength. I told them they were heroes, and I was grateful to have witnessed a part of their journey. But, unlike these mythological protagonists, the participants of Kin haven’t finished their stories. Their endings are still being written. But now, thanks to Kin, they know they aren’t alone in their struggle.

I took my seat, and Tina spoke next. Her son, the cause of pain and suffering and utter devotion she described in her speech, held up his phone to record his mother’s moment. When she finished, he stood up to clap for her, and with tears in their eyes, they embraced.

Rhonda, flanked by two of her children, snuck in soon after and took a seat. She waved excitedly.

It was then time for the certificates. Lila called each participant’s name, and one by one, they came up to accept their diploma. Each of them paused before accepting it fully, to better pose for the photos documenting the occasion. They each embraced Lila. A few cried.

Once Lila finished, the Kin cohort stood again, to give Lila flowers, thanking her for how she’d led the group, and for how she’d always known the right thing to say.

And with that, it was done. We stayed a while longer, eating lunch together for the last time. I walked past Rhonda’s children, who were performing a choreographed dance routine which Rhonda had joined in on, half for fun, half to embarrass them. As I watched them step to an unheard beat, Kaushion opened the door to the auditorium. When she entered, all the participants and volunteers yelled her name. She smiled wide and came to say hi. She wasn’t wearing the dress she’d shown me. I didn’t ask why; I was just glad she’d made it.

As I got ready to leave, I walked around the table, saying my

goodbyes. We made small talk as I put on my coat, saying we'd keep in touch, knowing we wouldn't.

I stepped out into the sunlight dappling the street and thought of Kaushion and her children. I thought of Rhonda and her childhood. I thought of all the secrets that had been liberated in the past five weeks, of all the pain that had been shared aloud for the very first time. They were heroes, all six of them, and now, they were each other's family too.



Untitled 1
West Isle Virus, Texas



Ballroom Painter

Steve Fegan, California

18' x 24', Acrylic on Canvas, 2021

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork

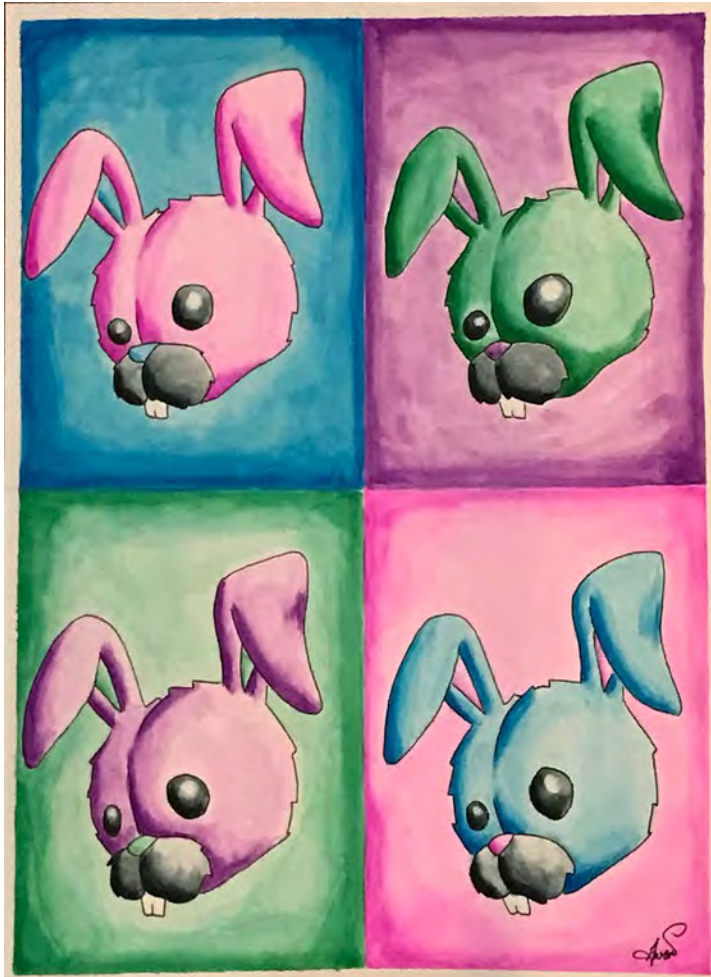


Big Shrimpin' aka [oxymoron] w/a starfish

Jonathan Marvin, California

Acrylic on Canvas Paper, 2022

Project PAINT Artwork



Some Bunnies

*Gwen Randal, California
Watercolor on Paper, 2022
Project PAINT Artwork*



Donkey

*Brian Hindson, Texas
Acrylic*



The Smiling Defense

West Isle Virus, Texas



JUSTICE ARTS COALITION

*Uniting teaching artists, arts advocates, incarcerated artists, their loved ones, and allies,
harnessing the transformative power of the arts to reimagine justice.*

Through the sharing of stories and resources, and by using the arts as a bridge between people inside and outside of prison, the Justice Arts Coalition (JAC) unites teaching artists, arts advocates, and currently and previously incarcerated artists and allies, harnessing the transformative power of the arts to reimagine justice. This work stems from the premise that art can serve as connective tissue, weaving its way back and forth through prison walls to foster and strengthen relationships between people inside and out. Art can remind us of our shared humanity, of our common struggles and sacrifices, and that every one of us has unique gifts and a unique story to share. To create a work of art, a song, a dance, or a poem within the repressive confines of prison is truly a courageous and liberatory act—a reclaiming of identity, of possibility, of worth; a demand to be visible. JAC affirms, uplifts, and amplifies the voices of those who venture onto this path towards freedom.

JAC serves as a unifying body for those engaged in artmaking in and around carceral institutions across the US. We provide numerous ways for the over 400 incarcerated artists in our growing network to share their work both through our own platforms and by facilitating connections to opportunities offered by partner organizations like Iron City Magazine, PEN America's Prison Writing Program, and MoMA PS1.

JAC hosts exhibitions, online galleries, and ArtLinks events in which community members view new works by incarcerated artists and write letters to the artists sharing their reflections and feedback on the work. JAC also hosts an arts-focused correspondence program, the pARTner Project, through which incarcerated artists are paired with artists on the outside to exchange letters, creative works, sources of inspiration, and words of support and encouragement. JAC supports teaching artists and arts organizations that provide programs in prison by serving as a hub for resources, community building, and collective problem solving. This aspect of our work has been of particular importance during the pandemic, as all programming in prisons came to a halt with the start of the nationwide lockdowns. JAC's network also includes numerous family members and loved ones of incarcerated artists, as well as formerly incarcerated artists, many of whom connected with JAC while still inside.

To learn more about JAC and how to get involved, visit www.thejusticeartscoalition.org and follow us on social media. Connect with us via email at info@thejusticeartscoalition.org or by snail mail at Justice Arts Coalition, PO Box 8261, Silver Spring, MD 20907.

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



Project PAINT is an arts organization based in San Diego, CA, 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 eight professional artists, including one former Project PAINT participant, 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 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.

Learn more

Email: info@ProjectPAINT.org
Website: <https://www.projectpaint.org>

Check out the Project PAINT COLORING BOOK on Amazon by incarcerated artists *Beyond Blue: Echoes of Color*. 100% of money raised from this book goes to Project PAINT classes and art supplies.

IRON CITY MERCHANDISE



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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS



M A G A Z I N E

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS
BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

www.ironcitymagazine.org

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.

We are currently accepting submissions of short fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, one-act plays, cartoons, comics, graphic stories, and art for **Issue 8**.

Postmark deadline: **May 15th, 2023**

Please note that submissions are currently being accepted, but final decisions may not be made until October 2023. If you don't hear from us by November 15, 2023, your submission was not accepted for Issue 8.

Submissions are accepted through

- Email: submissions@ironcitymagazine.org
- Submittable Website:
<https://manager.submittable.com/opportunities/discover/190632>
- U.S Mail: Iron City Magazine, P.O. Box 370,
Tempe, AZ 85280

We accept both electronic and mail-in submissions. We also accept both typed and neatly handwritten submissions. There is no submission fee. Please include the cover sheet with all your work. Work without the cover sheet will not be considered.

For questions, contact us at submissions@ironcitymagazine.org or the P.O. Box address listed above.

Who Can Submit and What Can Be Submitted

- current/former prisoners: any topic
- current/former prison volunteers: ONLY topics related to mass incarceration
- family/friends of current/former prisoners: ONLY topics related to mass incarceration
- current/former prison staff: ONLY topics related to mass incarceration

Payment/Gift for Accepted Work

Two contributor copies, prison policy permitting.

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

Guidelines for All Genres

We look for quality and originality. Send us writing and art that are compelling, well crafted, and attentive to detail. We do NOT accept previously published work. 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 CONSIDER book-length works or pieces that include:

- names or other identifying information of any actual persons who are victims to or guilty of a crime, apart from the author
- nudity or graphically depicted violence
- detailed discussion of drug use

Guidelines for Fiction

- All genres of fiction are considered
- Flash fiction and short stories are preferred, but stand-alone chapters from longer works are considered
- **Submit 1 to 3 pieces**, up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages (4,000 words) TOTAL

Guidelines for Creative Nonfiction

- Any true story is considered, but memoir (distinct personal episodes or memories) and personal essays are preferred
- Brief opinion pieces and argumentative essays are rarely considered
- Submissions must be factual and creative (use descriptive details [imagery], paint scenes, provide action, etc.)
- **Submit 1 to 3 pieces**, up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages (4,000 words) TOTAL

Guidelines for Poetry

- All types of poetry are considered
- **Submit 1 to 5 poems**, not to exceed 10 pages TOTAL

Guidelines for Art

- Physical (mail-in) and digital artwork* are acceptable
- No portraits of celebrities
- **Submit 1-5 pieces ONLY.** If you are submitting multiple pieces, please make clear which art piece goes with which title, medium, and year created. Original art will be returned only with a self-addressed, stamped envelope or mailing tube.

*Quality images (300+ DPI) in JPEG, PNG, or PDF formats are preferred over the original art, but we will still accept original pieces and attempt to return them as feasible.

Guidelines for One-Act Plays

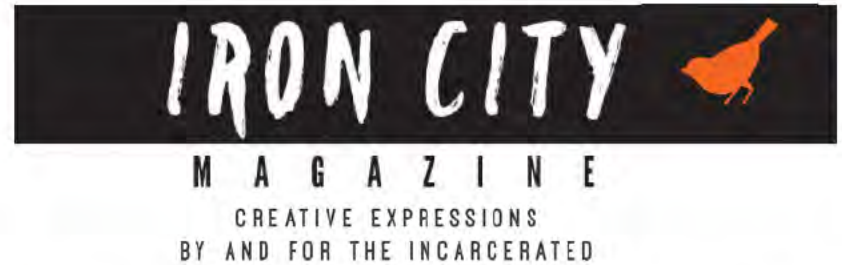
- **Submit 1 or 2 plays ONLY.** Each play may be up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages.

Guidelines for Cartoons/Comics/Graphic Stories

- Both color and black-and-white graphics and cartoons/comics are considered
- **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 on the first page of the consent form.

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.



To be considered for publication, this four-page coversheet **MUST** be completed in its entirety. The coversheet may also be accessed at www.ironcitymagazine.org.

If you cannot gain access to a copy of these sheets to fill out and include with your submission, **you MUST include a handwritten or typed letter with clear answers to ALL the requested information below.**

Your submission will NOT be considered if we do not receive all the requested information.

Fiction: 1 _____
2 _____
3 _____

Creative Nonfiction: 1 _____
2 _____
3 _____
4 _____
5 _____

Poetry: 1 _____
2 _____
3 _____
4 _____
5 _____

Art+medium+date: 1 _____
2 _____

3 _____
4 _____
5 _____

One-Act Play: 1 _____
2 _____

Cartoon/Comic: 1 _____
2 _____
3 _____

Graphic Stories: 1 _____
2 _____

Please mark one of the options below:

- I am currently incarcerated.
 I was previously incarcerated.
 I have never been incarcerated.*

*If you have never been incarcerated, do you fall under one of the groups listed under the **Who Can Submit and What Can Be Submitted** section on the first page of these guidelines? If yes, state which and provide a brief description of your relationship to the theme of incarceration. We publish work by those who have never been incarcerated ONLY when that work clearly highlights themes of incarceration.

Please be sure your handwriting is easy to read:

Full legal name: _____

Prison number (if currently incarcerated):

How you wish your name to appear if chosen for publication:

Reliable, long-term address. If you are incarcerated, please also include your prison address.

Long-term address:

Prison address:

Reliable email (if applicable):

Proofreading consent (if left blank, consent will be assumed):

I do give my consent to *Iron City Magazine* to edit spelling, grammar, punctuation for publishing without prior approval from me.

I do NOT give my consent to *Iron City Magazine* to edit spelling, grammar, punctuation for publishing without prior approval from me.*

*Consent is voluntary, but because communication with prisoners is often slow, not consenting may limit chances of acceptance for publication in this year's issue.

Editing Consent (if left blank, consent will be assumed):

I do give my consent to *Iron City Magazine* to make moderate edits pertaining to structure, style, or content.

I do NOT give my consent to *Iron City Magazine* to make moderate edits pertaining to structure, style, or content.*

Authors MUST note on the submission itself if any unusual style elements are to be kept so that the editors maintain the integrity of the piece.

*Consent is voluntary, but because communication with prisoners is often slow, not consenting may limit chances of acceptance for publication in this year's issue.

Merchandise Consent:

___ I do give *Iron City Magazine* permission to include excerpts or images from my work on merchandise (t-shirts, mugs, notebooks, etc.). 100% of the proceeds will go toward the publication of future issues of the magazine. My name will appear on the merchandise alongside my work.

___ I do NOT give *Iron City Magazine* permission to include excerpts or images from my work on merchandise (t-shirts, mugs, notebooks, etc.).

I _____ (sign name) hereby attest that this is my original work. I am granting *Iron City Magazine* permission to print my submission if selected for the coming issue, but copyright remains mine. (If submitting electronically, you may simply type your name in the space.)

Date: _____

Thank you for submitting to *Iron City Magazine*!

If your work is not chosen for this issue, please don't be discouraged from submitting in the future.