



eXCHANGE

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Exchange features writing and artwork by incarcerated people across the United States, produced by writer-editors at the Manhattan Detention Complex in collaboration with MFA Writing students at Columbia University's School of the Arts as part of the Writing Program's Incarcerated Artists Project (IAP).

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EXCHANGE, with heavy emphasis on the second syllable.

This magazine was conceived, designed, and created by many hands. Over several months, student-teachers from the Columbia University MFA Writing Program formed editorial boards with creative-writing students at the Manhattan Detention Complex to read through hundreds of poems, essays, stories, and works of memoir sent to the *Columbia Journal* by incarcerated writers all across the country. We read with a collective eye for language that made us feel and content that made us think, but most of all, we sought to assemble and broadcast a plurality of voices. There is no single narrative of incarceration in the United States, but rather millions of people, each with a story of their own.

Our editorial process was itself an exchange, not only of prose and poetry, but of identity and experience, style and taste. We read, debated, agreed and disagreed, the results of which synthesis are reflected on every page of this magazine. From flash fiction (“The Uniform”) to epistle (“Letter to Sonny”) and multiform essay (“Vigilance”), these pieces demonstrate something of the tremendous variety of submissions considered in the production of *Exchange*. We are grateful to these authors for sharing their work and to our many partners in the creation of this project.

—Adam Schwartzman
Editor, *Exchange*



“Warrior on Black” Theodora Moss

THE UNIFORM

Benjamin Frandsen

The second bullet tore through the tender flesh of my forearm. The next one grazed a rib right above my heart, like an unfulfilled promise or a last-second stay of execution.

Morning brought an antiseptic-scented room, blinding fluorescent lights, and a pale, portly surgeon tugging on his wrinkled scrubs shirt. “One more inch, Mr. Salas. You’re extremely lucky.”

I grunted noncommittally. I suppose I was lucky. But luck is almost always a matter of inches. In my line of work, I’ve often seen life and death balanced on the precarious fulcrum of a single inch.

That surgery was sixteen years ago. Every day when I put on the uniform, I still feel the sting of those bullets and think of that gang member on 83rd Street, killed by a round from my .38 Special. He had a family, too: a pregnant wife and a three-year-old little girl who loved angels and ice cream.

“Him or me,” I remind myself this morning, and it sounds just as hollow as it always does. I surge with my uniformed compatriots—another day on the job—until the P.A. system squawks my name: “Inmate Salas! Report to Complex One for an attorney visit!”

My chosen profession, criminal, usually ends in places like this, retirement homes, where armed guards watch over the Pinochle tables. With a sigh of resignation, I tuck in my prison-blues shirt, turn around, and shuffle back through the uniformed crowd.

Haiku for My Cellee
by Anthony K. Graham

In-cell dogfighters:
my fly, Spaghetti, and I
are the best of friends.

VIGILANCE

Elizabeth Hawes

I try to learn something new every day.

*Irish soda bread = 1 pound of flour, 1 tablespoon of
baking soda, 1 tablespoon of salt, 3/4 cup of buttermilk*

A photon = a "packet" of radiation

The western part of Lake Huron is polluted with algae.

Susurrus means "a whispering or rustling sound."

Yesterday, I spoke to Stephanie, who lives a few doors down the hall. I learned that her mother:

1. was in a wheelchair because she had a bad hip and fibromyalgia;
2. was watching not only Stephanie's ten-year-old son, but also his three cousins, all under the age of four, because their mother is in treatment.

I learned that Stephanie's husband had black and grey tattoos—all gotten while in prison—that covered his entire upper torso, from his chin to his belt level, and most depict demons. He is now in Texas and will be on parole until August.

Stephanie is planning on going back to Texas once she is out of prison, and that's in December. I don't know why she's here, but I'm guessing it's drug related.

I don't share much of my life with others. But then, my husband is not in prison and has no tattoos, and we don't have children—just two half-Siamese cats that are siblings and poor mousers.

My home life lacks drama.

In Ojibwa, the word for “old woman” means one that holds things together.

It is a myth that MSG is bad for your health; it is a flavor enhancer.

The endangered pangolin is only found in Africa and Asia and looks like a walking pinecone. Anteater-like, it is gentle and has no teeth.

Millie Benson was the ghost writer for Caroline Keene, and wrote most of the Nancy Drew series.

I play cribbage with a petite woman who was a big drug dealer.

She started using coke at the age of twelve, and as a teen stole thousands of dollars in quarters by breaking into carwash money boxes. She is a heavy-stakes casino regular. Her true vice is gambling.

I work out with a “sex offender.” She slept with a 15-year-old kid who mowed the lawn. That's a seven-year sentence.

Kara stole a car. Christy embezzled. Misty assaulted with a knife. TJ killed her unborn child in an automobile accident while she was driving drunk. Kelly held up in a house surrounded by

the sheriff's department while threatening to kill herself with a loaded shotgun because she believed she had just killed her two youngest children (not true). Mary killed her abusive husband—I don't know how. I don't want to know.

I never ask why people are here. It's none of my business. I stay away from people who try to pry into other people's crimes. I like to hear people's backstories though, where they're from and what they liked to do as a kid or in the past.

Over the weekend, while walking in line on my way to the dining room—a very loose term for “chow hall,” which I refer to as “The Hit and Miss,” because the food is inconsistently prepared—I followed a friend, again, loosely defined. She is in my playwriting class and has a red swastika that shows its top half just above the back of her t-shirt neckline. What in the world would possess someone—anyone—to permanently mark themselves with a prominent sign of universal hate?

I felt I could finally ask her because we had been in writing classes together, the aforementioned playwriting class, where she wrote about a hippie couple in the '60s with Bonnie and Clyde tendencies who were running from the police (when I say running, I mean motorcycling), and a poetry class—lyric poetry—where her work seemed relationship based. She didn't appear to be a racist. Or anti-Semitic. Or mean-spirited. Actually, she smiled a lot, which was interesting as most of her teeth were rotting black except for her front two.

What's the story of your tattoo? (I don't have to explain which one).

I hung around people that were into that sort of thing, that culture.



“Searching to Find Her Inner Child” Serge Tkachenko

Peer pressure?

No. I thought it was a good idea at the time. I designed it.

I don't understand. You seem. . . gentle.

I was different then. I've changed.

I don't know what I learned from that conversation, but I thought about it all afternoon.

Once a white-supremacist, always a white supremacist? Was she a fascist? Is she a fascist? Was she a Nazi? Is she a Nazi? Do I give nazis more respect when I capitalize their name?

The woman with the red swastika on her neck will soon be in boot camp and then gone. I guess I'll never really know. I know she likes to draw goddesses and moons. I try to let go of my judgment.

I am surrounded by bad choices. Bad situations. Addiction.

I try to figure out what I'm supposed to be learning within this college of disaster. I document what I see because I don't know what else to do with all that surrounds me.

We are currently on lockdown. This means everyone is locked in their room and all activities cancelled. Dinners are brought to our rooms. People are let out by wing to get medication. We are each allowed a five-minute shower on the third day, while the lieutenant yells over the loud-speaker from the dayroom desk, "two more minutes (last name). . . one more minute (last name)." Thanks, that is relaxing.

My two issues with the lockdown are:

1. I am a vegetarian and they give us "regular trays," meaning a tray with a meat entrée. Hot dogs, hamburger, chicken fajita, beef and gravy concoction, chicken patty; I've been living off side dishes all week.

2. The water here (not just in the prison but the whole county) tastes bad. It smells like chlorine and tastes of metal. If water sits for a few minutes in a cup, I can often see a film forming on the top. The water is worse in some areas compared to others, meaning the water in my room is worse tasting than the water out of the laundry room sink. The laundry room is in the unit's day space (central room) and they won't let us get water from there. I now have diarrhea.

Today is Friday. The lockdown began on Monday. On Wednesday, everyone in the unit was strip-searched and marched over to another building for five hours while guards gutted our rooms. They also brought in drug-sniffing dogs. On previous lock-ins, room shake-downs had not been a problem; dogs sniffed and guards respectfully left things intact. This time, upon my return, I found the room in shambles. My clean clothes were mixed in with worn clothes that had been in a dirty laundry bag, now hurled across the sheet-less bed. There were punctures in the mattress from dog's teeth or claws (I'm not sure which) and bite marks on my bed-linens ("linens"= ill-fitting, bleach-smelling cotton sheets, and two thin, synthetic blue blankets). All my papers were in piles, all my mail—including my legal paperwork that was in an envelope marked attorney-client/private—was out and had been gone through. My books were scattered; my holy books lay helter-skelter.

Why are we on lock-down? I'm not sure. Several people had gone to segregation last week and that upsets the powers that be.

And supposedly someone newly incarcerated had brought in drugs a few days ago as well. But why punish everyone?

We are fed this falsehood of “You matter.” But the truth is it's all about control. The system matters. Not health. Not education. Not well-being. Not even recidivism.

The system is protected by the system.

Just two macadamia nuts per pound of body weight can poison a dog, sometimes leading to paralysis.

Alzheimer's does not affect the musical part of the brain and that is why even people in the depths of this disease still respond to the music of their past.

It takes less than half an hour to have a set of eyebrows (free hand application) tattooed.

Sofia was the only capitol city in Europe that refused to hand over Jews to Hitler during WWII.

In the past month (I write this on 3/26/18), three guards have been attacked in Minnesota. Two were at Oak Park, the men's maximum facility in Stillwater. The single story is “Officer attacked by lifer-inmate. Stabbed several times, officer left institution on a stretcher.” The back story (as told to me by two separate people) is that the guard was a racist who called people names and treated people poorly. That it was not random. That the guy who attacked him was big, but actually pleasant. That he felt that he had been pushed too far. That the guard was two weeks away from retiring. That after the attacker attacked, guards pummeled him, breaking many ribs and applying handcuffs so tight that they fractured his wrists. That he was then thrown in seg with just ace bandages on his wrists for days before being sent to the hospital.

Nobody seems interested in that story.

I'm not condoning violence. But I do think that there are a lot of things that are not discussed. They need to be if we want a less-toxic environment in prison.

In his novel *Hawaii*, James Michener shows a large, meaty boat captain bullying a scrawny, journaling minister who was advocating for some immigrants:

“No, Captain, you don't, because if you did you would never treat me as you have the past two days. You have never learned the one respect in which missionaries must be feared.”

“What?” Hoxworth asked.

“They write.”

“They what?”

“They write. They have an absolute mania for taking pen in hand and writing a book, or a memorial, or a series of letters to the newspapers. . .[and] unless you feed these Chinese better, when we get to Honolulu I am going to write. I am going to write. I am going to write a series of letters that will forever cast a stigma upon the blue flag that you love so well. Whenever an H&H ship pulls into port, someone will have heard about those letters. Because missionaries have one terrible power. They write. They are the conscience of the Pacific.”

*Since 1985, the rate of women's incarceration has increased twice as much as men (ACLU).

*One in 28 American children and one in nine American children of color will experience a parent's incarceration.

*The Native population in the state of Minnesota is four percent. The Native population in the women's Shakopee prison is 26 percent.

*Between 1980 and 2014, the number of incarcerated women increased by more than 700 percent (Sentencing Project).



“Ella” Daryl Rattew

The First Lie

Michael Willis

The first lie
that
I recall
came from my mother.
She spoke of her
"love"
for me and my brother.
"I'm going to come
and get you.
You'll see.
And we'll be a family!"
She called me
her "little man."
She said (nodding her head),
"I know that you understand."

At the time,
I was four.
That was
fifty-three years ago.
I haven't heard
from her anymore.

MISS PEANUT AND ME

Jon Sanger

She sits, balanced comfortably on my knee, cheerfully chewing on the meat of a freshly cracked walnut. She's ready for another tidbit before I have the next one shelled. She watches, waiting patiently; she doesn't fidget or fuss. Her tiny hand-like paws reach out as I offer the next one. Then the next. And the next.

After grasping each morsel, she quickly glances upward, toward my face. Our eyes meet for a moment, and if squirrels could talk, I believe Miss Peanut would say, "I love you."

So it is with our relationship. She visits almost every morning, just as the sun slides over the housetops across the street. We spend morning quiet-time together—before the adventures of the day consume us—watching the sun set fire to the morning clouds.

Most mornings she's waiting on the stoop when I step out the door, she with perked-up ears and bushed-out tail and me with hands full of nuts and a heart full of love. She's only been late a few times and rarely ever misses our morning meetings.

She waits next to the feeder—a small redwood box with a hinged lid—that's kept filled with peanuts for all the neighborhood squirrels. Miss Peanut prefers to wait for the good stuff, however. And, I like to think, my company.

I sit on the stoop and she hops on my leg, comfortably settling down near my knee. She watches as I open the bag of

unshelled nuts—pecans, hazelnuts, filberts, and, her favorite, walnuts. She waits with quiet, yet eager, anticipation as the first shell cracks, the sound seeming to split open the morning's silence. I hand her the first nugget and she takes it with both paws—gently, gracefully, ladylike. She's never acted in any way other than as a proper lady would. She's always polite: never grabbing, never rowdy.

Her paw rests for the briefest moment on my thumb as our eyes meet. "Thank you," I believe she is saying.

I smile, "You're welcome," back at her. Sometimes I say it out loud, not caring if anyone is close enough to see that I am talking to a squirrel.

For a quarter-hour or so I feed her, mixing the types of nuts I give her. She doesn't complain when they aren't walnuts, but there's a special twinkle in her eyes and twitch of her whiskers when they are.

Miss Peanut feeds me, too, although the food is spiritual instead of tangible. She feeds me love and peace and joy as she nibbles nuts while I sip my first cup of coffee of the day. Relaxed. Unhurried. For the moment, the world is at peace: just the two of us in our special sun-rising universe.

Traffic begins to invade our solitude, announcing an end to our morning meeting. She seems to know it's time to go. To signal an end of our daily ritual, I give her an uncracked walnut. With this parting gift firmly gripped between her teeth, she hops from my knee to the sidewalk and begins to lope away, her fluffy rust-colored tail held high.

As she reaches the midway point of the walk, she stops, as she does every morning, and turns my way as if to query, "Same time tomorrow?"

"Of course," I reply, as she scurries off to do whatever it is that squirrels do all day.

H. Belle Amerson

WILD DIFFERENT LIFE

I wept in front of Venus
at her Birth, in stillness.
Her expansive peach
flesh [redacted] right there big and
supple and real.
Travelers buzzed around
me absorbing all they weren't
in their haste and she
was all beaming beyond them right
to me. Everything
fell away
and she and I were there in the world
made for each other. I took
stillness upon my skin, my
tears reflecting her
pastel offering.

I wept while clutching a
bottle of gin, fully
clothed in the shower as if, my
last earthly possession.
[redacted] When we
broke up i broke
a million shards of
despair [redacted] life [redacted]
[redacted] dissolving
[redacted] Everything
around me was
static.
The water hit hard but
the sound, [redacted] nothingness and i
absorbed
[redacted] the sound into [redacted] my
gasping mouth taking all the static on and
knowing nothingness.

*

I danced to Stevie
Wonder in the morning in my
underwear i gave
zero fucks
just in a paint stained tee dancing and i
felt like I was made
to love her.
Those mornings were good noise i
threw shape above me and
pretended like i was in a 70's Italian film because
the radical time
was now
and my purpose was to let it into me
the noise and the morning that were
forever brightness.

I danced in distance
of the soul the Christmas
after they told about his passing.
The opaque white outside my window
reflected all I had
inside but the memory
of our dancing, _____
_____ gliding _____
liquid two step _____

_____ but now,
my father left
and there was
blankness
and I was dancing with
blankness and the terrible
voice repeating
you could have called
and i knew and knew
sorrow.

LETTER TO SONNY

Shirley Anne McCulley

Dear Sonny,

I remember the times you cried because BJ had broken your heart again and the times I cried to you because Cliff had broken mine.

I remember the ring and bracelet you made for my 32nd birthday and the box of Brillo Pads & garden gloves Cliff gave me for the same occasion. Of course it was you I called and cried to when Cliff went back to the crack pipe.

I remember being reluctant to cross that line and become lovers. You promised I would not lose your friendship if we did.

I remember the day we went to Lake Sinclaire; it was our nation's 241st birthday. We were so free that day, *Our Independence Day*, before Cliff knew there was an us, before the threats, hiding, deaths, and broken promises.

I remember the sky, exploding in colors, and the cries of our friend's son. You swooped Bubba up with his first cry. While you transformed his terror into appreciation of fireworks, I fell in love with you.

Every July 4th since, I have remembered that day.

I remembered it that first anniversary sitting on my metal bunk on the 1/2-inch-thick foam mattress that caused my joints to ache.

I remembered it while eating fresh watermelon after having eaten only canned food for months.

I remembered it while realizing Jennifer was parenting my children much the way you and I did Maise and Bubba that day.

I remembered it while squished into the cage of a bottom bunk in an overcrowded three-person cell.

I remember it now sitting in my 79-1/4 square-foot two-person cell.

I remember it when authorized strangers (uniformed officers I thought of on that day only as good guys), enter my room and raid my belongings for their Shakedown log.

I remember it while being counted, waiting in line for a cup of hot water, and while other people eavesdrop on my phone calls.

I remember it while wearing ill-fitting clothing I have altered ever so slightly, just so my pants and shirts are not exactly like everyone else's, and while lying on coarse sheets in a cell I am not allowed to adorn or improve in any way.

I remember it when attempting to fit all my food and personal belongings into a 16"x24"x32" metal box.

Sometimes I remember it while bathing under a weak, single-temperature spray of water. Little privacy is offered behind a frequently windblown curtain in a shower that practically sits in the inmate "living" area.

I remember it while doing my laundry in a plastic-lined, collapsible cardboard box and when I am cooking my food on a flat iron meant for my hair.

I remember it while staring longingly at pictures of my grandchildren. They don't know me because the drive here is too difficult, time consuming, and expensive for their parents.

I remember it even as I sit here listening to a wailing mother who has just learned of her son's murder, unable to muster enough compassion or even curiosity to go comfort her.

The Church says you and Cliff are burning in Hell. I say you two got off easy.

—Shirley Anne

Pigeons

--by Nathan Ybanez

I saw a pigeon.
It was beautiful!
I was small.
Clomping over
Bread in hand.
Scaring it off.
Sitting still, tiny
Palm outstretched
Till it began
To trust me
To come close,
And I asked
"How's it feel
Having a rainbow
On your chest?"

I saw a pair
Of pigeons.
I was sixteen.
He was dancing,
Showing off
His wares:
Puffed breast
Flared tail.
She played coy.
They nuzzled heads,
Made a heart-
shaped silent
Moment of authentic
Presence. A flutter
As he took her.
It wasn't crude
Or ugly. It was
Powerful
And Real,
And suddenly
My loneliness
Was unbearable.

I saw a flock
Perched above my
Brand new camaro.
Rats of the sky!



“The Printer: A Portrait of Prison” Christopher Levitt

JOE THE LIFELESS ORANGE

James Torres

On a beautiful wintry day in 1728, an extravagant borough of London celebrated a birth in one of their aristocratic families. The Wentworth family, in all their posh glory, were busy welcoming their newest addition, Joseph, to the world.

To proclaim that Joseph was born with a silver spoon in his mouth would have been an understatement, to say the least. He grew up with everything he could ever want, never developing the annoying characteristics of humility or gratitude. Even at a young age, he considered them deplorable and debilitating traits, not fit for anyone of his high birth and stature!

When he was a teen, his parents spoiled him with the best education, the finest imported wines and foods, and the most expensive toys from the farthest reaches of the world to appease his slightest whim. He had his likes and dislikes, just as everyone does, but his only true love was himself.

In Joseph's teenage years, he came to hate an unusual number of things, merely because he felt like it. At the top of that list was the orange. He knew it was the only fruit with a defense

mechanism made especially for him. Joseph could not simply peel an orange without it constantly squirting him in the eye. . . every time! Even when Joseph had one of the servants peel it for him, while he was eating it, the orange would inevitably shoot him in the eye.

Joseph grew to be known as ‘Joseph the Arrogant’ because of his self-absorbed addictions, his degrading personality, and his atrocious behaviors. He looked upon almost everyone with contempt, unwilling even to consider the idea of tolerance towards anybody of a lower station than his own. Well known throughout the land were stories of his reputation, told by the rich and poor alike. Nobody wanted to be around him if they could help it, but all wanted his money, so they suffered his indignities, until one day at the local market. . .

“What are these trinkets for? Joseph sneered at the little old woman standing by her cart.

“My Lord, those be for luck, sire. And these do be for good fortune.” The old woman lovingly caressed her handmade ornaments, “On the far side, they do be for love. Just below those, they do be for strength. I’ve made charms for whatever you be needing.”

Joseph picked up a necklace as if it were a dirty diaper, examining the quality workmanship, yet not daring to show his admiration for fear of letting his lust for the object be known. “You made these?”

“Enchanted them myself, M’ lord. A fair price I do be asking and a lord of your wealth and taste can no be without one.” She looked around carefully, eyeing Joseph up and down, “Three silver pieces for you M’ lord, be quite the bargain.”

Joseph tightened his grip on the chain, “Three silvers? I would not pay over five copper for such vile work! Why would I pay

such a high price to someone who obviously has not seen gold since she looked toward the palace? You little troll; I should have you arrested for robbery!”

“M’ lord, I cannot be accepting anything less than two silvers. Sire, these do be the finest enchantments in the land.” The old woman had been around for more years than anyone would believe; she knew Joseph’s propensity for greed and conceit.

Unable to contain his tantrum any longer, Joseph threw the necklace to the ground, crushing it under his boot and yelling at the woman, “How dare you, witch! You should be kissing my boots for even stopping here. Look at yourself! How dare you speak to me, as if you could make your year’s earning from my generosity. Be gone from here, you wretch, before I make an example out of you!”

“Joseph the Arrogant, you do be given far too much rope. When will you decide to tighten the knot? You tempt fate, yet you no be wanting to pay the price, be it more than you be let to give.” The old woman looked from the jewelry to Joseph, mumbling under her breath.

Joseph took a step forward to plant his boot in the middle of the cart, breaking the display and kicking the cart over. “You worthless ingrate, take your wares back to the rubbish pile you scraped them from! How could you know the name of excellence such as me?”

“Joseph the Arrogant, you do be cursed to awaken as what you hate the most. You will spend endless years ‘til you do be learning your lesson.” The old woman started waving her hands while chanting her incantation. She quickly reached out her hand to steal a few hairs from Joseph’s beard.

“Ouch! You harpy, how dare you touch me?” Joseph grabbed his chin, turning around to see if the city guard was around.

When Joseph turned back around, the old woman had disappeared; the broken cart and jewelry had vanished. Joseph looked around, bewildered at the wild change of events. A small sparkle caught his eye as he moved his boot to see the broken necklace beneath it, the only evidence the old woman had even been there. He was quite sure it was not just a figment of his imagination. He picked up the broken ornament and headed home, not wanting to seem as embarrassed as he truly felt.

That night he tossed and turned as he tried to sleep. When he did finally manage to fall asleep, the nightmares of the old woman crept inside his dreams, her words kept repeating in his head, “Joseph the Arrogant, you do be cursed to awaken as what you hate the most!” Her face was everywhere he turned: “For eternity you shall spend, until your ways you do mend. Once upon a nightmare, I do cast this with your hair. . .”

The sun rose with its regular brilliance on this clear, chilly morning. Joseph found, to his annoyance, that his blanket was not keeping the chill from reaching him or the brightness from his eyes. He opened his eyes to an astonishing realization; he had quite the view, though it was obscured with leaves and branches.

As he looked around, he noticed that he did not recognize the landscape at all. There were other trees all around, the grass a dull green, but it seemed as though he was seeing it all through an orange haze. Oh, but Joseph was ever the wise one; it only took him a handful of seconds to realize there were oranges in all the trees and bumping up against him in the light wind. He tried to stretch out his arms, but the sensation of their movement was absent. Panic started to set in now, as he tried to kick out his legs to push the oranges away from him, the feeling non-existent.



“Is Anyone Else Seeing This?” Robert Howland

“Help!” Joseph started to scream, “Somebody help me!” He could hear his voice in his mind but his ears only registered the faintest whisper in the breeze.

A motion between the trees caught his eye. Somehow, he still had control of his horizontal movements, watching as a little boy ran between the trees humming a wordless tune of his own creation. Silently Joseph viewed the child with a sense of trepidation as he started going in circles around the trunk of the tree. Joseph began spinning to keep an eye on the youth when he heard a slight ‘pop’ and the ground started rushing up at him.

Bouncing off the ground and rolling a short distance, Joseph found himself a bit jarred by the impact. “Hey, what the. . .”

“Would ya look at that? That one looks good, not too bruised yet.” The child picked up the orange in his tiny hands, “I bet you’ll be fat and juicy!”

“Unhand me, you little troglodyte! Aren’t your parents missing you somewhere? Leave me be, you grubby little drooling cabbage!” Joseph raged with all his might, with little or nothing to show for it.

An unfamiliar pain took him by surprise as the boy started peeling his snack. It wasn’t intense, as he had expected or feared, but dull as the child got his fingernails under the skin and started to rip it away without heed or care, “Oh yeah, I love these things.” He said as the juice ran down his hands.

Part by part, Joseph felt himself becoming smaller and smaller as the child ate each section. When the kid held the last segment in his hand, Joseph remembered too late his only defensive weapon, as the last of him was shoved into the kids’ mouth.

“NOOOOO!” Joseph started to scream, but stopped when he looked around to realize that again he was in a tree. “What a

nightmare that was. I can't. . . hey, wait a sec." Again, he realized the topography had changed, as he looked around at his surroundings. On his second time around he heard the tell-tale "pop" as the ground rushed up at him again, but from much higher than before. He landed with a liquid splat, watching his juices coat the dirt beneath him. "Owww!" Joseph yelled, but being so broken, he was unable to move, so there he sat for the rest of the day.

The next morning was a bit cloudy when Joseph opened his eyes to find his nightmare had restarted, yet now he was in a different tree. The branch shook as if a storm had chosen just a single part of the tree to attack. A large hand reached up to grab Joseph, ripping him off the tree and tossing him into a barrel with dozens of other oranges, to be buried with yet still more oranges. "Wait! Please, no! This can't be happening to me." Joseph cried.

The man in the tree stopped to look into his barrel, "Jose, did you hear something?"

"No Señor, I hear nothing." Jose replied.

Joseph noticed the man above the barrel in which he had landed was looking around, "Can you hear me?" Joseph yelled. "Hey you, I know you heard me! Down here!"

The man looked down, shuffled through the top layers of the oranges 'til he found the one that caught his attention. "Eso es! What do we have here?"

Joseph almost cried in relief, "Can you really hear me?"

"Sí señor, or course I can, I am el Susurrador de Naranjas." The man replied.

"The what?"

"Señor, I am the Orange Whisperer."

Swallowing the Universe

by Dr. David Rexford

Back into the womb
Arms and legs shrivel
I'm a zygote again
Deprived of all senses
Yet conscious
Floating in amniotic fluid
That becomes an ocean
I drink it all
Then swallow
The Earth
Moon
Sun
Milky Way
Universe
Then merge with God
Electrifying
Then bliss

THE LEAF

Edward Duncan

After being sentenced to thirty years in prison and banished from society, I was assigned to the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, New Jersey (formerly Trenton State Prison).

One day in 1992, while I was walking the big yard alone, something occurred which provoked thought and spiritual reflection. As I enjoyed the crisp air of fall, a leaf, traveling the stream of air which had been its carpet, was carried into the recreation yard. The leaf landed at my feet; I picked it up and continued to the yard's corner. There I sat down and reflected upon what this leaf meant to me. As I held it and enjoyed its aroma, I began to feel my eyes water and tears stream down my face. Quickly, so that no one might know what I was experiencing, I wiped my eyes, put the leaf in my pocket, and continued to walk.

Returning to my cell, I placed the leaf inside a photo album and put it away. Lying back on my bunk, I began to reflect upon the emotion produced by something as simple as a fallen tree leaf. For in the confines of my soul, that very leaf

represented my life and a freedom that I could no longer have. It symbolized the tree that I could not see, whose shade could offer me shelter from the sun's rays. It served as a memento through its very separation from the tree—its ultimate lifeline—of my disconnect from my family, community, and society, the sources of human belonging.

Via the leaf's scent, I remembered. I remembered the days raking leaves from the lawn of the home I no longer had, their numerous shapes and colors, each introspectively evidencing the cultural diversity of humanity. I remembered jumping in the many piles while wrestling with the kids. I remembered the fall foliage in Maine where the leaves, while still connected with their source, displayed the beauty of creation.

Throughout the years, I saw life amazedly through the discovery of that single leaf. I saw in my understanding the sun shine upon its green form, the rain quench its thirst, and life begin to consume its youth. I saw its inability to reconnect with its source, regain its vigor, or maintain its beauty. I cried that day because I saw myself and my existence from a far greater perspective. Even more persuasive and comforting, I saw my connection and relationship with nature and its creation.

Now, after having served 30 years in prison, I am slated for release in just four months. I still have that leaf. I have the photo album containing the remainder of its existence, its encouragement and its tragedy. At my home, the very leaf awaits me and I endeavor to again see it. Considering all, the most beautifully awakening photo contained therein will not be the people or the memories they invoke, but the connection, vision, and influence of that withered leaf and all that it symbolized during the most trying times of my life. How incredibly amazing!



“Graceful” J. Mann

HOLY SMOKE

By Vassar W. Smith

A curious sight greets us prisoners
As we file from the chow hall to walk back across the yard
To our blocks, to our cells:
Three men in cowboy garb—hats, boots, jeans, vests, etc.—
Stand by our path, not in it
And pass out something to inmate after inmate walking by...

These are the Gideons, servants of God,
Passing out Bibles, spreading the Word,
Bringing the Light to the Darkness. It's True!
Not as they thought, though... If they only knew!

Inmate after inmate,
Smiling and thanking these men from the Gideons,
Takes and pockets
A small book of many pages,
Exquisitely thin pages bound in faux-leather.
Some get a New Testament.
Some get a Holy Bible.
All get the King James Version.
None gets the benefit of either the Apocrypha
Or a more accurate translation.

It matters little, since
Few if any of these texts are going to be read.
They are going to be taken into the body
Much more literally.
They are going to be inhaled.

Level Four prisoners,
Struck out by "three-strikes laws" and other
Draconian measures,
Usually worry much less about
Where they will spend Eternity
Than about how they will spend the eternity
Remaining before them in this life,
Where, in prison,
Each day seems a month,
Each month a year,
Each year a geological age...
And so, most prisoners smoke.

Somehow tobacco is almost always obtainable,
Ever available to be bought, sold, traded...
Sharing it is an almost sacred obligation among inmates.

Paper is another matter.
You can't roll cigarettes without it.
The preference, of course, is actual "rolling papers."
The product's made and sold for just this purpose.
In prison it tends to run short
Even when tobacco is still plentiful, and when it does,
All kinds of paper will be smoked,
Even toilet paper.

But the test of time has proven:
When rolling papers run short,
The best alternative is
The exquisitely thin paper
From the pages of the Gideons Bibles.

A heavy smoker may consume
The New Testament within a week,
The whole King James Bible within a month.
Thus do the Psalms of David,
The wisdom of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes,
The cries of the Prophets,
The parables of Jesus,
St. Paul's Epistles and St. John's Apocalypse
Day by day go
Up in smoke.

Sometimes there are consequences
Salubrious and insalubrious:
People who smoke "Bible paper" one day
And joke about doing so
Sometimes get sick the next day
From the smoking, not the joking; however,
Some are moved to swear off tobacco altogether.

But for most the road goes on,
Unchanged, unchanging,
Like the very truth of the Incarnate Word,
Transcending all dogma,
Surpassing all translation...
These men continue to ingest it
More through their lungs than through their ears.

So, once or twice a year, when the Gideons come by,
The prisoners are always glad to see them.
Each inmate as he passes takes a Testament or two,
If not for himself, then for a friend...

God bless the Gideons! Rarely has any
Organization so well-meaning
Actually managed to do
So much good for so many!

These are the Gideons, servants of God,
Passing out Bibles, spreading the Word,
Bringing the Light to the Darkness. It's true.
Not as they thought, though. If they only knew!

ALONE

Boyd Edwards

I am trying to get out. Trying to breathe. But her cord, twisting tight around my fragile neck, says, *no*. Slowly, she strangles. *Life is hard*, the cord warns, *you don't want to live anyway*. But. . .I do. I want to learn. . .I want to love. . .I want to grow. *Give up*, it whispers, constricting as a python does prey; *it's easy*. I suspect it would be. But easy isn't an option.

* * *

—I'm trying too hard, aren't I, he stated.

—Yes, she nodded, walking near.

—Sorry. Bad habit of mine (a wistful smile). I've got abandonment issues.

—Do you want to talk about it?

—I was hoping.

* * *

The mottled leaves of a million birch trees rattle around us, shimmering silver as a stiff summer breeze whistles through the White Mountains.

Mom plants herself on a fat stump of half-rotten pine, unburdening the pack from her back. She sighs, announces: “I can't go on.”

Dad, already ten paces ahead, takes five more before halting. Exasperated and without glancing at us, he mutters: “Another break.”

He leans against a tree and rummages through his fanny-pack, fishing for his pipe.

Happy for the rest, but wary of the pervasive tension, I squat to examine a moss-covered rock. I am four and find it fascinating. The crusty moss is the color of well-worn hospital scrubs, like it's dead. Like it's wondering why it ever fathomed that life could thrive on the surface of a stone.

* * *

—Okay (her eyes silver slivers of empathy).

—(a hesitant pause) I'm afraid of being alone.

—I think that's pretty much universal

—I mean really fucking afraid of it. Like facing down a firing squad fear.

—(silence like the heel of a thunderclap).

* * *

I've made it. Ripped out through hastily sliced abdominal tissue, but still, I'm out. I'm alive. And breathing—but not easy. The voice of a practiced physician, his tone tinged by tepid panic, asks the busy room: *Has the bird arrived yet?* Amidst the controlled chaos that weighs heavy on my sanguine skin, a nurse affirms it has. *Good*, the doctor says, *we gotta get this kid outta here—now*. He places me into a clear plastic crate and clamps the lid shut. An orderly urgently wheels me down an antiseptic corridor, towards what, I know not.

* * *

—Desperation drowns me at the threat of someone important leaving.

—I'm sorry. (a rich blush) But I have to—

—I know. You don't need to apologize.

—Well, that's *my* bad habit (her pause, a subsequent apology). I wish things were different.

—That they're not doesn't mean we should avoid it.

* * *

Dad puts his pipe away and announces: "I'm going to the top." Then, to me: "You coming with me?"

"He's only four," Mom answers, "He can just stay here with me. We'll have a picnic."

"You coming?" he asks again.

Their tension, as always, seeks resolution through me. Stalling, I ask: "How far is it?"

"We're about halfway." Four more miles he means. It's my first big hike—I've been keeping track.

Mom's expression, clearly calculated to remind me of his prior oppressions, pleads for me to stay. But this time, her concern strikes me as too contrived. Rather than curbing my courage, it prompts me to welcome his challenge.

"I'm going to the top," I tell them both.

* * *

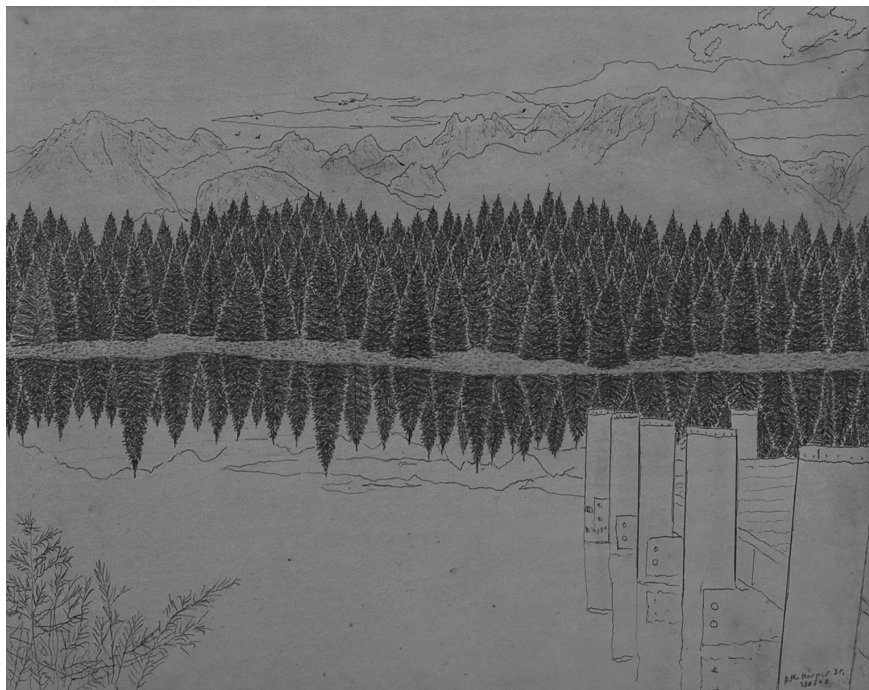
—You're making this harder than it needs to be.

—I know you despise clichés, but I'm going to use one anyway—nothing good ever comes easy.

—(a fickle frown creased her cheeks) There's just so many opportunities for things to change, to go wrong. What if—?

—We get hurt?

—Exactly.



“Untitled” David M. Harper, Sr.

* * *

My infant eyes and ears struggle to make sense of this cold and unfamiliar bright-noise world. I've been sewn into the belly of a beast painted with myriad flashing lamps that blister my oxygen-starved brain.

An unrelenting beat of *whumpa-thump-whump* pounds a sound into my soul that is wholly unlike, in both tone and tempo, the heart of a warm womb. It clips across the city skyline at an unsettling speed, whisking me toward men in bleach-blached coats, away from my Mom.

No one is paying attention to me.

* * *

—So. . .you're afraid, he said.

—(a considered pause and reluctant nod).

—Of what?

—Miles of time.

—(stunned silence).

* * *

“Dad, can we take a break?” The afternoon is growing hot and my body tired.

He stops without protest and hands me a canteen. We trade sips as I study the trail ahead. A hundred yards down the path the forest and its attendant shade melt away into a bald mountaintop.

“Are we there yet?” I ask, knowing better.

“Last mile,” Dad reports, recapping the canteen and stashing it in his backpack. What he doesn't say is that it's the steepest and most strenuous mile. He doesn't need to. It's obvious, even to me.

When he steps off to continue the climb, I collapse onto the forest floor and whine: “I caaaaan't!”

* * *

—I think you expect too much.

—From love?

—From love, from life. From me. You can't predict what will happen to you.

—No. . .but you can choose your attitude towards it. There are equal parts power in possibility and pessimism.

—(a frustrated pause) Do you ever give up?

* * *

A volunteer opens my box. It's been my home for nearly 48 hours now. She reaches in and scoops me out, gentle but hurried. Others need to feed. She coaxes me to accept a sterile rubber nipple. I bawl buckets of tears, wanting Mom.

Eventually, I capitulate. Infant formula is preferable to an empty stomach. I learn that life is a compromise.

* * *

—Not when it's worth working towards.

—I see.

—I sense you're still not sure. I don't want to put you off or drive you away. I want to create a different result this time so people have no cause to call me crazy.

—Goals are always good.

—And easier to meet with the help of a friend.

* * *

“Don't leave me!” I scream from the edge of the forest, as loud as my lungs will let me.

Dad keeps walking. My flush cheeks caked with tears dried and those not yet cried, I wail some more. Still, he doesn't turn around.

The realization that he isn't going to stop grips me like gravity. He is going to the top. Without me. With each step he takes, the forest enfolds me deeper in fear.

I am alone.

* * *

A doctor opens my box. It's the ninth needle in five days. I don't know what it is, only what it's not—love. Where is my Mom?

It lances my thickening skin. I scream. Hours pass before I cry myself to sleep.

* * *

—Isn't that what it means to be a hopeful romantic?

—I'm not so sure I believe in love.

—Well. . . I think Dear Sugar got it right.

—How's that?

—That each of us is responsible for defining our own concept of love. Applying her advice strips away the cliché.

* * *

I stop bawling and spy my Dad, now tiny on the trail.

Sensing a shift, he turns and encourages me to forsake the forest: "C'mon," he shouts. "You can make it!"

He's right; I can. I abandon the shady safety of false belief and step out into the light. One foot in front of the other, I find the strength to continue my climb.

Away from fear. Away from alone.

* * *

—Damn if you don't always find a way.

—A way to what?

- Make me doubt my doubts.
—Call it my gift. Or my curse, depending on your viewpoint
—(a thoughtful smile) Probably both.

* * *

The seventh and final day of isolation proves the most challenging yet. I want to give up. Perhaps the cord had it right. Because if *this* is life—little more than a miracle of modern medicine, kept locked in a box of stale nurturance—then. . . I hold my breath, believing love will rescue me. My pallid face turns pink, crimson, purple. . .almost blue.

But. . .no. Easy isn't an answer. I gasp. Life—harsh, heavy, and raw—rushes into my body.

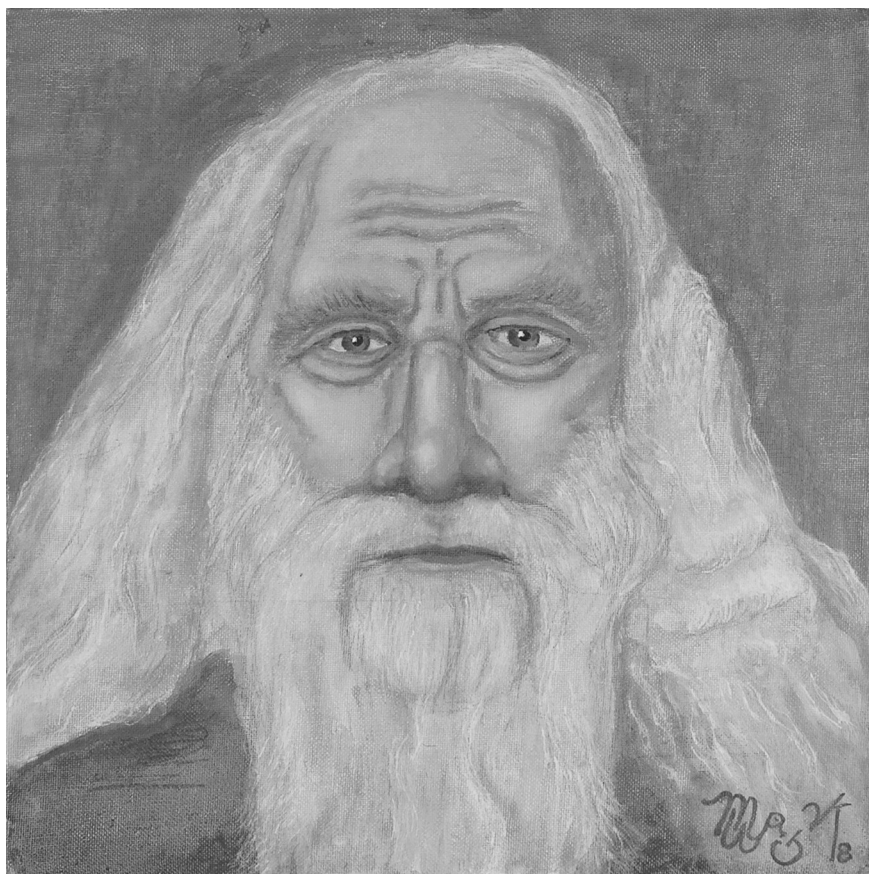
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- Okay then, let's give this a go.
—You make it sound easy.
—No, not easy. Just worth the effort. Otherwise it seems we've been wasting our breath.
—I wouldn't say that.
—Well, what would you say?

* * *

A sweet breeze brushes over the top of Mount Baldy, tingling my trembling legs. Only the sleepy sky speaks. We rest upon an outcrop of granite. Dad relights his pipe and I inch closer, soaking up the pungent scent.

Sitting up on high, secure in the silence of shared accomplishment, we are not alone.



“25 and Counting (Self-Portrait)” Moses Whitepig



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