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2021

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a columbia university magazine

Exchange features writing and artwork by incarcerated people across the United States, produced in collaboration with MFA Writing students at Columbia University's School of the Arts.

Exchange is a publication of the Columbia Artist/Teachers (CA/T) Incarcerated Writers Initiative (which incorporates what was formerly known as the Incarcerated Artists Project), in collaboration with the Columbia Journal.

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Introductions

Welcome to the second issue of Exchange, a collection of poems, essays, and stories by incarcerated writers across the nation.

This Exchange was brought together during a time of unprecedented distance. In addition to experiencing some of the worst health impacts of a global pandemic, incarcerated populations dealt with suspended classes and workshops and cancelled in-person visits. Given that Columbia's Writing Program went online, the submissions in this issue were read, selected, and edited by student-teachers scattered across the U.S. In California, an MFA student was moved to tears by the reflections of a New Jersey prison hospice worker, while in rural Montana, a reader belly-laughed over the wild antics of a Coney Island scam artist. The pieces contained in these pages display a wide range of the incarcerated, human experience.

The Exchange board couldn't be prouder to present these works. We look forward to resuming workshops and in-person collaborations, but in the meantime, this Exchange embodies a simple but critical truth: the best writing connects despite distance or divisions.

–Darby Minow Smith, Editor, Exchange

Exchange was created to deepen the bond between MFA writing students at Columbia University and writers in jails and prisons across the United States. The magazine is an act of community, an effort to shrink the distance between people through the shared joy of creative expression. In a plague year, a year in which everyone has felt the sting of isolation and loss, perhaps it is more important than ever to sustain projects like Exchange, which transcend the barriers that divide us.

Read the stories, essays, and poems in these pages with an eye towards that end. They are often funny, often sad. No two are alike, and all are beautiful.

–Adam Schwartzman, Founding Editor, Exchange

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The Pursuit of Happiness
by Christopher M. Campos

Dear Lord

by Daniel Ventre

Dear Lord:

I bask in your
weird light,
a stranger to myself,
in love and
anguish,
terrified and
captivated.

You are
the greatest friend
I've ever had;
and yet
some day I fear you may
devour me like
a Good & Plenty.

Life Inside

by Dorothy Maraglino

SENTENCING:

Although I've been here 940 days, I have not had a trial yet. For two years, the DA and the defense attorneys have been discussing penalty options. It turns out you can't go to trial before the DA has determined what penalty to ask for, should they actually win the case. For now, they are debating if they should ask for the death penalty in case of a hypothetical guilty verdict. We can't get scheduled due to their debating.

My observation of the sentencing process reminds me of a cattle auction I went to. It's all bull, but you don't know what you got until the papers are signed. At the end of the process, everyone smells like manure, but the bull is still the only loser.

CELLMATE ETIQUETTE:

My cell has hosted a large number of cellmates. I quickly learned the fine art of bunkie etiquette. There is the importance of courtesy flushing. Never touch anything that does not belong to you. Gracefully accept when your stuff is plundered. Don't ask if your bunkie is OK if you suddenly hear rapid breathing. When in doubt, turn and face the wall.

The variety of persons placed in my cell helped to broaden my outlook and skillset. I am now confidently able to handle a bipolar, paranoid schizophrenic outburst against the unseen evil force that, unbeknownst to me, was the third resident in our two-woman cell. I am now capable of dodging flying paper, shoes, cups, and toiletries while calmly making a cup of instant coffee.

My bunkies have been gracious in sharing not only their body odor and drug-induced world philosophies, but also their working knowledge of criminal activities. My cell education has included how to properly pack a meth pipe, the importance of removing all air bubbles before shooting up, where to buy drugs, how to sell drugs, how to upsell a drug deal to include prostitution, the best places to shoplift, and so much more.

Now, does this go on my résumé as formal training sessions? I think it best not to express my doubts about receiving skill training from people whose skill levels landed them in jail. So I'm not ready to embrace a career change just yet.

FOOD:

Our food here in San Diego isn't so bad. You just have to get past the sight, smell, texture, and taste. After that, it's gourmet Alpo.

I cannot imagine any Food Network chef doing the things our chef can with what I am sure used to be edible ingredients. We can spread our soy burgers as smoothly as pâté.

The proteins have been given such a makeover that I dare the most trained palate to guess the source. I'm sure they consulted a rabbi to determine which rodent, feline, and equestrian proteins are kosher. The rest of us on unrestricted diets just dig right in without asking.

The meals are so good that you feel and taste them for hours after you finish. Some meals stick around into the night. Our food here also tries to escape. With deep concentration you can keep it from escaping your mouth. Sometimes it will catch you by surprise and race for the body's southern exit.

But inmates have the option to spend their precious pennies on nuclear winter-style food at high prices. If your family can take out a second mortgage, you too can stay stocked in instant coffee and top ramen.

PRETEND PRIVACY:

Confinement specialists got together and collectively agreed that privacy is an overrated luxury that only serves to remind a person of their former humanity. To help us acclimate to our new existence as social rejects, all efforts have been made to remove this reminder. While unconfirmed, many believe the staff have been given special training to instill the importance of their role in this process. Well-trained staff will show up at your cell door mere seconds after you have nestled your butt on the toilet. Staff who take their job seriously in regards to "de-privatizing" (yes—it's a thing) find that an opportune time to ask you a question.

Every conversation, written or spoken, always has an audience, so inmates won't have to adjust and re-adjust to even the illusion of privacy. Legal and medical conversations are supposed to be privileged, so the audience promises to only half listen/read. The lack of privacy comes in handy, as most staff remembers, even before I do, when I'll need extra maxi pads. It's important to remember the removal of privacy is for our own good. We should embrace each humiliation with gratitude. The sooner one adjusts to no privacy, the quicker the pesky humanity will fade.

VISITATION:

Our facility is preparing the inmates and community for intergalactic detention facilities by phasing out all outside human contact. This is done by allowing only video visits for most inmates.

MEDICAL CARE:

Our doctors look like Doogie Howser and approach patients how a short order cook does breakfast. To avoid abuse of the medical services, the jail has standards for triage. You must submit paperwork. Priority is given to non-annoying inmates with money for the co-pay, then non-annoying with no money, next emergencies, followed by annoying inmates with money, then everyone else.

The staff is well trained at weeding out non-emergencies. They are not swayed by hysteria or pleas for help. It's well known that if you can't breathe, you can't talk. The fact that you call for help using the intercom proves it's not an emergency. If you have an asthma attack, you should be as blue as a Smurf and unable to speak.

If you're cut but can't see the bone, try to hold off for the next shift. Do not use pads or TP to clean blood or press on the wound. Using county-issued items for anything other than their intended uses leads to write-ups.

Self-induced injuries such as a concussion from beating your head against the wall will not be considered an emergency unless you're unconscious, so stop vomiting. When you need help quickly, bypass the box and simply try using the toilet. A staff member will appear at your cell door momentarily in compliance with de-privatizing efforts.

SURVIVAL SKILLS:

If you know of any, please share. The only one that works effectively is "when in doubt, face the wall." This works whether you're with staff or inmates.

VIOLENCE:

It's only violence if it is documented, so I can't write about it. Kindly ignore the black eye, bruises, and limp.

PRISON'S IMPACT ON FAMILY:

Too personal to share. Also TP is rationed and laundry exchange is days away, so I can't risk crying.

LOCKDOWN: WHO CAN'T CRY ON CUE?

I've been in ad seg (administrative segregation, AKA solitary) for 532 of my 940 days. That's lockdown. 23/7 at a minimum. Usually I elect 24/7. Otherwise, it's like seeing a fresh red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting but only being able to lick the spatula. You just crave more.

Ad seg reduces your world to only as far as your eyes can see. This is not necessarily bad. My cell door window provides comedy, drama, suspense, tragedy, and everything in between.

The negative impact is that I no longer appreciate the acting skills of Hollywood. It does not matter how many awards an actor has; people in jail are far superior at acting, and they don't need a scriptwriter. In Hollywood, agents search high and low for people who can cry on cue. I dare you to find an inmate who can't.

GETTING OUT:

The goodbyes to those leaving prison life behind are sad. You marvel at how even the ice-cold killer becomes a scared young woman. The worst part of releases is that too often the person has no idea where to go, which almost always means they'll be back.

I look forward to the day I can walk out. I pray for the opportunity and the balls to shout "I TOLD YOU I DIDN'T DO IT." Maybe I'll get the staff to grill me one of those prime ribs I've been forced to smell through the vents during holidays. More than anything, I want to wake up and see my little girl, knowing she won't disappear.

A Shorty Story

by Juan Francisco Mejia

"Fuck, yeah! I'll kill you, you mutherfuckers!" The little boy yelled at the television. The video game he was playing was very violent for a kid his age, but there was no one there to care.

Hector lived in a small house with his mom, but she wasn't home yet because she was at her second job. Hector never saw much of her. When he did, she always smelled like sweat and alcohol. She was always telling him how much she loved him, and how he was such a good boy, but he didn't think he was such a good boy. He did a lot of things she didn't know about.

Hector was in the fifth grade. His teacher Ms. Tores always told him that he was real smart, but he didn't know what that meant. What he did like was that Ms. Tores would touch his hand a lot. She was very pretty and he liked her.

Hector heard the door open. "Fuck!" he thought. He turned the television off, and shoved the game console into a drawer.

"Hey, Mijo," his mom said.

"Hi, Mom," Hector said. He felt something was up.

"Are you hungry, baby?"

"Yeah, what are you gonna make?" he said, remembering that he hadn't eaten all day.

"I don't know yet, but can you go to the store for me? Can you do that?"

"Yeah, what do you need?"

"I need an avocado and half gallon of milk."

"Why milk? We got milk."

She became a little agitated by Hector's question.

"Why are you questioning me? I'm your mom, if I want fuckin' milk, you just go and buy the fuckin' milk, okay!"

Hector found her behavior strange, but it was not just her; a lot of moms did this. They talked about not saying bad words, and being nice to people, but they would yell and curse, and do all kinds of crazy shit. Then immediately apologize. He didn't know how to process it.

"Okay, Mom," was all Hector said. His mom went into her purse and handed Hector a ten dollar bill. "Keep the change," she said, and caressed his cheek.

Hector put his shoes on and walked out. They lived in a cul-de-sac. The houses were the kind that poor people lived in but still tried to make look presentable.

Their house was the smallest in the cul-de-sac. It had no bedroom, just

a small kitchen, a bathroom, and a living room. He guessed it was really a multipurpose room. He smiled at the thought.

He stepped onto his porch, and grabbed his bike. It was a Frankenstein, made of many other bikes. Some parts Hector and his friends had stolen, and some parts they had just found. He tried to paint it with some spray paint he found under the house, but all that did was make it look like it belonged at a junkyard. Still, the bike worked perfectly.

He saw that there was a car parked in the driveway, but his mom did not own a car. The car was old and cheap. The man sitting inside smiled at him. Hector looked at him and thought, "What do you want, weirdo?"

Hector jumped onto his bike, and did a few laps around the houses.

He saw a ball on one of his neighbor's front yards. He recognized it as his tennis ball, jumped off his bike, and ran towards it, but before he could get to it the door to the house flew open. The old lady that lived there started yelling at him. "Hey, hey, hey! Get off my yard you little prick!"

"That's my ball!" Hector yelled back.

The lady was horrible looking. She always wore mumus and never combed her hair. She was about sixty and three hundred pounds. Every time the kids would play games and their balls ended up in her front yard, she would run out and take them away, like some crazy little rodent. The funny thing was that every Sunday she went to church dressed up nice, then her son would come and pick her up. Her husband was rarely around.

Hector had seen his mom talking to the lady's son before. He heard him telling her that his mom and dad had sent him to college by picking up aluminum cans. They would wake up early in the morning, and they would get into their beat-up station wagon, and they would look for cans, and they would go and recycle them, and get money for them. They were so good at it that they paid for rent, food, clothes, bills, all of it from recycling cans. They even bought their son a nice Volkswagen beetle when he graduated from high school. The son seemed like a cool guy, at least Hector always thought he was, because every time the ice cream man would come and his mom wasn't home, and he had no money of his own to buy an ice cream cone, the son would buy one for him.

Hector kept arguing with the lady. "That's my ball and I want it back, you old bag."

"Don't you come onto my yard, you little turd, I'll mess you up."

Hector's friend Byron, who lived next door to the old lady, heard the yelling, and came out of his house.

Byron stood on his porch and nodded at Hector. Byron yelled, "Go and get it, it's your ball!"

"I'ma tell your mom," the crazy lady yelled at Byron.

Hector got on his bike. "Shut the fuck up, you old bag," Hector thought, because when you're a kid you can only think bad things, you can't say them.

Hector felt bad for Byron. He wasn't able to play with all the kids, and it was partly Hector's fault. Byron's leg still looked messed up.

One week ago Hector's uncle had come over to visit him and brought him some new clothes and a tennis ball. As soon as he got the ball, he ran outside to play with his friends. Byron came up with a great idea to play hockey, but they didn't have hockey sticks.

Everyone ran to the empty lot to look for old wood. They were competing to see whose stick would be the best, and all came back beaming with their sticks. Hector went onto his uncle's truck; he knew that his uncle would have a hammer and nails, because his uncle worked in construction. He made everyone's hockey stick, but he made his the best.

When the game started, Byron said that he wanted to be the goalie. He started talking shit and got Hector mad. When Hector saw the chance to score, he swung his makeshift hockey stick so hard that he hit the ground by accident, and the bottom piece of the hockey stick flew off and exposed three nails. It was too late to pull back. The three nails went into Byron's calf. Byron started yelling. Hector was so scared, he pulled the stick back out. The three holes were bleeding. No one knew what to do, so they did what all kids do when they don't know what to do: they ran home.

Hector smiled at the memory. "That was a crazy day," he thought.

After all the kids ran home, Byron's mom started yelling at the top of her lungs. "My boy, you animals hurt my boy," she shouted over and over. She walked to Hector's house. When Byron's mom came and knocked on the door, Hector's mom opened it. Byron's mom tried to yell at her, but all that did was make her slam the door in her face. Now they couldn't play together anymore.

Hector was pedaling, when he heard someone calling him. "Hey, Hector, what ya' doin'?"

"What's up, Tamika?" he said.

"I saw the old lady yelling at yo' ass, and I saw pussy ass Byron gettin' beat by his mama."

Tamika was a tall girl who lived at the end of the cul-de-sac. He had been friends with her for a long time. She was cool, almost like a boy.

"What you doin' out here?" he asked. "Where's your mom, and dad?"

"They told me to come outside 'cause they needed to fumigate, but I know it's all bullshit. Come here; I'll show you what they do," Tamika said and put her index finger to her lips. Tamika stopped at a window and pointed inside. Hector looked inside, and saw that Tamika's dad was on a bed and

only had his boxers on. Tamika's mom was also on the bed, but she was naked. They both had crack pipes and lighters. They were smoking crack and had asked their daughter to leave the house so that they wouldn't feel so ashamed. They thought that by asking her to leave they were doing things the right way.

Tamika and Hector walked back to the front of the house. "Damn, that's fuckin' crazzazazyyyyyyyyy!!!!!!" Hector said, laughing.

"Yeah, they think I'm dumb, but I know what they be doin'," she said, sounding a bit upset. She changed the subject. "Where you goin'?" she asked.

"I gotta go to the store, and buy my mom a half gallon of milk, and an avocado. I don't know what the fuck for though. Anyway I'm gone, lates," he said and pedaled away.

He didn't get very far. His friend Mike came out of his house.

"Where you goin', vato!" Mike asked, trying to do his best cholo voice. His older brother was from the gang in that area, and Mike wanted to be just like him. "To the store. I gotta go or my mom's gonna get mad," Hector said. He only said that because his mom told him that he should be leery of Mike, because Mike was disabled, and he was real big, but he was real nice.

Hector's mom asked him a weird question one day. "Has Mike ever tried to touch you in your no-no parts?" Hector didn't know how to answer that. He had never even thought something like that could happen. Ever since his mom had told him that, Hector worried about Mike trying to touch him. He felt that his mom had ruined his friendship with a fun guy.

One time when Mike's parents weren't home, Mike took Hector to his house to play guns. Mike's dad was a gardener, and his mom was a maid. Mike took Hector into his bedroom, lifted the mattress up, and showed Hector all of his dad's guns. There were a lot of big guns. Most of the bed was covered with the guns, and there were a bunch of plastic bags with some white powder inside of them. Mike picked up a bag full of money. Hector tried to grab some of it, but Mike pulled the bag away from him. "I'll get in trouble," he said. They heard Mike's dad's old truck come to a stop. They threw the mattress back on the bed, and ran out of the house by the back door.

That had been the last time he had played with Mike.

"Can I go to the store with you?" Mike asked.

"No, I gotta go by myself or my mom will get mad," he told Mike, and before Mike could say anything else he rode away. He was almost at the store.

At the next street, two of his best friends, Napoleon and Cesar, met him on their bikes.

Cesar was from Peru. He had a crazy bowl haircut and he was short and plump.

Napoleon was Mexican. He had a big black birthmark on his right cheek. His bike was always shiny, and he would get a new one every year.

"What's up?" Hector asked.

Cesar lifted his shoulders. "Nothin'."

"Shut the fuck up. We're stalking Kathy. Tell him. He knows that you're in love with her," Napoleon teased Cesar.

"Yeah, so what!" Cesar said and pedaled back to his house.

"Come here," Napoleon told Hector. They got to some bushes. Napoleon pushed the leaves to the side and told Hector to look. Hector looked through the hole, and saw Kathy. She had been Cesar's neighbor for years. She was a lot older than all of them; she was about to graduate high school. Kathy was laying on a towel in a very tiny bikini. "Damn!" Hector said. Napoleon let go of the leaves, and put his fingers to his lips. "SHHHH," he said.

They both walked towards Cesar. He was on the porch in his yard. "I'm gonna marry her," he said and grabbed his heart.

"Shut the fuck up!" Napoleon said.

"You shut up!" Cesar said. Napoleon took a swing at Cesar.

"Chill out!" Cesar told Napoleon.

"Alright, alright!" Napoleon said and showed them a cigarette. They had smoked cigarettes before. At first the smoke had made them cough, but little by little they had gotten used to it.

Napoleon lit the cigarette, took a puff, inhaled deeply, and passed it to Cesar, who grabbed it with the tips of his fingers. He looked funny, almost feminine. He passed it to Hector. He tried to grab it like he had seen his uncle do it. He was about to pass it to Napoleon when he heard the back door swing open, and Caesar's mom came running out, screaming bad words in Spanish.

Hector dropped the cigarette and ran away with his bike. Napoleon was right behind him. They both heard Cesar yelling as they pedaled away as fast as they could.

"Where you goin'?" Napoleon asked.

"To the store, you wanna go? I'll buy you a soda and chips." Napoleon couldn't turn down the deal.

They reached the store, and saw that Jose was out front. Jose was a bum. He would buy you anything, as long as you bought one for him. "Jose, come here," Napoleon said. "What do you little vatos need?" Jose asked them. Napoleon pulled out two quarters, and handed them to Jose. "Buy me a single cigarette, and buy yourself one too." Jose went into the store. They could hear him talking to the cashier.

"What do you want?" Napoleon asked Hector.

"I need an avocado and a half gallon of milk."

"What do you want?" Hector asked Napoleon.

"A Pepsi and some crunchy Cheetos."

They both walked into the store. Hector asked the lady in the store to show him where the Pepsi and Cheetos were. She walked with him and showed him where they were. Hector grabbed two Pepsis and two Cheetos, walked back to the cash register, and paid with the ten-dollar bill his mom had given him. He still had six dollars and fifty-five cents left. He walked out of the store, and Napoleon was talking to Jose.

"Let's go," Napoleon said. They rode their bikes a couple blocks and stopped. "Here," Napoleon said, pulling out a half gallon of milk out of his jacket, and an avocado from his pants pocket. Hector pulled out the two sodas and Cheetos from the store bag, and put the milk and avocado inside so it looked like he had bought the items.

He hung the bag from his bike's handlebars. They walked with their bikes and drank their Pepsi. "What're you gonna-" Napoleon stopped mid sentence, and nodded for Hector to look at what he had seen. They both hopped on their bikes and tried to get away unseen. The guy they were trying to get away from was Oscar. Oscar had beat them up more times than they could count. Today they almost got away. He saw them and jumped on his bike. Hector and Napoleon dropped their Cheetos so they could pedal faster. They pedaled faster than they had ever pedaled. Oscar followed them for a couple minutes, but gave up. Hector and Napoleon did not stop. They pedaled past Caesar's house until they were in front of Hector's cul-de-sac then they brought their bikes to a sliding stop. They were out of breath, but they started laughing. "We got away from that punk," Hector said.

"Yeah!!!" Napoleon said in his best tough guy voice.

"One day I'm gonna beat the shit out of that punk ass bitch, watch me," Napoleon said.

"Yeah, whatever, you always say that," Hector said and punched him on the shoulder. "I gotta get this shit to moms. I'm gone. Lates."

When Hector got home, he dropped his bike on the front porch, and walked into his house. His mom was watching TV. She got up and grabbed the bag.

"Did you buy yourself something with the rest, baby?"

"Yeah, thanks, mom," he answered. He went to the sink, washed his hands, and sat down to eat. His mom came into the kitchen, put a plate into the microwave, and punched in a time. When the food was ready, she brought it to the table, and she kissed him on the forehead.

Hector thought about how many times this had happened. A strange car, a man, and some stupid item from the store. He would always take his

time on purpose, and she expected him to take a long time. When he would come back the man and the car would be gone.

Hector had asked his mom who his dad was a couple of times. She could never tell, and Hector knew it was because she didn't know.

Sometimes she would get drunk and tell him that she would get him a daddy. The next day she would act like she didn't remember what she had said and he would play along.

She thought that he didn't know what was happening, but he knew everything all too well. She wanted to erase the mistakes she had made, and in doing so she kept on making the same mistake, over and over. The men would use her for sex and never come back. He wanted to hug her and protect her, but he was just a kid.

Hector's mom stood behind him, watching him eat his dinner. She rubbed his shoulders. He stopped eating, looked up, grabbed her right hand, brought it to his food-smearred lips and kissed it.

We Can't Hear Ourselves Sing

In conversation with Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Sympathy"

by B Batchelor

Can you hear that? The not-
silence. Shaking of
the air. The great gate
of too many men contained
in cramped quarters, voice over
voice as necks stretch & heads
tip back in this feral nest
expecting to be fed or nurtured
or shown the ritual of flight.

You don't know noise
until nerves sizzle
& shock the body
into short-circuit.
How much too much can you bear?

The loudspeaker's constant
god-voice, the late-night/ early-light
pill-spiked grievance fevers
of cooped spook birds,
of prison's dumb metal
percussion-drunk, the bangs
clangs groaning bones moans
in walls in throats in the wind
& its baggage &
goddamnit shut the fuck up!

Figure fatigue of tongue
would set in at some point, enough
for this poem to reach
its final plea: instead of rapture,
a private field's pastoral hush.

Apology in Defeat

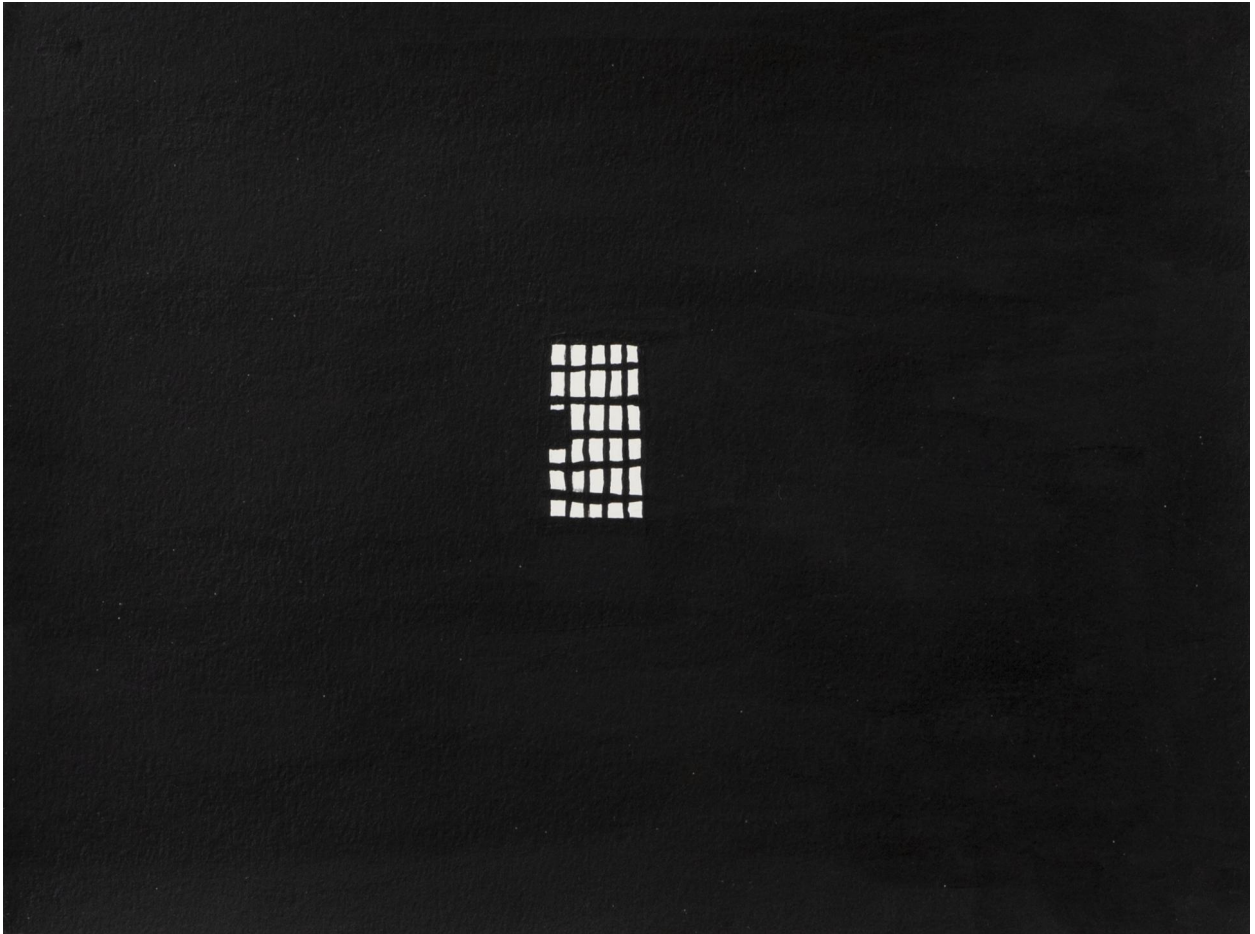
by B Batchelor

White boxers torn & knotted
around broken & taped-
together plastic hangers
in a makeshift pole
become a sign of surrender
I wave through my bars.

Brothers, we share a creased
history of hatred between
our brows, formed thin
& slack lips as protest
when force-fed the stale
bread of promised reform.
We have commingled too long
in the mangle of discarded
bodies "justice" has made us.

I swear I've worn
the thick hide that makes men
tough to chew, withstood
the razor wire gnashing
of this prison's feasting
mouth, its decades fevered
with the marinade
of my proud bones.
I have made a skimpy meal
feeding on bitter skins
I peel from the curdled mess
of what persists, the constant
punishment & punishment.

I'm sorry. I have grown
lean from eating defeat.



Suffocating

by James D. Fuson

Time

by Nathaniel McKowen

April 12

I'm getting out soon after doing 8 and a half years.

I don't know how I feel about getting out. It doesn't feel real. It's like how you know that one day you'll die, but the idea is vague and distant, not really a part of life. Plus, you have that secret belief that you'll somehow live forever and that keeps the fear of it at bay. It's something like that. I know I'll get out soon, but I refuse to buy into the idea too much. A part of me is afraid they'll decide to keep me here forever. I'll be at the gate, about to walk out, and they'll shut it in my face. And then laugh at me, at how stupid I am for ever thinking I would have a life outside these bars. I remember the last time I got excited about getting out and how absolutely soul-crushing it can be.

It happened about four years ago when my ex-girlfriend wrote me a letter. She wrote to tell me how much she missed me and how she had just broken up with her boyfriend and how when she was with him she kept thinking of me.

So, of course, I told her she's my soulmate. She said I was hers. We began to make plans for when I got out. I would lay in my bed, lost in fantasies of future days, of backyard barbecues. I read books on start-ups and began writing a business plan. I started having literary ambitions and submitted writing to magazines in hopes of getting published. I saw my future self as this successful guy who had overcome adversity—a guy who wears a suit, but not a tie, and who doesn't bother buttoning the collar because he doesn't take himself so seriously. A man who has risen from the ashes of his mistakes and has been reborn as an influential voice of perseverance and hope.

Then her letters came further and further apart. Also, I realized that without access to a phone or computer, doing market research on a business plan is impossible. A growing mountain of rejection slips let me know that either, A: Publishers don't take handwritten submissions seriously, or B: I have no writing talent whatsoever. All my ambitions began to crumble in my fingers, and I watched as the debris rained to the floor. After about six months, her letters stopped altogether.

And then it hit me.

I still had four years to go. Four more years of this barren, beaten dirt and rusted steel; of chain link and razor wire; of sausage turds for breakfast, pink slime meatloaf for lunch and bologna sandwiches for dinner. Four more years of hair-trigger violence; of degrading strip searches; of thwarted

ambition and impotent dreams. Four more years of being alone; of isolation and separation, where the most intimate interaction I can hope for is a fist fight. Four more years of wasting away while everyone I know moves on with their lives, and I become just a quaint memory slowly fading into obscurity. Four more years.

It was spirit-grinding, hope-smashing, apathy-inducing realization. I vowed to never let it happen again.

Now I have less than a year left, but it might as well be ten. I learned my lesson. That's how you survive doing time. You manage expectation by not expecting. You protect hope by not hoping, by keeping it a seed and never letting it germinate. You don't do the years. You don't do the weeks. You don't do the days.

You do each moment into the next. And you keep that seed safe for better soil.

April 22

I think my cellie is dying. He lies shivering in his rack, bundled under his wool blanket, layered with thermals, sweats, and extra socks. It's 90 degrees out. Then his fever kicks in and he pours sweat, turning into a hot clammy mess. This has been going on for a month.

If there's one thing you want to avoid in life, it's getting sick in prison. Medical won't do a damn thing for you.

About four weeks ago, my cellie started shivering and his throat hurt. He thought it might be the flu or something, so he tried to ride it out. A week or so passed and his fever wouldn't go away. He passed out in the chow hall, but we helped him make it back to the cell. Finally he decided to go to medical to see what was wrong. He told them about his fever, his throat, and how he had passed out. The nurse gave him allergy pills and Ibuprofen. The Ibuprofen helped with the fever but he had to take a pill every hour or so to keep it from coming back. He told them this. They took his Ibuprofen from him, since he wasn't taking it as directed, and threatened disciplinary action. That night his fever got so bad he was delirious. Since it was over 104 degrees, they were forced to take him to Rincon Medical.

Rincon Medical is like a hospice for dying convicts. They diagnosed my cellie with an infected abscess on his tonsil. They gave him some antibiotics, and sent him back to the yard. He improved a bit, but when the antibiotics ran out, his fever and chills returned. He put in to see medical and medical prescribed some more antibiotics. Nothing. So they gave him more antibiotics.

After about the fourth cycle of antibiotics, I told him, "I'm no doctor, but I don't think continuously pumping you full of antibiotics is a good idea because your body gets used to them."

“What do I do?” he asked, teeth chattering.

“You need to see a real doctor and have tests run. Figure out what’s wrong with you,” I said, keeping my distance.

“How do I do that?”

“I dunno.”

He closed the face-hole of his blanket and went back to shivering, jiggling like a mass of grey jello.

I decided that I was going to get him some help. When the nurse came around to pass out pills, I stopped her at our cell door.

Me: Excuse me, ma’am. My cellie needs medical attention.

Her: What’s wrong with him?

Me: He’s got a fever and won’t stop shaking.

Her: OK...

Me: This has been going on for a month. He needs to see a real doctor. You guys are pumping him full of antibiotics but it’s not working.

Her: You guys? Do I look like a guy?

Me: You guys. Your company. Corizon. Who you work for.

Her: What do you want me to do?

Me: Give him some medical attention.

Her: We’re locked down today. Why didn’t he come to sick call yesterday?

Me: I don’t know. Because he didn’t need it yesterday?

Her: Then he’s not that sick.

Me: You don’t... He needs a doctor.

Her: He needs to put in a HNR (Health Needs Request).

Me: He needs medical attention now. Feel his head.

(She doesn’t.)

Her: I’m sorry, I can’t help you.

Me: [Expletive removed].

This type of treatment is nothing new. The Arizona Department of Corrections just went through a lawsuit a couple of years ago (Parsons v. Ryan). They were sued for their lack of adequate medical care. For a couple months, guys in suits would come around and make sure medical was doing what they were supposed to. Then the tours stopped. It seems the prison has returned to their old policy: treat ‘em like inconvenient pets. “Oh, it’s sick? Hurry, put it outside before it shits on the new carpet.”

“What am I supposed to do, man?” My cellie croaks this from beneath his blanket. “I think I’m dying.”

It’s a joke we’ve been saying the past few weeks, but this time there’s no humor in his voice. He hasn’t eaten in a couple of days. His head is burning up. He’s slurring his words a little bit. I wet a rag and put it on his forehead. I

ask him if he wants me to make him some Ramen soup. I don't know what else to do.

Finally, we decide to fake a heart attack. Maybe they'll take him to the hospital. It's 10:00 pm when they get him. After he leaves, the cell is quiet and smells like the old people's armpits. I sit down and put my head in my hands. I hope he's in a better place.

I mean that literally, not in the spiritual/dead sense.

I hope he's in a better place, anywhere other than here.

April 25

When I first came to prison, older convicts would talk about being institutionalized. They talked about it like it was a sickness I'd eventually catch. I didn't believe them. I thought it was a myth.

The other day I got called up to property to sign a contraband notice for a magazine they won't let in (apparently my Moviemaker magazine is a threat to security). On the way up to property there's a gate that separates the housing units.

When I get to the gate, I look around for a C.O. to unlock it and let me through. There's no one in sight. So I wait. I know there's a C.O. stationed on this part of the yard, and that he'll be around sooner or later. Minutes tick by and still nothing. I tap my feet. I finger-drum my forearm. I stare at the sky. I check my watch, and it's ten minutes until count-time. I curse the C.O.s and their incompetence.

Just as I'm about to give up and walk back to the house, another inmate comes up. He nods his head in the typical 'sup greeting. He slides past me. He pushes the gate open and walks through.

The gate was open the whole time. The struggle is real.

June 25

Is it strange that when I hang out with a convicted murderer, we jam to Taylor Swift while we discuss philosophy?

June 29

Now that I know my date's right around the corner I've been thinking about it a lot. I know I need to process what happened, but there's not really anyone to talk to about it.

After the accident everything was a blur. They told me a man died, but it didn't feel like real life. It felt disconnected, like it was something I had watched on TV. I knew I was supposed to feel something, but I didn't. Everything was numb. It was as if my brain shut down, a part of it, the feeling part. I didn't think about it. I didn't want to think about it. There were

indictments, court dates, and constant stress. Everything was falling apart and it was all too much.

That is when I embarked on this quest for knowledge. I started reading books. Devouring them. Novels, religious books, books on quantum mechanics, philosophical treatises, conspiracy theories—everything I could get my hands on. I would stay up all night reading different books, underlining important passages; I was a detective piecing together clues. Somehow it all fit together—the illuminati, Plato’s cave, Buddha’s enlightenment, Jesus’ resurrection, and how light quanta can behave as a particle or a wave depending on how the observer chooses to observe it. It was all connected. There was significance in everything I read, and if I could fit in together, in the right way, the world would make sense. Life would have meaning. The important thing was that I didn’t have time to think about what happened. I was too busy putting together invisible puzzle pieces.

I was charged with leaving the scene of an accident after causing serious injury or death, and I plead guilty. At the sentencing, the family of the victim came. The pain and anger on their faces were unbearable. This was the first time I realized a person died. It wasn’t abstract anymore. I felt like a monster. If they would have sentenced me to hang, I would have gladly put the noose around my neck. That night, in my jail cell, I felt the weight of it crushing me.

It put my head in my hands.

My cell mate looked down at me and said, “You better not be fucking crying.”

I cleared my throat. “Fuck you.”

He laughed. “That’s it.”

I stuffed all of it in a deep dark corner and went back to reading my book.

Then, I was swept away to prison. I came face to face with this new world, like a post-apocalyptic compound of roving bandits. There was no place for weakness. They prey on it, smell it like blood in the water. So, I built myself a shell. Don’t let anything in, don’t let anything out. But I had dreams, slow motion dreams of airbag dust and glass shards reflecting light. It was like a wound that wouldn’t close, but I had to ignore it so I didn’t look vulnerable. I found the most effective way to distract from weakness was to get mad at something. I got mad at the system, at the cops, at society, at anything out there to keep from looking inside.

I didn’t think about the accident much for another five years. I got into a routine. If someone asked me about what happened, I repeated my charges like reading a discovery. Then one day as I was cleaning my cell, going through my paperwork, I came across a report where the family had to

identify the body. The only way they could tell it was him was a tattoo of praying hands on his chest. Something snapped when I read that. The closest I had come to crying during this whole experience was that night after the sentencing. I wasn't even sure I was capable of crying anymore, but all of a sudden I felt the hot sting of my tears in my eyes. I rushed to the shower and turned on the water. I stuffed my face in a bundled up towel and made coughing noises to cover the sounds of my sobs. When I got out of the shower I pretended like nothing happened.

It's been a couple of years since then, and eight years since the accident. I still haven't processed it. Some nights I lay awake and imagine what I could say to the family to help them find closure, if it's even possible. Maybe I would just make it worse. Sometimes I imagine letting them take turns beating the shit out of me until I'm a pulpy mass, and somehow they forgive me after that.

July 11

I got assigned to a new class. I've been trying to get into as many classes as I can before I get out. Problem is there are no classes in this yard. Even the A.A. guys gave up on us. The class I was assigned to is called "Cognitive-Behavioral Curriculum/Thinking For a Change." It's one of the few classes that we're required to take. It's the system's strug-and-sigh attempt at rehabilitation.

At first I was excited about it. I thought maybe we'd go to a classroom where a trained professional would come in with lesson plans. Of course not. Our teacher isn't a teacher; she's a corrections officer—an overworked, underpaid woman who barely speaks English. And our classroom isn't a classroom; it's an old storage room with bare walls and a cement floor. Since the electrical sockets don't have covers on them, the wires stick out of the wall like dead tarantula legs in festive stockings.

During our first class, after we had all taken our seats, she told us that this class was required and if we missed a class there would be disciplinary action and loss of privileges. Everyone grumbled. She told us that we were only going to get out of it what we put in.

"But you're forcing us to be here," someone pointed out. "If I'm going to get something out of a class, it's because I want to be there. Not 'cause you're threatening me."

Everyone laughed.

While it might be true that we'd only get out what we put in, I felt it necessary to point out that it goes both ways. We can only get out of a class what they put in, also.

"Do you have training to teach this class?" I asked.

She said that the prison gave her a one-day training course.

“One whole day?” I said.

Everyone laughed, again. I saw her cheeks flush. Immediately I regretted asking her. I had embarrassed her, and she was just trying to do her job. I was making it worse.

“I already took this class,” someone said. She asked the rest of us who had already taken this class. About half the people raised their hands. They had taken it anywhere from one to four times.

She smiled big and told them get to take it again.

“It’s ‘cause they get a paycheck every time we take it,” said one guy. He had his feet kicked out in front of him, and an arm hooked over the back of the chair.

She said she definitely didn’t get a paycheck every time.

“Not you. The prison,” the guy said, waving his hand at the air around him, at the omnipresent enemy.

She asked the guys who had taken the class what they thought about it. The guy next to me sat up. “It’s bullshit.” He tapped the book in his lap. “This book is written by a bunch of college professors and doctors who don’t know shit. They never been through the shit I’ve been through. They don’t know my life.”

I thought about the title of the class. Cognitive Behavioral Curriculum/Thinking For a Change. How condescending can you be? On one side of the title, the authors (read: society) employ these Latin-based, cerebral-sounding, champagne-toting, monocle-wearing words, looking down their noses at us. Then there’s a slash—a solid dividing line—where on the other side of the title, they offer us simpletons a simple translation in some nice simple working-man words. Thinking for a change. But even in these simple words, lies a hidden rib-shot, a witty yet demeaning turn of phrase that insinuates, “Hey stupid, why don’t you try thinking for a change, like us much more intellectually superior people?” I subscribe to the theory that the way you treat someone influences their behavior. If you talk down to people like they’re dumb criminals, they act like dumb criminals just to piss you off: “You think your thinking is so much better than mine? How ‘bout I just rob your ass, Einstein?”

“What about you?” The officer pointed to a young Mexican man with a pair of headphones around his neck.

“I don’t even know why I’m in this class,” he said. “This book, this class, they try to teach you how to act, and it’s cool if you want to be a part of society. It ain’t going to help me in here. It’s a different world in here, different rules. I’m 14 years in on a 42-year sentence. Is there anything in that book that’s going to change that? I got real problems. This stupid class ain’t going

to help fix those. I need help. Real help. You're supposed to be a counselor, right?"

"Not that kind of counselor," she said.

He barked a laugh. "Well, I need some real counseling. You don't give a shit about me. No one does. At the end of the day you go home. I've been in here since I was 14, and I'll be here 'til I'm 56. And you want me to start thinking for a change? I'm trying not to think at all."

The class went quiet, but everyone gently nodded their heads, lost in their own thoughts. His anger seemed to reverberate off the walls like a tuning fork.

Pitch perfect.

Speak My Spirit Name

by Dawn René Peel

I speak my Spirit name to the four sacred winds
 Giiwedinanung, Giiwedinanung, Giiwedinanung, Giiwedinanung¹
 Reverberating from depths of my soul
 to ethereal Ishpiming²
 beyond inner giizhigong³ of clouds, lightning and crystalline rain
 Migizi Nenaadawi'iwed's⁴ protective wings spill over me
 embodying colors of life and radiant sun
 moving amid worlds, veils of illusion dissolve
 Imposing in his mohawked crown, long strands of raven hair,
 alive as whirling wind and pirouetting shadow
 Piercing starburst, Wisdom-knowing, ambered eyes
 fierce sharp nose, cheeks chiseled high upon his coppery face
 Yielding talon's grip, I'm enfolded to his heart's embrace
 carried over nighttime mists, by echo of Aki's⁵ heartbeat
 Far into the Ishpiming landscapes of cobalt cosmos
 We soar higher, *Sky Dancers*, together as one
 amongst pageantry of slivering stars, array of palatial planetary,
 across Nokomis'⁶ milky moon patterns timeless loops
 amidst Ancestral prayers, Sacred Hoop,
 scattered as curative love songs
 Dancing flawless my fractured life, healing Indigenous Nations,
 inhabited Ishpiming, all parts of me, *Sky Dancers*,
 healing, twirling, swirling gently from deep nocturne's passage dance
 He nestles down in waving, whirling wiingashk,⁷
 hair of the Great Mother
 Encircled by oboodashkwaanishiinhyag,⁸
 iridescent flight wings flicker,
 dainty *sky dancers* bathe me in sweet, sweet, sweet caress
 Tethered to Her heart's rhythmic beat, Aki, grounded
 I surrender to souls soothing—as language fails me,
 magnanimous Migizi Nenaadawi'iwed,
 takes flight singing shrill strident song,
 “*Gidebweyenimin!*”⁹

1. To the North, in the North,
 from the North, North Star
 2. Sky: moon, stars, planets,
 and heavens; up above and
 beyond; inner sky

3. Sky, inner sky; where rain,
 clouds, and lightning form
 4. Eagle Spiritual Shaman
 5. Mother Earth

6. Grandmother
 7. Sweetgrass
 8. Dragonflies
 9. I believe in you



Flow

by Flying Spaghetti

Raking

by Elizabeth Hawes

In a pile of leaves
wearing cocoa mustaches
we sit in all brown gardens
in loosely-woven cardigans &
galoshes pink
tipped fingers poking out of
arm holes frayed regretting
no mittens
silent spaces
static stillness but for
obese squirrels scurrying with
last minute to-do lists
expecting any-second drizzle.
A cardinal does a drive-by past
me and you like a red
M&M in a sky of ash —
he's got a mouth on him.
I yell, "Get a blog."
He gives me
the finger as he is in flight.
Cardinals are rude like that.
I look down at my cold right
palm. The upper line in the middle
breaks forewarning
desolation in the middle
of my life. I am
in the middle of my life.
Hands shoved back into the arm
of my sweater, I tuck
my hands in your pockets
looking up just in time
to see nothing.

Talented

by Samuel Powers

The dormitory lights flooded on at 5:45 a.m., but Rich was already awake. He'd been turning things over in his mind, wondering about his wife, who, after sticking with him for five years of his incarceration, had suddenly stopped answering his phone calls. As he contemplated the possibilities, his bunkmate farted. Unperturbed, Rich climbed down the bunk and pushed open the window through the bars. He grabbed a t-shirt and fanned the air mechanically, still lost in thought. A cool breeze drifted in and Rich set down the shirt. He pressed his face to the scene before him: the early morning haze, which lingered over the green hills rolling beyond the prison; that sliver of moon hanging over the orange and blue morning. Something about the stillness and tranquillity seemed at odds with his present environment, that twisted mass of metal and concrete, of hard edges and broken lives, of violence, regret, despair.

Many guys had risen and were rustling about now. Rich turned and appraised the 80-man dorm in all its fart-stained squalor. The 40 double bunks had been packed together in a tight space designed for half that capacity. He could reach out his arm and touch five different people. Soiled sheets and towels hung from bunks to block the light, damp clothes dangled from the windows, shoes were scattered, piles of books and papers tumbled. Groans and coughs, wheezing, mumbled conversations. Flies pillaged food that had been left out. The place looked like some forgotten refugee camp. Rich glanced up and saw that his buddy Jay was awake, too.

"Good morning, neighbor," said Jay.

"Morning," said Rich.

"Can I get a shot of coffee, please?"

Rich went into his locker and grudgingly spooned some instant coffee into Jay's plastic mug.

"I don't know why you can't buy your own coffee. You ask me for some almost every day."

"We've been over this, Rich. I have a serious drug problem and I can't have any substance in my possession." As Rich folded his blanket, his bunkmate, One-Eyed Ed, stirred.

Ed, who had just one eye and two teeth, heaved himself out of bed with a grunt. His joints cracked. No one ever asked Ed how he lost his eye. His teeth, it was assumed, had fallen out because of meth. But one bottom incisor had stubbornly and proudly survived. Ed claimed to have a molar, too, though no one had ever seen it.

At six o'clock a voice beamed on the outside loudspeaker and reverberated throughout the prison.

"The compound is open! The compound is open!"

Ed grumbled something, took out his coffee, and began to chop it up into some lines on the cover of his Bible. Rich strained to retrieve his earlier thoughts as the noise around him increased. Jay returned, mug in hand, sipping with satisfaction and observed Ed, who just snorted a line of coffee. Jay looked impressed.

"What are you doing, Ed?"

"It gives you a pretty good rush, I'm telling you. Wanna try?"

"I better not, but thanks, brother," Jay replied.

"Ed, you are burnt the fuck out," said Rich, as his bunkmate snorted another line.

Ed smiled, tooth flashing. Rich grabbed the toilet paper and soap and headed for the bathroom. Even walking that cramped, 50-foot distance he almost bumped into 16 people, all going in different directions, some in no direction at all.

On the floor of the entrance to the bathroom was splayed an older, heavysset inmate. He'd thrown up and pissed all over himself and appeared to be unconscious. People stepped over him, entering and exiting the bathroom. Someone said that the staff had been notified. Rich got in line: with just four toilets for 160 inmates on this tier alone, there was even a line to take a shit. The toilets were blocked off by a wall only a couple of feet high—just enough to block the lower half. Some guys chatted on the pot while others stared ahead forlornly. But there was some sense of urgency because of the line of glowering inmates waiting their turn.

As Rich sat on the toilet, a couple of medical personnel arrived unhurriedly with a stretcher, lowering it to the floor. They struggled to roll the inmate onto it, looks of disgust on their faces. Finally, they got him on and wheeled him away. Another problem swept out of sight. When Rich returned to his bunk Ed was brushing his tooth with dish soap.

"What was all the commotion about?" Ed asked, spitting into a cup.

"Some old guy fell out in the bathroom."

"Is he dead?"

"I don't know."

"Rich, I want you to remember that if I ever fall out, you tell them not to resuscitate me. I do not want to be brought back to this godforsaken shithole."

"OK, I'll let them know."

Rich recognized the laughter of Alex, who'd been joking with a couple of guys nearby, as he swaggered toward their bunk. Alex, who referred to

himself as Alexander the Great, was an admittedly talented athlete. He'd supposedly played special teams for the football program of some lesser-known university. Yet for all his physical prowess, he'd been struggling the last couple of years learning how to sing, taking voice lessons from some disgraced former opera singer.

Rich supposed that Alex didn't love music so much as he wanted to be famous. And although Alex frequently missed the note, it wasn't for lack of trying. He devoted hours every day to practice—belting scales on the yard, humming arpeggios, crooning off-key love ballads incongruously in the shower. Rich had been listening to this for two years and, in that time, Alex hadn't improved at all. He may have even gotten worse, as his confidence grew in disproportionate measure to his ability. No one ever had the heart to tell him he sucked.

"Are you guys ready for the dress rehearsal at five?" Alex asked.

"Yeah, we'll be there," said Rich.

Ed, who was sitting on the edge of the bed clipping his toenails, grunted in the affirmative, rings of coffee crystals crusted around his nostrils. Jay, always attuned to his neighbors' conversations since they lived just three feet away, chimed in:

"What dress rehearsal?"

Alex's face lit up, glad to be asked.

"There's a talent show in the gym tonight. The winner gets a bag of junk food. But whatever the guy's talent is—singing, dancing, magic tricks—he gets viciously booed off the stage by about 400 inmates. Of course he doesn't know that before. It's pretty savage. We do this every year, so to find participants we hit up inmates who just got here and don't know any better. My band is the opening act—we'll be kicking off the event with 'Play that Funky Music' while everyone arrives. I'm lead singer and I'm gonna MC the show. Rich plays guitar, One-Eyed Ed's on drums, and O.G., the older Black guy who lives on the second floor, is on bass."

"It's something different," Rich said. "Good recreation."

"Everyone gets a laugh, except the contestants," said Alex.

"It sounds kind of fucked up," said Jay.

"Fucked up? What are you talking about?"

"It's pretty mean, isn't it?"

"Mean? Mean? This is fucking prison, bro. You need to leave those feelings behind," said Alex, who saw this as his musical debut, and had put a lot of work into the preparations. He acquired a few clean mop heads for the band members to throw on under their ball caps to wear like hair. He made sure everyone had sunglasses and he borrowed some fluorescent green soccer jerseys for maximum attention-grabbing effect.

In the weeks leading up to the show, as the band practiced their introductory song, Alex instructed the group to keep their performance secret. He wanted to dazzle the prison population with his premiere. And enlisting guys in the subsequent talent show was contingent on their not knowing that they would inevitably be booed at by a few hundred inmates.

“How many guys did you get to sign up?” Jay asked.

“We have four now—that’s enough. Some old white weirdo just got to the prison yesterday. Says he’s a singer- songwriter from Nashville. I stroked his ego and signed him up and told him he can go first. He has no idea what’s in the store for him. It’s gonna be great,” Alex said with a grin. Ed snorted.

“Who else did you get?” Rich asked.

“A young Black dude’s gonna sing a John Legend song, a Mexican guy’s gonna play the accordion, and Whale, that 500- pound Polynesian, is gonna rap or something.”

“Sounds like it’ll be pretty entertaining,” said Jay.

“Dude, it’s fucking comedy. Tell everyone you know to be there. We want as many guys as possible in the gym to boo the contestants, just make sure they don’t find out about it,” Alex said, suppressing laughter.

Ed, who’d been struggling to clip his big toenail, which was covered in a yellow fungus, finally lopped off the top, whereupon it struck Alex in the face.

“Ed, if you ever do that again I’ll make that eye of yours swell shut,” Alex said. “See you guys at the dress rehearsal at five. Don’t be late.” With that, Alexander the Great took his leave.

As the hours passed the dormitory came to full life. Different areas of the housing unit were dedicated to different illicit activities. The incessant buzzing began, as inmates tattooed each other. One sector, “the casino,” hosted a high-stakes poker table on one bottom bunk and reserved another bed for shooting dice. Disputes frequently broke out and sometimes turned violent. There was “the red light district,” where if one strayed even briefly his intentions were well understood. “If you ever want to get weird, come on by,” they’d say. “Crack alley” featured a few bunks where guys lay around strung out all day.

Around noon, Rich, dressed in his snot-green prison khakis, mounted his bunk, and opened his copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*. But the swirl of noise around him made it all but impossible to read. In any case, his mind kept reverting to his wife—or ex-wife—and he felt a sinking feeling even as he reminded himself of the triviality of it all. You’re just a microscopic creature living on a piece of space dust. Your concerns mean nothing, he thought. But for some reason this didn’t console him.

An inmate walked around with a gym bag full of food that'd been purloined from the kitchen. He advertised his wares:

"Onions, cottage cheese, cilantro."

Ed stopped the guy.

"How much for cottage cheese?" he asked.

"Three mackerels for a glove full," the guy replied.

Since paper money didn't exist in prison, the accepted currency was a packet of mackerel, which cost about a dollar.

"A glove full?" Ed asked.

The guy pulled out a latex glove stuffed with cottage cheese and tied neatly at the wrist.

"It's the only way we can get out," he explained.

"OK, give me a glove of cottage cheese and an onion," Ed said. He struggled to his feet and completed the transaction as his bunkmate zoned out.

Jay had noticed a change in his friend's demeanor. While Rich was normally a quiet guy, he seemed even more withdrawn than usual. Jay approached the edge of the bunk.

"You seem to be hard timing it. What's on your mind?" he asked.

Rich paused as he sorted through his thoughts.

"I miss women," he said finally, a wistful look on his face.

Jay nodded empathetically.

"I'm telling you, brother, you just have to accept the reality," he said, with open arms.

Rich laughed but didn't respond.

"Look, they say it's not gay as long as you stop within six months after getting out of prison," Jay said.

"I thought they said it's not gay as long as you stop when you get out of prison. Now you get a six-month grace period?"

"Times have changed," said Jay.

Soon afterward a guard opened the steel door to their tier, releasing them for lunch. Everyone filed slowly out of the building to the inner compound, that quadrangle formed by the three housing units and the cafeteria. Hundreds of inmates milled about the inner compound—some sat on benches or at tables, others used the phones, groups formed, people talked and laughed. A long, 20-minute line snaked out of the chow hall for two slices of bread and a scoop of tuna slime. Rich and Jay saw their friend Jose, who lived in another unit, at the end of the line.

"Jose, I saw you running to lunch like they're actually serving something good," Jay said.

"I'm just faster than everyone else," Jose said. They stood in line together as it inched forward. "When I was a teenager I ran a five-minute mile. They tried to sign me up for a track. But they got me fucked up if they thought I was gonna wear those shorts and run in circles for them."

"Yeah, now look what you're wearing, bud," Rich said, grabbing the sleeve of Jose's prison uniform.

As they neared the chow hall, Alex called out to them. He lumbered up to the group in a burst of manic energy. "Jose, I need your help at the talent show tonight," he said. "We need someone to throw confetti at the contestants as they fail."

"No problem, I'll be there. Just show me what to do," Jose replied.

"Rich, five o'clock—don't forget," Alex said.

"I know," said Rich.

Alex could hardly contain his excitement for his musical debut, kicking off the event that evening. Gleeful at the prospect of MCing the talent show and watching the participants crash, he left in a hurry.

Rich's thoughts trailed off. As the others talked, he wondered what he would return to when he got out of prison, if that day ever came. He'd left behind a life in ruins years ago. The line crept into the anteroom leading to the chow hall. Rich gazed through the barred windows to the area outside the kitchen where they threw all the garbage. There, caught in the midday light, he saw a lone sunflower growing in improbable splendor among the junk heap. He smiled to himself as his mind wandered, someone from behind gave him a nudge. Rich realized that the lunch line had tugged away from him and he rushed to follow it.

That afternoon, the four o'clock count seemed to arrive faster than usual. Rich was lying on his bunk when the two guards entered the dormitory. On their radios squawked a voice:

"Count time: stand 'em up, count 'em, call it in." All of the inmates stood automatically, accustomed to this ritual they performed several times a day, every day of the year. They waited in silence by their respective bunks as the two guards passed, keys clanging, counting every head. After they left, everyone returned to normal. Ed looked at Rich.

"What's for dinner, bunkie?"

"Uh, the menu says 'rice pilaf.'"

"What the fuck is that?"

"They usually just give us a spoonful of white rice with some margarine on top."

"Oh yeah, I like that one," said Ed.

"But we have to skip dinner for the dress rehearsal. Remember?" Rich asked.

"You're making me miss my favorite meal just to practice the same fucking song we've already played 50 times? I got it—I can keep the beat."

"It means a lot to Alex. We have to make sure the equipment's set up properly and everything sounds good."

Ed sighed. "Fine, I gotta make myself some dinner then." He poured some oatmeal into his plastic bowl, threw in a fistful of jalapeños, added a pack of mackerel, and squeezed some cottage cheese on top from the latex glove.

"Hey Jay, are you going to the talent show?" Rich asked.

Jay was on his back looking sideways at a five-year old Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition. "I guess so—it's not like there's anything else to do. I'll go cheer you guys on."

When the time came for their unit to eat dinner, the guard unlocked the steel door. Rich and Ed headed to the gymnasium.

They entered the gym and saw Alex talking to O.G., the bass player. They both wore sunglasses, neon green soccer jerseys, and white mop heads under their hats. Alex noticed the rest of the band arrive and waved them over.

"What do you guys think?" Alex asked, referring to the get up.

"It's kind of creative," said Rich.

"We're gonna make it work," said O.G.

"We'll wait to put all this on until right before we hit the stage, to surprise everyone," Alex said.

"What stage?" asked O.G.

"Here, will you guys help me with these?" Alex asked, as he gestured to a couple of warped, unpainted ping-pong tables leaning precariously in the corner of the gym. The group dutifully moved the tables to the middle of the gym, up against the wall. Alex envisioned the semi-circle of hundreds of inmates who'd fan around the band as they played.

"Sorry, Ed, the drum set has to stay on the floor. We don't have room on the stage," Alex said.

"As long as they can hear me, I don't give a shit," said Ed.

After tuning their instruments and fixing the setting on the amps, the group began to run through their rendition of "Play that Funky Music." O.G. laid down the signature bass line to start the song and everyone else fell in. After a few seconds Rich heard how horrible the acoustics in the gym were. They'd previously practiced in the band room without issue. In here, a sneaker squeak echoed across the building.

"It's pretty fucked up," O.G. said.

"Well, it's the best we got. Just turn down your amps a little," said Alex.

The group made their adjustments and prepared their garb to throw on right before they hit the stage.

Inmates soon started to trickle in. Relaxed, confident, Alex greeted people as they came.

“Hey Smooth, what’s up? Good to see you, bud,” he said.

“Jeff, how’s it going? Thanks for coming.”

He shook hands and fist bumped most guys as they entered. When Jose showed up, Alex grew a little more animated in spite of himself.

“Jose! I almost forgot. Let me show you the confetti.” He took Jose to a garbage bag stuffed with shredded paper. “This is all yours.”

“When do I throw it?” Jose asked.

“Give the contestants a few seconds to try, but once everyone starts to boo, let them have it,” Alex said, grinning wickedly. Jose agreed, smiling, glad to be a part of the fun.

The gymnasium began to fill. Inmates talked and laughed with their friends and formed a ring around the makeshift stage.

Rich noticed a familiar-looking heavysset guy looking morose in a wheelchair near the front. He decided to approach him.

“Hey, was that you on the bathroom floor this morning?” Rich asked.

“That’s what they tell me,” the guy replied, staring ahead.

Rich searched for an appropriate question. “Are you doing better at least?”

“I guess you can say that.” He looked defeated and had barely registered eye contact with Rich while they spoke.

Rich cracked a smile.

“Are you having the time of your life?”

The guy sighed. “It’s a time in my life.”

“Well, enjoy the show,” Rich said.

Once a couple hundred guys stood waiting, beginning to get restless, Alex decided to start the event. He made sure the band was ready then, mic in hand, he jumped on the ping-pong tables.

“Thank you guys for coming. I’m Alexander the Great and I’ll be your MC. We have a special evening planned for you. A lot of talented motherfuckers in this prison. Are you ready to see what they’ve got?” he asked.

The inmates in the crowd roared with unfeigned enthusiasm. Jose stood nearby with his trash bag full of confetti. Jay was among the hundreds, taking in the spectacle with an amused smile.

“But first, we want to kick things off—get the wheels moving. We have a song for you guys that I think you’ll recognize.”

He gestured to the band and the members threw on their neon green shirts, mop heads, baseball caps and sunglasses. O.G. and Rich jumped up on the dais and One-Eyed Ed hit the drum set. Inmates in the audience were already beaming. O.G. sounded the opening bass line and soon the rest of the band was playing. The jumbled noise echoed off the gym walls.

Alex started to sing the first verse, off-key. Barely a couple of lines into the song someone in the crowd yelled. “Booooo!”

The reaction came like a cascade. Soon, dozens, hundreds of inmates loudly booed and jeered and shouted their full-throated disapproval without mercy. Alex’s face flushed crimson under the white mop head. Still singing, he glanced sideways, seeking direction from Rich, who was strumming the chords and shrugged slightly. Somehow Ed seemed oblivious and banged his head as he drummed. O.G. cradled the bass in his arms as he would hold a woman, and swayed his hips and danced, clearly loving it all. Rich looked out and noticed the guy in the wheelchair, red in the face from yelling. Even Jay was booing. There didn’t seem to be a friendly face in the crowd. After they finished the first verse, Alex unilaterally decided to end the song. But he played it off well, as if all along they’d only intended to play one verse. “All right, all right,” he said in the mic, quieting the crowd. “We’re going to start the talent show for you guys. First up is a singer-songwriter from Nashville.”

He hung up the mike and climbed off the stage, throwing off his costume with disgust while the gym full of inmates laughed. The band looked at each other as they parted from their instruments. As the first contestant clambered on the stage, the band approached Alex.

“What the fuck was that?” O.G. asked Alex. “Why’d you end the song early?”

“Fuck them. They were booing us,” Alex said.

“We practiced all that time to play one verse?” Ed asked.

“I’m not gonna keep singing when they act like that,” Alex said.

“We shoulda finished the song. Who gives a fuck if they boo? Own that shit,” said O.G.

“I guess we deserved that,” Rich said.

The first contestant, in his mid 60s, held his guitar and adjusted the mic. He started to play and sing, but so loudly and immediately was he booed that Rich never even heard the music. Jose jumped to action and threw confetti over the guy. Long strands of the shredded paper caught in his and dangled like tinsel as he continued to play. The shouts grew in intensity, completely drowning out the music. But, to everyone’s surprise, the guy didn’t stop playing. Jose grabbed a thick clump of shredded paper in his hand and,

standing point blank in front of the singer, threw it hard at the guy's face. The singer-songwriter from Nashville got a mouthful of confetti, rendering it impossible to keep singing. He spat out little pieces of paper and hung up his guitar as people cheered, not for his performance but the fact that it ended. Jose pumped the air with his fist as people hooted.

The next contestant was K.D., a young Black guy around 20 years old who'd been excited to sing a John Legend song. After a brief introduction from Alex, K.D. climbed on the stage and grabbed the mic. The crowd was loose now. Only a few lines into the song, the inmates let K.D. have it, barraging him with boos and whistles and all manner of disapprobation. K.D. froze, unsure what to do as people laughed at him and shouted him down. Not until Jose dumped confetti on K.D. did the singer seem to return from his trance. He hung up the mic and left the stage, shoulders slumped. He stood to the side of the stage, looking shell-shocked and on the verge of tears. Rich felt a pang of guilt for his part in setting up the show. He put his hand on K.D.'s shoulder.

"Aw, man, it's all right. It's a tough crowd. We were booed too," he said. K.D. nodded sadly without replying.

Juan Manuel, a middle-aged guy, had planned on playing the accordion for the contest, but, witnessing the crowd's hostility, he thought better of it and didn't budge. Despite his friends' attempts to cajole him, Juan Manuel refused to take the stage. The crowd booed him for his unwillingness to perform.

Just as everyone thought the event had petered out, Whale, the huge Polynesian, slowly swung his body to the front like a sumo wrestler. For a moment it appeared that he would try to crawl onto the ping-pong tables, but a couple of inmates dissuaded him. Whale grabbed the mic stand and confronted the crowd. After someone passed him a guitar, Whale flipped over in the instrument and told the crowd in an unexpectedly soft voice: "I'm going to try something different for y'all." A couple of inmates booed reflexively and laughed at each other. But a respectful silence had taken hold of the crowd as everyone listened. Whale began to drum on the body of the guitar and simultaneously beatbox with his mouth, issuing arrhythmic guttural sounds that mystified the audience. He closed his eyes and gyrated his body and the thick folds of skin on his neck jiggled as he moved. He clucked and grunted and drummed, working up a great sweat as he poured forth his act. Some of the sounds he emitted vaguely resembled words, but no one understood their meaning.

He seemed to unleash something from deep within, something powerful that left the crowd dumbfounded. When he was done, half of the audience remained quiet and the other half erupted in cheers and applause.

Whale stood there absorbing the adulation, satisfied, as if he knew he'd win all along. Someone passed him his prize, a trash bag stuffed with 50-cent junk food. The crowd started to disperse, the sideshow came to an end. Rich watched as the gym emptied and that vast space, which moments earlier had echoed with catcalls and laughter, fell silent.

The remaining hours of the day passed without ceremony. The cacophony in the dormitory reached its climax as the inmates waited for the 10 p.m. count before lights-out. Arguments broke out about that evening's football game on TV. Unceasing conversations filled that small space where 80 souls dwelled. Many guys who attended had already forgotten about the talent show, a small distraction in the monotonous blur of their daily lives. Alex didn't talk to anyone after the performance. He lay on his bunk with his beanie pulled down over his eyes, and his earbuds in, listening to the radio.

One-Eyed Ed pinched and measured his ample stomach fat and picked the lint out of his belly button while Rich flossed his teeth. Jay called out to his neighbors:

"I want you guys to know that I was only booing Alex, not the rest of the band."

Neither Rich nor Ed commented. It didn't seem to matter now.

The two guards arrived for the count and the dorm hushed. It was the rare, eerie interval in prison when quiet momentarily presided, save for jangling of the guards' keys as they passed. The lights shut off and some scattered murmurs continued as Rich got in bed. He closed his eyes, and all that he could see were the scowling faces of hundreds of inmates arrayed in front of him in the crude semi-circle. He smiled as he fell asleep.

Zora Neale Hurston Wrote the World

by Francisco Wills

The book She was laboring upon...
 is to be finished
 in the interval
 between a tombstone drowned
 in a thistle sea, and the garden
 of morning glories
 She once planted.
 Her bones never rest; sweating
 and telling lies, they still write:
*"It is pretty well established
 That I did get born."*
 It is also established
 that She cannot die.
 Not as long
 as someone reads Her
 and loves Her, simply
 because She is lovable.
 With *"work and sweat,"*
 or that of Her mules,

Zora wrote the world.

El libro en Ella que laboraba
 será terminado
 en el intervalo
 entre una lápida ahogada
 en un mar de cardos, y el jardín
 de estrellas matutinas
 que una vez plantó.
 Sus huesos nunca descansan; sudando
 y contando mentiras, escriben.
*"Está muy bien establecido
 Que he nacido."*
 También está establecido
 que Ella no puede morir.
 Por lo menos no
 mientras alguien le lea
 y le ame, simplemente
 porque Ella es querible.
 Con Su *"trabajo y sudor,"*
 o el de Sus mulas,

Zora escribió el mundo.

A la escritora afroamericana, genio del sur, graduada de Columbia.



The Surfer
by Kevin Oscar

Educational Obstacle

by Benjamin Frandsen

Without question, my toughest educational obstacle has been taking distance-learning classes from a prison cell. Rules forbade supplies most students take for granted: tape, string, hard plastics, even hardcover books. Recently, when I collected my Statistics book, the officer grunted, “No hardcovers,” and commenced amputation by box-cutter.

“I *rented* that,” I groaned. “Were you afraid I’d build a dangerous cardboard dollhouse?”

He ignored me, trashed the \$185 cover, and called, “Next!”

Later, I read the course syllabus: *All the course assignments and statistical formulas are printed on your textbook’s inside covers.* Eyes closed, I let loose a sigh heard ‘round the world.

I wondered if my Physical Geography lab would mesh better with institutional regulations.

Nope.

Lab #1—Wind Direction. Requires: world atlas (maps are considered escape paraphernalia) and protractor (contraband). After tracing the library’s atlas, I constructed a “protractor” from a clear sheet protractor, using its corner for the 90-degree angle, and repeatedly bisecting the outer angles until all were near to 1 degree. By midnight, my lab was complete.

Lab #2—Seismic Activity. Requires: #2 pencil, string, metal compass. Seriously? Why not a grappling hook and a coil of rope? *The compass point represents the earthquake’s epicentre...* Of course, the guards provided no metal compass. Instead, I used the adhesive edges of stamps for tape and string, thread from my state-issued boxer shorts, and voila! Three hours later, Seismic Activity lab—check.

Lab #3—Magma in Earth’s Core. Requires: a lava lamp— Oh, come on! I won’t recount my ridiculous experiment mixing cold and boiling water in a bowl with apple jelly and Kool-Aid. Sometime before dawn, I finally finished the world’s messiest lab.

Oddly, I never minded these extraordinary hassles. I even reveled in the challenge, taking perverse pleasure in the extra effort required. These obstacles were but a small part of the invaluable opportunity to attend college from *prison*. All along, my silent mantra has echoed: *If I can be successful in college under these circumstances, I can do it anywhere.* In this moment, I realize with surprising clarity that I was right.

Midlife Crisis

by Keith Martin

Being dopesick sucks. It's someplace between what it must feel like to be tortured by sadistic dungeon masters with a fresh set of anal probes and the worst flu anyone has ever had. Not rest-and-hydrate flu. You're-going-to-die flu. You twitch and kick and flail like you've got Parkinson's. You sit there and curse your mother for even thinking about having you. In the end, it's all your own stupid fault. You did it to yourself.

Waiting in the project staircase for Black to put down the Xbox controller long enough to send someone to serve me. I take a second in my state of abject misery to evaluate my life. I look at my phone and see a reflection in the screen. Fluorescent light half-covered in decades of dirt and grime throws a yellowish glow that makes my complexion look even more jaundiced than it really is. Usually considered a good-looking guy—I do pretty well with the ladies—an unwashed, greasy, long-haired gargoyle stares back at me. Bloodshot eyes and a week's worth of patchy stubble dotting my face. I look almost as bad as I feel.

“Where the fuck is Black?”

I survey the environment. Piss puddles and elephant size piles of constipated junkie poop litter the stairs. Nasty little landmines. No one comes in here except the fiends looking to cop their drugs. Not even the most hardened project veteran would brave this particular staircase. They'd prefer to wait on the always-broken elevator, even if the place was on fire. Used syringes and empty crack vials crunch under my Nikes. I pray to God I don't accidentally poke myself on a dirty set of works before I get my shit and make it out. Pacing back and forth, I can't believe it's gotten so bad that I'd subject myself to this class of punishment. What the hell was I thinking? Constant triple sneezes and rotating hot and cold chills: the only distraction from my specialized misery.

Two floors below I hear Jazzy blowing one of her regulars. I can tell it's them because Morty, an overweight little Jewish guy who owns one of the numerous pawn shops down the block, moans like a bad porn star whenever he gets some head. Just as he reaches his high-pitched keening climax, the door to the 12th floor landing bangs open and someone yells, “Yo!” I scramble up the flight. I haven't moved that fast since, well, never probably. I can almost smell the drugs. When you're sick your senses are magically heightened and over-sensitive. Maybe it's your mind playing tricks on you or actual phenomenon. Either way, when I make it up there, I'm met by one of Black's many runners. All women, each one fatter than the last and ugly as

sin. This one couldn't have been over five feet tall but weighed more than an NFL linebacker.

"You look like shit, white boy."

"Thanks. Five chicken and ten steak," I say, handing her a wad of cash.

She puts a bundle and five nickel bags of crack into my palm. Drugs in hand, I proceed back down the steps, looking for a relatively clean square foot to sit on and get straight. I hear Large Marge yell down at me, "You short me five, white boy. Have my shit next time."

"Fuck you and your five bucks."

"Yo Lemonade Man!" the homeless guy who opens the McDonald's door for people yells at me as I walk by. "You got a cigarette?" You'd think he'd buy himself a few loosies at the bodega with all the money he makes. Opening that door in hopes that someone puts some loose change or a buck in his upturned palm. Someone who didn't know better might have stopped and given him a smoke. What I do know is that on a good summer day like today, people from all over the world spilling out of the train station across the street, he'll end up making more in an hour than most people make all day at their regular jobs. I've only got half a pack and I'm broke now so he's shit outta luck. Stop spending all your money on crack and cheap beer, I think, and you won't have to ask.

They call me "Lemonade Man" around here because the odds are good that I've got half a lemon tucked in my back pocket at any given moment. If not a fresh one, one of those plastic lemon-shaped ones with the lemony acid water inside. That works just as well. Anything acidic does the trick, but who walks around the neighborhood with a bottle of vinegar in his pocket? I like lemons. When you put that piece of crack in the cooker and put a few drops of lemon juice over it and proceed to break it apart with the butt end of your rig, it creates a viscous fluid that smells like the furniture polish your mom used to clean the tables with.

Depending on how old you are, you may remember your favorite TV kid show scientist: Mr. Wizard or Bill Nye. You might've missed this episode, but it goes something like this. Crack, the alkaline (hence the nickname, base), when mixed with an acid (lemons!), causes a chemical reaction. When you hit home and that instant rush takes you from zero to a thousand in two seconds, you sometimes taste the lemons in the back of your throat. Until you inevitably spill your guts all over whatever's in front of you.

I've heard people say, "You can't shoot crack." Or, "Nobody shoots crack," but I assure you, people definitely shoot crack. Some junkies try to shoot anything. Whatever they can get their hands on. Pills, powders, anything remotely water soluble. All because they like sticking themselves.

Those people are weird needle freaks and should be avoided at all costs.

Sure, most baseheads don't projectile vomit every time they take a blast, but any real addict knows shooting crack gives you a rush far more intense than just smoking it. You gotta be careful though. When you miss, it stings worse than getting poked by an electrically charged yellow jacket. If the shit you get happens to be cooked with particularly good coke, you could blow your heart up. Other than that, you're fine.

I get straight in the project staircase, instantly wiping away the sickness like a magician waving his wand. Abracadabra, boom. Normal again. As if you didn't just shit your pants ten minutes before. Crazy. One minute you'd gladly pull off your own skin, piece by bloody piece, if it would help you feel better. Then the next minute you're fine. Appetite back. Ready to run the NYC marathon. Now it's time to do the five pieces I copped from the house of horrors I just left. This is what really makes it bad. A regular dope fiend could possibly manage his addiction for years before it ever went off the tracks. Add cocaine to the mix, especially crack cocaine, and you're fucked.

I'm walking with purpose to Boris' house where I can shoot up in peace. Chainsmoke cigarettes and puke into plastic grocery bags because I can't leave his bedroom and make it to the toilet. We'll hang out and talk, or at least I'll talk and Boris will listen. He's the big, silent type. First generation Brooklyn Russian. A breed unto themselves. Not the most vocal guy in the world. If you didn't know him you might think he was looking at you and plotting your slow death. In deep thought about where he's going to dispose of your body. Almost seven feet tall, 350 solid pounds. A wall of flesh with a sloped neanderthal brow. I take him along when I go to neighborhoods or into buildings I don't feel safe in, and people usually stay far away. Little do they know Boris is a massive Care Bear. The sweetest, nicest guy you'll ever meet. He'd rather style the hair on one of his My Little Pony dolls or bake you a pie than do you any violence.

"I swear to Christ, if you don't clean this shit hole of a room, you're gonna come home one day from work and everything is gonna be gone, cleansed and sanitized." Boris' vacant stare turns back to the amateur glass blowing exposition going on in his small room. He maneuvers a handheld acetylene torch, a two dollar crack pipe, and a pair of pliers. One of these days he's either going to end up hospitalized, looking like Freddy Krueger, or he's going to burn the whole fucking building down. Dude makes 100k a year. You'd think he'd just order a real deal meth pipe off eBay, but he'd rather tweak out and make his own. Way more fun I guess.

"It smells like a family of gerbils died and are liquifying somewhere under all this crap you got piled up in here." "Haven't seen Chester in three weeks," Boris murmurs, biting his lip in deep concentration. He gets the stem to the right temperature, one end glowing a bright orange. He then puts the other end in his mouth and carefully seals the hot end with the pliers. Reheating the sealed end, he gently starts blowing, and a little bubble begins to form. With the help of a paperclip, he then pokes a hole and expands it, making a pipe bowl in it in about twenty minutes.

"What do you mean you haven't seen Chester in three weeks? You live in a three-bedroom apartment, not some country estate, dude!"

"Haven't seen em'," Boris replies.

"Don't you feed the poor thing?" I say.

"Mom," Boris grunts, before he puts the pipe back to his lips. I know for a fact his mother hasn't fed the dog. His ancient mother survived Stalin and the gulags, came to America, and worked thirty years until she couldn't walk anymore. If I had to guess, she's roughly a hundred and fifty years old. Hasn't left her bedroom, or even opened the door for anything other than Boris handing her a plate of food, and then again to give it back when she's done. Boris' room, the smallest in the apartment, is the kind of room they find overdosed agoraphobes in when the smell gets too bad. Except this one looks like the poor bastard who lived and died there worked at a medical supply warehouse, was a terrible kleptomaniac, and exclusively ate fast food. Four or five overflowing sharps containers line one wall next to a wrought iron fishtank stand holding a thousand gallon tank filled with what looks like toxic waste. Runoff from a barely operable nuclear power plant in Uzbekistan. At least two inches of matted garbage coats the floor. I eye the pile in the corner with suspicion. Chester only weighed fifteen pounds soaking wet. An avalanche of shit might've trapped his little ass. Fast food papers stuffed into empty plastic bags covers the love seat next to the pull out futon bed Boris sleeps on. Those plastic bags do come in handy. I'm looking at a couple double-bagged ones tied off and placed by the door in the hopes that someone will grab them on their way out and throw them down the trash shoot. They're filled with what was, up to an hour ago, my breakfast and every ounce of solid or liquid I've had all day. Bulimics got nothing on crack shooters. I'm not advocating for a drug diet, but a junkie slims fast. Boris of course is the exception to the rule. The only man I know who can stay up for two days and eat endless chicken nuggets. Bottom line, his place is a shithole and my skin crawls everytime I get there, but it's safe. No other junkies harassing you. No one trying to rob you or kill you and no cops coming to kick the door in. I don't care if Boris doesn't say another word as he sits and

fiddles with this meth science project. I know he'd take a bullet for me if need be and nobody is gonna fuck with us. You can't say the same about the gas station's bathroom. It may be just as nasty but I don't care. It's not as if I had showered or changed my underwear anytime recently. Who gives a shit about personal hygiene when you've got the next high to chase? I didn't have to go home and pretend to be clean and sober to my wife anymore, which frankly had become the most tedious piece of theater I'd performed in quite some time. I'm just fine with my current company. Unfortunately I'm now penniless and drugless, presenting yet another problem. I've got about eight to twelve hours to fix it before I devolve again into a puddle of mess.

"Good afternoon. My name is Linus, and I'm going around the neighborhood to spread awareness about the one million homeless and hungry in our fine city. Two homeless children die from starvation every 10 minutes right here in NYC." Dressed in my Sunday Best, I'm spouting off facts made up on the spot. Rattling off my line of bullshit to upper-middle-class housewives. "If you could find it in your heart to dig deep and give something to help those far less fortunate than you." Laminated I.D. placards hanging from my neck. Receipt book in my hand, both made and printed to order online, giving me an air of credibility along with the little tin lock box their "donations" go into. The made-up logo for the non-existent organization looks enough like one of the real ones, so if any of my marks gets suspicious and does a quick Google search, I'm still good. I'm not that broken on the inside that collecting money for imaginary starving homeless kids doesn't rub me the wrong way, but I'm not gonna do anything but scam a few unsuspecting victims into giving me enough money to get what I need. You can't do this on Park Avenue. You'd never make it past the doorman. You'd also be wasting your time doing it in the projects or even a working class neighborhood. I also can't do violent crime anymore, period. Two-time losers like me have absolutely no business doing anything that approaches violence. If I get caught spitting on the sidewalk too hard, it's lights out. "Thank you ma'am. Thank you so very much, here's your receipt. I'll see that your name is placed on our mailing list. Yes, absolutely, it's 100% tax deductible. Have a great day!"

"I'm tellin' ya, it's a full time job!" Crazy Roberta squawks through a half-chewed bite of hamburger. "They'll hire ya on the spot. All that schoolin' ya got, they'd be dumber than shit to take somebody over you. Plus, I got you, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"Thanks for the praise, Roberta. Coming from you it means the world," I say. Before her first stay in the loony bin, Roberta was the head secretary

for the most powerful union in the city. As she tells it, the place would've fallen apart without her there. That's about half true. Everything did fall to pieces when she left. It probably had a little more to do with the five-year-long multi-agency federal investigation that broke up that sweet little racket. The feds running down on them just happened to coincide with Roberta finding her husband in bed with another woman, her son coming out of the closet, and her father dying of a massive coronary all in the span of one week. All that together caused the normally rock-steady Roberta to lose her marbles and get carted off to the rubber room.

She's been back a few times since. Now she spends most of her days posted up in the same window booth at McDonald's. Holding court with a steady procession of junkies, gangsters, homeless men, and union bosses who filter through her eclectic orbit on any given day. She also happens to, now and then, get an inside track on pretty good jobs. Both kinds. The "you might go to jail" kind and the "you'd be a complete loser asshole to pass up" kind. A this-is-a-career-not-a-job job.

"Ya know, for such a smart kid, you're one dumb fuck, Linus." Piece of apple pie flying out of her mouth as she speaks. "You'd rather keep wastin' your life and scammin' these poor schmucks outta a couple hundred than go back to work. Fix yourself up and get your life together."

"I just don't know if I'm ready" is my reply. "Ready for what? To stop bein' an asshole? These kinda spots don't pop up often. Whatta you afraid of? Actually bein' successful for more than ten minutes before you go and fuck it up again?"

"Boris was telling me the other day there might be something available at his company in a month or two," I lamely offer.

Roberta stops devouring the pile of apple pies she'd been going at and gives me a look before saying, "You gotta be fuckin' kiddin' me. I know that big mongoloid loves the shit outta you, but either you're lyin' through your teeth to me or he's just tryin' to be nice to you. We both know there's no fuckin' way he's puttin' his neck on the line gettin' a job for you at his place and potentially fuckin' up his paycheck when you end up doin' something stupid six months down the line like fuckin' the boss' daughter, or the safe mysteriously found empty. No fuckin' way, Linus." Roberta keeps going. "I got nothing to lose. You're lucky I like you. Go to the hospital. Get off the shit. Get on a program. Call your fuckin' wife. Go home. And for once do something, one fuckin' thing that doesn't make your life harder than it gotta be. Please. I'm beggin' you. Take. The. Fuckin. Job!"

On a bad day, you can't argue with Roberta and win. You definitely can't argue when she's right.

I continually do this to myself. I fuck up and get myself into these drug-fueled messes that never end well. Then I always find some convoluted way to come back from the dead and rise back to the heights most people never make it to in the first place. Me—a stone-cold junkie, two-time loser, habitual fuck up, who walks around with half a piece of fruit in my pocket for getting stoned convenience—always seem to land on my feet. Most times with a pocketful of cash and a bunch of fancy-pants paths to choose from. One of those guys. I had everything I needed and most of what I wanted. Then one day I just decided to trade it all back in for a shit sandwich. Left my apartment, didn't go to work. Didn't text my wife and tell her I wouldn't be home that night or the next hundred nights and jumped right back into the cesspool I currently find myself in. For what? I wish I could give you a half logical answer. Now, the horse-shoe-up-my-ass golden child that I am, I find myself being offered yet another lifeline thrown across the abyss I was mired in a second ago. Hour to hour, day to stinking day. Carefully cultivated, intentional misery.

Roberta stares at me, silently munching the remainder of her ump-teenth apple pie. Waiting on the forgone conclusion of a response she all but expected before ever mentioning the job, then giving me her version of a Tony Robbins inspirational speech. I had about eighty-five bucks left in my pocket and a sock full of drugs. Enough to last me another day and a half. I thought about not having to deal with dodging humongous piles of dopehead poop. Not having to be grossed out, getting high in the Chernobyl dumpster that is Boris' room. Visions of countless other poor assholes and their misadventures.

I think about all these things and say to Roberta, "You want me to buy you another apple pie?" Being dopesick sucks. Can't think of anything worse. "Where and when?"

Roberta looks at me slack-jawed. She figured I'd blow her off like I usually do. "Monday after next, downtown. I'll text you the address. You really gonna go, Linus?"

I turn from the table and smile. As I walk toward the door, already held open by the same homeless guy, I say over my shoulder to Roberta, "Can't think of anything else I'd rather be doing."

I walk back out into the sunny Coney Island afternoon. I need a new lemon.



Twisted Mind (Continued)

by Michael Willis

Clock Upon the Willows

by Dylan Batchelder

Time pours soundless salty steams
Surely slipping from my soul
Clock upon the willows
Silent savior make me whole

The snapping tick a screaming sound
That seeps like stains beneath my skin
Clock upon the willows
My secret prayers staving sin

A slowly slaughtered sobbing slave
Am I to evert snarled slash
Clock upon the willows
Somber heart a seething gash

Staring speechless at Satan's hands
Simply knowing where something stands

No One Here Gets Out ~~Alive~~ Alone

by Carl Norman

It's hard to die with dignity when you're wearing a dirty diaper.

That was the first thought to cross my mind when I heard that Tony had passed away earlier in the day while I slept. He had been my patient in the Palliative Care Program (PCP), my—and his—virgin vigil; the first fellow prisoner I'd sat with as he lay dying.

But I was someplace else, sound asleep, when he took his last breath.

I had left his cell at South Woods State Prison's Extended Care Unit (ECU) at around 8:15 that morning, after sitting double six-hour shifts because the volunteer tasked with relieving me at 2:00 AM never showed up. The evidence of a vigil's busyness greeted my return to my own cell: accumulated laundry, unanswered letters, and a cell in disarray. I could do little about it at the time though, as I had to be back in ECU in a few hours. So I did my best to straighten things up a bit, showered, then plopped into bed and submitted to the fatigue that greets a vigil's sixth or seventh day. In the early afternoon, I was awakened by a friend who said he'd heard Tony was gone.

In prison, even the dead are rumors.

The second thought to occur—the one that will never leave—was that I had failed Tony. My role as a PCP volunteer, according to the manual, was to “provide comfort, support and companionship to the dying, while helping him to maintain his dignity and personal wishes to the end.” That's a high ideal, and one that every palliative care volunteer aspires to. Hospice work is never easy, no matter the setting. But as a prisoner, there is even more to the job. The men in the PCP are not just dying, but dying in prison. They are prison inmates, just like the volunteers, with all of the guilt, fears, and apprehensions that entails, except that they are also poignantly aware that their last breaths will occur as prison inmates, which is its own kind of fear; their fear, my fear, and the fear of anyone who has ever done time. Nobody wants to die at all, true, but especially not in prison. That is why I felt like a failure; without yet comprehending what I could have done differently, my mood still was colored by the awareness that Tony's less-than-dignified passing was at least partially my fault.

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The term “hospice” is derived from the Latin *hospes*, from which we also derive words like *hospital* and *host*, among others. Historically, hospice suggested a spirit of compassion in providing relief from suffering and despair, not the facility or treatment locale associated with the word in more

modern times. The hospice as a dedicated facility seems to first appear in the 4th century, where Greek-speaking Christians ran public infirmaries, which also served as way stations for travelers en route to or from the Holy Lands. Over the centuries, as Western medicine adopted an impersonal, high-tech treatment approach that insisted on keeping people alive at all costs, hospice services became rare outside of certain monastic orders. By the 20th century, the suffering of the terminally ill was often pointlessly prolonged—sometimes for years—as treatments and machines replaced failing bodily functions, while religions and courts wrestled with decisions as to “when to pull the plug.”

The counter-cultural revolutions of the 1960s and '70s opened the doors to new thinking in all social spheres, including end-of-life decisions, and in landmark cases, courts slowly began to rule in favor of individual choice. More patient-focused care became available, and caregivers began concentrating on the quality of life and pain management of the dying, not simply the forced extension of life. Palliative care signified a more encompassing continuum than the traditional hospice, so was suggested by a Canadian physician in the 1970s. Derived from the Latin word for pallium, or cloak, the term—and concept—has continued to spread.

Palliative care went to prison in 1987, when a paraplegic inmate at the Medical Facility for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, Missouri, saw the suffering, loneliness, and despair of the many incarcerated men there who were dying of AIDS. In spite of his own disability, this man initiated and gained approval for the first hospice model of palliative care in an American prison. The “Springfield Model,” which allows specially trained inmates to provide palliative care for their peers, is now the gold standard for prisons worldwide, including in Bridgeton, New Jersey, where the PCP started at South Woods in 2002.

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Although it has been years now, I clearly remember the night I met Tony. It had come as a surprise, on a drizzly evening about a week prior to his passing. PCP patients are brought in from throughout the state prison system (and contracted medical facilities) with no advance warning to any inmate, so a volunteer could be called for a vigil at any time of the day or night. To be assigned to the palliative care program, a patient must be terminally ill, must wish for further treatment to cease, and must sign a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order. Volunteer inmates are only permitted to be with the patient because of the DNR; otherwise, medical personnel must constantly monitor the patient in order to revive them. After transfer to South Woods, the patient will be admitted to the ECU and the dying process

allowed to run its course. Once Tony was settled into an ECU bed, the doctor gave whatever orders necessary for pain management, treatment, and palliative care. My name was at the top of the PCP “call list” for that time slot, so my unit was called and I was told to report to ECU for vigil, starting a process of round-the-clock volunteer coverage for Tony. When the call came, I had just showered and dressed after a handball game in the gym, so I was out the door within fifteen minutes.

It was a long, rainy walk to ECU. The trek only added to my preexisting trepidation at what lay ahead. I had seen people die before, of course, having both witnessed and caused such demise. Death was no stranger to me, sudden, violent death especially, and there was much mental baggage to confirm both the moral and karmic consequences. This though, companionship a man through the dying process, was something different entirely.

Unique among any relationship I’d ever contemplated, prison hospice is about forming an emotional bond with someone knowing that there is no hope of anything but grief at the end of it. I’d never done anything like that before, and was frightened. But I figured that the patient had never died before either, and that seemed unquestionably the tougher of the two tasks. So I took a deep breath, shook the rain from my face, and quickened my steps to ECU.

When I arrived, I had to peel off my wet clothing as part of a strip-search, to appease a sadistic officer’s concern that I may be smuggling contraband to an anonymous, dying man. It did allow me to wring my clothes out before putting them back on though and gave me a chance to take a few more deep breaths. Reaching the cell, I sidled in, quietly introduced myself to an unresponsive Tony, and explained my reason for being there. I had been in ECU earlier that day, with my long-term palliative care patient, Bedo. I had been visiting Bedo daily for about six months as he bounded in and out of stroke-related dementia, so ECU was not new to me, nor were the processes. But this, the vigil, was new, and all I could think about was the death part.

The cell was hot, bright, and smelly, with a dozen large, aggressive flies swarming about. Sticking to my informal jailhouse PCP training as an immediate distraction, I gathered cleaning supplies and tried to improve the atmosphere. A quick assessment of Tony’s physical and mental condition found him seemingly asleep, with an occasional fit of agitated movement, the cause of which, if the smell were any indication, was a soiled diaper. An officer at the housing control desk was kind enough to turn off the overbearing fluorescent lights in the cell, which helped shoo the flies. I began pestering passing medical staff about the diaper situation, but found little promise in their responses. The cleaning kept me occupied for the better part of an hour, and at least the cell felt better for the effort. After putting away

the cleaning supplies, washing myself up, and turning off the loud, grating squawk of the cell's cheap TV, I was finally able to sit down beside Tony in the quiet, dimly-lit cell, listen to him breathe, and just be present. This is why I was here.

Of all the lessons one learns in palliative care, this is the biggest: “meet the patient where they are.” It took a while for me to grasp this, because my natural inclination—as a controlling male—is to try to fix things. But men like Tony are beyond fixing, and trying to do so would only worsen an already bad situation. All that he really required was for me to be there; that he not be abandoned before he abandoned this life. After the trauma of birth, there is no lonelier or more frightening a journey. Until Tony reached that point, all he really needed was the reassurance of someone’s presence, and perhaps a hand to hold. Those, then, are what I gave him.

A middle-aged nurse arrived with a warm smile and a distractingly plump fanny. I was relieved that somebody finally showed up to check on Tony, though at about 5'5" and 110 lbs., it seemed unlikely that she could maneuver a motionless, fully grown man through a diaper change without it getting messy. This may have been my first full time vigil for a man on the verge of death, but having been a PCP volunteer for months, I had regularly worked with aged or terminally ill prisoners, including Bedo. I was not squeamish, and didn’t mind being conscripted to assist in a man’s diaper change.

I should have thought that through a little better.

Suffering from liver failure related to a combination of cancer and hepatitis C, Tony’s body, particularly the groin and genitals, was covered in large, angry boils that constantly oozed a smelly, amber-orange pus and left a scar on the heart of anyone who’d seen them. A brownish disinfectant of some kind had been half-assed wiped on his crotch, mainly on those few patches of skin where the diaper rash had not yet turned to boils. It was a nightmarish vision that is beyond my ability to describe. Or my desire to do so further.

A thin man of about 52 years, with a goatee and close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, Tony looked to me like the long-term prisoner that he was; not too different from my own look, or that of a thousand other people I (and Tony) had undoubtedly done time with. And though his build was slight enough that the physical task of changing his diaper was little challenge for the nurse and I, the emotional toll of seeing his condition made the change one of the toughest tasks I’ve ever undertaken, and another thing I’ll never forget.

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While palliative care in prison is a noble ideal, it is still in prison, so hardly conducive to what is considered a “good death.” We volunteers may commit ourselves to hold a patient’s hand until the end, but our tears are not those of the patient’s loved ones. In life, our relationships are the framework upon which we build our identity. In prison, access to loved ones is a trying process even for healthy inmates, with multiple levels of restriction no matter the form of contact, and passive-aggressive denial techniques often added by staff along the way. Since those dying in prison are inmates, they are therefore often forced to live, and die, according to the whims of sometimes-indifferent medical staff and arrogant jail guards, with no loved ones around. This matters: as Tony lay dying, one officer would regularly walk past the cell and slam a large ring of keys against the door to make a loud, crashing sound. This startled everybody, and when the sleeping Tony jumped, the officer would say, “Yep. Still alive,” and walk away. The inglorious death of Tony is indicative of the general indifference that any inmate will face in any prison, because he/she is an inmate and because it is prison: compassion’s flyover state.

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On the days following my third and fifth night with him, Tony had visitors. In addition to the overnight vigil, I was still reporting to ECU to assist Bedo to clean his cell, listen to his stories, and help him with letters home. The ECU social worker made a point of stopping by to let me know a day in advance each time a visit was expected for Tony, to ensure that he and his cell were prepared the night before. When I got to Tony later that night, I would straighten everything as best as possible, explaining to Tony as I did so that somebody may be coming to see him.

The day three visit was a woman in a wheelchair (probably a sister) and a pair of teens, male and female. They spent a little more than an hour in Tony’s cell, which I noticed from across the hall where I was losing my shirt to Bedo, who always cheated—and won—at checkers. I’d have liked to have talked to the visitors, even if just to reassure them that Tony was not nearly as alone as he looked. But contact with a patient’s family is extremely forbidden (Tony’s PCP volunteer for that shift was sitting in the dayroom until the visit was over), and even looking at them with sympathy is believed punishable.

I was also in Bedo’s cell on the afternoon of Tony’s fifth day visit, reading last year’s birthday cards to Bedo for the tenth time. (Dementia can renew joy: not realizing he’d heard it before, he roared with unrestrained laughter every time I read a particularly funny quote from his daughter’s card.) Tony’s visitor on this day passed by looking like his brother. The brother

was wearing the clothes of a working man after a long shift, and was in the cell for only twenty minutes. It was late in the afternoon, so it's not clear if staff terminated the visit or if he just couldn't stay longer. But that was it for visitors; roughly ninety minutes of familial contact over two days, with eternity waiting in the wings.

That night, I talked a little about it to Tony. He was too far away to give significance to such earthly matters, I suppose, so he ignored me. But he did seem to withdraw a little further after that last visit. His fits of activity became less frequent, his breathing quickened, and I wondered if he hadn't somehow said his goodbyes to his guests and started to move on. Honestly, he seemed at peace.

At least for that day.

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New Jersey is one of 39 states that have laws permitting medical release or parole. That did not apply to Tony because many crimes, including most violent offenses, are not eligible. This is particularly troubling, because most of the men dying in prison are long-term inmates who've committed violent offenses, and because medical parole/release is only granted in very exceptional circumstances. For we veteran volunteers in the PCP, it is a unicorn; a mythical thing rumored to exist but never actually seen. Halfway through my fourth decade in prison, I recall only one instance where medical parole was granted. One.

There are a number of reasons for this, not the least of which is the fear that an inmate will be released on medical parole, then rebound from the illness and go on to commit new crimes. This is not exactly realistic, since medical parole is only available for those who are beyond recovery; it would take a miracle, indeed. But it is a fear. Another reason is the revenge factor: some people consider it anathema for the parole board to usurp the authority of the courts or legislature by reducing a prison sentence that was lawfully imposed, regardless of the reason. If a person commits a crime, the thinking goes, then they must serve the full term for that offense, regardless of their physical or mental condition. Yet another reason is the theory that, because families and friends die off or move on during long incarcerations, there is no one in society left to care for these inmates if they are released on medical parole. So the thinking seems to be that, because they've been incarcerated until they are dying and unable to care for themselves, the state should continue to incarcerate them. Forever.

This, coincidentally, is also the justification for not returning zoo animals to the wild once they've been domesticated.

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On my final night with Tony, I arrived to find the cell a mess: flies all over the place, food trays on the table, the smell of crap in the air, and the damned television blaring sports. The ECU porters, who clean and empty the trash, were obviously hanging out in the cell watching TV, and neither they, nor the ECU officers, cared that a man lay there dying. Tony repeatedly burst into fits of moaning and agitation, which hardly abated as I cleaned everything up and killed the television. (Literally: I dunked it in the mop bucket, then put it back on the shelf with towels under it so nobody would notice the water dripping out.) Just as I was finishing up, a pair of nurses came in on their rounds and sent me to the dayroom for a half hour while they changed Tony's diaper and bedding. Three hours later, just after 1:00 AM, the same two returned, sent me back to the dayroom, and repeated the changing process. It felt like it was going to be a good night at that point. But feelings lie.

Tony's fits of agitation came less frequently after the second change, and the air in the cell freshened some. That didn't last long: within an hour, the smell of soiled diaper filled the room, and Tony again grew agitated. Glancing under his sheet, I saw that his diaper was saturated with pus or some other indescribable fluid. When I placed a cool rag on his forehead, I noticed streaks of the same fluid streaming down his face to stain the pillow. It was seeping out of the corners of his eyes and mouth, apparently filling his entire body now. I wiped his face and neck as best I could, flipped his pillow to the cool, clean side, and rubbed a lemon-flavored swab inside his mouth to alleviate whatever ungodly taste the fluid must have had. I then went for help to the nearest officer, who vowed to call the nurses back ASAP. No nurses came.

For the rest of my double shift (more than six hours), nobody came to check on or change Tony. I reported the situation to an officer again and to two different nursing assistants who I caught passing by. But nobody came. I sat and spoke softly to him, trying to explain the situation as best I could, and held his hand for a while, stalling until help arrived. But nobody came. I spent a half-hour with him in Powha, a meditative practice from Tibetan Buddhism that is believed to alleviate suffering. I don't know if it did or not. But nobody came. Tony remained agitated, which is understandable considering the combination of open wounds and pus that covered his groin, and I didn't know what to do. I felt powerless and repeatedly listed in my head the risks and rewards of just changing the damned diaper myself. Such an act is against the rules, naturally, and, if caught, would cause my immediate termination from the program. I was willing to take that chance, if that were the only consequence. But unlike palliative care in society, in prison it is just

another “inmate” program, and subject to termination for little or no reason at all. There are usually factions within every administration that resent programs like the PCP, and will jump at opportunities to get rid of them. So the mantra among PCP volunteer prisoners is *always keep the program sacred*; it is too important to jeopardize for any one prisoner.

On that day, however, it didn’t feel sacred at all; when I left him, the very last time I would see him in this life, Tony still hadn’t been changed. I don’t believe he ever was.

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In spite of decades of prison experience prior to my time with Tony, he was my graphic introduction to the process—and inherent flaws—of dying in prison. His story is also a tragic expression of the need for change in a system—and on a subject—that few people talk about.

America’s population in general is aging, and that includes its prison population. That, combined with the onerous and pointless mandatory minimum sentences spawned by the “tough on crime” political posturing of recent decades, has led directly to prisons which are full of aged, infirm, and terminally ill prisoners years past being dangerous. Bad politics is the reason why so few are released on medical parole, and why the solution to this humanitarian crisis is a political one. There is no denying the moral and financial burden that dying inmates represent to the State, or the obvious need for lawmakers to introduce a cost-effective and morally tenable alternative to the current policies regarding terminally ill prisoners. All that’s lacking is the political will to do so.

This should matter to all who read Tony’s story, because while the guilt of Tony’s undignified departure will remain with me for the rest of my life, I am no more than a surrogate for the social culpability of every person whose tax dollars engender these circumstances. And there are many Tonys still here, dying.

Calabasas Night

by Ali Moseley

The van drove 2-hours across
Los Angeles freeways to the
boondocks. I ain't try to
trace our route by looking
out becuz the honeycomb
screen on the windows only
added to my motion sickness.
Besides, I really ain't care
where I was going. I burned
inside with the time I had
at camp community placement.
1-year minimum at Senior Boys
probation camp. "Here we are, boys,"
said the Black man who called
himself Coach. The
van took a road by a hill—
a field, ugly and grass-covered.
It was a leveled expanse
of ground, perhaps 2-acres,
enveloped by rolling hills.
Around the campground a
15-foot tall red brick wall.
Camp Gonzales? It had to
be way out here in the
middle of nowhere.

I sat stiffly in the backseat,
my T-shirt damp with sweat
and sticking to my body.
My eyes squinting slightly,
betraying the fact that
the fear was not negligible.
I knew the reason.

Camp Gonzo is Gladiator School
For 16, 17, and 18 year olds.
I fought. I made weapons.
I forged county documents. I
participated in melees. I
smoked contraband cigs. I

ditched school. I robbed other kids.

I remember a time at Camp Gonzo with Mr. H, the red-orange sun burned a hole in the streaked blue tapestry that was the evening sky. Areas of yellow rimmed the lower clouds; a purplish-black void was above. The soft Calabasas night would soon envelop this section of L.A. County. It would be dark when the camp exercise yard opened. Mr. H and me sat at a picnic table and stared out at the horizon over the tinted grass of the canyon hills. Staff was inside the control bubble behind us, sleep. Zzzzz. Mr. H had the best manners, slightly aloof and very proper, with just the right traces of ghetto wit and unfelt humility. I don't remember anything he said to me this night, but I'll never forget how we made me feel my 17th birthday. Ordinarily human.

"The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit."