

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2018/09/28/voices-from-solitary-a-concrete-death/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | September 28, 2018

Branton Noojin received an [Honorable Mention for Nonfiction](#) in PEN Americas 2018 Prison Writing Contest for authoring the following piece, Solitary Confinement, which is republished here by permission of the author and PEN. Noojin, currently serving a 100-year sentence for murder and voluntary manslaughter, has spent seven years in solitary confinement overall. Here, he provides a striking narrative from his cell in the Secure Housing Unit (SHU) at Wabash Valley Correctional Facility in Carlisle, Indiana.

Noojin was originally placed in solitary, labeled as administrative segregation, for his designation as part of a Security Threat Group, though he says he doesn't know the reason for this classification. After five years in solitary, Noojin was transferred to a program meant to transition him out of long-term restricted housing status at New Castle Correctional Facility called STAND (Striving Towards a New Direction), where he spent two more years in solitary. Most recently, he was placed in SHU for the use of a cell phone. Noojin says, disciplinary segregation, the type of solitary he currently faces, is much worse than administrative segregation, because you have no privileges. No TV, no commissary, no nothing. Six cement walls and me. Valerie Kieba

I am the nucleus of a cube made of concrete. Six cement walls, all twins. Keep me surrounded. Day in and day out. A tomb of solitary confinement. All days perpetual motion; never ending! My eyes a hollow husk of themselves. Deprived of sunlight, they've become black circles, shadows. Two trophies of pain. I see all of this in the mirror, that it is not a mirror. A piece of stainless steel screwed into the wall. Pretending to be a mirror. Just like I pretend this tomb of mine is not depressing. I mask my depression with anger and frustration. Fresh air and sunlight, once taken for granted. Now a delicious treat to be craved. Some of my few carrots in a world of sticks. Alone no matter how many people love you, I turn my mind into an army, so it is strong enough to fight these walls. I must not surrender. No matter how much these walls try to close in on me. This cell feeds on my heartbeat. Stealing my life. Absorbing my essence. A dungeon within a dungeon, supermax! Rows of concrete tombs designed to break men; men breakers. I've heard these walls break men with my own ears. I cannot see them break. These concrete cubes with men inside them; are designed to prevent almost all human interaction. Still you can hear a man's mind topple and fall. Gradually transforming from sane, to not sane. I must reinforce my mind on a daily basis. Call upon my reservoir of strength. My prison within a prison. I exercise my body and mind, so I don't break physically or mentally. Correctional officers trying to sneak through each of our dungeons at 5:30am. In the hopes to catch us asleep, so they can say we refused our only chance at recreation for the day. One hour inside a dog cage for humans. The guards love to rob us of fresh air for our lungs. The chance to greet the sun for the day. We cannot even exercise in these cages because the ground is littered with bird droppings. The cages never cleaned, psychological warfare. Being marched from one cell to this cage by two officers. Hands cuffed behind our back with a dog leash attached to the cuffs, so they can make us heel like dogs, I don't know sleep. This cell deprives me of slumber. My bed is forged from concrete. A concrete slab. My mattress is as thin as a yoga mat. I toss and turn all night long. Dreams a long lost memory. Unless it's a day dream of my hopes and wishes. I travel in my mind. My only vacation from this madness. Only to be snatched from my reverie by the smell of feces. The smell is terrible. Gut retching! Worse than any primate exhibit, in any zoo! A broken mind playing in excrement like it's a new toy. I want to feel sorry for those broken minds, but sorry is a feeling. Feelings are weakness. I must be strong. Otherwise become a broken mind myself. My dignity I cherish like a prized possession. It's all I have left. That and my integrity. They are my brothers and sisters. Always with me. Principles to grasp and hold on to. A day turns into a week. Then a year, five years. My solitary confinement begins to feel immortal. This concrete wall chips away at me. I patch my armor just to find more cracks and dents. This place is a zoo for humans. Other humans count on us, feed us, observe us. The broken mind in cell six hasn't taken a shower or left his cage in six months. He smells like refuse.

I am permitted one twenty-minute phone call per week. It's like a TV program where someone is arrested. All they keep asking Can I have my one phone call? Almost all contact with civilization is lost, because my one phone call per week belongs to my dear mother. In my tomb I walk from bed to cell, back and forth. A dead man walking. It's meal time in the dungeon, we are served our meals in disposable trays. Usually the food is already cold by the time they are placed in our food slots. The trays don't have enough slots for a balanced meal, so our dessert or bread is usually floating in our soup. If you're not fortunate enough to have people that love you, and send you money to purchase food and other much needed items from commissary. You will starve and suffer in ways unfathomable. Speaking of commissary. It's delivered weekly and is compared to Christmas. The only thing to look forward to each week, just like one weekly phone call. As we hang up, already we are waiting for next week's call. As soon as commissary departs, not a day goes by before

were waiting on it to return. This is what my life has come to.

I anchor myself to sentiments such as love, strength, will, determination, and family, to name a few. I haven't had a visit in years. They're allowed, but on a TV screen. No sense in having my family drive all day long to see me on a TV screen. We are being dehumanized. I am nothing more than a DOC number residing in a cement square. They make visits so bad, we don't even wish to have one.

The smile I wear is a disguise. It masks my tears. My eyes reveal the deception. This is my 19th year in prison. Year five living in the dungeon. Even a mountain is worn down by drops of water. I am eroding. No matter, I will not quit. I will not falter. I will call upon my heart and soul. And they will answer. Providing me with what I needed to carry on.

My eyes hurt from lack of sunlight. The lighting in my dungeon is horrible for the eyes. I know this will affect me later in life. I exercise two to three hours a day just to suppress the tension within myself.

Day after day this tomb chips away at me like a woodpecker. Stealing my life. I own my mistakes. They belong to me. I take responsibility for my poor judgment that brought me to prison. However, this tomb of solitary confinement is a concrete death. I do not deserve to spend years in the secure housing unit. Better known as the SHU. Solely for the purpose of trying to break me. Good luck to them anyhow. They did not make me, so they cannot break me. I will emerge from this concrete tomb intact. Believe that.

In conclusion I leave you with something I wrote called A Concrete Death.

A CONCRETE DEATH

I am the nucleus of a cube made of concrete
I bring it to life
it feeds on my heart beat
If you're not relative to my history
E equals mc squared
I'm relativity
I ruined my life
at the speed of light in a vacuum
Metaphoric with physics
My mind is a classroom
Cloning my strength
Having will in abundance
Saying no to drugs
Still full of substance
wealthy in thought
Not poor in judgment
living these words
I really done this
wasn't always on point
now I'm sharp as a razor
Quid pro quo is my motto
a favor for favor
Something for something
fair exchange is not robbery
treating all with respect
I live by this policy
standing tall like a building
Not slouched in defeat in the belly of the beast
And it's not digesting me
Living life to the fullest
nor knowing surrender
life is a bitch
Still I requested to friend her
this is so hard
I'm embedded in concrete
I admit I was lost
but soul searching found me
I'm true to myself
You may lie detect me
encased in a tomb
Still free as I can be
Circumstances costing three lives
that's way too expensive
I don't understand it at all
it's too comprehensive
I pray for forgiveness
My heart is repentive
This concrete a rerun
All days repetitive
What I'm describing
is what a concrete death is.

Today the door to my concrete death opened. I emerged from solitary confinement. I would like to tell you I emerged unscathed, but I would be lying

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

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September 6, 2022

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