

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | October 19, 2012

Not to be missed is Shane Bauers article in the November/December issue of *Mother Jones*, now available online. Bauer was one of the three American hikers arrested on the Iran/Iraq border and held in Tehrans notorious Evin Prison for 26 months. In his article [No Way Out](#), which is both highly personal and factually detailed, he compares his own experience with that of the thousands of prisoners in solitary confinement in California. The article begins this way:

Its been seven months since Ive been inside a prison cell. Now Im back, sort of. The experience is eerily like my dreams, where I am a prisoner in another mans cell. Like the cell I go back to in my sleep, this one is built for solitary confinement. Im taking intermittent, heaving breaths, like I cant get enough air. This still happens to me from time to time, especially in tight spaces. At a little over 11 by 7 feet, this cell is smaller than any Ive ever inhabited. You cant pace in it.

Like in my dreams, I case the space for the means of staying sane. Is there a TV to watch, a book to read, a round object to toss? The pathetic artifacts of this inmates life remind me of objects that were once everything to me: a stack of books, a handmade chessboard, a few scattered pieces of artwork taped to the concrete, a family photo, large manila envelopes full of letters. I know that these things are his world.

So when youre in Iran and in solitary confinement, asks my guide, Lieutenant Chris Acosta, was it different? His tone makes clear that he believes an Iranian prison to be a bad place.

Hes right about that. We were held incommunicado. We never knew when, or if, we would get out. We didnt go to trial for two years. When we did we had no way to speak to a lawyer and no means of contesting the charges against us, which included espionage. The alleged evidence the court held was confidential.

What I want to tell Acosta is that no part of my experience not the uncertainty of when I would be free again, not the tortured screams of other prisoners was worse than the four months I spent in solitary confinement. What would he say if I told him I needed human contact so badly that I woke every morning hoping to be interrogated? Would he believe that I once yearned to be sat down in a padded, soundproof room, blindfolded, and questioned, just so I could talk to somebody?

I want to answer his question of course my experience was different from those of the men at [Californias Pelican Bay State Prison](#) but Im not sure how to do it. How do you compare, when the difference between one persons stability and anothers insanity is found in tiny details? Do I point out that I had a mattress, and they have thin pieces of foam; that the concrete open-air cell I exercised in was twice the size of the dog run at Pelican Bay, which is about 16 by 25 feet; that I got 15 minutes of phone calls in 26 months, and they get none; that I couldnt write letters, but they can; that we could only talk to nearby prisoners in secret, but they can shout to each other without being punished; that unlike where I was imprisoned, whoever lives here has to shit at the front of his cell, in view of the guards?

There was a window, I say. I dont quite know how to tell him what I mean by that answer. Just having that light come in, seeing the light move across the cell, seeing what time of day it was. Without those windows, I wouldnt have had the sound of ravens, the rare breezes, or the drops of rain that I let wash over my face some nights. My world would have been utterly restricted to my concrete box, to watching the miniature ocean waves I made by sloshing water back and forth in a bottle; to marveling at ants; to calculating the mean, median, and mode of the tick marks on the wall; to talking to myself without realizing it. For hours, days, I fixated on the patch of sunlight cast against my wall through those barred and grated windows. When, after five weeks, my knees buckled and I fell to the ground utterly broken, sobbing and rocking to the beat of my heart, it was the patch of sunlight that brought me back. Its slow creeping against the wall reminded me that the world did in fact turn and that time was something other than the stagnant pool my life was draining into.

Here, there are no windows.

Read the full article at [MotherJones.com](#).

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics

to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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 [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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