

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2019/03/21/voices-from-solitary-in-my-demise-25-years-and-counting/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | March 21, 2019

The following piece was written by LaDon Sean, who has been incarcerated in Michigan state prisons since 1993, serving a sentence of life without parole for felony murder. Sean says he was convicted of aiding and abetting a robbery attempt in which someone was killed, though he maintains he possessed no weapons during the incident. The Miller v. Alabama Supreme Court decision, which made mandatory life without parole sentences unconstitutional for juveniles, did not apply to Sean since he was nineteen years old at the time of the crime. Now 45 years old, Sean practices Islam and has acted as a prison litigator against conditions in his facility for over fifteen years. Two years after the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center, Sean was designated as a Security Threat Group II Leader in what he calls a post-9/11 anti-Islam sweep, and has been held in solitary confinement ever since. Valerie Kieballa

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Were on lockdown again. No movement within the facility. The below-zero wind chill advisory took the yard for the third day this week. My one solitary hour out-of-room is gone forever never to return.

I called toward the wall heater that I shared with the captives next door. Both lifers on either side.

Bop?

There was no answer.

Bop?

Still, there was no reply.

I left my disheveled bunk to lean over the metal floor locker painted in the same off-brown as the heater behind it. I called over again. But this time, a little louder, as I unconsciously picked at the peeling paint to expose more of the oxidized metal beneath. My eyes scanning the cold terrazzo floor for movement. Insects. They were hard to see as they scurried across the speckled surface of the expensive floor.

Like me, B-Bop is a designee, too. Were so-called security threats who are living right next door to one another. Along with a few other so-called threats on this same floor, too. To me, prison officials are merely modern Adamites, because of their omniscient power to name them threats here in Eden; according to their need. Everything is according to their need. Even the misnomers, like threat to security, so frequently misused here. It sounds serious. And expensive. That's what the Dept. needs to hear when they're considering a budget. Something serious; something expensive.

But at the moment, I needed to hear my neighbor say he'd just called me a few minutes ago. That's how it all began. I was giving Bop a call back, as we say here. This was a call back. Our heater and window doubled as make-believe phones at times. A lot is make-believe in prison.

I thought I heard Bop call over. It never crossed my mind that maybe he hadn't.

The squeak from the gray wall locker signaled that he was coming to the phone. The wall lockers hung in the corners beside the metal desk and over the heater. And sometimes, if I'm not careful, I'd crash into its opened door as I rose, causing me to see stars. We'd all do it until we were used to closing the locker door before we talk. You'd learn to shut that door or pay that price again.

My eyes watched the tiny holes on the heater for movement, too. I was hyper-vigilant these days. Yet I'd imagined that tiny spies lived in the thousands of tiny holes of the heaters cover. Their job was to record anything said on the phone. They were in there collecting and transferring data on every convict who's been on this phone. Oh the stories they'd be able to tell!

We were on lower B-wing in 5 Block at the facility. There's eighty-six rooms in a two-story brick building. From a distance, the faade

looks almost collegiate. Its the real school of hard knocks. Lower B Wing was 3 feet below the grade. Just a reminder, I guess, that were that much closer to the grave. That much closer to purgatory, I think. This might be just modern penal philosophy at work here. I understood that every facility was not necessarily a penitentiary. They were both designed to incarcerate or imprison convicts. Not just criminals. Weve all become residents of the same state. This is Ionia, Michigan, where the locals profess the acronym to be I own Negroes in America! I thought about the re-emergence of White Nationalism into mainstream governance. And whos more united on what is right than the Department of corrections?

It was December 2017. And were living under 21st century crime and punishment, cold enough to make even Dostoevsky shiver. And my neighbor, Bop, had just got on the phone:

Whats up?

At first impression, his voice does sound typically Puerto Rican. His accent was not heavy as youd expect. Hes a dark-skinned Borriqua, and proud of his Afro-Caribbean roots.

Wed Bo-Bo occasionally. Thats what we call general conversation here, Bo-Bo or Kickin the Bo-Bos. Its just another way we pass the time. But youd get an idea about someone that way. Youd get a sense of their personality. Bop and I would mainly talk political science or religion most times. Keeping it constructive and respectful. I asked if he had called me, once he came to the phone.

Did I call you? He repeated it, sounding annoyed. Bop wasnt a sociable dude. He didnt talk too much. Hed been to some of the same prisons that I had at the same time but we didnt know each other. We moved in different circles. Hes an introverted personality until he gets to know you better. I repeated my question to him: Did you call me a minute ago? As I used damp tissue paper to pick up the dust from the corner.

Naw, he said blandly. I aint called you once tday.

I craned backward. Surprise filled my mind. Get the fuck outa here! It shot out before I could stop it. That confused him a bit. He didnt know why I was being kind of dismissive. I thought youd called me, I said. I thought I heard you call me a minute ago. Thats all it was.

Oh, Naw. I aint call you, he admitted again.

Could I be losing it? Stranger things have happened here at I-Max. Michigans infamous Supermax facility had a long reputation of foul conditions. Every con has heard something about this place. None of it good. Hearing things wasnt too unusual here. Even when it was that muffled voice Id heard a few minutes ago. The one that called my name, sounding like it was coming through the wall heater-phone. Its not the first time Ive heard it.

Or thought I had.

And every time, the same thing happened. Id called next door, ask if either one of them had called me. And their reply would often be Naw. Neither had called, theyd say. Lately, though, Bop had begun asking, Are you buggin out over there?

Buggin out is how we described most prisoners who were demonstrating any abnormal behaviors. Behaviors that are abnormal to aspiring career criminals who believe that anything goes, says a lot. Being disruptive of those norms says a lot about being seen as a Bug by other cons. Bugs disrupt the norms here. Theyre always a threat to the normal operations of the facility. A threat to the existing status quoorder.

My sanity was now in question. Since Bop had become my neighbor a few months ago, his word has remained true in my sight. A real stand-up guy as we say here. So I had no reason to doubt him. He hadnt called me. Id left the phone with a pensive Alright dog. And backed away.

Looking around the room, I wondered if this hearing of things were the first symptoms of my mental deterioration. Its been twenty-four years of prison And counting. And fifteen years in solitary And counting. Theres no end in sight for a life sentence.

GRAND SHEIK was the Security Threat Group designation restraining me to solitary for the past fifteen years. Here, as well as there, religion is a threat also. And being in solitary is to be exposed to a test-free punitive section. Its to be exposed to an indefinite punishment.

Solitary is extreme privation. Theres no quasi-judicial determination prior to being placed here. Its called an administrative restriction to bypass such requirements. A restriction is not a punishment, they reason. Though the objective is the same. Why call something a name when it is not? And how do we challenge such a subjective categorization? How do we challenge being redefined as human beings? An artificial thing redefines the natural thing here.

How does one test for truthfulness that infinite power to name my fear? Its an unassailable power of the fiction to redefine reality. Unscrupulous artisans have seized the proverbial grey area of law.

Can natural persons, reformed as so, also be stripped of a viable process by which to say, You are wrong! Let that declaration echo in the halls of isolation and degradation, like Camp Six on Guantnamo Bay. Can we find a disinterested person therein? Someone to decide contested Facts or Fictions?

The Balance of Power rests on such lofty principles essential to this republican form of government. A check, guaranteed to each citizen of these United States. For designees, that check, as they say, is not in the mail, i.e. a commercial transaction.

Its 23 & 1 here. Twenty-three hours in solitary and one hour out, when weather permits. In solitary, years drudge by Sasquatchian-like. Being a threat to norms slows everything down. Being different can be expensive.

And like the elusive Yeti, the stench of liberty lost lingers in languid hours of longing for the safeguard of citizenship. In its wake, the repugnancy of its revocation emerges from the ashes of where the Bill of Rights once was. Liberty died there! There's no discourse to be had! In this new construct, the cornerstones of constitutional liberties and procedural safeguards are merely cumbersome impediments to the necessities of this *New Amerika*.

And into that void left by our once-cherished Bill of Rights came the shrill cries of the architects of this New Nationalism, shouting, One blood! One soil! In the ensuing chaos, basic rights are incinerated at once. Civility, compassion and understanding are but echoes of our past. A way of interaction that is no more. The ethos of the bygone construct of old citizenry. A citizenry that will never be again. It is dead. Never to rise again.

In a nefarious way, the word was made flesh again. By the word of prison officials, their Behavior Modification Program from within to without is yielding their desired results: psychological damage to the New Non-citizen.

From designees like us, to proles like you.

We are hastened in our demise as we lie in this valley of this shadow of death. Here, one may hear the call Muffled, as if it comes through the wall heater. How much is too much? How long is too long? I wondered. Still here in solitary confinement, I sat down to write.

Come my moral arc, I whispered in reply. Come to bring justice to the people of this new nation.

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

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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I am from the uk. I am fascinated with the story. I got so emotional reading this because i cant understand how this is humane. Please pass my thoughts to the author and wish him all the best!

Hello Margaret Muhammad-Urban,

My name is Gwendolyn Williams, am the Fiancee of the Author, please feel free to contact via email: gwlifeline@hotmail.com. Thank you for your concern:)

Is there a way to contact the author, LaDon Sean?

Cant wrap my head around this amount of time in solitary. Having a loved one experience the trauma 24/7 2yrs & may be getting more 24/7 in near future. No end insight for my loved & may never get out Began @ 19yrs old in 2011 All is broken for these souls in this life, be it jail, max, forensic.

Always amazed by the fortitude

Always despondent by the injustice

Always vigilant & maintain hope

Sometimes sorrow is deafening

The author has chosen not to share his real name and address to avoid retaliation, but we will share your thoughts with him. Good luck to you and your loved one.

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Solitary Watch

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