

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2020/06/12/voices-from-solitary-satans-domain/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | June 12, 2020

The following piece was written by Tashon Burke, a 28-year-old African American man struggling with mental illness, who estimates he has spent nearly eight years in solitary confinement throughout his incarceration. This past February, Burke was transferred from the Restricted Housing Unit (RHU) at SCI Houtzdale in Pennsylvania to the SCI Fayette [Special Management Unit \(SMU\)](#). He was told this was a step-down program that aims to release him from solitary to general population within a year, though Burke fears he will remain in solitary even after the year expires. In a previous [Voices from Solitary piece](#), Burke explained how his initial 60-day solitary confinement sentence extended repeatedly into several years, even increasing his time in prison. People with mental illness often get stuck in the hole longer than others because the social isolation combined with their erratic behavior and lack of mental health treatment worsens their illness.

In this piece, Burke illustrates the psychological torture he faces as a man with mental illness trapped in solitary confinement, with nothing but his own mind, anti-depressant pills, and the harrowing sights, sounds, and smells of the isolation unit. His first week in the SMU, Burke wrote in a letter, I just got to this jail and already, I witnessed a suicide. This was the third one [I witnessed]. They're racist up here, like every other prison. Burke currently has a release date in 2022, and he hopes that he will be able to find professional psychiatric treatment in society. I must get help, he wrote. Valerie Kiebal

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I can hear and see the other prisoners of hell, engaged in battle with their own demons. I can hear the screaming, crying, banging, clapping, laughing, and I can see prisoners being dragged out of their cells with bloody, self-inflicted wounds on their bodies from cutting themselves. I see prisoners being dragged out of their cells with a brown substance, and from the disturbing smell I take it to be feces, smeared all over themselves. Their screams of pain or of reasons only they know is bedevil to my ears. I say to myself thank god they're alive, but their demons seemed to have gotten their hands on the prisoners' sanity which can eventually lead the prisoners to self-destruction, unless they take it back. My sanity has been snatched away from me a few times, but I had taken it back and now I fight so hard to keep it in my grasp. I mean I never played with feces, but I have hurt myself a few times.

I am Tashon Burke, and I'm also a prisoner of hell, so I've seen the evil things that this place can do to people. I'm also not blind either to what it's trying to do to me. I fight so hard not to let myself debilitate to the point where I'd want to take my own life or leave my sanity open to be snatched away from me again. No matter how bad my demons beat me, as long as I'm still alive and sane, I'm winning.

I have a weapon, and it's an anti-depressant pill called Effexor. Effexor shields me from my demons' attacks, lets me forget about them, and allows me to escape this hell hole for a while. Eventually the Effexor wears off, and there's a certain period of time I have to wait to use it again. I do have other weapons. I have watching tv, reading books, writing, and it distracts me away from my demons and their beatings for a while, but I'm still aware of my surroundings, meaning I'm still aware I'm in hell, if that makes any sense. My Effexor has the escape button, and it allows me to escape to a peaceful place, called sleep. Even the demons from dreamland, known as nightmares, can't break through the ward of the Effexor.

I think about the prisoners this place has already devoured. I see them being dragged out of their cells, sheet line tied around their necks, their bodies left all stiff and unconscious, souls forever trapped in hell, and I tell myself that that will not be me. I have two friends from Solitary Watch who I call the Washington DC angels, and they send me words of hope, love, and encouragement, and let me know that I'm not alone, and that they're rooting for my victory.

My demons have weapons, too. Called PTSD, depression, hopelessness, desperation, tricks of the mind, and more. These weapons are very strong and I do become very exhausted fighting them off. These weapons make me remember terrible and hurtful things that I have witnessed as a kid. They also make me remember terrible and hurtful things that happened to me and people I love. They can even show me terrible and hurtful things, threatening me that it's what will happen to me and people I love in the future. They also remind me of the terrible and hurtful things I'd done to people. They make me believe that everything that happened was my fault and everything that will happen will also be my fault. These weapons all are to make me despondent to the point where I just want to die. No. As long as I'm still alive and sane, I'm winning.

My demons also have angels too, called Correctional Officers. The COs job is oppression. Its a diabolical activity that involves terrifying mental and physical attacks on the prisoners to make your life a living, well, hell. So what is this place? Some call it the hole, the bucket, solitary confinement, the twist, etc. I got my own name for it. I call it Satans domain.

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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Will do whatever I can to help.

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