

# Prisoner Express News

# Summer 17

Welcome to the latest edition of Prisoner Express News. Prisoner Express is a project of the Durland Alternatives Library, which is in Ithaca NY. PE's mission is to provide incarcerated men and women with information, education and opportunities for creative self-expression in a public forum. Publishing this semiannual newsletter is one way we can make your thoughts and art public. Paper copies of this newsletter are sent into prisons to individuals who request joining our programs, and an online copy is posted on our website, [www.prisonerepress.org](http://www.prisonerepress.org)

Many, who are incarcerated are living in isolation, or in environments where they do not feel safe in expressing their true feelings. Prisoner Express is meant to be a place where you can share your thoughts and ideas without being seen in a lesser light for expressing your vulnerability. In fact, others reading your work often take great comfort in realizing they are not alone in their thoughts, or the struggles they face while trying to make sense of living within sealed doors. Many PE participants have written to me and let me know how much reading each other's stories means to them, and how it can help reestablish a healthier mental perspective ease making it through the day, week or year.

One purpose of this newsletter is to set straight for all of you who write to us at PE, what we actually do. People hear about the program through word of mouth, or resource guides or family members. Often what you hear could be information about a program that we ran 5 or 10 years ago. When you write and ask to join that program we automatically sign you up to receive the newsletter in hopes that something we are actually doing now matches your interest. Every 6 months or so we create this newsletter to both update members on the status of the projects from the previous program cycle, as well as to list the latest program offerings. There is a sign-up sheet at the end of this newsletter, and you can fill out if you want to join any of the latest programs. If you don't want to tear your newsletter, just send a letter letting us know what programs you wish to join.

Because people can move around so many times in prison, and mail may or may not follow them, we have policy of only sending out the newsletter to people who have written us in the past 6 months. We have had over 20,000 people write us in the past 10 years but only about 3500 are currently active. Active means we received a letter from you since March 2017. If you like receiving this newsletter please be sure to write us back sometime before Jan 2018 so you remain active on our mailing list. Any correspondence you send whether it be signing up for latest programs or submitting writing or art is automatically recorded for registration for the newsletter so you don't have to write for it specifically, you just must send us something so we know you are receiving mail.

Besides recapping our previous cycle of projects, and listing our recent programs, the PE News offers me an opportunity to create conversation among the many readers, and personally it is a chance for me to write a bit about my thoughts and feelings. I ask so many of you to do so, and often your letters share so many details of your private lives and what interests you. I often want to send a personal response, but, I do not have the time or postage money to engage in so many conversations. The newsletter is a chance for me to share a bit of myself with all of you.

If you are new to PE, my name is Gary and I have been coordinating this project since it began with a single letter from a prisoner to the Alternatives Library asking for a package of books. One thing led to another and now 15 years later we have evolved into what we are today. Think of this newsletter as a frozen snapshot of where PE is in this moment, but know that a rule in life is that 'Everything Changes' At least that is a line I keep going back to as life in and around me keeps swirling on. In a few days, I will celebrate my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. There is no denying the aging process, and birthdays certainly are good times to reflect on those changes. I think we might explore "aging in prison" in a future PE project, but for now all I can say is that I appreciate the wisdom that is made possible by longevity. Getting older gives me the chance to learn from my mistakes. Without mistakes, there is little reason to learn, but once you've messed up something a few times, you can start to see ways to prevent it from happening. Mistakes and adversity are our greatest personal teachers. No one would consciously choose to learn through hardship, but it seems that it is an effective tool. For me at this stage of my life, as soon as I realize I am struggling with a situation I start asking myself, "what is the lesson I need to learn. How must I shift my perspectives so I am not suffering with this situation?"

Currently I am focused on dropping my attachment to the outcome of situations, my expectations of how it should be and what others might be thinking about me. That leaves me feeling less encumbered, and less often in the position of trying to change someone else's actions. I have struggled too long in the fruitless task of trying to change others. It just doesn't seem to work, so instead I focus on changing my response. That is what I do have some control over. Also, as I age I can start to grasp that there is indeed a finiteness to this incarnation which provides me perspective on what is important in the time I do have as a sentient being.

I do wonder what lies on the other side of this life. I have been reading several books about near-death experiences and events people recall experiencing in the clinically dead" state. I can't say what is true as I have not experienced any of the things described by those who have "come back". Often they see a beam of light and feel their being traveling towards it, or they see loved ones who have passed calling to them. Or sometimes there are spirits speaking to them. It all sounds so fantastic, yet I do find myself interested in hearing about these experiences.

In the here and now I am also keeping very busy. Besides managing PE and working at the library I have 2 other professions. I am a massage therapist and I help people with a deep tissue massage technique that relieves tight stuck muscles. I have been doing it for 35 years and am still learning new things all the time. I am very effective in reducing peoples pain, and I enjoy the focus on healing the work provides. My other time-consuming adventure has been to start growing garlic for commercial purposes. I always had some garlic in my gardens, but for the past few years I have been growing out my harvest each succeeding year, and it has been increasing exponentially. This year I planted 12,500 garlics and I just finished harvesting them early in August. The process took way longer then I thought and I fell behind in so many other projects. I am a farmer at heart, and am most content when I am growing

food. I still have not figured out where I will sell the garlic, though I have signed up to sell garlic at a festival in Cuba, NY in mid-September. It is drying in the garage hanging from rafters. My next steps are to separate out all the small and misshapen garlics and peel and dehydrate them into powder. I also plan to pickle a lot of it in a certain kind of Japanese vinegar call Umeboshi. It is salty and delicious. I will keep you informed of my garlic adventures in future mailings.

My daughter starts college in 9 days. I am deeply concerned that she is not ready, based on her current behavior, but time will tell. My youngest son is entering his second year of high school. How time does fly. I haven't gone into my usual rant about the current political system and will spare you all the details of my distrust. As a student of history, I can't help but see an empire that is bloated, corrupt and crumbling. I am not sure what we can do as individuals to make a difference, but if we all supported one another it will make the future less harsh. Many of you share so much of your life story with me, and I wanted to let you know a bit about what goes on in my life.

**Fall 17 Project Listings-** We have a mix of ongoing regular projects and new initiatives to offer this upcoming cycle. **Please know our finances are limited, so only sign up for projects that interest you.** Photocopying and postage costs are our biggest expense, and by selectively choosing programs that interest you, our funds can be used to serve more participants.

**Expedited Book Program-** This is an opportunity for you to request a customized book package. The packages are made from our collection of donated books. What we have on any given day is subject to change. We ask you to give us a list of topics or types of books you want. If you only want a specific title or author this is probably not the program for you. We use our deepest knowledge and intuition to make the best selection we can for you, but we are limited by the books we have on hand. The more subject areas you offer us the better. Certainly, you can let us know your priorities within the subjects you list or ask for something very specific as long as you understand there are long odds against us having a specific title. Currently we are experiencing a chronic shortage of chess books as well as building trades type of books. One never knows through what the next donation will bring. **Expedited Books** is the only PE program where we need your donation to complete the process. Each book package can cost PE up to \$7 or \$8 to mail. To offset the cost we ask you to help with a donation of 8 stamps or \$4. **Please check with your facility and find out if you are permitted to send either stamps or a check.** At one-point years ago we did not ask for a postage donation and we had over 1500 people waiting for books and no money to pay postage. We had to adjust this by asking for your help to allow this book mailing project to continue. Again, please ask at your facility to find out if you can participate. **It usually takes a few months before you will receive your package, so if patience is not your thing, again this might not be for you.**

**Poetry Project-** This is an ongoing project. Every six months we publish an anthology of prisoner written poems. Everyone who submits a poem for consideration receives a copy of the anthology. You may or may not be selected for inclusion. We have a different

editor for each edition, and they read all the poems and select the writings to be included. **Jennifer, a student worker at PE is just finishing up selections for Volume #18 and hopefully it will be in the mail this fall.** All the poems we are now collecting will be considered for Vol 19 which will be published in late spring 2018. All the volumes of poetry printed to date are available on our website.

<https://prisonerexpress.org/programs/poetry/>

Please consider sharing your poetry with us.

Here is a selection of poems chosen by Jennifer from the many thousands she has read while editing Poetry Anthology Vol 18

### **Reflection: Them, Me by Janice Funk**

Like it or not--and really, I don't like it  
With every passing year they muscle in,  
Inhabit my skin like fingers in a sock,  
Shifting my face into a foreign familiarity,  
Less me, more them: father, mother, uncle, aunt,  
Blunt nose from one, slack cheeks from another,  
Her lips, her eyes, and from them all, the wrinkles.

Age bring them home to me in this new way,  
And how hard it is to love myself  
As I loved them--still do, down to the moles  
On the backs of their hands, the tobacco breath,  
The bald spot I pray I'd never have. God  
Didn't listen. This morning in the mirror they  
are merciless and I stare at my face until

I lift my hand and press it against  
My eyes the way one presses down the eyes  
Of the dead. But then, in darkness behind  
My eyelids, I see what I won't want to forget  
When I trace their features on my changing face  
They are where I come from, and my age  
Brings me home to them.

### **Ghost by Daniel Montano**

With all these years in prison I believe I've  
Come to feel what a ghost must feel, forced to be  
Spectators in a world where we've been long forgotten.  
Neither here nor there as life goes on around us.  
Some have forgotten that they were ever part  
of that world, they go around hating the world  
and the people in it. Others remember too well,  
They long to be part of that world again, to be seen,  
To be heard, to be relevant.

Every once in a while, for however  
Brief it may be someone sees them, really sees  
Them. Not for what they are told to see, a ghost,  
But for what lies beneath. For those who haven't  
And do not want to forget, who still cherish and hang  
on to their humanity, it means the world to them.

So yes, behind these four walls I've most  
Definitely come to feel what a ghost must feel,  
Your friendly ghost.

### **Invisible People by Shawn Kunio**

I have seen the promised land. But it's been promised to someone else.  
 Do you know what it is to be homeless? Living in a state of complete aloneness, like a car  
 That cannot roll, without wheels, unwhole!  
 Maybe you find a doorway you can call your own. But the building's owned by somebody,  
 You could never call it home.  
 Those faceless armies march the street; I saw then smile; I saw them perish with every rag and refuse to cherish.  
 Hollow, I saw them confer with secret friends, within the night that never ends.  
 A funeral pyre to warm their hands, a smoke signal to the promised lands.  
 Lay me down on a bench so hard. I dream serene of my backyard  
 Where children play till dusk of night and sleep in sheets crisp and tight.  
 Where dreams begin with a mother's kiss and keep the seal of innocence.  
 I tried my best to sleep for long but a night stick cracks, "Time to move on."  
 I am in a town where they only rent to the rich or the statistically acceptable poor. I smiled at you, you just turned your head, and went on through your own door.

### **Gypsy Wind Stirs my Soul by C.S. Bagwell**

This blessed life is all I know.  
 What thought can I think, that I haven't muttered before?  
 All I have, do I yearn for more?  
 Sometimes, gypsy wind stirs my soul.  
 Whispering for permission  
 To be unleashed against the world,  
 Abandoning the complacent existence  
 I've labored to shape and mold  
 Into love so dependent upon me  
 A reciprocal responsibility.  
 Love that acts the host  
 when like a parasite I feed.  
 Still, these daydreams I entertain  
 Setting my conscience unleashed to roam  
 Though not unchaperoned.  
 Because such emotions will never entirely go.  
 Inevitably, from time to time  
 Still, gypsy wind stirs my soul.  
 Always intriguing and enticing,  
 The epitome of exciting  
 Until I muse upon this blessed life God's made.  
 One day I'll leave an amazing legacy  
 Subtly the itch of passion starts to fade.  
 Dreams are fun to wander errantly,  
 But could never outweigh the significance of me.  
 The beautiful lives I've created, selflessly touched and raised  
 To no less continue to rely on me  
 I wouldn't have it any other way.  
 No lingering doubts about the decisions that I've made,  
 The foundation that's become me

The vein through which my family bleeds  
 Like an essential artery  
 The love transporting roots of a windblown tree  
 In a sweet gently tempting breeze.  
 Even though I have the will to not let go  
 Still, gypsy wind stirs my soul.

**Journal Project-** Writing is a wonderful way to explore your, feelings and memories. Keeping a journal is a tool that can be used to help clarify the confusing thoughts that can spin around in our brain or to capture a great idea as it emerges from our mind. It is therapeutic to explore your world through writing. This journal program, currently coordinated by Mackenzie will collect and file your journal entries. Students periodically come in and read your latest entries and update your files. On occasion, they will write and share their thoughts with you. While it is not meant to be a pen pal program, journal writers often find themselves in correspondence with the students who maintain their folders or are volunteering with our program. Many of you are already participating, and I encourage you to continue. If you want to join the program check the box and we will send you a small packet that we hope inspires you to begin to keep your own journal. If you want to get started on a journal you do not need to wait for the starter packet. Just remember to date all your entries. You can mail them to us at whatever rate works for you. Some folks write often, others sending entries every week and still others send in their entries at random times based on when they feel like writing. It is a journal for you, so you figure out a rhythm that works for you. Please write legibly as if it is too sloppy it can be hard for others to read. At times we scan entries to our PE website, but only if they are legible.

**Building a Book-**This may be the most exciting offering for many of you aspiring authors. Maia, who is leading this endeavor found us through her friend Katherine who 7 or so years ago had the job of editing your theme essay submissions while she was a student at Cornell. Mia is in the publishing world and she is interested in helping you learn how to write a book. Below is her introduction for this project.

*Building a Book -About the course:*

*Hello! My name is Maia, and I am so excited to have the opportunity to work with those of you who are interested in writing a piece of creative fiction. I worked for six years as an editor for an independent book publishing house, shepherding manuscripts from the acquisition process through a series of edits all the way to the publication of a hardcover book. After working in this sphere and talking with hundreds of authors, I became frustrated with the numerous ways in which the traditional book publishing world inherently restricts access to those who are well-connected or from certain backgrounds. I am now working for a fiction app which connects writers directly to readers without the gatekeepers of the traditional book publishing world, and it has been wonderful to see readers respond and connect to writers who hadn't before found the right space to share their work.*

Over the course of this program, I hope to help you develop your own single piece of creative fiction in the form of a short novella or longer novel. Beginning a manuscript can often feel like an overwhelming prospect, so my aim is to help guide you through every step of the process—each of the workshop exchanges will cover the basic steps of setting out to write a long work of fiction in a way that will hopefully make the endeavor fun and manageable: brainstorming exercises to help you decide how to focus your ideas, worldbuilding, developing your characters, mapping out the major plot points and narrative arc of your piece, overcoming writer's block, setting reasonable goals for yourself, editing as you work, etc.

Deciding to write a novel is a big commitment, so it's important that you pick an idea that you feel passionate about—you're going to be devoting a lot of time to this fictional world, so you'll want to write about something that gets you excited. Maybe you already have an idea that you've been kicking around in your mind for years now, or maybe you are interested in the challenge of building a piece from scratch. Either way, writing exercises will help you to tease out what it is precisely that you want to write about and help you to fill in the details that will make the piece really sing.

There are a lot of different ways to go about tackling a longer piece of fiction and every author has their own strategy for developing the plan for their manuscript, but for the purposes of this program we are going to be workshoping the following areas before settling in to write:

- Setting
- Main Characters
- Genre
- Main Conflict/Narrative Arc

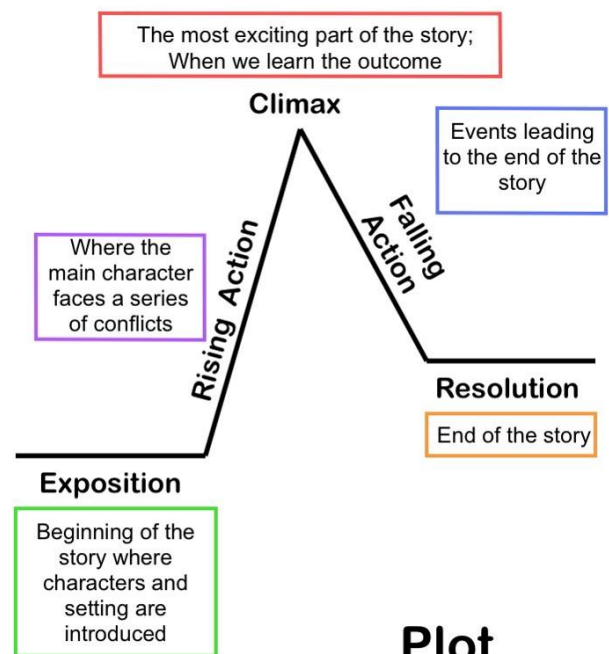
Deciding on a setting for your piece is a great starting point. You'll want your piece to take place in a space that gets your imagination fired up, whether it is set in the neighborhood in which you grew up or in the Land of Mystical Flimflammy. There are no limits to the world in which you set your piece, as long as you are able to fill in details that ground the piece to make it feel real for the reader. Think about movies that you love—from "The Godfather" to "The Matrix," they work because that world feels complete and logical within the confines of the narrative. We'll work together on building up the details that make the world in your imagination feel full and rich to the reader.

Once you've built up a world and started to think about what direction you would like your piece to take, you will have almost certainly begun to think about the individual characters who will be inhabiting this world (or perhaps characters that you've been mulling over in your mind inspired the world to begin with—it's different for every author!), so the next step is to begin flushing out the particulars. Who will be your protagonists, or heroes? Who will be the villains, the creators of the conflicts? Successful characters, whether we are meant to root for them or pray for their downfall, are three-dimensional, with believable

motivations. We'll piece together the likes, dislikes, fears, hopes, and personal histories of the important characters in your work to ensure that they are relatable, even if they may not be likable.

Thinking about genre, or what fictional category your piece will take place in, is another step in putting together your plan, and will help you as you map out your narrative arc down the line. The main genres in fiction are mystery, comedy, romance, horror, and drama (depending on who you talk to!), but the wonderful thing about fiction is that anything goes. Do you want to write a classic piece of contemporary fiction? Are you interested in a detective who travels through time solving crime? An apocalyptic dystopia? An autobiographical novel? A space opera sprinkled with lyrical poetry? If you're wondering if the idea that you have been mulling over will work, the answer is: absolutely! As long as it gets you thinking, we can make it work.

Figuring out what category of fiction you are planning to write brings us to one of the most important steps in planning out your work: the narrative arc. While works of fiction are infinitely diverse, successful storytelling (even in works of non-fiction) tends to follow a general pattern of exposition, or scene-setting; rising action, or a build in tension; a climax; falling action; and resolution:



## Plot Diagram

Before you begin to write in earnest, we'll put together a general map of the major plot points in your piece and how they will build and work together to create tension and keep the reader on the edge of their seat.

After you've developed your world, your three-dimensional characters, and your basic narrative arc, you are ready to settle



*in and begin writing! Writing is immensely satisfying, but can also be tremendously frustrating, so we will continue to workshop as you write to find ways for you to set goals for yourself, push past the dreaded writer's block to reignite your creativity, and pull all the pieces together.*

*The last step in writing is always editing, which sounds like a bummer but can be fun—I swear! The tendency with authors is to finish writing something and then to shove it aside and declare it done, but revision is a vital part of the writing process. We'll work on the best ways to evaluate your own writing in ways that will ultimately strengthen your piece as a whole. Setting portions of your work aside and revisiting them later with a fresh new eye can reveal issues that you never anticipated as you were writing.*

*Please note: if you are more interested in building a long-form piece of nonfiction, such as a memoir, we can make that work too—as I mentioned, successful nonfiction still contains the same basic building blocks of storytelling: a detailed setting, three-dimensional characters (maybe you?), and a narrative arc. The same strategy still applies!*

*If you are interested in participating in this program, I would highly recommend that before we begin the writing exercises (and throughout your process) you read, read, read! Absorbing quality writing is the best way to research what makes good books work: sentence structure, dialogue, plot, characterization—the whole shebang. The more you read, the more you will internalize the general cadences and rhythms of successful storytelling. Soak up as much as possible!*

*This may all feel a bit overwhelming, but all you really need to participate in this program is an interest in writing. Together, we'll build everything from there! I believe that storytelling is a powerful tool that allows people to build empathy for one another, and I am passionate about hearing the stories of those who don't have traditional platforms on which to share their creative voices. I am very much looking forward to helping you develop your stories and providing you with editorial support and advice!*

**Recipe Packet-** This booklet is for all you cooks trying to figure how to create a dessert spread using limited resources. Last year, we sent out a survey with our newsletter that asked you all to send us any recipes you use within the confines of your walls. Thanks to all your submissions, we are compiling a recipe packets. This edition, we will be focusing on the dessert recipes—“Calling all Sweet Toths!” In addition to the recipes, Clara has researched and reported about the history of the desserts, such as that cheesecakes date back further than the Greek/Roman period. To learn more and read about what other prisoners make for dessert, sign up for this packet. Future packets will cover entrees and spreads

**New Jim Crow Book Club-** Ithaca, home to PE and the Alternatives Library had a community read this past year. Organizers distributed a few thousand copies of the Michelle

Alexander book, “The New Jim Crow. Here is a brief blurb of the book, “The New Jim Crow is a stunning account of the rebirth of a caste-like system in the United States, one that has resulted in millions of African Americans locked behind bars and then relegated to a permanent second-class status—denied the very rights supposedly won in the Civil Rights Movement. Since its publication in 2010, the book has appeared on the New York Times bestseller list for more than a year; been dubbed the “secular bible of a new social movement” by numerous commentators, including Cornel West; and has led to consciousness-raising efforts in universities, churches, community centers, re-entry centers, and prisons nationwide. The New Jim Crow tells a truth our nation has been reluctant to face.”

It is a powerful book, and I am unsure whether it will be allowed in every facility we serve. I encourage you to inquire through your mailroom to see if you can receive the book. We only have 115 copies so we want to focus on sending it to people who can receive it, commit to reading it and willing to offer their thoughts to other PE readers on the main themes of the book. The book will come with some background material on the author and some thought provoking questions. **We will use your answers to create a compilation document capturing your most interesting insights.** Please only sign up for this program if you are sure you will participate. **I am asking everyone who signs up to include a separate letter letting me know why you would be an ideal candidate for this book club.** Your letter of intent will be helpful in helping us choose who to enroll in the book club. As this is an important topic I will find a way to share some of the ideas generated through this community book with the rest of you. I am still trying to get more copies of the book as well as find a community volunteer who is more knowledgeable about systemic racism to help create the materials for this project. **I will contact all the folks selected to participate in the project prior to mailing the book. If you do not hear from us by the first week in November than we were unable to secure a copy for you. Usually no one is turned away from our program, but in this case the lack of copies is creating a distinct group of participants.** Please make a case as to why you are a good candidate for participation in the project. If you are allowed to share books, perhaps you can use your copy of the book and find many readers in your prison to participate with you being a coordinator in your facility.

**Artknows Packet-** Treacy has been leading the PE art program for many years. She always has fresh ideas about how to both cultivate the artist in you as well as creating venues for shows of your art. Below is a update from Treacy. If you want to get more involved in exploring your inner artist sign up for her ArtKnows newsletter.

*Greetings!—This year PE will be offering several exhibiting opportunities and projects. For the exhibitions, you do not need to sign up, you need only send in the artwork submission. Please, please remember to put your name on the artwork submission —on the back is best. Unfortunately, your number is also helpful, particularly if your name is John Smith. This helps us keep track of who did what art should your letter get separated from the artwork. Also, please note that artwork submission cannot be returned or copied and sent to your sweetie. But we thank you*

very much for your art donation and hope the opportunity exhibiting to the public is a good exchange. We don't sell the work, but if an individual likes, they are welcomed to make a donation and in appreciation we allow them to select a work of art. Two local judges made donations and were very pleased with the drawing by Jimmy Coleman and an art piece composed of patterned numbers by Clarence Gipbsen. They plan to put them in their courthouse chambers.

#### **NEW Project:**

"Everything Coffee" exhibitions: Two exhibitions (both including writing and art) will be presented at the coffeehouse, Gimme, which has several locations in and around Ithaca and two in New York City. There are many people who spend their lives drinking coffee at Gimme. The exhibitions will be in Ithaca. The first one in January 2018 at the Cayuga Street store and another exhibition in March 2018 in Trumansburg. This is a good opportunity venue, often sought for by local artists. There is a mad competition to exhibit at Gimme.

I was inspired by the art of Leroy Sodorff, Jeff Harnden and others in prison who worked with coffee as stain in their work. I approached Gimme suggesting an exhibition in which the art was created by the medium of coffee – either using coffee as a stain, using the coffee grinds or another yet to be discovered way of using coffee. I am not asking for pictures of coffee cups with steam arising from the top – that is a commercial picture for coffee. I am asking that you to create your artwork from coffee. I have included a portrait made by coffee by an Asian artist. Because I want to this extend this exhibition to writers, I am including the question, "How does coffee make life better for you? (...duh – if that isn't a commercial, what is?!) This can be answered in a poem or 100 words (or less) (someone just sent in writing for the "Anywhere but here" exhibition requiring the same 100-word limitation and they put numbers on top of their words to make sure it didn't exceed the quota. (One hundred words can express anything - My mom as a teenager wrote a 100-word essay on why she liked Popeye Chicken Noodle soup and won a new car....No car to be awarded here.)

Depending upon the entries, the two shows will include different artists/ or maybe the same. Depends upon you....

Allison, the manager at the Trumansburg, send her greetings and writes:

**Hello Dear Readers,**

**My name is Allison Hancock and I am the Store Manager at the Trumansburg, NY location of Gimme Coffee. I have been working for Gimme for over 10 years as a barista and just recently took over management of my little store. We are so excited to feature some of the amazing art pieces done using coffee this upcoming March.**

**Gimme Coffee is an Ithaca, NY based coffee roaster with stores in Ithaca, Trumansburg, Manhattan, Brooklyn and even on Cornell University's campus! We have been buying, roasting and serving specialty coffee to New Yorkers for over 15 years now. We have won multiple awards for our contributions to the specialty coffee industry, including '2013**

**Macro Roaster of the Year' from Roast Magazine, 'Top 10 U.S. Coffee Bars' by Food and Wine Magazine and we have won the 'Good Food Award' three years in a row for our coffees. We are well renowned for the quality of our products and the fast and friendly service.**

**The Trumansburg location is a very special one. It is one of our smaller locations with a very devoted local population. Trumansburg is host to the Finger Lakes Grassroots Festival of Music and Dance that boasts nearly 20,000 visitors during its four days of musical performances. The whole town comes alive and boogies during Grassroots, leaving the rest of the year blissfully "sleepy." That doesn't stop anyone from coming through for their daily buzz, however. We have so many regulars that we love, faces that we see every day if not two or three times per day! Lots of retirees, teachers, bankers and families frequent our coffee shop and it is often the place where you can keep tabs on the town gossip!**

**A lot of our regulars are really invested in the shop, what happens there every day, they take interest in the personal lives of the baristas and they pay a lot of attention to the art on the walls. So far this year, we have featured nature photographs, sculpture, illustration and, right now, we have a collection of cactus inspired pen and ink drawings done on wood blocks!**

**Featuring the art of prisoners, especially done using coffee as a medium, is not an opportunity I could pass up. It is the perfect bridge for connecting the art to the people, especially the people that love coffee! I can't wait to see the many forms of artistic expression that have been realized using coffee and the chance to show the masses that coffee can serve a much larger purpose than just providing caffeine.**

**Thank you so much for your submissions!**

The Cayuga Street coffeehouse is located in the center of Ithaca and clientele includes many Cornell professors and students. It is always filled with people and is open 7 days a week.

#### **Instructions for submitting artwork and writing:**

Deadline for the January show is December 1.

Deadline for March show is February 1 (of course if you get it in by December there is a better chance to be part of both exhibitions).

**The medium – meaning what the artwork is made of – needs to include in some way coffee. It can also include other mediums – pen, watercolor, pencil, and so on. Of course, writers do not have to write with coffee (their words) but it would be interesting.....**

If you make 3-d work out of paper or whatever, there is an opportunity to exhibit these also.

You do not need to sign up for this project. Just send in your submissions!



Six x four-foot coffee portrait (made only with coffee stain) by Asian artist Red Hong-Yi

#### **Fall 2017 Artknows Newsletter:**

*Everything Nepal!*

*I always use the Artknows newsletter to learn something new about art for myself. In that way, it becomes more interesting to me. I am constantly seeking to learn new things about art. This fall, my husband (many of you have heard me refer to my husband, Gary Weisman, a sculptor who teaches at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts) won an art residency for a month to Kathmandu, Nepal; and yep! I'm going, too. Nepal is next to India and is famous for being the only Hindu Kingdom. However, their art is a combination of both Buddhism and Hinduism influences.*

*I want to learn about contemporary Indian and Nepalese art. What kinds of art do artists make today in Kathmandu and how does this current art fit into the tradition of Indian art?*

*Another thing I want to do is draw and sculpt the animals that have been abandoned by their owners after the earthquake hit Kathmandu in 2015. The city was terribly damaged. I am particularly interested in visiting the donkey sanctuaries and drawing them.*

*So, what does this mean for the Artknows newsletter? It means I will write about what I learned about art in Nepal; who are the current artists (maybe I will meet some and let them speak to you for themselves); the history of art - who are the famous dead artists; and what it is like to try creating art in a foreign country! And I will share what I learned about the animals on the streets.*

*I hope the artists/animals from Nepal can inspire you in your work! Even if you don't create art, I hope you will enjoy learning about them.*

*To receive this Artknows Newsletter, you need to check the appropriate box at the end of this newsletter. Thanks!*

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#### **Animation Project**

*"Why was the king thirsty; why was the donkey sad?"*

*Amir Khosrow, 12th century Hindu poet who wrote in riddles.*

*Some of you will remember the moth animation created two years ago – a wonderful animation depicting a moth flying towards a light that several of you created the stills for. It turned out to be a very moving animation. If you don't have a chance to see it, have someone who has access to the internet take a look at it; <http://www.documist.com/moth-and-light/>*

*I heard from Jose Villarreal who participated in making the animation. While he couldn't see the animation himself, someone he knew viewed it and reported back to him. The names of the animators are credit listed at the end of the film.*

*The new animation involves a donkey and the rescue of that donkey. (You can clearly see the link to Nepal and donkeys....) Donkey sanctuaries have been established all over the world. In one article describing donkey sanctuaries, the question is asked:*

*"Why does the world pick on the donkey?"*

*IT IS a sad irony that it's a donkey's ability to suffer in silence that has made it one of the world's most abused animals. Docile and trusting, with its doleful eyes and long ears, the donkey stoically carries on in pain when injured, hiding its suffering. So its' unfair destiny has historically been one of cruelty and mistreatment."*

*The animation will be an attempt to convey the need to protect those who have been abused.*

*The first moth animation has been shown at two museums: Arnot Museum and Morris Graves Museum, and two universities: Binghamton and Cornell.*

*Because of the success, I am excited about the next animation.*

*Projects instructions: When you check the box to participate in this project you will receive a packet by mid-January. (The deadline for the drawings will be determined then.) You will be asked to draw 15 drawings (if you participated in the last animation, you will remember this.) Your 15 drawings will take the movement from one "still" through to another "still". (I will have already drawn the stills to give you a framework from which to draw)*

*But in the meantime, if you have any stories or ideas for developing the storyline of this animation – how many donkeys have you rescued? – please, send them in! If you want to do some drawings of donkeys to help develop what the donkey looks like, please send your donkey drawings in! (You don't*

have to wait to do this – just send them in. BUT ALSO - Please check the box to participate at the end of this newsletter.

The moth animation was almost 2 minutes in length and required 600 drawings. Maybe we can make this longer. If you can do more than 15 drawings (like two sets of 15,) please let me know when you sign up.

Your friend,

Eeyore

(For those of you who haven't read Winnie the Pooh, Eeyore is the sad donkey friend of Winnie.)

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Update "Anywhere but here" exhibition

This exhibition is developed for the Binghamton, NY, Re-entry Program, directed by Jeff Pryor. In addition to being the program director of the Re-entry program, Jeff owns a travel agency. It is through the travel agency that Jeff is sponsoring this exhibition to be presented at Binghamton University. My question for the exhibition was: What does a prisoner have in common with a travel agency client? They both (may) want to be "Anywhere but here."

Not only is Jeff sensitive about the needs of prisoners in their re-entry into the community because he is program director of the agency, but, because he, too, is a former prisoner, knowing all too well the difficulties confronting someone who has been incarcerated. I am honored to work with Jeff and his program in helping the community positively embrace their homecoming people.

Thanks for all the wonderful submissions to Jeff's exhibition and for the letters you wrote to him. It is all very heart-felt.

Until then - that's all folks!

My best,

Treacy

**Psychology Unit-**The Psychology packet is a combined effort between Bruce Micheals, a PE participant incarcerated in Michigan, and Clara at Prisoner Express. Bruce has authored an incredibly comprehensive introduction to psychology study packet that Clara adapted for Prisoner Express. As Clara is an aspiring clinical psychologist, she has incorporated details relevant to clinical psychology, topics ranging from intelligence to sleep. Whether you are advanced in your psychology studies or just interested in learning more, this packet will be a wealth of information that is relevant to your own lives!

**Buddhist Meditation Guide-** Tara, creator of the guide, teaches practical meditation practices to help you embody more peace, patience, acceptance and compassion. The packet offers articles and suggestions to help with difficult emotions like anger, and includes testimonies and insights from other participants in the program who share how the practices are affecting them. Tara is working on her 8<sup>th</sup> packet, and they continue to inspire me and the people who read it. The insights shared in this packet are valuable to all Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. If you are trying to make sense of this life, these packets offer a valuable perspective.

**Chess Club-** David is at work creating the next chess packet. Each packet is usually full of puzzles, strategy and info on famous chess games and the people that played them. David volunteered to do this when our last chess program guru, Jack, graduated. David is currently incarcerated in Washington. This makes his coordinating a PE program particularly exciting. I have been inspired by David's contribution and we are seeking for more of our programming to be created by people who are presently incarcerated. [In this cycle, the psychology program that Clara is editing has a lot of the info in it coming from Bruce in Michigan. In the future, I am also hoping to gather a team of you to write legal advice for the para legal advice column. Of course, as a group you have always owned the theme essay component of the program

**Trauma Study Guide-**What is Trauma?

Trauma is the result of a situation or situations that are shocking and emotionally overwhelming, often involving actual or threatened death, severe injury, or threat to physical integrity; these situations are often called "traumatic events".

Trauma is often associated with a state called "crisis". Crisis is a response to a stressful or dangerous event and it is a point when emotions overwhelm rational thinking processes and typical coping skills.

When situations are overwhelming or severely distressing our bodies and our brains try to adapt to the perceived threat. This means that hormones such as adrenaline are released that cause us to focus on protecting ourselves in ways that are instinctual and basic. Often, this is referred to as a "fight or flight" response.

However, this isn't a completely accurate term for this state. Fighting and fleeing are two of the most basic components of this, but as humans have adapted and evolved with our environments they are certainly not the entire spectrum of reactions. For example, freezing is a common instinctual reaction to trauma, especially the trauma of violence -- when we do not perceive, on an instinctual level, that we can win a fight or flee effectively we will sometimes "freeze", or comply, in order to survive the threat that is in front of us. This constant focus on survival can cause stress, which in turn leads to a trauma or crisis response. **The packet will explore ways we can recover from trauma.**

**Theme Writing Program-**The theme writing program is the heart of Prisoner Express. PE started as a book mailing project. So many of you wrote to thank us for our books and shared stories of your life and of your prison experience. Certain points seemed to constantly show up in the letters. One was that it was not easy to display your true feelings in prison, as any show of emotion could be interpreted as weakness. People also wrote that they felt they were going crazy! Still others wrote about how great it was to receive mail. From these comments, the theme writing program began. **Every month there is a theme listed. If you write something on the topic it will be added to a compilation of that month's entries. Everyone who sends in a theme will receive a packet with all the writings for the month.** [Great way to get mail] Reading each other's writings is a great antidote to the feeling of going crazy. When you read each other's writings, it is clear to many of you that you are in a crazy making environment, rather than there is something organically wrong with you. That itself can be empowering because then you can bring your best self forward to help you do your time in a productive way. When



one is going crazy it is out of one's control, but with this new perspective we hope you can use PE programs to help keep you grounded and balanced through difficult times. In the Word Theme Project we ask that you write an entry based on something real, and not a fantasy or made up story. There will be opportunities for fiction writing in the Picture Theme Project describe later in the newsletter. Remember though, if you want to see all the submissions for a particular month you must write something yourself. Please limit submissions to 750 words as we cannot afford to print super long theme packets

## Upcoming Themes topics

**"Protected" due 10/01/17**

**"Thwarted" due 11/01/17**

**"Thankful" due 12/01/17**

**"My Parents" due 1/01/18**

**"Tuned In" due 2/01/18**

**"Apologies" due 3/01/18**

**"Blink of an Eye" due 4/01/17**

Below is a small selection of themes that were already compiled into packets and mailed to the authors. It is a chance for all of you receiving the newsletter to sample this theme writing project. Remember if you want the complete packet you must contribute a theme

## Leap of Faith

### **"Shared Leaps" by Carl Branson**

As prisoner-authors, I suspect that we all share one or more "leaps of faith" which have us where we are now.

The reason behind the conduct for which we have been convicted is the first in a series of shared leaps of faith. On this point, I believe we fall within one of three categories: (1) we thought our conduct was *not* criminal, (2) we knew our conduct was criminal, but we were convinced we were smart enough to avoid "getting caught," or (3) considered the conduct worth whatever the cost. Regardless of which category you or I fall into, rest assured that there is at least one other among us manning the oar on the other side of the boat.

The second shared leap of faith was trusting our attorney-be it paid or appointed counsel. We were convinced that the attorney(s) would do their best to either: (1) "get us off" or (2) obtain a more lenient sentence. What we forgot was that even with attorneys, at least half of their graduating class is in the bottom 50% of the ranking. How many of us thought to ask where our attorney ranked in their class? Hmm...

Let's not forget post-conviction proceedings, be it direct appeal, habeas corpus, or some statutory form of action available to challenging the legality of the conviction or sentence. Again, we trust our attorney(s) to do their best but more often than not are disillusioned by the quality of their performance versus the quantity of the promises they made. Since the post-conviction arena seems to be open continuously in one form or another to combatants, this allows us to visit the abbey of the "jailhouse lawyer." Observation of his cloistered society yields mixed results. These persistent students of law occasionally make inroads and obtain relief where

trained attorneys have failed. A leap from this cliff requires caution and far more questions than those we failed to pose to our attorneys.

There may be other "leaps of faith" common to us all who have gone through the criminal justice system. These areas just reviewed qualify as the "big three" which I believe all prisoner-authors can relate to.

### **"We Are Not Alone" by Richard Sean Gross**

There are 100 billion stars in our galaxy and who knows how many throughout the universe. In recent years, astronomers have discovered hundreds of planets around nearby stars. Our solar system has nine planets. If we assume an average of 5 planets per star, then the Milky Way galaxy would contain 500 billion planets. This is a conservative estimate: it would be a trillion!

With such a staggering number of planets, it is clearly possible, maybe probable, that some have life on them. Earth is in the temperate zone where liquid water exists. Yet life on Earth exists even in the most hostile places on our planet: frozen tundras, deserts, deep ocean trenches, pitch dark caves, and on the edges of volcanoes. Life is hardy and adaptable.

Scientists have proven that "life as we know it" can only exist in some rather unlikely circumstances. This key phrase reminds us that life on Earth has evolved within the parameters that exist here. Life elsewhere in the galaxy has likely evolved within the parameters that exist on other planets. It may not be "life as we know it;" it could be life we don't even recognize or understand.

The idea of intelligent life on other planets is not that preposterous. The idea that we are the most intelligent creature in the universe is pompous. The universe is far older than our planet, and the planet is far older than human beings. Our civilization is only 10,000 years old, and that is nothing compared to a 16 billion-year-old universe. There could be civilizations out there that are millions of years old and much further advanced than us. The more I think about it, the less it seems a leap of faith and more a reality not yet proven.

### **"In the Land of Other Gods" by Catherine LaFleur**

After spending years toiling in the bowels of the prison's law library as a clerk, I found myself becoming depressed. In a regular year, there may be 6-7 disturbing cases on my desk, but that year, 26 horrific cases were assigned to me. It became difficult not to be judgmental. That is when I knew I needed time away.

At the same time, a new Senior Chaplain was hired: Dr. Robin. She was a delightful pixie of a woman, full of song and praise just like her name. One day, I happened to be delivering papers to her office, and she asked me to sit down and tell her about myself. We talked for two hours, and then she offered me the job of chaplain's clerk, a new job that no one had ever been assigned before. I immediately said no. Law clerk is the best job to have in prison: it comes with many unstated benefits. Why would I leave my extra-large desk located directly under the air conditioner vent for an unknown quantity?

Dr. Robin asked two more times over the next week, and I still said thank you but no. Unfortunately, I couldn't sleep after that. At 2:00 A.M., my eyes would pop open, and I would lay, staring at my ceiling of my cell until 5 in the morning. I am not the type of person who hears the voice of God calling in the night, or really at

any other time. I thought my number was unlisted, but somehow, she got it.

Finally, I went back to Dr. Robin at the end of the week and told her what was happening. Within 3 days, I had been job changed because Dr. Robin personally marched my papers through. It was a real leap of faith to leave the law library for the unknown. I was frightened. Was I crazy? The other law clerks certainly thought so. Even the supervisor kept questioning me... Are you sure about this?

I got assigned an extra-large desk and got to sit in the back office with a dedicated file cabinet and a cabinet of curiosities. The cabinet was stuffed with the accoutrements for different worship services. Our chapel is full service, meaning it represents all the major religious and spiritual groups, not just the ones approved by the Republican Party. One of my duties was to take care of these religious items. In short, I was to guard the materials to make sure no one was: using prayer rugs for home decor, stealing prayer and rosary beads for use as hair ornaments or beading projects, using zafus as decorative throw pillows, making the runes into scrabble tiles, drawing a moustache on our Lady of Peace, graffitiing on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, shredding the Buddhist books, defacing the Quran, or obliterating the alternative religious resources. Mostly, it was the adherents of only one fundamentalist religious persuasion who felt a calling to do these kinds of things. Some of the more insistent Pentecostal type persons were anxious to tell me what "their god" has told them. Apparently, there were many gods with conflicting points of views jamming up the midnight phone lines. This is the reason the cabinet had a combination lock on it. I learned to bare my teeth menacingly and moved the cabinet behind the desk.

At first, it was a struggle to not tell people what to do. After all, as a law clerk, people wanted me to make decisions for them. Now, it wasn't my job to tell people what to do anymore; they should make choices by themselves. Reviewing your options is what free will is all about. Ask my opinion, and I'll give it. You would be surprised what worshippers come out of the woodwork once they feel there isn't going to be any persecution about their religious preference. I liked helping them because otherwise, we'd never be able to have a conversation. I found that you don't have to agree with those you are serving to be happy in the work.

The sedentary job in the law library was a lot different than my running around in the chapel. There was always something to do, papers to deliver to different departments, flyers to post, inmates to track down, and services to set. Because of limited space, some of the programs did not actually meet in the chapel but in satellite locations all around the compound. My co-workers and I were always hauling things down to these classrooms then collecting them afterwards. It was a labor of love. Service work makes you a happier person.

One day, I was helping to set up for the weekly Rosary Prayer. Carefully, I brought the statues out to a side room in the sanctuary. My co-workers were arranging the battery-powered votive candles and decorating the table with plastic plants and fruit. In walked one of the Little Sisters of Charity who occasionally came to the prison. It was Sister Glorious Savior. She walked right up and gave us hugs and pats on the shoulder, exclaiming what a beautiful presentation was set on the table. I happened to look down at Sister's feet and noted that we were wearing the same shoes as her: humble, black Crocs.

I think no matter what leap of faith we are asked to make; faith shoes are going to be provided.

## Winning

### "My Very Best Win" by Rudy J. Djordjevic

When the pistol was fired, the race was on. The odds were already against me, maybe a million to one, but natural instinct and tenacity have prepared me for this moment since I can't even remember. I see maybe hundreds of thousands of my opponents in the race are already ahead of me. Most of them have a head start, but I wouldn't allow this to discourage me. I refused to give up, so I pressed on. Through my mind I knew that only one of us could win, even though everyone around me wants this just as badly as I do. With my destination in my soul, I go as fast as physically possible.

I see trouble ahead when many in the race start to get slow, as if they are getting weaker, like some type of force is choking them out till they desist to move on. A lot of my opponents that seized to carry on were as close as family to me, but I progress forward aggressively with fervent devotion of winning in mind.

The race track leads us up a slender tunnel. The finish line is getting near. The lead is getting even slimmer when many have started to veer off course. Some tend to start crashing into the wall and can't seem to comprehend their sense of direction.

The lead trickling down to only a few, and under fortunate grace I am still one of the few. I can hear millions more of my adversaries behind me, and so I entertain no thought in my mind that says it is okay to start slowing down. We pass through a hollow passageway and get a first glimpse at the finish line. At this point of the race, every cell I have burns and aches, but with the finish line in my sight, it's like I was given a second wind.

There's only one participant ahead of me at this point, and I give it everything left inside of me. I start to gain up to him till we are side by side. The finish line is getting so close I can almost taste it. By the looks it, it is going to be a photo finish. The other guy tries to ram into me in a desperate attempt to knock me off course and gain back the lead, but I keep my control. I try to ram him back, and now we are practically going at it like a pair of vicious Siamese twins. I have worked too hard. Once I felt him shoving into me hard, I quickly slip under him. With the absence of my force equaling his, he loses control and starts to hydroplane. I would have loved to look back to see him crash, but the rest of my life was just ahead of me.

I plummeted head first into the gamete, thrusting myself inside with such intrepid excitement. The excursion is over. I will live out the next nine months in utero. My cells transforming from zygote, embryo, fetus to newborn.

Then on the eighth month in the year of 1990, the cozy, little home I lived in my whole life will be invaded by a light that blinds me. Since my eyes are immature and incapable of seeing, a masked figure will use this chance to grab a hold of me by the back of my neck and extract me unwillingly.

The unexpected coldness of the air envelope me, and oxygen was consuming me. I kicked and squirmed to break free, but the masked man just held me suspended in air as if he was taunting me. The man brandished a large pair of sharp scissors in front of my face as another clamps my lifeline shut. Then with the gruesome looking shears, he severed me completely from my

mother and my home. The room was full of smiles as I was suffering the cruel, unwanted raid. I couldn't help but cry.

Welcome to life: this is what I won from the race nine months ago against millions of my potential sisters and brothers. I guess from that point, I began to hold some type of angst toward the world for ripping me out my comfort zone. I felt that the world owed me something, and I was going to take it at any means necessary. I resented life and gambled with it every day, taking my winnings for granted and not understanding that I also won the lottery when I was placed in the arms of my mother.

My very first winning in life was the most important one. It paved the way for many more winnings in life to even have a possibility. Life can easily be forgotten as a reward for the strenuous feat we had to endure, just to be able to breath the very air around us. So, before you start to feel like a loser or worthless at times, remember that in a million to one, you can come out the winner.

### **"The Price of Privation" by Calvin Westerfield**

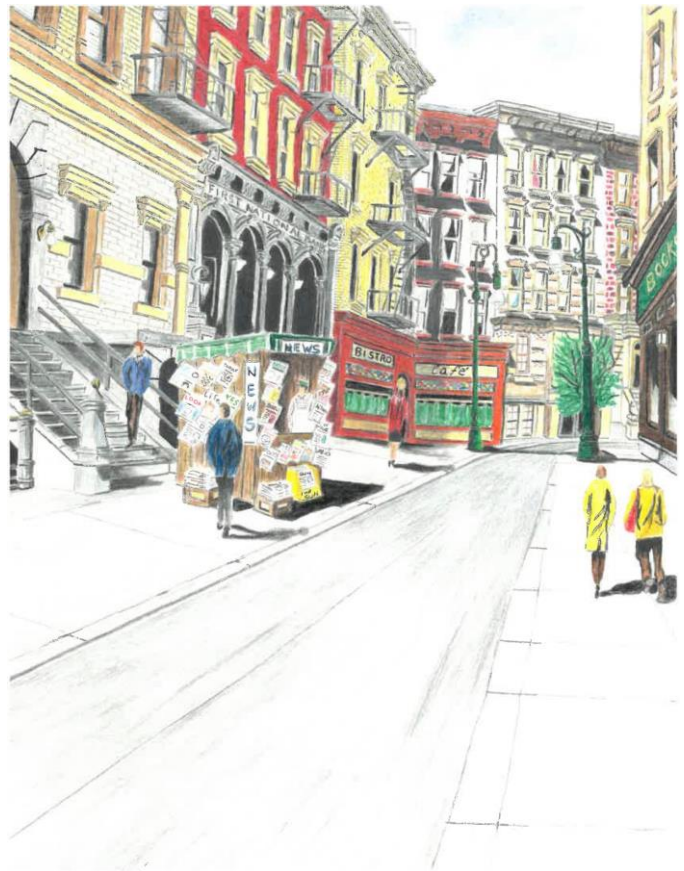
President-elect Donald won the election by a substantial margin a couple weeks ago. America now has a man who holds the opinions of a modern-day George Lincoln Rockwell that has made clear his supremacist agenda to "Make America Great Again." Trump will be sworn in come January 2017 and will hold the highest office in the United States of America, but many American citizens do not feel safe under his leadership. Can such a result be viewed as a win for Mr. Trump or the millions of rural middle to lower class supporters who voted him into office? Niccolo Machiavelli said, "Men change their rulers willingly, hoping to better themselves, and this hope induces them to take up arms against him who rules; wherein they are deceived, because they afterwards find by experience they have gone from bad to worse."

Winning does not always equal victory. Thousands of people have had their lives ruined because luck made them winners of the lottery. Simple, ordinary people turned millionaires literally overnight. You have the stories on T.V. of those winners who settle for the lump sums and seemingly overnight, they become famous. Suddenly everyone shows up at their door, and calls start to come in from relatives and old friends they haven't heard from in years. They move to a huge mansion they don't need and end up blowing most of the money on insignificant things to fill this new home. A few years later, they are in debt, have lost all their family and real friends, and many end up committing suicide. Winning is actually losing in such instances.

A truly triumphant person is one who has discovered the peace of knowing who they are inside, getting to cultivate that energy, and using it to add to this world freely. "The virtue of all achievements is the knowledge of self, those who know this victory shall never know defeat."

"We may encounter many defeats but we must not be defeated." — Maya Angelou

"We need to be the change we wish to see in the world." — Mahatma Gandhi



Art by Gary Farlow

### **Found**

#### **"Lost and Found" by William Andrews**

I found them, or maybe they found me. As fast as they'd appear, they would disappear. Some within days, some weeks. Then so would I.

The first couple found were in Waco, Texas. I was living in a small apartment, and my life was beginning to unravel--again. I had a misdemeanor court date pending which meant going to jail and losing everything: the job, apartment, and my stuff. Things were beginning to feel very temporary and meaningless.

The girlfriend and I had been riding around the rundown side of town when a small, dirty, sad-looking creature crawled from underneath a boarded up building on the corner of the street. Its eyes locked on us as if it were expecting us, and I whistled and coerced the stray. Within seconds, she was in my lap. The intersection at which we found her was Dallas Street and some numbered crossway, and so we named her Dallas. After feeding and giving her a much-needed flea bath, my apartment became her domain. She acted as if she cared less about going outside anymore, except to poop. Then she would hurry back across the threshold, safe and sound once again.

One sunny weekend morning, I opened my door to let in the cool air, leaving it open. Dallas went outside, and I never saw her again.

Within a few days, another stray (this one was a fluffy black blur of a beast) came running to my front door with no collar or leash dragging, and so I adopted it. I still asked around if anyone

may have lost him, but there were no claims. He stayed about a week until one day, he too vanished.

Then I went to court and then to county jail for the summer.

Years later, I once again found myself on the cusp of losing my freedom. Things were looking bleak, and I couldn't manage my way out of a wet paper sack. Bad choices, drugs, booze, and lame relationships were all my world had to offer. So, I saw the end of my freedom coming at a pace I couldn't stop. No real friends, just those posing to be, and my options seemed to narrow each day.

Then it happened. Riding to the store for more beer, I noticed that down the busy main street, there he was running as if he were trying to blend into traffic, hanging his tongue out, keeping a steady gallop astride traffic, heading in our same direction, and occasionally peering over his shoulder as if waiting for us to catch up. We pulled into the station, and I called him. "Get over here!" He came right to me, jumping into the truck and mostly into my lap. He began to lick me with slobbery affection. He was a full-size pit bull, red in color with clipped ears. He loaded up into the truck as if he did it all the time. When we got back to the house just around the corner, my friend's wife saw the dog in the truck as were pulling up. She asked what we were doing with it since she just ran it off from the front yard a little while ago. It was as if the pooch had been looking for me first!

So I kept him around for a while. He was healthy, and maybe his owner would put up notice soon. He was easy to walk on a leash, never tugging and always minding his manners. He would even ignore the barking dogs... behind the fenced yards. At first, he would start to flare, but by simply telling him to "be nice," he'd look at me with big, brown, wet eyes and blink before he continued walking. He had a habit of pooping in the street, even though he'd sniff around on the grass next to the curb and circle around a couple times. After doing that, he'd step out in the street and arch up on the asphalt. Passing motorists would look at me with disdain, and neither he nor I would care.

It was getting colder, and so I would let him in the house to stay warm at night. He kept me company as well, being the best listener possible to my rants or worries. Usually, he would sleep at my feet, not moving all night, and he would fart. They were probably the worst farts that I have ever been exposed to. When he did, he'd turn around and look at his rear like he couldn't believe it came from him. Then he would look at me to see if I noticed. I did.

One night, I had left him outside, and in the morning, all that was to be found was the chain and collar. He was gone. Then I went to prison.

I reminisce on the companionship those strays provided when I, too, was lost. Maybe it was I who was found and tolerated by the only beings that could at the time. I was allowed to walk that path with their company, just as I was. Be it good or bad, they accepted me.

### **"Lost and Found" by Daniel Matthews**

I've found, after all the years, all the changes. I'm still an artist. I always have been; I always will be. It's where I find myself every time. Every time I'm lost, ever since the first time I was ever truly lost, I found myself. Poetry found me. Art found me, and it has saved my life everyday ever since. I guess it's natural when you are overflowing with so much life and emotion but are without a way to

experience them. Art being life is where I always find myself and where I find the world around me.

Art can get me out of any situation, emotion, and experience, and I can use it to bring or release anything and immortalize it. A story, an element, or a memory, wherever I look, I find it all in my art. What better place to find yourself when you are lost? Your thoughts become tangible, the images in your mind become real and expressible, the world becomes your stage, and you learn that if and when others say life is politics, math, science, or religion, you can show them all that life is art. Life is art.

I found myself, once upon a time ago, with poetry. I remember my first poems, almost all I've ever written. I knew before writing the first one that I had "talent," but it always meant much more than that to me. I just knew it, just as I know myself. I had found myself, and I would never forget it.

## **Stars**

### **"Where the Wind Blew" by Cambren Thomas**

Note to the reader: When wishing for something, think hard and watch your wording. You may get exactly what you ask for. I know I did, and here's my story...

It was the middle of the night, and I awoke again in my prison cell. I don't remember exactly what random nightmare had awoken me, but I arose with restless disdain, knowing that I was going to be up for a while. I sluggishly got up from my bunk, yawning, and I shuffled my way to my cell window. As I looked out across the oppressive fences, surrounding buildings, and patrolling COs, my eyes were drawn up by the cloudless and star-filled sky above.

To take in the cool breeze, I slowly hand-cranked the old-fashioned lever that opened my window. As I continued to search the sky for familiar sights like the Big Dipper, the Zodiac Signs, and the North Star, I caught a clear view of the fiery, yellow-orange-green streaks of a shooting star. As I watched the natural wonder plummet toward the earth, I was reminded of the beauty of freedom, the feeling of seeing such a sight 10 years ago—from my apartment balcony with my girl and a Budweiser in hand.

At that very moment, I uttered through a sigh, "I wish I could just *blow* this joint and be free." The shooting star that had arrested my gaze fizzled out into a spark-filled explosion: it was like a firework sent straight from God himself. My attention was then brought back to the bland environment of my prison cell. I turned, sadly, and headed back to my bunk. It was then that an unusual breeze came in through my window, stopping me in my tracks. It slowly poured in through the window screen, like any other wind, but then within seconds, it became a raging gust of hurricane force intensity. My pictures, papers, and commissary were all tossed around like in a category F5 tornado.

I stood in the middle of the fray, frozen. The strange wind wrapped around me with an unnaturally constricting grasp; as it squeezed tighter, I was disintegrated within it. I was bonded with the wind and whisked away. I was brought out through the window screen of my cell and into the open air, leaving my state clothes and property behind in disarray.

I slowly wafted along the grass of the rec yard then blew over to the concrete of the courts, rolling a basketball along as I moved upward to a guard tower. I jetted across the back of a



patrolling guard, startling him and blowing the hat off his head. I took his hat for a ride with me as I continued to soar above and beyond the razor wire of the fencing, up toward the stars of the night sky.

Freedom and I were now synonymous. My thoughts were captivated by where I might be travelling to next, and the possibilities were now infinite... To be continued...

### by Rudy Djordjevich

It has been one thousand one hundred and twenty-six days since I have seen the stars in the night sky. I mean, really seen them, not a foggy, blurred-out version I get through the thick, murky, and time-riddled plexiglas that surrounds my window and obstructs my chance at ever reminding myself that there is more in this world beyond this twisted construction of brick and mortar that consumes my physical body and taints my mentality.

The awe-inspiring moment happened at around 9 P.M. count. "Right after count," the corrections officer told me as he checks my name off on his list, "get in compliance and wait by the door for legal mail."

Here, we have to go to the squad room for our legal mail, which is a good thing because it is 9:30 and the sun has been down for a while. So I will get a chance at some night time fresh air. I have not been out at night in so long; we only get rec. during the daylight hours.

I got dressed and waited. The sergeant called and told the correction officer he is ready for me. The door gets buzzed open, and I head out.

The cold air struck me like I just entered the vacuums of space. I clenched my muscles tightly and crossed my arms for more warmth. The night wasn't windy; it was actually very still, but the sky was cloudless. The stars glistened with such vibrant contrast like Christmas lights on a festive evergreen. The moon was so big and bright that it was like a spotlight that was focused on me to guide my way.

I felt like an astronaut that just exited his module and made his first step on a Martian planet never explored by mankind. This must have been what Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin felt when they landed on the moon. Every star and nebula they have seen seem to be completely different ones.

I have seen the stars before, but now I was miles out in the country. Here I could see them much better than back when the city lights of my hometown interfered with the visibility of this magical world above. I searched the constellations for Orion and looked at the three stars along his belt. Those stars are in perfect alignment with the pyramids of Giza in Egypt. I imagine to myself that I am in Giza right then, looking at the stars that inspired such a marvel of the world.

Just by staring at the stars, I could take a quantum leap of sorts to any destination in the universe. An out of body experience better than any Tryptamine could offer. I was soaring on Haley's comet, jumping out, and taking a dip in the oceans of the Jovian satellites of Europa. Swimming in the strange chemistry of the planet and the exotic species that inhabit it, I took a sip of the fluids that overflow out of the Big Dipper. I danced to the percussion beat of the pulsars and figure skated on the ice rings of Saturn.

At that moment, I was the astro-median that could look centuries into the past. I could bask in the wonders of the cosmos, roast marshmallows off the thermic rays emitting from the star,

breathe in the diatomic gas from the atmosphere that surrounds me, and watch the quasar light show.

As my mind drifted off, my body was discovered back on the walk. I was paralyzed from the stars and pulled 3,670 million miles back to earth by the sergeant yelling at me for being out in the walk for so long. He took my DOC number and said that he was going to write me up on an Out of Place #366 for staying out too long and making them go look for me. I can't be mad because if they only knew how far I escaped that time, he would have thrown me in the SHU.

I went back to the unit and made up my mind that I would never take the wonder of the universe for granted again. I will travel to the desolate deserts of Arizona with a sleeping bag and telescope and take that wonderful exploration through the Dark Matter of space again. Allow the stars to light my way.

### by Carl Worthington

Looking up at the stars in the sky, I contemplate my place in this universe of infinite wonders.

Our sun is a common yellow dwarf star. Our Milky Way Galaxy has about 3 hundred billion stars of every size and variety. There are hundreds of billions of galaxies in the universe, each with as many stars as our own. How many planets surround these stars is unknown, but it must be an enormous amount. Are we alone? Highly unlikely. Numbers don't lie.

We are all made of "star stuff." The elements in our bodies were formed in the heart of a star. I realize now, while I look up at the stars, that any feeling of separation is an illusion. I *am* the universe contemplating *itself*. If only the rest of humanity could realize the truth: we are one. All humans, animals, plants, the Earth, moon, and stars are all one living, breathing, sentient organism. No single component of this symphony called existence could be without all the others.

D.N.A. studies have proven that all humans have descended from perhaps a dozen of the first humans on Earth. We're all related, yet we have wars, racism, poverty, homelessness, and famine. Some people have more than they will ever need, while others have nothing at all. We're a family, but we treat each other like strangers.

Look up at the stars tonight and remember that as you stare at the universe, the universe also stares at you. The stars are our mirror. Can we, as a species, look ourselves in the eye and be proud of our works? We can do better. We *will* do better. The stars are watching.

What lies behind us and what lies before us  
are tiny matters compared to what lies within  
us. Ralph Waldo Emerson

"He who controls others may be powerful, but  
he who has mastered himself is mightier still." —  
Lao-Tzu



Art by Timothy Rodriguez

## Bargains

### Bargains and their Hidden Cost by Marvin C Jones

1985: As Emma sleeps blissfully, her mother moves about the house like a tornado: she is looking for her coupon book, today is shopping day, a day she lives for, catching all the bargains she can afford.

Finally! She yells excitedly after locating her coupon book between the cushions of her favorite old chair.

"Emma!" she yells, "Emma baby get up, I need you tuh takes me to duh sto's across town..."

When she gets no response she goes down the hallway and knocks on Emma's door.

"Emma? Baby you up in nare?"

Emma, startled out of her sleep by the pounding on her door sits bolt upright.

"What's going on momma?" she yells at the door.

"I need you tuh takes yo momma tu duh sto's befo' they gets crowd'd!"

"Okay momma, I need to jump in the shower first and have a cup of coffee."

"I'll makes you some coffee." her mother responds.

Emma loves her mother but sometimes she just wishes she had her own place. Out loud, Emma says "I'm so sick of driving her all over town for these stupid bargains, all she do is penny pinch, all my life she says 'let's go catch these bargains.'" She should have gone to school instead of chasing bargains, walking around here talking like a slave, so embarrassing."

Emma opens her door to head to the bathroom and stops in her tracks, startled to see her mother standing there with a steaming cup of coffee and tears in her eyes. Without reaching for the coffee Emma asks, "Momma what's wrong?"

"You wanna know wha's wrong baby? Let me tell you wha's wrong..." With trembling hands, she places the cup of coffee into her daughter's hands. "Eva since you wassa baby I swore you would neva want nuffin'. I was 13 when yo daddy found out I was

pregnant and took off. I had no family, no place to go, strangers givin' me a few dollas here and there to clean they stinky clothes and smelly houses. I saved every dime and lived unda a bridge fo a long time until ole Ms. Mack took me in one day, she was blind and so ole she could hardly walk, but she taught me how precious a bargain was. This was how I was able to put food in yo mouth and clothes on ya back, thanks to what she taught me. I learned to save enough money to put you through school and keep a roof over ya head."

"So you see, my darlin' Emma, I gave all I had for you, an I's talks..like dis...so you wouldn't...hafto..."

"I's chase bargains because bargains saved our lives!"

### Are all Bargains Truly Bargains by Brother Boston

Everyone loves bargains...  
Bargains, bargains, bargains  
Save, save, save

We look to always get ahead,  
Have the upper hand in life

But where is the upper hand  
When we bargain our souls?

What are you talking about now  
Brother Boston... you ask!

Well I'm glad...you asked!!

We are quick to go after everything this world has to offer  
We love a deal!

Well The Bible tells us not to love the world or things In the World  
(I John 2:15)

We strike Bargains sometimes unbeknownst to us with Satan  
And he always comes to collect.

If the bargain seems too good to be true  
Or too easy to obtain,  
They are and should be avoided!

Proverbs 1:19 says "so are the ways of everyone who is greedy for gain, it takes away the Life of its owners."

Bargains can cost you, far more,  
Than they save you!

### by Shannon Guess Richardson

The word "bargain" can carry many different meanings depending on the person and the situation. It can mean a deal. It can mean a settlement. Or it can mean a fair value. According to Webster, it means, "something that you buy cheaply."

To a person charged with a crime, the word "bargain" takes on a whole different meaning. We are sometimes offered a plea "bargain." Sometimes, it really is a bargain and refusing to sign would be idiotic. But there are so many people who are forced into

signing what they think is a bargain, but it bargains for no one but the government.

What about those who are truly innocent? Yes, they are few and far between, but they absolutely do exist. They are told to sign this "bargain" or spend the rest of their life in prison. It is the right of the prisoner to accept or decline. But is there really a choice? Or are we being bullied into signing big portions of our lives away in the hopes of one day regaining our freedom?

Once we do sign these "bargains," many people realize that they have also signed away the right to appeal or file any post-conviction motions. Most people do not realize the significance of what they have signed away until they get to prison and talk to people with legal knowledge, when it's too late.

Have you ever heard "ignorance of the law is no excuse?" Well, with that in mind, why are we not taught law in school since we are apparently to be held to the same standards as an attorney and are expected to know we are being screwed over?

The fundamentals of the United States Constitution and the entire United States "Justice" System have veered so far off-track from what our founding fathers had intended it to be, they wouldn't even recognize it. We need to get back to the basics the way our founding fathers intended. We need to get America back to the America that soldiers shed their blood and risked their lives for. Back when crime rates were lower and children were taught morals and consequences in school without the fear of a lawsuit. Back to when mass incarceration was not an issue and families were not destroyed because of it.

Bargains can come in all shapes and sizes. But for prisoners, they come at such a high price. Does anyone out there care? The bigger question is what are we going to do about it?

## Birthdays

### "Melted Candle Memories" by Cambren Thomas

Birthdays have come to mean so much more to me since being incarcerated. Every single New Year's Eve, which is my actual birth date, will now be a bittersweet occurrence for me. What would usually be a momentous time of celebration will now bring forth fading memories of a happy past and the hard reality of my present and future. Birthdays take me back to my childhood days when I used to have all the birthday cake, ice cream, pizza, and fun I could stomach. I remember my young-adult days, when my birthdays were drunken and marijuana-stenched blurs. I will reflect on my birthdays as both a husband and father, when the festivities were lighter but far more comforting and heartfelt. There was truly nothing like my wife taking me out for a nice dinner, or seeing the beautifully scribbly-scrabbly birthday card my young daughter had made for me. Those subtle moments in time, of feeling like royalty amongst my Queen and Princess, will always make me smile. But my absolute favorite birthday memories aren't even about me. I regard the moments from my daughter's birthdays the most.

One of my fondest memories is from my Pumpkin's 1st birthday. I remember baking and decorating an awesome Doc-McStuffin's themed cake for her. I mean, I put some time and thought into this thing----it had the sugar sparkles and pearls, Doc stickers and lettering, cool swirls in the icing, and a big numero uno in the middle. So my wife and I lit the candles and sang, and my Pumpkin just sat there looking like "WTF is this, guys?" It was so

hilarious, watching a one-year old reject my coveted confectionary creation. Her reaction was the exact opposite of those Youtube videos where the baby just dives into the cake with their hands and mouth in a hungry frenzy. You see, at the time my Pumpkin was one of those rare kids who actually loved fruit and veggies more than sugary treats. I will never forget recording her as she stuck out her finger, grabbed a sample of strawberry icing, put it on her tongue, and gave the cutest look of disgust. My pumpkin got more enjoyment eating her Gerber veggie medley, fruit cup, drinking her water, and tearing up the wrapping paper on her gifts that day.

That was just one of many brief but "happy" birthday moments I had with my Pumpkin that, as I fast forward through my time here, will always bring solace to my mind. It is definitely the small things that tend to have the most impact on you behind these bars. They say you never truly appreciate something until you face a loss--- and I have lost BIG, so my amount of appreciation for days like birthdays is on a gigantic scale now. From the tender birthday memories of making my now ex-wife feel special on her day, to my younger days when I would cook my mother a birthday breakfast in bed meal, to a few days ago when I had wished my dad a happy 60th birthday through a telephone receiver along with a card made of notebook paper. These moments are even more special and meaningful to me now. My detachment from outside society has made nothing but a positive impact on my attachment to my loved ones.

Birthday candles may melt away to nothing as the flame burns on and seconds pass---but my birthday memories, my thoughts, my LOVE (for those I love), will remain through the receding flame of my imprisonment.

### My Most Memorable Birthday by William Hill

Unlike many children, I did not have organized birthday parties growing up. This wasn't because of religious or cultural reasons, rather it was because my family did not have the finances to be able to provide such festivities. However, my parents and siblings always made sure that I received a few presents each year. Best of all, my mom would make a pecan pie for me too. Mom's homemade pecan pie is still my favorite dessert. Birthdays were more of a family affair than a soiree with friends from school. This was okay with me as I did not have many friends because my family lived in an isolated area of the county with few kids my age.

This changed when we moved from the tiny farming community of Mount Vernon of rural northeast Texas to the slightly larger farming community of Sulphur Springs. While our new home was in an area just as isolated as our former home, there were several other nearby families that had kids my age. Though we didn't all become best friends, we grew to enjoy each other's company.

My birthday is in October and as the days dwindled down to my 11th birthday I was anticipating another one of Mom's fantastic pecan pies. Finally, the big day came and there was the usual routine of getting out of bed and watching cartoons while eating Frosted Flakes cereal, the kind with so much sugar it energized you for the rest of the day.

I was preparing to go outside and play when dad announced that we would be going to town. This may not sound like much to you, but it was big news in my eleven-year-old world. I don't want to make it seem like I lived on the set of *Little House on the Prairie* but dad only went to town every Friday, when he got

paid. Only on Fridays would he and mom go to town to pay bills, buy groceries, and take care of whatever other business they had.

My brother Nolan and I piled into the back of dad's pickup truck, back when this was legal, and headed into town. On the way into town we stopped at my best friend Buddy Sutton's house and picked him up also. We also stopped to pick up my friend Yancy and his sister Shanna. All the way into town the only thing anyone said to me was "Happy Birthday." In the words of Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* this entire situation was getting curiouser and curiouser.

Finally, we pulled into the parking lot of the local Ken's Pizza and saw the rest of my friends from school and church arriving. What a strange coincidence, I thought at the time--hey give me a break, I was only eleven years old.

Mom and dad had planned a birthday pizza party at the restaurant. Also invited was another neighbor Lara Coke, who would become my very first girlfriend. My oldest brother and two sisters who no longer lived at home also came. My sister Pam and her husband Doug drove all the way from their home in Irving Texas to be there too.

It was a great party and I believe that we all had a great time--I know that I did! There was pizza galore, games, and I got a lot of cool gifts too. The people who worked at the restaurant even sang "Happy Birthday" to me.

They say that all good things come to an end and eventually it was true, in the case of the party. As much as I would have been content to stay in that moment for a lot longer, ultimately my friends and their families had to leave. It had been a very enjoyable birthday, and one that I thoroughly enjoyed, not because of the pizza and presents, but because I had been able to share it with the people that I loved.

When I got home I went about doing the same things that I did every Saturday. I played and I did my chores, and come supptime I had one more surprise waiting for me: Mom had not forgotten about the pecan pie! Now, this day went from being very memorable to being my most memorable birthday ever.

## Gratitude

### A Few Reasons by Jeremy Dunlap

Life will beat the hell out of you; be grateful for its lessons. Don't be hard-headed when God is trying to show you something. That lesson may come from a personal experience, but it can also come from what happens to another. Don't try and learn to be a better criminal because it will lead to the same place.

Be grateful for opportunities to further your education. It really is good to be intelligent, well-read, and thoughtful. These qualities will take you places in life that being ignorant and impetuous won't. Be grateful for an honest friendship, a deep conversation, and a laugh in the midst of chaos.

Be grateful that life is painful and a struggle. Only the dead don't struggle. Be grateful that trials make you stronger and be grateful when pain mysteriously turns into beauty. Be grateful when you can use your strengths to help another who is going through what you've survived. What good is being strong unless it can be used to help the weak?

Be grateful for family, friends, and love. Be grateful that even behind a fence you can make a positive difference. Be grateful

for sunshine, rain, and snow. Be grateful for your soul and to the God who made it all. Be grateful so that when the days of ungratefulness come, and they will, there will still be a lot to be thankful for. Just remember the places to look.

### by Anthony Kenley

I want to express my gratitude to my dad Jerry Kenley. I am so grateful to him for being a dad instead of just a father. Any man who helps create a child can be called a father, but a dad is something else entirely.

My dad became a single dad and a new widower in 1970. He was a dad to a five-year old boy, a four-year old boy, a two-year old boy, and a one-year old girl. This was 1970 and my dad was twenty-six with four very young children. Can you imagine? I'm sure he had trouble getting by.

My maternal grandparents told my dad he should "put us up for adoption." "A man could never handle this situation." "There's no way that a single dad can raise four little children and a baby girl too." Would they have said this to a woman?

My single-parent dad stepped up and made the decision to keep his family. My dad decided his love for his children wasn't dependent on a wife. His love was unconditional.

My dad moved our family to Arkansas to be near his parents for a new start. He did not rely on my grandparents to raise us. We were soon in our own home.

My dad had to hire a babysitter of course. He worked long hours then relieved the baby sitter when he came home to us. My dad was there for us when no one else was. He did without so much so he could provide for his children.

My dad stayed up some nights and some days when we were sick. We cried for "daddy" when we were hurt or in need. Dad made uncountable breakfasts, lunches, and dinners for us. Dad was the birthday-cake baker and surprise maker.

Dad celebrated our accomplishments and helped us with homework. He took us to practices, shopping, appointments, school functions, etc. Dad even became a little league coach for us. On my sister's behalf he did all he could to raise a little girl right. She's a well-adjusted mom of two kids now.

My dad never acted as if he considered himself extraordinary for doing a loving parent's duties. These actions are expected of a parent, not just a mom. My dad eventually found a loving woman who would take on a ready-made family, but even then he remained a good dad.

Unfortunately I never vocalized my gratitude to my dad about his many sacrifices and ever-enduring love for his children. He might never, in this world, know of my gratitude, but the world can know. My gratitude would make me nominate my dad for a "father hall of fame" if one existed. I appreciate my dad being a dad. My gratitude can only attempt to equate to his love.

### One Grateful Prisoner by Carl Branson

Long ago a very wise man (probably my father) commented that "Gratitude is a matter of attitude." A nice, pithy platitude with that attractive ring of internal rhyme. The remainder of that tête-à-tête from which this cliché arises is lost amongst the dust-bunnies of memory. Now, however, I have cause to dissect and assess the meaning of this bromide as it relates to my life as a prisoner.



Attitude, in my opinion, is comprised of a variety of components, primarily perception and perceptive. These two factors influence whether optimism or pessimism govern in any given set of circumstances. The doom and gloom inherent to the prison experience, particularly with a lengthy sentence, fosters a pessimistic view on life in general, which is detrimental to the attitude of gratitude.

Like any prisoner worldwide, I detest the destruction of my prior lifestyle and plans for the future. However, I do have examples of prison experiences for which I am grateful. In each case, I was exposed to disciplines I would never have considered as a free man.. The three most important experiences relate to the topic of education; both for myself and for others.

Chronologically, the first new horizon for me to explore came through a creative writing adult enrichment program sanctioned by the prison's education department. Although I had been writing most of my adult life, it was all technical documents: high-level and detailed design specification, operator's guides, repair manuals, and related technical materials (I was an electronics engineer). The creative writing program was segregated into three distinct curriculums; the first two covered the basics of short story, novella and novel structure. The third covered classical poetry forms including the sonnet, villanelle, sestina, terza rima, and a host of others. As much as I enjoyed the prose forms, particularly the short story, poetry captivated me beyond my wildest imagination. Sadly, much as I enjoy writing poems, I discovered that the muse is a fickle mistress who detests my spending time with other activities, especially my legal treatises.

At least partially as a consequence of my participation in the creative writing programs, I was noticed by an education staff member in need of a replacement Teacher's Aide ("TA"). Other than helping my own children with homework, I had no background in teaching and was nervous as a whore in a church when I was made responsible for instructing others so they could complete their mandatory literary lesson and GED requirements. Although there were a few bumps along the road for both me and my students, this turned out to be the most gratifying, ego-inflating experience of my life. Watching the sense of pride explode across the faces of my students as they accepted their certificate of completion (mandatory literacy) or their high school equivalency diploma was a thrill every time it happened. A few of those men could not even read when they entered prison. This shared sense of accomplishment with these few surpassed being the Superbowl winner's quarterback.

In conjunction with my responsibility as a TA I was given the opportunity to formulate and offer a curriculum for a poetry workshop as a part of the adult enrichment program. Again, watching these men explore new horizons, develop inherent skills, or expand on prior knowledge was very rewarding. One student and I shared the joy of having poems published in the same issue of Cell Door Magazine.

As much as I hate prison, I owe a debt of gratitude to two proactive, dedicated staff educators for activating previously unrecognized talents in me. Now, that same sense of gratitude extends to the staff and volunteers at Prisoner Express for providing an outlet for my scribbled mental meanderings.

#### by Shannon Richardson

I will be the first to admit that I was a complete brat before coming to prison. If I wanted something, I bought it. End of story.

My ex-husband David would get so frustrated with me because I would see something and make a comment about liking it, but by the time he got around to surprising me with it, I had already bought it for myself. The word "gratitude" or "grateful" didn't exist for me---at all. If something broke, no big deal! I just bought another one. Looking back, I would like to slap the old me and hopefully knock some sense into myself.

When I was arrested, life as I knew it ceased to exist. My five sons who were and are my life and my entire world were taken from me and their father refuses to let me contact them. I gave birth to another son at only 24 weeks (out of 40) due to the neglectful conditions of prison. I never even got to lay eyes on his precious face, hold him, or tell him how much mommy loves him. I woke up from my C-section handcuffed and shackled to the bed without my baby. I was later handed adoption papers. His father didn't want him and I am nothing but a prisoner in the eyes of the court, so I was not allowed to have an opinion on the matter. The same man who gave my son away (thankfully my now EX-husband) got rid of everything I owned. I will leave prison without even a pair of panties to my name. Everyone I knew and loved abandoned me completely.

If nothing else, prison has taught me to be humble and grateful. That is something I will always carry with me, and no one can take this from me. It makes me so angry and frustrated to see the ungrateful women around me. They get to talk to and see their children and have no idea of the anguish of not being able to. Are they grateful? Nope, they just complain. They have people who care enough about them to help them financially and have no idea how hard it is to survive on the few dollars per month the prison pays. Are they grateful? Nope, they just complain and no amount of money ever seems to be enough. If only they realized that every single one of these things could disappear in the blink of an eye, perhaps they would be more grateful?

In my more positive times, I look at this as a life lesson. In my not-so-positive times, I crumble under the anguish and despair of my current life. But one thing is for certain: the words "gratitude" and "grateful" not only exist for me now, they are some of the most important words in my vocabulary.

#### An Attitude of Gratitude by DJ Forbes

Having an attitude of gratitude while in prison can be difficult, but it's something I'm working towards. Yes, prison is a form of punishment, and no one I know got here without doing something wrong, but that doesn't mean there aren't positive aspects of it to be grateful for. Allow me to share with you some that I've found.

First and foremost, prison was a life-saving intervention for me. My entire family agrees---the way I was going, I'd probably be dead by now if it weren't for my arrest. For this, I am grateful.

By providing for my basic needs, prison gives me the opportunity to focus my energies into making needed changes to my life. I'd probably not be able to make these changes if I were working full-time to support myself on the streets. Sure, what we get here isn't that great, but I eat every day, have clothes on my back, and have a place to sleep---things many people on the street have to worry about. For this I am grateful.

Prison has also allowed me to get in shape. At the time of my arrest I weighed a measly 137 pounds, severely underweight for my 6'2" frame. I couldn't even jog one-quarter mile lap or do ten pushups. Last October, I completed my very first marathon (104

laps) and recently performed better at a physical fitness test than I thought I could. For this, I am grateful.

The Governor's Fee Waiver provides me with the means to take college classes. I am currently working towards an associate's degree without having to worry about the tuition costs. Since many of the textbooks are available on the e-readers that the Education Department checks out to us, I have yet to buy any books. For this, I am grateful.

I'd have to say though, what I am most grateful for, surprisingly enough, is the common aggravations of prison life. All the officers who go out of their way to make things tougher than they need to be, all the inmates who whine and complain about anything and everything, and all the frustration from not being able to do things when I want are all the major motivations to rehabilitate myself. I hate prison life so much that I'm willing to do what I wasn't before: live my life in an honest and upstanding fashion.

So yeah, prison sucks! That just makes me want to get out and NEVER come back. And for this, I am infinitely grateful!

**Picture Themes**-Some writers respond much better to image than word cues. For those of you who let the picture create a story, here a chance to tell a story. The writings in the picture theme section can be true or fanciful. Anything goes. Please limit stories to maximum of 750 words. If you submit you get a complete packet of the monthly picture theme.

Below is a small sample of picture theme writing submitted in a previous program cycle



#### **"Retrieval" by Chris Hannigan**

It started with the ash falling from the sky. They called it the grey rain. They had known it was coming, but it was always in the future, someone else's problem, and then one day, the future became the present. No one was prepared for what it brought. Sure, there were people with their bunkers and months of food stored, but none of that was enough to see them through the disasters.

The rains moved, and some areas were drowning as others were dry as a bone. The lightning still came. The government was able to handle the first few fires that broke out, but the resources were quickly stretched too thin and dwindled. More and more land burned, and firefighters consigned whole swathes of land to the flames.

The great clouds of smoke standing over towns engulfed in flames carried the ashes of civilization high up into the air. There,

they met with the jet stream which carried the grey particles to every corner of the globe. As the ash spread, it began to rain down, and it appeared as if a giant blanket had been thrown over the earth. Its very being poisoned all it touched, clogging up the streets and rivers and burying the ground.

Once again, humanity made an exodus, only this time in reverse and back to the birthplaces from whence it came. The endless stream of people marched to the lands drowned with water where the fires couldn't burn. The reddish orange glow of the flames reflected by the clouds of ash lit their way as dark, billowing columns of smoke rose in the background like the fingers of the hand of hell come to snatch them down to its fiery pits.

Soon after the people made their march to the distant lands, the gangs made their appearance. Hyenas preyed on the weak and those stupid enough to think they could outlast nature's fury. Thousands of lives were put to the toil to eke out an existence for the privileged few in the barren wastelands. They were put in chains and staked out in the desert, made to dig holes searching for water or to cultivate gardens of the few surviving desert plants.

Every now and then, one would get it in its head to shake off its leash and run. And that's where I would come in, sent to retrieve those that escaped. Most of the time, it wasn't hard to do. A starving bag of bones can't get very far out in the wastelands without any water and dragging chains. Usually, you could find them the next morning a few miles away, dead.

But the last time, no. The last time was different.

He (I told you it was a he, not that it really mattered much) was staked three days out into the wastelands. Late teens, brown hair, brown eyes, nothing special about him. I figured he shouldn't be too hard to find, especially because not too many guys walked around the wastelands dragging a chain around their neck. Go out, find him, bring him back (preferably alive). Just another job.

I got my gear and set out on a 450cc Honda 4-stroke dirt bike with an extra gallon of gas. Finding gas wasn't hard: all the old gas station tanks underground were close to full, and a map of how things were before the disasters showed where to find all the stations. I also had a tent to keep sun the off me during the day, a mask to filter out the ash and dust, a double barrel shotgun with plenty of ammo, and most importantly, a week's worth of water.

I opened the throttle wide and rushed out to where they said he had been staked. I could waste fuel on this run because of plenty of stations in between. Time and water, though, were my enemies. They said they wanted him alive, but there's not much chance of that if he's wandering the wasteland on his own for three days. The bike ate up the ground, carving a trail throughout the mounds of ash. Stopping only for short breaks or a quick nap, I managed to make a three day trip in 36 hours.

I spent the next six days looking for him. At first, it was easy given the clear tracks in the ash and sand to follow. I had seen only one set of footprints leading away from the stake, which had to be his, and I figured he was carrying the chain. However, the second day out, the winds blew a wall of dust and ash high enough to block out the sun for hours and erased everything on the ground. His tracks wandered back and forth but always headed east. When the winds died away, I set out opposite the setting sun, hoping to see signs.

Three days later, I picked up his trail again. I don't know how he managed it: after the dust storm, I had to ration my water. He had gone seven days with what little he had saved or the little

he managed to find. The chain around his neck must have grown too heavy to carry anymore, but the trail it left, dragging behind him, was a road beckoning to me.

I found him the next morning, and to make sure it wasn't easy for me, he managed to make it into another gang's territory. And that is why I always carried the shotgun. They didn't give me any trouble because it's not worth it for a run away, especially one half dead.

My remaining water barely got us along, until we came across a watering team. I got him back alive, just as I was told. When I dumped him on the flood at their feet... laughter. You ask why they laughed. So did I.

"We bet the son could outlast his old man."

When I tell you to go, pull on the chain and be ready to run with me.

### **"The Men in the Mist" by Vaughn Wright**

If you ever want to know what kind of job your imagination can do on you, do night sentry duty on a wooded mountainside when, instead of dawn, you end up with a dense early-morning fog. With only about ten feet of visibility to stare into, everything that you ever feared was under your bed or hiding in your closet as a kid starts to creep in. The big difference between being a kid and a soldier, of course, is that the Boogeyman is real, heavily-armed, and likely to have some friends with him when he comes to get you. Plus there's no pulling the covers up over your head, not when it's your job, your duty, to protect the camp.

It was about a half hour after sunrise when I actually started seeing a shadowy outline of a hulking figure on our southern perimeter. It seemed to tear itself from the wispy tendrils of the fog as it entered our campsite. It walked upright on two legs but was not a man; it was two men. One of them was carrying the other across his shoulders. Both of them were Caucasian and wearing fatigues, and the one being carried was smaller and much paler.

The carrier was wearing a banded mask of some sort that covered the lower half of his grime-smeared face, like a muzzle. Around his neck was a metal collar with a length of heavy chain swaying from it. In his right hand was a double-barrel shotgun. He used his left to steady the man across his shoulder.

The carrier, he saw me. I know he saw me. He looked right at me and the P-26 pulse rifle I had trained on him since the moment I realized I had something to shoot. After that initial eye contact, he fixed his gaze ahead of himself and continued across the misty clearing of our camp like a possessed man. The only sounds were his labored breathing and the tramping of his boots upon the moist earth, and even those sounds were deadened by the fog.

In spite of our wearing the same uniform, the nearer he came to my post, the more I was reminded I was supposed to stop him, make him identify himself, yell a warning to the rest of my squad... say or do *something*. Only I felt as muzzled as he looked because even though it may have been my first war, I'd been fighting it long enough to have seen the look in his eyes. It said nothing--not me, not the enemy, not death--was going to turn him from his objective. I had him outgunned and still wasn't fool enough to mess with that.

Without faltering or slowing, he reached the north side of camp where the fog swallowed him and his human cargo in its gossamer embrace as if welcoming them home. Almost as soon as

they disappeared, I began to doubt I had even seen them. It happened so swiftly, so silently, so surreally. I *know* what I saw, though even if everyone else was still sound asleep and confident that I was doing my job to keep them safe.

Visibility was still crappy, but I stayed alert for anything else coming out of the south. If the chained man was being pursued, I'd handle it. In the meantime, the incident had at least given me something constructive to use my imagination on, like asking myself questions I'd probably never learn the answers to. Other than the chained man having obviously been a captive, was his pale companion a rescuer who himself ended up needing to be rescued? Was he even still alive? Where had they come from and where were they going? Why didn't they stop and ask me for help?

Soon after the sun had burned the fog away and visibility was clear to the horizon, my relief showed up. I told her there was nothing to report, though I mentioned having a funny feeling about the southern tree line. I wasn't going to admit I had let someone run through camp without raising an alarm or that others might follow, but I thought it best to put her on point, just in case.

On my way to chow, I at least learned the answer to the one question I needed answered more than any other. There were a set of boot tracks that cut right through the center of camp. They were fresher and deeper than all the others, realer than the others.



### **"His-Story" by Calvin Westerfield**

There is a history of many centuries filled with loss, struggle, deception, and derogation behind the unseeing eye of this indigenous elder of America. I cannot help but reflect upon the coming holiday season when I look at this picture and ask myself what is Thanksgiving Day really about. Exactly what is being celebrated on this third Thursday of every November?

My entire family would come together every year to prepare a feast in honor of this day. The food was always superb, and my favorites were my mother's turkey dressing and pecan pie. This whole family enjoyed each other's company, sat at the table to what we all were grateful for and thank God for our blessings. I can't remember anybody ever revealing what that day was actually commemorating. Not even in school was the truth given about the conquering of the Wampanoag Natives by the so called pilgrims: to use manipulative tactics as a strategy to secure the "rights" to land is, in essence, conquering a people. The kindness of the Natives were used against them to eventually steal their land. I'm not

gloomy gus by far, and while I enjoy the holidays like the next person does, to blindly celebrate an occasion or commemorate a day without knowing the details of its history is a bit remiss.

Sure, there was a feast held in 1621 at a place the colonists named Plymouth (after a borough of SW England on Plymouth Sound) in Boston, Massachusetts. This is an irrefutable event that took place between the so called pilgrims and the Wampanoag Natives, and they may have all gathered to give thanks to God for harvest and health (despite the English labeling the Natives heathens.) I'm positive the Wampanoag expected all the "pilgrims" to eventually board the Mayflower and return to whatever foreign place they came from. Clearly this was not the case; in fact we have been taught to claim English invaders as the founders of the Plymouth Colony! How can you find a place that has never been lost, has been functioning as an inhabited territory for centuries, and was unmistakably owned by the people there before you? Plymouth Rock was stolen. Is this the basis of Thanksgiving Day celebrations? Surely, the surviving Wampanoag (meaning those of the east) are not commemorating this historical event on the reservations they have been displaced to!

To even refer to the English Separatists as pilgrims is a desecration of the symbolic representation of true pilgrimage. A true pilgrim is an individual who goes through a time of trial so as to reach, at the moment of death, whether that be a physical or mental (egotistical) death, a promised land or paradise lost. The term denotes one who feels like a stranger to the environment through which they pass in search for their ideal city. This is a spiritual journey of inner detachment from the present and attachment to distant, higher ends. An actual physical pilgrimage is a paying homage to the person of a great prophet - be that of Jesus, Muhammad, Osiris, or Buddha. If I set out on a pilgrimage to India's Northern region to the ancient kingdom of the bank of the River Narrandera, near modern Bihar, where the Bodhi Tree is Siddhattha Gotama found/attained enlightenment, that would be my pilgrimage, and I would go back home afterwards. To forcefully stay and invite all my buddies to join me without the consent of the land's inhabitants would corrupt my cause and make me a barbaric type of intruder, not a pilgrim. Right?

Why couldn't we just gather with family and friends on a day set aside just for that occasion? Better yet, family should always have such feasts and enjoy the sadistic acts of this stolen land. I've yet to meet a Native American that approves of this day. The foggy window of the woman's soul certainly does not seem to be celebrating either. We should just keep it real with ourselves and face the history of this country for what it is. That's simply my opinion of course.

#### by William Earl Hill

The autumn moon was shining brightly on the modest house on the Fort Sill Indian Reservation. On this night, the house was the center of attention as a young couple brought their firstborn child home and people were coming by to admire and congratulate the proud parents.

Finally the visits, although welcomed, came to a halt allowing the couple and the last remaining guests to prepare the child for his first night at home. Relating stories of their own first night with their children, the grandmothers helped the young mother bathe and dress the child and finally put the child to bed in a handmade crib built by the father.

After placing almost every evening in rural southwestern Oklahoma, a wolf begins to howl at the full moon. The occurrence is so commonplace in that area that it almost went unnoticed by the inhabitants of the home...almost, except for one person. When the wolf finished howling the youngest occupant of the house answered him in the only way that he knew how: he began to cry. The new mom began to rise to go and see what her child needed, but just as suddenly as the crying began, it stopped.

"I knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep through the night tonight, but I thought I would have a little more time to relax than that," joked the mother of the child.

"Oh, get used to it, sweetie. From this day on, you will be listening for even the faintest sound of need from him," said one of the grandmothers.

While the adults were speaking once again, the wolf, or perhaps a different one, began to howl. As before, the only occupant of the house to notice was the child lying in a handmade crib, and once again, he answered in the only way that he knew. Once again, he cried.

"I guess he just can't make up his mind tonight," joked the father as he started to go see his son, intending to give his wife a break.

Once again, however, before he could even get completely out of the recliner the child ceased his crying.

"Mom is this usual?" asked the new mom.

"I must confess that I have never experienced this," answered the grandmother.

When the wolf howled again this time, more than the baby heard and listened. When the howling stopped and the baby began to cry again, this time the aged tribal shaman attuned his spirit to that of nature. Once again the mother began to go to her child and was determined to go see what was making the child cry, even if the crying stopped.

"Don't go to the child. He is not crying for your attention. This is a spiritual thing," reported the shaman.

"What do you mean, father?" inquired the child's father.

"Your son is more blessed and favored than every child is blessed and favored by the spirits. The wolf spirit is introducing your son to his wolf brothers. I have only heard of this but never experienced it in all of my years."

"What does that mean, father? How is our son blessed and favored by the wolf spirit?"

"Your son is destined for great things. He will do much good for his people and the spirit of the wolf, the most powerful of our people's spirits, will protect and favor him. The spirit has spoken. From this day forward your son shall be called Howling Wolf."

#### "Death Perception" by Robert Andrew Bartlett Sr.

The old medicine man had severe glaucoma. One eye still had much of the same mischievous sparkle I remembered from the old days. The other was cloudy and dim with an indistinct faded iris and a shallow, lifeless pupil. It wandered sometimes. His left eye would stare unblinking into yours, making you feel nervous, exposed and guilty. The right one would stare blankly into space. I used to wonder what it saw, if it saw anything at all.

I asked him about it once.

That was a big mistake.



We were both drunk at the time. At least I was. He had drunk much more than I had--he always did--but he still seemed ready to climb an unfinished skyscraper and walk the high steel as he'd done in his younger days as a welder. In the morning--or was it afternoon?--when I had that hangover, I would deeply regret my importance and firmly resolve not to be so nose in the future.

I made many resolutions that day. I've even kept some of them. He cheerfully acknowledged that his eyes weren't what they'd been twenty years before. His diminishing vision was the main reason he'd retired early (as soon as he reached 65 years old), but he assured me that he could still see things younger men could not.

My own vision was slightly impaired at that hour- tunnel vision, differently focusing, sensitivity to bright light... but I was always ready to accept a challenge when I was "under the influence." That trait has almost got me killed more than once. (That's one reason I don't drink anymore.)

"Close your good eye," I said. At least I tried to. My tongue was dry and feeling fuzzy. So I may not have pronounced "close" very well. Perhaps I told him to put clothes on his eyes. Anyway, he seemed to understand.

He even put his hand over his eye. Then I realized he had closed his clear eye, the one that had been fixing me with it's unblinking gaze. The older eye was wandering off somewhere in his left. Before I could protest, he told me what he saw.

He started with my fears and my nightmares. Then he told me about my hopes and my fondest dreams. He spoke of thoughts and feelings I'd never share with a woman much less a crazy old man.

He stripped my soul naked and left it lying on the floor. My friends say I passed out from too much whiskey and beer.

Maybe so, but sometimes I think it was my self-defense.

### **"Trail of Tears" by Sheryl Cox**

Some people look at me and wrinkle their nose. Some say I'm withered from countless days in the sun and that I should have taken better care of myself. Young ones say I look like an old, dried up apple or that I look like a wicked old witch. Some say I look sad and worn out. Some say I'm just wasting space that could now be better utilized by younger, more vivacious inhabitants of the world.

But they don't know what they fail to see. They don't know the tales told in this line-etched vessel... lines that hold stories of success we celebrate or hardships my clan and I endure... stories of the way of my people passed down from my ancestors. Consider each line or wrinkle a trail of tears.

A trail of tears of victory at having mastered the art of grinding grain to make bread. A trail of tears of satisfaction of learning to weave blankets to keep my family warm. A trail of tears for pleasure of the beauty of a finely crafted pot or the rich fragrance of a pot of stew or fresh baked bread.

A trail of tears for the love of my youth proudly riding out to battle clad in a loincloth, war paint and feathers, bearing a bow and quiver of arrows, then returning slung over the butt of a beast, his lifeless face ashen, his breast painted in his own blood.

A trail of tears because another tribe's chief took me from my father's tent to be his squaw, not considering or caring for my own feelings or desires. A trail of tears of joy for children I bore and strapped in a papoose to continue my work. A trail of tears of pride as I watched my sons pass the rites of manhood.

A trail of tears of gratitude for the bison who lay down their lives so my tribe could eat and I could sew the hide into robes and tent sides. A trail of tears of thanks for a successful hunt. A trail of tears of thankfulness for the years of great abundance. A trail of tears for the seasons of lack. A trail of tears for loss as fires swept the prairie land purging it of all we worked for and in.

A trail of tears for the times of physical and spiritual purification in the sweat lodge. A trail of tears from when my people were forced from the freedom of her homeland into places that could not sustain our way of life. A trail of tears for the times the whiteman broke with us the treaty he swore to. A trail of tears for pity of those who refuse to understand we wish to live on the land our way instead of bound in identical homes.

Perhaps I do look like a withered old woman, but I won't hide. Just take a moment to see something different. See the love, the joy, and the pride of success. See the pain and the sadness of loss and betrayal. Take time to wear the moccasins in which I've walked so many miles... miles that produced these trails of tears of which I am so proud of. Because no matter what you say or see, I am indeed proud of everyone on my trail of tears.



Art by Jerome Washington



### **"Reflections" by Robert Andrew Bartlett Sr.**

She stared anxiously at the image on her intelligent cell phone. It didn't move. The lighting in that dirty, fast food joint was

harsh and sometimes glared off her screen, but she remained motionless and unsquinting. There wasn't much traffic on the street at this hour of the morning, but occasionally, as a big truck passed on its way to or from the docks, the window would vibrate. Images reflected off the glass would shake and shift eerily, and some weird lights from a beer ad suggested crude representations of halos like you see in some medieval representations of saints. She was no Saint. I knew that.

I loved her anyway

I had sent her a text message as soon as I realized she was gone. Everywhere I went, every time I looked around and saw that she was still gone, I wanted to send another message, but what more could I say?

It was almost lunchtime when I spotted her in that cheap restaurant. Should I send another message? Or bang on the window? Or go inside, go to her and beg? Or command? Or reason? Or...?

What was she looking at? My message was short. She would surely have finished reading it and deleting it or whatever. She stared at something for a long time.

Traffic was picking up. The sidewalks would be crowded soon.

I needed her to look up, to see me standing there, to run into my arms and promise never to put me through anything like this again. Should I send another message? Maybe a little snippet from a Bob Dylan song. "Why wait any longer for the one you love, when he's standing in front of you?"

I was afraid she'd look up and see me standing there confused, helpless and alone. Should I send another message? Could I bear to see the look on her face? In her blue eyes?

There were people around, but still no crowd a guy could get lost in. No, I was out there, naked and afraid. I saw a couple of men reflected in the glass as they passed by on their way to unknown destinations. A big black man was standing still, staring like I was.

It was dark inside. The glass reflected images from behind me, but I could still see her and a few other objects inside. It was hard for my confused brain to distinguish and process what was transmitted and what was reflected. The mysterious quiet stranger had to be right beside me or was he behind her? Was that a halo around his head? Over hers? No, it was neither. It was a neon profanity. He had to be beside me, watching the same woman I was.

I looked at my right. He was not there. I looked all around me then back at the window.

She was gone.

I looked at my own cell phone. Everything was getting blurry, but I made out the message I'd sent her. I told her my life story, not from the beginning to the present, but from the present to the end. Everything I knew about her, me, us. Everything I would ever know, feel or care about.

Love is forever.

I turned toward home and pressed the DELETE key.

### **"Room #6" by William Andrews**

The way she moved seemed vulgar and obscene as she filled the salt shakers and wiped tables. Tall, lean and angular, she still had enough on her bones to remain feminine. Through her

hands seemed larger than normal, with rough knuckled and nails, I liked her style.

The bars were closing and the booths in the diner were filling up. Her attention was paid to nobody, yet, to everyone. I was not drunk but more delirious from being fully awake the previous couple days. My "come on" game has never been great but usually effective enough to get attention and keep it. I tossed a sugar pack on the floor. As she approached, I bent forward to pick it up and said to her, "Hey, I think you dropped your name tag." Our eyes met.

There before me stood the epitome of disdain. Her pupils were dark pools that sank into the souls of anyone who dared to peer too long. A bead of sweat on her upper lip gave her the look an athlete. She stood topically still for what seemed minutes but were mere seconds. It made mad jump a little, just enough for her to notice.

She pulled a little pad from her stained apron and scribbled something down. Tearing off the sheet, she laid it face down on the table along with the sugar package. She then turned and walked away.

Lifting the paper off the table as my eyes followed her across the diner, not sure what to expect, I read it. Written in a childish print that looked nearly alien, the words "loser wins" with a phone number under them were there.

I trekked back to the motel room which I called home. Across the freeway sat the motel decked with just enough neon to catch travelers curiosity. They rented rooms by the week. Once it had been a true gem, but that was long ago. Room #6 is where I live, if that's what you want to call it. I keep the philosophy that things could always be worse. Having read about places and situations where grim is the norm, I tested the sound, gray skies and wear a few scars to remind me that things could be worse.

Safely getting across the freeway is always a small victory. The division between this side and that side gives me a sense of security from some low income apartments and a rundown carwash. They both seem deserted during daylight, but at night, things change. Once the sun has set and the street lights cast their fellow shadows, they are a place for people to stir, that is, to take inventory of their motives, of why they are where they are, of a few bad choices, or a streak of bad luck. Either way, you are here. A sci-fi writer once quoted, "Reality is that which when you stopped believing in it, it doesn't go away." This is my reality.

The doors have been kicked in by the police at least once in the last ten years. Mostly, I just mind my business. Once in my room, I pulled the note from my pocket. No name, just that two word insult/compliment? Who knows what the hell she meant? So I dialed, it rang, and she picked up with a drowsy "Hello?"

It was late. I answered, "Sugar?"

She came to life: "I'm glad you called!... sorry for not saying anything before I left. I had to rush out." I heard a door slam in the background and the air quiet.

"That's fine," I said... "at least this was a real number."

We talked about her job and how she hated it and about her boyfriend and how she hated him. Bittersweet. I told her I'd help her with the boyfriend. He had been rough lately, and she was tired of it and scared to leave him since he was the type to hunt somebody down. Funny she mentioned that, she must be attracted to those kinds of guys... like me.

After we talked, the night began to pale. I told her that I'd meet her at her job before her shift started. I hung up feeling a new vigor. I sent her a short text, "I'm here to help," and signed it loser. I thought I'd never get to sleep since I was thinking of so many possibilities. Getting out of this motel, starting over, another town.

When I awoke, the sun was beaming through the window stirring the dust motes. I opened the door and stepped through the battered jamb for the last time. I got across the freeway. My first victory of the way. Walking towards the diner I could see her there in the front window, looking somehow different that last night. As I hit the resend button to my previous text, I thought to myself... I like her style.

### **"My Angel" by Carl Worthington**

Walking down the street today, I saw an angel in a cafe. Struck as I was by her beauty, I stopped and stared through the window at this vision of perfection. The lights of the cafe even created a halo effect over her head. A true angel.

She was so captivated by her phone that she didn't notice me outside staring at her. Then she looked up, and our eyes met for the first time. She smiled at me, and I smiled back. That was when the suicide bombers explosive vest detonated.

The next thing I remember is looking up at the sky, acrid smoke billowing up to the clouds. Screams, sirens in the distance. Pain. Lots of pain. I'm laying on my back on the cold sidewalk covered in glass and blood. I reached up to feel my face and pull a sharp glass from my cheek. I stared in confusion at the bloody shard of glass that was so recently embedded in the tissue of my face. What just happened? A terrorist attack? Here? Now?

Then I remembered that halo, that smile. My angel! "No!" I screamed as I jumped to my feet and rushed inside what remained of the cafe. Body parts and debris littered the ground, and I choked and coughed from the thick smoke. Where was she?!

The bomber must have been standing near the register. Probably standing in line to pay so he would be in very close proximity with as many people as possible. No survivors over there, only carnage.

But my angel was all the way on the other side of the room. *She might be alright.* I was right on the other side of the window from her, and I was alive, bleeding profusely from my wounds and in agonizing pain, but alive. She had to survive! Where the hell is she? My angel?!

I heard a moan. I flipped over a charred and broken table, and there she was my angel! She was hurt, my god--she was hurt bad!

Blood poured from her nose and mouth, and she had a piece of jugged metal shrapnel protruding from her chest. She saw me and opened her mouth to speak, but only bloody bubbles came out, letting me know she had a punctured lung. I grabbed her from under her arms and dragged her out to the sidewalk, away from all the smoke and out into the daylight. She was a beautiful mess.

I cradled her in my arms and told her it will be alright. Ambulances were coming. I could hear the sirens getting closer. She grabbed my hand tightly, with surprising strength. I told her, "You can't die yet, my angel. We only just met." She looked in my eyes, smiled, and squeezed my hand tighter. She was a warrior.

I stayed with her until the paramedics arrived, and I rode in the ambulance with her to the hospital. I stayed at her bedside for three weeks, only going home to shower and change clothes.

During this time, we talked, and I read to her, gave her sponge baths and combed her hair. We got to know each other, but we were both already in love from that first moment our eyes met through the cafe window. Love at first sight.

*One year later:*

One week after being released from the hospital, we were married. Now, one year later we're back at the same hospital, under much happier circumstances. "She's so beautiful, just like her mommy." I tell my wife, my angel, as she cuddles our new born baby girl in her arms for the first time. "My two girls." I say as I kiss first my wife, then my new daughter. My wife says: "What a story we have to tell her about how we met." We laughed, smiled and kissed. What a story indeed!

### **"Just a Girl" by Rudy Djordjevic**

It was a cold day in September as she drank her iced caramel frappuccino. Her hair was up in that beautiful little bun she does when she is in a hurry. She wore a heavy flannel jacket and played on her phone as I watched her from the outside of the store front window of her favorite coffee shop she always loved going to. She looks just as beautiful as she always had.

She doesn't even notice me. She more than likely doesn't even know I exist. Why would she? I am probably unrecognizable. I can't rightfully stand here and say I am the same guy she used to stay up late at night talking on the phone with, waiting for her mother to fall asleep so I could sneak over. Or the same guy that would hide in the bushes outside her house early in the morning to scare her when she came out, just so I could utilize the chance to hold her in my arms and comfort her back to normal. I focused on her heart as it was beating in her chest on to mine then as its tempo was calming down. No, I am not the same guy that would defend her when his old roommate would make claims that she practically lived with us rent free or am I the same guy that used to suck off the sour part of her Sour Patch Kids because she couldn't handle the tartness.

No, that guy has long been buried under the evolution of life's trial and errors and cauterized by the fires of the hell he put himself through. Every soft spot she may remember has built a callus around it. Spending six years away from society's safety will cause part of that to you. You become a phantom to the world you once knew, like you've been cryogenically frozen for years and the world learned to forget about you.

We haven't spoken in such a long time that I wouldn't even know what to say to her. Time has changed since the last time we talked. Is she even the same person I used to follow home after school? The same person that knew the lyrics to every Tool and Nirvana song? The same one who would wear her pajama pants that displayed cartoon characters in public without a care in the world of what anyone thought? Would the person I am seeing right now be my old best friend that would talk to me in her Sharon Moon zombie impression to cheer me up or arouse me?

Though I would hate myself even more to think that her life went on pause because of me. She had so much going for herself. She was so smart and affable that she had the potential to do anything she dreamed of. I just wonder if all the years wasted away could have actually been used like we both had planned: plans involving her having her realtor's license and my having a construction company. She buys the house, I flip it, and she sells it. It's been so long that I would be stubborn to think that there isn't

another man flipping the houses she is selling. Or worse, if his company is called "Whatever His Name Is" and Sons.

I stand out in this cold, calibrating my thoughts and imbibing on the nostalgia that is of our memories. Constricted with the cold anxiety of all the "what ifs" scenario I keep playing for myself to avoid seeing if I am nothing but a memory, I evaluate what I really want to come out of this. Do I really just want to drop back into your life and carry you away from the niche you carved yourself in. Is that even fair to you? This feeling holds value to the moment I first kissed you. All the thoughts of what would come next after that point, if I was ready, ran through my head. As my mind was battling this conflict, I opened the door to the coffeshop.

### **"My Guardian Angel" by Christopher Lee**

There she is--my guardian angel. "Tina" I call her because well, why not? She answers to it, even though she doesn't quite understand the human need to call each other by name in casual conversation. As she pointed out, I am the only one who can see or hear here. So who else would she be talking to?

And there she is. I would recognize her anywhere. Tina has always had the effect of grabbing my attention whenever she shows up, and of course, she is attractive in a girl-next-door kind of way. You can't tell from this angle, but she also has a nice body that she never lets me see. I think she finds her large breasts to be annoyances, and she says they are not practical and are merely projections of my subconscious mind.

But there she is, probably playing Candy Crush on her cellphone. Tina is not very tech savvy and doesn't understand the infatuation with social media. However, she confessed to me that she was absolutely addicted to Tetris and after that, Dr. Mario. Now, it is Candy Crush.

Yes, there she is, sucking her thumb. That is another one of those projections of my subconscious mind, albeit a rather odd projection that neither of us really understand. Tina says it helps her focus when she's trying hard to concentration, and so she's not too upset about it. I just think it's a little erotic.

There she is, sitting at a window table at our favorite cafe over on 16th Street where they serve a great lemon meringue pie made with real lemons. None of that artificial stuff from a can. Okay, it isn't *our* favorite cafe: Tina doesn't need food like humans do, and we don't hang out much. In fact, I have only seen her a handful of times throughout my life, and so you can't really say we have much of a relationship. As a general rule guardian angels are only allowed to show themselves during moments of crisis.

And so, there she is. That was my thinking as I stood there outside the old cafe on 16th Street. I thought about tapping on the window to get her attention but decided to go in and surprise her instead. That was when I heard the screech of tires as someone lost control of their vehicle on the street next to me. The car jumped the curb and hit me.

There I was, staring into a window as at my guardian angel while getting run over by a high schooler with a heavy foot. Actually, the car only clipped me, but it was enough to cause me to flip a time or two. I remember thinking as I rolled across the top of the car that these careless drivers could kill someone. Then I realized that I could die. Then I was over the car completely, heading face-first for the pavement and vaguely aware of my reflection in the cafe window. Then I saw Tina glance at her thumb

before shoving it back in her mouth and playing Candy Crush on her cell phone, oblivious to anything else.



### **"The Voice of my Father" by Steven Lee. Adkins Jr.**

The Cultivator was owned by my father until his recent murder. He'd told me after he bought this boat that the sea is like the farmland that he was raised on and had raised me on. Both the land and sea need to be respected and nurtured, and in return, they will give bountiful harvests. When he turned to the sea, I turned to the city.

I tried committing myself to a career that would give my son more than I had, and now this boat belongs to me. I quit my job, sent my son to relatives to finish the school year, travelled hundreds of miles, and set foot on the Cultivator for the first time in my life. I sought answers, and sitting in the cabin, I could smell my father and the same familiar scent of my childhood.

There was sweat from hard work, and the transition from land to sea apparently birthed the same rewards for him. Since he was a peaceful man his entire life, I was astonished when our family lawyer informed me of his brutal dispatching from this world. I brought myself from my thoughts of hatred for whoever laid him low, and that hate seems to warm my heart more than anything else now.

I slowly looked around, and the inside was meticulously well-kept, and so was the outside. He hadn't changed in the years since I'd let the corporate world envelope me. You would never find rust on his tools, an animal unfed, a plant thirsting for water, or a machine ungreaed or unfueled. If it needed to be done, it was done without complaint or boasting.

I must escape, I thought sprinting from the boat onto the dock. I sucked in the sea air greedily. Angry at the quiver of my hands and the moistness of my eyes, I had read somewhere that men do not cry for their loved ones: they avenge them. It was esoteric text from ancient laws, no doubt, but some laws live on through ages, lives and worlds without fading or tarnishing like gold. Beautiful, cherish, pure, mysterious, and deadly.

Seagulls screamed as though offended by my presence, but it is I who is offended--offended at a faceless foe who took the man I wanted to make proud, offended that person isn't at my feet so I could gaze into their eyes, offended I cannot feel their warm

blood snaking its way around my arms, offended that I cannot come as close as a lover's caress and whisper for their first steps into the land of the dead to find my father and tell him his son has avenged him.



### **"The Gathering Point" by Scott Smith**

Throughout all time there have been places of social interaction that have characterized the spirit of the community and tell of people of all kinds. If you linger at any of these places for long, you will begin to see a story unfold that tells of the people that frequent the scene and the culture that they are a part of. You will soon become familiar with the common tongue and slang that is attached with them. You will hear of some persistent struggle, some recent outrage or a unique trauma that plagues the people. The rumors will begin to surface, which almost always show themselves to be unsightly exaggerations. Here, new styles emerge, at first rare, but soon popular. This place is the source of all fast-paced information, mostly mythic rubbish, but some steadfast and reliable. At the gathering, you hear news of friends, children, and opportunities that have newly arisen. It is these types of places that denote the era and signify the ethos of the land.

A gathering point is a place where the identity of the culture can be found and further defined. In fact, the community would feel hollow and lost without such a place. We are a people who search for meaning and are filled with pride from the individualities that make us distinct. We need something to depict us and to communicate about us to history and the outside world. We are crying out for people to remember us in such ways. The agora and acropolis of the old Greek, translate to us the meaning of life in those days. From these relics, we can determine the state of the mind and the pressing consciousness of that time. Just as they did then, with their gods and their stories, we today also unite by some common threads. If not always by some direct cause or belief, then definitely by some piece of pop culture or by some form of professional athletics, we are all invariably bound. Pick any gathering place or arena of convention and you will uncover conversations replete with such topics. These are subjects that everyone at least knows a little about; therefore they are entwined in us.

Some people are so enthralled with the common rhetoric and prattle that they are consumed and wholly obsessed with it. Everyone knows a person like this; they update their social media

accounts every several minutes and spend their time ogling others' profiles and leaving comments. This is the type of person you rouse for your own entertainment, speak a few choice words to and watch them embark on a tirade concerning the most recent gossip. This is the more deplorable form of the species; they have seemingly sold themselves to the frenzy and the tumult.

On the other hand, most people have a realistic and balanced association with these things, which in turn, gives them a healthy sound perspective. This type of person indulges in some of the fancies that the times have to offer, but these currents play a subtler role in their lives. These are the preferred people to confer with at the gathering points because they are less likely to speak fallaciously and are the more dependable type. They honor their duties, morals, and responsibilities. They have a vision of where they would like to be in the future and they execute and accomplish the small goals that they have set to get to that destination. They are not overcome nor are they distracted by the hubbub of the gathering point.

There are those who recognize and identify the gathering point for what it is, accept it and attempt to find some deeper reasoning for it all. These people take a studious approach to understanding the social dynamic and function of the meeting place. They see that there is purpose and influence that perpetuates from these zones, and that it impacts the larger society. These astute individuals are intrigued by this phenomenon and its greater role in the formation of our culture. Just as the other types of people are captivated by the rush of the onslaught of rumors and breaking news, these sophisticated members are stimulated equally by the necessity of the "watering hole" and its indispensable role in the movements of our species. Many sciences are produced from these observant people. From this location we can begin to determine the trends and inclinations of man, seeing what enralls and inspires him. This analyst then records and studies the data he has compiled and makes many assumptions about the future of such likings. He theorizes where this spirit will carry the people who embody it. Upon his speculation, he will produce philosophies that he believes will withstand the momentum of the people appropriately. In other words, he deduces the state of the group in study, and then he prescribes a doctrine that he has come to trust, in hopes that it improves and evolves. In this way, he plays the keen and productive mastermind.

It is undeniable; the gathering point has a definite and profound effect on the days we live. It is instrumental, as it fills our lives with meaning. It allows us to identify ourselves and also provides a mirror with which we can judge our standing.

**"It's not whether you get knocked down, it's whether you get up."** — *Vince Lombardi*

**"Your living is determined not so much by what life brings to you as by the attitude you bring to life; not so much by what happens to you as by the way your mind looks at what happens."** — *Khalil Gibran*





### **reUnited by Cambren Thomas**

"I've missed you..." she said, through a trance-like gather of otherworldly whispers. I stood before her, equally amazed and speechless. My eyes adjusted to the mysterious dark expanse we were standing in. Was I dreaming--hallucinating?

Glancing back at her, I realized that she was exactly as I remembered her most. Her eyes, inviting, like the glistening blue waters of a tropic paradise. Her lips, soft and smooth, like the finest silk; her teeth, set amongst them, like two necklaces of rare pearls. Her freckles, always my favorite of her features, drew me in like a starry-night sky of amalgamated constellations and galaxies.

She was wearing a hooded robe, which she pulled back slowly, to reveal auburn locks of flowing hair. The same hair that I lost my fingers in, many a warm summer's night; as we watched waves crash and wash up on the local beach sands, in our highschool years. As the robe rested at her feet, her body became illuminated with a supernatural brightness; that clothed her otherwise naked form. I tried to move my lips to speak her name. "Em--," was all I could muster, through watery eyes and a restrained tongue.

She smiled, extended her arm, and motioned me forward. Again, her comforting voice ran through me, "Come, my Love. Do not be afraid." For a moment, reality set in.

I looked down at the medical gown I was wearing, and the clear tubing of the TV; that linked my aged and withered frame, to the nutrient-inducing bags on the metal; hook roller beside me. As I shook off this imagery, and walked forward, a miraculous metamorphosis occurred. The hindrances that time had stricken me with, were erased. Each step toward her, became easier on my creaky joints; and rejuvenation to my wrinkled skin, gray hair, and hunching back. I was reminded to my pinnacle--the prime, of my existence.

As my hand finally met and embraced with Em's, I too was illuminated clothed by the immense light that enveloped her own body. My will to speak started to return to me. "Emma!" I exclaimed, and continued through tears, "I thought you were dead--Am I?--" The loving smile that arose on her face, answered my questions before I could finish them. As her gentle hand reached and caressed my cheek, she said, "You are HOME, and we are on again. That is all that matters now Boopy."

I reflected for a moment. I knew for sure now, that this all was no cruel farce, or a dream. My name was Bobby; some called me Bo, but only my Emma would call me "Boopy". That had been her nickname for me, since we met on that elementary school playground long ago. Only my Emma, my wife for 42 years, would touch my cheek that way too. She had passed on just 3 short years ago--but she was here now.

I remembered, regretting that I had never gotten a chance to say a proper goodbye to her. Some misguided choices I made, had landed me in shackles and a cage for decades; hindering us from living life at each others side, like we were accustomed to. But some life-changing spiritual choices, along the way, had made our belated reunion possible. We were both here--together. I never had to be away from Emma, ever again.

The expanse around us, slowly began to fade; from an infinite darkness, to swirling masses of the purest white. They were akin to clouds of an unbeknownst artistic quality, shape, and movement. We were now hovering, in the midst of abstract tranquility. Em took my hand again, and we began to travel through the cloud-like array. Soon we were on the outskirts of a booming airborne metropolis; of immeasurable size and immaculate design. Emma turned to me, as we inched close and close to the city, and said through a joyous smile, "Welcome, to eternity, Boopy!"

Abundant life was a buzz in the extravagantly celestial buildings, skies, and streets. Beautiful orchestral music filling the air; mixed with singing, exuberant laughter and conversating. Everyone was in a state of permanent celebration; and I could feel the same urge growing within me. I had my Emma back; and I had never been happier. The omnipotent presence of the Alpha and Omega was everywhere around Em and I; and for once in my life, of hard knocks and disappointments--I was content. I was complete.

### **The Dreamer by Corita Corpuz**

With a proud yet weary gait, she walks by day carrying an old beaten up pack she found in the garage outside of a department store that someone discarded when they replaced their own. Or maybe the bag was stolen, emptied and ditched. Who knows... it's hers now. All her earthly treasures are carefully packed inside.

With no special destination she continues aimlessly, slightly less as she trudges along wearing the same clothes she'd worn for weeks, a pair of old dungarees, a well worn blue t-shirt, and a pair of keds that are a bit too small. Her old grey hoodie is tied around her neck haphazardly and just seems to be hanging off her. From afar she looks like any other young woman walking about in town. If not for the hollow look in her eyes and her disheveled appearance, one might not know she lives on the streets.

She wonders if the streets are better than being a part of the system. If she made herself a ward of the State would someone decent take her into their home, offering her a chance to rise above the scum that currently surrounds her? It's not her fault she's on the streets. But that matters not. She made her choice weeks ago when both parents were whisked away in a blue and white car. She's determined she will not be locked again. "I'd rather live on the streets where I have a semblance of freedom," she says, "Than be closed in again." She reasons there's no difference between a dark closet and a children's home where no one gives a damn about her. At least she's free on the streets. Free from the abuse, and with the ability to come and go at will.

Exhaustion weighs heavily upon her and slowly take its toll as it begins to drizzle, but she can't stop moving. The shop owners continually harass those that have not, are not, do not. Why? They're afraid. There's nothing to fear from this waif of a girl, who is alone in the world. She hasn't been on the streets long enough to go rogue. There's still honesty and integrity within.

Her parents were recently arrested on numerous criminal changes, the least of these being possession of drugs, and child neglect and abuse. She's just a lost and lonely young woman, bot soulless – just homeless. "Look at me," she silently pleads, "I'm salvageable. I can be helped if only... No! Please don't walk away." Tears fall silently from her sad eyes mixing with the rain that brings to pour down in earnest.

She realizes as long as she appears a hobo no one will give her the time of day. Not one single person will lend her a hand to save her from the destruction that living on the streets brings. No one will talk to her. They avoid her giving her a wide berth as she approaches. Without an education and looking like the average street person, how can she find gainful employment? No one will hire her in her present condition.

Hunger eats away at her as she comes upon the restaurant district. She can smell the heavenly scents from the food outlets. She'll not know what it's like to sit in a chair at a table and eat like a human being. Passing a diner she looks into the well lit dining area. Her mouth begins to salivate as she watches the patrons enjoy their meals of burgers and fries, steaks and potatoes, pies and cakes. Oh how she wishes she could taste the delicacies within. Unfortunately, it's not to be. She has no money and no way to earn any.

As night draws near and darkness comes upon her, creepy shadows dance in every corner of her mind. She yearns for the familiarity of the dark closet her father locked her in for hours, sometimes days at a time. It's time to search shelter from the rain, a place she can rest. Nothing is safe nor sacred here on the streets. Who would have imagined her life would go from bad to worse in the blink of an eye? Who would have thought there was a place worse than that of a dark and dirty closet.

So she continues her search for a place to rest. Thoughts of warmth and a loving family she's never known bring tears to her eyes and pangs to her heart. "All I want is to be loved and cared for," she says. "What kind of life is this that I live? What did i do to deserve this?" Life has been so cruel to this woman child, fate has led her astray. There aren't any wonderful memories that will carry her thru the cold winter nights. She's on her own as she has been for many years now. Her eyelids droop as she drops down under the shelter of an alcove in front of an empty building. Sleep comes upon her quickly. Still clutching her pack, she falls into a restless slumber.

Tomorrow she'll begin anew trudging along looking, hoping, and wishing. "I'll never give up, I'll never let go of my dream."

PLEASE REMEMBER TO PUT YOUR NAME ON EACH ESSAY OR ARTWORK YOU SUBMIT TO THE PE PROGRAM. Your letter may get separated from the envelope and if we do not have your name on an essay it is impossible to give you credit or to mail you a packet of themes.

## Upcoming Picture Theme Prompts



Due Date 10/01/17



Due Date 11/01/17



Due Date 12/01/17



Due Date 1/01/18



Due Date 2/01/18



Due Date 3/01/18



Art by Chad Whiteford

## Final notes

New project development-**Para-legal advice**- Many of you have asked for legal help, and I am unequipped to answer your questions. We have had a few PE members volunteer to help answer your legal question. I'd like to make an effort to get this project going and see how it develops. Write me if you have expertise and are willing to answer questions from others on navigating the legal system. You can also write if you have questions. This is an experiment and I will see if we can create a workable project that can be introduced in our next newsletter. I am not asking for questions you would ask an attorney, but rather questions on how certain procedures work that a para legal might know. **If you have questions or wish to offer your expertise write "attn: Legal Dept" on the envelope**

Nutrition Program Update- *Many thanks to all who had requested the packet "Nutrition: How food becomes you". I hope you found it worth your while. I have received a bunch of responses and more are arriving as I write this. I really enjoy seeing the variety of ideas people have about the food they eat. I'll be responding when more of your letters have arrived. With Gratitude, Larry*

Song Writing Update from Kathy  
– WE DID IT, WE MADE A SONG!

Hi to all past and future participants of this Prisoner Express songwriting group. Thank you all so much for showing interest in this course, for sending me your thoughts and examples of your creativity. There are a lot of you who sent me work, but didn't include lyrics for the group project and I want you to know that I enjoyed these letters equally. I am still slowly responding and I am sorry that this process is so slow going but please know that your letters have brought me much joy and inspiration.

The group project was an exercise in faith. For those of you new to Prisoner Express, I provided a very loose chorus ("Pick It Up, Pick It Up, Mooooooooooooooooove It, Lines On My Face.....") and invited lyric submissions for the verses. This idea was very vague at best.....and the concept made more difficult by the fact that most of you have no access to musical instruments or listening devices. We couldn't share melodies, chord

progressions, or rhythms – all important building blocks of good songs- and our only interactions were through postal letters. This was a challenge for all of our imaginations and I am so happy and amazed with the results. One of you said in your letter to me that there is a human potential behind prison walls which can be easily overlooked or forgotten. Our project proved this so clearly and I will do my best to spread the message. Also, music is an important language which spans distances and breaks barriers.....we have connected under the most unlikely of circumstances and together created something bigger than ourselves. I am proud!

In the end, I had about 40 lyric submissions. I copied them all down so that they were in one place, then went through the process of weaving them together into one cohesive song. There are three verses which were put together from the words of Jason Williams, Steven Lee Adkins Jr., Geneva Phillips, Miles O Bonty, Jimmy Nicholson, and Johnny "Javoni" Jones.

Verse I: We are trees that can never plant our roots too deep/ We are dreamers who can never get much sleep/ put together lives like a puzzle piece, moving our feet.

A new face, a new name, a new foe, it gets old/ We leave our mark, gain scars, open doors that hurt closed/ don't warm the bench, what will you show? Never alone Pick it up, pick it, moooooove it/ pick it up, pick it up, moooooove it/ pick it up, pick it moooooove it/ pick it up, pick it up, lines on my face.....

Verse II: A little desperate but not defeated/ A little silence was all I needed/ to gather up my thoughts and feed them through my pen

Answers and reasons come and go the way birds fly/ time has awakened me to realize/ judge a neighbor, touch a stranger, or just treasure a good friend

Verse III: Shoot past the moon and stars/ we smile out there and behind bars/ happy at your darkest time, hope you're listening to this rhyme/ I write all day and through the night, it's dark in here but I see the light.

C'mon feel the heat of this beat, it's something you can't ignore/ feels more like Hell's fire, knocking on Heaven's door/ electro lights in the air, glitter in our pores, we're livin'!!

Pick It Up....

In addition to these verses, lyrics were layered in a middle section and then also sung or spoken over the outro chorus. What I did is, I selected a two to four line section from each of your submissions, sometimes with some light editing mainly so that they would fit the rhythm as well as possible. I typed all of these up and cut them into strips so that each person's words were on a strip of paper. I brought these to the recording session and as I got to know the singers, I handed them out. I had wanted every person who submitted to be represented, but decided to leave some off as the song was getting too long and too crowded with lyrics. I thought that we could layer them (and we did to some degree) to kind of represent your many voices, but in order to keep it clear and to make the words understandable, I had to leave some of the submissions behind. This decision was made kind of randomly and had nothing to do with which ones I thought were of more or less value. I honestly thought that each one of you had something important to say,

and your spirits are all included regardless of whether or not your words are. Below I will include all of the lyric excerpts (not in full, but the lines that I chose) with your name so that you can see how they all came together.

I want to share a bit about the recording process itself as that was also fantastic. Your voices were brought to life with love and care. As I mentioned in the previous newsletter, my brother works with a gospel choir made up of people who are in recovery for drug/ and or alcohol addiction in Los Angeles, California.

They call themselves the Mary Lind Recovery Gospel choir, and many agreed to lend their voices to this project. I worked with an old friend to get the drum tracks: drums, Cajons, and shakers layered into a cool, rolling beat. Then I added a piano part, organ, and an electric Moog bass. I sang the verses and the choir joined me for each chorus. When it came time to record that middle section, we all became quite emotional reading your words and processing their meaning. Most of these people had never done anything so spontaneous before and we were amazed by how easily it came together, how the words of many seemed to speak through them to deliver a cohesive message. Every single person who participated in this felt very grateful for the opportunity. In this way, your words have already begun to manifest. They have touched lives, and will continue to do so.

I want to keep this going, to offer more opportunities to prisoners wishing to express themselves creatively. Because of the amount of letters received and because I need more time to answer these letters, I think I will wait until spring to offer another group opportunity, or inspirational project. In the mean time, I will still welcome any feedback, questions, requests for guidance or whatever if you want to pass those to me through Gary at Prisoner Express. Gary will let you know where you can listen, or send family members to listen to the song "Pick It Up." That's all for now. Keep yourselves focused on the rays of light you perceive!

#### LYRIC EXCERPTS:

James Guss: Years come and gone, old and grey/ lines on my face seem to say/ time passed you by, but I'm moving on/ gonna make it to tomorrow, yesterday has won

David Irons: Gonna move a rubber tree/ place it in a garden just for me/ whatever comes up we shall see/ first ring story is complete

Luis Gonzalez: Rhythm and soul, naturally gifted/ like December 25<sup>th</sup> and birthday wishes/ music for the working class, determined to shine/ me and sun get it done, 24 is no time

Craig Shipley: Concrete and steel, these monotonous years/ behind walls and fences I shed my tears/ home is nothing more than a storage box/ my abattoir, when will the pain ever stop?

Michael Mallet: Dark pools of my mind (how could it be?)/ I have not tried myself (where did I go wrong?)/ How did it go this way (something is cruel to me)/ I can't find what it is (things I could not be)

Vriel Perez: Can't ostracize, classify degrade, or shame you/ once you bring to light deep shame, reveal your true face/ lift the veil, show the way, illuminate your heart strength/ pain will come and go, with every new experience

Halley Mills: Living in the shadows, I come out of hiding/ take control of my life, let no one deny me/ letting go of old behaviors,



passing my test/ fighting battles with myself, I know that I'm blessed

Waleek Parker: I woke up this morning/ I gotta go pick it up/ pick up the pace/ I got no time to waste/ I'm racing to work/ grab my food on the go/ I'm trying to move fast but the traffic's moving slow

Shaun Blake: Past mutates to present/ old friends unrecognizable/ like a stranger is a friend/ something different and believable

Jeremy Brown: The pieces are not broken/ time's my only remedy/ I've got to go much higher/ than conceptual reality

Timothy Youngblood: I'm gonna make it home/ Can I keep my mind strong/ Everything in society is wrong

Robert Belk, I want to pick up the pieces of everything I shattered/ Even if I can't fix it, it all still matters

Broderick Flowers: Pick it up, move it/ fast as you can, don't lose it

Jimmy Coleman Jr: We pick it up and move it, do not bruise it or mis-use it

Edwin Serrano.: Trying to find a reason cause it's got no rhyme/ just another mountain that I've yet to climb

Jabez, Hebert.: Time and again/ we just about lost/ chasing dreams like the wind, without visioning the cost/ lines on my face, for miles stars trail/ tracks are traced even when time snails

Gary Gregory.: Gonna move a rubber tree/ all the birds can land on me/ add beauty to the scenery/ let their songs come naturally

Clarenece Whitaker-Jones: Pick up the pen, fast as your thoughts race/ freedom of mind like the underground railway

Troy Glover: We live to smile, we're born to cry/ pick it up and raise it high

Robert Belk: Because I did that, I won't do it again/ and when I get it back, I'll hold it tight in my hands/ I know that I let my

priorities drop/ I'm gonna pick em up again, I won't ever stop

Keith Williams: 123, 123/ we wanna jam on hip-hop beats/ smiling

lines on my face/ we wanna sound that moves our feet

Roy Rogers: Blue and black wounds, tryin to grip/ Every time it moves, it slips/ my soul is on the line, precious to me/ Paul had his thorn, I got my rubber tree

Da'Juan Burns: Morning soul sits in the dark/ catch me off guard tears fall from my heart

Nathaniel Lindell: lines on my face, prove the weight of hate/ I'm disregarded, deemed a mistake

Chadwick Majamay: objects, stories, infinity/ God's pulse, universe, C'mon live with me

Herman Shaw: Walk down the street, see a dollar bill/ bend and pick it up, or someone else will

Jimmy Ray O'Kelley: I almost stopped breathing/ my heart is leaking/ I'm trying to pick up the pieces/ help me pick up the pieces

Sean Gerard Washington: I gotta reframe, don't drift to the past/ I gotta stay sane/ never let them see behind the mask

Elliot Gornall: I wanna put down roots, but Mother Earth says no/ it's an unplayed hand, this is not my home

Mark Hamme: There's a rock in your way/ you let it stop you every day/ on that rock you lay the blame/ that your life will stay the same

Steven Ardrey: I'm falling, sooner, later hit the floor/ no cage, no body, no chatter, no more

Billy Joe Star Draper: forget the past, heart's grow bolder/ lift my head off of these aching shoulders

Lonnie Gavaldon: I was asked to pick it up and move it/ so I stepped up my game and showed improvement/ these lyrics are more than just a movement/ they still tell a story about a system that causes confusion

\*quick note: you might notice a few references to a rubber tree. I had given the phrase "123, gonna move a rubber tree" as a way to envision the rhythm behind the lyrics.....some participants cleverly tied this into their lyrics.

I really hope each one of you can find a way to hear this song one day!!

We will put the song Kathy and all of you composed on our website [www.prisonexpress.org](http://www.prisonexpress.org). you can tell your family and friends they can listen to it there.



Art by Marlon Mccowan

Please know that our combined work at PE, all the students and volunteers who make this happen, reflect an ethos where people care for one another and want to help their fellow humans survive and thrive. When we read the news or listen to it on TV it sounds like one bad thing is happening after another. In truth humans are caring and empathetic beings who get the most pleasure by helping one another. The dominant culture/folks trying to sell you something, know it is easier to attract and control your attention by focusing on the stressful/harrowing tales of life and greed. They want your attention and they want to control your behavior. Take a deep breath instead and know most humans want goodness and love to prevail in the world. Don't let the politicians fool you by dividing you into groups that dislike and distrust others. Reach out to one another and share and support each other. It is the way.— blessings on us all-Gary



## REGISTRATION FORM

**Please Note:** If you received this newsletter, you are on our mailing list. This form or a letter should be returned in a timely manner if you want to sign up for programs.—and If you don't want to cut up your newsletter, you can write a list of programs you wish to join and send it to us. **If we do not hear from you by Feb 2018 you will be removed from the active mailing list until we do receive a letter from you**

**Programs** – Please check the box of each program in which you wish to participate. Carefully read the requirements of each program before signing up.

☐ **Expedited Book Mailings** –Check with the administration of your facility to be sure you are allowed to participate. If yes, please send 8 stamps or a check for \$4.00 to cover postage. Books are free, but the mailing cost is not. List types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection. Please fill this in if you order expedited books

\_\_\_\_\_ Number of books allowed

\_\_\_\_\_ Soft cover only

\_\_\_\_\_ Hardcover and soft covered both allowed

☐ **Poetry Project** – Please send me the next Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 19. I understand that to receive the anthology I am required to submit a poem for consideration in the anthology.

☐ **Journal Project** – I will keep a Journal for a year, and may share my entries with PE. Please send me a Journal Starter packet.

☐ **Building a Book**- this packet will help authors plan, develop and write a book.

☐ **Dessert Recipe Packet**- Yes send me the collection of dessert recipes submitted by the members of PE in the summer 16 survey

☐ **Chess Club** – Yes, I want to receive David's mailings on how to improve my chess game.

☐ **New Jim Crow book club**- Please send me a copy of the book. I will submit a letter stating why I should be included in this project. I understand that there are only 100+ copies and I may not be selected for participation.

☐ **Art Knows:** Come explore the world of art with Treacy. Treacy has many new projects and art shows in the works

☐ **Animation Project**- please send me the details on Treeacy's new animation project

☐ **Psychology Study Unit**- This introduction to psych will introduce you to basic concepts and ideas in psychology

☐ **Buddhist Meditation Newsletter**-Come explore the practice of mindfulness through breath and contemplation as well consider the inspiring quotes and ideas shared by Tara

☐ **Trauma Study Guide**-Learn how to work with the traumatic experiences in your life so they have less control on your present experience

You do not need to sign up for the Theme and Picture Writing programs. By submitting your writings and art, you are automatically included on all future mailings regarding those individual projects.

**NAME:** (PLEASE PRINT)

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**ADDRESS and ID #**

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I give the Alternatives Library permission to post my writings and artwork on the web

**SIGNATURE:**

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**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

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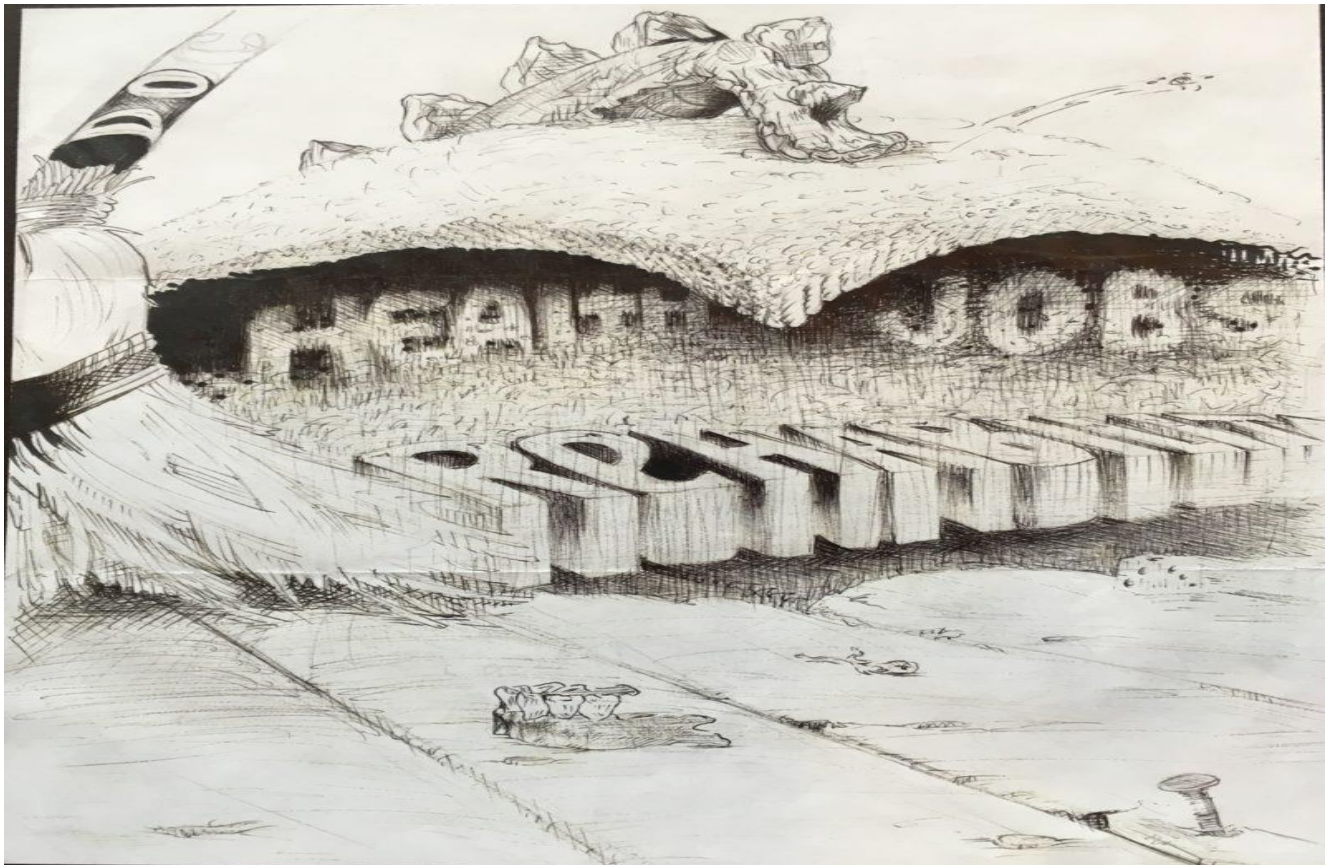
# Prisoner Express Newsletter Summer 2017

*Prisoner Express promotes rehabilitation by providing information, education and opportunities for creative self-expression to incarcerated individuals throughout the United States.*

*Subscriptions are free to prisoners.*

The Durland Alternatives Library, which funds Prisoner Express, is a project partner of the Center for Transformative Action.

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Art by Daniel Gest