

# Prisoner Express News

## Winter 2018

Welcome to the world of Prisoner Express. We focus on providing incarcerated men and women with information, education, and opportunities for creative expression in a public forum. Prisoner Express is a project of the Durland Alternatives Library[DAL] located on the campus of Cornell University. DAL is about 50 years old and formed during the height of the Vietnam War when mass protests were beginning to challenge the assumptions prevailing among the governing bodies. Our collection now focuses on alternative viewpoints on subjects far ranging including politics, health, agriculture, sustainability, sexuality, race, gender, spirituality development, environment, arts, incarceration etc. You can guess that as a worker in the library I am surrounded by great books. Our library is funded by a small endowment set up by a dad to remember his daughter Anne Carry Durland who died an untimely death. My name is Gary and I work at the library and about 15 or so years ago I began this program through a single letter from Danni Harris requesting books.

The program has grown over the years and we now have many more services than book mailing and the intent of this newsletter is to give you a comprehensive understanding of what PE can offer you, so you can choose to participate in the programs that interest you. So many people send us mail based on a recommendation from others and often they request services that we do not provide. Resource guides list us and do not adequately or accurately describe who we are and what we do. It is understandable as we do not advertise. If we did and gobs of people started writing, we'd be bankrupt in a New York minute. That is not to say you must keep what we do a secret. We enjoy hearing from new people, but sometimes we the sheer volume of mail we receive makes it difficult to perform our task in a timely manner.

In the following pages you will find a listing of all the programs we are offering in this upcoming cycle. A version of this newsletter goes out 2 times a year, every six months [or so] and each edition will have a listing of the current projects. Some of our projects are ongoing, while others are special for the cycle. While you are free to sign up for all programs please note that we must independently raise all the funds for PE. The library provides space to house the program, and lots of student employees to help run the programs, but all the

printing and postage costs must be raised. So, if you only sign up for the projects you will follow up on and we don't mail packets that are not really utilized, then we can send more people the items they do want. By conserving now, we can insure that we can keep mailing packets in the future. If after reading the newsletter or participating in our programs, you feel called to make a donation please do. We need your help. Friends and family on the outside can do so as well through our [www.prisonerexpress.org](http://www.prisonerexpress.org) website.

A very important piece of information especially for those of you new to the program, is that we send our lessons out by bulk mail through the USPS. It gets us a reduced rate, but it also limits us to mailing all packets on the same subject once. If you send in a request for a packet after the bulk mailing is done, do not expect to get it. We don't have the funds to mail it. A packet sent through bulk mail might cost .18 cents and the same packet by first class could be \$1.75. You can see the difference when you multiply the mail by 500 people. So, if you are receiving this in March do not wait until May or June to reply, as that might mean you miss receiving the materials. Many of you wrote for the first time this last year asking for something. Sometimes your request is not something we do, or it came too late for you to receive the packet you requested. **The good news is that it put you on our mailing list and here is your first packet, and we are at the beginning of a new programming cycle.** We are glad to be partnering with you in this educational exchange.

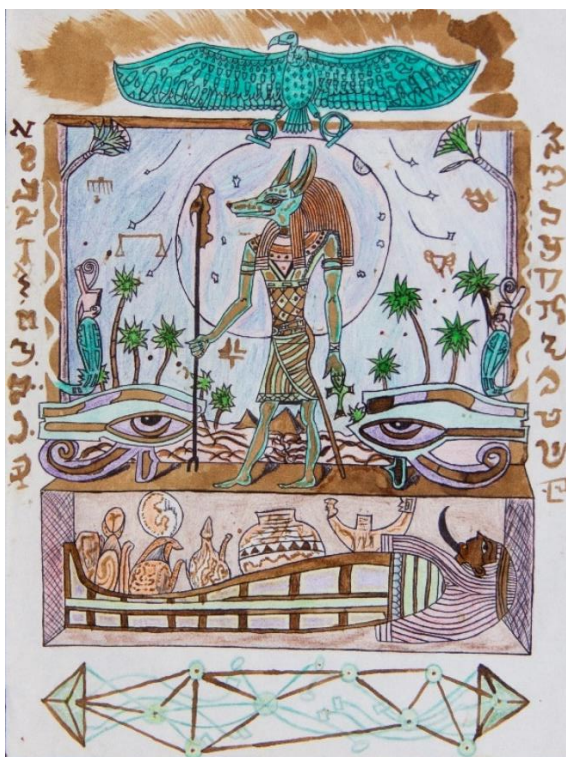
Another task of this newsletter is to share a sampling of the submissions we received over the past 6 months through our art, poetry and creative writing projects. Many PE members have written to say how helpful it is to read the writings of others sharing the incarceration experience. We are striving to foster connection, and your participation makes it possible. That you are in prison certainly can be a defining part of your life experience, but it is by no means all of who you are. We hope you can use our programming to expand your horizons. We want to provide you a seat at the table as a citizen of the universe.

The earth for as large as it is, is a tiny drop in our solar system and our solar system is but a minute part of the Milky Way

galaxy. The Milky Way, composed of approx. 200 billions of stars is our splendid home galaxy, and it is but one of a 200+ hundred billion galaxies that make up the universe. that would make it to be approx. 4000000000000000000 stars in the heavens. I guess I write this because it helps me to remember "Don't sweat the small stuff".

Even though I can see how small I am in the scheme of things I still believe each of our lives has purpose and experiences are here for us to learn and grow as divine sparks of some fathomless greater intelligence. We at PE encourage self-introspection, creativity, fun knowledge, and building community even while we acknowledge the freedom we have in being inconsequential specks in a most giant universe. We invite you to join us in the fun excursion into creativity. I wish of course we had more funds, so we could afford more comprehensive projects and large lessons, but we do a lot with a limited amount to resources and I think you will find some projects listed in the following pages that will capture your interests.

- We want you to know how PE operates so you can participate at the level that best suits your needs. All our programs except for expedited book program is open to anyone. If you have received this newsletter than you are in our system and you can sign up for the programs listed in this newsletter.



Art by Jeremy Brown

## Winter 18 Projects-

**Expedited Books-** The book mailing program is how PE began, but it has expanded into something different. Partly this happened due to necessity. At one point, we had about 2000 people asking for books and we realized we could not raise postage funds to keep up with the demand. Being on a university campus we are constantly looking out for donated books which we collect and send to you in the form of individualized book packages. On the signup sheet at the end of the newsletter is a place for you to let us know the rules of the prison you inhabit regarding book mailing. Please send us a list of subjects you are interested in. Give us as many choices as you can, as we rely on donated books to make the matches, and our collection is always changing. I think we make some outstanding matches and many of you write to let us know that. At times we will have nothing of what you asked for. Sometimes we send substitutions and other times we hold your request hoping we will get something close to what you want. If you are from Florida, you will now have a blacked-out section as the information contained in the next paragraph is found out of bounds in FL prisons. It involves things one might buy at a post office.

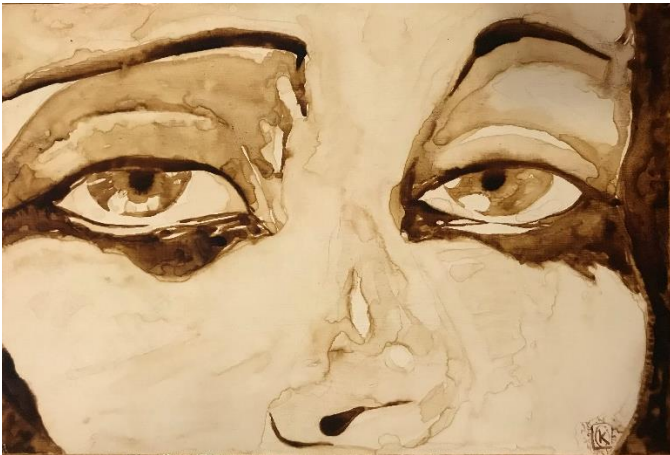
We need your help in subsidizing this program. **To receive a book package, we ask you send either \$4.00 check or 8 postage stamps to help defray the cost of the postage on these book packages.** This is the only PE program that requires your financial assistance, but it is the only way we can afford to do this. A typical package can cost up to \$7 to mail.

We have a few hundred people in line ahead of you and it often takes a few months before you get your package. As an avid reader who appreciates the transformative power of books I love that we do this, but you must be willing to be patient. We are a volunteer organization and with so many people writing things take time; often longer than I anticipate. So, send us your list and we will see what we can do.

**Poetry** -The Poetry project has been in the capable hands and mind of Jennifer for the past year. She is currently reading through all the poems submitted in the last cycle and we hope to print Volume 19 in our series in late spring 2018. We invite you to send poetry for inclusion in the anthology., We receive 1000's of poems and it certainly can be challenging to narrow the selection for our anthology. Somewhere in the next few months we will have enough poems to fill anthology 19. When that happens, we start collecting poems for Volume 20, so you never have to worry whether your poem is being considered by PE as this project is

ongoing. As soon as one anthology is finished we collect for the next one. Currently everyone who submits a poem for consideration receives a copy of the anthology when it is printed, whether your poem was chosen or not. Below are some thoughts from Jennifer and some poems she has chosen to print in the newsletter

*Hi everyone, I'm Jennifer, a student worker for Prisoner Express; I put together volume 18 of the poetry anthology and I am currently starting to work on volume 19. I enjoy working on this project because I get to read thousands of poems from you guys and I'm always surprised and moved by the creativity and vulnerability in your work. I love poetry because it is such a flexible art form that can have such a big influence on both writers and readers. From reading your work, I can tell that for many of you, poetry is a cathartic exercise meant to help you explore and verbalize your experiences and emotions and turn them into art. Whether your work is funny, sad, romantic or hopeful it is valuable to you and the reader, so I would encourage you all to keep writing! Over the summer I asked many of you to provide more context about your poems to include in the anthology, so if you choose to send in your poems consider including a tidbit about yourself or your poem (or maybe even art) that you think could enrich the reader's experience. I look forward to reading some more of your poetry and hope you guys enjoy this next anthology!*



Art by Kristopher Storey

"Girl Lost" by Christine Leal

She was just a child, who wanted love,  
From a mother that wanted nothing but drugs.  
She prayed to a God that just didn't hear,  
While every night on to her pillow, flowed endless tears.  
By daytime her mother would beat her with belts,  
She wondered just who gave her the cards she'd been dealt.

So she'd run to the streets to get relief from the pain,  
Only to find herself caught up in the game.  
She'd hustle just to make it day by day.  
But the law said that's illegal so they put her away.  
But once again when she'd hit the brick,

It would just start all over, just like an on and off switch.  
The hustling and drugging were bringing her down.  
And every time she'd go in front of that judge, all he would do is frown.

All this had to stop before she died,  
But all she could do was bow her head down and cry.  
She was shooting her veins, this, that and the other,  
Thinking to herself she turned out just like her mother.

"Daffodils in the Summer" by Bayete Komunyak

I heard you say that you would reside forever,  
That nothing could remove you from eternity.  
Promises of enduringness were made.

I knew you  
From the first promise to the last.  
Never once giving thought to doubt.  
Even among distractions,  
And frustrations never spoken,  
The illumination of our eyes never dimmed.

Expressions of bare naked truth  
Sentiments of adornment afresh  
Could not be extinguished.

However, time plays the most unusual games,  
Setting apart the things that are,  
And remember, once removed, twice forgotten.

Why now,  
As fate would have it,  
Does the memory linger  
Leaving nothing but anxiety.

The vision of everlasting, exonerated,  
Nothing left to feel, nothing to partake  
Nothing left to hold  
I now embrace emptiness.

Misguided behavior had been my trill  
Ever since your departure  
Nothing left seems to shine  
Not even daffodils in the summer.

Recreation is born, but in another life  
Colors of hope, but not as bright  
Only thing left to do is assimilate  
The times we shared together.

"Elle" by Pete Gonzales

I'd do anything  
For you  
I'd do this, I'd do that



I'd do something I couldn't take back  
I'd care for you  
Carry a burden for you  
Carry you  
If you couldn't walk  
Write me and you forever  
On the sidewalk with chalk  
And people would walk  
By and see it  
And they would believe it  
Because they would think to themselves  
Why would someone write it  
If it wasn't true  
And then they would wish they were  
Me and you  
No, really  
Do you believe me  
I'd do things I wouldn't normally do  
Like I was under the influence  
A bloodstream filled with you  
Just say the word, or give me the look  
Wiggle your finger  
My heart on a hook  
An obsession  
I'm obsessed with  
Way too much  
Send me flying  
With just a touch  
I'd  
Kiss you and  
I'd melt in your arms  
Let myself get into trouble  
Let you use my jacket to walk over a puddle  
For  
You

"Rebirth: Seasons and Tears Falling" by Blair Blanchette

Bluebirds and red robins sing  
Welcoming spring's rain;  
Washing winter's chill away  
In rivulets of pain.  
Flowers unfold blossoms' bold  
Fragrance of life;  
Devastating death's icy grip  
With strokes of bring green stripes.

Valley's croon, veranda's bloom  
Swimming in streams of light  
Our tender years we'll remember dear  
As perfect and polished white.  
Tales and frosted remembrance,  
Having tasted its golden kiss,  
And in the transformation found  
The meaning of pure bliss.

"A Prayer to and for all Mothers" by Joseph Simmons

Dear mothers, moms, my prayer  
to you.  
On my bunk or on my knees my  
Voice cracks.  
My personal message to mama, the message  
to every mother in the world:  
Blue clouds, floating so free, so far, won't  
You carry this message, this prayer, for me.  
Dear mom, mothers, tired, weary, left all  
Alone, torn from her child, children, filled with  
Sorrow and pain.  
Please gently touch her, please gently kiss her, bring  
Her my love.  
Tell her how I miss her, feel her pain, feel her sorrow.  
Please tell her, my friends she must live for  
Tomorrow...  
If you see her tears, please wipe them. Tell her  
Soon, soon will come the day when together  
Again, we will be.  
A mother, her child, her children, a  
Family all free.  
Soon your empty arms, your  
Child, your children will fill, the sorrow will turn  
To joy.  
Tomorrow is near, please  
Live  
Be strong  
We'll weather this storm...  
We'll find you, dear mom, mothers please do not  
Despair, we will live, I will live to be free.  
Love, your child.



Art by Kristopher Storey

**Journal-**Participants in the journal project keep a journal and send the entries to us to keep in a file. The journal provides you with a way of reflecting on your past, present and future. It offers a chance to get your thoughts down on paper, which often involves improving your thinking and communication skills. It also lets you share your thoughts with us a PE. Students and community members come to the library and read the journals. Often, they will write a friendly letter back to you regarding the thoughts or impressions generated by your journal. It is a way to foster communication between you and folks on the outside, and it is a way for you to gain more clarity in your thinking. If you sign up for the project, you will receive a short packet describing all the reasons why keeping a journal is good for you as well as some tips on how to keep a journal. You can start anytime [now?], just be sure your name and the date are on each entry, so we can keep it filed in sequential order. Mackenzie is leading the journal project and I know many of you who are already participating are touching many of the lives of the people reading your words. Just as I was inspired by receiving a letter from Danni Harris years ago asking for books, I can see how many of the students who read your writings are moved and inspired by the process. Your words are changing lives, yours and others. We are not currently posting journal entries online. A few journal participants have written thinking we will be posting all their writings online and were disappointed that we are unable to do this. I read many of the journal submitted and I can see the growth and clarity of thought that many of you achieve by regularly writing in a journal, and I want to encourage you all to Write On!

**Songwriting Project-**We are so fortunate as Kathy Z is coming back to lead another songwriting program. I am so excited. Below is her description of the project. Kathy live in Europe, The Netherlands, and if you write her care of PE I box up her mail and send it to her every few weeks during the songwriting process. Following are Kathy's words regarding her next project.

*Dear prisoners,*

*Last year I wrote my first course for Prisoner Express: songwriting through the mail. I was met with enthusiasm and moved by the strength, wisdom, humor, pain, sorrow, and hope nestled in between your words. I am thrilled that so many participated and we even succeeded in making a group project together which is floating around the internet as a recorded song. I struggled a bit with the format.... the fact that our communication is so lagged by distance, and my own limitations. I have come to peace with doing the best I can*

*even if that means sending replies to letters long after they come in. I hope you know that every letter I receive is read and processed with gratitude and care even if you haven't received a note in return. All of you deserve letters, communication, acknowledgement, and human warmth. If nothing else, I am sending you those things now through this note. Thank-you for your efforts, and to all newcomers: welcome!! Sign up for the spring project!*

*Getting involved with Prisoner Express has led me down a wormhole of learning, not only about the faulty, profit-based prison system, but also the inequalities which seem to stronghold certain communities into this system. I thought that it might be interesting (and with any luck, helpful) to utilize the creative skills available inside of prison walls as a means to plant positive seeds to the young communities on the outside who may still be able to change their path. Many of you have expressed sorrow regarding children with whom you have lost contact or have limited access to, some have no family at all. Some feel frustrated at the inability to provide for loved ones, some may be enticed by an opportunity to be of service (a cornerstone in many recovery programs.) I recently saw a documentary about teenagers in South Chicago, so much gun violence and it seems almost impossible to escape the darkness that is literally engulfing these young people. Many of you were very young yourselves when you first came into the prison system. These are some of the thoughts swirling around my head as I consider what kind of course to offer this spring. I would love to see our group writing lyrics which could be performed by youth choirs or something like that. I hope that you all will forgive my idealism.... I honestly don't know of any other way to approach the heaviness, the enormity of the mess which is our criminal justice system. The idea here is to offer something to you who are incarcerated and at the same time give you the opportunity to offer something which someone else might need.....a chain reaction, no pun intended. Anyway, I will gather my thoughts and put this idea into a new, exercise-based songwriting packet to be mailed out in late spring 2018 to all who sign up. I will leave you with this song I have been working on which kind of encapsulates the concept I am thinking of.....try to imagine a chorus of young voices singing:*

*"Shaked from the mother ewe/ rolled toward the hole you fell into/ buried, never knew/ warmth penetrating, steady you grew/ Dodged drought and hungry beaks/ sprawled flames and melting mountain peaks/ every ring attached/ felled by one misguided axe  
Save me! Save one tree! Dee dee dee dee dee dee  
Birthed through malnourished legs/ pride molded out of the poison dregs/ lowest on the pole/ ribs quiver, tears slapped*

*from your skull/ Shield bullets with your books/ hood over head  
to escape the looks/ sinew under skin so fine/ never walk the  
streets past your bedtime*

*Save me! Save one man to be! Dee dee dee dee dee dee dee  
One is One is One is One is one....."*

*That's all for now. Wishing you all the strength to do your best.*

*Cheers! Kathy Z.*

**Kathy's last project can be found on our website. it is a song composed using the lyrics she collected from participants in the last project. She made a recording of the song and you can have friends and relatives listen to it on our website at**

**<https://prisonerexpress.org/2017/09/song-for-prisoner-express/>**

**Plasmodesmata** -Mia is back as well with her third edition of Plasmodesmata. Mia had the idea of putting together a science journal using articles written by students that are meant to be read and understood by the general public. hey that is all of us. i read the first two editions and learned lots. i look forward to her next edition and hope you do too.

*"Hi everyone! My name is Mia and I'm a biology student at Cornell who is interested in sharing my love of science with you. For those of you that are new, plasmodesmata are microscopic channels that form between plant cells and allow information to be exchanged. In this program we try to create "plasmodesmata" from our cells on the outside to yours, through which we can talk about science. All articles in this science journal are written by biology students who are trying to improve their ability to communicate about science and scientific issues to a general audience, so you won't need to be a scientist to understand them. Your thoughtful and enthusiastic responses to the first two issues of Plasmodesmata have been really encouraging to all of us, and I am happy to announce that we will offer a third issue of this science journal this spring. As plasmodesmata are cellular structures in plants, this issue will feature some interesting botanical articles about wildflowers, pollinators, and even growing plants in outer space. This issue will also include some interesting articles about the risks of brain injuries for football players, HIV treatments, invasive earthworms...and more!"*

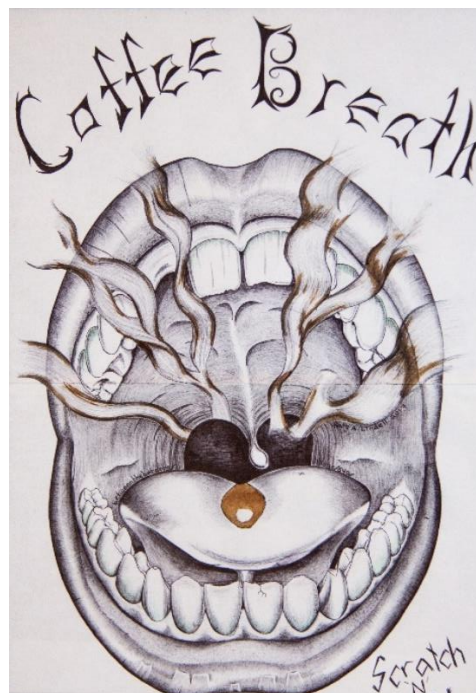
**Rainbows and Physics.** Andrea is back to create another science project. For all of you who took her Chemistry and Climate change course, you know how talented Andrea is at explaining complicated scientific theories in ways that ordinary people can enjoy and understand. Andrea's profession is as a

science writer, and we are y fortunate that she is taking the time to develop a lesson for all of us. Below is a description of her course

*What causes a rainbow?*

*In the two millennia it took to answer this question scientists gained insight into the nature of light and matter, and ultimately developed the quantum mechanical theory of the atom. This course will provide a historical perspective of important scientific discoveries and will use everyday examples to describe some of the most complex concepts in modern physics. No background in science is required. I welcome new students as well as former students who took my Chemistry of Climate Change course. I am excited to be once again working with Prisoner Express and can hardly wait to get started.*

*Andrea*



Art by Nate Lindell

**Building Book 2** -I hope many of you received your Building a Book introductory packet. If you want packet 2 in the series, please sign up. If you are new to PE and are interested in developing and writing a book this study guide is for you. We will summarize lesson 1 in packet 2 so can do some catch up. We expect there to be 4 packets over 2 years to complete this building a book course. Maia who leads this process is committed to reading your writing and proving you with useful feedback. here is what Maia has to say to you.

*Hello! My name is Maia and I am an editor running a course called Building a Book. If you are interested in writing a full book-length manuscript, either fiction (a novel) or nonfiction*



*(memoir, history, biography, etc.) I'd love for you to join us! All genres, or types of book, are welcome. If you've ever thought that you'd like to write a book and just haven't been sure how to get started, this is the course for you.*

*Building a Book is structured as a two-year program, with four packets being sent out—one every six months—with assignments designed to assist writers in the entire process of putting together a book: idea and character development, worldbuilding, mapping out a narrative, editing and refining, and putting together cover letters to shop your piece around to potential literary agents and publishers. I'm also happy to assist writers in finding information about self-publishing companies (some of whom cater specifically to inmates to help them get their work self-published).*

*To get a sense of the timeline, the packets are structured as follows:*

**Packet One (Year One):**

*Idea development  
Worldbuilding  
Important Characters*

**Packet Two:**

*Mapping out a narrative  
Book Proposals*

**Packet Three (Year Two):**

*Beginning your manuscript  
Common roadblocks and how to avoid them*

**Packet Four:**

*Editing and refining  
Writing a cover letter for your book*

*If you are interested in getting involved, let me know and I can send you the first packet! Thus far, we have worked on building out the setting as well as outlining the important characters (protagonists and antagonists) and supporting characters. The second packet will be coming in a couple of months, and the timeline is flexible enough that you can certainly catch up.*

*If you've already got an idea in mind and are eager to get started, write down a brief (1-2 pages) description of the plot you have in mind, a detailed description of your setting (the world in which your book takes place), and a list of all the characters you've thought about thus far (their names, physical description, likes and dislikes, dreams and goals, etc.). In the*

*second packet, I'll be explaining how to map out a narrative arc for your piece, so it's a good idea to start writing down the main points of your plot (the most important action points in your book) now to get a head start.*

*I've already received an outpouring of fantastic, creative ideas, settings, and characters from participants, and I'd love the opportunity to work with you on your own book!*

*Please sign up for the second packet in the signup sheet. It will only be mailed to people who sign up for it*



Art by Emilio P. Saldaña

**Chess-** David has been creating the last few chess packets in this ongoing program. Each packet will contain chess strategy, puzzles, bios of famous chess people and the games they played. Chess is the perfect metaphor for all the Prisoner Express projects in that it takes you away from your current reality and drops you into a more timeless focused mindset. We hope many of our projects can help you focus your mind and harness creative energy to help modify the environment you live within. David is incarcerated in WA. state, and appreciates how valuable a good game of chess can be. He loves the game and I so appreciate him for developing these lesson for you.

**Paralegal Project-** Many of you write with legal questions I don't know how to answer. I have an idea and we will try it out with this issue. In a previous issue of PE News, I asked for PE members with legal expertise to volunteer to answer questions. I have about 15 people who have volunteered. I have also approached some first-year law students who come to the library to study to see if they would help write answers to some

of your questions. They said yes, and I am thrilled to have their resources as part of this project. If you have a general legal question, especially a question whose answer might help others as well please send them to us. We will select several questions for our legal team to look over and respond to and in a while we will produce a packet with answers to what we feel are the most universal and beneficial questions. It may take a while but bear with us. The first step is for you to send us the questions you'd like to see answered. Please sign up for this project if you wish to receive the packet we will create after our "experts" answer your questions. If you send a legal question, please keep it direct and to the point. sending us your entire case and expecting us to help you is not realistic. instead write questions about where you are stumbling in your knowledge of the law. We do not have trained attorneys ready to help, so please keep your questions to ones we can answer and whose answers might help others. Sign up if you want to receive the packet of questions and answers.



Art by Jesse Osmun

**Cool Cats Alive in You: Freedom Incorporated-** This project is being developed by Greg from Homewood, Alabama. Greg developed Project Jump Start last year and wants to jump back in with Cool Cats Alive. Below is a description by Greg of what he and his cohorts have to offer you.

*To capture your everyday thoughts and turn them into timeless word paintings. —To become One Cool Cat, in a living picture of an empowered mind, in a rad place of freedom of its own Kind.*

*To be fully absorbed in that space, so that it's imbued into every aspect of your imagination and capacity for expression.*

*Well, now you know just what the team of Greg, Taj, Michael, Mithrellas, and Jason are striving to give you by way of "Cool Cats Incorporated".*

*An offshoot of JumpStart! 2016, we have now expanded and changed our name, as we dig our paws a bit deeper into the richest soils of poetry, the most beautiful and basic elements of this genre. "Cool Cats" will introduce everyone to the vast and complex realms of sound and imagery, in a way that is accessible but also fun and rewarding (Prose writers are invited as well, we'll explain that in a little bit).*

*Our team will introduce the formal metrics of trimeter, dimeter, and tetrameter as a vehicle for creating titles and generating ideas. Soon you'll find yourself on a word-train ride, one filled with rhythm and chug as you're whisked away into metrical charm and the many tools for creating sound gems.*

*Cool Cats truly interested in tasting the many textures of poetry and the ring that gives this genre its luster won't be left disappointed. You'll be empowered with the ability to read with a poetic eye texts from famous poets and local writers alike. You'll also be given many opportunities for experimentation and practice transferring the magic of what you have read into engineering your own compositions. Our aim is to make your experience not only fun-filled but also enriching and educational.*

*We'd also like to give participants the full range of writing options—within the scope of brief frameworks (300 words or fewer). That includes prose poetry, which is often very similar to writing short stories.*

*Such writing has its own ring and flow, incorporating literary tools that revolve around imagery and sound—but in ways that do not require line breaks. Prose poetry, in fact, reads just like prose in the sense that it is written in standard paragraph form, just as you would read an essay or a story.*

*Prose poetry can be broken into small chunks, giving budding writers the opportunity to zoom in on moments in time, making the task of writing itself relatively manageable. Whew. Not so overwhelming! — What every new writer wants to hear. — It also allows a writer to look at their own experiences as a kind of rock collection. In this way chunks of writing can build into a book of gem-like fragments for a prose-poetry book!*

*For the most ambitious participants, who want to delve into all forms along the spectrum, free verse represents a range of midpoints between metric and non-metrical forms. We will introduce you to a wide range of free verse writers including Nikki Giovanni, Lucinda Roy, Mary Oliver, Billy Collins, and Charles Simic. By learning to read these poets with an eye for literary tools along with form, you'll be empowered to read a poem again and again, appreciating it at many levels, and*

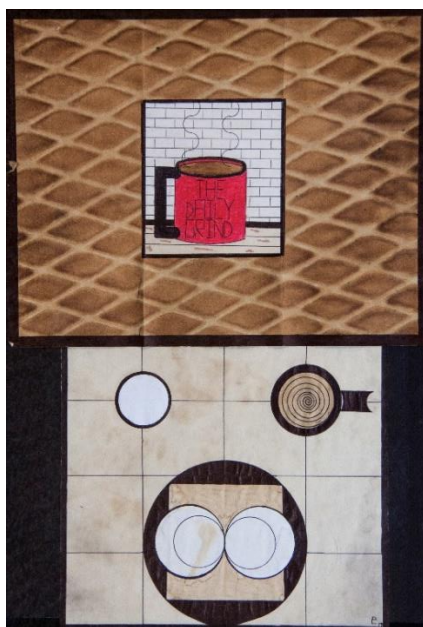


*thereby absorb it. This gift and process of osmosis is the very stuff of learning; a budding poet is born!*

*We look forward very much to having some of the old guard from Jump Start! back in the saddle with us, so that we can continue our journey toward creative community and deep connection. Indeed, many of you have become a part of our writing family. As the connections deepen, opportunities will grow. That is our aim! To empower and connect, at the deepest and broadest level.*

*With that said, we hope you'll join us for a season of Cool Cats Coming Alive!.. in the Spirit of Freedom!!... and Readiness to incorporate!*

**Recipe Project-** Last cycle we mailed out a packet of dessert recipes we gather from a survey many of you filled out in 2017. We have gone back to that survey to find the most delicious spreads and other meal ideas PE members submitted. We try to make the recipe selections match what you are able to acquire through your commissary. If you like to cook sign up for our packet of recipes and expand your culinary skills



Art by Leroy Soderoff

**ArtKnows-** Treacy leads the PE art programs and currently she has a lot of your work moving through the community in art shows. Below she describes some of the recent art shows. She also creates a newsletter that you can sign up to receive "ArtKnows. It focuses on artists and the creative process. sometimes it will include art instruction all well. Sign up for Artknows if you want to hear more about the PE art programs. **Most of the art displayed in the newsletter is part of our Coffee Art exhibit, where coffee is used as ink to color some or all of the art piece. I wish this was printed in color, so you could appreciate fully it's effect.**

Greetings from Treacy and happy 2018! There has been a number of art shows for prisoner art this past couple of months.

**"Anywhere But Here"-** In October there was the Anywhere But Here exhibition at Binghamton, showing art exploring places, states of mind, dreams, hopes, and so on, describing where you would like to be. I was very impressed with the work submitted and the audience loved seeing the work. Jeff plans to award a number of scholarships to individuals for work submitted but has been busy these past months and I haven't heard which artists he selected. I will keep you posted.....

**Coffee any one?** We already had one of the coffee art exhibition at Gimme Coffee. I overheard someone in a store tell the clerk to go to Gimme Coffee to see the great art show. That's always a good sign. Again we received many great pieces from you! The next coffee art show will be exhibited next week and will run through the month of March. **The shows are titled Prisoner Espresso**

**Animation project:** If you signed up for this project, you should have received a letter updating it in January. Originally, I had planned to have the animation based upon a donkey. However, I settled instead on the rescue of a sheep. More information will be sent out to you by April. (As you can see, we are behind in many of the projects – but don't despair!.....things do get done.....) I need a block of time to draw the stills from which you will create the remaining drawings.

**Artknows!** The winter 2018 Artknows edition, based upon Nepal's art, is on its way to the printer and will be sent to you in about two weeks – if you signed up for it. The next Artknows (which will be sent to you by May/June) will focus upon Aboriginal art. It will look at art of first-nation people in United States, Canada, Australia, Mexico, and other parts of the world. I will also look at contemporary artists who have been influenced by Aboriginal art – like one of my favorite artist, Sidney Nolan from Australia.

**Annual spring art exhibition at Cornell.** This exhibition is scheduled for April 11, so if you have anything that wants included, please send it by the end of March.

**Future ideas:** It's a dog's life. I want to hear from those are involved with a prison dog program (if there is one at your prison) and if you are not involved in the dog program, but you have observed a program in your prison. I want to hear stories how the dogs adapt to being in the prison or how the prisoners adapt to having the dogs in the prison – interesting stories that

*give an outsider the sense of a dog's life in prison. In one prison where I teach, one man attempted to commit suicide when his dog was taken away from him due to the prisoner doing a small infraction. The strange thing is that this man was scheduled to be paroled in a month.*

*I want to thank you for participating in the art program and for sending your beautiful work. I must remind everyone that we are unable to return the work. We do not have the money to return work, make copies, or forward it to another person. But please note that we highly regard the work you send, we attempt to find ways to exhibit it, and are looking for ways in which it can be archived for future generations.*

*Thanks again! Treacy*

**Themes Essays-** For me the theme essays are the heart of Prisoner Express news. We provide a word and picture cue for each month. If you submit a writing on a theme topic you receive a packet with all the writing submitted on that topic. It is a wonderful way to get mail, and to read the thoughts of others. I believe the most healing comes about from this project. As you read each other's words barriers disappear and understanding grows. Please limit your writing to 750 words on a theme. Sometimes we receive a lot of mail and it is hard to get people to type super long entries. You can always send in more than 1 entry on a theme topic if you are so moved. With all your PE submissions please be sure your name is on the writing. Please write legibly as if we are going to type it we don't want to have to guess at what you are writing. We can receive upwards of 40 to 60 writings on some topics. We select a few from previous theme packets in the hopes of inspiring more of you to write. Don't worry about grammar and spelling. Just write neatly and get your idea into words on paper. Try your hand at it.



Art by Brandon Rushing

## Upcoming word theme topics

<b>Blink of an Eye</b>	<b>Due 4/1/18</b>
<b>Flowers</b>	<b>Due 5/1/18</b>
<b>Emerging from the Fog</b>	<b>Due 6/1/18</b>
<b>Weddings</b>	<b>Due 7/1/18</b>
<b>Miracles</b>	<b>Due 8/1/18</b>
<b>Magic in the Air</b>	<b>Due 9/1/18</b>
<b>Ancestors</b>	<b>Due 10/1/18</b>
<b>Jealousy</b>	<b>Due 11/1/18</b>

*Selected writings from previous themes:*

## ALMOST (5/1/17)

### "An Almost Parent's Tale" by Carl Branson

Almost is one of those nebulous terms commonly associated with a failure of some sort. The second-place competitor can claim that he "almost won" the race. An accident survivor can claim that he was "almost killed." This parent's tale deals with both successes and failures within the embrace of the concept of "almost."

In the early fall of 1982 my wife was experiencing gastrointestinal problems. The recommended upper and lower gastrointestinal radiological exams were scheduled. This proved to be the starting line for months of emotional upheaval for us. The medical staff made the critical error of not doing a pregnancy test prior to exposing Pam's abdomen to the x-ray tests. The problem being that x-ray exposure, especially early in the first trimester, is disastrous if not fatal for the developing fetus. Yes, we later discovered that Pam was about four weeks pregnant post-conception at the time. To further complicate matters, state authorities shut down the x-ray lab on the following day for exceeding maximum allowed radiation output levels from the equipment.

The gastrointestinal testing results indicated that the digestive problems were the consequence of a pedunculated uterine fibroid tumor, which would shift and impinge on the bowel. Additional intramural and intramuscular uterine fibroid tumors were also identified. The radiologist, who was either unaware of or disregarded the pregnancy test results, recommended a hysterectomy to resolve Pam's digestive tract problems. Our immediate reaction was that this recommendation was an attempt to prevent a malpractice suit over the provider's failure to follow established pre-testing procedures; therefore, second medical opinions were in order. The first line of inquiry was to my three brothers, all of whom are doctors. Their opinion was that the fibroid tumors were far less critical than the effects of the radiation exposure on the developing zygote. Since none of my brothers specialized in OB-GYN, they recommended checking with specialists in the field, and we did check with six of them.

The consensus was a good news/bad news opinion. The good news was that the pedunculated tumor was palpable and could be manipulated through abdominal massages to

eliminate the intestinal obstruction. I became proficient with this procedure in short order. Additionally, the other fibroid tumors could be safely removed with minimal potential complications for future pregnancies. The bad news was that there was no available data regarding the potential effects of the radiation on the developing fetus. Terminating the pregnancy was recommended. Although none of the six specialists consulted would perform the abortion, they all recommended the same gynecologist for the termination procedure.

It was the abortionist who gave us the first glimmer of hope on a very dark horizon. His recommendation was to wait eight weeks, watching for a potential miscarriage. In the absence of a miscarriage, a sonogram and amniocentesis would be performed to confirm or deny damage caused by the radiation exposure.

After another eight weeks of uncertainty, the sonogram revealed what appeared to be a fully, properly formed baby with all body parts accounted for. The amnio results revealed no identifiable defects and confirmed sonogram suspicions that this was a girl.

Our miracle baby was born in July of 1983, a beautiful little blue eyed blonde. Eighteen months later she had an active baby brother. Three months thereafter, Pam was diagnosed with stage-three breast cancer, which took her from us in the summer of 1989. I was now the sole caregiver for five and six year old bundles of joy.

This arrangement lasted ten years. In 1999 the state decided that I should be in prison. For reasons beyond the scope of this missive, all contact with my children was effectively terminated. Now eighteen years later, my children are strangers to me. In the world of almost, I am, at best an "almost parent." Certainly, I have sired offspring. But did I adequately satisfy the parental responsibility to mold his children into well-adjusted productive members of society? I don't and probably won't have the answer to that question due to my current circumstances. Then, of course, is the nagging question of what if Pam and I had chosen the recommended hysterectomy back in 1982? How would that one decision have changed the current course of my personal history? Needless to say, the world of almost is plagued with an endless list of "what ifs" that could change the results of any situation--be it a race, accident or relationship.

### **"Almost Changed the Odds" by M.C.S**

Growing up black, you're assailed by a seemingly endless stream of statistics that are supposed to be relevant to you. Like computational oracles of the "black future," co-mingling the possibilities of every brown skinned human into one set of possibilities, these statistics end up dictating the flow of your life, if you let them. When I read the word "almost," and search for its significance in my own life, I come up with this: I almost defied the statistics.

As a young child I was a straight-A student. My formative years instilled in me that special sort of confidence one only gains by consistently surpassing the expectations of

those around you, by always being the one able to help his peers understand the world. Even later, when I struggled in advanced placement classes, or succumbed to adolescent malaise and stopped caring about school, I still had it in my head that I wasn't one of those kids "destined" for bad ends. Even though my family was poor, even though we lived in an area of high crime, even though I grew up in a single parent household, had no strong male role model and my mother was a drug addict, I was raised in such a way that I was never entangled by those things and grew up relatively well adjusted. I managed to get work with the federal government while in high school, and by time I was 21, I had a job with the Department of Defense, my own place, and had no problems with relationships, drugs, money or the law.

In the back of my mind there was always some smug satisfaction that I was not conforming to the statistical stereotype of the underprivileged black male. My father and my uncles had been to prison, but they expected me to be different. My friends smoked, drank and fought like crazy but made a point of keeping me out of those things. Everyone expected the best out of me and conspired to help me achieve great things and I came to judge how well I was meeting those expectations by comparing myself to the bleak statistical statement of how my life should be.

This is not to say I never got in any trouble or never did anything wrong or against the rules, but it was never anything serious enough to suggest a philosophy that would lead me to repeat those deeds. The one exception to this was a secret, a behavior that grew from a skewed perception of right and wrong in one area of life that I was never expected to discuss and would not have known how to discuss anyway. If I had revealed it to anyone who cared about me, I know now that they would have helped me. But, admitting to such serious wrongdoing felt impossible to me. Instead, I lived a life that on the surface was squeaky clean, but in private was marred by confusion and shame.

When the day came that the police knocked on my door, I knew that life as I had known it was over. I knew that I had managed to fall short of all the expectations. Despite the faith my family and friends had in me, despite overcoming a myriad of other obstacles and defying the odds in so many ways, I had become just another black man in jail--just another statistic.

Ultimately, I accept that I needed this intervention and earned these consequences. I might have self-corrected my behavior given time, but it unlikely I would have ever been able to identify the logical fallacies upon which my behavior was based without receiving outside help. My familial and fraternal bonds have also been strengthened as so many people have stood by me and supported me. I understand after years of reflection that a statistical correlation says nothing about who a person is. Still, I had lived believing that my life would change the odds for those who would come after, so that the statistics they'd see would paint a rosier picture of what they could expect from life and grant them confidence. All I can say now is that I almost managed to do it.



### **“The Last Page” by Catherine LaFleur**

The sun is blinding on this Spring Everglades morning. I hurry along on the way to meditation class because today *dada*, *brother*, a traveling monk is coming to our prison. He stands in front of the building where our class will be held; his bright orange robes flap in the breeze. *Dada* looks like an exotic peony as he waves to the line of inmates pushing past to the recreation yard. A few stop, confused at the sight of this colorful character, and wave back. But no one comes over to find out who *dada* is. Only the twelve members of class step out of the crowd.

Once inside the classroom, I sit in lotus position and clear my mind. Today I will be coloring outside the lines. *Dada* guides me with his voice to a forest glade with a calm pool. A droplet of water plinks into the pool in intervals. As I sit beside the pool, a book appears on my lap. Upon opening the book, an image of a person whom I love forms on the page. I follow *dada*'s spoken mantra silently in my head while gazing at the person's face.

May this person be whole, may this person be healthy, may this person be happy, may this person find peace.

A drop of water falls into the pool and I turn the page. Another person's image forms except this is a person I've had a conflict with. I repeat the mantra: whole...healthy...happy...peaceful. *Dada* leads me through several pages and I release each person until I come to the last page. The image that forms is indistinct, dark and murky. Suddenly there it is, the twinge like a tickle in the back of the throat right before tears begin to fall.

I can't recall too much of what happened. His face and clothes are blank to me. I only see the back of his head on the page, thick hair trailing slightly over his collar. Of course, he had a knife. They usually have something: a knife, a gun, brute strength or the element of surprise.

He doesn't speak at first, just punches me in the face. I fall onto stuffed trash bags. One of them breaks as I land on it. Next, he's holding the blade to my face just under my left eye. I try to remember what I learned at a rape awareness seminar I attended in college.

Don't resist. Don't struggle. Don't fight. Don't do anything that might cause your attacker to kill you.

My skirt rips along with a part of my mind, which flies away from my body. The assault seems to drag on and on but is over in minutes. I'm safe in my detached refuge watching what is happening to my body lying on the ground.

I can't feel anything in this moment, not even anger, which comes later. I'm just relieved it looks like he's going to be done soon. He groans and goes limp. It's over. I snap back into my body. He's heavy and leaning on my chest. I can't catch my breath, but I try to push him off. Then his fingertips brush across my face, closing my eyelids as he turns my head away to the wall. I'm waiting for the blade on my throat, but he pushes hard on my shoulders and gets to his feet. Then he's gone.

The cold air slices my body; rolling to my knees I push my skirt back down and hold the torn edges together.

The car isn't too far away. I fumble with my keys and manage to lock the door. Finally, I get the car open and collapse into the passenger seat, crawl behind the steering wheel and engage the automatic locks. I sit and sit until I start screaming, shaking and banging the car with my fists. I'm so mad at myself. Why didn't I fight him, hit him with my fist or at least with my big purse?

But that was years ago and today I am sitting by a calm pool of water. Droplets hit the surface one by one. Like an old soldier, I am looking at this wound clear of shrapnel and long healed. Almost. Almost, I am saying the words with gritted teeth and turning the last page.

May this person be whole, may this person be healthy, may this person be happy, may this person be at peace.

## **ACCOMPLISHMENTS (6/1/17)**

### **“Cavalcade of Proud Moments” by Carl Branson**

Philosophically I find the topic “Accomplishments” an exercise in self-aggrandizement. How do I reveal the various proud moments from my nearly 70 years of life without coming across as an arrogant so-and-so? Avoiding the “you think you're better/smarter than me” inferences which will no doubt be drawn from what I consider major achievements is all but impossible. For me, it's not a matter of being better/smarter than anyone else, but a matter of being blessed with parents and teachers who forever challenged me to ‘think outside the box’ and who compelled me to continually expand my horizons of experience. Other environmental factors together with inherent talents certainly played a part in the equation of my life

The first feather in my cap came in the sixth grade when I took first place in the school's science fair. At 10 years old, I designed and built a three-note transistor organ and was able to explain the judges how the sample could be expanded to a full instrument keyboard. Taking top honors in science fairs continued until my sophomore year in High School.

My Grammar School years of studying electronic circuit design paid dividends during High School. My first job at age 16 was as a radio/T.V. repair technician. It was a time of transition for the home entertainment industry. The traditional vacuum-tube technology was being replaced by the “new-fangled” transistor—both of which I had been “playing with” for the prior 6 years or so.

The apex of my achievements came as I forded the magical age of 30. Again, my study of electronics was at the roof of this proud moment. I designed a specialty application circuit which according to all published texts and comments by engineers with doctorates in electronics claimed was impossible to achieve. The company's legal department took a full year to process the paperwork for the patent that subsequently was awarded.

Harassment by the internal revenue service was during my 30's opened the door to a new “hobby” (read: obsession) for me: Legal research and litigation. One court

victory resulted in an ego-inflation experience. Here, the attorney that brought a garnishment action against me, which the judge just quashed at my request, offered me a job immediately following the hearing resulting in his defeat. Not bad for an electronics specialist lacking formal training in law.

Disruptive as the prison experience has been regarding achieving prior life goals, new horizons for personal gratification have presented themselves. The two most important areas relate to endeavors I would never have considered in the "real world". The realm of primary importance arose when I was hired as a teacher's aide in the prison's education department. Over the roughly 6 years that this assignment lasted I was able to assist dozens of my fellow felons obtaining their state mandated functional literacy certificates and to pass their G.E.D. tests. The second domain is creative writing. This ego-centric obsession began with a prisoner constructed curriculum approved by the education department under the guise of adult enrichment. I was hooked! The unit's monthly newsletter published a few of my short stories and about two dozen of my poems. Other publication credits include poems appearing in "prison living" and "cell door" magazines as well as "prison express" anthologies.

For this dyed in the wool techno-nerd to make the transition from engineering specialist to author/poet is viewed as an accomplishment equal to obtaining a circuit design patent.

Am I better/smart than anyone else? In those areas my talents and experienced have been developed this might well be a correct conclusion. *BUT*, and that is a "but" in caps and bold print, I am green with envy of many others I have met whose talents and experience lie in areas I have never had the opportunity to explore.

### **"Against All Odds" by Nate A. Lindell**

It amazes me, what I've achieved, given my few resources and the massive resources of the system that sentenced me to a life as only three-fifths of a human being.

When I arrived in prison in 1998, I couldn't draw a good-looking stick figure, didn't even try.

Then, several years into solitary confinement, barred from litigation by the three-strikes rule and large debts, I decided to master drawing. First, I did self-portraits, looking at myself in my mirror—they came out looking crude, misshapen, scary, of use only to a psychologist wondering how I saw myself.

For a couple years I plinked away at drawing, in between studying, writing, poetry, etc.

When I entered the WI prison system, my writing ability was scored at the 12.9 grade level on the TABE. But I despised writing and would have scowled at anyone who suggested I write anything beyond personal letters.

After a good 1,000 pages of legal writing, I realized that I needed to master our language to be a skilled litigator. And poetry is the heart of any language.

There was a story I recalled, about Sylvester Stallone having recited Edgar Allan Poe's poems to help him overcome his speech impediment. I did as Stallone did, recited Poe's

poems, which I found intriguing. I ended up reading everything I could get of Poe's.

Thus began...three, five years of liberal-arts self-education, made possible by free books sent to me by stores that sent books to prisoners at no cost.

I studied the origin and history of English poetry, classic lit., essay writing, rhetorical principles. E.g., I wrote out copies of *On Writing Well*, *Creating Short Fiction*, and took extensive notes and quotes from books on mathematics, anthropology, psychology, etc.

Writing the material out, I found, made it stick to my noodle better, and made the info available when the book was gone.

I had no visitors (other than a soul-severing Jehovah's witness, who was effectively an anti-visitor), no T.V., and usually no one around me to socialize with. It was hard time, hurt me emotionally, psychologically; but I fought it by educating myself.

It was obvious to anyone with eyes that the rural folk running this place (the WI Secure Program Facility, W-S.P.F) were intent on making us miserable, degrading us, so they'd feel better about their own sorry lots in life—turning keys, looking at prisoner's buttocks for contraband, writing misspelled tickets because a prisoner had a ketchup packet isn't something you want to be lauded for at your funeral.

Their ill will fueled my effort at developing my artistic and intellectual abilities.

There came a point when psychology staff didn't want to talk with me. One once said, "Why are you asking me? You know more than me!"—and she said it sadly, not sarcastically.

I persuaded the head psychologist here—Dr.Scott Rubin-Asch—to do an I.Q. test on me, figuring if it was high enough, maybe mensa'd let me join and I could find some intellectual companionship. Dr.Rubin-Asch did four sub-tests for the WAIS-4, through the glass, in a visiting booth. Afterwards, he said he'd do the remaining subtests the next day.

It was a year before he again saw me, at which time he did the full he did the full WAIS-3, not the WAIS-4.

He dragged out telling me the results for another several months.

When he eventually told me the results of the WAIS-4 sub-tests ("all scores were in the exceptionally high range") and that my full-scale I.Q. score on the WAIS-3 was 144, I realized why he'd waited a year to finish testing and used the WAIS-3, not the WAIS-4.

From studying statistics, I knew that my score was one-point shy of being two standard deviations above the high-end of average. You only need one standard deviation above average (i.e. 130 points) to be eligible for Mensa. It's like that my score was higher than Dr.Rubin-Asch's, which—given that I'm only three-fifths of a human—likely offended his comforting delusion of superiority.

With my I.Q. tests done, I implemented my behavior-modification program—the "High-Risk Officer Program".

Apparently, they disliked my program, because they shipped me off to federal custody...

My art, which I continue practicing, drastically improved. You can see samples of it on <https://www.prisoninmates.com/NateLindell303724>. Two collections of my poems and songs, and the start of a volume of creepy stories are also there.

My writing and my art/drawings impress everyone who reads or sees them.

With no familial support, with no money, with a life sentence, with over 14 years of solitary confinement eating at me, with a few friends and many hates/enemies, it seems to me that a person may still accomplish a lot.

Maybe—although I hold little hope of it—American society will come to respect my struggle against all odds, respect me as a human being, and permit me to join in a society that's worth me being a part of. My talent, I think, could be put to better use than suing and writing about prison staff's crimes against humanity

## ZOO (7/1/17)

by Michael John Reese

As I look back I try to think of my experiences with zoo's. I first remember a school trip to the zoo at about seven years old with Robert E. Lee Middle School in Richmond Virginia. How exciting it all was! I remember feeding a giraffe and its long blue tongue, the night creatures exhibit. Giant bats, bugs, spiders. But then my mind beings to make new accusations. Comparisons between jails, prisons, and inmates. How both the zoo animals and inmates are removed by force from their natural habitats. How both are confined to small unhealthy artificial habitats. How "people" "see" both zoo animals and inmates both from far away through glass and bars (for safety's sake) how most people never understand that the small piece of the life they observe is not an accurate portrayal of the real day to day life either animals or inmates. I think how inmates are thought of as "animals". I think of how after a few short years in captivity most zoo animals and inmates alike are no longer able to survive in the "wild" on their own anymore. At least not without a lot of help and training. I think how the people are given the false impression that they know how the animals and inmates really live, think, act, who and what they really are. Based on just a few moments of visiting. I think of the common ways in which both suffer developing mental health problems, from being confined and denied a healthy natural outlet. How both have a, on average, reduced life span and or quality of life. How both are "Humanly" punished or "put down" when they react negatively to a world they do not understand or relate to. I think how both the zoos and it's support structure and the "justice" system and its support structure both gain millions of dollars for themselves from both government and private sources. How no matter how much "they" say that they have the best interests at heart of society and animals and inmates alike. They undeniable have a vested interest in perpetuating the existing system. Even if it's at the expense of the ones they are entrusted to keep and care for much less the society at large. How if you as

the "keepers" do they think the existing way of things is for the best. Most will "honestly" say yes. Even though of if not all scientific data shows that it is not for the best of anyone but the system itself. I think how there are small underfunded groups fighting for better care of both zoo animals and inmates alike and how almost no one pays much attention to anything those groups say or do. Did you know that many zoo animals have to be medicated to keep them from harming themselves and others? Many zoo animals tend to chew out their own fur as a result of stress brought on by their captivity and become antisocial even extremely violent in ways that do not "naturally" do. Many inmates also have to be medicated due to mental health problems caused by their captivity that they did not "naturally" exhibit before. I think how very few know of the confusion, fear, and feelings of loss both kinds of "animals feel". The mournful cries in the dark the confusion from not understanding how they came to be where they are. The pain of losing loved ones, mates, herd mates, offspring, etc. I think how access to both zoo animals and inmates is a highly restricted thing for (safety's sake) I think how neither the zoo animals or inmates have any real power over anything that goes on in their daily lives (while in captivity). Yes, I see that in every aspect of my current situation and how it alters my thinking and life. I see that as a child before my own captivity. I thought zoos were wonderful places. And now I think they should all be abolished in favor of wildlife preserves. And then the truly odd thought occurs to me. Could such thing be the answer for inmates? I mean look at Australia! Ha! Ha! I joke. I also wonder will I ever look at a zoo and see wonder again. Am I the only person that sees such a clear comparison between a zoo and prisons and jails?

by Leo Cardez

3:30 A.M.

My eyes pop open. My internal clock is set around our "feeding" schedule. My stomach churns. I'm hungry; it's been over fifteen hours since my last meal.

3:45 A.M.

I hear the jingle of the CO's (correctional officer) keys, the crackle of his radio, chuck holes (feeding ports) opening and closing, and the creaking wheels of the food cart...breakfast is served. I silently pray for a decent breakfast. Nope: two pieces of grey mystery meat, two pieces of stale white bread, and a small carton of skim milk (slightly warm and questionably safe). I hand it to my celly (cellmate). I'm not THAT hungry yet. I've lost 12 pounds in the last week. I can see my ribs.

3:50 A.M.

The CO has returned for the tray. Somehow my celly managed to scarf all his food down in less than a couple of minutes. He burps loudly.

\*It's amazing what we're able to endure when we have no choice. I don't even notice the stench of this place anymore.



I'm somehow able to block out the relentless noise and sleep through the blinding, ever present light.

4:00 A.M.

With nothing else to do, I go back to bed. I ponder if I came to prison as my punishment or for punishment.

7:00 A.M.

It is Saturday, yard day. Today we get two or three hours outside on a concrete slab. We make sure our cell is in compliance and stand eagerly by the cell door. I'm starting to feel like the family beagle waiting to be let out.

7:30 A.M.

Still waiting. I'm starting to get nervous, palms sweating and biting my nails.

8:00 A.M.

We got the bad news. Yard is cancelled – apparently there was a light drizzle. Without a window I have no way to confirm or dispute it. I'm upset; this makes three weeks in a row. I need some fresh air. I need to see the sun. I need out of this 8x10 sinkhole.

8:30 A.M.

I read. I read anything I can get my hands on. I don't discriminate. I'm not too good for an urban novel and won't shy away from a historical nonfiction text either. I average two hundred pages a day. I don't know what I would do if I couldn't read. My family sends me books. I request books from various organizations that donate books to prisoners. I trade for books: book for book or sometimes meal tray for book.

\*They say there is a prison library book cart, but I think it's just a jailhouse myth.

Today I'm reading a George Washington biography. I'm on page 240 of 678; I should be able to finish it by the weekend. Frankly, it's much more interesting than I thought it would be. \*

10:30 A.M.

Cock-in-a-sock (encased sausage) and beans: lunch. I pick through the beans before eating, last week I chipped my tooth on a pebble.

11:00 A.M.

Workout: Push-ups, sit-ups, burpees, and squats. I wish I could do more but I'm limited in my tiny cell. Also, our deficient diet isn't conducive to muscle growth – I tire quickly.

Noon.

The nurse is on our desk passing out meds. It seems as if half the prison is on some type of medication. I once considered faking "crazy" in order to get some psych meds that could help me sleep. I still think about it sometimes. My celly is at the door trying to steal a peek. He's a "gunner" (someone who masturbates when a woman walks down the tier). We've talked

about it. He knows how I feel about it. We look at each other waiting for it to pop off. It's torture just being in the cell with him.

\*He's a bug (weird, demented, odd, institutionalized). I'm pretty sure he has PTSD. He's been locked up for over twenty-seven years, many of those in max solitary. He gets panic attacks and is paranoid that "they're listening." He often talks to himself (and answers himself) and has mentioned suicide more than once. Last week he went to the boom boom room (suicide watch room) where they stripped him down and watched him for three days. He said he spent most of his time masturbating to the nurses coming to check on him.

1:00 P.M.

Cleaning time. I scrub out the toilet to wash my sheets and clothes. I take a thorough bird bath in the sink. I mop the floor and wipe down the walls with a rag. I've become OCD since arriving to prison.

1:30 P.M.

The animals are awake. My celly stands on the sink to yell in the vent and talk to his buddies in the cell below us. He sends and receives kites (notes) via lines thrown out our chuck holes tangled together with other inmate lines. He knows how to "jail" (used as a verb). He can "pop the chuck" (open our feeding ports from the inside) and knows all the angles to get what he wants.

3:00 P.M.

The neighbor decides to "shut it down" (making so much noise it's impossible for inmates to talk or hear each other). I'm grateful.

4:00 P.M.

It's our shower day – once a week for ten minutes. I grab my shower shoes, can't forget them, last month I found a steaming pile of shit in the shower. The water starts out freezing cold and quickly heats up to scorching hot making it virtually impossible to get all the soap out of my hair and eyes before the CO is back to escort me back to my cell.

4:15 P.M.

I return to my cell to find my celly pasting magazine pages over our overhead light. It's against regulation and could cost us a ticket, but I understand, so I don't say anything. He's stuck on the top bunk, just inches from the blaring light and constant buzzing twenty-four hours a day.

4:30

Dinner: more cold slop. I check the veggie mix for insects and insect parts. I spill some fruit juice. It quickly stains the cement floor – I wonder what they put into the stuff.

I save some bread in case my pet comes to visit tonight: a baby mouse. I think he's given up on me. I don't usually have any food for him. It's funny I used to have a strong aversion to rodents – prison cured me.

Well, that's it for food or movement for the day.

6:00 P.M.

I'm tired of reading, but not tired enough to fall asleep. I daydream. I imagine different realities. I'm not in prison. I go back in time and make different choices. In my dreams I still matter.

7:30 P.M.

Mail call. I have nothing to send out, but anxiously await any incoming mail. I love getting mail but am also anxious about what it might be. I don't think I can handle any more bad news: a death in my family, a denial of some sort, a confiscation notice.

Nothing. It's both a relief and a stab in the heart. I start to obsess about a letter I'm waiting for from my family. Are they mad at me? I rerun every conversation we've had and dwell on any slight. I feel abandoned. Buried alive.

10:00 P.M.

My day is over – nothing left to look forward to. I pray. I slip off to another dreamless slumber.

## KEEPING CALM (8/1/17)

### “Keeping Calm” by Alfred MangaBell

Keeping calm: to describe a state of situation so alarming to the mind that the person exposed to it would otherwise panic if not for strong self-control. There I was many times. However, there is one significant instance was when I was about 14 years old. Born on the Atlantic Coastal Line in Guinea (West Africa), sea fishing was part of my favorite past time. One summer evening my friends and I went to the Sea to get some fish from the fish men's Pirogue (“Banana Boat”).

The fish from the fish men's Pirogue were always the easiest way to catch fish after the fish men retrieve their daily catching, as there were always plenty of fish they left in the Pirogue, which fish kids like myself would then reach to collect.

This evening the Pirogue was close by the shore when my friends and I climbed into it. So busy in amassing our “found treasure” that I did not notice the Pirogue had drifted from shore to ease its way farther out in the Sea. When I felt that I had collected more than enough fish in my bag, I jumped in the water without looking where I was situated in rapport to the shore-thinking that my feet would have landed on the seafloor, I found myself sinking deeper than I expected.

Panic? Well not really. Adrenaline rush? Definitely. For at that precise moment my whole being shifted to the instinct to survive the situation. There I reflexively started moving my hands and feet in a swimming motion to propel myself upward. The situation wasn't frightening at that moment, until my head emerged to find out that the pirogue had indeed drifted far from shore and gravity was strongly pulling me downward. Not to mention that darkness had fallen

upon the whole Port, so there was no one near to see me, nor were my friends inside the Pirogue in sight.

Keeping calm. A few minutes later I was walking on the sand with my fish bag and all its contents, my heart pounding in my chest so strongly that I could hear and feel the pressure on my ears. If it wasn't for “keeping calm” that day, panic would have cost me myself. Without anyone near to see me, it would have been even more costly to my family and friends because the Sea is able to take the human Soul and forever keep the body. However, by exercising self-control I succeeded in keeping calm and thus Mother Sea released me unharmed.

### “How Not to Burn” by Catherine LaFleur

Prison is not a nice place. Even Camp Prisoney Land, where I am incarcerated, can be a difficult dark environment. As an institution prison is full of sexualized violence against women through intimidation, rape, harassment, and other forms of misogyny. When you spend a significant amount of time in prison, you notice a look on the female inmate's faces. An anxious, closed look, as if we are frightened by something but can't talk about it. And you can't talk about it. Because to take any of the available remedies is to mark yourself out for further attentions.

The resulting stress in my own life caused me to burn. A constant fire was lit in my belly and this induced anger, rage, and a desire for vengeance. Men rape you with force but women rape with words and emotional manipulation. Everything became a personal attack and I fought back. The proper scale of things tilted askew and reality was slowly shredded. As a person of French and Scottish descent, these desires whip me into hotheaded tempers. I couldn't go on living this way. And I didn't want to continue to be that person.

At some point, I decided I don't want to feel bad. I don't want to feel angry. I don't want to feel like a victim. I don't want to be heartbroken. Growing up in a Christian religious cult where you were not allowed to have feelings that weren't pretty did not prepare me for life. Everyone said or implied that dark feelings were not accepted. That you weren't really a solid Christian if you had dark feelings, in fact, you might be possessed by a demon and in need of an exorcism. Even then I had a lot of dark feelings. I tried all my life to run away from them, but old wounds chased me until I ended up in prison.

Eventually I found some measure of peace to take me through life on the inside. These are a few of the things that keep me calm. To start, learning how to breathe and meditate is helpful to maintaining calm. If you haven't taken classes on breathing, then you are probably doing it wrong. I took the Prison Smart Program, which is offered around the country to incarcerated people. I learned that my emotions are attached to my rate of breathing. Any female who has been through Lamaze labor coaching can tell you this, but I never thought to apply it to my daily life.

The program teaches rhythmic breathing cycles that help to calm you. I developed a specific intention, with this breath I choose peace, with this breath I choose freedom. I

learned how to meditate. Taking the Siddha Meditation program, also offered nationwide in prisons, provided a lot of information on how to do this. Guru Maya taught me to chant "Om Namah Shivaya" and how to find the still spaces inside of me. This led to meditative walking, as there is a track here. Sometimes I can spend an entire afternoon walking. Not talking to another, not listening to the radio. Just walking. It takes three miles to clear my mind.

Reading books, uplifting novels and genuine life stories, both helped and entertained me. Reading these helped me to empathize with characters and place myself in their shoes. Soon I began to have empathy for others. I got a job as a law clerk helping people with their cases, and was assigned to be the legal aid in the SHU. Helping people who are in a worse situation than yourself keeps you humble and mindful.

I also became a part of the Alternatives to Violence Community. This is a program I have worked within for years. Learning how to tap into the Transforming Power is life changing. Using tools of Expecting the Best, Respecting Yourself, Caring for Others, Thinking Before Reacting, and Asking for a Non-Violent Solution. For years I've been working on the exercises in the AVP manual with the other facilitators. Some of whom are completely annoying and obnoxious, still I work the exercises.

The opportunity to practice these ideas in my daily life has changed me on a fundamental level. I've learned how to actively listen, how to place myself in someone else's shoes, and how to release my anger in a non-violent way. My anger has slowly dissipated.

Sometimes the loneliness and isolation of prison becomes too much. Cruelty is not a personality trait, it's a habit. I started feeding the cats and luring them to lie in my lap where I would comb and pet them. Their purring is hypnotic. Petting soft creatures makes your heart rate go down and lowers your blood pressure. I volunteer to babysit dogs, Golden Retrievers and Labs, from the service dog program. Lying in a field of grass and being licked by dogs on your palms and the soles of your feet is infinitely more enjoyable than the Old Testament would lead you to believe. Throwing the ball is therapeutic. Feeding the ducks and their ducklings is also soothing. They are like an adoring fan club and it's funny to see them run waddling on webbed feet running to a bread crumb fest. Animals are always happy to see you.

Lastly, I started writing. There have been two writing programs here Artspring and Exchange4change. But Prisoner Express was the first program I started with. Prisoner Express is still one of the most important parts of my life. I usually stick to creative non-fiction about my life. The writing prompts are therapeutic and help me to put the past in perspective. Writing is an exercise in which you, the writer, want to be known and to tell your story. It creates emotional intimacy with other people. The readers of Prisoner Express may know more about me than many of my friends and family. And I feel I know some of them in the same way. I enjoy reading the essays. Every time a packet comes, I stay up late in the night reading. I feel like I am part of a community that is helping me to become a better writer. But again, that is what happens when you write.

You become known to others. No matter how impersonal you try to make your writing the truth about yourself leaks out around the edges. Being a part of this community, writing about both the pain and the farce of my existence brings calm.

And on that note, I would like to thank the two gentlemen who complimented my writing/ Also, in no order, a short list of writers I have enjoyed reading but by no means the whole list. Thank you, Mr. Matthew Tomlinson, for your amusing story No Grace, but did you have to kill Midnight, the dog? Thank you to Ms. Shannon Guess Richardson for your brave story about pregnancy in prison. Thank you to Ms. Kwaneta Harris for your amazing Brown Baby story from 2016. And last thank you to J. Bauhaus for your biker stories, to Bobby Bunderson for his Toy story and to Cesar Hernandez for your many flash pieces, my favorite of which is an older one about the meaning of Security that I have taped to my locker lid. Thanks to all the many other writers whom I have enjoyed and still enjoy reading. I am honored to be included in the anthologies with you.

## LIFE'S PURPOSE (9/1/17)

By Jimmy Ray O'Kelley

As a human being it is impossible to definitively say what my one true purpose in life is. Throughout my life its purpose has varied with the different stages and circumstances. So, for me, life's purpose, has been to endure, thrive or survive the moment. Thereby, fulfilling the purpose of that moment.

In childhood, life's purpose progressed in stages of apparent necessity. Early on it was just making it to Saturday morning so that I could eat Fruity Pebbles and watch Scooby Doo.

At adolescence it was trying to get "things." Things your "rich" friends had.

As I grew in age, so did the seriousness of what I imagined my life's purpose to be. The greatest of all always seemed to be survival. A broken home, gangs, police, drugs, public housing, death and prison.

Yes, depending on how a person grows up shapes his perception of what life's purpose means. Survival becomes a necessity, and necessity becomes life's purpose. As sensitive as it may be, it is reality.

Luckily and gracefully, I have survived all things, including prison. Which has brought a new purpose in life: to end the cycle.

I have a new life's purpose. One that contrasts with all the things, desires, and thoughts that shaped my definition of life and purpose for so much of my existence. One that has everything, to do with others and little to do with me. I mean wouldn't life for everyone be more joyful, peaceful, and fulfilling. If our neighbor's life's purpose was to help with the next man?

God has blessed me with three sons! My purpose is to try to ensure that they don't have to make their life's purpose survival. I do not believe that prison denies a man or woman



the ability to play an active, instructive and influential role in the lives of their children. No, it's quite the opposite. Experience is one of the greatest tools in life. Accompanied with love, desire, will, initiative and prayer, it is possible to fulfill life's purpose of making out children's stay on this planet a better one than what we had.

For me, I find no cause more honorable than to be a father who contributes to the wellness of the lives of my children. Prison walls may physically separate me from my sons, but a purposeful life must tear down barriers, break stereotypes and let love guide its steps toward a better day.

Yes, there will be trial and tribulation, all the peaks and valleys. But what in life comes easily that is truly purposeful? I am not surprised at all that behind prison walls I realized the most noble purpose for me: FATHERHOOD

### **"Life Has Purposes" by Brian Lowe**

I am not a believer in that life has a purpose. I believe that Life has multiple purposes. Some are shared by all Life in general, narrowing down all the way to each individual person's unique and personal purpose.

I'll briefly expound upon Life's purpose in general to start. All living beings have the purpose of living, growing, reproducing and dying. Everything that is alive has mastered one of these aspects, thus has served Life's purpose. In past was alive the present is alive or if the present is dead, future-will be dead.

The next category is also general but more narrowly focused than all Life, is humanity collectively. Humankind has the same purposes as the rest of Life, plus many more based on the special position they hold—that of being the only known intelligent being anywhere. In truth, many of these purposes are also great responsibilities. Some of the purposes in this category are simple, like long term planning, and others are so complex that only our entire accumulated pool of knowledge allows us to even guess they exist. Use your head and think about humanity's role in Life and you will get a peek at the tip of the iceberg.

Now, to the Life's purpose that most people focus on: Their individual sense of purpose and meaning in Life, what makes Life worth living. Remember this, if you don't have a purpose in life, you are just an actor, never a director. You must find your own purpose, and here is how to get started:

First, you must know yourself, inside and out, before you can begin to identify your purpose. Second, once you have a hint of your purpose, you must formulate a plan to guide you to it. Third, do not be afraid to revise your plan. Things change. You cannot see the future, stuff happens. You can either work around it towards your purpose or you can surrender and lose your purpose. Lastly, be true to yourself and your purpose.

There are many gradations and degrees of Life's Purpose, the key being to remember you are unique and what works for one may not work for another. So, if something does not work for you, don't let it discourage you from your purpose, and try something else.

## **PROTECTED (10/1/17)**

### **"Protected" by Shaun Blake**

About thirteen years ago things became clearer to me; for the first time in my life I didn't despise myself. I decided to stay human(e). I softened inside. The system may have hold of my worldly instincts—my emotions, I found, are mine alone. I just needed them to learn how to keep them conscious.

One of the terrible things the American justice system has tried to do is persuade us that mere impulses, or "mere" feelings, are of no account. While at the same time robbing us of our power over our natural world: What we feel or don't feel, what we do or don't do, makes no difference anymore. They try to make us vanish, and not be heard from again, to banish us from the stream of history.

All of society should question this.

Our personal relationships and seemingly helpless gestures are what really matter; an empathetic gesture, an embrace, a tear, a word of compassion...have value and power. We might not be able to stop our societal death once here; we're now without normal power, if they could make us stop loving—that would be the real tragedy. They can't do that. It's the one thing they can't do. They can make us say anything, but they can't make us believe it. They can't get inside us. No, if we can feel that staying human(e) is worthwhile, even when it can't have any worthwhile result in our external environment we have beaten them.

They can spy on us, control us physically, manipulate our actions and thoughts, but if we keep our heads we can still outwit them. With all their cleverness they never understood how to master controlling what another human being is truly feeling. Because there isn't a way of doing this, we may give this information temporarily, it can't be taken.

Gradual wearing down by sleeplessness, solitude, constant light or darkness, deprecation of human(e) needs can be inflicted, but if our objective is to stay human(e)—stay emotional beings—what difference does it ultimately make? They can't alter our emotions. They can lay bare everything that we have done or said or thought; but our inner hearts, our true essences, remain protected inside. Our emotional independence is irrevocable, our protection. I know this truth. We all need to learn it.

### **"The Vow" By Sheila K. LaBarre**

A child should be protected. That responsibility belongs to the mother. One could say it also belongs to the father, or caregiver. Regardless, every child should be protected from harm of any kind. This is a fact that cannot be disputed.

I never felt protected as a child. How could I? My mother had willingly married, procreated with, lived with, and refused to divorce my devoutly alcoholic father. Any subject could and did trigger loud, lengthy, frightening arguments between them. They seemed to thrive on this chaos. Peace was rare in the home.

My mother maintained the household. My father worked for the state in highway construction. Monday through Friday he left early for work and there he was his bosses' favorite employee and his coworkers' friend. It was at home that he exhibited volcanic rages lasting over twenty-four hours many times, verbal abuse, physical violence, destruction to our meager household items. I've tried to forget so many painful memories. He never protected me from anything or anyone.

Most damaging to me is the realization that my mother deliberately failed to protect me from him. When I begged her to leave him, she gave the same, bizarre response. She said, "Sheila, I took a vow for life when I married Manuel." So, her life included witnessing and participating in the constant abuse I suffered as a child and teenager.

If I think about those awful days my mind can still imagine the odor of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, whiskey, or moonshine. These are not pleasant memories. They are the doorway to flashbacks of my horrible childhood, echoes of violence and rage. I've become indifferent to emotional pain. I've closed that door and sealed it with my mind. After all, crying is a choice. Isn't it?

When Daddy drank alcohol, he would not stop until he became so inebriated that he threatened to kill all of us. This helped to encourage my three brothers to marry and move out as teenagers. It also was the reason my oldest sister married as a teenager. That left my mother, my sister who is five years older, and me. We were the ones he threatened to kill almost every weekend. The worst childhood memory of mine is when daddy, drunk and homicidal, chased the three of us through a tall cornfield in darkness close to midnight. I was about five years old. I can still hear the maniacal breathing as he ran in a cornrow directly beside the one in which my mother and I ran. The moon was full and it seemed to be watching us, guiding us, and protecting us. We heard him cursing, ranting, and finally retreating toward the house.

We walked, jumping into ditches to hide whenever car lights appeared on the old, blacktop road. My right hand was swollen from being hit by a metal can full of anti-freeze that my father had thrown at my mother's face. I had protected her by blocking it with my little hand. After walking for about seven miles we reached my brother's house. I was in shock. They did not take me to a doctor. I awoke the next day, early morning, alone. My mother had abandoned me to go see about my father.

To survive in this hostile environment, I invented imaginary friends. Chak, Chardon, Serdic, and Pinky were unique and kind to me. I would enter a dark closet, close the door, and talk to them in the closet. Derdic and Pinky were Chak and Chardon's children. They wore fur clothes and had long, dark hair. They appeared to me as often as I needed them. I never told anyone about them, until now.

I'm in prison. The closet is gone. In here, the only person looking out for me is me. It's another hostile, loud, irritating environment. I have to be vigilant, careful, selective, and at ease with associates. I do not trust many inmates. How could I? Many befriend, manipulate, lie, and deceive. They

hypocritically defy the tenets of their monotheist religion. They loudly pray over state provided meals and then stuff their shirt or panties with stolen, state food. They claim to be Jewish and still gorge on pork skins or bacon. They claim to be Christian and still steal, lie, and sing in church right after orally swabbing the vulva of their girlfriend. It's enough to make a Wiccan like me cast my own spell of protection!

Time is a friend and an enemy. It holds us suspended in fleeting, happy, moments. It spins and replays the horror of an abusive childhood. We cannot go back in time to undo or relive any aspect of our existence. Like a mysterious shark swimming in the deep, dark, sea we must keep moving forward.

### **"Guardian Angel" by Dillon James Gresham**

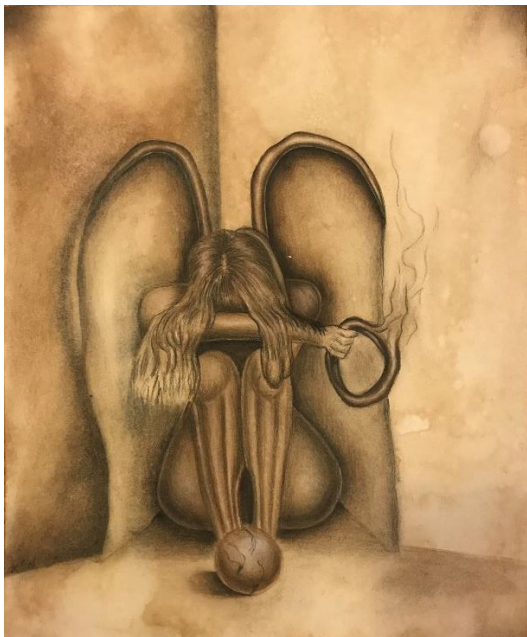
My father died in Jacksonville, Florida back in 1994 when I was only 3 years old. Due to a ton of hardships and circumstances, I didn't get to live a normal life. None of my biological family would accept me, so DCF (foster care) took over. I spent a good deal of my time in and out of institution group homes and from one abusive family to the next. I was running away by 7, and fully involved in the streets by 8, then being arrested by 9.

I got slammed into life through the Fast Track. After my first arrest, it just became standard to go to JDC, then get out and run away, back to the streets and away from foster care. I eventually got affiliated and moved into bigger and better crimes as life progressed. After JDC, I started Juvenile Programs then advanced to County Jail at 17, youthful offender programs, and then the Chain gang. Right now, I'm sitting in the County Jail on 23-hour Maximum Security Lockdown waiting to go to trial for a Capital Murder Case. I'm 27 years old and I'm looking at the death penalty. I never got to experience an actual childhood, never even got to enjoy my teenage years. My whole life has been nothing but experience after experience in the school of hard knocks.

My life wasn't entirely bad, however. Through the numerous life-threatening situations, I've surpassed, I'm still breathing, I'm still healthy, and all my body parts still function properly. Though I have many battle scars, nothing has ever been internally critical. There are many times that I reminisce, and I realize how lucky I am. My father has protected me this whole time. He has never left me; he is my Guardian Angel. Shot, stabbed, bitten, jumped, run-over, hit by a van, overdosed on medicine, suicide attempts, drowning, falls from extreme heights, and rape. I've survived it all, and to look at me from the outside you'd never know the whole story. I've moved all over and been established in Florida, Minnesota, Iowa, Maine, and Wisconsin, in multiple cities, and never established real friendships or relationships. I've always been too wild. And now, I pay for that with loneliness, but I thank my Guardian Angel for protecting me from death, and fake friends, and scandalous women, and all those times I should have been arrested for some pretty bad things but got away.

Though it may seem that I've had no protection, it takes the truth to see how much I really had. I've made it through life with some pretty good luck considering, and

nothing permanently damaged. I'm alive, and my Guardian Angel has used the legal system to give me breaks and vacations, but never permanently took me from the world. So, in dying, my father found a way to keep me protected by guarding me through life.



Art by Christopher Newhouse

## Picture Themes

PE also provides picture cues to spark your imagination and hopefully inspire you to put pen to paper. If you submit a word or a picture theme you will receive a packet with the writings from the other participants. It is a great way to get mail, and it is fun to see how different people respond to the same writing cue. Everyone can see something different in each topic, and yet given the common thread of being incarcerated that you the authors live within, I think your writing often touches the members of PE in a deep way. Incarceration often leads to isolation, and at times imbalance. Writing helps keep you centered, balanced and more in touch with the truth of who you really are, and people reading what you wrote benefit in the same way. Think about the books you read and how they have helped you. Understand that the authors of those books also benefit and complete something in themselves when they write. When you write for our program, not only can you help yourself, but your words affect countless people who see them as a lifeline when they are feeling lost or overwhelmed by confinement. We are all much more than the sum of our experiences and writing can help transcend the ordinary and allows you to express whatever stories or emotions you find inside yourself. The picture themes do not have to be based on true stories, though certainly they can be. This is an opportunity to unleash your imagination.



(5/1/17)

### **“Behind the Lace” by Daniel Montaña**

So, this is me, a gangster, born and raised in the south side of Chicago, living that thug life I was born into. Following the footsteps of my own father, uncles and brother. There is something else I feel I was born into: the femininity within me, which like my gun, is always with me.

This is how I wanted to present myself to you. I made this myself. I really wanted it to be a dress, but I didn't have the courage to see it through. Ain't that something. I have the courage to face a bullet fired at me out of an enemy's gun, but I don't have the courage to simply be me.

My heart tells me to put the gun down, along with everything that isn't me, the things of this world that I let define me. My mind tells me to raise this gun to my head and end my pain of a life lived in vain because I will never have the courage to live what should be my beautiful reality. What do I do? Pray to a god who according to this world hates me? Hate, hate, hate is all around me. Where is the peace and love my heart cries out for? What will my next move be? I talk of peace and love, things that cannot exist while raising a gun.

So, I'll make my move. I'll put this gun down. I'll put this hypocritical hate down. It's a move I can do on my end to clean the slate instead of letting this world dictate my fate. I'll let my heart do its thing. Hey, maybe it will make out of me what I made from this lace: something beautiful where I don't have to cover my femininity, no matter how it manifests itself. I will be at peace knowing it's truly me.

### **“Dominabie Land...ish--The Alternative Facts” by Nate Lindell**

Well.... who would've thought that Trump would bring about “the end of the world as we [knew] it?” (And I feel terrible!)

Okay smartass, a lot of people knew.

But I doubt they thought it would end like this.

For whoever might someday read this, here's the story.

Trump (i.e. the joker to the right) and the other Repukelicans made sure everyone had guns, literally. They passed a law mandating everyone over the age of eight carry a gun at all times.

What about the crazy people and ex-convicts, you ask? Crazy people on the street were put in prisons, where many crazy people were already being held. There was plenty of room for them in prison because all ex- and current convicts were rounded up, implanted with a beacon chip, shipped to the southern border's gun free zone and forced to work on the Great Wall of Trump. "They'll make it bigger and taller than any wall ever," Trump assured the public. Or they were armed with bats, knives, and spears to pursue any sons of bitches that tried to sneak into America, which wasn't many after life in "great" America became known to the world. Free citizens were authorized to shoot any of those border slaves who tried to escape the gun free zone.

Everyone in the rest of America had guns, usually multiple guns, which legally could be shot in public areas and buildings so long as bullets only hit a person you could prove had stolen or threatened you.

People wore guns like they once wore watches: took them in the shower with them, wore them while dumping and humping. YouTube was flooded with videos of people doing all sorts of weird shit with guns, ingenious uses for guns, like using them to trim your nose hairs.

It was weird, at least to me. Made me wonder if the Kimster (i.e. the clown to the left) used one of his magic potions to cause that too. I had to wear two guns just so I wasn't labeled anti-gun and put under surveillance by Trump's Cossack secret police!

Then, the zombie-ish apocalypse came.

I knew it was coming because--hell Trump is a zombie himself. He's all "sound and fury, signifying nothing" but raw emotions...a zombie, no higher thought on display.

Anyway, Trump and the zombie running North Korea decided World War III would be a great idea. (It'll be huuuuge!) Trump dumped some nukes, took out half of North Korea along with Lil' Kim Jong Ding-Dong. But before Kimminy Cricket croaked, he unleashed some sneaky spies who unleashed chemical weapons throughout America.

Voila, zombies.

Didn't quite see it coming like that...

The chemicals rubbed out most men, most boys, and a lot of girls too. I survived, though one of my nuts swelled up and fell off.

The bitches went wild though! They couldn't stand their face being seen. They became hyper aggressive and dominant harsh nymphos who searched for and captured what men remained--fought each other in groups, basically what men used to do in the cave days.

I call them dominabies--dominatrix + zombies.

If Trump is still alive, he is getting grabbed by his pussy now. (I wonder if any of his nuts fell off too.)

Anyway, being treated like a piece of meat is something new to me. What are my thoughts on it? Meh, not as fun as I thought it would be.

These bitches ain't very social either. They don't say much, other than, "eat," "go clean yourself up," and "you can do better than that!"



(6/1/17)

### "The Ultimate Unit Transfer" by William Hill

"7 Dorm, cubicle 10! 7 Dorm, cubicle 10!" droned the disembodied voice over the dormitory's intercom.

"Yes ma'am, this is 10 bunk," I replied in a sleep-laced voice.

"What is your identification number, 10 bunk?" asked the voice.

"743871," I answered.

"Pack your belongings," the voice commanded.

"Where am I going?" I asked.

"Be ready in 10 minutes," the voice commanded as the intercom went silent without any further explanation.

When I turned to go back to my cubicle to pack my belongings the questioning eyes of my dorm mates met me. They all had the same questions that were running through my mind.

"So where do you think they are moving you Hillbilly?" asked my best friend Jimmie. "You haven't gotten in any trouble lately, so you can't be going to B wing."

"I don't know Jimmie. I asked but as usual, they didn't tell me anything. Wherever I go, I'll get word to you," I answered as I finished packing what meager belongings I owned into a red chain bag.

There was no time for emotional farewells, besides us macho prisoners do not do farewells, we just say, later bro. The door to the dormitory opened and two transport guards came and escorted me away. I tried without success to get the guards to say something about why I was moving or where I was going.

When I reached the area known as nine tank in the upper rotunda, I was surprised to see around 50 other inmates with the same red chain bags I had. Apparently, for some unknown reason there was a mass movement off this unit. Wherever it was that I was going, at least I would know someone when I got there.



The blue bird bus arrived, and another pair of guards ushered us aboard after shackling and handcuffing us to another inmate. The bus ride began as all such rides begin, with nobody speaking as everyone contemplated his own thoughts until finally someone asks the same question we had all been asking ourselves. As we traveled down the back roads, someone who was from the city of Houston said, "Hey we're going to go by NASA if we stay on this Highway."

He was wrong; we did not go by NASA. We went directly into the space centers compound. When the bus turned into the short drive that led to the perimeter gates the space agency must have been expecting us because the barricade opened without the bus even slowing down. The mystery of where we were going and even more so of why we were going there began to deepen and the interior of the bus became deathly quiet, as each man was lost in his own thoughts.

Looking out the prison bus's windows, we could see as we passed numerous buildings neatly manicured lawns and the agency's logo on the front. Then as the bus turned down a narrow side road the scene changed, instead of professional looking buildings the buildings in this part of the compound had a distinctive military appearance. This impression was confirmed as we noticed men in full military gear, including high tech weapons held at port arms, were lining the side of the road. Finally, the bus reached its destination as it turned into an area that had the largest spaceship I had ever seen. To be honest, it was the only spaceship I had ever seen, but still, it was humongous.

The chain bus crawled to a stop right next to the spacecraft as more men in military gear surrounded the area forming a lethal perimeter. There were other inmates already within the perimeter and I noticed that more chain buses were crawling along the same side road that we had recently traveled. Finally, when all the inmates that were scheduled to arrive were present, a man in a suit and tie stood before us and told us why we were there.

"You gentlemen have been designated to open up a new unit of the TDCJ system. This unit is not a regular unit. It is located in outer space...deep outer space," explained the man in the suit.

"Outer space? I ain't going to no unit in outer space," objected one of the inmates that had arrived on a separate bus than the one I had traveled on.

"Yes, you are, inmate. Not only are you going, but each one of you is going on a little trip to the stars."

"No I ain't. You can't make me. You'll have to kill me," objected the same inmate.

Several people began to murmur their agreement with the unidentified inmate. It seemed that nobody within this group of inmates possessed any desire to become an astronaut. Just as the murmuring began to reach a crescendo, the man in the suit subtly nodded his head to someone outside of our collected view.

That is when a soldier in a military uniform and carrying a weapon marched forward from his place in the phalanx surrounding the group of inmates. Stopping in front of

the dissenting inmate, he raised his weapon and shot him at point blank range without a word of warning. The blood and gray matter from the dead prisoner's shattered head rain down on the bystanders like droplets of red rain.

"That was unfortunate. When I tell you that each of you will be getting on this spaceship and traveling to star base 1995 that is exactly what will be happening. NASA scientists have discovered the presence of a vast amount of antimatter on a small planetoid at the edge of our galaxy. If the antimatter is brought back to earth could solve the entire planet's energy problem. The problem is that it is extremely dangerous to harvest, which is where you come in, the state of Texas has contracted out the use of certain inmates to go into space and harvest this antimatter. TDCJ has selected every man in this group to go to space for one reason and one reason only; none of you has anybody on the outside that keeps in contact with you. You have no money on your inmate trust fund accounts, you have not received even one piece of mail in over a year and there is no one on your approved phone list. You are all alone and there is no one that will ever miss you when you leave this earth. TDCJ and America, need your services and unlike prisoners here on Earth, your labor will be rewarded," said the man in the suit.

After the soldier shot and killed more dissenters, who favored death to space, they herded the rest of us aboard the spacecraft like cattle into an abattoir. They placed us in pods and hooked each one of us to life support systems that would monitor our vital signs for the duration of the trip that would take almost a year to complete. Our bodies would receive nourishment intravenously (Yes! No more pork noodle casserole for lunch for at least a year). Our bodies would be exercised on a regular basis through an automated isometric apparatus.

The last thing I remembered was a computerized voice counting down to blast off. Before it could reach zero I was unconscious from a chemical induced coma as the ship took off on its long journey through space with a cargo of reluctant prisoners destined for an undetermined period of forced labor in hazardous conditions simply to procure immense wealth for a prison system more interested in profits than rehabilitation.

When the ship neared its destination, star base 1995, the chemicals that were responsible for keeping me in a coma began to wear off and I could hear a beeping noise through the haze, then a familiar sounding voice began to call:

"Seven dorm, cubicle #10! Seven dorm, cubicle #10!" droned a disembodied voice from the speaker.

When I opened my eyes, I was surprised to find that I was back in my old bunk, on my old unit, on blessed terra firma. I have never been so relieved in my life, to awaken and discover that I had only been dreaming. I was not going to some unit in space to harvest antimatter after all. I almost kissed the floor of the dorm but knowing how infrequently the dorm was cleaned I decided against it. Instead, I got up and padded to the intercom speaker to answer the summons.

"Yes ma'am, this is cubicle 10," I answered in a voice still heavy with sleep.

"What is your identification number, 10 bunk?" asked the voice.

"743871," I answered automatically.

"Pack your belongings and be ready in 10 minutes," the voice commanded before clicking off, ending all conversation.

The icy fingers of deja vu began tracing an ominous pattern up and down my spine.

### **"Perspective" by Shannon Guess Richardson**

Welcome to my current home. How do you feel when you look at this picture? Do you feel a sense of peace or a sense of dread? I suppose it's all a matter of perspective.

There is beautiful green grass as far as the eye can see. Can you imagine the feel of the soft grass under your feet? There are many picnic tables and park benches. They are great for socializing. I've always been a social butterfly, so I was super excited about that. The trees are beautiful. Don't they make the place even more peaceful? There are families of squirrels who live in them. They are so tame, they will eat right out of your hand. Doesn't the building look impressive? That's my home.

Sounds nice right? The reality is that although there is beautiful green grass, I'm not allowed to walk on it. The picnic tables and park benches are nice, but there aren't enough of them and there are fights over who will use them. The trees? Well they're in the nice grass I'm not allowed to touch, so I can't get near them either. My home is called the "high rise." A fancy name for a building that crams thousands of women together in tiny spaces where everything is concrete and steel. There is no need for curtains when your windows are decorated in iron bars. See the spot at the top? That's where an armed guard stands ready to shoot us if we make the wrong move.

I am in federal prison. What looks like a utopia from the outside is my nightmare. What you don't see are the fences and razor wire. You don't see the chains and shackles. You don't see the prison officials who look at us and treat us as though we came from the bottom of their shoes. Club Fed? What I want to know is where are the golf courses and swimming pools people talk about? I must have missed those!

Life is all about perspective. I try every single day to look at the hell I'm in as the place you see in the picture and to believe I am more than just a number. Sometimes, I can trick myself into believing it. But then reality sets in and my heart shatters all over again.

Oh look, there's Con Air dropping off another bunch of unsuspecting people...oh wait we aren't people anymore. We are inmates.



(7/1/17)

### **"Uncle Ned" by Shannon Richardson**

Everyone has that one person in their family that sticks out. The one who gets stares when you go out in public. The one who when you were growing up, you tried to keep away from your friends. The one who makes you afraid to procreate for fear that your child will be like them. For me, this person would be my Uncle Ned.

Meet my Uncle Ned/ This my favorite photograph of him. Isn't he handsome in his tie? It was almost impossible to get him in a suit, but when my sister called it a monkey suit, he couldn't get it on fast enough. No idea why!

Our family doctor says Uncle Ned's physical and emotional makeup resembles a primate more than a human. Wait! What? Clearly, we need a new doctor. I mean, so what if he climbs the walls?! No one laughs when Spiderman does it! He does have long and slightly curved fingers and toes, which is probably why he's such an awesome tree climber. Never challenge him to climb anything. I only did that once. Lesson learned!

Unfortunately, Uncle Ned's brain is less than half the "normal" size of a [human] brain. That only tends to be a problem when...okay, that's a problem daily. One time I asked him to wash the dog and thank God I found him before he closed the lid on the washing machine! Another time, I asked him to get me some juice. I guess I should've specified to get it out of our refrigerator. Man, our neighbor was mad for days after that! But it's the thought that counts, right?

Speaking isn't really his thing either. He rocks at sign language, though. Oh, but if you make him mad, you'd better watch his hands or shit could hit the fan quick. No, seriously. Literally. An adult female primate is 60-65 pounds. I know some ladies would be totally jealous. The whack-job doctor seems to believe this is why Uncle Ned prefers the girls who look like they could use a good, greasy burger...or a dozen. I know Uncle Ned is different, but he's great to have around. Never a dull moment around my house. More like a trip to the zoo every day.!

Love your eccentric relatives. They make life so much more entertaining!

**“Man in the Mirror Poem” by Caleb Wilson**

I look at my reflection, it is transparent to see  
What do I see, thee strong, Beast, wild side in me  
Like who he is, He, me, the man who dress in tailored suits  
With ties of flat colors no tie dye, how do I feel like I can be the  
new odd, look on a dollar bill  
And the world pictures that but judge me otherwise, no monkey  
business, I hope of any kind  
Is he, me the stand-up guy, with Gumbo of Chemistry, of all  
man'd kind with features of the Old  
And Wise, look yes, look in my eyes deep into the Puzzle  
Planet, of many universes soaked, natural, soul, public to the  
eye, interesting noise from me ears nose that picks up millions  
of smells, lips, voice to speak, generations, tunes, possible to  
its Peak, look at I, look at me, image, of many men in, He, Who  
am I, What am I Just the man in the mirror!



(8/1/17)

**“Lost and Cannot Find My Way Out” by Nkrumah Valier**

It is so dark all around me. There is no moon or stars  
in the sky to light my way. The sky is black and so empty like  
the feeling I have inside of me. Hope is lost just as I wander in  
this forest walked for what seems like forever. My hands  
touching trees and branches feeling my way through the forest  
surrounded by darkness. I didn't know what direction I was  
going, but I continue to walk slowly at a steady pace. The only  
sound I can hear is the branches breaking under my feet.

I am hot, with sweat dripping down my face. My shirt  
is damp from the sweat on my body and sticks to my chest and  
back. There's not even a breeze of wind to cool me off. How  
strange it is to be in a forest at night and not even hear any  
sounds of animals around me. No birds flying from tree to tree,  
no crickets chirping. What is this place? And how did I get  
here? All I remember is waking up lying on the ground in the  
middle of this dark forest. Before that I was at work getting  
ready to go home. If I am dreaming, I hope I wake up soon  
because this is not a pleasant dream. But I know this cannot  
be a dream because it feels so real.

I hear crying. I call out, “Hello! Hello! Where are you?  
I can hear you crying. Are you hurt? Are you alright?” The

crying continues as walk toward the direction it is coming from.  
It sounds like a child. As I got closer I could see a little girl  
sitting on the ground looking up to me, still crying. I asked her,  
what is wrong? She would not stop crying. I then asked for her  
name. She did not answer me. Please little girl, tell me, how  
did you get here?

She stood up and used her hands to wipe the tears  
from her eyes. Then she said: “my name is Lisa and I am  
crying because of what the tall man told me when I found my  
way right here through the forest. I've been here for a day  
waiting for someone to come. That's when the tall man said he  
would return and take us someplace else. I think he said it was  
you who would be coming.”

“Lisa. Did that tall man hurt you? Is that why you are  
so upset and crying like you are?”

“No sir he did not hurt me. It's just what he told me— I  
can't believe I'm still alive.”

At that very moment a light in appeared from nowhere  
right in front of us. It was a door and it opened, and the light  
inside of it lit up the forest around us. I could see the little girl  
clearly now. She was thin and had long curly black hair. Her  
eyes were big brown and beautiful and so was she. I looked  
around and could see the trees and the forest. It was beautiful  
but had no life in it. Then I looked back at the door, a tall thin  
man walked out dressed in a trimmed black suit. He had a  
smile that gave me peace.

The tall thin man did not have to speak—for the  
questions I had were all answered. I knew what he told Lisa  
that made her cry.

Lisa touched my hand with her small hands and in my  
mind, I could see what her mother did to her. Lisa was  
suffering from hunger and she was very sick because her  
mother was too poor to take care of her. Because her mother  
could no longer see her suffering like she was, she decided to  
suffocate Lisa with a pillow while Lisa slept. Then Lisa's mom  
tried to commit suicide, jumping from the bridge in the park  
they lived under. But she survived because someone found  
her the following morning and called for help. Lisa's mom was  
taken to the hospital, but it was too late for Lisa.

I then remembered what happened to me. I was  
inside my Barber shop after I had closed it after everyone left. I  
was trying to some synthetic marijuana for the first time, and  
for the last time because it killed me before the blunt was  
finished.

At that moment I knew that I was dead. Lisa was  
pulling me towards the light telling me it's time for us to go  
now. The tall thin man disappeared as he walked back in, and  
Lisa and I followed him, into the light.

**“Homecoming” by William DeClark**

I slowly make my way along the overgrown, tree-lined  
path. If not for the occasional piece of cracked asphalt peeking  
through the underbrush, it would be hard to believe this was  
once a paved, well-traveled road. No one has been allowed in  
this sector since the attack over 50 years ago, and Nature has  
fully regained control. I had to obtain special permission from  
the Capitol just to be allowed in, filling out reams of paperwork

and agreeing to numerous rules and conditions. I was limited to 12 hours in the Zone, and was required to carry a Geiger counter at all times. Thankfully my destination is in the outer sector which experienced little fallout, so I'm not required to wear a radiation suit. Even still, my friends and family did not want me to make this journey.

"What if you get sick?" they asked.

"What if you get lost?" Well, that's what GPS is for. What if, what if, what if...? Don't get me wrong, I understand their concern. However, I made a promise to a certain old lady on her deathbed, and I won't let her down.

I'm getting close, according to my GPS, however nothing about this place looks familiar to me anymore. I was only 13 years old when we were forced to leave, with hardly enough time to pack our clothes. But I remember that night vividly—the news reports, the warnings, and finally the flash and resulting mushroom cloud that could be seen even here, some 100 miles away, that changed our lives forever. No one believed they would really do it, and by the time the 'powers that be' realized attack was imminent, it was too late. Bye-bye NYC. Not to mention the large chunk of the Eastern Seaboard that was rendered uninhabitable due to the fallout.

Now, here I am crawling through this wilderness on my government-issue ATV looking for our old homestead. At 63, I'm too old for this, but I have a promise to keep.

My GPS begins beeping, telling me I've reached my destination. I kill the engine on the ATV and step off, trying to recognize anything about my surroundings. When I was a kid, this was all mostly farmland, fields and pastures. I carefully study the landscape...there, what's that? A piece of rusty iron poking up through the underbrush. I pull it free. It's the old sign post from the end of our long driveway. The wooden sign is gone but I remember the farm's name: "Whispering Meadows." My great-great-grandfather gave it that name when he built the place over 150 years ago. I concentrate on the landscape and can just make out the route of the old driveway.

I start down the driveway on foot, picking my way through saplings and undergrowth, wondering if the old house is even still standing. You used to be able to see the house and barn from the road, but not anymore.

After about 15 minutes of slow-going, I spot the sun reflecting off something up ahead. A few more minutes and I'm staring at our old house, the house I was born in, along with 3 generations of my mother's family. I got goosebumps just looking at it. Memories came flooding back: chasing fireflies in the fields, my Mom's homemade lemonade, my sister and I playing on the old tire swing hanging from the big oak tree in the front yard. I notice the tree's still there, now surrounded by smaller versions of itself. The old stone house looks about the same, except for the holes in the roof and broken windows. I even notice off to the side the rusted hulk of my parents' old station wagon that we were forced to leave behind all those years ago. It's now sunk to the frame in the dirt, a tree growing through the missing windshield.

I briefly debate entering the house, then decide against it. I'm running out of time to do what I came to do. I walk around to the back of the house, to the former site of my

Mom's flower garden. How proud she was of that garden. Now, you would never know it ever existed.

I reach into my pack and pull out a small cardboard box. I hardly notice the tears streaming down my face as I break the seal on the box and slowly spread my Mom's ashes over her old flower bed.

"Welcome home Ma," I whisper. "I love you."

After a few moments, I place the empty box back into my pack, take one last look at the old house, then begin the long trek back to civilization.

### **"Autumn's Fall" by Michael Lanning**

Two saplings, August and Autumn, were hand-picked that spring. They were the perfect addition to the landscaping of the family's acreage. One placed on each side of the entranceway to the hiking trail. They were so small at this season and with that lush foliage, they seemed more like shrubs than saplings. Picked for their sturdiness as adults, they would provide excellent archway welcoming hikers.

Towards the end of summer, a subtle change began to appear in Autumn. Just ever so slight, yet different. As if he became distant and withdrawn from August. Why me? Asked Autumn. Sure, there were rumors throughout the neighborhood evergreens, but nobody really knew what was going on next door.

Soon Autumn's bright leafy green lost its shine altogether. By mid-fall, the once wondrous Autumn changed into something dark. From top down he stood there in rustic brown colors too heavy for his slender trunk. Why me? Asked Autumn. By now it was too obvious for the gardeners to deny that what they had noticed wasn't right.

Tree protection services were called. Interviews were staged, studies were performed on Autumn and the surrounding pines and firs. But in the end, a social botanist simply said, "sometimes things happen to trees and they're not equipped to deal with it. Only Mother Nature knows what might be happening within the soil of some landscapes, horrors equal to the one that had overcome this once bright tree, perpetrated not by an intruder such as a termite, but by one member of a family upon another.

Early morning on a cold winter day, while all the other evergreens stood tall clothed in densely knit foliage of dark marbled green and black protecting them from the harsh weather, there stood Autumn, naked, in all his glory for the world to see. He was felled, placed into sections, then brought inside the home and stacked by the fireplace. Why me? asked Autumn. What had been the point of living? What had been the point of all the tragedies I endured? Why had I suffered and gone on with existing if it was all to end like this? What cruel consciousness is behind the workings of nature that it could even conceive of forcing me to struggle through a troubled life that turned out, in the end, to have no apparent meaning?

Just then, a soothing voice arose from the crackling fire. Who are you to ask why? Does Mother Nature not have the right to create some trees to become giant redwoods, some to become lumber to build homes, some for decoration and some to burn in the fire for providing warmth.



Suddenly Autumn was very stoic as he was placed on the smoldering embers to stoke the fire. Submitting to his fate, he pondered how love makes you do things you never thought yourself capable of.



(9/1/17)

#### **“Radiance of a Refugee” by Steven Lee Adkins Jr.**

I met her doing volunteer work in a refugee disaster area and have been captivated ever since. A natural disaster hit an area that a refugee camp was located. She seemed to not be marked by its effects in anyway. I've only seen her in one dress, but somehow, it's always clean as is her hair and skin and stockings.

Her mind remained unscathed as well. Her demeanor was always pleasant, if not happy and never less than hopeful. Every day after fulfilling my volunteer duties for twelve hour stretches. I cleaned up and washed off in time to walk with and her grandmother, as they walked daily, to the communal shower.

Her grandmother always kept an eye on me as she was the day I took a picture of them, capturing also my friend's pleasant and hopeful smile. Her features then were of royal beauty. Slender neck, elegant hands and graceful steps as she held her grandmother's hand so she wouldn't stumble as she shuffled along.

Even today I don't know her name. Few there could speak English, and all were definitely loyal to their own. Mistrustful of any outsiders no matter how well intentioned they were. I'll always think of her fondly and hold those rare memories dear.

#### **“There's Glitter Everywhere” by Catherine LaFleur**

My relationship with my mother was thorny, difficult, and unmanageable. I was raised in a religious cult with many unusual beliefs. I left almost as soon as I was legally able. We still spoke and spent some family holidays together, but as to our emotional closeness, there was a closed door between us.

Mom was super religious, believing that anytime you saw glitter in an unexpected place, it was a manifestation of the working of the Holy Spirit. I spent much of my childhood being raised on the mission fields of Guatemala and India where glittery substances appeared with great regularity. I was a true believer until the death of my father from lung cancer. My parents had to come back to the States for his treatment. And I had to move back home to take care of both. It was a long nine months and at the same time too short to say goodbye to my daddy.

Afterwards, mom and I had only each other. Then the hunt for the source of my father's death came. In our faith tradition, no one is allowed to die without there being some outside demonic cause or a lapse of faith on the part of a family member. A prayer team came to my parent's house to drive out any evil spirits and to find objects that might be curses in the house. It didn't take me long to see which way the wind was blowing, and I left. I can't remember ever returning to my mother's house.

I lived more than eight hours away. My mother became more intense in her spiritual devotion and began to work short term assignments with religious sponsored non-governmental aid organizations. She traveled all over Central and South America and in the early 90's took assignments in war-torn Eastern Europe. One morning I was lying in bed when mother called. I asked her how she was doing, where she was going next, etc. I can't remember how long we talked, maybe 10 minutes, before she asked me to pray for her. A long pause ensued. “Please,” she said. “I really need you right now.” So, I did and while I'm praying and calling the Holy Spirit, I start to hear thumping noises over the phone. I stopped and asked my mom what the noise was. Was she at a party? Another long pause. She said, “Nothing to worry about, opposition forces were in the mountains outside the city and that the noise was them shilling the other side of the city. It happens every day about this time. Besides, there's glitter on my hand right now.”

I couldn't say a word. What emotional manipulation. Finally, I ground out, “Mother in all the times I was traveling not once did I ever phone you from a place where opposition forces were shelling the city. Are you leaving?” She stated she wasn't and that she was completely safe adding, “There's glitter everywhere here.” I hung up. Because I am the type of daughter that hangs up on her frightened mother who is in a war zone.

Mother eventually came home, and we never discussed that moment or me hanging up on her. Years later, I was the person on the phone calling from the lock-up cell of my city's jail house. Mom never hung up on me. Not that time, nor any of the times I called her over the next three years from the pre-trial detention facility. In fact, my mother moved to the city where I had been arrested, rented an apartment and came every week for visitation. She showed up in court at every call and spread glitter all over the seats. Because she was the type of mother who doesn't abandon her child.

Soon my mother became ill and had to return to her home in Pensacola. After a series of tests, she was diagnosed with Pancreatic Cancer. Aggressive, fast, terminal. The judge

called me into the chambers and asked me if I wanted to attend my mother's funeral or be taken by the police for a deathbed visit. I told the judge, no one needs to tell me how wonderful my mother is, but I need to tell her a few things before she goes. Days later I was in the back of a police car being driven to the far northwestern part of the state to the hospice where my mother was clinging to life. Once inside the officers uncuffed me. My mother was waiting in a walled courtyard lying on a double chaise lounge. The kind you might find by the pool of a vacation spa.

Although she was wasted by the disease, she still looked beautiful. Her flaming red hair had faded to a light silvery strawberry but her green eyes were just as bright and inquisitive as ever. I lay down on my side next to her on the chaise and we embraced. For a long while we just held each other. My mother whispered in my ear that she wanted me to forgive her for the many ways she had failed me. I whispered right back that she never failed me, not once, but that I needed her to forgive me for all the times I let her down. Mom assured me it never happened. We talked for over two hours, entertaining each other with funny stories and memories of serving overseas. Finally, the officers told me it was time to drive back. Mother wept as they cuffed. Looking back over my shoulder, I watched her until a door closed between us. While putting me in the car, the younger officer asked why I had gold and red glitter smeared on my forehead. Once in the car the older officer asked me if I knew what a gift I had been given. I said yes. I knew.

Mother has been gone for many years now. I last month received a birthday card from a friend whose family served in India with mine. She wrote, I'm sure Virginia is watching over all of us, spreading glitter every chance she gets. The card was covered in green glitter.



(10/1/17)

### **"Bobby Lo" by Steven Lee Adkins Jr.**

Bobby Lo and I had been best friends for years. We owned and operated a business together after we were released from prison. We rented houseboats and watersports

equipment to the wealthy. Bobby had always reminded me of Paul Newman in the movie, *Cool Hand Luke*, while in prison and out. While wealthy husbands slept off the exhausting demands of the day's festivities that we provided, we would take turns seducing their wives.

There was one especially insane, petty, and jealous husband who did not have the courage to physically retaliate against us after his voluptuous wife relieved her guilty conscience. She relented to his ruthlessly persistent inquiries and admitted that the two-week vacation that they had paid for had been exploited as a chance to spread her wings (and her legs) around both Bobby and myself.

Enraged, the husband brooded and contrived a plan of revenge. Meanwhile, we had forgotten all about the petty little man and his wife, moving on to new adventures. That is, until we were arrested and taken ashore one fine, sun-bright day, and charged with illegal possession of guns and drugs that were doubtlessly planted by the jealous husband that watched from a short distance away. He was smiling as we were carelessly shoved into police cruisers.

The local news channels and newspapers made us out to be villainous pirates, obviously starving for anything to keep their businesses afloat. Bobby had an obsession with the human mind and human nature. He studied the recorded knowledge of Nietzsche, Jung, Freud and many others perpetually during the years in prison that we had been neighbors, and I was sure he'd continue his obsession during the years we were certain to be neighbors in the future. Except...Bobby didn't.

During the second day after our arrest, we were still housed near the entrance of the jail called 'booking.' Cells that had a front made of glass so the CO's and their cameras could watch us 24-hours a day, usually for three days. While sleeping away the second day and mentally adjusting to being a captive again, I was woken by the rudest banging upon the glass and the crude, rough wool blanket fell to the dirty floor as I quickly rose to see what the CO's wanted.

I had fought many times over respect in the past and would certainly do it again, but I froze mid step and my scowl slowly upturned into an expression of shock. A few feet from me on Bobby's bunk stood the pants and boots he'd been wearing when we were arrested. They were upright as though he'd just disappeared while standing there.

He had literally thought himself free. Dematerialized and reappeared somewhere doubtlessly more pleasant. I bellowed laughter as nine CO's rushed in looking for Bobby Lo.

### **"Customer Reviews" by Christopher Hannigan**

Posted: 2 hours by Christopher Hannigan

Awww...man...it happened again.

Well at least this time it happened in the pool locker room, that's better than the last time. The last time it happened in the middle of the airport. You wouldn't believe the screams from my fellow travelers. It was absolute pandemonium, and TSA...well they tried to pin the whole thing on me, as if it was my fault this happened. Try laying it on the manufacturers,

dotards! Yeah, they also put me on the no-fly list. It's not like I actually separated my torso on purpose.

"Choose DynaMax Cybernetics for superior synthetics." Oh! I chose them all right; I even let the salesbot convince me to sign-up for the newest model, the DynaMax Somatic Chassis Lynx i9-beta. Promised—not guaranteed—to deliver the best in the artificial kinetics for those who opt to upgrade from their flesh forms. The salesbot offered me a 50% discount if I signed-up for the beta version within the "next 60 seconds." I mean, come on! Who could pass up a deal like that? The latest model for even cheaper than the economy model. Sold!

I had seen the ads appearing for the Lynx for the past month and it wouldn't be out in stores for another month. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to be seen in the cafe or show up to work within it. Needless to say, all my friends were envious.

The salesbot just failed to mention that the warranty didn't apply to the betas. Not a big deal, right? Not for me, 'cause I purchased the cyborg insurance policy that my insurance company emailed me the moment I purchased the Lynx, at a discount if I bundled with my home and auto. Let me just say, it is not a pleasant experience trying to file a claim with an insurance company while locked up in a TSA airport jail. I would like to see you attempt to explain to the oh-so-smart automated system that you forgot your policy number and you can't get to your card because it's in your wallet, which is still in your back pocket and the TSA has locked your bottom half in a separate room.

I spent 36 hours sitting in pieces before the Customer Service rep from DynaMax called the TSA to confirm that they were experiencing some minor glitches with the beta models. Minor! My body was split in two! I don't call that minor. So yeah, I was released after that, missed my flight to Duluth; they wouldn't refund my fee for the 33rd Annual Back to Nature Tour, was put on the no-fly list, and given a lecture on "appropriate" conduct in public. Maybe it would be more "appropriate" to give the lecture to the people at DynaMax, seeing how they were responsible for the whole embarrassing incident.

At least my insurance company sent an Uber to pick me up and deliver my pieces to their authorized repair shop. More like a little shop of horrors. Their technician swore they fixed the problem and according to the rep from DynaMax it wouldn't be a problem ever again. Obviously not! I should have insisted the insurance company send me to a better repair company. I certainly will this time. I mean what would you expect from a repair shop called "Uncle Billy's Repairs and Tofu." I mean seriously, do you want some mechanic, hands covered in synth lube, serving your food? Or your neural circuits adjusted by a short order cook in a crappy hairnet, who only knows how to cook one type of food? These damn insurance companies are only interested in the cheapest option.

Do not get the Lynx! It's trash! Unless you make your living as a Magician's Assistant or weirdly like having your body

in two pieces and want your life ruined and posted repeatedly on MTV's 24-hour Ridiculousness channel.

This customer rated this product at zero stars out of five.

## Upcoming Picture Themes:



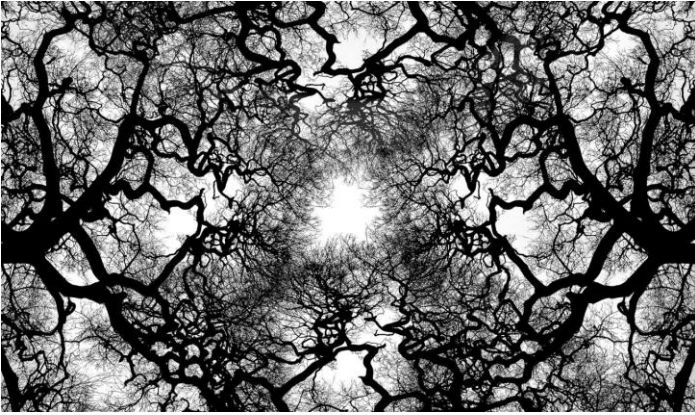
Due 4/1/18



Due 5/1/18



Due 6/1/18



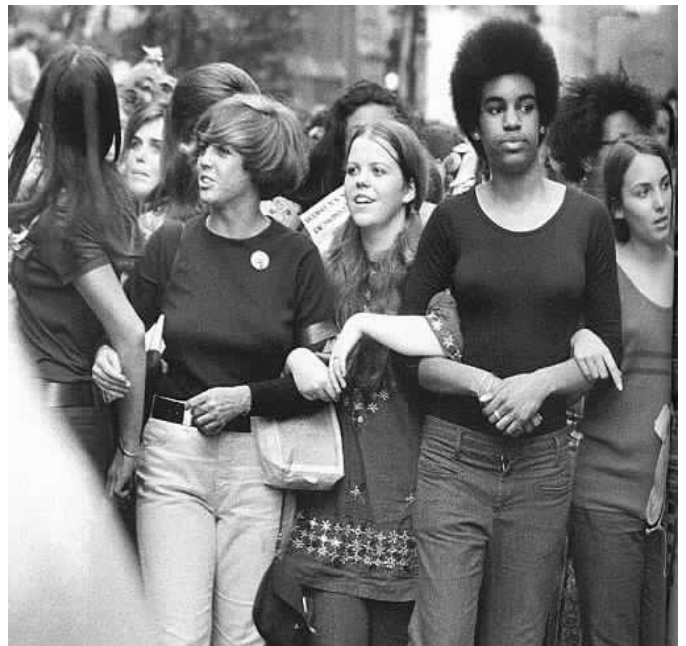
Due 7/1/18



Due 10/1/18



Due 8/1/18



Due 11/1/18



Due 9/1/18

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### **Final Notes**

First please send back your requests for this cycles programs in a timely way. You usually have at least 2 months before I start mailing out the programs listed in the newsletter and sometimes 3. There is a wait for the distance learning packets but getting us your requests sooner than later makes it so you are sure to be included. As I mentioned before all our programs go out in bulk mail mode which means each program gets mailed once to all the people who are registered at the time of the mailing.

I am having to customize the newsletters as different states have new rules which keeps the newsletter from being delivers. Some states refuse delivery due to the expedited



book program and our mention of stamps regarding that program. Other states do not allow our mailing labels with your address to be used. No labels of any sort are allowed on the mailer. I don't want to have to handwrite addresses, so I am not sure what to do. Others of you write to let me know staples of any sort are not allowed. Now I am learning that some states are blocking paper of any color other than white. If there are regulations in your facility that keep you from getting the mail, please share them with me. I will do what I can to modify our mailings, but it is certainly getting more difficult. For years PE has dealt with the changing rules about book mailings in different institutions but even more regulations that stop our program from sending things to you are coming down the road. For now, please know if you have received this letter you are on our mailing list and that as long as you write us every 6 months you will stay on our list and receive the newsletter.



Art by Y.M.

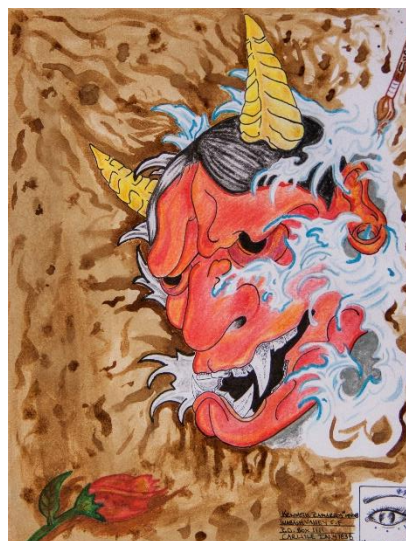
#### Bonus Feature -The Awakening by Johnny Rick

As I lay on my steel rack at the North Central unit in Calico Rock Arkansas, I wonder how it is that a forty eight year old intelligent, talented father of one has put himself in the position to be in prison doing my fourth bit, for numerous violent offenses. The night is dark. Brilliant flashes of light are dancing off the concrete walls and are accompanied by loud claps of thunder. I rise up on my rack to gaze past the bars and out the window at the wind whipped rain. Occasional sheets of rain blow up against the window to obscure my view, only to dissipate as quickly as they come. The light from the rapid-fire lightning stops abruptly, leaving me with an eerie reality of darkness. I wonder, now, why I am driven to see a correlation between the weather and my own troubled existence.

As I sit in the darkness and watch and listen, I feel the inner tugging of a spiritual message. My first thoughts are a

loud, powerful, destructive happening, but the inner voice says, no, look deeper. As I sit calmly in awe, the rumblings from the heavens whisper to my soul the importance of where I'm at and what I am doing, and that I need to look at the experience in a positive view. It's then that I notice the dirt is being washed clean from the basketball court and travels in small streams to the drainage pipes below. I realize the grass is swaying happily in the wind as it sucks up nutrients and minerals essential for its life. I understand that all I see is only possible by the floodlights in the sky.

Still sitting on my rack, I wonder how it is that an intelligent, talented father, who's seen many, many rains and storms, is visited with a fruitful message delivered to his heart. It's telling me that many of life's storms are really opportunities that provide the nutrients for spiritual growth. They give meaning and beauty to the quiet and calm as well as to the loud and thunderous. It helps me understand that small tree that has never been tested by the breezes and winds could never survive a storm. The very wind that threatens its existence is really what makes it strong. As I gaze again past the bars through the window, I am enveloped by a calm serenity. The flashes, rumblings, and rains have all ceased. I smile. I realize that it was not a storm at all, but a marvelous rain, a marvelous message, a message well received.



Art by Kenneth Zamarron



Art by Gary Farlow

## **REGISTRATION FORM**

**Please Note:** If you received this newsletter, you are on our mailing list through Aug 2018 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 Aug. 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 check for \$4.00 or some other means that is allowed at your prison to cover postage. Books are free, but the mailing cost is not. We have a good selection of donated used books List types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection of books.

Please fill in this 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.**

☐ **Rainbows and Physics – Please send me Andrea's packet on what scientists have learned about light and physics by studying rainbows**

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

☐ **Cool Cat Writing – Please send Greg's packet that will explore ways to unleash our creative writing abilities**

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

☐ **Art Knows: Come explore the world of art with Treacy. Treacy will explore art and its' connection to animals and Danielle will explore the world of Pop Art.**

☐ **Paralegal project-Send us your legal questions and we will review them and select a few to mail to our paralegal volunteers. We will create a doc with answers to some of the questions and send it back to all who sign up.**

☐ **Recipe packet - -sign up for a packet of recipes submitted by the members of PE. The packet will focus on meals and spreads made with items available thru most commissaries.**

☐ **Plasmodesmata Vol 3--- come read and celebrate Plasmodesmata, which are channels of communication between cells of plants, through which information can be exchanged. How poetic!**

☐ **Building a Book -yes send me packet #2 in the building a book series. I want to write a novel!**

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)**

\_\_\_\_\_

**ADDRESS and ID #**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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 Winter 2018

**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. Additional Support comes from the Cornell Public Service Center and the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives**



Art by Dominic Marak