

Prisoner Express News

Summer 2018

Greetings and welcome to the summer '18 edition of PE News. Prisoner Express, a program of the Durland Alternatives Library, focuses on providing incarcerated individuals with information, education, and opportunities for creative self-expression in a public forum. Every six months we print a general newsletter like the one you are holding. In it we will recount what we have been up to during the past six months, as well as share a description of the programs we will be offering this fall.

For those of you who are new, or those continuing members with fuzzy memories, I want to explain how this program can work to provide you with some enriching activities. As mentioned, the newsletter contains updates regarding the programs we offered in the previous newsletter. It also describes the next cycle of programming we will offer as well as a signup sheet for programs at the end of the newsletter.

We also include samples of the writing we have received from some of our writing programs. There will be some updates from me, Gary, about how things are going at PE. We will explore the trials and tribulations we experience as an organization, as well as how we are continuing to grow. I will also include a few personal notes from my own life. I know it can seem strange to someone reading this for the first time, but so many of the participants share their stories with me. I can't write back to all the individuals [over 4000 active members] who write to us, but I figure I can use the newsletter to mark some of the high and low points I experience in this adventure of life. No matter if we are in the "free world" or incarcerated, we all deal with the rigors of existence. We all have good days and bad. We all grieve what we have lost, and we all face whether to sink into misery or rise to living life in this moment in an ever-changing world. My hope is that this program can provide creative and meaningful outlets for your self-expression. Even though you are in prison, there is a lot of personal growth and self-reflection you can do to better understand yourself and this world. This life is an opportunity to know yourself better, and in doing so, you will increase the depth of your understanding about the people around you.

My name is Gary, and I created and continue to manage Prisoner Express. I have been doing this for about 15 years through my position at the Durland Alternatives Library, located on the Cornell University campus. As part of its mission, the library reaches out to provide services to underserved populations. You in prison certainly qualify. There is no money allocated in the library budget for this project, so I must raise the funds to keep this program operational. I tell you this, so you can understand why I ask that you only sign up

for programs you intend to complete. We hope this year to do some fundraising to help us expand, but for right now, all funds we raise are spent on postage, photocopying, and supplies to keep this program moving forward. By signing up only for what you will really do, it makes it possible for us to serve the most people. We are fortunate, as we have many student volunteers who help us as well as some student employees paid for through the Federal Work Study program.

In the last few months, we have been busy mailing out the programs offered in the winter 2018 Newsletter. We are happy to be hearing your comments on the programs. People seem to have enjoyed the Rainbow and Physics mailing, the recipe booklet, and the science articles in Plasmodesmata. Hearing feedback on our programs is the best way for us to continue to know what types of courses to offer. Most of you participating in the Building a Book project and the Cool Cats Writing project received addresses where you can send your submissions directly. **If you recently had mail returned to you from the Building a Book project, please resend it. I will update the address and provide an explanation later in the newsletter.** I look forward to seeing the writings generated by those projects. The journal project continues to grow, and I will write more about that opportunity later in the newsletter. Last cycle we offered a second songwriting packet, yet I forgot to include the offering on the sign-up sheet. A few of you caught that and pointed that out to me. I reprinted the offering and sent out a special mailing offering the course again and more people signed up. I am planning to hold onto the lesson until after I have mailed out this newsletter so more of you have the opportunity to sign up. Songwriting will be the first program we mail out in the fall. If you know anyone who has internet access, here is a link to hear the song written collaboratively by the participants in our first song writing project. It is inspirational.
<https://prisonerexpress.org/2017/09/song-for-prisoner-express/>

Many of you signed up for the paralegal project. We asked you to send legal questions, and then we mailed the questions to our team of volunteer paralegals who have been sending in their best answers. This is an experimental program, and we will learn how to best coordinate it by doing it a few times and working out the kinks. We will offer it again this cycle to see if we can improve on how we deliver the information to you. We are still waiting on the chess lesson offered last cycle. It is created by David who is incarcerated in Washington state. He has been busy with other matters, but we should have the chess lesson soon and we will hopefully have it in the mail before the end of August. We printed and mailed Poetry

Anthology #19 this past spring. I know some states banned it, as there were some poems that are considered disruptive. I have to remember free speech ends when we try to mail your writings into prison. Anything that is considered disruptive by the mailroom staff will not be delivered. Please consider this when submitting your writings. I certainly do every time I compose a newsletter. Even considering what I write, I still find I can run into issues of a whole publication being rejected due to some overlooked writing submitted as a poem or essay.

We have also run into mailroom trouble for a variety of other reasons. Among the reasons was the mention of postage stamps in our expedited book program. Using mailing labels is no longer allowed in certain states. We depend on bulk mail rates to run our program, and you are not allowed to hand write addresses in the bulk mail program, so putting labels on our mailing packets isn't allowed and neither is handwriting your addresses. It leaves me scratching my head, but a solution will be found.

We have also had mailings rejected because they were not in a white envelope or they had too many pages. I am not sure how individual states regulate the size of a mailing. We also seem to be getting more of our book packages returned as undeliverable. We at PE try to write letters to individuals whose book packages have been rejected to let you know what has happened. I wonder if the packages we get back are just a drop in the bucket of what does not get delivered. I still haven't figured out a low-cost method for determining how effective we are at getting books to you.

Please send us ideas on the types of instructional lessons you'd like to see created by us, and any other ideas on how PE can meet the needs of the thousands of participants. Please keep in mind, though, our small staff and meager funds when sharing your suggestions

In Fall of 2018 we are offering some new programs as well as continuing some of our ongoing offerings

Fall '18 programs

Expedited Books-Reading a book is a great way to open a window to the world. Send us a list of subjects you would like to read more about. PE staff go through our bookroom and create customized book packages to mail to you. Be sure to fill out details on the sign-up sheet or write us regarding the rules at your prison. We need to know the maximum books that you can get, and whether you are allowed both hardcover and softcover books. We ask for a donation of \$4 to cover the cost of postage. Check with your institution to find out how to cover the cost of receiving the books. The books are all donated to the program. Some of them are brand new and others are used. We have had trouble getting PE Newsletters delivered in Florida because we mentioned postage stamps in a previous PE News, so I will not talk about using them

now. Ask the authorities what is allowed. I wish we had the funds to mail everyone as many books as they could read, but raising funds for postage is an ongoing and necessary part of the work we do. Please give us as many choices as you have an interest. The more choices, the better our chances of making a good match for your reading interests. This is the only program where we need your financial assistance to serve you. A typical book package can cost \$5 to \$7 for postage. All the books and labor to make the packages are donated. Before we asked for the \$4 to help offset the cost of postage, we had a waiting list of close to 2000 people waiting for books. We can get books pretty easily, and struggle with finding the funds to mail them.

Poetry Program- Every six months we produce an anthology of poetry using the submissions received the past six months. Everyone who submits a poem for consideration will be mailed the anthology when it is completed. We are now accepting poems for Vol. 21. The choice of whose work to include is made by the student editors of each edition. Please try not to take it personally if your poems are not chosen. We should have Vol. 20 ready to publish in early fall. Please don't include poems about topics which will cause the prison authorities to censor this packet. I just found out the Vol. 19 was rejected by some mailrooms due to the nature of two poems. Keep your poems coming. It is certainly okay to have multiple entries. Below are some thoughts from Amber, our poetry coordinator, as well as a few select poems.

I know many of you have been long awaiting Poetry Anthology 20, and I am pleased to say it's coming soon! As always, we received a flood of wonderful, high-quality submissions, and it was incredibly challenging to select which poems to publish. If your work was not selected, please do not let this deter you from continuing to submit your work for future publications; we simply don't have room to publish every poem, no matter how well-written. As Poetry Anthology 20 nears completion, I am excited to begin accepting submissions for Anthology 21. Please send your poetry to us for consideration (labeled with your name). I look forward to reading all of your work!
-Amber

"Rebirth" by Daniel E. Sharpe

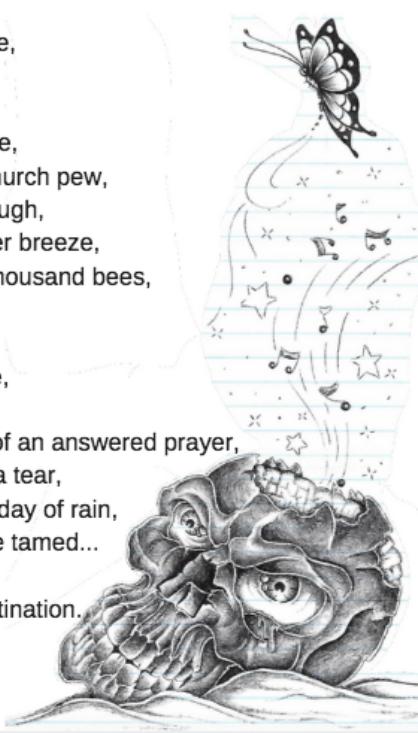
Back from death I grow
Outward a sprout blooms gently
My heart warmed by sun.

Each moment burns hot
Earth and rain my companions
Reaching, I touch sky.

Blossoming am I
A soul of infinite joy
Loved and loving, live.

"Imagination" by Jeffery L. Spurgeon, Jr.

I'm the fire of a dragon's breath,
I'm the magic to someone on meth,
I'm the shape of a unicorn's horn,
I'm that moment when a baby's born,
I'm a knight in a fairytale,
I'm the loud bang of a church bell,
I'm one of a kind, to all of my kind,
I'm the treasure a pirate can't find,
I'm the peak of the tallest tree,
I'm the freest of free,
I'm a prince in a far away land,
I'm the voice of a pop band,
I'm lost and I'm found,
I'm my father's crown,
I'm the sparkle in your eye,
I'm a piece of cherry pie,
I'm bound to give advice,
I'm the grand wizard's vice,
I'm with a little boy in a church pew,
I'm the portal to walk through,
I'm a butterfly in a summer breeze,
I'm the honeycomb of a thousand bees,
I'm the last of my breed,
I'm a planted seed,
I'm the smile on your face,
I'm the speed in a race,
I'm the magical moment of an answered prayer,
I'm the lips kissing away a tear,
I'm sunshine after a long day of rain,
I'm a thought that can't be tamed...
I'm just an imagination,
I'm far away from my destination.



"Stranger" by Matthew Ellington

Would you mind if I stood next to you -
A stranger on the street?
Even though my life so far has not been
Nice and neat?
Society says I'm less than you
Because I have a past,
And treats me like the dark and evil
Villain of the cast.

Would you mind if I sat next to you -
A stranger on a bus?
Could you look past the differences that
Frame the both of us?
Though scars and tats may seem to make me
Less upright than you,

To judge me from my cover is an
Unfair point of view.

Would you mind if I lived next to you -
A stranger in your town?
When you find out about my felony, will you
Let me live it down?
Your neighbors turn their eyes away
As if it wasn't clear
That because of my past mistakes
They don't want me here.

Would you mind if I worked next to you -
A stranger earning his way?
This job is all I've found so far to
Make some decent pay.
They shut me down in interviews
As if I wasn't fit
To do much more than mow a lawn or
Shovel piles of shit.

Would you mind if I joined you as part of
Your society?
An ex-con, forced outside it with this
Stigma forced on me?
I've done my time, I've paid my price,
There's no inherent danger
In treating me like one of you and not like
A stranger.

"OTHER WORLDS" by Michael Reichert

I lay for a nap on the soft riverbed.
Cool comfort for covers,
Smooth rock for a pillow.
Surfacing toes make a dragonfly's perch.
The gargling murmur soon lulls me to sleep.
The birdsong surrounds me,
The breeze on my face.
Floating beneath the mountain fed stream.

Adrift in my dreaming, I'm floating in space.
Amid a vast void
Of star-scattered darkness.
Buoyant and free from gravity's grasp.

A shooting star rockets by, light years away.
Glittering gemstones.
Black velvet embrace.
Spirit suspended, calm, and serene.

Dream-shift carries me to the bottomless blue

Abyss of the sea.
The ebb and the flow.
Gliding in currents fathoms below.

An alien landscape unfolds in my sight;
A chittering dolphin,
The wail of a whale.
A huge coral reef thick with colorful schools.

I emerge from the river awake and refreshed.
The birds are still chirping,
The water still cool,
But my eyes have been opened. Perceptions are new.

We live in a world full of wonder and awe.
So many realms to see,
World within worlds.
Waiting in slumber upon riverbeds.

Below is a haiku submitted by Geneva Philips for the Jump Start writing project we held last year. According to Greg who led Jump Start, Geneva submitted this poem [with 2 additional stanzas] to the 2017 PEN writing contest and won honorable mention award. Quite an accomplishment! Congratulations, Geneva!

Dancing Mosquito
wildly blooming dirtroad prism
sunpuddle drowns cat

flicker blink lights wink
fog shrouded dark green valley
wide wings glide, owl swoops

modest moon veils face
crickets complete night sonnet
fire; flame, ember, ash

crowlands eyeing scrap
dandelion seed fluff scatters
working man at rest
sundried scorching heat
cactus shadow paints home
brown hands shape red clay

Greg, who is a volunteer who leads some of our creative writing projects, had this to add to this edition of PE News:

There is a river in each of us,
which once expressed,
becomes song.

It eddies in weaving streams of melody
into gardens of imagination,
where swallowtails of thought
silently flutter and flail.

Wings stumble

into vibrancy of color and pitch,
once solidly perched,
soon to discover
for the first time,
that yes they, too, can soar.

A once swallowed flurry of note
no longer
is
but song—
rooted
in
the
wonder of Expression's Garden.

Community always widens
like a weaving music
within music
of us
as music, growing song

the light, the wonder
of a mystical place
we call
home.
Welcome home



Art by Chevie Kehoe

Journal Program- The journal program gives you a chance to explore and process your feelings, remember the past, or lay out your plans for the future. We have about hundred participants who are actively keeping journals. Years ago, we typed up entries and put them on our website, but it is taking too much time. Sometimes we scan some entries and post them on the Prisoner Express website, but don't keep a journal with that expectation. The journal is a chance for you to center yourself as you write your thoughts. Student volunteers come in to the library and read your submissions. Quite often they will write back a note letting you know they have been reading your journal. Some folks become regular correspondents through this project, but for many it is an exchange of a single letter. Do not assume that the student who writes you will be the same person who reads your journal next time. I read many of the journals and I see how, over time, journal program participants learn to write and express themselves with more skill, and that journal program participants demonstrate personal growth and increased self-understanding as they stay with the project. Do yourself a favor and start keeping a journal. Whether you share it with us is up to you, but regular writing is a great tool for maintaining balance and sanity. Sign up for our Journal Starter Packet or just start writing and sending your journal entries to us. We will start a folder for you.

Chess Newsletter- I was surprised at how many prisoners like a good chess game. David, a prisoner in WA., has created the last three chess newsletters. I believe he will continue. It is inspirational that PE members can create lessons for one another. If anyone has an idea for a lesson or project they would like to lead, please write. I am waiting on David's next chess lesson which will go in the mail shortly after I edit it and get it to the printer. Please sign up if you'd like to get the next chess lesson this autumn. A typical chess newsletter has some discussion of strategy, a review of a great game in chess history, as well as puzzles and tips for the interested chess player.

Artknows- Treacy coordinates our art program. She has been putting together the Artknows program for a few years. The packet explores concepts in art and often has some drawing instruction or art appreciation features which make it even more interesting. We have at least one and usually two or three art shows each year. Treacy curates the show using art that has been submitted through the year. Please feel free to send us any art you would like to see displayed. Sign up for the Artknows packet if you'd like to explore the world of art and artists with Treacy. Below is an update from Treacy:

Greetings! It's been an active past year since last summer with several art exhibitions. We were able to present two exhibitions of coffee art at two locations of Gimme Coffee in Ithaca. They were received with great reviews. Then there was the annual art exhibition

at the Big Red Barn at Cornell University in the spring. Finally, last fall there was the exhibition of art at Binghamton University in Binghamton, NY.

Some of you have written in asking for photographs of the exhibitions. I apologize that we didn't take photographs. For some reason, the photo moments always slip away. There usually is a lot of work just getting the exhibitions together, so once the work is up and the reception is started with people coming to see the work, we forget! This year we will make a more concerted effort to photograph the exhibitions and will include them in the general newsletter – or at least in the Artknows newsletter.

Animation project: YES! I sent out the animation packets and those of you who signed up for it should be receiving it soon. Once you receive the packet, you will have until January 15, 2019 to complete and send your drawings to me – getting them to me by January 15, 2019.

NOTE – If you signed up last fall for the animation project, you have been sent the packet. If you did not sign up for the animation packet but would like to participate, I can accept a few more participants. Please write me a letter asking for the packet. There will be no sign-up at the end of this newsletter and you need to write to me addressing the envelope with: TREACY – Animation.

ARTknows newsletter: I just sent out the most recent ARTknows newsletter in June that was focused on symbolism. Hopefully, those of you who have signed up for it have received it by now. I am not sure what I will select as the topic for the next ARTknows newsletter but because some – like Steve Fegan – have mentioned working on murals in their prisons, I am thinking of focusing upon art that is created upon a wall – murals, frescoes, cave paintings, so you ask, what makes a fresco a fresco? But then again, I also had the idea of writing an ARTknows newsletter on art that focuses upon weather – storms, tsunamis, tornadoes, pleasant skies....but who knows what I will decide upon....

The things she carried.....I've been working on sculpture utilizing correspondence by you. We read all the letters and after the letters are logged into the computer, the typical requests for signing up for the newsletter and book requests are put in the recycle bin. However, we saved more poignant letters. With the recycled requests to receive a newsletter and envelopes, I have been making paper pulp, and then casting that pulp into the same molds I use for bronze casting.

Well, my husband has been inspired to also cast paper sculpture. He has been working on a series of female crucifixes. While I primarily work in the imagery of animals, Gary (Weisman-not-Fine) works in the imagery of people. For the past couple of years, he has been creating a series of female crucifix. He created one that is 10-feet tall.

He cast this 10-sculpture into bronze and now plans to cast it into paper. It is a sculpture exploring the burdens that are placed upon a woman.

You are invited to participate in this project by writing about women in your life and the things they, so to speak, "had to carry" in order to survive; the burdens, the difficulties, maybe the joys that got them through. If you are a woman, then you are invited to reflect upon yourself or a woman important to you. Obviously, if you are man, then you are invited to reflect upon the woman/women in your life.

The letters will be used in creating the piece, but first will be copied so that they (with your permission) can be shared with the audience. The title "Things she carried" was inspired by the novel written by Tim O'Brien entitled "The things they carried"; those things – the harsh baggage and good luck baggage that the soldiers carried while in war. A poignant novel about war and how people carried their experience symbolically in what they carried into war and what gave them strength in their survival.

There is no sign up for this. Just send in what material you want to share addressed to Treacy – sculpture.

Why was the king thirsty, why was the donkey sad?; This is a Hindu riddle, and yes, I used this before as it was the original focus of the animation until I changed the focus of the animation to something else. However, I brought back the sad donkey for another project. Simultaneous to Gary's (Weisman-not-Fine) sculpture of the burdened woman, I am creating a life-size donkey lead by an ibis. If you would like to add something to this – a reflection upon why the king was thirsty and the donkey sad, it can be added to the sculpture. I will create a copy of it, use the original in making the sculpture, and share the copy with the audience. Moreover, where is the ibis leading the donkey?

Again, there is no sign-up for this. Just send in what materials you want to share addressed to Treacy- sculpture.

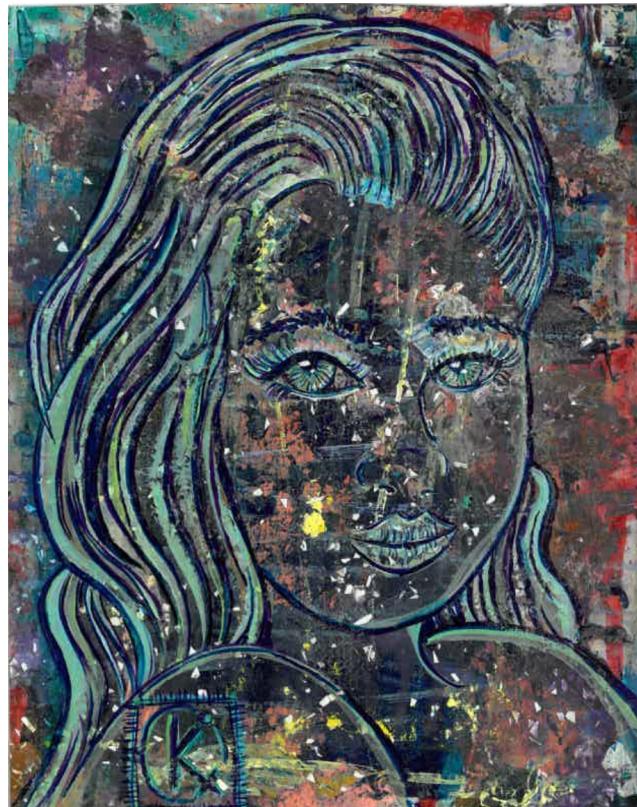
Big Red Barn exhibition in the spring of 2019. It is never too early to send in work for the spring exhibition! Please consider sculpture created out of paper – since paper sculpture seems to be a current theme. Or think about visuals to accompany the idea of the "things she carried" project – create drawings of your reflections about the women (or yourself if you are a women) and the trials and strengths that you carried – and I'm not talking about the big-breasted women smiling at the viewer pictures that are floating around prison....

Or imagery of animals, including the donkey.

I will write more about different projects that may arise in the next ARTknows newsletter. Ciao! Treacy

Paralegal Project- Please send us the questions you'd like to see our paralegals answer. We now know for the next round of questions to include the state you are living in with your question as our "Incarcerated Paralegal experts" say that makes a big difference in their answers. This is an experimental program. We will see if we can become a funnel for needed legal expertise. So, sign up if you want to read the answers to the submitted questions. Also, feel free to submit questions for our crack team of paralegals. Last but not least, if you are feeling knowledgeable about the law, please volunteer to read and answer some of the paralegal questions. We will send you a list of questions to ponder and hopefully answer. If you are submitting a question for our team of volunteers to read, please know they cannot answer every question. I myself know little about the law and just figuring out which questions are answerable and which information is important to many of you can be challenging. Let the questions begin! Try to ask questions that will benefit the other members of the project as well as yourself.

Origami Instruction- The origami packet will explore the art of paper folding and will include designs for a wide range of skill levels. Designs may include simple yet elegant geometric shapes, patterns inspired by the beauty of nature and the animal kingdom, as well as some pop-culture inspired pieces (origami Yoda, anyone?). Paper folding is a great way to relieve stress while simultaneously creating a beautiful piece of artwork. Sign up for our packet describing the steps needed to improve your paper folding skills. - Amber



Art by Kristopher Storey

American Revolution- Many of you request history books from our book from our expedited book program. I was fortunate to have a student working in the library this summer who is passionate about the American Revolution. He is putting together a lesson on the American Revolution. Below are some words from Alex on this project. Please sign up if you are interested in learning more about the movement that led to the formation of the United States.

This summer I have been working at the Alternatives Library and am in the process of developing an informational paper on the Revolutionary War. The paper will take you through many aspects of the war, including the causes, effects, and more, as well as the addition of questions concerning the war that can relate to incarceration or other current issues. As a student whose favorite topic is history, I am very much enjoying putting this paper together for anyone that signs up. Consider diving deeper into this interesting topic and formulating connections between this war and current events. -Alex

Song Writing- Kathy Z has graciously offered to lead a second PE songwriting course. Due to an administrative error at PE, we were not able to send out her course last cycle and we are offering it again. Below is a segment of Kathy's invitation for this project. If you want to expand your ability to write song lyrics, this is a project for you.

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 in regard to 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.) 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. 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 to all who sign up.

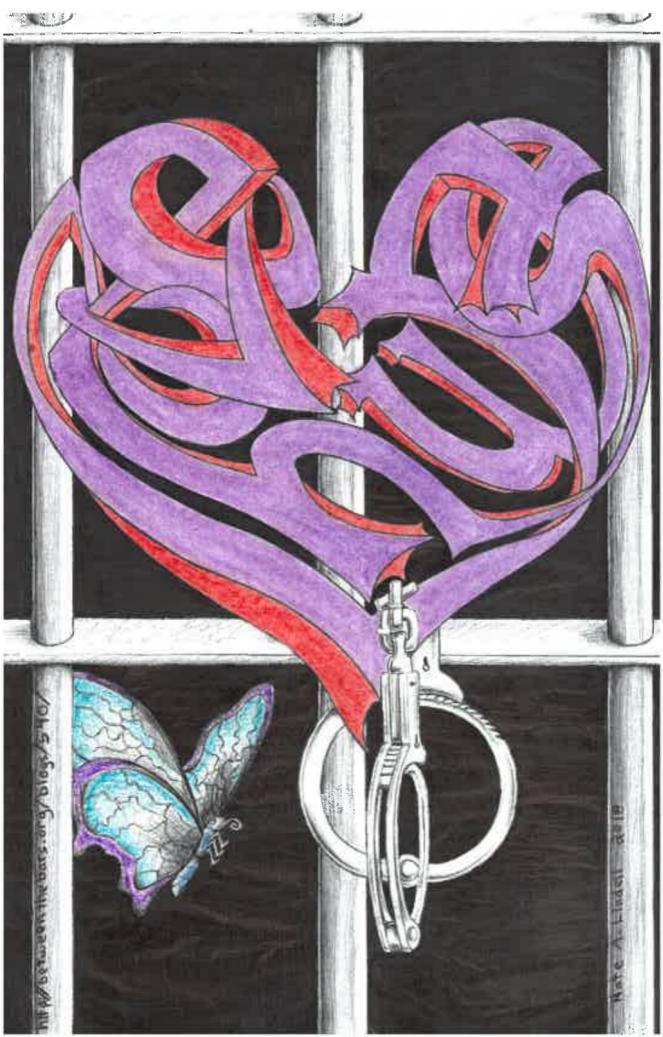
Buiding a Book 3- Maia who is leading the Building a Book project has a description of what she is offering. If you have always had a story to tell, here is your chance to get some help getting it going.

Building a Book is a two-year course on writing a manuscript—students are working on one long-form, book-length piece of writing. The course has been split up into four packets, two of which have been sent thus far—the first packet covered idea development, worldbuilding, and important characters; the second covered mapping out narrative arcs and character arcs. In packets three and four, we will cover settling in for the actual writing process, how to overcome setbacks and writer's block, editing, and putting together cover material for potential literary agents as well as information on publishing/self-publishing.

It's not too late to join in if this sounds interesting to you! We can add you to the list to receive the last two packets, and packets one and two can be mailed to you right away so that you can begin catching up on the material.

FYI for current students: I had to fly home to be with my family for several weeks and wasn't able to pick up mail during that time and the post office let me know that several of your letters were sent back to you. I very much apologize for the confusion—I am back picking up mail regularly at the same address now, so if you had material sent back to you please re-send it and I'll get back to you asap. I am sorry for the delay in responding to many of you and am back focusing on this project now!





Art by Nate Lindell

Meditation Project- Tara, creator of the guide, teaches practical meditation practices to help you embody more peace, patience, acceptance, and compassion. The packet offers articles and suggestions to help with difficult emotions like anger and includes testimonies and insights from other participants in the program who share how the practices are affecting them. Tara is working on her 9th packet, and they continue to inspire me and the people who read it. The insights shared in this packet are valuable to all, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. If you are trying to make sense of this life, these packets offer a valuable perspective.

Theme Writing Project

Every month we offer you a word theme to write upon. For the word themes we ask that these writings be based on truth rather than a made-up story. Sharing your writing with others helps normalize the incarceration experience. In the letters I receive, so many of you write how helpful it is to read of each other's experience behind bars. Seeing the common threads you all face in everyday life gives a

better perspective on what you are all going through. If you send in writing on a theme topic, we will mail you a copy of what everyone writes for that month. It is a great way to get mail. Our most recent theme packet was 60 pages. **A few themes from previous months are reprinted here in the PE newsletter so you can all enjoy the writings we receive.** For me, this section of the newsletter is the most important as it gives you a chance to express yourself and it also offers perspective to all who read it.

Upcoming theme topics include the following. Please consider sharing your thoughts on these topics. Please try to limit submissions to 750 words.

- Ancestors Due 10/1/18**
- Jealousy Due 11/1/18**
- Holding a grudge Due 12/1/18**
- Helping out Due 1/1/19**
- Good Advice Due 2/1/19**
- Believe it or Not Due 3/1/19**
- When life gives you ____ make ____ Due 4/1/19**
- A Memorable Adventure Due 5/1/19**

Selections from previous theme topics can be found below. Remember, to see all the writings on a topic, you must submit a writing of your own.

"Thwarted" due November 2017

"In My Own Way" by Delvin Diles

For a long time, I've had a tendency to get in my own way. As a teen in a classroom for a summer theatre arts camp for delinquents, we'd been served refreshments, and I set out to be cool. Instead of drinking my Sprite like a normal person, I decided to turn mine up to chug it, thug-style. Miscalculating swallows, I choked and sputtered and coughed soda from my nose, throat and lungs. It felt fatal and stupid. A kind, petite coordinator, Ms. Lisa Schmidt, led me out to the hallway, patted my back and assured me, "You're okay. Just a little embarrassed."

We spent 6 weeks writing and rehearsing an abstract play, "Contents Under Pressure," a performance in which I had a soliloquy. We would be paid \$200 for 3 performances at the Dallas Museum of Arts. I ended up missing the last of the three and my check, getting blunted. Later, I found out that names were drawn, and some lucky member of the cast was paid double to read my soliloquy from the stage.

Even after I ruined the play, Ms. Schmidt still tried to mentor me. Now a director over at the Creative Solutions program, she still keeps in touch, 20 years later. She wrote "I'm still fighting against the systemic racism that keeps black youth in poverty." Thankfully, some folks refuse to be thwarted.

"No Way to New Way" by Wesley Plater

I wish I could say I defeated every problem that came my way. I wish I could say I blocked all the negative influences that I was exposed to. But nobody is perfect in this perfectionist world. We cannot say what tomorrow will bring and we cannot live in the past; we can only live in the here and now. If you are willing to learn, study, and build your knowledge, you will be able to use that knowledge to defeat your problems. One by one, you will see them crumble. By no means is it easy to thwart anything, but with practice you will be able to take control and be able to think in high stress situations. You will become a leader who people look up to because you will be able to use your mind to defeat and block any and every problem that is thrown your way.

"Thankful" due December 2017

"Thankful for the Odd Things" by Derek LeCompte

Being in prison since I was 19 and turning 38 on November 12th is an eye-opener. Surely, many of us in the prison find appreciation for all of the little things we overlooked, but most of them people might find off in society because they haven't experienced what we have and still do. I am one of those odd thinkers. I grew up in Ocean County, New Jersey, which is, in all senses of the term, a very "naturalistic" area. We have numerous parks, state and county, the Atlantic Ocean, bays, lakes, streams, creeks, and more, even the Pine Barrens with their endless areas of full forest and animals. I'm very thankful for being privileged enough to grow up in such an area of countless experiences.

However, being in prison basically my entire adult life makes it torture because I have more to miss. But that's not exactly the sentiment I'd like to relay. I'm talking about the not-so-obvious things that might be harder to see.

For instance...grass! I've been in facilities where there is absolutely no grass! Imagine not even being able to smell the grass being cut. And I have severe allergies, but I'll welcome that smell. Just to take off my shoes and let the blades tickle between my toes would be glorious! Sure, many might not be completely aware of how I feel, but if you have grass or trees in your facility, imagine how sick you'd feel devoid of nature. Be thankful now because my only scenery is concrete, razor wire and steel dog cages. Literally! I'd give a lot to need to sneeze because of some pollen! Reflect on that.

Now, think of even more basic things than that. Think of all the little human things we take for granted. Some facilities don't even have door knobs, nor the freedom they show to be able to open a door at your own will. The facilities that do, wouldn't it be glorious if you could just turn it without someone needing to hit a button first?

Here's one for you! For all of us who have become accustomed to stainless steel toilets...what would you give to plant your behind on a really comfy toilet seat on a porcelain toilet? I went to Rahway (East Jersey State Prison) and experienced it after 16

years of only steel. I damn near moaned! Then, of course, I smiled like a kid with his first drink of Kool-Aid and laughed at how silly I found myself.

Now don't get me started on bathtubs! Damn! I was never really the type to take baths, but right now, I'd go to Bed, Bath & Beyond and spend no less than \$500 on bath salts, bubble baths and all that. I'll load it all up in the tub and bring some toys to relive my childhood! I'm not ashamed at all! Plus, I won't have to wear these god-awful shower slippers! Victory!!!

So, I'd like all of you who read this, close your eyes for a moment of personal reflection. Don't think about all of the obvious things you miss. Think of all the small, little odd things you will be thankful to have again. It's those things we should appreciate and smile to ourselves about... even if those around us think we're lunatics for smiling in such a manner.

If you're smiling now, then I helped both of us out! Remember! Be thankful for the odd things. Take care!

"The Small Things" by Alton Chavis

This couldn't be right. Rebecca heard what sounded like the familiar shouts of a preteen heading her way. "Mom! Skylar used my iPad!" There it was again. She peered from beneath her rising eyelids, hoping that the image of her son at the door was just a mirage. Tyler came completely into her bedroom, pulled open the thick grey drapes, and stood in the glaring sunlight.

"She's not supposed to be in my room, Mom!" Tyler crossed his arms, wanting retribution. It didn't matter to him that his mother had just worked a double shift at the hospital. Rebecca somehow found the strength to stumble out of her pillow paradise. She threw on a tattered robe and rainbow-colored toe socks. Then, she sleepily followed Tyler downstairs to an impromptu family court hearing.

The "proceedings" lasted well over two hours. There was a long break midway, so that Rebecca could fix lunch for the plaintiff and defendant. After both parties had reached a feasible personal property and boundary agreement, Rebecca sauntered back up to her humble bedroom haven. She slithered beneath her comforter, and sleep swept over her like a warm foamy wave.

Two hours and three minutes later, it was Skylar's turn to crash the slumber party. She startled Rebecca out of her late nap with a running stage dive onto her mattress. "Mooooom! I need some more stuff for my science project, and Ty needs more Pop Tarts and Hot Pockets! We'll be in the car!" Skylar bounced off of the bed and back down the stairs.

Rebecca yawned and stretched away the mild heart attack her daughter may or may not have just given her. She pulled on some mismatched sweats over her pajamas, put her hair back into something resembling a ponytail, and slipped into some highlighter yellow Crocs. She was the walking dead, all the way to her petrified fossil of a minivan.

Of course, a trip to the craft store became a trip to the mall. Then, a trip to the grocery store (with a brief trip to the wine section for Rebecca!). Then, a trip to the gas station and the adjoining car wash. It was a four-hour trip in total. Rebecca was guided back home by a fading sun. By the time she had finished washing the after-dinner dishes, the moon was out patrolling the night skyline.

Rebecca ascended to her refuge of rest on autopilot. She poured herself into her bed's soft embrace, sweats and all, and began to doze off. There was a soft knock at the door. Rebecca gave a grunted invitation into her cozy lair. Her twins peered in cautiously. They were filled with a guilty sadness at the sight of their depleted and defeated matriarch.

The twins entered their mother's room with an aura of peaceful compassion. Tyler removed Rebecca's Crocs first. Then Skylar released her hair from its elastic bondage. Rebecca retreated her weary head to the fluffy solace of her pillow. The twins raised her comforter up and wafted it back down over her.

There was a gentle kiss from Tyler to Rebecca's cheek and one from Skylar to her forehead. The twins tiptoed their way out of her nocturnal nest and lightly closed the door behind them. A loving smile emerged through Rebecca's exhausted features. She had one last thought before she dissolved into a distant dream. "Thank you, God, for my family."

"My Parents" due January 2018

by Ron Pavey

I have been locked up now for almost twenty years. While I was incarcerated, both my folks have passed away. Being in here, I heard all types of horrors stories of both moms and dads being neglectful to their children or even worse, doing unspeakable things to the kids.

It was these times that I realized how lucky I am to have a set of parents one can be proud of.

My parents were together for over 50 years and aside from my father being at work, they were hardly ever apart. My dad had an impeccable work ethic and was very respected and known for his work as a small engines mechanic. I remember him starting his business in 1963 with two chainsaws, two lawnmowers and two mowers you walked behind to mow. He turned this into a million-dollar company.

My mama always had breakfast on the table for him as well as us kids. Supper was waiting when he returned home from a long day of work. The few times they argued involved him being at "the store" too much. The fights never last long and never turned violent. Many times, it would end with dad dropping his head and saying, "Yes Dear." Don't get me wrong, dad wore the pants in the family, but he loved mama deeply and would admit to being wrong only to her.

While the death of a child would tear many couples apart, the deaths of my older (by one year) twin brothers just strengthened

their marriage bond. Neither blamed the other. God just needed them back quicker than expected. The two babies only lived a few hours but stayed forever in our lives. I remembered as a kid, the entire family (now 5 kids) and our folks would walk the ten minutes or so to the cemetery and visit the twins. The trauma of the loss turned mama's hair white overnight, but she was stronger than any of us gave her credit for.

Neither were ever unfaithful to the other. It was not even considered. They did not smoke or do drugs. I had never seen my dad drunk. Mama, maybe tipsy once! A few beers once in a while were their vice, and when I say once in a while, think 3 times a year--4 if you count New Years.

They were both satisfied with just enjoying life, family, and a quiet abundance of peace and joy within their souls. When it was dad's time to start the next step of his journey, he passed peacefully in mama's arms.

We all thought she would be lost without him and would soon follow, but as I speak of the huge strength that she possessed, mama stayed in this world for another 13 years. She still had many more lives to brighten, whether they were family or strangers she would meet and never see but once.

She used to say, "If I was a better mother, you would not have done this to go to prison."

All I can say is this: If I had just listened to the wisdom and the advice of these two marvelously kind and loving people, my path would have gone another way. It was neither of their faults that I made a bad choice. I have, for the past 16 years or so, tried to turn my life around to be just half the person they were. I know they are smiling down at me, proud of the person I have become.

For this gift called life,
I thank you Mom and Dad.
I'll make the most of it.

By Steven Lee Adkins Jr.

Where to begin? My parents were great. They were, and I say "were" because my father is dead, and prison has placed many physical miles between my mother and I, perfect in many ways and flawed in many ways, like we all are.

My father spent much time with me, sharing his love of the outdoors and passing that quality to me. He'd take me hunting wild mushrooms, where I could breathe deep the damp, old, forest air. Where the tortoise would eye my presence suspiciously and sagely through red-rimmed eyes.

And where rabbits bolted through tender grass that had been awoken by spring's gentle caress. In the late fall and early winter, I'd literally follow in his footsteps like he'd taught me, so as a child, I wouldn't make unnecessary noise. Occasionally, stepping on a frost covered acorn where I placed my feet, I would gain a frown over his shoulder.

Then, he'd turn and continue after the echoes of the seemingly small explosion died away into the otherwise still, but watchful forest. My mother also had a love of nature and passed it to me. I was her shadow in our vegetable garden and her flower garden. Apparently, a green thumb is hereditary, going back to our time untold. My mother is still alive and was recently telling me about her father being crippled when she was younger, and her and my grandmother, Goldie, gathering berries until their fingers hurt.

Keeping their family fed and the lights on and making ends meet. I remember collecting black walnuts with my mother, and what we didn't share with the squirrels that she had tamed, we used claw hammers to crack open on large unopened blocks of firewood. Cold winters like this one remind me of the firewood my father and I would cut and split, and eating those walnuts, a much simpler time... the good ol' days.

"The Balanced Life" by Martin Vicario

Christmas is right around the corner, and I am thinking about my parents. Back then, my father would deck out the outside of the house with a rainbow of colored lights, and my mom would be baking and cooking because she knew that the children, us, now grown up, would be coming home for the Christmas holidays. It always felt good coming back home. And it did not have to be Christmas, anytime was a good time to be home and visiting with my parents. I used to like watching them. They were the perfect couple. I always wanted to have a marriage like theirs.

There are times late at night that I cannot sleep, and I will sit up on the bunk and think about my parents, now gone. People have a hard time believing that I never witnessed my parents have an argument, but it is true. My siblings said the same thing, i.e., they never saw them argue. I am certain they had their heated conversations, but they must have done it in the privacy of their bedroom. I am thankful that they thought of us enough to keep their business private. I sure do miss my parents. To me, they always seemed to have it together, so in control and responsible. As I remember my parents, marriage and family were paramount to them. I get it! Because it is also important to me.

On a sweeter note, I recall going camping or just hitting the road for the weekend and visiting National Parks like White Sands, N.M. I remember the laughter as we slid down the sand dunes, just to get up and do it again. I can still see my parents "so into it" that, for an instance, I could see the child in them. Back at our campsite, my parents would fire up the grill and give orders to their children to set up the table...everything would fall into place as usual. I can still feel the love just thinking about it. Those times went by too quick...I sure do miss my parents.

As I jump around in my mind from scene to scene, I remember a time during a late summer night that I stopped by my parents' house. There was a gentle breeze that was working its way into and through the house. The night lights were glowing soft and

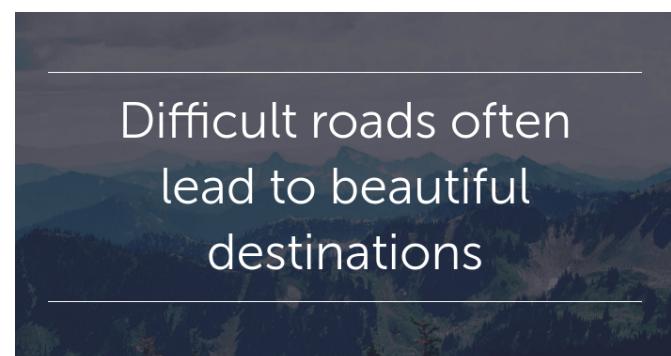
the atmosphere felt so easy and peaceful. I walked into my parents' bedroom as they slept. My father was hugging my mother, and I just stared at them for a long time. I remember thinking, "one day they will no longer be with us." I wanted to wake them up, hug them, and tell them that I loved them. I wanted to look into their eyes and say, "see me," and thank them for loving me when I least deserve to be loved. And for giving me life, not once, but twice. First, for bringing me into this world, and second, saving me from my own self destruction. And in the process, showing me that I am still worthy, and that I do matter and make a difference in the world, especially in theirs. I do not recall how much time went by, it felt like a dream. The experience had not only been imprinted in my mind, but in my heart. I remember my heart pounding with a love that ached. I slowly walked out from their bedroom and took a stroll around the house, absorbing the history that was my parents. Before I left, I took one more look into their bedroom to see them. O' how beautiful they were, and what a marriage! I am thankful to God for my parents. I sure do miss them.

By Jeremy Porter

My peace of mind, my rock of serenity, my majestic blessing from the most high, are just a few statements of endearment that resonate within my heart and mind to express my deepest sentiments for the queen who birthed me into this world.

I have been broken down to my lowest point in life, lost everything only to find out who will love me despite any adversity I may face. My mother is my angel from God. Her strength has carried me when I was weak and felt like giving up. Her faith has inspired me to believe in positive outcomes when I felt like there was no hope left. Even when I tried pushing her away out of anger, stress, and depression, she remained steadfast in my corner....

As a man now, who reflects back upon his childhood, I can clearly see the sacrifices made by my sweet, dear mother, to give me opportunities and chances she herself never had. For that, I am forever grateful. I would like for her to know that ultimately it is her unconditional love that makes the storms of my life seem so small in comparison and brings joy to my soul....





Art by Michael Dasilva

"Tuned In" due February 2018

"Tuned In" by Antwon Housey

As a prisoner with a heart full of compassion, it's dangerously difficult not to be tuned in to other prisoners' emotional tantrums. I try my hardest to stay out of the lanes of other prisoners. Every day, I am forced to tune in to somebody else's emotional currents. Prison is like DirectTV. It is always a lot of channels, however they all show the same movies. Tune in next week for a sneak peek of what will happen in the next episode of "The Walking Dead." That's the only time I'm able to cease tuning in to others' emotional currents; when the walking dead become the sitting/standing dead. Tuned in to watching "The Walking Dead." Most prisoners need to tune in to others because they are not ready to deal with themselves, so they intentionally tune in to everybody else's drama weekly, daily and hourly. Amongst the walking dead, I'm fully awake, tuned in to the "Power" within myself to create an "Empire," so that the world can witness the birth of a star. As I make my next "Prison Break" for freedom, I will no longer have to endure the "Law & Order" of an institution. No more unexpected lockdowns because rival gangs decided that they wanted to engage in "Family Feuds." No longer will I be subjected to the "Scare Tactics" of the C.E.R.T. or S.O.R.T. teams. Now that I know "The Price is Right" within my business plan, the only thing I want to hear the investors in the "Shark Tank" say is "Let's Make a Deal." Living out this "American Horror Story" of a prison sentence didn't make me a "Despicable Me." On the contrary, it allowed me to focus on my "Game Plan," so when I am released I won't have to live with the "Fast and the Furious." My rehabilitation was brought to me, courtesy of "DIY" and even though I still crave a little "TLC," I can't wait until I once again

have my OWN!!! Inmates spend the majority of their time turned in to these shows, networks, broadcasting and programs. Only a few, a select chosen few, utilize the Trick Box for what it is worth. The only time I am tuned in is when I am thinking of a master plan on how to beat recidivism, while being a "Survivor" of the chicanery of "Lucifer" because even though I may have to complete five more years, I plan on showing "America that I got Talent," while "Wild n' Out," "Unplugged" and on vacation with my family, staying away from all of the "Ridiculousness" that these concrete walls have to offer.

By Thomas A. Hightower

Our universe has been said to be chaotic, that masses of atoms, without a designer, brought about life from chaos. Us with a religious leaning believe in a designer who directed every atom to a set purpose. That leads to the creation of life and heavenly bodies. In short, all of matter and antimatter to ever exist is tuned in to a set purpose; a pattern designed to compose all that exists today.

As the human species has learned the hard way, to lead life by chance leads to chaos. Life must be tuned in to a set, specific goal in order to achieve the best results. Yet, most of the human race seems to never achieve the desired results sought after.

To take this even further, here in America, we make-believe that we have a purpose to achieve a set end result. Namely, the American dream. In truth, very few ever see their American dream come true. Why? Because as a society, we act like 350 million individuals all going our own way is the path to the same goal - middle class American Dream.

We have no idea exactly what is going on in our world, country, neighborhood, or family. We are like a radio set off the station sought - it's filled with static. You cannot understand anything for the static-filled airwaves of our lives. We are unable to tune-in to the correct frequency we need to hear the music-harmony of a well-tuned-in life.

When 350 million souls attempt to each go their own way down the road to the same destination - middle class America - we end up running over each other. We crash and clash all along the way and wonder why we arrive at old age still as far away from our dreams as the day we started.

When will our nation figure out that we all desire the same dreams in life? For us, our children, our country, we are all headed in the same direction, yet fight each other the entire way.

If only we would realize that there are zero differences between us no matter our age, race, religion, gender, sexuality, or political leanings. We all have more in common than not. In order for us to succeed as a nation, we must get in tune with each other and tune out our differences until we learn that it's our different strengths that can work together for the overall good of all.

We need to all sit down and make a list of everything we value in life, and beside it everything we dislike. Then trade lists with your political or religious opposites. Then, count off how many values

you each have in common. I bet you have a two to one similarities to dissimilarities.

Those dissimilarities are what you need to work on. Which ones can you live with for the sake of the greater good? Again, it's reasonable to bet we could learn to compromise with each other for the sake of the greater good of our nation, state, community.

So this is the challenge to all of you - take a realistic assessment of yourself. Understand that the largest asset of America is its diversities. These diversities have made America the world's leader in innovation. We shall surely fail as a nation if we do not get tuned in to what makes us the most powerful nation on earth.

We "used to be" the envy of the world, a country all other nations aspired to become. Not anymore. Now, the world looks at us with horror as we set out to destroy each other over the same diversity that once made us strongest.

Say goodbye to the American Dream unless we wake up soon. We have become our own worst enemy. Our enemies are gleeful at America's demise at its own hands. You can thank a divided nation for the destruction of the American Dream and our Freedoms.

Respectfully yours,
A social justice advocate,
Tommy Hightower

"Tuned in To Life" by William Sprayberry Jr.

Have you ever felt like you weren't really tuned in to life? I have. I just couldn't seem to get my life right.

I never really understood what my life's purpose was. I just went around aimlessly, never knowing what I was going to do from one day until the next.

I always had a knack for writing, but I avoided it because I was scared of failure. If I went all in with writing and nobody enjoyed it, then what? As long as I never put my full force behind my writing, then I could say that I might be good at it if I'd just actually sit down and write something.

Words don't write themselves, though, and talent is only talent if you use it. If you never use it, it's nothing. How can a person ignore the talent God gave them, question God on why He made them, and ever expect to be tuned in to the life he's supposed to live?

I lived so many years feeling empty and useless. I hated myself. I became a drug addict, tried to commit suicide, and went to prison four times. I was the poster child for not being tuned in to what I was supposed to be doing. All because I was scared of failure.

I was on the verge of giving up again a couple years ago. Headed back to prison with an 18-year sentence. My wife had filed for divorce after years of us not really being together. My new fiancé left me. I knew that I might never see my stepdaughters again. I consider them my real daughters. They call me daddy Jay and are the closest things to children of my own that I have. I felt like what was the use of trying.

Then it hit me; I was already a failure. There was no need to be scared of it anymore. I had so many emotions, so many things I wanted to say, and the only way to get those out was on paper. Who cares if no one wanted to read what I wrote? I couldn't hold it all inside any longer. I had to get it out.

So, I started writing, and a funny thing happened. The pain and sadness never disappeared, but it lessened. I could escape this world filled with hurt and enter one that I create.

I could live happily through the characters in my stories. I finished a book called "We Were Just Kids," and published it online at a place called www.prisonsfoundation.org.

I started praying again, trying to build a closer relationship to God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit. I found that as long as I wrote, prayed, and stayed in contact with my family, I didn't need antidepressants anymore. Writing was my medicine.

People started reading my stuff, and they enjoyed it. The smiles on people's faces when they hear my stories, the genuine interest they have in the things I write keeps me going. They make me see how much of a fool I was for not writing before.

The emptiness inside me has faded somewhat with each prayer and story. I still feel bad sometimes, but not as bad as I used to. I finally feel like I'm in tune with what I'm supposed to be doing.

We will never feel like we are in tune with the world, until we get past that fear of failure that's so gripping that it keeps us from trying. A little fear is healthy, but too much fear is suffocating.

What scares me more now is the thought of what I would have been. If I had never decided to finally take this leap of faith and confidence, then I'd still be the person I was before I got here. It would be twice as hard to wake up at 70 and realize I have so much to say still, so many dreams I never went after, and not enough time to complete them.

If you've got something you feel like you should be doing but are too scared to try or think that there's always tomorrow, don't put it off another day. That could be the thing that helps tune you in to a life where you're truly happy. Tomorrow might come, but then it might not. Let's not wonder what we could be but tune in to what we are right now. Right now's the only thing we have that's guaranteed.

"Apologies" due March 2018

"Envy Misplaced" by E.C. Theus-Roberts

At times, prison can feel as if you're inside the Twilight Zone. As if up is down and red is black. It can be a world within a world of a world all to itself. Prison is full of surprises, both terrifically fantastic and spectacularly horrific. Of course, those are the extremes of the wide range of experiences to be had in this peculiar environment. Many are more mundane, falling into the norm of regular experiences of people fortunate enough to live far outside of the Twilight Zone. One such occurrence is envy or jealousy.

In life, we may find a million reasons to feel the tickling of the “Green Monster.” Our hair may not be as full-bodied as so-and-so’s or might be falling out at twenty while so-and-so’s is full and thick. Our physique may be far less than this or that celebrity or model. Our financial situation may be drastically different than so-and-so’s. The list goes on infinitely, and in prison, reasons for jealousy are equally voluminous.

Many of us feel envious because others have what we do not or cannot have. There is a reason why someone has this or that and we don’t—the consequence of sacrifices made. In the case of prisoners, many guards and people in society express jealousy over the seeming ease and luxury of prison life. Many feel prisoners enjoy too many privileges, while law-abiding citizens can’t afford the same luxuries. Critics say prison should be harder, less comfortable, a more severe punishment. Wrongdoers shouldn’t be rewarded is the basis for such jealousies as why inmates get three free meals a day, television, music players, exercise equipment, access to higher education, special meals for holidays, and so forth. Allow this to place things in proper perspective.

Reality in prison is soul crushing. Can you imagine waking up and not being able to do whatever you pleased? No sitting on the front porch watching the sunrise, family sleeping safe and sound? Can you imagine 99% of people you know abandoning you? Coworkers, friends, spouse, family even? Can you imagine no safety or security, not for your person nor property? How about living with the real possibility of enduring violence for no reason, because another inmate just wants to lash out? Can you imagine being made to disrobe for a search of your person? Or how about being placed in a concrete cell with chains, leg shackles, and handcuffs, with no clothing save boxers, for four hours? Can you imagine not knowing if the food you’ll get today will be fully cooked or rancid and rotten? Can you imagine stressing and worrying everyday about all the people who abandoned you because there is nothing more connecting you to the real world, other than memories?

Now, imagine this was what you awoke to every day for one, four, fourteen years, or the rest of your life. Now, imagine the only reason you continue living in the Twilight Zone—the day that never ends—is because you hope one day something might change. Can you imagine being that person? If you can, then, now, imagine not having all those small privileges—no television or music player to drown out reality. No special meals to bring back missing comforts of life. No education to stimulate the mind. Just grim reality and extreme deprivation to accompany it. Finally, I want you to imagine not losing your already tenuous grip on sanity, or not committing suicide.

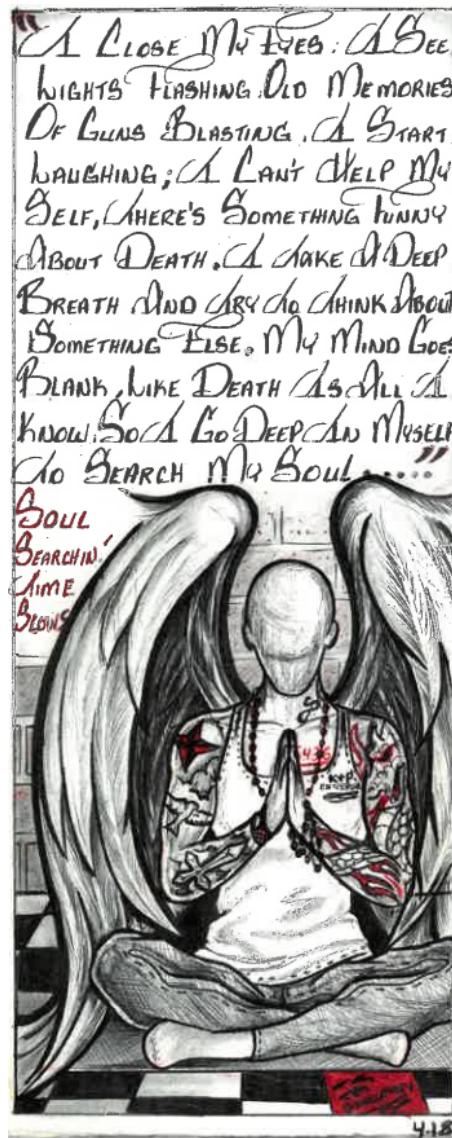
Prison as it is punishment enough, pushing some over the edge even now. Sacrifices made, and consequences paid being considered—can you really begrudge a prisoner such trivial conveniences? Especially when any inmate would unhesitatingly trade shoes with you or even a homeless person to return to the land of the living.

Envy in the Twilight Zone is a strange thing indeed.

Our envy of others’ situations can often become motive for feeling sorry for them. Especially when we learn even part of what they gave up to enjoy what they now have. Sometimes the sacrifice is small, other times it’s disproportionate. Considering the prisoner’s situation, you may feel an impulse to apologize for jealousies.

Fortunately, no apologies are necessary. You couldn’t know the sacrifices made. In all honesty, I would rather you never make them.

No, in this case, no apology is needed.



Art by Steve Singletary

“Reparations Speak Louder Than Words” by Mangáakà Ádè

Apologies are a vocal attempt to right a wrong. Remorse is the germ of all apologies. In the absence of guilt and regret, there would be no apologies because a conscience is essential. Doing the “right” thing is the moral expectation of humanity; to live by a general

ethical code of society, and when the code is broken, to acknowledge, then correct the error. By definition, an apology is simply those two spoken cliché words, “I’m sorry,” or “I apologize,” maybe “forgive me.” What of the occasions where injury has been done? When the natural course of an event or someone’s life has been offset? Mere lip service will not suffice! Unfortunately, after a century and a half since the abolishment of slavery (except for those convicted of a crime), all the descendants of the kidnapped Africans in America have received is an apology. If I’m not mistaken, it took for this country’s first official black President to give this expression of regret on behalf of America’s sadistic acts against Africans and human decency.

This topic often compels comments like: “Here we go again, that was so long ago,” and “you have to move on and stop dwelling on the past.” My favorite is: “You all now have the ability to have everything anyone else in this country does.” To these comments and those that use them to sweep the barbarism of American history under the rug, I quote Malcolm X: “Don’t stick a knife nine inches in my back then pull it out four inches and tell me I’m making progress!”

It’s a natural expectation of those who have been injured to want the responsible party to be remorseful and regret their actions. Descendants of kidnapped Africans in this country have been left with a grim inheritance of poverty, segregation, trauma and all the ill effects of American sadism that we are expected to alter through individual grit and exceptionally good behavior. Nothing could be further from the truth. You cannot cut my legs off at the knees and then look down on me when I lose the race. First, give me a chance to compete with those who have not been injured, then judge my performance. Of course, you can’t repair the original damage by re-attaching my severed legs, but you can design some good quality prosthetics for me, and while you are presenting them to me, apologize for the injury you have caused me. One would assume this to be a common-sense solution- right?

In 1769, the Quaker John Woolman wrote: “A heavy account lies against us as a civil society for oppressions committed against people who did not injure us, and that if the particular case of many individuals were fairly stated, it would appear that there was considerable due to them.” Quakers in New York, New England, and Baltimore demanded that membership was contingent upon compensating their former slaves. This was an apology for their sadism and atonement for their sin.

The practicalities, not the “justice” of reparations, seem to be the problem. Who will be paid? How much will they be paid? Who will pay it? The guilty ones have all died! These are the salient points, as if responsibility and accountability died with the last slaveholders. It’s this country that’s guilty for allowing and participating in such savagery and would now rather pretend it didn’t happen. Yet America openly professes its pride in its history and revels in it. A nation outlives its generations. To proudly claim the World War I veteran

and disown the slaveholder is patriotism à la carte. We were not there when Washington crossed the Delaware, or when America fought off the British, but these events still have meaning. We were not there when Wilson took this country into war, but we are still paying out the pensions. So, telling me: “I wasn’t there,” does not cut it. “The bleeding does not stop when the knife drops.”

“Dear Frederick” by Catherine LaFleur

Dear Frederick,

Have you noticed that on days when there is a chicken dinner or special meal that your tag swipes in the Computerized Inmate Meal Service Database show that you have already eaten your meal?

You see, Frederick, often our scanner at Camp Prisonery Land is out of service and the officer must hand type my Department of Corrections number into the system. Your number differs by one digit from my own.

Sadly, I must admit that my friends and I have eaten many times on your tag number. I hope this hasn’t caused you too much trouble. Although, it probably has on Thanksgiving, Christmas, the Fourth of July, and every weekly chicken day...for the past five years. Well, sometimes we ate your eggs, biscuits, and turkey sandwiches too.

I’ve thought about you a few years, when my shriveled conscience gasps aloud. However, this is not as often as it should be, considering my religious convictions.

I’d just like to take this opportunity to apologize and let you know that you should write a grievance that the Meal Database shows that you are eating meals at a women’s prison in Southern Florida. (You lucky dog).

In the future, I hope I can refrain from using your number to double dip.

Don’t count on it though. That chicken is really, really good with the ranch dressing.

Cordially,
Catherine

“Never Too Late” by Cambren Thomas

To Carter, the hands on the wall clock moved with the slow succession and sound of a swinging pendulum of doom. His throat was a desert, his palms a sauna, his heart a flat stone skipping randomly across still water. The lively conversations going on around him reverberated in his ears like hollow sounds in an aquatic abyss. He had waited, and slightly dreaded, for so long to taste this moment – and he had no idea whether it would be sweet or sour.

Carter looked at her as if he were a jeweler with a monocle to his eye, appraising some rare gemstone. She returned his curious gaze with a layered stare that was either a welcoming oasis or quicksand. Carter knew that he needed to burst the growing bubble of silence between them. He had known for close to two

decades what needed to be said, but distracting thoughts surged through his brain like a cacophony of explosive fireworks displays, erupting in a rousing finale...

"She finally came to see me! Look at her! She's beautiful like her mother. The same light skin. The same short and fit build. Those bouncy curls of brown hair with a hint of red in them. Those same dimples that try and hide when she's nervous."

"I see myself in her features too! That little mound of a nose. Those big brown eyes with an almost exotic slant to them. The inquisitive dents in that undeniable Carter family forehead. I can't believe she's a woman now!"

"There's so much, too much, to catch up on! Did she get all of my letters and the birthday cards? I wonder what she thinks of me? She must have questions. What's she up to now? Work? College? I wonder what she loves? I wonder what she hates -- me? I wouldn't doubt it."

Carter's continued mental meanderings reached critical mass and imploded into uncertainty, but he slowly transported himself back through the infinity of time and space, toward the threshold of reality. His focus materialized, back to the monotony of the threadbare visitation room he was in with his estranged daughter.

He knew it was time now. Carter pushed the knot in his throat aside, with a dull fleshy thud. His bladder chimed in, to pester him with a resonating pang to be emptied. He closed his legs tightly, in hopes to keep the sudden swell at bay. Simultaneously, he dried his clammy mitts at his sides.

Carter exhaled the remaining residue of fear from his body. His hands began the seemingly mile-long journey across the generic plastic table that separated him from his legacy. He softly enveloped the delicate, and colorfully manicured, fingers of his daughter's right hand. He cleared his throat again, with the stuttered clatter of an orchestra conductor. The symphony of emotions within him were ready to begin their heartfelt melody. His head rose to find his daughter's countenance, receptive and attentive.

The words fought for stability on Carter's tongue, like towering monoliths wavering to the earth quaking forces of nature. He held onto them though, through the vice-like grip of his teeth, not letting the words fall and crumble away. Small streams were building to a teary waterfall in his eyes. The words were pushed to the very edge of his mouth, ready to freefall into the depths of his daughter's heart.

"Elena... Elena I -- I'm SORRY," Carter voiced with unfathomable sincerity. Heavy tears began to drop from his lids, like a refreshing summer rain, saturating his state jumper. Elena's own misting eyes gave way and pushed forth a flood of Biblical proportions. Raging torrents were rushing down the lovely contours of her face and dotting her dress with the abstract symbols of relief and forgiveness.

It was finally finished.

Now, they could start...

"Blink of an Eye" due April 2018

"The Blink of An Eye" by Moses Valdez

Anabel had a peculiar problem. She couldn't blink. Not as a disability, but because every time she did, she'd jump into the future. There was no set amount of time that would pass. The first time it happened, she was 16, still in high school. She dropped a quarter down a wishing well and wished she'd be grown and far from the home of her parents. For her, being home was torture. Her parents, always complaining about this and that. If only she could manage until graduation. She knew her future to be bright. She turned to walk away and felt the atmosphere stir. She blinked, and she was no longer at the well, but at her graduation. She blinked again in shock. When her eyes opened, she was staring at her pregnant belly in a full-length mirror. She yelped and blinked and found herself in pain on a hospital bed having a baby boy. Pushing, she screamed and blinked and opened her eyes to a ten-month-old baby asleep in a crib. The love and adoration she felt was overwhelming. A tear formed in the corner of her eye and she blinked it away. Just like that, the moment was lost. Opening her eyes, she watched an eight-year-old boy she assumed to be her son playing on the slide. The love was there, but she couldn't remember him aging. Her last memory, he was a ten-month-old baby. It isn't possible. A sad tear trailed down her cheek, she blinked, and she was in a different place. It was her son's first day of high school. She was standing at the window, watching him walk towards the school bus. She tried to recall anything besides the vague memories that seemed like yesterday. In all, she blinked eight times before realizing what was happening. And then again, when she could no longer force her eyes to stay open. In the beginning, she could only keep her eyes open for a few hours at a time. Each blink took years away from her and her family and friends. Everybody got older and she had no memory of any of it. One blink she was getting married, in the next it was her son replacing her. One blink she was a beautiful, young bride, the next she was old and weary. She couldn't recall anything more than bits and pieces that didn't add up to a full life lived. It seemed like yesterday that she wished she could be far from her parents. A moment later and both of her parents were sick. The next blink and they'd both be beyond her reach forever. She had to make this moment last as long as possible. It would be the only memory of her parents besides wishing she was away from them. So, she couldn't blink. She was going on a week and her bloodshot eyes had long ago dried out. She stood at the foot of the bed, wishing she could go back in time. She would cherish her parents, her son, her life. A tear began to form in the corner of her eye. Unable to blink it away, she allowed it to fall as she pondered how fast life passed by.

"The Big Picture" by Juan P. Rosales

Oh, the blink of an eye. Tus forgotten through day and night. Seldom thought of and, when remembered, quickly dismissed

as insignificant. But it is so much more. So much more because it captures the big picture, moment by moment.

A friend in high school once said to me that life goes by in flashes. Blinks. That for every blink of an eye, a memory has been captured and stored. "Like pictures?" I had asked. She turned to me with a knowing smile and a secret within her eyes. Her words then struck truth. It is now that I begin to analyze them as an archaeologist, delicately peeling letter by letter to discover the treasure of wisdom underneath.

From her perspective, I see, laying back to open the photo album of captured moments, a most peaceful, lightening mood blankets those reveries. I do laugh at times when I picture I'm in my own private theater, the stills of my life reeling on film and that same lightening mood projecting them on the big screen. Ha! It is such a joy to view moments like that, whatever the "motion picture's" genre. This is my greatest escape when the open eye view is not so great.

So, it goes to say, a blink of an eye is far from just a blink. Memories are being captured by our very own personal cameras with a snap of our shutters. Those still life moments are accessible at any time. Truly, life's a big Kodak moment. Get the big picture?

wink

Cheesing,
Juan P. Rosales

"Lost Eyelashes" by Derek LeCompte

When was the concept of time created? Who came up with hours, minutes, seconds, milliseconds, and so forth? I wonder what we did prior to that. Sure, day is an easy concept with the rise and set of the sun and moon. Even their positions in the sky are easy concepts to grasp.

I, however, have decided to strip myself of time and physical age for a new concept. It is inspired by two other concepts. The first is the phrase, "blink of an eye," which we recognize as a concept of speed. The second is an old school concept of telling how much is left on your prison sentence. This was when Soul Train was still in syndication. Men used to express, "Yo! I got ten Soultrains and a wakeup!"

You see, this opened my eyes that time truly is related. It's all in how we see it. Theoretically, we can speed it up or slow it down depending on how we see it. Soul trains were weeks. So, the person expressing it is choosing to forget the gauges of days, hours, and minutes.

For me, when I think of the eye, we always seem to relate it to speed. The blink, the quick glance, and the darting stare are all quick actions. When guys find out that I'll have nearly two decades in prison soon, knowing I'm only 38 years old, they ask me how it feels. So, I choose to express how it feels with a metaphor nearly nobody thinks of. I reply, "It is like losing an eyelash." It takes a moment to register, then they understand that almost nobody realizes when they lose an eyelash. I further emphasize, "That's the point!"

I don't like to look back at yesterday. I enjoy looking at tomorrow. So, my past days got lost like eyelashes. I laugh because people pay attention to just about every hair on their bodies, but only a small percentage of them ever look at the loss of eyelashes. Nobody counts them! But when I realize one has fallen, even if it ends up on my fingertip when I wash the sleep out of my eyes every morning, I smile and let it wash away like nothing. They grow back, just like possibilities of our futures. But when we lose them, we don't even notice. To me, that gives me a good way to look at the future.

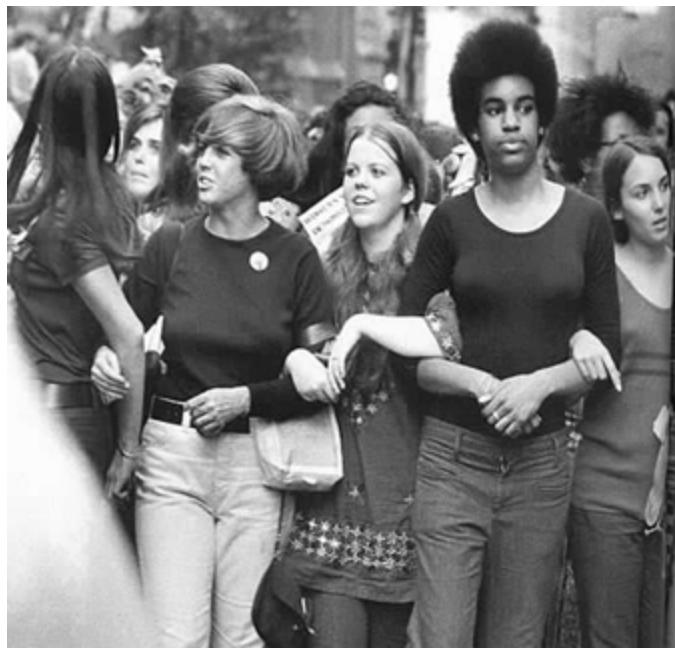
In essence, because 20 years went by quickly, I do consider it like passing in a "blink of an eye," or to my estimation, 92 eyelashes. Yep, it doesn't feel like yesterday, it feels like tomorrow.

Picture Themes: Many of you respond to pictures more strongly than you do the preceding word cues. Here are picture cues for the next many months. Like the theme essay project, if you write a story based on a picture, you will receive a copy of all the stories written on the same picture. Unlike the word theme essays which are to be non-fiction, the picture theme can be whatever you want, a true story or an imaginary one. Your writing can make a big difference in the lives of those who read your words, and I invite you to write something, especially if the idea of receiving a packet of stories appeals to you. Please try to keep your theme and picture essays limited to 750 words. If you need a few more words to tell your story, we certainly understand, but then cap it at 1000. The really long themes some of you are submitting make it very expensive to mail copies to all participants.

Due 10/1/18



Due 11/1/18



Due 1/1/19



Due 2/1/19



Due 12/1/18



Due 3/1/19



Due 4/1/19



Following are samples of writing from our previous picture theme writing assignments. Please consider sending in one of your own. Happy imagination!

November 2017 Picture Theme



Due 5/1/19



"The Relation" by Dillon James Gresham

If you take 1 million people and cram them together, what do you get? 1 million people, duh. There will be different shapes, sizes, colors, and sexes. Some will be ugly on the outside, and beautiful on the inside, others gorgeous on the outside, and hideous on the inside. Some will be strong, others weak. There will be people who will get together in groups, and some people will shy away by themselves. Some colors won't like other colors, but there will be people who like all the colors. You'll have gay men, bi men, trans, lesbians, and bi women. All 1 million people will vary. No two will be exactly alike, and they will not all be from the same family, surely. So, what's the relation? How about the air we breathe, or the blood we bleed? Don't we all still walk on the same planet? The relation is all 1 million of those people are humans, regardless of their differences.

"Wear Shorts and Ride a Bike" by Jamie Pelton

I am at the race like she wanted. I am beginning to have second thoughts. I bet she does not show at the finish line. One hundred bucks I bet my friend Joe that she would show.

"Wear shorts and ride a bike," she said. What a man will do for a foxy lady.

Well, here I am in boxer shorts on my bike. If I race on a bike in my shorts, I get a date.

I wonder what the rest of these suckers are here for? I begin to peddle, and I ponder how I ended up here in the first place. Several years back we were in grade school, she had braces and, wow, would she laugh at my corny jokes. That was Brandy, what a sweetheart she was.

Well, she grew up and so did I. After high school, we both went our separate ways. After college, she called me one day and

*E*very day may not be good,
but there is *something* good
in every day

wanted a date. I said, "No thanks. We are friends and I want to keep it that way."

Brandy said, "All right, but I think you will regret it."

I said, "Oh no, I don't want to mess with our friendship."

She said, "Well actually, I was gonna hook you up with a college roommate, Amanda." Brandy hung up as quickly as she could, and I was left without a date. The next day, I was told that Brandy left town again.

Two years later, I am at a bar and I get a call from Brandy. She says, "Hey, do you still want a date with Amanda?" I say, "Ya, sure. Where do I meet her?"

Brandy says, "You know that race tomorrow that starts at the town square?"

I say, "You're not talking about the Free the Whales in your Shorts bike race, are you?"

Brandy says, "Yep, that's the one."

I say, "Well, what do I got to do to meet Amanda?"

Brandy says, "Wear shorts and ride a bike at the race. At the finish line, Amanda will tell you where to take her out."

So here I am, and I have one mile to go. I start to go down a steep hill and I am wondering what Amanda will look like. I am going really fast now, and I hit a rock. I start to fly through the air and I hit the ground hard. So hard that I pass out.

When I wake up, I am sitting at my kitchen table. I look down and I have our photo album out. Well, looky here, I say. Wow, would you look at that? There is the photo of the race Brandy made me race on a bike in my shorts, so she would marry me.

I think back to the dream I just had. Wow, I am so glad I did not have that date with Amanda. I lost the hundred bucks to Joe though. Amanda never showed, but Brandy did.

We got married a year later. To get engaged to Brandy all I had to do was wear shorts and ride a bike. After all, I turned her down on the first date and she laughed at all my corny jokes for years.

I look at this picture with all of us guys in our shorts in a bike race. The other guys raced for the whales and I raced for my fiancé. What a guy will do for a foxy lady?

My two beautiful baby girls come into the kitchen with my wonderful wife. My little girls say, "Daddy, are you ready for your anniversary gift from mommy?"

I say, "Yes, sweet peas, daddy is ready. What is it?" They smile and burst out laughing. I say, "What is my anniversary gift from mommy?"

Brandy walks towards me, kisses me, and whispers in my ear. She says, "Tomorrow is the annual Save the Whales bike Race in your Shorts. If you want your gift, wear shorts and ride a bike!"

I think to myself, "Yes, she is worth it, but she was right, I would regret turning her down for that first date." I wonder where my finish line for my regret is. Brandy smiles and says, "Remember, I am

the friend you always wanted to laugh at you and I am having a good laugh!

December 2017 Picture Theme



"New Family Day" by Alfred McGlory

I'm sitting on the steps, waiting for my new family to come and adopt me today. My case worker says they're nice people, and that they love to fish and go camping. I'm excited and can't wait to meet my new mommy and daddy. I'll have a sister too.

A minute later, I hear squeaking tires and a bad running engine. A station wagon pulls up. I see a long-haired man with a motorcycle jacket step out of the driver's side.

"Come on, Teresa!" he said to his wife, "and put that damn cigarette out." She does, after she releases a cloud of smoke out of her nose and mouth. The back door opens and a little girl about my age hops out wearing glasses with a big green apple in her hand. They all walk past me into the building.

Ms. Tara comes outside and calls for me, "Alfee! Come inside and meet your new family."

"Huh!" I said.

"Come meet your new family." I shook my head no and ran to the back of the place. Ms. Tara came and found me. She always knew where to look. She sat down and talked with me.

"What's wrong? Today is your lucky day," Tara said.

"But they don't like me," I said.

"Don't say that," said Tara.

"That woman looks mean. I don't wanna go. What if they really don't like me?"

"They will; that's why they are here. They are here for you. Now come inside and meet them." I wipe the snot from my nose and the tears from my eyes. On the way inside, I'm greeted by the man with the motorcycle jacket.

"What's up, sport? You must be Alfee. I'm Delbert," he said, holding out his hand. "You can call me dad if you'd like."

Then, the woman stooped down and said, "Hi Alfee, I'm Teresa, but you can call me momma. I want you to know that we love you, and we are glad to have you in our family."

"But I'm black," I said. Suddenly she reached out and gave me warmest hug I ever had in my life and, at that moment, all my tears went away.

"Hi! I'm your big sister. My name is Cindy. I fixed up your room for you all by myself. Mommy said you're seven years old. Well, I'm nine. I turn ten next month. Here, I brought you this." She handed me a big green apple.

After my new parents signed the papers, we all loaded into the station wagon and headed to my new home.

January 2018 Picture Theme



"The Atelier" by Robert Taliaferro

"There is a symmetry to her movements, the way that the beads drape from her neck and her bracelets garnish her arms," the master said to his students, as the young woman entered the room.

"Namaste," she said in a small alto voice that seemed to fill the room, even though slightly spoken, like the subtle smell of jasmine.

"Even her voice defines symmetry," the master said, as he took up his charcoal and paper and began to sketch.

Following his lead, his students began to render drawings of the beautiful young woman who had entered the room.

The woman stood, confused, perfectly framed in the doorway to the small room. Spread around the atelier were a

number of tables that had small tubes of paints. Large canvases of the master were hung haphazardly on the walls, while others were strewn on the floor.

Behind her hung one of the master's woven rugs; its ruby red acting as a backdrop to the young woman who stood in an ivory white veil that framed her face so perfectly that when the light struck her just right, the students could not help but to be taken by her exotic beauty.

"Yes, yes," the master said to himself, and that brought the students back from their reverie. They knew that when he was finished with his sketch, he would come around to look at their work, and if they did not have something substantial on the paper, they would wish that they had stayed home that night.

By then, the young woman was even more confused. She had been sent to the room to ask a question and here she was standing, while all of these crazy Frenchmen sketched furiously with pieces of charcoal on rags, and paper, and wood.

"Please, my dear, could you turn a bit to your left, then raise your hands in prayer again?" the master asked, and she did as she was requested.

That slight movement brought into play the light reflecting off of her necklace and allowed the pearls on her forehead and hands to glisten whiter than white, like small stars that flashed within the radiance of the woman's exotic nature.

Her bracelets never seemed to move, and the colors, muted as they were, offered a counterpoint to the pale, shell-colored dress and pale blouse that the young woman wore.

"Could you stand straight forward and look up, my dear," the master said after a few more moments, and the woman--anxious to leave from this crazy place--did as she was asked.

"Notice the fullness of her eyes," the master told his students, and he started to chuckle.

He knew that when he looked at the sketches of his students he was going to see perfect beauty defined by the beauty that radiated from the woman... yet, he would be disappointed in what they would create.

He often shared this disappointment with his wife Amelie. "They are great technical artists," he would say, "but they seem to lack the ability to see the poetry of the models that they paint or draw. They don't see beyond what is sitting there in front of them...they only see the subjective essence."

The young woman began to search the room anxiously until she laid eyes on the young man on the furthest side of the room and tried to get his attention.

To her dismay, he was so focused on his canvas that he seemed to only see her as the object that he was to draw.

Seeing her discomfort, the master said, "Just a few more moments please...we are almost done here."

Hearing that, she looked back at the master and was put at ease by the childish gleam in his eyes, only slightly hidden behind rounded glasses.

"Voila, I am done," the master exclaimed, which was the signal to the others in the room that they were done as well.

"Thank you, my dear, for your patience," he said to the woman, who by now was obviously furious.

"So, did you want something?" the master asked, knowing full well that he was going to have a story to tell from the reply.

It was then that the woman entered the room fully, walked over to the man who was in the furthest end of the room and knocked his canvas from his hand.

The sketch appeased her anger a bit, as it was a perfect rendering of the beautiful young woman. She hid the small smile that she felt coming to her lips and picked up the canvas before she chastised the young man.

"Saddiq, do you wish to draw another thing of me, or are you now ready to get married?"

It was then that the master began to laugh, and his students followed suit.

"This is not the way to start a marriage," the master said to his young student, "trust me...I know."

As the woman passed out of the room, she glanced from drawing to drawing until she got to the drawing of the master.

"This...this," she spluttered in anger, "this thing does not even look like me," she said, shocking the other people in the room. "You had me stand here only to humiliate me with such a thing as this," she said, pointing at the drawing that was on the master's pad.

Everyone in the room gasped, but the master only smiled, then raised his sketch so that everyone in the room could see what he had done.

"That is where you are wrong, my dear," Henri Matisse said to the young woman. "They have drawn you as you are now...I, however, have drawn you as the woman that you will become."

As the woman stormed from the room with her future husband following close behind, the master pointed to the rendering that he had created.

"Notice that there is symmetry in her movements; the way that her beads drape from her neck and how the bracelets garnish her arms..." he said with a smile as she turned once again in anger, "and the fire in her eyes..."

"Karma" by Nate A. Lindell

There once was a young girl who lived in the outskirts of a large city in India. Because of the family she was born into, she began working at age six. She worked every day, helping her family wash clothes. That was the caste she was born into; and, because most Indians accepted that this is the way their society is, that is the way their society was.

She would never learn to read, never have nice clothing, never own a car, never have a vacation- she might, when she is an adult, someday have a pair of shoes.

Because of her bleak life, the girl was often sad.

Sometimes she cried.

Sometimes she dreamed she was a princess.

Every day she trudged in bare feet to and from a well, carrying a bucket in each hand and balancing a third on her head. She trudged through narrow, winding, muddy paths, between the shacks and tents of low-caste Indians. She did this several times each day to get water that her family needed to wash clothes.

On her way, she would pass an old blind man who'd beg passersby for food or money. She could clearly see each of his ribs, and his eyes were milky. The girl felt bad for him because nobody ever gave him anything, and sometimes people spat on or cursed at him.

One day, while on her way to the well, she saw an actual princess!

It was on a holy day. The princess was in a gilded, ornately decorated carriage, with velvet curtains, carried by a dozen large, strong men wearing fancy uniforms. Armed guards cleared her way as the beautifully dressed princess gently threw coins, candies, and other gifts from her carriage.

The girl looked at the princess in awe. Just then, the princess looked in the girl's direction; their eyes met, and the princess felt pity for the girl. The princess called to one of her guards, gave him something, spoke to him, and pointed at the girl. The guard looked, nodded, and walked towards her.

"The Princess wants you to have this," the guard said to the girl, then handed her a golden ring with a large ruby in it.

"Thank you!" the girl said bowing, her hands clasped in prayer. When she accepted the ring, it surprised her how heavy it was.

She'd never seen such an expensive piece of jewelry, and the most money she'd ever handled was a couple rupees she would use to buy soap or food. She had no understanding of the immense value of the ring relative to her family's usual income; she only knew it was valuable. Happy about the gift, the young girl smiled as she went on her way to the well.

Soon, she was approaching where the beggar sat. As she neared him, she saw and heard a tall man looming over the beggar. The tall man was shouting down to the beggar, "Why should I give you my money without you working for it? Here," the tall man said, lifting up his foot, "Clean the bottom of my sandal with your tongue! Then I'll give you a penny!"

For a moment, the girl was stunned by the cruelty she witnessed. Then, she dropped her buckets and ran up to them.

"Sir," she said to the tall man, "I beg you, please don't be so cruel to this man, who is obviously blind, starving, and old."

"Ahhhrrr," growled the tall man, looking back and forth at the girl and the beggar. Finally, he made up his mind, spat on the beggar, and stomped away.

The girl's heart ached for what she saw, which was the miserable life of the old man.

"Thank you, child," the beggar faintly said.

Wiping tears away, the girl looked at the ring she'd been given, then at the beggar. She handed him the ring. "What's this?" the beggar asked excited, turning the ring in his hands, lifting it, feeling it.

"The princess gave it to me. Now, you won't need to beg," said the girl. Then she turned, beginning to walk away, sad about no longer having the ring, but glad that she helped the beggar.

"Wait, my child," said the beggar, "I have something for you."

The girl stopped and turned back. "Yes?" she asked.

The beggar held out his gnarled, calloused hand. In it was what looked like a small, smooth, normal stone. "It's a wishing stone," he said, offering it to her. "If you hold it tight and wish for something hard enough, your wish will happen," he said, smiling so broadly that she could see his toothless gums.

"Thank you," she said, doubting him. She then turned and continued her journey to the well, realizing that her parents would be upset if she told them about the ring. So, she didn't tell them.

Back at home, as night approached, she thought more and more about the beautiful princess, imagining how wonderful her life must be- wearing the finest clothes, eating the finest foods, wearing expensive jewelry and perfumes. As she drifted off to sleep, she desperately gripped the stone, wishing that she were the princess.

* * *

When morning came, the girl rubbed her eyes as she woke up, looking around. She thought she was still asleep and dreaming, for she was in the royal palace, in the princess's bed, wearing a brightly colored silk nightgown, lying between fine cotton sheets, smelling the sweet odor of fresh-cut flowers, surrounded by luxuries she previously couldn't imagine.

"I'm the princess!" she thought.

Soon, servant girls entered. They dressed her, perfumed her, and braided and decorated her hair with jewelry. She was taken to a large dining room and fed exquisitely prepared foods that, previously, she'd never imagined existed.

After eating, a servant girl informed her that her teacher would soon arrive. When he entered, smiling so all of his teeth gleamed, the Princess felt that she'd seen him before, when she was the washer girl. She closely examined him, then realized that he'd been the old, blind, starving beggar- looking healthy, well-dressed, with teeth made it difficult for her to recognize him.

"Sir?" she asked, stunned by the strange events.

"Yes, Princess?" he responded.

"Why-? How-?" she tried to ask.

"Ahhh, Princess," he said, "now you understand." He paused for a moment, looking at her. She remained silent. "You asked me what life was like for the lowest castes, what your life would be like if you had been born into a low caste. I gave you a ring, with a stone created by Ganesh, the Ruby of Understanding. Now you understand, don't you?"

Frowning, she said, "Yes... But I feel terrible knowing what their lives are like. You- you were there, an old man, a beggar, blind."

"Hahahaha," he softly laughed, smiling, knowing, pleased at her enlightenment. "Maybe in a past life."

Considering the life she'd lived as a washer girl, the princess was overwhelmed with pity for the lives slotted for the lower castes. "Have my carriage prepared," she announced. "Our studies will have to wait."

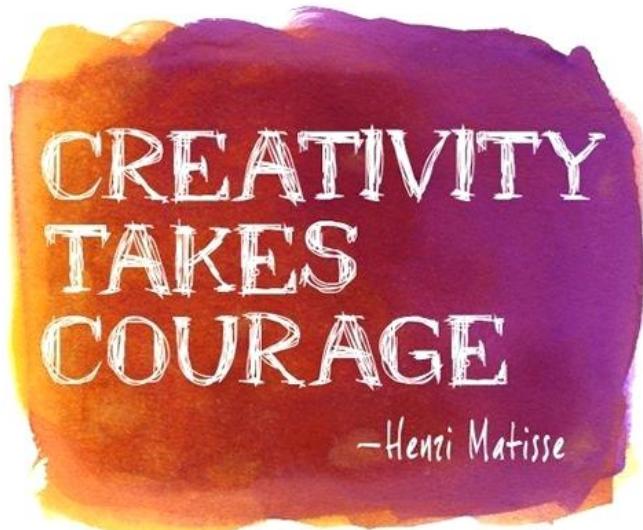
Still grinning, her teacher bowed, turned, and left.

The princess looked around. She gathered up her jewelry, her loose money, fancy combs and brushes, and all small, valuable items. She put them all in the trunk. "Gather all the sweets, pastries, and loaves of bread. Have them loaded onto my carriage," she said to a servant girl.

An hour later, she was in her carriage, being carried through the narrow, winding, muddy streets in the poverty-stricken outskirts of the city. She gave the food and other items to those who seemed most in need.

Looking into the crowd, she saw a young washer girl, barefoot, carrying three buckets. Looking at her hand, the princess removed a large gold ring that had a large ruby set in it. She called to a guard, handed it to him, and said something to him while pointing to the girl.

The guard looked at the girl, nodded, then left.



February 2018 Picture Theme



"Cats in Razor Wire Cradles" by Chad Frank

There have been feral cats on every prison yard I've been on. It never ceases to amaze me how even the most hardened convicts soften whenever they see a cat -- especially a kitten.

Cats have a way of unifying even the most polarized prison population: rival gangs have come together, racial lines have blurred, even homophobia and bias based on criminal backgrounds have become irrelevant in the interest of caring for kittens.

A few years ago, here at Butner-Low, there was a mama cat with a litter of kittens. Mama made a cradle for them among the razor wire between the fences. Mama would frequently lead her brood out to the fence line to receive the tuna treats and saucers of milk offered them.

The felines drew so much attention, the lieutenant had them removed.

A major incident was only avoided when the lieutenant assured the angry mob that had gathered outside her office that the cats were given forever homes and spared being put to sleep.

Much can be said about prisoners being violent, callous, and selfish, but it's tender, caring and compassionate actions like these that prove society's assumptions wrong.

I know whenever I begin to lose faith in myself and my fellow prisoners, all I have to do is think about the cats in their razor wire cradle and **know** there's good in all of us.

"Barbwire Cats" by Scott Shults

I, Scott Shults, was the first foreign journalist allowed into Catland ever. And it just so happened while I was there, Dogville decided to invade the country. My luck has never been particularly

good, so when the war broke out, I just figured my bad luck was showing itself once again. I couldn't have been more wrong. What I witnessed in the mountains of Catland, when the Catland special forces - known as the Barbwire Cats - began their offensive to take back Catland from the invading dog forces, was miraculous.

Catland is a small island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It is usually shrouded in fog and mist. The land is fertile, with huge grassy fields full of mice. Mice and fish are the two main food sources of Catland. The cats are peaceful. They don't allow humans onto their island, not because they are hostile, but because our history towards animals isn't all that great. There are mountains in the middle of the country. From these mountains, rivers flow down to all points of the compass in Catland. Catland has a small army. The army is called Catland Self-Defense Forces.

Dogville is a small island about one hundred miles south of Catland. Dogville is equally as mysterious as Catland. It too is shrouded in fog and mist most of the time. No human has ever been allowed ashore. No one knows the lay of the land. It's observed from the air and looks to be mostly forest and coastal plains. From what I observed of the dogs during the war for Catland, the dogs are not nice at all. Nor are they peaceful.

The invasion began without warning on October 31st. The dogs attacked all the major towns along the north coast of Catland simultaneously. They quickly killed every cat in sight. Within three days, the dog army had bypassed the mountains and surged south. Refugee cats from the north were pouring into the south ahead of the dogs. Tales they told were horrifying. Dogs roasting cats alive, stringing cats up and leaving them there to die. Tying cats to their tails and running for miles with them until the cats were dead. Horrible stuff.

The Catland Self-Defense Forces fought tooth and nail with the dogs. They were simply overwhelmed. For every cat, there were five dogs. Too damn many. But the cat army slowed the dogs considerably. They made last stand after last stand. A hundred cat alliances fell. A thousand cat Thermopylae happened. Nothing could hold the ferocious dogs back though. They came snarling and biting their way through all of the cats' defenses.

What I was completely unaware of at the time, however, was the Catland Special Forces - The Barbwire Cats. These select cats stay in the mountains of Catland for life. They live frugal, tough lives and they get their name from the beds they sleep in - beds of barbed wire!

I was trapped, along with the remainder of the Catland army, in a small pocket in the south of Catland when the dogs' luck ran out. Scared to death and resigned to death by morning. When I woke in the morning of November 31st, I was surprised to see that the remainder of the cat army were preparing to attack the dog forces' front lines! A suicide mission, I supposed, until an hour later.

My first introduction to the Barbwire Cats will be etched into my mind forever. When they hit the ranks of the dogs by surprise and

cut the dogs' forces in half within thirty minutes, I knew I was witnessing a whole new breed of cats! Bigger than the other cats, faster, stronger, bolder and with the faces of tigers. The dogs fell before them in droves.

With the dog army cut in half, those in the south could get supplies and were quickly dispatched. The cats showed no mercy.

When the Barbwire Cats initiated guerilla attack after guerilla attack on the Northern dog army, it was quickly demoralized and began a hasty retreat to the coast. Very few dogs made it off the island.

The Barbwire Cats are legends.

I carry one of their patches with me to this day.

"Slumber in the Nesty" by William Sprayberry Jr.

I fall asleep inside the flying nesty thing. At least I hope that's what this is. This one feels different than the one in the tree though. This one is cold and hurt my paw when I stepped on it. Still, I don't know what else to do.

Yesterday, I climbed up as high as I could into the only tree in our yard to see if I could find my humans. I especially missed Nelly. We'd grown up together.

I dream of being inside a box. Those were my first memories, actually. I hated it. I had brothers and sisters. We were always pawing at each other, trying to feed off mother's milk.

Then, a girl with hair she called "piggytails" was looking into our box. When she smiled, she didn't have any teeth. She was smaller than her mommy and daddy, so I knew she was little.

I was the first one she grabbed. She said, "Baby tat. I want dis one mommy." They were my humans after that. Me and Nelly did everything together. I even slept at the foot of her bed.

It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I didn't have to fight to feed anymore. Sure, I missed mother and my siblings, but I had Nelly. I got all of her attention. We were "inseparable" or however the humans say it.

At first, things were perfect. I got warm milk and food that came in a can. It was like eating at a fine cuisine every day. Then, something happened.

Now, I won't pretend to understand all the human talk, but from what I gathered, my daddy human stopped going to his place where he got my food. I think it was called the "job." All I know is that he used to leave every day to go to the job, and every day I had good food. When he stopped going there, the food wasn't so good anymore.

I started getting food out of a big bag. It was hard and dry, but I didn't care because I still had Nelly.

Next, I dreamt about when my parent humans tried to flip the switches to turn the daylight on in the house. They didn't work. It was okay until the night came. Then, Nelly got scared and started crying because she's afraid of the dark.

I left my spot at her feet and curled up right beside her. She stopped crying and held me. We could hear our parent humans arguing in the next room about the job.

Nelly laid her face on my side. Even though she wasn't crying anymore, her rain made my fur wet, but I didn't mind. I didn't like seeing her sad.

Then, I dreamt about Nelly asking our mom if I could come with them. My mommy human had rain in her eyes as she told her, "Uncle Randy doesn't want any pets at his house, but maybe we can come back and get him later." Nelly started crying again. She held me the whole rest of the day as our parent humans packed stuff into the truck to move. I don't know what "move" is, but I could already tell I didn't like it.

When they were done, they told Nelly they had to go. She said, "Please mommy, let me take Lucky." But I guess it didn't do any good. My daddy human finally got her to let him have me, and mommy human carried Nelly to the truck. They were both crying rain.

"I love you, Lucky," Nelly said. We grew up together, and she can talk good now except I think these words were getting choked into her "

"I think they're called. I guess it's hard to talk through rain. "I'll come get you, I promise." Even daddy human cried when he sat me down and patted my fur. He opened one more bag of food and said, "I'm sorry, Lucky."

That was the last time I saw them. I ate all the rest of that food a long time ago. Even ate some ants mixed in with it at the end.

I was so hungry. I hadn't eaten in days. I knew they'd be back soon. That's why I climbed the tree to see if I could see Nelly from way up there. I surprised a flying thing in a nesty. I ate it, and I feel bad because I didn't want to hurt it, but I was hungry. My instincts took over.

That's why I'm in this nesty thing now. I'm hungry again. I saw this nest thing on our neighbor's porch. I'm waiting for a flying thing again. That's how I got here.

A little boy about Nelly's age's voice wakes me up. He's with his mommy human. "Can I keep him, ma?" he asks.

"Sure," she answers with a smile on her face.

"Black Claws" by Jesse Clasby

A messenger came down from headquarters. The enemy has sent an envoy, under a white flag of truce, with a proposal to meet and begin peace talks. After millennia of unrelenting warfare, command was willing to talk. But the enemy is too well known to us. We must be ready for the inevitable deception.

The mission was simple. Get to the proposed location undetected. Do a little sneak and peek. If everything is good, pull back, set up an overwatch, and await command's arrival. If it's another trick, unleash the death and chaos. No mercy! No quarter!

Of course, it was a trap. Always is! Nineteen I put down with claw and fang before they were able to drive me into a corner.

Seven more I slew before the treacherous little bottom feeders somehow managed to get above me. Where the net came from, or how they got it over me, I can't say. That net couldn't withstand my claws, but my ensnarement emboldened them. Like locusts descending upon a lush field of corn, they swarmed over me. Biting, kicking, and stabbing with their twisted penny nails. I know I felled many more, but lost count. When my head began to spin, and my vision blurred, I knew the massive blood loss had put me on the verge of stepping through death's door.

It's funny, the thoughts that go through your mind as you're in the clutches of imminent death. I broke my record! Twenty-six! At least, in just one engagement. There's no doubt now that I could go forth and stand before that Great Cat in the sky with my head held high, with honor and dignity. I'd know that all the great warriors who have fallen before me would know how well I accounted for myself. That I looked death straight in the eye, without fear, and didn't run, didn't blink, didn't beg for mercy or wail at the injustice of being done in by this scum of the earth. Creation's worst mistake! These despicable, detestable Rats! One and all who sat at the mighty's endless table would know with an undeniable conviction, certainty, that FUSSYBALL, bringer of death and chaos, of the mighty and ferocious Black Claws, fell with fang and claw drenched in Rat blood. That with unbroken courage and determination, my final breath hissed unimpeachable defiance.

Imagine, if you dare, my mortification, my eternal dishonor, when my eyes opened again. Not to the sight of the great honorable war heroes, fighting to be the first to raise a paw in salute, to hold high a stein in toast of my great deeds. No sight of the never-ending table, laden with a glorious feast of the sea's rarest delicacies. No minstrels singing the epic saga of my life. No everlasting honors! No, my eyes opened, my awareness returned, to a spinning weakness. To great pain! The damning, humiliating reality that I was now a prisoner of war. Captured! Not killed by the parasitical rodent horde. Entrapped, entangled in a twisted spool of barbed wire. No room to move or stretch without the piercing barbs creating fresh wounds. Forced to curl myself into a tight ball and suffer the agony, the indignity, of allowing myself to become my worst fear: a POW.

Enshrouded in the ever-constant torture of festering wounds and feverish dreams of gutter-scum rats eating my decaying flesh. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else existed. Time passed, I can't say how long. Days! Weeks! It was hunger! Bone-biting hunger and a threatening, urgent need to quench a dying thirst that finally sparked that fire within my warrior heart. With this spark erupting into flames, the pain, the humiliation of defeat and capture, the fog clouding my mind, all fled in terror at the sight of the awakening of my most ferocious instincts.

With this unseen inferno raging inside, bringing my blood to a boil, realization hit like painful blows from a hammer. My great humiliation wasn't in defeat or capture, but in giving up. Laying around waiting to die. That's utterly unacceptable. Til the last breath!

It's more than just words, it's the code that bringers of death and chaos live by! Die by!

I still breathe, you rabid rodents. You think your razor wire can withstand the fury of my claws. Fools! Come one, come all, come and find out why we're called Black Claws. I'll see that endless table yet!

March 2018 Picture Theme



"Bubbles" by Delvin Diles

The kids were already arguing before we even pulled out of the driveway.

"Dad, tell Brigette the Black Lives Matter are NOT terrorists!"

Before I could even open my mouth, my wife, a white woman, breathlessly blurted to her daughter from a previous relationship, "Brigette, how could you say a thing like that? Who told you that?" "My dad. He says they have a hided agenda."

Calmly, once again, I have to disentangle the thorn bush my wife's ex has planted in his daughter's head.

"First of all, Brigette baby, you mean 'hidden' agenda. And I know your dad has his own views. He has that right. But the Black Lives Matter movement is a stand against racism. That's how it started. Sometimes, though, people do things hatefully and misuse the BLM title. What's important, though, is that we recognize that racism - hating people for their skin color - is wrong. Okay?"

Looking out at the window, she replied to the passing scenery, "Okay."

Finally, we make it to the park. The kids don't get out enough these days. They found out about an old toy: blowing bubbles. The wife's idea. Didn't know that stuff was still on the market. From the car we could tell it was a hit. "They'll be alright," she says, squeezing my hand. "I know," I tell her, embracing her. "We'll make sure of that."

"Just to See Him Smile" by William Sprayberry Jr.

I never thought I'd see him smile. It sure didn't come easy for the little guy. Not as easily as it came for my other two children anyways. I understand why it was so hard for him too. He'd been through a lot. I knew I'd done everything I could, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't spend many a night wondering if a smile would ever find a place on his lips again.

My wife, Sarah, and I had tried to have children of our own to no avail. It was something to do with her. We desperately wanted children, though, so we decided to adopt. It's a long process for an adoption and we ended up taking home a beautiful newborn baby girl. That's Mariah, the one on the left. The one in the back holding the flower in the air is Shannon. We adopted him next. He was also a baby when we got him.

My wife is a very compassionate woman. We watched a documentary on how hard it is for older children to find a home. I could tell the video was affecting her. That night, she woke me up out of a sleep, crying. She told me she'd like to adopt one more child and give an older kid a chance at life. We both fell to our knees and prayed. I felt like God was telling me it was something we should do.

When the man at the adoption agency told us Adam's story, we couldn't help but feel sorry for him. His mother had been killed by his father in a drunken stupor one night and Adam had witnessed the whole thing. He'd been begging his dad not to hurt his mom. What was even worse was after his dad killed her, he'd left Adam there with his mother's corpse while he went to a bar. We would find out later when Adam finally started opening up to us, that he slept next to his mom, not understanding that she was dead. He kept putting more and more blankets on her, wondering why she kept staying cold.

The next day when there was more light in the house, he noticed her eyes were still open. He went and told a neighbor something was wrong with his mommy. He was 5 years old at the time. When we met him, he'd been in foster care for a year, while his paternal father was in prison.

The first night, we made a mistake and put Adam to bed in his own room. He didn't tell us that he was scared. When I went to check on him an hour later, I listened at his door. I could hear him whimpering from inside. I yanked the door open as fast as I could, thinking something was wrong. He had been so scared in there alone that he'd wet himself. I felt horrible.

We moved his bed into Shannon's room, and they became not only brothers, but best friends. Still, smiling was something I never saw him do.

We made it our goal as parents to make Adam smile. We smothered him with hugs, kisses on the cheek, and every ounce of love we had. Still nothing. I got on my knees again a few nights ago and begged God to bring that little boy a smile. He needed one as much as we needed to see it. Somehow, I just felt that if we saw him smile, we'd know everything was okay.

The next day, we took the kids for ice cream. We'd been Adam's parents for two years, but we were starting to feel as if we'd failed him. He had never asked for anything, but he wanted to go to the park. So off we went when we left the ice cream parlor.

While Sarah and the other kids were picking flowers, Adam looked up at me. "My mom used to bring me here when I was littler," he said. "I had a dream last night and my mommy was there with Jesus. She told me you really love me and it's okay to love you. She said you're the parents she wanted me to have now that she's gone." He smiled.

I was wiping tears from my eyes, as Sarah had the good sense to take the picture. It captures his first smile with us and proves that God answers prayers.

April 2018 Picture Theme



"Visitation" by William Sprayberry Jr.

He never hardly got to see his daughter anymore. The divorce had been messy, and Janice's mother had gotten custody. Raul was only allowed to get the little girl every other weekend.

He felt like he'd let his daughter down enough in the past two years. They had gone from a close-knit family, where Janice was daddy's girl, to "I'm sorry, but I only get to see you every other weekend," in no time at all.

There was never enough time in a two-day weekend. Even when he was still living at home, Raul never felt like he got to spend enough time with his daughter. With work and everything else that seemed to occupy his day, his time was stretched thin.

He worked so much because he wanted to make sure his family had everything they needed. After the divorce, when his time with his daughter dwindled even more, he regretted all those hours he'd worked before. There was nothing he could do to go back in time and reclaim those hours. All he could do was spend every second he could with her from then on.

The last time Janice had stayed the weekend with him, he'd promised her he would take her for ice cream when she came

back over. She was an ice cream fanatic, so you can imagine how happy that made her.

Raul could still remember the way her face had lit up when he'd mentioned ice cream. It was a sad contrast to the look she showed now.

After Jamie had dropped her off, he'd broken the news to Janice that his car had broken down. The little girl had smiled, and he was sure she was still happy to be there with him, but he could see a tiny hint of sadness on those rosy red cheeks. No doubt because they wouldn't be making that trip to Baskin Robbins.

"It's okay, Daddy," Janice said. "I'm just glad I get to spend time with you."

Raul felt horrible. He leaned down to kiss his baby girl on the forehead, when it came to him. The idea formed in his mind and he knew it was one that would erase that sadness from her face. He had one thing to make sure of first.

He pulled his cell phone out and dialed the number of his next-door neighbor at the apartment complex.

Mrs. Kindle answered on the first ring. "Hello, how are you doing, Raul?" She'd obviously seen his name on the caller ID.

"I'm doing fine, Gertrude. How are you?"

"You know me. I'm great as long as the birds sing me sweet lullabies in the morning."

He could picture her on the other end of the line smiling. She was a widow, but had never let her husband's death get the best of her . . .

"I have Janice over," he said. "I was wondering if I could borrow your bike." She had bought a bicycle that she rode every morning, so she could hear the birds singing their songs to start the new day. Those sweet notes always helped her start her day on the right track too.

"Of course. Bring Janice by too. I can't wait to see her again."

When they hung up, Janice eyed Raul curiously. "What's going on, Dad?" she smiled. "I've never seen you ride a bike."

"I have an idea," he told her and grabbed her hand. "Let's go."

When they got to Mrs. Kindle's, she didn't ask him any questions, just handed him the key to the lock that kept it chained to the rails outside. He was happy about that, because he wanted to surprise Janice.

After some small talk with Gertrude, he winked at Janice, "Okay, we'd better get going."

"Where are we going, Daddy?"

"It's a surprise."

When they unchained the bike, Raul climbed on the seat and lifted his daughter onto the handlebars. The look on her face when they were close to the ice cream parlor and she turned and threw her arms around him made the pain in his legs disappear.

"We're gonna get ice cream after all," she yelled.

"Of course, we are. You know I can't let you down."

On their way back, she fed him a bite of her ice cream while he was pulling the bike back onto the street. "You're the best dad ever," she said, and for the first time in two years, he felt like it might be true.

By Chester Coker

I push my ice cream forward and find the wind as I cannonball through it. With tilts and twirls, I shoot and whirl, and steer my rocket around the galaxy.

Like Capt. Picard and his Enterprise, I pilot the starship Butterfly across the top of the heavens. Every bump and groove makes me giggle with blissful glee.

Never naive, nor feeling foolish among the giants. I am my own colossus and I possess Titanic power. Cross hatched, maple flavored and bearing a super-duper mega-mighty scoop of my favorite flavor. It's creamy and sweet and tastes like morning. And it's pink. Pink is power. With this power, I speed amid the stars.

I steer with abandon over every crack and fissure. I fear no pothole, nor bumpy lumpy highway. I guide my steed into each abyss, I give it a hug and a kiss.

A comical cycle bears me up and whisks me down the undulating fabric of asphalt. I prance across prairies and frolic through forests. When I see apple trees, I point my ice cream at them, swirl my cone, and pirouette with a cackle and a snort.

My day has been grand and delicious, from the wee hours of the morning, when I woke to pedal myself athwart the cosmic dust. I sped and fled, never wearied, sovereign in the star shine of the dawn.

As the day wore on, my body tuckered, pedaling for all I was worth. My eyes alight and smile bright, my jaunt was just begun. I was offered a ride and hopped aboard, flying helter-skelter through earthbound aether. My marshal's baton was in my hand and strawberry feast of cold delight.

But, whoa, the sun was out and blazed with fury. Bathing its domain with luminous warmth, I was there and felt its ardor and so did my ice cream. It wasn't long until my body waned, once again betrayed.

My ice cream melted and left me flat. Still, I rode the amicable beast over pavement and street. To each destination with warm hearted aide, every once in a while, I'd hear one say:

Which way now, Professor Hawking?

"Vanilla Vespers" by Jay Miller

If this photo were in color, and the quality slightly better, perhaps the viewer could then perceive the shadow that lays across this picture's soul like a dreary funeral shroud. But in the picture's current state, drabbed in black and white, you cannot see her flustered cheeks or the tear stains just below her eyes. So, look closer. The pale skin and empty look she gives her father is enough

to see, to know that young Natalia is fighting back the sobs; gobbling ice cream with her Papa to cool the burning pain within her gut.

Papa feels it too, taking tasteless bites, wishing ice cream were the cure to grief. Natalia needed him to be strong, she needed her Papa now more than ever. Every day since the funeral, he had pedaled her down the streets after dinner to get them both a needed treat. His cooking was nothing like Mama's...

The once delicious vanilla ice cream in his mouth, the best in town, was usually a sign of celebration; A joyous treat on occasion marked by special events: Birthdays, good grades, winning a soccer match ... But now it has become a daily treatment of consolation. A chance to taste something colder than their sorrow, as if a brain freeze could somehow numb their hearts.

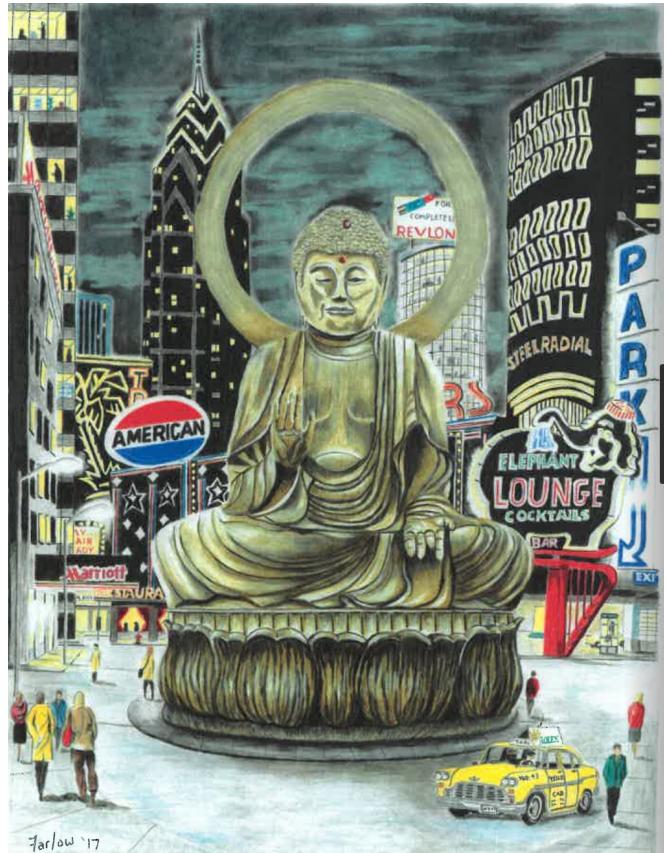
It used to be one of Natalia's most cherished treats, but now she hardly ever ate her cone. Every day Papa would pedal her to the parlor, trying to soothe her grieving heart. He would always buy her favorite: A large vanilla cone with extra sprinkles and the hot fudge poured only on the top. She loved to race the dripping chocolate goo, trying hard to lick off all the warm fudge before it had a chance to cool. Papa was right of course, it was her favorite, but it just didn't taste the same now that Mama wasn't there to jokingly scold her on how "a proper young lady" should eat her ice cream.

So instead of eating the treat herself, Natalia would ride home holding the cone for Papa, feeding him over her shoulder as they rode the bike back home. It was the same thing Mama used to do when her Papa would drive them all out for dessert in the car. He was always too busy driving to hold his own messy cone, so Mama would hold it for him, feeding him from the passenger seat. She always made sure to "accidentally" get it all over his face and nose; making sure to blame it on his bad driving and bumpy roads. So now, Natalia would do the same.

She would sit on the front of the bicycle, resting her feet on the wicker basket, holding the ice cream cone up for Papa to eat as he pedaled home. But Mama was right, the roads WERE awfully bumpy...

"Oops!" she would giggle in mock surprise as she shoved the ice cream up his nose. "I'm sorry, Papa! You really need to work on your driving skills!" she would say, as she let out a rare and precious laugh that sounded like a fond and distant memory.

Underneath the mask of cold vanilla ice cream, Papa would shed a couple tears, letting them roll secretly down his cheeks. Thank God for his lil' Nat, he thought. She is so much like her mother.



"East Meets West"

Art by Gary Farlow



Final notes

I am glad to be wrapping up another edition of the PE News. As I have mentioned, I receive so much mail from all of you updating me on the happenings in your life and I do not have the ability to respond to individuals. Please know we are committed to following up on the programs we are offering. Sometimes a volunteer is unable to complete a programming assignment and we get caught without being able to mail a packet, but we mostly do what we say we will. Sometimes it takes a lot longer than I think, and for that I apologize. As the program grows and the amount of mail and projects offered increases, it is much easier to fall behind on the tasks we have to do. Please know we are not going anywhere in the foreseeable future, and if you do not hear from us for a while, it is always okay to send a letter and check in to be sure we have your correct address in our database. If we do not hear from an individual in a six month span, you are often dropped from our list of active participants. So many of you are moved around and your mail doesn't follow. We are charged more by the USPS to have a piece of mail returned (60 cents) than we are to mail it to you (19 cents), so having your correct address is very important. Please be sure to let us know of any change of address.

Regarding my life, it is all about change. Often, one big change can bring along a cascading series of other changes. I'm in the process of orienting myself to the world as my marriage of 20 years is ending. I was distraught at first, but am much more comfortable with the process now. It is much harder to be in a relationship that is not working than to be on my own. I have moved out of town and am back living in a rural setting. That alone gives me great satisfaction. Living in town is convenient, but it does not nourish my soul the way that country life does. I like being enmeshed in the cycles of nature more than I do the cycles of civilization. Just looking at the Milky Way and stars at night is deeply satisfying. Town is too light at night. I mentioned in my last mass mailing that I went on a 10-day silent meditation retreat prior to moving to the country. It was the best thing I have done for myself in forever. I truly made the distinction between grief and misery and have been able to hold that distinction in my heart and mind. Grief is good; it is the mourning of losing things you love or care about. It is a natural and healing process. At its core is the fact that I loved or cared about something. Everything is always changing and all people I care about will one day die. All relationships will one day end either due to death or disinterest. Grief is the price we pay for loving. Misery is a different animal, and I prefer to stay away from it. It is when we want something that is not available to us, or we want things to be different than how they actually are. Everything will always change, and misery is when we try to stop the always changing. Everything about life is impermanent, and the easier we embrace and observe change rather than hold on to a fixed idea of how things should be, the better able we are to relax within the reality of our lives.

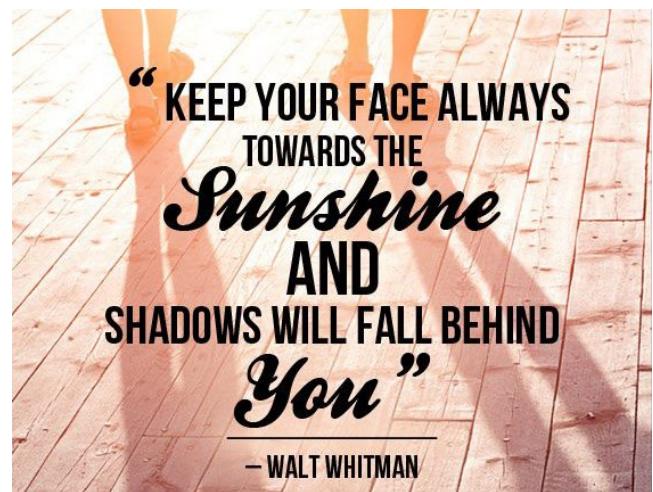
I wish my ex-wife nothing but the best and am grateful for the good years we did have. I am more focused on having productive and close relationships with my children, rather than being focused on how to stop the marriage from dissolving.

It is actually quite liberating, even though it does come with a great dose of the unknown.

I do miss living with my 16 and 19-year-old children, but am making an effort to stay close and connected. This August, I will take my 16-year-old son on a camping mancation up into the Rocky Mountains. I hope also to show him a bit of the canyon lands that are to the west of the Rockies. He has never been off the east coast. We will have a 36-hour drive to get to Colorado, and I am not sure how we will do in the car, but perhaps we will find a way to have a conversation or two. Today's children are hooked to their cell phones and the fine art of personal conversation seems to be on the decline. Other than divorce, my energy these days is on harvesting and drying the garlic on my farm. I have about 15,000 bulbs to pull. It has been nothing but rain these past few days, which is frustrating to me when I have my farmer hat on. I had hoped to make some money selling garlic, but am seeing the amount of hours I put in to create the garlic has me earning pennies per hour. Between preparing the land, planting the garlic, weeding, harvesting, drying, cleaning, and then selling it, the amount of time involved has to be given as a labor of love, not as a job. Next year, I will grow 1,500 rather than 15,000 and it will be 10 times easier. I will still have all the garlic I could ever eat, and I will find another way to supplement my income.

I also just spent four days at my favorite music festival. I have a massage booth there, and spent the time helping people relax and relieve their pains. Massage work is way more lucrative than farming, and I will have more time for it with my reduced garlic workload.

Summer in upstate NY is generally a very good time. I am so grateful to the library for allowing me to create and manage Prisoner Express. It gives me satisfaction to be able to provide you with books and other opportunities to expand your horizons.



REGISTRATION FORM

Please Note: If you received this newsletter, you are on our mailing list. This form (or a letter) should be returned in a timely manner if you want to sign up for programs—and If you don't want to cut up your newsletter, you can write a list of programs you wish to join and send it to us . **If we do not hear from you by February 2019, 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. Books are free, but the mailing cost is not. List types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection. A typical book package has 4 to 6 books and you need to send \$4 to help cover the cost of postage.

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. 21. I understand that to receive the anthology, I am required to submit a poem for consideration in the anthology.

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

Building a Book Lesson 3- This packet will help authors plan, develop, and write a book. We will provide a summary of packets 1 and 2 with this mailing.

Origami- learn the fine art of paper folding. Amaze yourself with all that can be done with a sheet of paper.

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

American Revolution- Come find out about the origins of this country and the forces that exploded into our war of independence.

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

Songwriting- Here it is, finally: Kathy Z's program to unleash your songwriting skills. This is your lucky day, as this was offered last cycle but delayed due to a mistake.

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

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:

DATE: _____

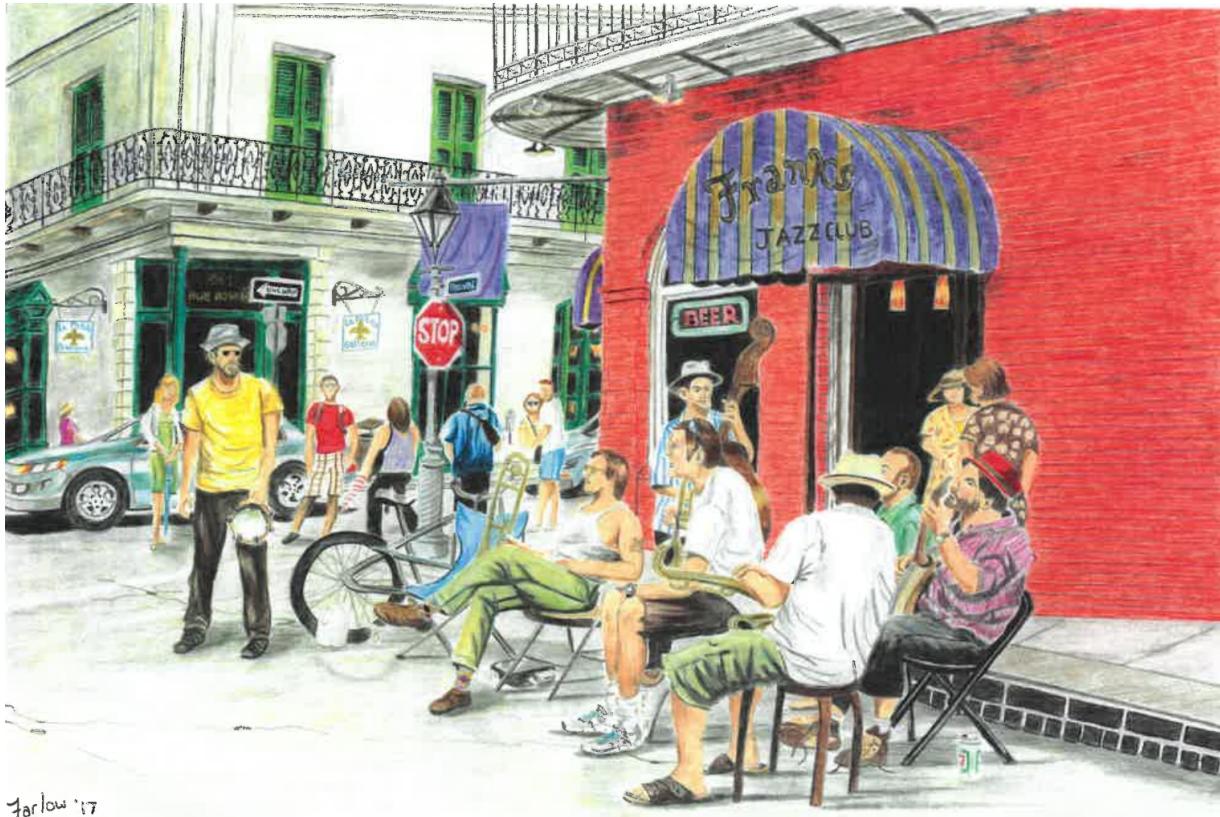
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Prisoner Express Newsletter Summer 2018

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.



"Take 5 At Frank's"

Art by Gary Farlow