

Prisoner Express News

Greetings and best wishes. A Happy New Year to all. My name is Gary. I am happy to say this is the 15th year of writing Prisoner Express News. I was working at the Alternatives Library in Ithaca NY, 2001 and received a letter from Dani Harris, a prisoner in Texas. Dani's writing inspired me to begin sending out book packages to individuals in prison. At first the packages were free but within five years we had 1000 people waiting for books, and we had to begin to start asking for donations from you for the postage cost of the books. Many people wrote me at the Alternatives Library to thank me for the book packages and share their thoughts with me. You let me know how important it was to hear an encouraging word, to know people care, and to know you are not forgotten. The writers were looking for creative engagement and other outlets for their talents. The first edition of the PE news went out in 2004, and I was happy to share your writings, then and I am even more excited to be doing it now. I was not expecting to be doing this when I began working at the Alternatives Library. I had a different idea of what my work would be but being at the center of Prisoner Express and helping keep this service going helps fill my days with purpose. I hope our efforts here offer you some idea on how you can use your time, mind and awareness to find a way to positively grow as you navigate your current experience. I am excited about the scope of projects we have to offer you this current cycle. They will be listed and described later in the newsletter.

If this is your first time reading a PE News: Welcome!. Prisoner Express is a project of the Durland Alternatives Library, located at Cornell University. PE's mission is to "Provide incarcerated men and women with information, education and opportunities for creative self-expression in a public forum."

Many of you have received Prisoner Express News already and are already involved in a program. I use this newsletter to update you on ongoing projects. About 200 people signed up for the "Songwriting" packet and it was mailed in late October. I hope you have received it. Kathy Z. is coordinating. Send in your replies to us back at PE and we forward them to her in the Netherlands. This is her 2nd project with PE and I certainly look forward to reading the lyrics you write as well as hearing about how you use her suggested techniques to overcome writer's block and express your creativity. She wrote and performed and recorded the song 40 you all helped create, "Pick It Up". It is on the PE website if you were involved and want friends to have a listen.

<https://prisonerexpress.org/news/>

Abby and Rachel are still compiling information received from the participants in "The New Jim Crow" book club. I know they are impressed by the quality of thought and writing many of you created in response to their questions regarding the book. Abby is creating an anthology highlighting ideas shared in your writings and will send it with all the folks who wrote to share their reaction and thoughts about the book. We will be mailing out that compilation this spring and posting a longer compilation of your responses on line. If we can raise \$1200, we can send out the 500 copies of Slaughterhouse Five, a Kurt Vonnegut sci-fi, fantasy, historical novel that created quite a stir in 1969 and throughout the 70's. Here's hoping. If we raise the funds, we will offer the book this summer.

There are two programs still to be mailed from previous cycles. We have run into a few problems. One program, The Paralegal Legal Project has bogged down with logistics. We received many legal questions from you the participants, but we didn't distinguish between states, and the laws in many states are different. We had a law student volunteering to help with the project, and then she transferred to another law school. We here are not certain we know which questions would be most useful and we also don't know which answers that were submitted by volunteer paralegals are actually correct. We are still trying to put together a packet from all the responses we received, and we are reaching out to students at the Cornell Law School to see if any of them want to help in this project.

Another packet, the one on the American Revolution still needs more work. We did mail packets on Paper Folding, Building a Book#3, Chess, Poetry Anthology #20, Artknows, Journal Writings and the above-mentioned Songwriting packet. Tara who creates the Meditation Newsletter has sent cards directly to all the participants. They were mailed in January and should have reached you by now.

New Projects for 2019 Please read through the offerings below. I encourage you to sign up for any program you intend to complete. Finding funding for our programs takes much time and energy. One way to stretch what dollars we manage to raise is for you to only sign up for what you will do. We are in this together and if any of us waste resources there is less for all of us in the long run.

We mail programs by US bulk mail. It means the mailings have to be identical and have at least 200 pieces. We will collect the signups for each program, and by late March and Early April we hope to begin mailing many of this cycle's

programs. Don't wait too long to sign up so you can be sure to be included in the program mailings.

2019 Winter Programs

Expedited Books-This is our original program and continues to be very popular. It is also the only program we are unable to offer for free. We have a room of donated books. We take your requests and make the best matches we can for what you request. We ask for \$4 to partially cover the cost of postage for the books. If you sign up for this program, it is best to ask for broad categories of books. It gives us the best chance to make a good match. You can ask for specific titles and authors as well, but by providing us with a greater range of choices we have a better chance to select books that interest you. All our books are donated so the selection varies all the time. Typically, there are 4 to 7 books mailed in a package. We do a good job of sending out quality reading material!

Journal Project-Journals are a great way to gain insight and awareness about life. If you sign up for this packet, you will receive an introductory letter talking about the how's and why's of journals. When the project first began, I was struck by the number of people who wrote about how they discovered writing while in prison, and how it was a great way to stay balanced and sane in a somewhat difficult environment. It became clear the positive benefits writing gave many people trying to make sense of their lives and the environment around them. Writing your thoughts down is a great way to open up and ponder life and all of its' twists and turns. The main thing regarding journal keeping is that it is about you and your world, perspective, mind, and awareness. You choose what you want to write on and send in as often as you would like. All we ask is that you please date all entries.

We have a few very motivated student workers who direct this project, and student volunteers who read your journals, and we have also begun digitally scanning journals. In 2019, we will also be adding an exciting new ongoing component of the journal project, and we invite you all to partake. We will be compiling a collection of your stories to publish in bound booklets released every 6 months. This can be an opportunity for you to tell any story, or write about any emotion or experience, that you would especially like others to hear. To participate just label whatever entry you send it for the journal project as "We are Humans: Stories from the Incarcerated" and we will consider your story for publication, as well as include these entries in your regular journal project folder. You

may also include any photographs of yourself or anything you feel you want to share, as well as personal artwork. Whether you wish to share your thoughts or keep them personal, writing can be such a healthy way to heal and explore your thoughts and emotions. We encourage you to put pen to paper and allow the thoughts to flow.

Poetry Project- Prior to the Prisoner Express Newsletter our effort was focused on was on sending book packages. The thank you letters we received often contained poems or art work. 10 years ago, a high school aged volunteer Toby read through the poems that were included in the thank you letters and created a first anthology of the poems. Toby started the tradition, and now we find ourselves collecting poems for our Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology #21. Send a poem[s] for consideration. PE volunteers read the poems and select the ones that they feel should go in the anthology. Everyone who submits an entry, whether it is chosen for publication or not, will be mailed a copy of the **Prison Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 21** All of the previous 20 poetry anthologies are on line at www.prisonexpress.org. Clare is one of the students working on the next poetry anthology. She has shared a few words below.

Hey there! It's Clare, In August I began the process of reading the countless poems submitted. About five months later, and I am still continuously blown away by the writing from everyone. Each poem is unique in style and content. Some are funny and witty while others are experimental and abstract. Some are filled with sadness, anger, and hurt, and some are a beautiful combination of all of these.

So, thank you to all our poets. Your words are valuable as your stories are too. I am thankful to have been able to be a part of this project and I am looking forward to reading more of your work in the weeks to come.

For now, please enjoy these five poems, submitted by poets from various parts of the country.

Ode to an Empty House by Julia Tomlinson

Sagging porch and broken pane,
Holes in your roof that let in the rain.
Mice build nests in the corners of your floors,
Birds chirp from atop your doors.
Weeds now grow where flowers bloomed
Shadows and dust fill your rooms.
Once you stood so proud and trim
Sheltering all who were within;
Holding at bay storm and rain
Welcoming all home again.

Summer breezes, Winter gales,
Rain, sun, sleet, and hail---
Through all, you stood proud and serene
A fortress for your family.
Now one by one they have all gone
Leaving you here all alone
To settle softly with a sigh and moan
Like a tired soul whose job is done.
And done so well, with quiet pride.
Memories are all that abide
Within your empty crumbling walls
Where laughter rang and voices called.
Quiet memories to carry you through
Your twilight time now as you
Slowly return from whence you came
Bit by bit to the earth again.

Wonder Why by Jeff Wager

Up it comes, its peaking eye,
As I sit this morning I
Ponder at the peaking sun-
Ponder sitting, wonder why.
Why must I, this morning I,
Be permitted neath the sky,
On this perch to sit and see
Hand of God, I wonder why?
One more day, this watchful eye,
Gifting me this morning I;
So my tears I share with him-
For these gifts, I wonder why
Thankful for another day
Holding speechless words to say,
I wonder why.

Voice by Jennifer Jennings

My voice will ring one day,
All across the world.
My words will bring beauty and darkness at once,
Weaving into the acts of life.
It'll allow others to hear
And know they're not alone.
Let my voice ring loud
And listen to my story,
My survival, and watch me
Fly free.

Somebody by Bob H. Cook

Nobody met Somebody
Somewhere along the way.

Somebody said to Nobody,
"Come walk with me today."
Nobody cried in sad reply,
"I cannot walk with you
Lest by chance somebody thinks
That you're Nobody too."
Somebody took him by the hand
And reached to kiss his brow.
"You cannot be Nobody, Sir;
Somebody loves you now."
Nobody found Somebody,
Somebody just like you.
And now, Somebody loves me,
And I'm Somebody too.



The card above was sent to a high school teacher and her class, in NYC, who are helping Maia edit your work through the Building a Book project. The class and teacher loved it. Thank you to whoever made it and sent it to them

Building a Book 4- Maia is an editor in NYC and contacted me two years ago and we have been collaborating ever since. Maia has been creating a series of lessons to help anyone who wishes to write a book. It can be of any genre or style. Her lessons are effective and to the point. She has you mail her writing to her directly in NYC.. Of course, you can write to us here about anything going on with your participation in the BB project. Maia is working on ideas to get your books published, but as always funding limits some of what we can do. She will explain the program in her next Building a Book packet. Please know that it can take her awhile to get through all her mail. As she is nearing the completion of her first cycle of the **Building a Book** series, I imagine she will have a lot of reading to do.

To date Maia has mailed three lessons in the Building a Book series. It comes out every 6 months [or so]. After Vol 4 comes out this project is complete, but the good news is Maia will run

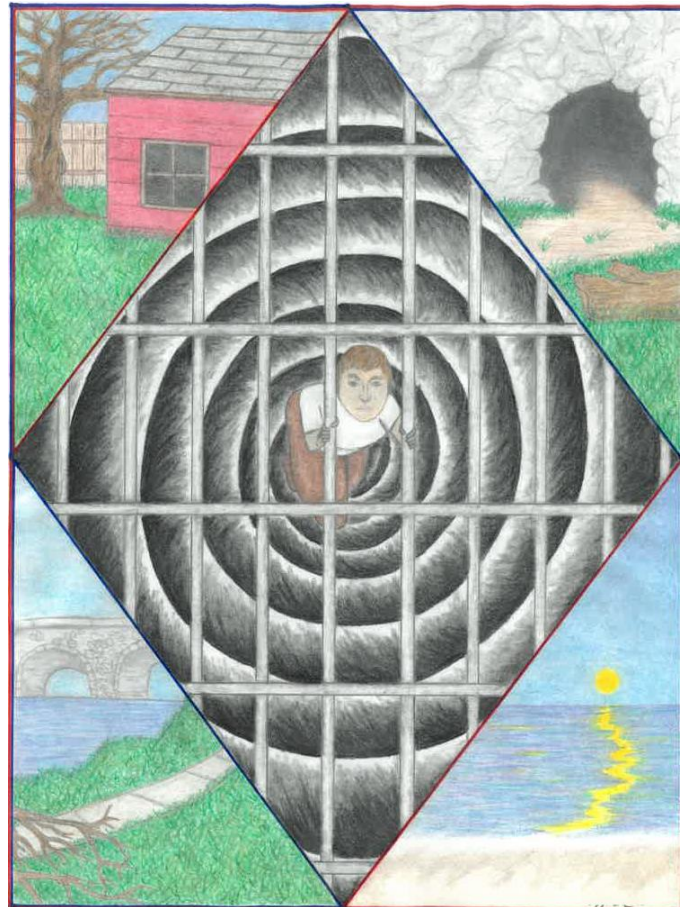
the project for another 2 years revising all 4 lessons and starting the process over again in Summer 19. If you have ever thought of writing a book, Maia takes you through a thorough the development process, and presto-chango you can be an author. Like many of us, I have always wanted to write a book, and I can imagine the satisfaction that comes from telling an important story. Good luck to all you, strong confident people for taking on this audacious, and doable task.

History and Design of Paradise-- Lois, a student studying landscape architecture has volunteered to create a project on design that sounds fascinating. Designing space to create balance is a delicate art and maybe also a bit of social science. It sounds like a fascinating way to improve artistically and technically any design skills you might like to express. Don't wait in signing up for this one. Below is the description Lois provided me on this project

This packet is an intro to the history of design, design elements and principles, and a primer on landscape design graphics. We will explore the origins of paradise, the portrayal of paradise and gardens throughout art history, imagine what paradise means to us individually, and exercise that imagined place through drawing. We will look at gardens around the world today and how each function differently to present escape, solace, peacefulness, and beauty. The drawing exercise will include a scale and a couple of sites to choose from to design your dream garden: apartment courtyard, rural or suburban house and yard, or small yard and urban house. We will also go over other types of drawings used to show a design idea, such as sections, perspectival, and sketching. This packet is great for anyone interested in landscapes, architecture, drawing, gardening, or art history."

Book Review Project-- Skye has volunteered at the library for a while. She helps me select books for the Expedited Book program. She loves books and reading and goes out of her way to provide people with books she knows they want. She reads a lot of your incoming letters to PE, and marvels at your writing. She has wanted to start a project where you share reviews of the books you have read. It would be fun to share a packet of peer written book reviews with all of you. She explains her idea below. I encourage you to sign up for the packet if you like to read, and if you think it might be fun or useful to develop this skill. I would like to post your book reviews online.

Just finished a great book? Or was it a disappointment? Maybe you have a favorite author, and each book is better than the last. Or maybe you're looking for something new. Talking about books with others is part of the pleasure of reading, and as a Prisoner Express reader, you are part of a large community of people who read widely. Let's talk about books! This project will publish a book review. You are invited to share your reading experiences, opinions and questions. The first packet will explain and give examples of how to write a review (both brief and in-depth) ; how to contribute graphic responses to books (such as book covers and character portraits); and how to respond personally to a book's theme or characters. There are many ways to respond and participate in the conversation. Participants will receive the published review. Future mailings will include more reviews, author interviews, reader profiles and writing tips. Let's talk!-Skye



Art by Bradley Allen

Grateful Anyhow - Sarah, a long-time friend of the PE program has been donating her books to us for years. Now she is stepping forward to share an idea about being grateful. She and I know it could be seen as an odd choice for us, on the outside, to offer you a packet on gratefulness. We also

find it compelling. Give a look at what she is offering and sign up if you want to learn more. I know from my own experience, that most hardship also presents opportunity for growth. Some of my most difficult experiences have been valuable lessons in life. Perhaps looking at life and exploring gratefulness can provide a useful perspective to some of your experiences as well. Sarah writes below.

Happiness is not what makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy. ~ -- Brother David Steindl-Rast

Does gratefulness truly make us happy? How does gratefulness serve us during difficult times? What is your experience of gratitude as a person who is incarcerated and denied so many of the freedoms and privileges associated with happiness? Have you been uplifted, comforted, motivated, or inspired by experiences of gratefulness? What, if anything, are you grateful for now? Science suggests that cultivating gratitude is good for our hearts, mental health, relationships and even helps us sleep better but how do these claims hold up in the midst of the challenges of prison life?

We invite you to explore these questions and more through "Grateful Anyway," an exploration of the transformative power of gratefulness in good times and bad. At this point in development we imagine the packet will include: articles, scientific studies, spiritual perspectives, practices, and stories along with questions for reflection and writing prompts. We will be encouraging you to share your experiences in writing so that we can all learn from each other.

A selection of writing submitted by participants in the program will be printed in the Prisoner Express newsletter and posted on the website gratefulness.org, which is visited daily by thousands of people from around the world.

I hope you will join us!

With warmth and gratitude,

Sarah

A Network for Grateful Living is a not-for-profit organization that offers free interactive website features and an online sanctuary at gratefulness.org as well as offline gatherings and workshops which explore grateful living as an orientation to life.

Chess Newsletter-David has written the last few chess newsletters. The packets for this ongoing project have been created by many people for various lengths of time. We have put out a chess publication 2x a year and they are designed to provide chess player with strategy, puzzles and recounting of

great games in the past. We usually explain notation in each packet in case you are a beginner. I myself do not play chess often, but I used to, and know what a great game it is., I like how the world around me can disappear when I am engaged in a chess game. It takes a lot of concentration and awareness to play. I was surprised by how many prisoners were interested in chess books and I believe that is how this project started. It has been going on for 10 years and I do want to give a shout out to Ettie, who came in as a volunteer and casually mentioned that she had high point rankings as a chess master. She developed the first 5 or so lessons and we have kept going. David, our current chess project coordinator is incarcerated in Washington State, In the last packet worker's at PE typed it up David's newsletter and even added a few more puzzles. I always refer to the game of chess when I describe the goal of PE programs. Chess takes one out of the current environment, but not numbing down the mind and senses, but rather by focusing our awareness on a particular meaningful task. We at PE want to provide you with multiple projects as avenues for you to stay creative and engaged, and provide activities that give you a respite from the everyday grind and the agitated numbness many people slip in to, to get through the day.

If the idea of creating a packet on a subject that interests you, for your fellow PE members, inspires you, as it did David, send me a letter and let me know your idea. I know David balances a lot in his life and all of us at PE are most appreciative of how he has been creating chess lessons for all of us. Thank you David! If you want to read the next chess newsletter remember to sign up for this packet

Artknows-The Artknows project is led by Treacy, an accomplished professional artist, who sees art as a transformational tool. She writes to inspire those of you so inclined, to express your artistic self. This cycle we have a particularly interesting arrangement to offer Art Knows participants. We are planning to utilize the art you share this cycle and create a traveling art show that we will package up and send to interested venues over the next year. We have been funded to buy frames and packaging materials for the show and to create a program about the selected artists and their work. We have a team of student volunteers, supervised by Treacy, who will view the work and frame the show. There may be too many submissions to included everything in the show and the students will choose the pieces that speak to them. Below Treacy will describe about the upcoming show and more.

Art Corner

Greetings and Happy New Year to all!

I would like to give you some updates on old projects and some new projects that will be happening in 2019.

Traveling art exhibitions: This year we are planning an art exhibition that will travel from venue to venue. We have not yet developed the traveling route, but hope the exhibition can be seen at community colleges, small museums, and other small gallery spaces.

For the first traveling exhibition I want to develop a theme for it to be structured upon. Last year, I curated an exhibition of outside artists at a gallery in Philadelphia. This exhibition was entitled **"The animal I become."** The basis of this exhibition was to look at the potentially false belief that we as humans have control and dominion over animal life. Do we really? After all, if we condemn the life of animal species to extinction, doesn't that really condemn ourselves to extinction? The artists in that exhibition took several perspectives – not all about saving animals and the planet, but using the imagery of animals as metaphor. Here is an image in the exhibition from one of the artists.



"By the time you read this, I'll be gone." The artist uses both imagery and language to evoke a mysterious feeling.

For the traveling exhibition, you are invited to develop the theme of animal imagery however you want. You could develop an imagery of an animal best fitting who you are; how animals are similar to people; your love of animals, your fear of animals; and so on.

I didn't want art exhibition of "prisoner art" – the exhibition that says, "Hey, lets see if the prisoners have any talent" because as you know yourselves – there is plenty of talent in prison. Instead, I want to develop an exhibition that gives the audience a sense of the artist's (your) vision beyond status as prisoners; an exhibition revealing your imagination. AND I know a lot of you have great animal imagery – Ellis Hyatt, dominick Marak, Jesse Osmun, Julie Spencer, Steve Fegan, Gary Farlow,

Leroy Sodorff (well, actually Leroy, I haven't seen animal imagery from you – but I know it's there), Brandon Rushing Nate Lindell, Katherine Hawkins, (hey women – I know you are out there drawing! There are more women artists in art schools than men, I think....) Daniel Gest (thanks to you for the extra help in the animation project!), D'Andre Morris, Reginald McFadden (yes! wabi sabi), Kristopher Storey (the artist of great textures!) Corey Higgins (there's a lot of animal drawings under this pen!) Elvis Perez, Omar Recalde, Thomas Buchanan, Richard Sears, and you! (And all the artists that I have forgotten, give a shout out to me!)

April Art Show at the Big Red Barn, Cornell University;

Yes, the annual art exhibition continues at Cornell. There is no specific theme for this. BUT, but while I don't want to make this about myself.... it would be helpful if any of the ARTknows information I shared with you helps in giving you new ideas, new directions; letting me know if what I am saying in the art newsletter makes sense and stuff.

Start sending in work now for this April show now. The Monday night group of students who come to the library to see your art will select the art for this show. And speaking of Monday night art reviews....

Monday nights with the Cornell students: Some of you have been receiving letters from Cornell students regarding your art and sometimes poetry you send to PE. Every Monday a group of students gather at the library to see the latest art sent in. The students then write to the artists giving positive feedback. Actually, one artist didn't like receiving a positive encouraging letter. So, if you don't want someone giving you positive feedback, that's ok also. Just let us know. However, always write your name on the back of the artwork. Often letters get separated from the art. When that happens, I have this lovely work of art and don't know who is the creator!

ARTknows: Some of you are just receiving the latest ARTknows from the last newsletter – probably receiving it after Christmas into the new year. This past ARTknows was on the many museums that occupy this world and some of the art that is presented in them. Hopefully, this has given you a little history of art and artists of whom you are not familiar. In the next ARTknows, I want to focus upon art materials and techniques. What do I mean by this? What is gesso and why is it necessary to the painter? What are the different kinds of gesso? What is egg tempera and how is it made? What is the difference between oil paint and acrylic paint and which is best to use for certain projects? Why does the artist varnish the painting? How do you stretch a canvas? What is the

difference between a lithograph and an etching? There are so many processes in art. One of the reasons I thought of this subject for ARTknows is because I see from your work and from teaching in prison that there are many technical experts out there just waiting for new ways to approach the blank canvas, paper, cardboard....

[Art by Gary Farlow]



Animation project – The naked mole-rat’s journey. I have been receiving the drawing stills for this animation from many of you. Thank you!Although, not enough. Therefore, I am extending the deadline beyond January 15 (oops – that probably already been and gone...) Please send in your drawings. Or if you haven’t signed up in the earlier newsletter and would like to receive the animation packet, please write to me to participate. (The animation project is not be listed at the end of this newsletter in the checklist of courses.) Extending the deadline means that the animation will not be shown in the museum for this summer, but will have to be presented next summer, 2020. Wow, how did we get there already.....

General stuff:-Thank you for your letters! I read them all and sometimes I get to answer them, and then, sometimes I don’t get to....time time time. But it is not that I am not thinking about what you have written....wabi sabi, newspaper clippings.

There was a concern from a writer about the fact that no photographs were taken of the exhibitions and then shared in the newsletters. Yes, I confess, I am really, really bad at documenting exhibitions. It is like; whew, everything is on the wall, and my job is finished - time for some cheese and crackers. However, Gary and I will make a concerted effort to post photos of the exhibitions in upcoming newsletters.

Then there is the problem of delayed time – Like the exhibition “Anywhere but here” taking a long time to select the scholarship awardees - selected by Jeff who had emergencies during the year delaying the selection. However, congratulations to Gary Farlow, Dedrick Shaw, Leroy Sodorff, and Julie Spencer!

The things she carried – thanks to you who have shared your experience and thoughts about women in your life who have taken a lion’s share of helping you through things; or **just women who have had more than their share of burdens.** Please feel free to continue sharing the stories of women in your lives who are have been called to work more than most. If you write, address it it as “things she carried.” and my name. Since it is not exactly an “art” thing, students might get confused as to whom it go when they sort the letters.

pARTner – This is moving along slowly, so please be patience. Wendy Jason is working on finding outside artists to be connected with inside artists. And please remember that this correspondence is not a romance-based thing. It is a correspondence based upon art and a sharing of art information.

DON’T forget - Please, please write your names on the back of artwork. I want to link art with correct artist.
Best wishes, Treacy

Meditation Packet-Tara has been leading the meditation project for many years. She has plans to complete another packet for this spring. Generally, using simple and effective breathing techniques can help folks calm their minds. It could be a helpful practice to keep the noise outside the cell, or perhaps the rattling around inside your mind, from knocking you around. There is a balance point inside us all, and for some meditation is a tool for reaching that point. In reading the many letters sent to me by PE participants I see there are people who use meditation exercises the way others have used writing, to keep themselves sane and on a path where they are growing positively as human beings. It is easy for someone with privilege to set aside some time to quiet down and relax, and I can understand the great strength you gain if you can manage this while locked up. It takes discipline to steady one’s mind amidst the chaos of daily life. This is true both in and out of prison. In the words of the late Bo Lazoff “We’re all doing time”. Sign up for the meditation packet and learn ways to empower yourself while you are experiencing prison. Our interior world holds much to fascinate us if we can just quiet down and experience what is there, when the mind quiets down. This program of mindfulness and awareness is appropriate for all no matter what your spiritual or religious orientation.

The Kid-Write Connection. Gregg has been leading creative writing project for a few years He and his crew bring a

lot of enthusiasm to their packets. Below he describes his idea for a writing project this cycle

*I hope the **Kid-Write Connection** will appeal to some of the old guard who have already been participating and bring in some new folks as well. Do you have children, grandchildren, nephews, or nieces or friends who enjoy drawing or painting, or even illustrating children's poems? What if they could collaborate with you by illustrating your children's poems or short stories? And what if they could send us their art in order to be considered for publication on a website with your writing? What if you could also get a copy of the collaboration, the picture with the writing, to include with other keepsakes. —So many appealing what ifs!!— Does such a project sounds exciting to you? If so, then The Kid-Write Connection may be just down your alley!*

Project Kid-Write will not only give you the opportunity to form closer bonds with friends and family by way of brainstorming and teamwork, it will also provide you with a wide range of writing skills that are easily transferable into any and all other genres. Focusing on the basics of writing is what children's writers do best—there's no better way to learn the nuances of the craft!

What is more, let's face it, most of us really need a good laugh. Developing a kid mindset is the perfect way to loosen up, have a good time, play in the sandbox for a while. Those tiny kernels of ideas, once shone in the light of a magic mind, will begin to sparkle like diamonds.

Collaboration has a way of making the world turn upside down. All the coins in the pocket of the mind start spilling out and falling, falling into a wonderland of ring and unexpected resonance.

So we hope you will take us for a spin this year! We'd love to have you on-board the Kid-Write Connection for yet another year of fun, heart-felt creativity, and genuine laughter. For those of you wanting to stick with adult poetry writing, we'll have a brief tool-kit for yawl as well. —From the Kid-Write Team of Greg, Jason, and Michael.

Word Theme Writing- -This is a project you don't have to sign up for. You only need to submit an entry. Every month there is a theme topic. If you send in an entry on the topic you will receive a packet with everyone else's submission on the packet. This, my friend, is the backbone of PE. I know that reading each other's stories gives you insight into your own journey. It also conveys your experience to us in the free world. It humanizes you. We are touched and moved by the stories you tell. While you are locked up, your thoughts and

words are still free to travel. You have an opportunity to be heard, to be acknowledged and to find your voice. I select a few of the past five month theme stories submissions for you all to read, and as a way to encourage your future participation. It was wanting to share these theme stories with all of you, that inspired me to start this newsletter 15 years ago. Your thoughts are important, and there is an understanding, a healing, a recognition that you can impart with your words. In the Word Themes writing, we ask you to submit true stories and reflections. Please keep entries to 700 words or less Below are upcoming theme topics followed by a few selected stories from past theme topics.

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
Spring Fever	due 6/1/19
Helping Hand	due 7/1/19
Tricky Business	due 8/1/19
A Close Call	due 9/1/19
Sisters	due 10/1/19

Flowers

“Unique and Special Memories” by Chadwick Keoni Majamay

Every whiff of Plumaria flowers and Hibiscus brings sweet memories of warmth, happiness, joy, and family or every Ohana (family) occasions and events with singing, food, Ku'Puna (elders) and all the aunties, cousins, and keki (children) enjoying kailua pig (roast pork), lau lau (fish, pork, and beef wrapped in green edible leaves) and lomi lomi salmon (salmon with chopped tomatoes, onions, and green onions): to every May Day performance in elementary, middle, and high school.

Flowers have always given me comfort, beauty, and memories from heaven that I miss so much in the dungeons I now reside in. It is now only distant memories in darkness. There are no flowers here in the desert that my dungeon resides. Instead I fill my dungeon with beauty and memories of thy word and it's creativity by writing words of beauty and memories that flowers bring one word at a time.

“Flowers, Bees, and Butterflies” by Bobby Bunderson

Flowers? What can a 6'3", 255 lbs., four-time loser serving a life sentence prison say about flowers? Hopefully I will surprise you! First off, I would like to say a few words about how social stigma has “pigeonholed” many Americans into believing flowers to be effeminate basically from the moment

we are plunged into a specific gender role. At birth we are swaddled in a decidedly little baby boy or little baby girl “blankie.” Generally blue for boys, and of course pink for girls. This may seem innocent enough, however, the subtlety is not lost on me. In my opinion this is the genesis of the gender schema.

Boys typically spend most of their time with their fathers and engage in rough and tumble play, while little girls are being molded by their mothers to be prim and proper. Boys are discouraged from crying, while girls cry as a matter of recourse. Boys play with toy cars, action figures, and toy guns, and girls play with dolls, tea sets, and other “girl-appropriate” toys. Boys play in the mud outdoors, and girls tend to play indoors.

As is the case for flowers. Boys generally do not pick flowers for other boys- nor do they give flowers to their fathers as a gift. Of course, these are only generalizations. Let me be more specific and relate to you my own personal experience with flowers.

When I was perhaps seven years old, my father used to load my baby brother Travis and I into the back of our Corvair station wagon and drive us out to the desert to see the California poppy fields. It was a spectacular sight. Large fields of orange poppies for as far as the eye could see. Travis and I loved to run through them until we collapsed, exhausted, to the desert floor. We would spend the rest of the day catching butterflies and tormenting bees.

I was a “momma’s boy” growing up and I remember going from house to house sneaking flowers from the neighbors’ flower beds to give to my mom. My britches were mud stained at the knees, my face streaked with dirt, as I would proudly hand her the bouquet of ill-gotten flowers. If I hadn’t been so darn cute, I think I would may have gotten scolded for the misdeed!

As a young adult I used flowers to get myself out of the “dog house” with my significant other or buy her flowers for no apparent reason which usually led to a little gratuity in the form of “nooky.” Thanks flowers!

When I entered the world of the penal system there were no more flowers, no more bees. No more butterflies. The “yard” was covered in sparse grass and gopher holes. My relationship with flowers had withered away as I feared my soul would too someday. In 1998, I was transferred to Pleasant Valley State Prison in Coalinga, CA. Don’t let the name fool you, there weren’t many pleasantries issued out there. However, I managed to procure a job on the yard-crew and my designated area was a large swath of grass- 10 feet wide by 200 feet long. Inside that area I began planting flowers, bushes, herbs, and some dwarf trees. In a few years time my flower beds were thriving. Suddenly, the bees and butterflies

returned. But I no longer tried to catch the butterflies, nor did I harass the bees. I simply relaxed and admired these small insects doing what nature intended for them to do. I had grown over sixty rose bushes. I also had planted daisies, petunias, goldenrod, and philodendron. The herbs consisted of thyme, cilantro, and rosemary. I enjoyed my job immensely. Finally, I had slowed down. I no longer rushed through life, missing all that there was to see, all that there was to hear, and all that there was to smell. This flower garden was an oasis in the middle of hot concrete walkways and buildings. A place to admire instead of fear. Seven years later I was transferred to Valley State Prison in Chowchilla.

Valley State (also known as VSP) was once a women’s prison but was now occupied by men. I noticed on my first day that there weren’t any flowers. The following day I went to the back main yard to go to the chapel and that’s when I first saw it. My initial reaction reminded me of all those years ago when my father would drive us to see the California poppies. We’d be driving off road over little rolling hills and as we began to descend, we could see the poppies stretch out for as far as the eye could see. That initial view was breathtaking. And so, it was when I rounded the corner of the gym and saw the chapel lawn area for the first time. The landscaping was immaculate. Large, lush flower beds encircled a wide grassy area. On one end of the lawn was a waterfall. At the other end, (the entrance), was a stone archway. Large, decorative stones with plaques declaring donor’s names adorned a side of the flower beds. This is where I spent my Sundays from 11:00 to 4:00 during our Buddhist services. The flower, the bees, and the butterflies had returned.

I spent three years there until I was once again transferred to my current locale: California Institute for Men in Chino, CA. This is a dorm setting with four dorms on each side of the yard. In between the dorms are “mini-yards,” and they are all well maintained with flower beds and vegetation. So for now my life is once again in the company of flowers and bees and butterflies.

“The Flowers in my Mind” by Phillip L. Rath

I walk alone long-haired, bearded, Viet Nam veteran, with a “don’t approach me” scowl on my face. I’m in my own world of memories and don’t want to be bothered by the inane conversation of the prison yard.

Others are wary of me, perhaps curious about my demeanor or intentions. Let them wonder or speculate. I won’t expend the energy to enlighten nor even allow myself to contemplate their curiosity.

I’m not reliving the horrors of Viet Nam, the injustice of my wrongful conviction or the pleasures of past loves. I’m not

regretting the hours with family or all the missed holidays. Partying, regrets and self-pity aren't even in the periphery of my thoughts.

I am walking through the flowers of my mind, recalling the priceless lessons my grandma shared with me and reliving those memories spent with her in our garden.

I have no better memory of being loved than my memories of being in the garden with my grandma. Nothing gives me a feeling of peace like visualizing the numerous flowers grandma introduced me to.

I learned to make dolls for my little sisters from hollyhocks; to tell time by the flowers on Four o'clocks; to make a Snapdragon roar and how to make its' pods explode in a shower of seeds. It seems that every flower in our garden had a secret or some amazing characteristic to tantalize my young mind.

Year after year throughout my childhood I experienced the flowers with and through my grandma. Every spring we turned the soil; Grandma with her spade and me with an old spoon, later growing up enough to handle a trowel and much later replacing Grandma on the business end of the spade. Once the soil was turned and the clods smoothed over, we put the tiny seeds to bed, covering them with a blanked of healthy, aromatic soil and settling shower of misty water.

I was always rewarded with the honor of being allowed to hold the water hose to moisten the soil into a soothing blanket for the baby seeds, so they would get plenty of sleep and wake up to grow into strong, beautiful plants able to produce radiant flowers.

Even this simple, mundane chore afforded Grandma the opportunity to share the wonders of our world and rewards of gardening. Putting the seeds to bed took a backseat to my having my own rainbow. I focused on creating rainbows and forgot all about misting the soil, while Grandma laughed and praised my rainbow skills. Sixty years later I still hear Grandma's voice in every rainbow I see.

After the seeds were put to bed came the worst part of the gardening for me...waiting! Every morning I woke up and rushed outside to see how many of my baby seeds had awoken. I can recall the disappointment when day after day, not a single sprout appeared. I feel the same six decades later. Weeding, watering, and waiting were the fundamentals of my following days. Each day I watched as my children grew tall and strong, changing every hour, right before my eyes, until that first bud appeared. I was hardly able to leave the garden, knowing that bud would soon explode into a vibrant flower...with hundreds more to follow.

When you see this grizzled old recluse walking the yard alone, don't bother me...I'm walking through the flowers of my mind.

Emerging From the Fog

by James Bauhaus

Watching and listening to the politicians and media personalities cluck about all of these school massacres is like being stuck in a fog. A tiny bit of their mutually-beneficial fog was blown away when the child-victims got angry and said, "[Take your '...thoughts and prayers...' and stick them up your asses! We are going to make you do your job!]." The politicians used this trick of retreating into a mythical, religious fog to dodge having to defy their cashgivers' edicts once too often. The media fog-talkers love this phony "...thoughts and prayers..." line too, because it gives off a superior stench of concern and religious humility without costing them an ounce of real effort. Religious folks are easily fooled, which is why politicians and media fogtalkers play to them so often. Also, it seems that Americans are particularly susceptible to falling for slick-talkers who use religion as the perfect tool for manipulating the gullible and the too-trusting.

Despite some of the child-victims managing to blow away some of the fog-talking, the politicians did only what was guaranteed not to work: they raised the gun-buying age to 21. This only means that angry, half-minded twerps like Cruz and that other shooter will get their guns off the street, similar to how most people have always done. The politicians' other guaranteed-failure law is to put more guns in schools. Obviously, the solution to too many guns is more guns. Whichever politician dreamed up this nonsense needs his name attached to this law, so we know exactly who is responsible when each successive disaster occurs. The students see these cops in school every day, and they know when they will be sleeping in their cars after moonlighting from their real job, where constant attention from their dispatcher forces them to stay awake. If an angry twerp can't wait for an inevitable opportunity to simply snatch up one of these extra guns from a sleepy cop or a busy teacher, he will just move his massacre a few feet outside the school. More cops at school will only provide an undeserved bonanza for cops and do nothing to stop any future massacres. Allowing teachers to play cop is an even stupider idea. When it becomes politically undeniable that this actually makes things worse, our genius politicians will probably start getting paid secretly by the NRA to squawk, "Give guns to students! They will protect each other! We will just give them cop training!" This, at least, would actually curb massacres, but increase individual murders.

The way to nail these fog-talkers who refuse to make the proper laws is to slam them continuously with a simple, un-squirm-utable idea, such as clips that hold fewer than six bullets. Nobody needs 20 or 30 bullets to kill any animal, and we are not fighting a war. Anyone caught with a bigger clip

needs to go to jail, immediately, even if he is a cop, prosecutor, judge or politician. The criminal elite who make our laws make us pay with our freedom. We need to make the elite criminal class pay the same way. They are so good at fogging up the place that they never have to go to jail for their crimes, even though their crimes are much worse. Their crimes of allowing massacres to continue in exchange for bribe money makes all of society suffer for their greed. Refusing to do your political duty is a major portion of all crime in America. They can nail a murderer for life with an accuracy of almost 86%, but they can't seem to figure out that "lobbying" is bribery, which is a political crime that is somehow impossible to legislate against. When we finally wake up and begin using our constitutional tools to kick off bad laws, (referendum), kick out criminals, bribe-taking politicians, (recall), and use politician bypass, (people's initiative petition) to make our own laws, then we will finally be emerging from the fog!

Like Kelly Clarkson said to her audience at the Billboard Awards: "They wanted me to ask for a moment of silence [for the school massacre victims]. I'm not doing that. Instead, I am calling for a moment of activism!"

A moment of activism is also a good way for us to begin emerging from the fog.

"Out of the Fog" by Philander Jenkins

As I played tag and rode my bike through the hood, I had no care in the world except getting the prettiest girl in my class to go out with me. To be liked by everyone in my class and my hood. At 10, what did I truly know about life? The innocence of a child is true beauty; either you were my friend or you were not.

In my Chicago hood and my little world, everyone was the same. Even though I was black, I did not truly know what that meant because to me, everyone was just a person.

One day back in Chicago, I sat and watched TV with my grandma- a soap opera to be exact. As we watched TV together, I'll never know what hit me, but out of nowhere, I began to look back and forth at the lady on TV. The lady on TV had real light skin. So did my grandma. This lady had blonde hair; so did my grandma. Then I began to look at myself and see my skin was not the same as either one of them. Not white nor as black as some of my friends, but light. As I looked at myself, my grandma, and the lady on TV, it hit me. God damn, my grandma was white.

My grandma caught me staring at her and asked, "What are you looking at?"

I asked, "Grandma, you white?"

She replied, "Boy, what the hell you think I was?"

I just looked at her and said, "My Grandma."

All she did was smile, then replied, "Baby, color does not matter; never get caught up in it. Treat people how you want them to treat you and judge them based only on how they act. Always love who your heart says to love, and you will be okay."

A few years later, my mom moved us from Chicago to Minnesota, and it was there I was first called the n word and my girlfriend, a "n-" lover. It did not take me long to understand that not everyone thought or felt the same way I did: that people were the same no matter the color of their skin. As I became older, I began to truly understand the different ways that society sees black and white.

My grandma is very old now, and I haven't seen her in a long while. But what she helped me come to realize on that day way back when I was a kid, when I discovered that I was black, and she was white, is that skin color truly doesn't matter. I am confident in myself and happy with who I am. It was on that day I realized that to hate or dislike a person based on race is a waste of time and a disgrace to myself.

"Emerging from the Fog into Conscious Self-Realization" by Frederick Harris

There are some things terribly wrong with our society. There's too much chaos and hatred. The wars, the fighting. It's as if society is enveloped in a fog of illusions that cloud our minds and makes peace an abstract dream; an intangible reality...

I've been locked away from the so-called "free" society, in one penal institution or another for most of my life. It if was not an oxymoron I would describe my plight as a blessing and a curse. But a curse cannot simultaneously be a blessing no more than heat can be cold, right?

But I suppose it's all relative. Because one couldn't know heat without being cold, just like one couldn't know peace without knowing war. What is the famous saying? "We make war so we can have peace"? Yeah right. And I'm Toucan Sam disguised as a black man with dreadlocks...

Why does society buy into the rhetoric politicians feed us? We all know it's not true. That the ends never justify the means, and that real lives are being used like pawns in a real life chess game being played for the benefit of only a few at the cost of so many.

I was part of a street organization, living a "thug life" since I was a shorty. I've participated in street wars, and I've been shot and stabbed, yet, I survived.

And being incarcerated has given me a lot of time for "introspection." I've sat inside my 6' x 10' cell and thought a lot about who I am, and what life is all about. What I've come to realize is that I had been living in total darkness. Unaware of

my true self and my purpose in this life. I realized that all the trials and tribulations I've struggled through were designed to build me into the man I am to become. I have emerged from the fog into "conscious self-realization," which is the process of knowing who you are, what your purpose and/or potentials are and striving to be that person every single day...

I've also come to realize that any problem can be solved. The problem must simply be identified and understood first. So with respect to mass incarceration, recidivism, black on black violence and other criminalistic behaviors that contribute to the epidemic of black genocide, which has a ripple effect that pervades every aspect of our society, we must realize and understand that these are only extensions of an underlying problem. Bigotry and racism.

But how could something so conspicuously ignorant be the cause of so much trouble? Because the whole world wants to believe in the fallacious notion of "equality," which is nothing but an illusion. Because the actual state or condition of "equality" does not and cannot exist. It is simply a word that has been exploited for propaganda.

So, from my perspective, the way to supercede racism and prejudices associated with it, is to wake up from the "American dream." Because we are not all created "equal," and we are not all endowed with inalienable rights. We are all born into this world, special, precious and unique "individuals" with a chance to live and to learn (by living) how to manifest our individual destinies "harmoniously" with one another.

People choose to hate and participate in wars only because they don't realize that there's the option to love and to accept. And this is especially true for inner city youth who cling to gangs, drugs and violence as their only source of power. They do it because they don't realize they have "options." Because their mental and emotional development gets arrested (figuratively and literally) with illusions designed to distract them (us) from the truth. The truth of ourselves and how we fit in the world we live in.

But, just like waking up from a real dream (is that an oxymoron?) we realize we're dreaming first. Then we try to control what's happening in the dream. And then when things don't go as we want them to go, we get up

"Clarity" by Matthew Ellington

Solitude, it turns out, can be a wonderful thing, insomuch as it provides a chance to clear one's head of the many distractions that narrow our vision and stunt the potential that is gained from a broader perspective on life. I've found that it is this newfound clarity, for those of us given no other choice but to accept it as a fact of life in a place like jail or prison, that can allow us to better see as never before.

In the outside world, we live in such a blind haze that we scarcely see much at all. We become deadened to our sense of awareness of not only ourselves but everything around us— the people in our lives, the messages and images fed to us by a society pumped full of subliminal media, and a hyper-sensitive culture that seems to resent freedom of thought. The problem is the fast-paced, technologically-aided-and-assisted framework our lives are fitted into which encourages us not to think about it.

Take, for example, our growing dependence on social media. I used to believe, like many others, that its purpose was for me to keep in touch with all of my "friends," but as time has passed, I realize that what it gave me was merely a false sense of connection to those people. It is incredibly easy to pretend to be a part of someone's life because you instant message them every other day on Facebook, but when you take that away you find that many of those "friends" won't continue that pretense because it is no longer afforded by convenience.

When we are removed from a society that is constantly smothered with subliminal influences and trending social phenomena, the solace can be an enlightening experience if we allow it to be. It can open our eyes to the real world around us and allow us to see what we may not have before and to better appreciate things we've taken for granted.

Obviously, the greatest insight to be gained is of ourselves- of determining who we really are, and where we are headed. Even the great philosopher Socrates recognized this when he said, "An unexamined life is not worth living." One must reason, then, that to take an opportunity to step back and evaluate yourself- our strengths and weaknesses, our dreams and fears- is required in order to truly be permitted to live. In the same way that an architect inspects the foundation of an area before he finishes his blueprint. We must see who we are at the base in order to build ourselves into all that we can be.

We all live in our own fog. Maybe it's out in "that world" and maybe it exists in a world of steel bars and concrete. Maybe it's drugs or negative social influences. Maybe it's your own doubt, guilt, or fear. Whatever it is, whatever may be blurring your vision, I believe that if you can take time to retreat into the quiet of your mind, away from the pressures of the world, you can find clarity.

Weddings

"Been There, Done That" by Carl Branson

The punch line to an old joke about a multi-million dollar study to identify the cause of divorce was: marriage is the primary cause of divorce. Since a wedding is the ceremony which validates marriage in society's eyes, they are likewise a

cause of divorce. For me, the question to be addressed is: what motivates couples to get married?

Since it has been almost 50 years after my first marriage, I take a retrospective approach to answering that query. There were two primary factors leading to that first wedding. One aspect was confusing sated lust with love. The other was a mutual desire to be free of parental control. In many ways, a sense of rebellion was at the core of both components.

My first wife and I were brought up in staunch Roman Catholic homes. But, the 60s hippie mantra of "free love, anything goes" had us rutting in the back seat of her '57 Chevy while subconscious guilt fertilized that dogmatic seed of "sex is reserved for marriage" which was planted early in our youth. The subconscious guilt together with the promise of independence won out and we were married at age 20. It was the traditional church wedding: her in the long white gown and me in a rented tux. A blonde, blue-eyed daughter blessed us one year later with divorce following shortly after her first birthday.

The second go-round was different yet the same. Although I was able to distinguish between sated lust and love, contraceptives are prone to failure, and that dogmatic bug-a-boo of "sex is reserved for marriage" had yet to die. My then just dumped girlfriend showed up at my door with a positive pregnancy test. Of course, I had to "do the right thing." The wedding was a few weeks later in the chambers of a local county judge. Two months later during a prenatal doctor's appointment, the prior positive test result was disavowed with the doctor surmising that it was a psychological pregnancy due to her overwhelming desire to get married. We "stuck it out" for two years.

Then in my upper-mid-twenties I had no desire for any kind of long term relationship and pursued the stereotypical "Randy bachelor" lifestyle. That lasted until age 31 when my employer transferred me to their new facility in the desert southwest.

A chance grocery store meeting brought Pam into my life. This was a very strange situation. Although Pam was attractive enough, there was no immediate romantic or "hot-to-trot" spark between us. However, we immediately discovered a long ignored shared interest in square dancing. Together with other friends we started attending "refresher lessons" with a local square dance club. Still no archetypical romantic stirrings, though "family" outings with Pam's two teenage sons to their sporting events, picnics, dinners, etc., were becoming commonplace. We were the very best of friends. The spark that ignited our "romantic" flame was a male friend of mine asking if I would mind his asking Pam out for a date. His

perception was that Pam and I were a "couple." I was stunned speechless! That night Pam and I had a very serious, long conversation about our relationship. What we discovered is that both of us were repressing our libido due to past experience with the lust/love conflict, as well as with that of divorce. Pam's additional concern was that her boys made her a "packaged deal." The hurdle of teen sons had been cleared early on due to our "family" outings. The boys and I had an excellent understanding of each other as well as our respective roles in a family unit. The wedding, like everything else in our relationship, was a simple ceremony in our living room with a minister friend officiating and, beside Pam's sons, only six of our closest friends in attendance. A beautiful daughter joined us fourteen months later and a handsome son eighteen months thereafter. This joyous fairytale does not, however, have a happy ending because Pam died of breast cancer four days after our seventh wedding anniversary.

Weddings? Yeah- been there, done that. For me that cliché "the third time's the charm" is too true to contemplate. Will there be a fourth? Not likely; Pam was that proverbial "one-in-a-million." Plus, at my age, why bother.

Weddings by Scott Shults

Universes overlap.
Worlds collide.
Stardust is flung in every direction through space.
Time doesn't matter.
Directions do not limit.
Through some mystery of cosmic energy, somehow, someway
the pieces that know one another reconnect.
Millions of years pass.
Thousands of lives get lived.
The energies reborn and reformed anew have never forgotten
one another.
Energies learn from every connection.

Every connection leads to a purpose.
Teams exist, in every form, to pursue goals.
To complete certain goals, some of us have partners.
Our energies never forget.
We've wedded before.
We will again.

"Until Death Do Us Part" by Frederick S. Harris

Like many men and women locked away in the American penological system, I got married to this bitch named "tha game" when I was young and naive. "Until death do us

part” was my motto. That was how I carried it with that bitch (no reference to the female species).

We wed; not by choice, but by force. The wedding had been arranged through a process of psychological conditioning that was orchestrated by a powerful entity widely known as “the system,” which I’ll try to explain a little more later in this treatise.

Right now I want to tell you about my ex-bitch, “tha game” (i.e., a culture and/or way of life). You see, if I would have known then what I know now, I never would have said “I do.” Because that bitch was nothing but trouble. Real bad news, I tell you.

From the start of our relationship we had problems. I should have seen the “red flags” when the bitch wanted me to choose between running the streets or going to school. The bitch was so alluring that I defied all the directions, warnings, and advice that every older and wiser person (including my own mother) tried to give me, and I chose the streets over school (a bad move to say the least).

I used to try to rationalize my behavior by telling myself “I was young, and high all the time.” Then I remembered that that bitch was the one who seduced me and introduced me to drugs. Those were that bitch’s friends, not mine. I never knew them until I met “tha game”.

I also look around. There are many, many young guys behind these walls who dated “tha game” and never got high. Never even smoked a joint. Yet, they’re in the same exact predicament as I am. So, I can’t blame my poor choice on my youth or on getting high- although they surely didn’t help matters at all. Now, the next red flag that should have told me that bitch wasn’t right for me was that the bitch wanted me to have “power” and “money.” (I was only twelve years old). But, I was so captivated by the bitch that I joined a gang, started selling drugs and played around with weapons to carry out violence against anyone who challenged me. Whether it was a rock, a brick, a stick, bat, a knife or a gun. Whatever it took, I used it.

Through my displays of violence, willingness to fight and to do anything I had to do to survive, I gained a reputation (among my peers). I was considered “thorough,” “real,” “a stand up ni###a,” “a rider. Although, looking back, that really wasn’t such a good thing. Because eventually, I got put on the police’s radar. Once you get on the police’s radar, you are guaranteed to see the inside of a jail cell sooner or later.

Besides, having a reputation like that couldn’t get me far in life anyway. In reality, gang members are a minority inside of a minority. So their social, political and economical power is superficial, almost non-existent.

That is not to say that gang members have no potential, or that gangs in general have no influence. They do. Just not on a scale large enough to have any real, substantial impact on the social, political and economic issues that actually affect us the most. Because they exist, not as one, but as many different fractions.

Nevertheless, I stayed faithful to “tha game”. Yet, even though I sold drugs, I stayed broke. Because I had no real concept of “economies.” Remember, technically I dropped out of standardized school at the age of twelve. That’s why I had no real substantial concept of finance.

Sure, I knew money could buy “things.” But I didn’t really comprehend the value of money. Not until I was well into my thirties. So, just like many young and naive people, I wasted my money on a host of insignificant “things.” Too many to list them all here. But, you get the picture.

Now, don’t get me wrong, me and “tha game” had a lot of good times together. She introduced me to a lot of good people and we had many great, fun and exciting experiences. I wouldn’t be the man I am today had it not been for “tha game”. And I do appreciate that, and I cherish that (gunshot wounds and all).

But, at the same time, I’ve come to realize that “tha game” is what had been holding me back all this time. You see, the only times in my life that I ever really sat down to learn and educate myself about the world were when I was incarcerated. However, I never really did any amount of real significant time (before this time), so my educational experiences had been sporadic. That’s because every time I got out of jail or prison, I was right back to running the streets. Right back to “tha game” and the same ole things, drugs, guns and violence. It became a cycle. I was running in place.

Then came the pivotal point in my life where the state had given me enough time to really sit down and to study to educate myself. I started reading a lot (just as Malcolm X did). I devoured every book I got my hands on. I didn’t discriminate. I had to study the law, so I used to read dozens of case laws everyday. Then I started writing legal briefs, petitions, etc. Eventually I became proficient in both criminal and civil rights law.

Simultaneously, I studied other subjects such as history, philosophy, psychology/social psychology, political science, and business. I also would read autobiographies and biographies written by and about successful people. I read self-help and motivational books. I even studied the concepts of several religions including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and even scientology and satanism.

All the wisdom, knowledge and understanding I’ve acquired has been beneficial and/or conducive to my future

success. The study of slavery and the development of America from different perspectives than the perspectives of those caucasians that contributed to the American history textbooks I was told to read in school had the most profound effect on me and my contemporary point of view. Compounded by my growing knowledge of psychology/social psychology and politics, I came to understand how "the system," which has become a self-sustaining institution for the oppression and exploitation of all "minorities" (whether white, black, hispanic, or Asian) that had been developed by the so-called founding fathers of this country psychologically conditions many young men and women to believe they're "powerless" so they will submerge into subterranean cultures (i.e. tha game).

The so-called "powerless" cling to guns, drugs and other forms of criminality as their only source of "power" because they/we do not realize we have "options." That's why jails, juvenile detention centers and prisons all across this country are up and running at full capacity. Because we're psychologically conditioned by "the system" (in many different ways) to feel "powerless." In psychology it's called "behaviorism" or "behavior modification."

But, boy oh boy, can you imagine the day when the so-called "powerless" wake up from the "American Dream" and realize just how powerful we really are? It can happen. It will happen one day. I woke up...

What happened to my marriage to "tha game", you ask? Well, like I said, "until death do us part." To me, that bitch is so dead.

Miracles

"The Miracle of the Loaves and the Chickens" by Catherine LaFleur

Regarding food, this year has been particularly good at Camp Prisoney Land. The reason for this is an organization called Farmshare. This organization collects food donations from all over the Miami area and outlying farm towns to support charities such as the various food banks, homeless shelters, and other places that help people who are in need. Prisoney Land is now on that list.

Lately we have been inundated with bagels: wheat, raisin, cinnamon swirl, poppy-seed, everything, garlic, and onion. We've had rye, wheat, honey baked, pumpernickel, sweet potato, and other assorted breads including English muffins. You would think all the inmates here would be grateful for this miracle. But no. Even if manna were falling from the sky, there would be a problem because it was not pineapple flavored.

In addition to all the different bread choices, we have had many different deserts: cherry nut chocolate covered ice

cream bars, ice cream cups, chocolate crepes, assorted brand name cookies, apple pie fritters. It boggles the imagination. You think people would be happy. But no. The complaint is that the ice cream, served for free in the dining hall, is not firm enough.

And finally, the miracle of the chickens. We are getting some variety of chicken at least every other day and sometimes three times a day. One day I lived every eight-year-old's dream and ate chicken nuggets for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Contrast this with the mystery patties they used to feed us. We get chicken breast, and another patty resembling the Burger King #2 chicken patty, chicken nuggets, chicken fingers, popcorn chicken. Plus we also get angus beef patties, really thick hamburgers served with lettuce, pickle, and tomato. Then there are teeny tiny Crystal burgers, of which you get served two. Occasionally we will get Roast Beef. You would think the inmates would be happy. But no, inmates are writing grievances about the sameness of the menu. They would rather eat crappy soy patties and mystery meat than chicken!

Personally, I have never eaten in the dining hall so much the entire time I have been incarcerated. I took a stand and stopped helping these crazy people with grievances. Some of these are inmates new to the system. They don't know what has been served in the dining hall in the past. The rules states that if you have a TABE score of fifth grade or above, that as a law clerk, I am not required to write your grievance for you. In the meantime, if you aren't eating that chicken breast...

"Miracles" by Hieu Ngo

The story about my God-grandmother is a miracle of my life. She's a very important person to me because she's always helping me with all her heart and caring for me with compassion and humility. She encourages me to be strong each day and to keep improving myself to be a better man.

Her name is Mrs. Minnett, and she is a counselor and a jail teacher. She teaches classes like: Parenting, Anger Management, Positive Options, Men's Group, and Women's Group, ec. The first time I met her was at Strafford County jail, Dover, New Hampshire. It's also where I was given a 13 year sentence to federal prison for my computer hacking crime.

My name is Hieu Ngo, a Vietnamese citizen who barely spoke English when I first came to America. I had never lived in American before; I was lured here by an informant and got arrested. Therefore, I have to learn and keep improving my English each day to be able to communicate with others. The first year of my incarceration was a tough time, which I guess everyone can imagine. Then things got better time after time.

Finally, I decided to challenge myself more by applying to the Therapeutic Community Program-even though I didn't have any problems with drug or alcohol addiction.

I attended some of her classes in the inmates' general population. However, our relationship got stronger while I was in the Therapeutic Community Program. She taught me about how to live life, about hope and positive stories. Every time when I feel down, I think about what she has taught me because it gives me more strength and hope to get through a tough day.

One day, she told me: "No matter what happens in a day, always get up, stand up, dress up and never give up." It became my mantra to live on ever since. She's a very compassionate person and has a good sense of humor. She cares a lot for inmates, especially me. I guess because in her class I was the only Asian inmate who came from a far country like Vietnam.

Every inmate loves to go to her classes because she treats us like human beings, not inmates. She told us that we all make mistakes; nobody is perfect, but we are perfect to be human beings. She sees us like her grandkids. How thoughtful and profound she is, always listening to an inmate's story, sharing with us nice photos and nice greeting cards so we have something to send home to our loved ones.

I remember that I made her real mad one day, but later on she realized that I made for her a cute crane origami, which I folded from a square paper. I passed it around the classroom to collect all the signatures and thank yous from all her grandkids (inmates). Afterwards, we all just clapped our hands to show her our gratefulness and appreciation. I can still feel the emotions and happiness of that day.

On my sentencing day, it was cold and windy outside. After a long hour drive, I felt so exhausted and quite nervous, waiting to see the judge with the hope that I would get a lighter sentence than the 15 years recommended by the prosecutor. Because I had something to prove to the judge, that I had been trying to learn and improve myself, I got some education certificates and many good letters from the teachers in the county jail, including the ones from my loved ones who all live in Vietnam. Suddenly, in a surprise and grateful moment, Mrs Minnett shows up in court to support me, together with my sister, Eden, who is from Vietnam and her friend, Pinkham. Mrs Minnett gave a speech to the judge to share how much I had changed and rehabilitated myself to be a better person.

Although, the judge empathized with all the good things that I had done during the time in the county jail and the strong support network that I had. He said because of the seriousness of my crime, he still had to sentence me to 13 years, instead of the 15 years recommended by the

prosecutor. However, I'm a "very" lucky guy in a bad circumstance like this, because I have great support from many people like my God-grandmother Minnett, my parents, my sisters, my girlfriend and other loved ones.

To me, Mrs Minnett is a wonderful gift, an amazing God-grandmother from God that many others would love to have. More than that, during summer time of 2017, Mrs Minnett and her husband, Tony, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary and chose Vietnam as one of the places to visit. They had a great day with my family in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. What a miracle right? It feels like winning a lottery with one in a million chances.

Once again, I never give up on myself each day because I have a new perspective and a good intention to learn and live life. I share this story because I hope everyone who is incarcerated like me, to keeps their hope up, be strong and be positive no matter what. Each day is a gift and a bonus. No matter how tough the circumstance and the situation is, you have to accept the reality and the challenge to challenge yourself

"Bon Chance?" by Nate Lindell

Who wouldn't want to win the lottery, be cured of cancer...or herpes... or otherwise be miraculously relieved from "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" by some great miracle maker in the sky? Hell, even I'd pray to such a God!

It feels good to believe in such gods, "reasonably" concluding in cultures all over the Earth, that the sun that "miraculously" might be his wife and praying to her might persuade her to persuade him to provide miraculous help. In such a manner the archetypes for all religions were created. (See Gustave Jahoda's fuller explanation in The Psychology of Superstition.)

A good feeling, such as what children feel when waiting for Santa Claus, is, however, not evidence that what is believed is true. Believing in lies or imagining can make one feel good, and that feeling (produced by particular mix of hormones and neurotransmitters, which activate specific neural networks...) can profoundly affect the believer's health.

I knew a man who believed God would heal his cancer and multiple tumors. Subsequently, inexplicably (to the ignorant), it faded away (the damage those tumors caused to his tissues remained). Another man whom I knew had an awesomely bitter attitude- the multiple tumors he grew spread and killed him. Those two men's opposite attitudes were self created and created very different patterns of neural activity, hormone, and neurotransmitter (E.g. serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin) levels, the very chemicals that flip energetic switches

that determine cellular activity. It may be that the second man also a "believer" poisoned himself with his rotten disposition.

To someone incapable of grasping the myriad of molecular factors touched on above, they will just call the healing a miracle, might even cruelly and self-righteously conclude that the man who died didn't "deserve" a miracle...as if an almighty, perfect god could be such an asshole.

I contend that "miracles" like the one described above are the results of natural processes and/or chance, even if there are too many (or unknowable) precursing factors for us to calculate/comprehend and explain why the "miracles" happened. My conclusion is, I realize, terrifying to pour souls who desperately hope miracle makers- i.e. good gods- exist and can't imagine living a healthy life without such hope.

Why, we should ask, are some "miracles" *unheard of*, while others are almost common? Have you ever heard of (don't believe him/her if you have) let alone verified that someone was miraculously cured of herpes or AIDS (without medication)? Surely there are ex-bimbos and ex-man hos who've repented and could use such miracles. Imagine all the sinners who would become believers if some faith healer could do that!

The reason we hear of some cancers being cured but never hear of papillomas vanishing is, I suspect, because viruses aren't so easy to hope away. Likewise, we never hear of cases of paralysis caused by severed spinal cords being prayed away. Why don't wonderful people win the lottery? Why is f-ing Trump a billionaire (and president!)? Why is my penis crooked? The answer to all of those question are that the miracle maker is an asshole, or that there is no miracle maker...and I tried too hard as a teenager.

It feels good to believe that an all-powerful god might throw us a bone, to blame a Devil for mishaps. But, the truth is that *shit happens*. Let's try to make the most out of this shit.

References: [A Universe From Nothing](#) by Lawrence Krauss
[Chance](#) by Amir D. Aczel.

"Miracles" by Anthony Zarro

I'm sure every writer in this program has had a traumatic experience in their adult life or childhood that's shaped them into who they are today. Many of you may have had only one or two, others many have had a handful or more. To me it seems my life has been one traumatic experience after another. In all reality, me being the man I am today is a miracle and a big one at that.

My early childhood certainly wasn't ideal and it's a subject I rarely ever talk about. But after reading "The Last Page" by Catherine Lafleur and "The Vow" by Sheila ??

LaBarre, I figured expressing some of my memories might help. My mother had me at 15, my father was 29 but never graced me with his presence because he was in and out of prison in the state of Texas. My mother didn't have anyone to go to for help raising me, everyone in my mother and father's family were drug addicts, prostitutes, or gang bangers. She took the easiest path and became a drug addict herself, living with many different abusive men so we wouldn't have to live on the streets. They used to throw huge parties and she would lock me in a bathroom because once everyone started drinking and getting high, violence usually followed soon after. The bathroom became a prison to me but surprisingly also a refuge. I taught myself to read and spell in that old bathroom using a leapfrog tablet meant for 5th and 6th graders. It helped to drown out the sounds of screaming and things breaking around me. It's a miracle that I never starved because sometimes my mother would pass out and forget I was locked in the bathroom. It's a miracle I never became mentally unstable after spending so much time without any other people to talk to.

The government of Texas came and took me from my mother when I was 5 years old. She tested dirty for crack at the hospital where she was giving birth to my half brother Darien. For the next 3 years I bounced from foster home to foster home, dealing with all kinds of abuse and neglect from families that were a little different than my own. Unfortunately the state assigned a doctor to me that felt I needed a handful (literally) of psych pills to deal with my problems. I stopped going to school because I couldn't stay awake long enough to learn. When the school complained, the doctor put me on a new set of meds, in essence I was his lab rat to experiment on. I became violent, had trouble focusing, and gained a lot of weight. I never had a lot of general education, school wasn't something I chose to attend and my foster families could care less. It's a miracle that my I.Q. is a couple points above average and that my brain chemistry isn't all messed up.

I came to prison when I was 16 years old and took my G.E.D. test back in 2015. I didn't bother studying, just took the test and passed every subject with flying colors even though I was never taught things like algebra, geometry, or biology. It's a miracle I passed at all.

I'm 22 years old now and spend my days exercising, reading, and writing poetry. All my life people have told me I'd never amount to anything and for the longest time I believed them. But since I've been incarcerated I've built myself into a man physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually stronger than everyone who ever doubted me. Yes I'm in prison but our surroundings doesn't have to effect the positive changes we can make in the world around us. I'm actually grateful that I

came to prison. Without this I don't think I would have made it to 22. Something I've learned since I've been incarcerated is that the universe does everything in pairs, for every action there is a re-action whether it's negative or positive. For every traumatic event in my life, I've been given a miracle to balance the scales. Who would have ever thought I'd turn out like I am today? Definitely not me, that's for sure. I guess it's a miracle, isn't it?...

Magic in the Air

"I'm a Vanilla Latte Princess with a Seaweed Spine" By Catherine LaFleur

There is a magic in the air at Camp Prisonery Land. That aura is brought on by Artspring, a charity bringing professional artists, dancers, actors and poets into the prisons in the Miami-Dade County area. Artspring also sponsors dancers to teach Feldenchrist, a method of training both dancers and non-dancers to engage mentally and emotionally with their body movements and gives the student an awareness of how the body reacts to stress and space. Artspring also teaches the methods of the performance artist Marina Abramovic.

Inmates who enrolled in the dance and theater programs are allowed to take master classes after two years of participation in the basic level acting classes and performance in at least two of our staged plays. This is only part of the magic.

Alberto, our gay Cuban dance teacher is indeed magical having once danced in the American Ballet Company, and under the directorship of the famed Pina Bausch in Germany. He also taught at a well-known arts academy in South Florida. We all anxiously mill around the outside of the building with the dance/acting space when we know he is coming. Alberto never disappoints.

He's usually dressed in some flamboyant way, all white with a zebra print scarf hanging to his ankles, or wearing a lab coat with a long purple feather boa around his neck. Once he came in wearing a dress; he inherited some things from Pina when she died. He is the only man I've seen wearing a dress in prison and the rules don't state specifically that he can't. I like that he's always pushing the envelope. He's surreal, like a mix of Franz Kafka and Salvador Dali.

Alberto teaches master classes. Everyone has to move, march, and leap. Sometimes we must become animals, or autistic animals. I have crawled around on the floor as a platypus with a walker, and leapt on the tables and chairs as a lemur. He plays avant garde club music so that we can feel our primordial bodies. One of the most difficult exercises he gives us is Transformation. We are required to interpret his

commands. There is no pretending and no half-heartedness. You must become the thing of the command. You are a soldier, you are a constipated soldier, you are a parrot, you are half alligator/parrot, you are all princesses, you are all supermodel fairy princesses. You are getting long, long, so long your hands waving and reaching up. You are seaweed stretching up from the ocean floor. You are latte princesses with seaweed spines

"Magic in the Air" by Anthony Zarro

My childhood consisted of physical, mental, and emotional abuse from the day I was born until I was 8 years old. But my whole childhood wasn't all bad... there was actually some pretty amazing times, magical in fact.

It all started when I was 7 years old living in a foster home and my name was still Anthony Herrera. At the time I was attending an elementary school called Oak Creek, and while I was there, I was constantly in trouble, fighting and disrupting all my classes. But there was one exception to that: my music teacher. Her name was Melody Zarro and there was just something about her that made me want to actually try and do good in her class. I didn't give a shit what any of the other teachers thought of me, but seeing her every morning smiling at us while we got settled down in the classroom was something I really looked forward to. Until then, I didn't have any adults in my life that I respected, but you could see the joy she got from teaching music to us, and it was contagious.

It's been so long that I can't recall the exact moment when I was like "I love this woman," but I knew I did. For someone like me, love and trust were not something I felt easily. Adults were people that had the power to hurt you and get away with it. So, I did everything I could to push away any adult that tried to be nice to me.

Months went by and Melody actually started taking me places with her husband Mike. The event I remember the best was putt-putt golf. I never played before, but I had so much fun. Just being able to escape my shitty reality and feel like a normal kid in a normal family was the greatest gift I could ever have been given. I was kind of suspicious of Mike at first, but he was really cool. He was funny and easy to talk to. I actually found myself enjoying being around him. There were a couple more of these outings, and then I was invited to spend the weekend at their home. Man, I remember the first time I saw their house - all I saw was a big house, nice cars, and a big yard. I just sat there in the car thinking this all must be a dream, it couldn't be real.

Eventually, the Zarros got approved to adopt me. I know I about died when Melody asked me if I wanted to be

their son. My heart rate shot way up and I got light-headed because I was so happy. There wasn't anything I wanted more in this world. This couple had showed me love and kindness, and I wanted to spend the rest of my childhood with them. I told them yes and my whole life changed.

Later, we went to court so that it was all legalized. Courts had a negative connotation to me, and I was nervous. I remember waiting in the hall outside the courtroom clutching a stuffed Wiley Coyote to my chest and praying this all wasn't a fucking-up joke. Mike asked me what I wanted my new middle name to be and even in my 8 year old mind I knew that this was it, this was a point of no return. I wanted my middle name to sum up my struggle and blessings to that point in my life. I thought hard and when I spoke the name I chose out loud, I swear time slowed down. My hearing got sharper, the colors in the room brightened, and I got goosebumps on my arms. For the first time in my young life, I felt whole. "Joseph," I said, "Anthony Joseph Zarro." It felt right and in that moment I knew there would be no more foster homes, abuse, or hungry days. I knew I was special because I was chosen by this amazing couple out of thousands of foster kids in Texas. I knew that I would be loved and that I would love them in return. In that moment I swear there was Magic in the air.

"LaFleur's Magic" by Delvin Diles

The strokes of her pen
Perfect
Clear
Virtuosic
Beautiful soul within
Lifting us
With her orchestration
Meditative personality
Widening our world
With lovingly crafted clauses
Tangible bliss even in her pauses
As she looks far and deep
D E E P
D E E P
Past surfaces and circumstances
Our condition
For a moment
For eternity
Is MONUMENTAL

"Magic in the Air" by Robert Downs

It begins around my ankles, a cold chill that rises up my legs, up my back, and down my arms. It will then slither its

way up the back of my neck and head, dying on my receding hairline. While the gelid chill is slowly enveloping my body a sort of static charge is building in the air around me, eager to be discharged. I will sit down at my homemade escritoire with quill in hand and then it happens, then I feel it - the magic in the air.

Once seated with my favorite quill in hand I'm ready to fully awaken my Writer's Mind. The very instant this happens it never ceases to amaze me. It's as if everything is brought into crystal clear clarity. Anything that I imagine I can see it as if it were in front of my eyes and for the bigger pieces, like my fictional world, I'm walking along its streets of stone and mortar while conversing with its inhabitants, my creations. I can feel the gentle breeze on my face, can hear the singing birds, and smell the wild flowers that accompany this warm vernal breeze, my world's very own exhalation. Everything - the realness of the twin suns setting, the swaying of the weeds in the breeze, and the cool water of the lake - is so realistic that it's almost alive, almost breathing.

As I lower my quill to the paper I can feel the static begin to stir as it anticipates the climax, the deluge of my imagination. With the first stroke of my quill the magic begins to fuel my writing, my need to create a world that isn't filled with hate, fear, racism, ignorance, and oppression like my "real world" is filled with. I'll use the magick to create anything my benighted heart desires, anything my encephalon can construct. I'll then be able to lose myself in my makings, lost with no desire to be found. But being found, being forced out of my hiding is inevitable. I'm forced back into this realm of razor wire, concrete, steel, guards with their insidious forms of oppression, and these mindless drones whose fake laughs and hate-filled eyes are a requirement.

I escape every chance I get. Each time the static builds I pray that this will be the time, the time that once I enter my Other world - lock the door, throw the bolt, and draw the shade - I'll lose the key and not be able to return, destined to be lost forever. This is what I look forward to when I feel the magic in the air.

Picture Theme- If you are new to PE let me introduce you to our picture theme project. Rather than a word cue, now we are offering a different picture cue every month. If you would like to read what everyone else writes on the monthly picture all you have to do, is send an entry of your own. Unlike the word theme, these writings can be as imagination based as you like. You can write something based in truth or something fantastical. It is your choice. If you like to get mail consider how fun it is to get a packet of writings. Below is a series of essays written in response to past picture cues. After this we will have

some new pictures for you to respond to. Please keep entries to 700 words or less.



“Favorite Things” by Keith Pertusio

It was an autumn dusk but the old man could still follow the silhouette as it plunged off the high trestle bridge into the water. He was too far away to hear the splash. He stood on the muddy bank, adjusting the straps on his lifejacket. He pulled out his watch. He had time, a minute and twenty-three seconds. He took a deep breath and stepped into the water, feeling the freezing river soak his shoes like frigid hands on his feet. He was ready.

There was something about that bridge, a magnet that drew the jumpers. Stupid politicians. The money ran out, they said, leaving the bridge incomplete. Now, it hung like a broken bone, reaching far but never meeting the opposite shore. A mist rose up the evening the last construction vehicle left, a fog that never moved as if it meant to forever obscure the bridge's embarrassment. It was there now.

A high bridge. A dead end. A lonesome fog. Bad magic, all of it. It's no wonder the jumpers came.

He glanced at his watch. Forty seconds to go. He edged a little deeper into the moving water. The legs of his jeans darkened as the icy river crept up his legs. His eyes strained to find the shadow bouncing on the currents. Any second now.

Sometimes they were dead. Most of the time they were dazed but alive. But those who survived the jump would not be alive soon after they hit the rapids downstream. That's why he had to be here. This evening especially with its overcast sky and leaden gray clouds. Tonight was made for jumpers.

He saw it. He set his watch inside his jacket on the shore. He eased into the water, his life jacket buoying him, another life jacket in his hand. His toes brushed the cobblestone bottom as he propelled himself to the middle, the

river pulling at him. The dark mass bobbed toward him and he grabbed cloth as it went by. The river wanted it but he yanked it toward him, maneuvering the life jacket haphazardly around it.

Then he pulled. Pulled. Pulled until his toes found the solid footing of the shallows. He dragged the body like a sack from the river's grasp and then unfolded the tangled limbs until a person was stretched out on the muddy shore. A man. Young, too.

He put an ear to chest. He put hands to chest and pressed. The icy river poured from his mouth. He rolled him to his side, still pressing. Coughing. A spasm. Then eyes fluttering open. He stepped back as the shadow choked and gasped.

He knew better than to explain. The young man would remember soon enough. He walked away and lit a cigarette which glowed in the darkness. After a minute, he heard pebbles shift as the man sat up.

“May I?” the young man croaked. He passed him the cigarette, feeling cold fingers fumble against his own. For a minute, neither smoke, the river grumbling by. The smell of tobacco mingled with those of earth and river.

“Camels,” the young man whispered hoarsely. “My favorite.”

The old man glanced at him. “It's good to have favorites.”

The young man coughed. “Yeah,” he finally replied.

The old man unfastened his life jacket and gathered it in his arms.

“The dead have no favorites,” he said gruffly as he stooped to pick up his jacket and watch.

The cigarette hissed as the young man pressed the stub against his dripping jeans. He shivered.

“Come,” the old man said and he followed.

A fire warmed the cabin. He dried off by it for a while, listening to the old man clattering around the kitchen. Later, he sat down at the table and the old man handed him a plate piled high. Spaghetti and meatballs.

“My favorite,” he said and felt the old man's hands pause before letting go.

“Yeah,” he replied before turning back to the kitchen.

The young man set his plate on a Cookie Monster placemat, exactly like the one he had as a kid. His favorite. He did not touch his food. Instead, he gazed around the cabin for the first time. In the corner, his favorite recliner. Over the couch, the crocheted blanket his mother made. On the bookshelf, the model plane he had made at thirteen sitting in front of his favorite books. He stood. All around him, on every surface, his favorite things.

A gentle hand on his shoulder guided him to his seat. "Eat," the old man commanded, and he did, and it was exactly as he remembered it, how it all was before. The old man sat and waited as he ate, waited as he cried, until he had eaten and cried enough.

"You are made of all this," the old man finally said, gesturing around him. "You still live and breathe and have favorites." Their eyes met. "This is you and it is always here, no matter what you go through."

"But how did you know?" the young man asked. The crackling fire filled the silence. Finally, the chair scraped the floor as the old man stood, looking at his watch. He opened a cupboard and pulled out a gray blanket the young man recognized from his childhood. He felt its warmth as the old man wrapped it around his shoulders.

"Are you ready to go home?" the old man asked. The young man hesitated, then nodded.

"You have twenty minutes," the old man said as he pulled on his life jacket. "I have another one coming."

The young man nodded again, looking around as he tried to memorize each object.

"They're always around, you know," the old man whispered, touching his arm. "As long as you are."

The old man walked to the door and opened it, grasping the life jacket he had hung on a hook by the doorway two hours earlier.

"But," the young man called out. "Where are your favorite things?"

The figure in the doorway paused but did not turn. Outside, the night hung thick and heavy.

"The dead have no favorites."

The door closed as the old man strode into the gray, swirling fog.

"Bridge" by Jaime E. Marrero

I can see the road that I need to travel, but I do not know where it leads. I am longing to go there because it must be better than where I am at. I feel confused, lost, and alone. I do not like this feeling and I want this feeling to go away.

These surroundings of mine are so dark and I cannot comprehend how to get to my destination. I can make my way to the road, or at least I believe that I can. However, because of the fog, my vision is impaired. Fear has caused my paralysis, resulting in my inability to reach my destination. Where are my peers? Is anyone out there? No— there is only me and my solitude. Maybe everyone has already traveled this path. What then, if I were to make it to the bridge, could I make it across without clear sight. There is water under the bridge

and it's cold! This adds to my fear, because of my knowledge of how cold the water is. This road of mine is full of obstacles, and this fog is my impediment. I'm afraid to fall because I may not be able to escape the cold waters again. I escaped the cold and violently ripping currents before, but will my determination allow me a third chance?

Perhaps, just a breath of wind could clear this fog just for a moment, in order to reveal my path. The path behind me is dark, and I know that I can't go back! The cold water is rising so I know that the bridge ahead is my only choice. As I close my eyes my destination is so clearly seen, but to my despair, as I open them, the ever present fog is still there. I will push forward to that place of uncertainty, but my fear of walking blindly and stumbling will not depart from me.

"To the Unknown" by Derek LeCompte

As prisoners, we are subjected to a myriad of treatments that confuse the soul. We transition from society to sub-society, and our futures are completely unclear. Sure, we have ideas for what we'll like to do once out of prison... if we make it that far. However, prison is our bridge and our destination is unknown.

It all depends on our focus while we're behind these walls. Are you here to get and recognize your "ah-ha" moment and strive for a higher station in life? Or, are you a criminal trying to improve your criminal skills? That last option kind of scares me, and I seek protection from it. First, are you confused as to which way to go for the first option? Second, do you like being in prison?

Don't get me wrong, prison was a blessing for me. As I said, it's my bridge. But, I don't believe it is my final destination. In fact, nobody in my life believes this is my decree. It did allow me to find myself by stripping away all my sub-personalities to get to the core of my being. I'm blessed for that. I'm further blessed that it's allowed me to accomplish things I likely wouldn't have in society when I was younger. I've had poetry published, books published, articles published, I got my high school diploma and am striving for my associate degree. I've reunited with family who abandoned me or I haven't had the chance to meet, and I've forged countless positive relationships with amazing people. It was also not just the rude awakening I needed, it was the same for all those in my life! Lives were changed, and not just my own.

I've utilized everything prison has to offer to better myself. Beyond the rehabilitation NJDOC claims to encourage (because even someone in the Commissioner's Office stated on a news program that it's not her job to rehabilitate us, but to warehouse us!), I've taken further steps to fight the dehumanization to rehumanize myself. I also push for all those

in my tight circle to do the same. Our power is limitless when we harness it for good.

That's not to say there isn't setbacks; we all have them. We are in an environment where we have little to no control over our own lives. If the powers that be want to knock us off our pedestal, they'll do so. We can always get back on it, we just have to fight off the soreness.

So far, my bridge of a prison journey is in its fourth leg, in my fourth institution. To be honest, I don't like this one, but it won't stop me from taking advantage of what is available. Even to get into the amazing Six Flags Great Adventure amusement park, you have to drive along a long road with numerous speed bumps! Or, using the bridge analogy, sometimes you are halted from crossing because a barge or ship is coming through. Care, attention, and perseverance will get you over.

Sure, the other side may be foggy. But look at it this way, maybe the fog is your imagination and it will pull together a creation of the destination you've always dreamed of. We can use these prisons, these bridges, to enter worlds others may not be able to who haven't experienced what we have. We are strong! Look at what we deal with on a daily basis! Our minds are strong, our wills are indestructible, our drive is uncanny.

Come, cross this bridge, and find out the great things life has in store for us. It's there. Be brave enough to walk into the unknown with your head held high and with a faithful heart.



by Robert Allan Dziekan Jr.

Ever since the bombings and violence in the streets forced Amira and her family to flee to the refugee camp, nothing in Amira's life felt certain. As she looked into the mirror in the scarcely lit dark of the night, all of her fears and uncertainties rose to the surface, so potent she could almost feel them under her fingertips as she touched her face.

She stared, unblinking, her large brown eyes locked on her own haunted visage as her uncertainties coalesced into a stream of disturbing questions. Would she ever be able to

return home? Is her home even still there for her to return to? Would the bombings follow them here? Was any place ever going to be safe again?

Amira allowed herself to indulge in her observation that she considered herself a pretty girl, but her new reality robbed her of any confidence or pleasure this might have given her, and the deluge of painful questions continued. Would she even be able to keep her pretty face, or would she end up horribly scarred like the boy in the next room? The severity of his trauma taught her that the bombs and fire didn't care who they hurt; even little kids weren't safe from the wanton destruction and violence. Amira wanted to grow up to be a beautiful woman like her mother, but that no longer seemed certain.

Other uncertainties drowned out other dreams. Amira dreamed of being a doctor one day; a dream intensified as she admired the rescue workers helping the injured refugees newly arrived to the camp. Amira's daily nightmare of life in this war-torn land made her wonder if she'd ever even get to grow up, and made her doctor dream seem ridiculous.

Suddenly, Amira realized she was no longer alone. Looking behind her in the mirror, she saw her mother's face emerge from the darkness, and felt her mother's comforting touch on her shoulders. With her mother near, many of the fears and uncertainties seemed silly. In the touch of her hands was her mother's promise that, somehow, all would be well. The too-rapidly maturing Amira knew there were things beyond her parents' control, and promises parents couldn't always keep, but the little girl Amira wanted help to control of her chaotic emotions, and for now at least, she was still able to be comforted.

"What is my beautiful little doctor doing awake at this hour?"

"Nothing, Mom; I was just wondering when I'd be big enough to start helping people like the red-shirts do..."

"Oh, Amira, you're growing up so fast that I expect to see you in your own red shirt by next week."

Amira and her mother laughed together, and tension melted from Amira's young shoulders.

"Mom! I'm not growing THAT fast!"

"Like a weed, Amira. Before you know it, you'll be a young woman, and you'll be able to be whatever you want to be. But only if you get some sleep!"

Amira's mother laid her down and tucked her in before cuddling next to her.

"Sleep, my beautiful Amira. Everything is going to be OK."

In spite of everything, Amira believed her, and fell into a serene, dreamless sleep. Everything would be alright.



"Infinite thoughts" by Nate A. Lindell

In science and art there is something known as a fractal, which is something that, if extended into infinity, would have no section that is identical to a previous section. (E.g. the number for π is a fractal, as are the kinkily twisted tree branches in the theme photo).

Fractals change, into forever, which captivates human minds, as our minds are programmed to seek patterns.

Seeking patterns is how we make sense of the world, what we base our conceptions of our world on, which we begin creating the moment we're squeezed or pulled into the world. Noticing the pattern of a predator's eyes staring at us enables us to realize we're in danger (coincidentally, on some moth's wings and the backs of some large cats' ears they've evolved patterns that mimic predatory eyes, which discourages attacks).

Each human mind, compared to any other human mind, even an identical twin, is fractal. That is because even twins, who start with identical genetic programming, from their initial embryonic stage experience slightly or greatly different environments (e.g. more or less nutrition from the placenta), which flips epigenetic switches that activate or deactivate genes, which dictate what and how cells grow, including the approximate 80 billion neurons in our brains, each of those neurons having around 10,000 dendrites connecting them to other neurons and sensory organs (e.g. retinas, cochleas, skin). It's the activity between those synapses/connections at the ends of dendrites, which happen in femtoseconds-

thousands of synaptic signals per second that create the myriad psychological micro and macro-functions that makes each of us the unique person/mind that we and others perceive us to be.

Change in the activity of one neuron in one twin, something easily done, and you no longer have perfectly identical twins; different experiences make such changes, which are magnified by each subsequent epigenetic change, so the older the twins are the more their minds and bodies will differ.

Fractals do more than show how minds/souls can never be identical to each other. They suggest the existence of infinity- a fractal cannot forever change unless forever (spatial or temporal infinity) exists!

The studies of Bertrand Russell and mathematics in its simplest form support the existence of infinity. (E.g. can you say what the largest number in existence is? You cannot - there's always a higher number!)

As far as I know, given my puny resources, nobody yet has proven that infinity does not exist. If it does exist, we'll never be able to empirically prove it, because that would require infinite knowledge, knowledge of the infinite, which is impossible because infinity never ends. (You can't see the end of infinite space, or touch it, or measure it with radio telescopes, etc.- to do those things there must be a bottom to the abyss!)

To be fair, you must be at least agnostic about infinity. It may exist, or it may not. If infinity does exist, it profoundly dictates what we can and can't rationally believe about the world (i.e. everything in existence, within and beyond our universe), including whether or not God or gods exist, whether or not intelligent extraterrestrial life exists, and if our universe is alone or one of... infinitely more.

Contemplating abnormal subjects, such as infinity-it has no relevance for the person's daily life- requires an abnormal and obsessive mind. Thus it should not surprise you that a high percentage of humanity's' greatest thinkers (most of whom didn't seek to comprehend eternity, just it's fringes- actually, eternity has no fringes...smile) went crazy, were crazy, or had a thick streak of "nuts" in their family tree. For example:

Einstein, who "merely" contemplated the nature of our universe, had a schizophrenic son and was so out of touch with everyday reality that he didn't wear socks, neglected his wife and dressed like a bum

Bertrand Russell, who's principia practically proved infinity's existence (at least in math and logic), had an insane aunt and uncle, his son and granddaughter were schizophrenic (the granddaughter killed herself).

Kurt Gödel, who studied infinity (in math and logic), starved himself to death fearing nurses poisoned his food.

Georg Cantor, Gottlob Frege, inter alia, all were bullgoose loonies.

And, Nietzsche, an O.G. free thinker, infamously stalked the composer Wagner's wife and died in a sanitarium.

The good news from all of this is that you, comrades (and comradinas) stuck in solitary and deemed criminally insane may use your abby-normal minds to figure some things out that square noodles are incapable of considering with their confirmative minds!

Those studying our cosmos have come to realize that over 90% of the matter in our universe is "dark" meaning that it neither emits nor reflects light (or other radiation) and is undetectable by our technology. As with infinity, understanding dark matter serves no practical purpose- for now!- with the average person's everyday life. Likewise, comprehending Einstein's specific and general theories of relativity isn't practical knowledge; it won't help you find shelter, food or a mate, or otherwise facilitate your survival.

Without natural selection pushing it, the average human mind didn't evolve the competency to grapple with concepts like dark matter, relativity or infinity. Thus it is normal for such ideas to be incomprehensible, and, to most people, they are incomprehensible or misunderstood.

As with dark matter, infinity is, even more so than dark matter, absolutely undetectable!

Think about it, those of you with abnormal minds. You can't touch the edge of an infinite macro-verse, the photons and particles of radiation can't hit it and reflect back, so you can't "see" or detect it.

The "darkness" of infinity is difficult to grasp, because our minds developed to help us survive in a world that we can touch and examine and which will kill us if we don't understand it and intelligently conduct ourselves... much like penitentiaries!

Infinity, to be clear, doesn't mean "all" or "the most" nor does it mean "everything"- those terms refer to a limited amount. Infinity means everything, but always something more, always.

Numbers are infinite. If you doubt this, tell me what the highest number you think is; and, as children do, I will repeat that number "plus one" or "times ten", etc. - and we could do this infinitely.

"Tree Of Life" by Cynthia Castoro

We are in a waltz with mother nature. A dance that has rhythmically beat throughout our existence. Trees are essential in sustaining human life through the oxygen they give us, each

person requiring eight trees to provide their individual needs. We, in tandem, release carbon dioxide so that they too can flourish.

Many of us learned at a young age about our family tree. The strength of the trunk symbolic of the foundation of our family, our ancestors stretching back through time. Tender sprouts on boughs indicating growth with each new baby and family members, twisting the net of leaf and limb to support future generations.

Humankind is no so different from the trees. There are many varieties, no two exactly the same. Some are beautiful while others barren. Though all are wood some are soft and weak like the White Birch and are not good to build with. Lifespans vary too with a Banyan existing some 200 years while the Bristlecone Pine survives for 5,000 years or more. Though the Red Wood may tower up to 300 feet, it is no match for the supreme strength of the Giant Sequoia that can grow to 275 feet and individually weigh up to 2.7 million pounds! All nurturing us with their own existence. No wonder a lot of us ask to be buried under the shade of an old oak tree: it's safe, peaceful, shaded from the harshness of a sun that can burn us.

An old riddle asks: if a tree falls deep in a forest with nobody around, does it make a sound? I believe it does. Just because there's no audience, the solitude does not render it mute. I believe the tree cries out when it falls, its bark snapping and limbs cracking as it leaves its spot where it's made its home.

We are like the trees, though which trees we imitate is up to each of us. The mighty wind will blow and strip our leaves, snap our limbs and pull our bark. We become tired and bleak and though some hold ground others will fall. What makes the difference at times is how well we have grounded ourselves. The Wild Fig Tree of South Africa has the longest roots, some up to 400 feet long that anchors the tree. We too stretch our roots into the earth where we decide to settle down and grow strong. The deepest parts of our souls often remain obscure and hidden, yet hold the vitality of our life.

In the old book "The Prophet" which I love, Kahlil Gibran talks about this core of our being, the roots, as it related to those who would judge a person who has committed a wrong as though "he were not one of you, but a stranger...an intruder upon your world" Gibran writes "But I say that even as the holy and the righteous cannot rise above the highest which is in each of you, so the wicked and the weak cannot fall lower than the lowest which is in you also...and if any of you would punish in the name of the righteous and lay the ax unto the evil tree, let him see to its roots; and verily he will find the the roots

of the good and the bad, the fruitful and the fruitless, all entwined together in the silent heart of the earth.”

The canopy and collage of foliage, brilliant limbs, contrasting variations of bark all bring a color kaleidoscope to our world. The sparkling strands of sunshine peeking through to dance on our skin is warm and nurturing. The great tree is a mighty teacher; it can remind us of our potential strength, to nurture our souls and dig deep to ground ourselves. Those who want to sing their song, we can support and uphold. We can provide protection and still shimmer through the showers. Our force of energy is powerful, though we can snap, we may bend instead and even if we are chiseled down, cut near the point of destruction, we will rise again. One sprig. One new sprout shooting for the stars.



“NOT TODAY” by Jack Simpson

This morning I would have loved to sleep in. My life as a rancher was slowly coming to an end. Of the thirty horses I once had I'm down to one stallion. I named him Buster. A name that had stuck with him since he was a colt.

I could have tried farming and most likely would have made a better choice. Both are time consuming and require dedication. At least farming would have produced more for my money.

Not only was Buster a comical horse who played his own tricks. He would be steady one moment then all of a sudden his wild side would come through. While riding one day on the beach, he went into a full gallop. We were both having fun. Don't know if he forgot I was on his back or that he thought it would be funny. I had never seen a horse who could stop that fast. I was caught up in the moment of the excitement of a flat out run.

Before I could react to his sudden movement, I found myself sailing in the air heading out in the ocean. It was so comical to be flying without wings. I found it to be scary and very unexpected.

The good part was that I sailed out far enough that the water didn't hurt. The worst part was I owned a new pair of boots. Talk about deer in the headlights. I was really sore for a couple of weeks.

I was more mad at myself than Buster. He stood proud and stomped the sand with his hoof. Shaking the water off, we made eye contact. I know deep down he was laughing inside.

The next morning Mr. Baxter showed up at seven A.M. He knew I had been having trouble for some time. He had agreed to take Buster off my hands. I had decided to sell him for what I could get out of him.

As we approached the barn, I noticed that Buster was standing. We talked for a moment. He had told me of his plans. To my surprise I didn't even care if he would end up gluing the envelopes.

Slick my dog was hiding beside the barn. Buster and Slick had become loyal friends over the years. The closeness wasn't really noticed until that day.

Buster's tail was swishing back and forth. I could tell he was a little excited. On the other hand Slick had slipped inside the stall and was sitting in the corner. Bridling Buster would be easy, even with his temperamental attitude. With him anything is fair game.

This time I would be ready for the unexpected. Everything was tight enough. Then I noticed it too late. He turned his head with a crazy look in his eye. He bolted out of the barn. Slick was right with him. Mr. Baxter dove for an empty stall. As he stood up his comment was “That's a spirited horse. If you can't control him, then the glue factory sure can.”

We both left the barn in a dead run. It was no mistake the two of them were heading for the ocean. Now, what are the two of them up to?

Mr. Baxter had fallen way back and motioned for me to go on. To my surprise I still had wind left in me. Once I stopped at the top of the sand dunes, I could see why these two had become friends. Not only was Buster jumping in the water, Slick was playfully nipping at his legs. Then they ran side by side as to test their strength.

While I stood watching and catching my breath, Mr. Baxter finally caught up with me. He watched with amazement. He replied, “Those two are meant for each other.” But it was too late. It was as if all of a sudden the two sensed our presence and sprinted for the deep water. There was nothing out there but open ocean for miles.

I ran as hard and fast as my feet would carry me. When I dove in and came up for air, two of my fingers locked around the rope. My grip was tight as I yelled, “NOT TODAY.” Buster stopped fighting at the moment.

Slick on the other hand had came up to my right side and I grabbed his right front paw in my hand. It kept him from being pulled away by the current. Most of all from having eye contact with his friend.

Mr. Baxter understood I couldn't sell Buster. These two are friends and friends that are true to life's end. Besides, he would be stubborn glue on envelopes.

To this day the three of us enjoy each other. Long walks on the beach. I still won't ride Buster. I catch a hint of that devilish look in his eyes. Besides, I still have some of the pain from the last ride.



“Bad Person” by Catherine LaFleur

My first drink was champagne at my second cousin Babette's wedding. I was nine. The taste was so wonderful I snuck around draining the glasses of unsuspecting guests. Eventually I crawled under some azalea bushes and passed out cold.

At eighteen, in Europe, I developed a taste for liquor. We drank wine at lunch and dinner. And drank at every opportunity.

My favorite: Bombay sapphire and tonic.

When drunk, I can do multiple versions of normal. All of them are convincing. All of them are fake. Being myself terrifies me. Being sober terrifies me.

I stayed sober for the beans. Nine months of sober followed by months of breastfeeding.

My favorite: whiskey, sugar, bitters, lemon, orange with a cherry on top.

I am a bad mother. An unobservant mother. A mother who is passed out on the couch instead of awake.

Some mornings I woke up with a black eye, long scratches on my arms and bite marks on my chest. Naked. What happened?

My favorite: margarita with lime and salt.

One night I collapsed on a girlfriend's couch. When I got home the next morning, my baby had a black eye and bruises on his leg. Shame. Disgust. Rage.

When you are drinking, you don't care that your life is falling off a cliff.

My favorite: orange juice and vodka.

It takes seven shots to get me going, but only one shot to kill a man.

A dilemma: would you rather be a good person who does one bad thing or a bad person who does one good thing?

“My Beautiful Boozed Broad” by Steven Lee Adkins Jr.

“Ah me,” I said as I took off my hat, scarf, and coat. Forgetting my shoes as I walked toward her, leaving behind quickly melting footprints. My beautifully pale and fragile lady has found my booze. I thought I had hidden it well enough before my hiking trip. Nearly froze to death twice, mountain climbing, camping, and fishing. Breaking ice to fish for my meal made me much more appreciative.

Of her, for example. Me being a large Appalachian man with a hearty appetite, she has never failed to satiate it with home cooked meals. Putting much time and effort into them even though she works 60 hours a week. I slip the ale gently from her hand and kiss the back of her graceful, royal-like wrist.

A recovering alcoholic, who has a beagle-like nose for sniffing out my booze. I may start locking it in the garage...or my brother's garage. Yeah, that'd probably be better. I better carry her upstairs. Poor thing passed out fully clothed. Tomorrow's a new day and after I drain what's left of her ale down my throat, I pick her up and kiss her forehead as she wraps her arms around me, eyes still closed. She'll be mad I had booze. I'm recovering too, after all.

“Whiskey Memorial” by Delvin Diles

In his memory, I passed out.

“A Hot Mess” by Todd Leatherland

Whitney sat attentively combining the yarn locks of Bojangles. They were honey colored because Bojangles was a goofy stuffed lion. He always looked surprised because of the way his cheap plastic features were arranged. Such was his demeanor. He sat indifferent to Whitney's methodical grooming, as she defended her mother's tardiness. She whispered in hushed tones as not to disturb G-ma napping on the living room couch. Her grandmother had emphysema; it made her sleep a lot. Little Whitney did not want to do anything

to ruin her big day with her momma. Bojangles needed to look his best too.

"I know she is late again... but momma is going to show up, mister," Whitney said confidently; chiding Bojangles. Bojangles could only stare back in his goofy way.

Today was the Fourth of July and they were going to watch the fireworks down by the waterfront. Whitney was excited about the huge parade too. She loved watching the miniature cars zoom around, driven by the old men in their strange hats. It reminded her of how silly grownups could be when they weren't taking everything so seriously. Her favorite was the princess beauty pageant float filled with glitter and lace; which Whitney was certain she would win one day. Her mother said they couldn't afford beauty pageants; but sometimes, when momma was drinking, they would pretend together. Momma would let her use her make-up and they would play dress up. For the talent section, Whitney would display her cooking prowess on her easy bake oven, to the delight of the judges - her stuffed animals. No matter who was crowned princess that day, Bojangles always seemed surprised by the outcome.

Cassie was a hot mess, and now, she was messier than ever. Already late, she was struggling to make it off the island. The ferries were backed up due to holiday traffic, and Cassie was stranded on the beach. She had woken up there, curled around the embers of a dying fire. She could not remember last night. The beach revelries were already begun with music blasting and horns blaring all around - oblivious to her awakening form. Assessing her situation with bleary eyes and a swimming head, she realized her phone was broken somehow and she had lost her panties somewhere along the way. Where were her friends she was partying with? Unable to find answers, Cassie went searching for some of the-hair-of-the-dog-that-bit her.

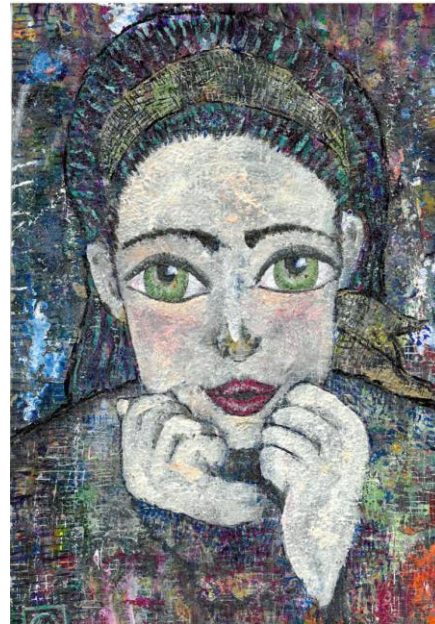
Cassie knew her baby girl would be disappointed. She had promised Whitney so many things, so many times before. Throughout life, Cassie's intentions were always more noble than her actions. She had never learned to settle down and follow through. After Whitney's father had been locked up, Cassie continued selling dope to make ends meet. Shortly after, she lost custody of Whitney. With each defeat, another obstacle was paced in her path, and she was struggling to maintain. Overwhelmed, doing her own thing seemed easier, even though she knew it broke Whitney's heart. Precious, loyal Whitney. Cassie towed these feelings with her - dragging them along the beach - her feet sinking wearily into the sand as she plodded toward... something.

Whitney had stood a watchful vigil at the window facing the street for hours. The roar of each car engine

sending her racing to look expectantly. Only to be disappointed as each one continued to destinations unknown; happier places she imagined - over and over again. Eventual disappointment turned into concern; she was worried about her momma. G-ma could only sit and watch. She had long since given up on Cassie, and in time, Whitney would too. But Whitney adored her momma and had not given up on her. As she waited, she retreated into her cocoon, her secret place of imagining where her mother was a starlet. She continued to cling stubbornly hopeful to Cassie's skirt, with flashes of fast red lips and shiny liquid nails that dried as they gossiped playfully.

Just then, the screen door screeched open and Cassie padded bashfully into the house. She grabbed a beer out of the fridge, exchanged words with her mother, and went to find Whitney. They hugged each other fiercely in silence, exchanging emotions knowingly through stinging eyes. Cassie peeled the label from her beer bottle and wrote a message on it with crayon from the floor. Then she laid on a cot and closed her eyes. It read: Sorry I let you down baby. IOU a princess makeover. I will make it up to you, I promise. Love momma.

"I believe you, momma. I love you too; and me and Bojangles are going to take care of you." Whitney grew up in that moment. Leaving her mother to rest, she went off dutifully to preheat her easy bake oven, as the sudden waterfront fireworks began booming in the distance. Bojangles no longer looked surprised.



Art by
Kristopher
Storey

New images for your writing pleasure

Due 3/1/19



Due 4/1/19



Due 5/1/19



Due 6/1/19



Due 7/1/19



Due 8/1/19



Due 9/1/19



"Transitioning out of prison to the free world begins the moment one steps into the prison. If you go into a prison thinking you are now a prisoner, then a prisoner is all that you will ever be. I entered prison and immediately decided that being a prisoner was the pits, so I made the decision to leave that very minute. While it was true that my body had to remain in prison, there was no law or prison rule that stated my heart and my mind had to stay there with it. Thankfully, Prisoner Express came to the rescue.

Prisoner Express was a window in my cell that allowed me to see the world outside of prison. Through that window, P.E. invited me to write stories and essays about things that mattered to me. Writing all those stories and essays helped me to examine the way I think and feel - and that really changed my life for the better. You see, P.E. allowed me to advance my communication skills and that alone is the greatest thing that will help you transition from the inside to the outside.

I could tell you about all the free world help that awaits you, but unless you use your prison time to better your communication skills, all the free world help in the world won't change a thing about you. I encourage you to sign up for the Prisoner Express newsletter. As you write a short story or maybe a poem about someone or something you care deeply about, you will notice how your ability to express yourself in words will grow. No matter what you write, if it comes from your heart it will be a masterpiece. Keep writing those masterpieces as Prisoner Express looks forward to publishing your writings in their quarterly newsletters.

Remember, your transition from the inside to the outside began the minute you came to prison. Use your time wisely and sign up for Prison Express today!"

Due 10/1/19



I would like to hear more from people who have been released, to understand the transitions that need to be navigated and to use the info to help plan our programming to best serve you regarding the challenges that abound. If you get out of prison, please let us know about your new situation, and how if in anyway PE helped you in being prepared for what's next in life.

Please remember there are 4000 people writing us. We read every letter, but are limited as to what we can do to help. You can write and request anything, but in reality, mostly all we can do is create and maintain the programs we offer in this newsletter.

Final Notes

I am challenged to choose the stories to print in the theme essay portion of the newsletter. I have limited room and there is so much of good writing going on within PE. The theme project is only seen by those who send in an entry. I hope the preceding samples inspire you to participate.

Recently, I received an email from Dave Gordon who was released after 20 years in prison. He offered me some insight as to how PE worked for him, and I was pleased as his experience PE's effectiveness was in line with our aims. Here is a portion of what Dave had to say

Please know that while there are a number of new PE volunteers and many people want to help, the number of requests keeps us hopping. Money is tight, and I always worry about how to get the newsletter and other programs printed and mailed. Sign up for as many programs as you can see yourself doing, but please know if you aren't interested let it go so we have enough to get everyone something. If you or your family can donate to PE have them go to our website, www.prisonexpress.org or send checks directly. If you do not hear from us don't ever think we have stopped. Feel free to write and check in and be sure your we have your correct address. If ever I feel I can't raise the funds to continue I will find enough funds to put out a mailing telling you of this. If you don't hear from us that we have folded, then assume we are doing our things and you are welcome to join us. If we do not hear from someone for 6 months we typically move you to an inactive part of our data base, so be sure that if you are reading this and want to stay on our mailing list we hear from you before June 2019

There is a growing energy among the students who come into the Alternatives Library, where PE originates, and it is exciting to be linking the students to your writing and art. I know there is an unsettled feeling in our country as divisive politics seems to be the order of the day. In truth, life and existence is a miracle which we are far from understanding, but here we are experiencing life as easy as it is to take a deep breath. Let us all take a collective deep breath knowing we are linked by our humanity, and by a desire to grow and learn and prosper. I hope you all will lend a helping hand to someone you know in the hope that we can start a wave of support for one another.

At the heart of Prisoner Express, are you the participants. Your letters, writing and art give us a sense of direction on how to weave this project into a vehicle for your personal growth and exploration. That you are in prison clearly does not make you any less of a human than anyone else. It may mean many things, but your humanity is never in doubt. Life is about exploring our humanity and supporting others in this quest. This is how we build community. I am pleased with the Prisoner Expressed community and how we are growing and learning together. This is about more than you, the incarcerated, but also about how your writings and experience effect the college students and community members who help us with the project as well as all the people who read selected writings online.

I usually share some personal info about my life as so many share their stories with me. As space is short I will condense my life to that: I am doing well. I have found an apt that is close to where my 3 children live, which gives me great joy. I went through a divorce last year, and establishing new patterns with the children seems essential. I worked like crazy growing garlic and while it is satisfying work, for the amount of time it took I might better find other employment. I did sell 200 pounds to a local farm group who will include them in their market basket, but it takes a lot of work and skill to make a living as a farmer. And the big news is I am going on a 17 day trip to Costa Rica in late Jan early Feb to explore rainforests, mountains and ocean, and to drink that most excellent Costa Rican coffee. I was there 25 years ago for the same amount of time and am excited to have an adventure. I will put some pictures into next newsletter if I am able.

I hope you can find balance and prosperity in this new year. Just know there are ways to be prosperous that are not measured by cash and possessions alone.

Stay real and keep writing. Tell us how this project helps you and how we can make it better.—Gary

Art by Nate Lindell



REGISTRATION FORM

Please Note: If you received this newsletter, you are on our mailing list through July 1 2019 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 July 1 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. If yes, please send check for \$4.00 or some other means that is allowed at your prison to cover postage. Books are free, but the mailing cost is not. We have a good selection of donated used books List types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection of books.

Please fill in this if you order expedited books

_____ Number of books allowed?

_____ Soft cover only?

_____ Hardcover and soft covered both allowed

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

☐ 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.

☐ Building a Book -yes send me packet #4 in the building a book series. I want to write a book!!

☐ History and Design of Paradise Please send this packet on the history of design, design elements and principles, and a primer on landscape design graphics.

☐ Book Review Project – Yes I would like to write and share book reviews. Send this packet to get me started

☐ Grateful Anyhow- Come explore the practice of gratitude. See if it's benefits can raise your spirits and provide sparks of inspiration. Let us now.

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

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

☐ Meditation- Cultivate awareness and learn to witness the hustle and bustle of existence rather than be controlled by it with some simple meditation practices.

☐ Kid-Write Connection- Come join Greg and crew in program geared towards writing stories to be read by and to children.

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

NAME: (PLEASE PRINT)

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

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

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Art by Dwayne Rieco