

# Prisoner Express News Summer 2020

Hello There! Wow. It's an exciting time to be alive! Welcome to Prisoner Express. This issue is full of offers to help you stay sharp, focused, productive and informed. Given the stay at home nature of the pandemic, none of us are moving very much these days. I hear from many of you that lockdowns are the new normal.

Out on the streets in my town people keep their distance. I don't know what most people do to keep busy. I have divided my time between keeping up with Prisoner Express and gardening. Prisoner Express is finding a way to keep going by utilizing volunteers and students who can work remotely. Anabel Taylor Hall where I work and your mail is sent to is shut down indefinitely by the university. I have moved the physical parts of Prisoner Express into my apartment, and while there is a freedom to working at home, the clutter is relentless, and a lot to manage.

For those of you who are new to the program, I am Gary and I began Prisoner Express in 2002 and we published our first newsletter in 2004. Our intent is to supply you with information, education and opportunities for creative self-expression through a variety of programs that are intended to provide something for everyone. The newsletter is printed 2x a year, and if you are holding this and it is not yet Oct 30 2020 you have the opportunity to join the programs listed in this newsletter. There is a signup sheet later in the newsletter. You can return the sign up sheet or you can send us a letter, letting us know what projects you wish to join. Our lessons and newsletters are sent out in batches by USPS bulk mail services so don't procrastinate about letting your wishes be known. Though I would like to respond to individuals and send programs whenever they are requested, time and money do not allow this luxury. Don't worry if you are too late for this cycle's programs, write anyway and you will receive our next newsletter in Winter 21 and you can join in then. You will stay on our active mailing list as long as we have heard from you in the past 6 months. If you want to continue receiving this newsletter, then we must receive some communication from you. Many of you just joining have heard about PE through friends, relatives or resource guides. Consider whatever you heard to be rumor, and now that you have this newsletter you will get an updated and accurate idea of the services we currently provide.

A special edition of PE News was sent earlier this summer to let you know how things are shaking out here, and now I am better able to describe the changes to PE programming due to COVID. Some of the services we provided pre-pandemic are not possible right now. We are locked out of the Alternatives Library and the PE bookroom as Anabel Taylor Hall has been closed. We can still get our mail addressed there but I pick it up at the campus mail center. We

are not allowed any gatherings with students at Cornell University which puts a big dent in our letter writing programs. As you probably know the virus exploded in NYC last March and things shut down across the state. There have been just a few cases in Tompkins County where I live.. One would think things could go back to normal, but my understanding is that because so many people are asymptomatic and because it spreads so easily, we can't go back to normal or the virus will spread unchecked and once it gets a foothold, watch out. I have been reading your stories of COVID behind bars and while some of you remain untouched others, especially those living in dorms have reported large outbreaks. Please continue sharing your stories about COVID with us [more on that later].

There are many problems with the mail and I hesitate to place blame. What I want to do is minimize any returned mail or undeliverable mail as much as possible. I have received many pieces of mail returned as undeliverable. I have a volunteer trying tracking down updated addresses through online state prison databases, but if you move or are released or can't get mail please let us know. I am always treading water when it comes to having the funds needed to continue paying the photocopy and postage costs from our program. My frustration with spending needed funds on mail that is not deliverable is easily aroused.

If you are moved please write to us, as all the returned bulk mail notices cost me 70 cents each, so you know I don't want to get those. It only costs .20 cents to mail a packet, So a packet getting refused costs more than the mailing price of sending 3. I know it is often through no fault of most of you and I am dealing with larger systemic problems, but anything you can do to keep your address current in our system is appreciated.

All the programs from last cycle were mailed. If you did not get them I am not sure why. There seem to be many reasons for mail to be rejected. Too many pages, mailing labels on envelopes, perhaps overlooked content in a story, incorrect addresses, people released or moved. Sometimes I know why mail is rejected and often I don't. Certainly let me know if you are not getting the mail you expect. It is often hard for me to go back and figure out individual situations with the volume of mail and ongoing request for services that come in. My way to keep PE going is to correct any addresses I can and focus on the next set of lessons, and get as many of them mailed to you as I can do. I know it sounds harsh, but for me it is a matter of optimizing the good we can do. As it is, PE has lost access to the computers and scanners and copiers available at the library, and I'm managing the project for now with my laptop and many cups of coffee.

Before I go on to listing our new programs I want to review the status of some of the last cycle programs. We have two ongoing yearly programs Building a Book [BB] and Spanish. They are closed to new participants as we are a few lessons into both. There is one more lesson in the BB series, and I hope to mail it this fall. Next year we will offer it again, so don't fret, unless you are getting out soon. If that's the case then you have reason to celebrate. Many of you wrote that the mail sent to Maia who leads the BB series was returned to you. This was a pandemic induced problem. Her PO box was a long commute from her home in NYC and she could not access it. Send all mail to me and I will forward it to her.

Hope, who leads the Spanish program is in Kansas, and will complete her senior year of college remotely. I am not yet sure if we will have a 3rd Spanish lesson for her series. If we do I will mail it to everyone who received Span 1 and 2. We will reoffer the beginning Spanish Packet next year as well so all you new folks will get a crack at it. I hope to hear back from all of you who received the mailings on Financial Literacy, Song Writing, World of Birds and the Slaughterhouse Five book. The creators of those packets are compiling your answers and comments and if you reply you should receive a copy of their compilations. Your replies are like votes. If you don't respond to a packet then I figure the subject is not so interesting to you, or you did not receive your mail. We also sent Poetry Anthology 23 recently and in the coming pages you will learn about Volume 24 which we are beginning to put together.

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### **Fall 20 Projects**

Following, is a list of fall programs we will mail out this cycle. It will take awhile for us to collect the names of all who wish to register. I plan to begin mailing out the fall programs at the beginning of November, but that is not written in stone. Please don't dawdle in replying and enrolling. As I wrote earlier I can certainly understand why each of you should be an exception if you want to join a program after it has already been mailed out, but we just can't afford to promise any individual mailings right now. So read this carefully, don't miss the deadline. If you don't get a mailing it could be because you enrolled past the deadline. Also if you send in a response to a program or are submitting a theme essay or a poem, please put your name and number on each submission. No one is happy when we find your submissions with no name on them to identify the author. Your name on the envelope doesn't help when your submissions are sorted into the different program folders and sent to different volunteer groups. Especially during this pandemic, please help me in this way. Put your name and number on each essay or poem you submit and take the time to write legibly. I want to be able to scan and send your letters to others electronically, but if it is messy it will not work.



*Art by Kaylee Booth*

**Expedited Books-**This, our oldest program, is hobbled by COVID. We have no gathering place to store donated books and to search through our collection to create customized packages for you. I know many of you are or were waiting for books. I was able to mail a couple of hundred requests earlier this month. I contacted the local "Friends of the Library" [FOL] organization. They hold book sales to support the 4 county public library system in the area. They allowed PE volunteers to buy books a couple of evenings after the sale closed for the day.. Volunteers picked up your letters and found the books and we rubber banded each packet. Later we meet at an outdoor location and set up social distant packing stations. FOL will have another sale this fall and I plan to take all the book requests there again and create many more packages. This is the only program we offer that has a cost. We ask that you donate \$4 to cover the cost of postage. It is the only way we can afford to do this service. The books are free but the postage costs range from \$4 to \$8 per package. The selection at the FOL sale is very good. As much as I think PE has done a good job getting quality donated books, the FOL sale in our area is billed as the biggest used book sale in the country and people come from far and wide to scour their shelves. The selection is beyond good. I hope to make this a regular event with the FOL organization and if all goes well we

will have another couple of hundred expedited book packages to mail out in the late fall.

I know there are still many of you waiting for books and I am sorry that I don't have a way to make this happen any quicker. If you want books and don't feel you can wait, do not participate in this program at this point in time. If you can wait then by all means give it a go. I know many of you feel ripped off if you send funds and the books don't make it to you. If that is the case let this offer go during the pandemic as these are uncertain times and I cannot guarantee a timely package of books. However, if you do send for books, please give us a range of subjects to look for. The narrower the choices in your request the harder it is to ensure you get what you want. Of course you can be super specific, but always give us some back up subjects in case we can't meet your first choice.

**Poetry Anthology-** Hundreds of you join the Poetry Anthology project each cycle. The cost of joining is sending us at least 1 poem. You can send as many as you like. Volunteers read the poetry and select the ones that they like the best for inclusion in our semi-annual PE Poetry Anthology. Write about whatever crosses your mind. Every entry does not have to be about prison. We are all complete human beings and we seek your full range of ideas and expression in your poetry. I expect Volume 24 will be printed this winter. Here are a few poems we have received since the selection of poems in Vol 23 was completed. All poems that arrived after the selection process have been entered for consideration in Vol 24.

### **Timeless by Carnell Wingfield Jr**

The everlasting love is to be shared in word,  
Word is timeless and will never fade like the beauty of the sun,  
And to live in the moment is to be cast like a shadow when the night  
Comes and the world blends.

Bury me in a psalm so I may dwell with the intellects and great minds,  
Cherished within the passing times,  
And held like cold milk in a hot mouth on a dry tongue.

Only time exists within the measurement of man made clocks,  
May I be expressed in a timeless manner  
May I be resurrected within my poetry.

### **A Walk by Kaylee Booth**

I jaunt along towers cascading knowledgeable  
Reflections through pages of morning glories  
Crazy eights wind white birch trees  
And towering maples. Digits outstretched,  
Embracing ventricles of my beating aorta.  
Warmth from the sun radiates rays of comfort  
And love along my shoulder blades.  
Intertwined leaves and brush curling like a  
Newborn baby being cradled. Waterfalls  
Trickle off the pages, climbing steep  
mountains and jagged cliffs - a wrong turn,  
A two-edged sword. Success,  
My only option

### **I Remember by Michael McVicker**

I remember that old playground,  
And all those childhood dreams.  
Fishing with our bare hands,  
Catching crawdads in the stream,  
Running down the corn rows, balling up some hay.  
Pretending we were farming, every sunny day.  
Under that old elm tree, my best years passed me by.  
Dancing in the puddles when the thunder lit the sky.  
Swinging on the front porch, listening to the game,  
God and Uncle Jimmie, bowling in the rain.  
All those years I wasted, falling out of line.  
I never thought I'd lose you both, I thought we'd have more time.  
Blinded by the demons that lured me from that farm.  
I couldn't see my superman, only had one arm.  
I can almost smell the coffee, the Camels on his breath  
I miss those prickly whisker kisses more than I ever guessed.  
In the darkest hours when my star's about to fall,  
Far beyond the fences, heard a distant pasture call.  
The grass is always greener till you're on the other side  
Wishing that you never chose this long and bumpy ride.



Art by Tim Vergosan

### One Day by Al Coleman

One day  
I will walk barefoot on deep pile carpet  
Then feel cold tiles on my soles  
As perfectly warm water  
Dribbles down my body to meet them

I will sink into a soft mattress  
More than two inches thick  
Rest my head on a feather pillow  
At nine am or two pm  
Or whenever I want

I will wear reds and blues  
Blacks and greens  
Leather sandals of a woolen cap  
Untuck my shirt or not  
Wear my cap inside

I will eat when I am hungry  
Actually chew my food before swallowing  
Carry on a conversation  
With someone I care about  
Or just listen to the silence

I will have knobs on my sink  
A seat on my toilet  
A window that opens  
With glass I can see through  
And a door with a handle

One day  
I will have all of this

But the one day that matters  
May never come  
The day when I can look each of you in the eyes  
To tell you I am so sorry  
And finally be forgiven.

### And in the News... by David Hehn

And in the news, on TVm they showed  
Mass burial graves in New York. They're  
Burying 'hundreds' in long tractor dug  
Holes hundreds of feet long; the white pine  
Caskets stacked like cordwood; and I  
Have a friend who works at a cemetery. He  
Buries people. He told me those are the graves  
Of the "unclaimed people." It got me thinking;  
What if I was to die here in prison; I've  
No contact with my family for 19 years;  
I'm essentially disowned, a black sheep  
A pariah a felon an unwanted relative  
Whom the family doesn't mention any  
More (my letters were never returned).  
Well my point being, that if I was to die  
In here, from Corona or whatever, I  
Too would be relegated to an unknown  
Grave. This is very disheartening.  
It puts my writings and my ART in perspective  
But I wonder: what will become of all my writings  
poetry&art after I'm dead? I essentially feel that these  
Two things are all that will be left  
After I die; it puts a certain  
Seriousness and an immediacy to what I do.  
I am literally creating as if  
My after-life depended on it because  
It DOES. No one wants to be  
Forgotten. If you can't empathize  
Then imagine this: write and produce  
ART as if everyday your entire  
Existence depends on it; for it is  
A race & the clock is counting down  
Tick-tock-tick-tock till you're  
dead.

**Journal Project** -The journal project has been going on for 15+years. I am so impressed by how so many of you display the power and insight you gain by regularly reflecting and writing about your hopes, dreams, experiences and memories. If you sign up you will receive a packet of pointers on how and why to keep a journal. If you like you can send your entries to us and we keep them in a folder. Student volunteers often read journal entries and write letters to the authors. When you write your mind gets to tell a story, and as you reflect on your it can lead to new understanding about yourself.

Insight can be a wonderful friend and comfort, and I see in many writings, the keen insights that you share. We have scanned some journals into the computer but have not yet made them available to the public as we worry there may be material in some of them that could cause you problems. Also much of our old journal folders have gotten very mangled. I have everything from 2015, but before that it is hit and miss. Caitlin, a professional archiver, is volunteering to help us create quality, organized digital archives. We will continue to develop an archive either paper or electronic. This newsletter includes a release form that you can sign if you want your journals and other writing to be available through our website to the general public.

If you want You can begin your journal today. We will still send you the Journal info packet when the mailing goes out. Just date all your entries and put your name on them. Write what is in your heart and mind. You'd be amazed at the clarity of thinking that develops in people who regularly keep a journal. Send it to us for safekeeping if you like. We particularly want to hear about your experience with COVID at this time.

**Chess** - Every cycle we send out a chess newsletter.

Typically it contains puzzles, chess history and famous games from the past and chess strategies. So many of you find great escape from the grind of incarceration through chess and we hope to provide you with new insights on how to play the game. We have an experienced chess teacher, Rob, joining our ongoing chess leader Robert, and I expect their collaboration will be engaging and an effective in providing you with insights and chess wisdom.

**Meditation** -Tara has been producing meditation packets for many years and to my great delight she has agreed to do another one for this fall. While Tara is a practicing Buddhist, she draws from a number of western spiritual traditions. Prisons are not so different from some monasteries. Meditation is another way to clear your mind of the discord of prison life and reset your balance point. I strongly encourage you all to give your mind and all the storylines it creates a rest, while focusing a bit on the awareness that is inside all of us. By tapping in to your awareness, you can set yourself free, I know that sound counterintuitive to someone locked in a cell but I encourage you to explore your inner world, even as you deal with the everyday difficulties of incarceration

**ARTknows** -Treacy has been managing the Prisoner Express art project for years. She is devoted to helping you find ways to express yourself artistically. Signing up for her ArtKnows newsletter will provide you with a glimpse into her world. Below Treacy extends an invite to you all

*Greetings! I hope you are all well and keeping safe as best as possible. We are operating from afield, but I am receiving your letters when I periodically drive into town to pick up the letters at Gary's house.*

*Obviously, we are on hold as far as Monday night letter writing, but hopefully we will think of a clever way of continuing this regardless of our inability to meet at the library.*

*Think of the future and of spring. We plan to have the annual April art show at the Big Red Barn. Please send in your artwork.*

*I would be interested in developing a separate part for this art exhibition that addresses the pandemic and your experience of living through it while being incarcerated. I don't know what you are doing for masks, but I have collected an interesting assortment of masks. Thinking of this, I thought it would be interesting to see your ideas for mask designs. This could include designs for the typical 9x4 size mask that fits over your nose and mouth. But it could also include designs that construct a whole different mask. If you received the ARTknows newsletter this summer, you would have seen the interesting construction of a mask for the plague doctor with its elongated nose - looking nothing like our simple masks today. So please,*

*Draw out a design for a mask that is the standard nose and mouth cover that most of us are wearing. On a 8.5x11 piece of paper, it can be drawn to size of the regular mask.*

*Or create a mask that is totally different from the standard mask; maybe something that shields the eyes; is the head of an animal; whatever you want.*

*We will display these at the April show along with general artwork you have sent.*

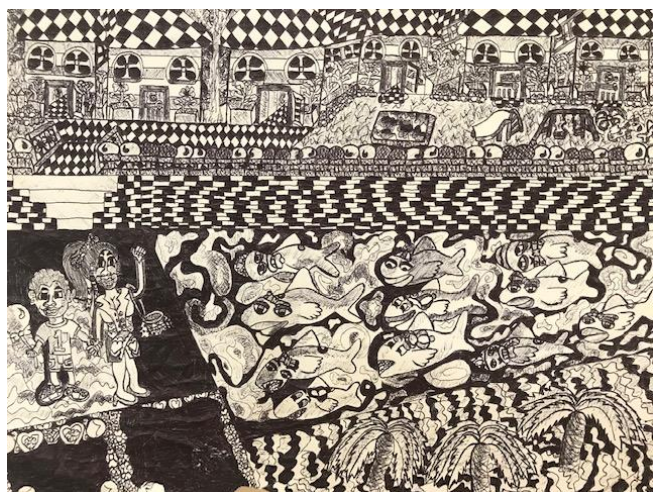
*As I mentioned, this summer's ARTknows newsletter was based upon art that was created throughout historic pandemics starting with the plague of Constantinople of the 1300's. I am not sure what the fall ARTknows newsletter will contain, except it will have artwork from famous and not-so-famous artists. My hope in creating the newsletter is to expand your basic knowledge of art history, different genres of art, and art mediums. Therefore, it is not only directed to artists, but to people who enjoy art.*

*Congratulations to Mark Loughney, James Sepesi, Jerome Washington, Jesse Osmun, and Billy Sell (posthumously) for*



being invited to exhibit at the upcoming exhibition at the MoMA PS1, New York City. The exhibition, **Marking Time in the Age of Mass Incarceration**, will be presented from September through April, 2012. The exhibition is in conjunction with Dr. Nicole Fleetwood's book of the same name. (Some of you received this book over the summer from the limited number of copies that Nicole sent us.) It is a great honor to be included in this exhibition.

Keep safe!  
Treacy



Art by Jerome Washington

## Intro to Philosophy – What Does It All Really Mean?

-Kylie volunteered with PE years ago when she was a student. She recently contacted me and asked what more could she do. As we spoke she discussed her passion for philosophy and we came up with an idea for this packet. Below is her invitation to you all to join her in this exploration.

*Dear fellow philosophers, I hope this letter finds you well. I'm beyond excited and thrilled to share with you a new program coming to Prisoner's Express this fall – Introduction to Philosophy. This program will be a brief introduction to philosophy for those of you who are interested in thinking about philosophical problems- about whether life has any meaning, and if so, what, whether we can really know anything, whether things could be objectively right or wrong, whether death is really the end, whether anything can exist, etc. I'm almost sure that most of you have wondered about at least one of these questions mentioned above some time in your life. If so, I encourage and invite you to join our philosophical club and we can ponder these questions together! I truly believe that every human being is a natural philosopher at heart. Who wouldn't be curious about all of these wonderful phenomena that govern the world and our beings? As someone who has spent most of her life wondering about all of these seemingly daunting and impossible questions, I certainly don't have all the answers figured out*

*(and I shouldn't)! That to me, is both the beauty and essence of philosophy. The object of thinking about philosophical questions shouldn't come from a place of trying to find THE answer, but rather to think about the world in a new light and along the way, discover new things about the world, yourself, and one another. All of that being said, there are simply too many philosophical questions for us to tackle in one program and beyond my current knowledge to dive into them. So for the first issue of Introduction to Philosophy, we will be focusing on surveying the following selection: 1. Free Will 2. The Basis of Morality 3. The Nature of Death 4. Knowledge of the World 5. The Meaning of Life. Of course, even the selection outlined here opens up a jar of unfathomable questions. My hope is not for us to come up with right or wrong answers, but rather to encourage one another to start to or continue to think about these topics in new ways. As my mentor once told me, "the best way to study philosophy is to think about them directly." And I invite all of you to join me! Warmest Regards, Kylie*

**Mental Health**-Sanjna who recently created the Intro to Birding packet is back with an idea to explore Mental Health. I expect, as this is such a large topic to consider, that there will be multiple packets on this subject going out, and to be sure you are included in the conversation, sign up for this first packet. Below Sanjna breaks down her vision for the mental health unit she is offering

*In writing to numerous incarcerated individuals over the course of more than a year now, I have come to realize the toll that the prison system and environment have on prisoners' mental health. While those beyond the prison system may be able to access numerous mental health resources, this is largely not the case for those in the system. As a result, I, along with my partner (Joy, a fellow student and biological sciences major at Cornell) came up with the idea of exploring mental health through a yearlong series of newsletters, especially during these rapidly evolving and emotional times. In doing so, we hope to shed light on the importance of mental health from both biological and psychological standpoints, using the topic as a way to not only encourage dialogue around mental health awareness but also share our passion for biology (by exploring, for example, the connection between mental health and the gut). Our hope is to create a safe space where inmates can express thoughts, share stories and art, ask questions, and learn about biology as it relates to mental health (and current research in this area!) We will not be able to respond to everything that gets sent our way, but please know that we take the time to read each and every response and will reflect on and acknowledge what we can in follow up newsletters. We hope you and your loved ones are safe during these times and look forward to sharing this series with you!*

**Screenwriting-Writing a Film Treatment** -Mathew, like Kylie, volunteered many years ago with PE. Now he is a

professional screenplay writer and educator and he contacted me about assisting with PE. After a discussion of his interests, he volunteered to focus his efforts on helping you turn your stories into screenplays. This first lesson will focus on creating a film treatment. Mathew's description follows...

*This course will introduce core concepts of dramatic storytelling for film and television. In the first section, we will explore the structures and techniques that writers use to analyze and craft film stories. Students will work through exercises to identify these concepts at work in films they're already familiar with.*

*In the second section, students will work on developing an original idea and writing a "film treatment". A treatment is a short document written in prose, like an essay or short story, that a writer uses to pitch a script they'd like to sell. It lays out all the essential characters and events that make up the story. It can also serve as a useful tool for the writer, however, because it allows you to create a "blueprint" for a screenplay, before you take on the challenge of writing a full script.*

**Poetry /ChapBook Club**-Author Elizabeth Wolf has donated **300 copies** of her poetry book **"Did You Know?"** for our next book club. Here is what she has to say.

*This book came together from two directions. Rattle Magazine is a poetry journal that runs an annual chapbook contest. A chapbook is a short collection (generally 25-40 pages of poems) based around a theme. The poems can be different styles but a cohesive theme, underlying question, or story arc is critical. For me, the contest supplied a deadline. It's great to have an idea of what you want to write. But a deadline for submission makes it happen. I attended a local story slam. Story slams are competitive storytelling. There is a theme for each night. Driving home, a friend and I were discussing the next prompt: Tangled Web. I told her, I have a story for that! and gave a rough sketch of my family tale. My friend said, That's what you should write about in your poems. And there it was. The theme for my Rattle chapbook.*

*I had some ideas for memories that illustrated the story. I also wanted to frame it from the perspective of what was going on in the country as I was growing up, in the 60's and 70's. I roughed out an outline of scenes, in chronological order. And then I started writing, in longhand, in a journal my daughter had given me for Christmas. I had the first draft of every poem written in under two weeks. Then I moved to the computer and put it all together.*

*It was too long in the beginning. There is a 36 page maximum for the Rattle competition. So I had to go through and cut poems. In order to stay in the collection, a poem had to say something to the theme, specific to my life or my mother's,*

*and be related in some way to another poem. That page limit really sharpened my focus.*

*I love to write poetry. My weakness has always been titles. I just don't have that knack. The Rattle editor pointed out that, if the titles don't add to the poem, they kind of subtract. He suggested renaming most of the pieces with a date. That not only pumped the context, but made my personal story more accessible to many readers. Or so it seems from the comments and reviews I got on Goodreads.*

If you sign up for this project we will send you a copy of Elizabeth's book and along with it information on how to create a chapbook. For this project you will be asked to write your own chapbook. I am encouraging you to consider "Criminal Justice" to be your theme, but ultimately you chose. Fact or fiction, let your heart and mind converse and express. Right now political leaders are talking about criminal justice reform.. **Your voice on the subject shared through these chapbooks** can offer insight to those on the outside concerned about this pressing issue. People are paying attention. Whether you choose this theme or another your chapbook is a way to tell your story about something important to you. It is an opportunity for poets to refine their craft.

Most chapbooks are around 20-30 pages. Most people write a collection of small short stories or small poems and then structure them into a story. This way, you can focus each story or poem on a specific event or part of your theme and then arrange all of the poems altogether to outline a story. The poems/short stories are often organized chronologically and have some sort of resolution or reflection at the end. If you'd like to read Elizabeth's book and w create your own chapbook then signup for this project. Remember we only have 300 copies. Don't dawdle!

**Computer Science [CS]**-Anna manages the data entry at PE.. She has noticed that many of you are interested in computer science and she is creating a unit to introduce CS to all who want to know more. Below Anna's shares her thoughts with you.

*Hi everyone, the Computer Science Concepts packet provides a basic understanding of some important concepts in computer science. Computer science today is "the study of computation and information, including their principles, their system design, their applications, and their impact on society". It sounds abstract and foreign, but in reality computer science is deeply embedded in the things people do or use commonly, like sending emails or calling someone! This packet tries to show what computer science is and what it's used for. It will introduce the 4 basic pillars of programming and a type of thinking called "computational thinking", as well as more advanced concepts like algorithms. CS is important to today's*

Ellie and Rus by Catherine LaFleur



Art by Franklin Lee

**Theme Writing Project**—The Prisoner Express Project owes its existence to the theme writing program. Since 2004 we have been providing you with a monthly word theme and asking you to **write a true story inspired by the word theme cue**. Everyone who submits a theme will get a packet containing a copy of all themes submitted that month. It was clear from the original participants in the project how reading the writing of other prisoners was helpful in understanding their own feelings. For some it helped you to see you weren't going crazy, and for others that it was healthy and brave to share vulnerable thoughts, that you weren't alone in your perceptions, and that other prisoners, no matter their color, ethnicity, religion or gender, similar thoughts and experiences as you. You, the writers in the theme writing project, have had a profound influence on other prisoners and I thank you for your participation. I cannot share all the writing here as each month's packet is longer than this newsletter. If you want a complete packet take the time to write a story and send it back to us by the deadline listed.. It is a great way to get mail. Below are some themes selected from previous themes packets in 2019 and 2020. I reprint them to give you a sample of what your fellow cell dwellers are sharing. I hope you feel inspired to write and contribute. **Please limit your words theme submissions to 800 words and non-fiction**

I have two sisters, two different kinds actually. My older sisters, Patrice and Paloma, are twins. They are 17 years older than me. I was often mistaken for their baby when I was taken out by one or the other. However, they both left our family to go to college. I only got to see them on holidays or special occasions. Then they began having children of their own. I was six when I was aunted by Patrice. Even though I was the youngest of two brothers and three sisters, I had the experience of growing up as an only child because the others were so much older than me.

Way before my birth, my parents joined a religious cult in the early 1960s. For most of my childhood, we lived in communes around the world. When I turned eight, my parents were assigned to live in Arizona, and I was required to live in the children's dormitory there. It wasn't so bad. I had a friend, Rus, who was my age and another girl, Ellie, six years older than me who had frequently been my babysitter. I didn't have to live in the dorm every day. I was allowed to spend weekends in my parents' house from Friday evening to Monday morning. During the week, I didn't get to see my parents at all, not even if I threw a tantrum. I spent my time cocooned with my group in school and the dormitory.

Rus, Ellie, and I were in the Rachel and Leah house. There were around thirty teens and children in that dormitory. Not huge but a good size. Rus and I were inseparable. We woke up holding hands most mornings and we were break of dawn gigglers. This would wake Ellie every morning because she slept on a floor mat next to us. Ellie took care of us like we were her little chicks, making sure we got up in the morning with a routine: wash, brush, dress, hair braiding, etc. Rus and I usually chose to wear the same color dress, hair ribbons, and shoes. So Ellie had to plan accordingly. Last, we had to fold up our sleeping mats neatly and sweep and mop the floors. There was always an inspection by the dorm mother each morning and if you did not pass, you got no breakfast and extra chores. Ellie kept us and our area very clean, shiny, and neatly braided.

Between the ages of eight and twelve, all of the children were required to attend two hours of school every day beginning at 8:00 a.m. There were no teachers and us children worked at our own pace out of books. The older teenagers would tutor the younger children in the mornings then in the afternoon, they would have their own school time. I stuck like glue to Ellie and Rus. I was pretty shy.

In the afternoons, we had work assignments. Rus and I were usually assigned to the kitchen garden. We took care of weeding and cleaning the rows each day. During harvest, we had two identical small stools we perched on while picking peas, tomatoes, or strawberries and scooting up and down each row. Our voices chattered like magpies while we



practiced our required scripture recitation or multiplication tables. We also sang a lot. The cult had set all the Psalms to music which is why we had that entire book memorized. We would do call and response as we worked along with plenty of giggling.

When I was seventeen, I left the cult. My mother's parents had enough and pretty much paid a bribe to release me. I left everyone whom I had been close to or known. It was wrenching. I lost contact with Ellie and Rus, even though they also left the cult.

When I committed my crime, I was forced to stay at the jail. That turned out to be for three years. My mother rented a house and moved to that city to be close to me. While mom was out shopping one day, she ran into Ellie. Unbeknownst to each of us, we had been living in the same city. After that, every week, Ellie came to see me in jail. Ellie posted all of my details on Facebook which alerted Rus to what had happened to me. Rus started flying in to see me when she was in the States.

I have been in prison for a significant amount of time. Ellie lives in Denver and Rus is an Art Conservator in the Emirates, but my two sisters faithfully come and see me in Miami once a year. I can always count on a visit in the Summer and Winter from each of my sisters.

### **"Sisters of St. Blase" by Leo Cardez**

The Sisters of St. Blase were a mean, old, ugly bunch of witches.

My sister and I grew up in a lower middle class, primarily Hispanic neighborhood on the south-side of Chicago; raised by immigrant Mexican parents; who were devout Catholics. St. Blase was our community Catholic church -- its campus included the large Cathedral, a convent, the priest's home, a K-8 grade school, parking lot, and small park. We attended the Sunday noon (Spanish) mass religiously (pun intended). And when the time came we were expected to attend St. Blase kindergarten in our finely pressed blue and white uniforms. And we did.

My sister and I didn't speak English. We were raised by parents who only spoke Spanish in a Spanish speaking community. The Sisters had little patience with our plight. They would resort to mocking and belittling us in front of the whole class or worse: washing out our mouths with soap when we accidentally said something in Spanish in an effort to be understood. We couldn't understand what was expected of us and often were punished with detention, which meant an hour on our knees in Chapel, or having our hands smacked with a giant ruler by Head Sister Josephine. We endured all of this quietly, we never complained to our parents, but I would often see my sister's eyes well up in tears either on the walk to school or the walk home. I, being two years younger, felt hopeless. It was a miserable experience and ruined school for me. I acted out because I felt stupid and insecure. I stopped

caring about the punishment and accepted it as a badge of honor.

My sister endured three years at St. Blase; I only had to endure one before the doors were closed for lack of funding. I'm sure some of the other children complained and their parents pulled them from the school; eventually dropping attendance below survival. Thank God.

It would take many years for me to fully recover and enjoy school and learning. My sister diligently completed all mandatory education, but would fear and avoid any unnecessary schooling throughout the rest of her life. The Sisters really did a number on us -- I blame them for a lot



*Art by Donald Corpie*

### **"Three Sisters" by Hugh Gossett**

I grew up in a family with four siblings. I was the only brother, teaser and protector of all my sisters. What a ride it has been throughout all these years.

I remember mostly our younger years before we all left the nest striking out on our own. The fishing, camping out or just riding around on country roads with our parents and all of us children piled into the back seat. My sisters would talk of dolls, dresses and whatever a particular girl at school may have done. I would stare out the window reflecting on what monsters might be lurking out there behind the tumbleweeds or mesquite trees. Then one of them would poke and prod me as I was very ticklish and then the rough housing would begin until Daddy would turn around and soundly admonish us to stop.

I taught my sisters how to climb the big locust tree in our backyard. We climbed it so much that all the thorns rubbed off from all our clambering around. They never grew back. Still their favorite game was to chase me down, tackle and tickle

me. We would chase one another around the butane tank, sit and watch doodle bugs scooting around backwards and building their funnel traps in the soft soil. We often went down to the railroad tracks a block from our home and looked through all the rocks and debris deposited by the boxcars and tankers that rumbled by. We would find pop top aluminum lids that had yet to be pressed onto cans. Bands of metal that had come off crates were our most delightful find because we would break it down and then fold them in half and make a very shrill whistle when blown through.

Our most favorite times were time spent with all of the various families at holidays and reunions. Cousins not seen very often, aunts and uncles doting on how big we had grown from the last time they had seen us. Christmas presents and Grandmothers with their excellent homemade apple pies and ice cream.

I have not seen my sisters for some considerable lengths of time. Twelve then five and now fifteen years. Each time we meet it is sort of like meeting a much older version of my sisters as I assume it was for them seeing me again after so many years apart. There are still the hugs and news and new names to learn. But, mostly, there are my three sisters, still there, albeit wishing for the younger years. The memories we relate bring laughter and they bring tears.

There have been disagreements and wrongs done by us to one another. Some to never be forgiven or forgotten. Trust broken with many attempts in words, not action, to apologize. Never should you think only of yourself. Think of the others, especially the ones you love.

I hope one day in the next few years to join again with my three sisters, talk things over and make amends. And once again be able to laugh with and hug and love my three sisters.

They may not know it but they are in my daily prayers, never forgotten and always loved. I would not trade a single one of them for a brother.

### **“My Sisters” by D. Gresham**

This is to all my sisters, living the struggle. I love you all. We are called Girly, Babies, Boys, Gay, Queer, Gender Nonconforming, Lesbians, trans, Intersex, Boogers, Dragons, and many other names. But sisters, in reality, we are just women who are misunderstood. People hate and fear what they don't understand, and well sisters, it's no military secret that men will never understand us. As women, we are the only puzzle that men will never completely decipher. So I'd like to give a round of applause to all the women in the world. No matter what society labels you, please remember that what truly matters is what's embedded in our hearts. Stay strong sisters. Everything we go through only makes us stronger. By the looks of the way things are going, women will soon control the world. So keep your heads up. I love all of you and wish you all to stay blessed and stay safe. Girl power!!

## **FLYING**

### **“Flying High” by Leo Cardez**

Eat the brownie, she said. You'll feel better, she said. What she didn't say was that her famous pot brownies were laced with LSD.

“She” is Kara, my stoner/hippie roommate. She's just trying to help me relax. See, my National Guard unit was recalled, and I'm supposed to board a plane to Fort Hood, Texas for desert training before we deploy for some dusty patch of sand in the cradle of civilization. I just wanted the free tuition, but that was before 9/11. Now, I'm trading my books and beers for an M-16 and bullets. The last thing I think about before I take a bite is why I ever chose Combat Communications Specialist as my MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) – the key word: combat.

The brownies rock my world before I even board the plane. My world shifts into something much slower and brighter. Up until this point, I was mainly a drinker with the occasional puff of weed. I'm thinking today probably isn't the best moment to lose my hallucinogenic virginity.

Somehow, I boarded without incident. I'm holding on to my seat feeling the harsh spikes up and down of a roller coaster.

“Ma'am how much longer will we be in this turbulence?” I ask the pretty stewardess.

“Sir, we haven't left the gate,” she tells me with a skeptically raised eyebrow, “Are you ok?”

No, I'm not ok, I want to say. I'm as high as giraffe pussy.

“Yes ma'am, just peachy, just a nervous flier.”

She shuffles off to help someone secure their seatbelt – leaving me to the cold sweat puddle accumulating in my shoes.

I close my eyes and pray for sleep – it defies me. Colors meld. Sounds become emotions. I feel myself letting go, feeling weightless. BUT I'm not relaxed, quite the contrary. I'm stressed, anxious, and terrified – every nerve in my body is screaming. Hours pass like this until we mercifully land at Dallas International.

I board a service bus to M.E.P.S. (Military Entrance Processing Station) for intake. After they confirm my I.D., they administer a blood and urine test.

“What's this for?” I ask.

“Drugs.” The bored nurse answers without looking away from her files. Uh oh - I think.

The next day I'm on a plane again – not to the Middle East, but back to Miami. My time in the service is over. They call it, “Other Than Honorable” discharge. Not quite as bad as Dishonorable, but definitely not as good as Honorable. I'm upset at myself, at Kara, at the Army. A part of me wanted to see what I was made of, wanted to have those stories. I saw

my team; Lucero, Peltier, and Anderson before I left Dallas – I thought I saw a hint of anger in their eyes.

I don't talk to Kara anymore – I move out the next semester. She was a bad influence. I write to the guys and send them care packages. They're due back in a couple months. They have great stories, I'm sure, and I can't wait to hear them.

Lucero didn't make it, – wrong place, wrong time. It could have been me. Kara may very well have saved my life

### by Joanna Madonna

I should be terrified to fly. It only makes sense considering that I have been plagued by a paralyzing fear of heights my entire life. I mean, it's so bad that I can't watch someone look down from the top of a building in a movie or on T.V. I can't even read about it in a book without feeling like I'm going to fall.

So, naturally you'd think flying would be out of the question for me. But it's not. I don't understand it myself but flying has almost had the opposite effect on me. I feel held. I feel peace. I feel awe and safety. Weird, right?

I'm going to have to give credit to my dad on this one. He owned a gas station in New Rochelle. He worked 6 days a week, went sun-up to sun-down. But on Sundays, his one day off, he would pack my brother and I in the car early in the morning and take us out to the Westchester County Airport. I was little, couldn't have been more than 4 of 5. I don't remember a lot of talking. I just remember a sense of watching and waiting, and our reward was the take off and landing of the planes. I have to believe it was my father's sense of reverence that infected me. This was his Church.

I didn't get it at the time but as I got older I learned my dad's story. He had been a pilot in WWII. He was trained as a bombardier navigator by the age of 20. And he loved to fly. Later in life he could describe with minute detail what the experience was like. The instrument panel. Propellers. The noise. The cold. He couldn't remember if he had eaten breakfast but he could tell you exactly how it felt to "shoot a landing."

I have no qualms about admitting that my dad was my everything growing up. Even through the worst of "the drinking years," I saw him as my hero. And that's why, as I prepared to board a plane for the first time in my life at the age of 19, I shared every detail with him. He prepared me. I was excited, eager- almost breathless. And I had no fear.

This is where it all gets kind of fuzzy, though. Because, by 19, I was a full blown addict. I was taking this trip with 2 of my using buddies. We were headed to the Dominican Republic. I remember (vaguely) lots of beer and weed the night before our flight. We felt so grown! This was some luxurious, jet-setter adventure we were undertaking. Me! This no one from Thornwood, NY- headed to the tropical beaches of the Caribbean!

I don't remember much about that trip other than the blowout arguments between me and my "friends"- (oh, yes, and some bus boy asking me to marry him- I suspect that was more about citizenship than true love, though). It was so intolerable that, after 6 days, my parents bought me a ticket home, a day early, so I could escape from these horrible companions of mine- (seriously? How bad could it have been that I would ask my parents to fork over all that money to fly me home 1 day early?? I wish they were still alive for me to ask them)

I flew back alone. This would be my first "geographic cure." I was stoned, hungover, and depressed. I flew out on a REALLY SMALL plane. This one had propellers. We had a layover in Puerto Rico where I ate something called a chiro. An hour later, I was in the bathroom in the San Juan airport losing all of that poor little chiro (the animal lover in me would never eat goat again).

After a few hours it was announced that we were approaching NY, that we all needed to put out our cigarettes (can you believe that was only 30 years ago???), buckle up, and prepare to land. JFK or LaGuardia, I'm not sure which. But what I remember clear as day was seeing NY for the first time from the air. The skyline. The grid of streets and buildings. The coastline and bridges. NY. I had never had such a sense of rightness- "this is my home. NY. This is mine. It washed over me and reached out even in the midst of my crummy 19 year old drug and alcohol fogged brain. Descending. Wheels down. Approaching the runway with a roar. We bounced one and then were on the ground. The pilot didn't "shoot" a perfect landing (Dad would laugh about that- "hot shot commercial pilots"). But we arrived. It's over, my first adventure. My first grown up vacation. And I will never forget the thought that crept up on me as I prepared to step off that plane. "I can't wait for my next flight

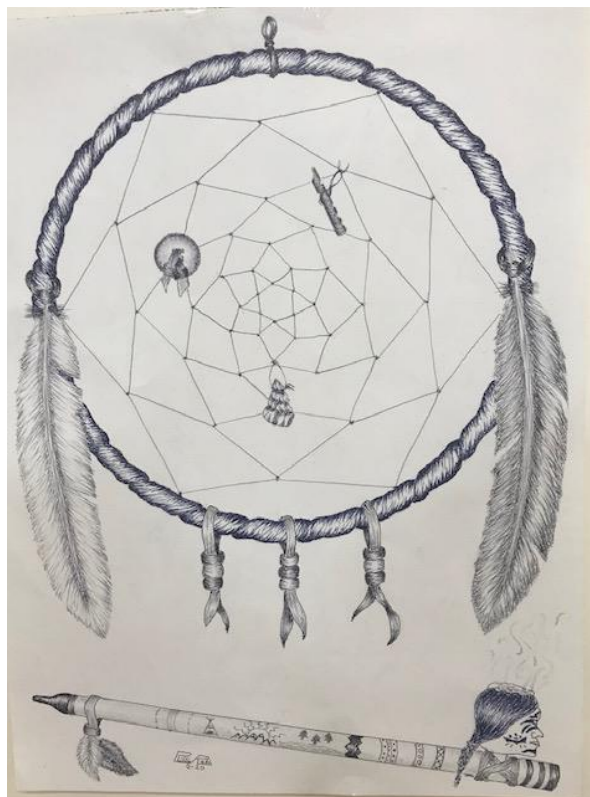
### by James Bauhaus

Flying? I do a lot of it. Most of my flying is off the handle, like an axe head, spinning toward a particular television "expert" who is efficiently spreading a fake version of history that benefits him and his class of elite, hereditary rich super-criminals. For example, this month, PBS had an excellent series titled, "The Dictator's Playbook." Thursday's 10-24-19 episode portrayed much of what we knew of Manuel Noreiga before and during his ascent to become the top cop ruler of Panama. The producers of this video are American, so naturally they left out most of the dirty work of our government. They noted that the route to power is usually through being ruthless cops, military mass murderers and fiendish politicians, but not how they are selected and assisted by our own fiendish politicians. Noreiga, they 'forgot' to include, was selected and assisted by the CIA, whom he helped finance collectives who farmed, manufactured and sold tons of cocaine. Big Daddy Reagan himself used Noreiga's cocaine to start a crack and

prostitution epidemic in America, Europe and Britain to buy weapons for his 'contras' to fight his secret, outlawed war on Nicaragua. These acts are called treason and high crimes everywhere else, but, when you are writing the historical propaganda for American politicians, you customarily omit these truths out of 'patriotism'\*.

I'm going flying again this morning. Trumpy Dumpty is on TV, bragging about how 'he' (his military mass murderers) killed some Big Arabian Cheese that they selected. It sounds like they are calling their corpse "Allie Big Daddy." He probably used to be just another member of the CIA's hired killers, like Noreiga, Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, The Shah of Iran just to name a few in a list too long to remember. Trump, who was not there, proudly bellows that which he knows not: "Big Daddy died like a dog; a coward!" In reality, it will probably eventually leak out that he was murdered, while asleep in his bed, by a bomb blast, lobbed by cowards. At least they don't seem to be parading his corpse around, like a cat playing with a dead mouse as a trophy, yet. I'm sure they will do this. As happened when the Rat Pack killed Bin Laden, there will be at least two of the killers write books, both claiming the glory of killing their sleeping target. I look forward to the day when our glorious military experts are let go on TV and compete for the honor of claiming to have the shot, the fatal bullet into Allie Big Daddy's bomb-blasted bullet riddled, shrapnel-filled corpse. Why? Not because I'm a psychopathic sadist, but because this is when I get to go flying again.

\*Patriotism is where you lie to your own tribe to trick them into believing that their rulers have more, rather than less, integrity and honor than the common, law abiding citizen.



Art by Phillip Rath

by Shawn Ingram

Depression in prison is similar to being stuck in an oversized SUV, in the middle of rush hour traffic, on the hottest day of the summer, with a broken AC and only an 1/8 of a tank of gas left. Completely grounding of all hopes and dreams. Your brain hurts and your heart seems dead but you awake every morning just the same. Rarely anything of significance happens or changes. You are stuck to the ground that even getting up can be difficult.

Reading a novel though, WOW, that can set you clear for an immediate take off down runway 101. No matter if you enjoy fantasy, sci-fi, romance, or murder mysteries, you can soar as free as an eagle on the updrafts of beautiful blue sky over the mountains. Make your choice; do you want to ride on the back of a dragon, fly an alien spaceship, maybe a long adventure on the back of the doggish luck-dragon or just a private jet to the tropics? Be free for hours on end. Send your mind beyond the chains, cuffs, fences, and gangs.

Just be careful to keep an eye out for turbulence of thoughts about family, loved ones, and others on the outside that you miss so much. Be healthy and mentally free for them and yourself. Keep to the clear blue skies over mountains or above the hot white sand of the beaches.

Love the time you have to read and explore stories you never would have read otherwise. Love yourself and keep flying high.

## MY BODY

by Mark Diagre

Despite being betrayed by it over and over and over again throughout my life, I am both amazed and in love with my body. I am tall 6' 5", and relatively thin, 220lbs and I have been so my entire life. There was a time in puberty when I was some 6' 2" and weighed 100lbs. I am told that I looked like a bag of bones in a wetsuit. I worked very hard to gain weight and did so, gaining 50lbs in a little less than a year, and I was still skinny!

As a teenager, my body further betrayed me by responding to the molestation that I was being subjected to. No matter how much my brain told me "this is wrong," my body craved the touch and release that ensued. The close contact and the overt 'physical-ness' of the close-ness over those seven plus years. I was confused, to say the least.

More recently, I have been dealing with my body betraying me in new and interesting ways. Pain from old injuries that is resurfacing, arthritis, pinched nerves and general achiness. I have also had to deal with a bout of cancer. Caught early and removed, but scary still.

At 53, I am just now becoming comfortable with what my body looks like. I hated the fact that I have had long and thin arms and legs most of my life. It was only in the last five to



ten years that I have been able to look in the mirror and like the person that I see, some of that is due to the work that I've done about my past. And some is due to accepting that I will never be 5' 10" and muscular.

There is a history to be read in and on my body. I have many, many scars and healed breaks that show my life in a tapestry of forgotten pain. I also have two tattoos. One a mistake, gotten in my 20's and regretted almost ever since. The other I've had for most of the last ten years, a Buddha on the back of my lower right leg. That one I do not (and most likely will never) regret. Buddha is a daily reminder of that untouchable, piece of perfection that I and everyone else on the planet has, the part of us that is "perfect," no matter what.

### **Sexy Nerd Body by Jevon Jackson**

My body has been pinned behind walls, gates and razor-wire electric fences for the past 26 years. My body was just a young growing teenage body, at 16, when I first came in. Now the young guys call out "Hey, Old School!" towards my body, and my body acknowledges and reluctantly answers back.

I remember when my body felt invincible, when every testosterone covered thing in my five-foot nine-inch frame convinced me to believe that I could win a jungle fight against a lion and chase down a quarter-horse at full speed. Now I am intimately intertwined with the cold, inevitable mortality of my body. A few years ago, after collapsing during standing-count like a falling timbered tree, crashing my face (chin) into the floor, unconscious, and awakening, dazed and bloodied, in the crowded emergency room, shackled to the bed, needing seven chin-stitches and a three-day hospital stay to monitor the pneumonia I didn't know I had, I am now fully aware of the fragile, odd, breakability, of my body.

My body is caught in this sort of physiological dissonance where the gray flecks peppered in my beard usher me onto the elders, yet when I am clean-shaven my old high school friends react "Oh my gawd, you still look the same!" Hypothyroidism, an autoimmune disorder, has drastically slowed my metabolism, and if I don't eat properly I feel slow and sluggish, yet my body doesn't desire much to eat as in years prior.

My body needs cappuccino-flavored coffee to kick its engine start in the A.M. My body prays for silence and solitude, but settles for a cellmate or a neighbor that doesn't cause anxiety and stress chemicals to flood throughout the blood veins. Stress stretches wide inside the environment, so my body listens to the timeless slow grooves of Sade, to recline a few precious moments in God's divine graciousness.

The untattooed light brown skin of my shea butter body craves to be kissed by the bliss-worthy body of a woman's warm supple skin. My bold poetic body awaits the comfort and connection of her shy, neurotic, intelligent body to

hold, protect and praise. My sexy nerd body seeks out its smooth eccentric match.

My 42-year old convicted body is neither dangerous nor a hazard to the most gentle parts of society. Yellow cabbage butterflies have landed safely on the epidermis of my skin and taught me the proper gossamer of things, which I long for.

Right now my body is full with cinnamon raisin bagels and Rumi poems and scattered, disconnected ideas about Writing. Tonight, it will likely pre-dream of Freedom and envision the day when it will walk between the opened gates and rightfully join the sun in the unencumbered industry of unbending luminescence.



*Art by Steve Fegan*

### **My Body - My Temple by Vicki Hicks**

My story goes back to Easter 2004. After church my family packed lunch and went out to the ranch to do some cleanup and horseback riding. The horse of choice that day was Sugar Babe, a flea bitten appaloosa. I saddled her up and took her for a quick spin to warm her up for the kids. My husband was pressure washing the shed at the same time. I was in great shape wearing a size 4 weighing about 125 pounds. I mounted Sugar Babe about the time the pressure washer surged and off to the races we went. Sugar Babe thought she was in the Kentucky Derby. I was holding on for dear life until she got to her favorite spot in the pasture. The spot was half way down the property line. When she decided

she had enough she reared up and spun on her rear hooves turning her rear end end throwing me into the barbed wire fence. I went flying one way and she went the other. I got myself up. My glasses were nowhere to be found. I began walking and tried to raise my right arm only to find that it was not moving at all. I passed out. My husband picked me up and got me to the hospital where it was discovered that my arm was broken clean in half. I tell you that because the pain was so great that I went into a deep depression afraid to leave the house for fear someone would bump into me. The doctor did a bad surgery and I had to have three subsequent surgeries. 10 years later I realized that through my depression and many hours of therapy I let my body go. I now weighed 181 pounds. Once very active now I stayed in the house and ate. In 2014 I decided to do something to help myself. I joined the biggest loser at the local YMCA. A 12 week program of not only exercise but a total lifestyle change, Monday, Wednesday, Friday 5:00am workouts, label reading, swimming, Tuesday and Thursday nights kickboxing. Saturday morning 5K's. All things I said I would never be able to do. After the 12 week session I came in third place losing 30 pounds and many inches. I went from a size 18 to a size 9. I wasn't about to stop there. I signed up for bootcamp at the same YMCA and continued running and working out until I was arrested. I weighed 138 pounds in county and came to prison at 147 pounds. I am now back at running and watching what I eat and just weighed in at 132 pounds. I tell you this story because just when you think there is no hope for your body, think again. No matter if you are in the free world or in prison your body is your temple and you need to take care of your body. It is the only one you will find that will be less depressed if you release the endorphins that come with exercising and running.

#### **by Mr. Dominique Lavance Givens**

From the microscopic amoeba to the twisting chain of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), I'm built up of the highest mathematics-scientific calculators can't even begin to compute it. My atoms, neutrons, and protons, like the sun, moon, and earth, are an organized physical system-heavenly bodies, and bodies in general are subjected to mathematical laws. My genes, chromosomes, and my genome, tell the story that has gone untold - I am who I am. When I'm in need of somebody, I make a pilgrimage to the mirror where I'm always overcome with a perfect peace and understanding in the presence of supreme divine perfection - let's not forget who I'm made in the image of. Within my fingerprints lies the same spirals also seen in the ocean waves - not to mention in the formation of galaxies. My body and spirit represent and resonate with the power of God - the sun, moon, and stars are my siblings. So even while peering through a telescope at the family, I can never feel

small - my body is the universe's way of becoming conscious of itself. PEACE.

## **FINDING INSPIRATION**

### **by Lance Porter**

Finding inspiration is like finding my car keys. I will search high and low. Just when I think I know where I left them they elude me again. When I'm ready to give up I look across the room and there they are right in front of me.

### **Finding Inspiration by Tiffany San**

There will be days. Be calm. Loosen your grip, opening each palm slowly now. Let go. Be confident. Know that now is only a moment, and that if today is as bad as it gets, understand that by tomorrow, today will have ended. Be gracious. Accept each extended hand offered to pull you back from somewhere you cannot escape. Be diligent. Scrape the gray sky clean. Realize every dark cloud is a smoke screen meant to blind us from the truth, and the truth is, whether we see them or not - the sun and moon are still there and always there is light.

Be forthright. Despite your instinct to say, "it's alright, I'm okay" - be honest. Say how you feel without fear or guilt, without remorse or complexity. Be lucid in your explanation, be sterling in your opposition. If you think for one second no one knows what you've been going through; be accepting of the fact that you are wrong, that the long drawn and heavy breaths of despair have at times been felt by everyone - that pain is part of the human condition and that alone makes you a legion.

We hungry underdogs, we risers with dawn, we dismissers of odds, we blessers of one - we will station ourselves to the calm. We will hold ourselves to the steady, be ready, player one. Life is going to come at you armed with hard times and tough choices, your voice is your weapon, your thoughts ammunition - there are no free extra men, be aware that as the instant now passes, it exists now as then. So be a mirror reflecting yourself back, and remembering the times when you thought all of this was too hard and that you'd never make it through.

Remember the times you could have pressed quit - but you hit continue. Be forgiving. Living with the burden of anger, is not living. Giving your focus to wrath will leave your entire self absent of what you need. Love and hate are beasts and the one that grows is the one you feed. Be persistent. Be the weed growing through the cracks in the cement, beautiful - because it doesn't know it's supposed to grow there. Be resolute. Declare what you accept as true in a way that envisions the resolve with which you accept it.

If you are having a good day, be considerate. A simple smile could be the first-aid kit that someone has been

looking for. If you believe with absolute honesty that you are doing everything you can - do more.

There will be bad days, times when the world weighs on you for so long it leaves you looking for an easy way out. There will be moments when the drought of joy seems unending. Instances spent, pretending that everything is alright when it clearly is not, check your blind spot. See that love is still there, be patient. Every nightmare has a beginning, but every bad day has an end. Ignore what others have called you. I am calling you friend. Make us comprehend the urgency of your crisis. Silence left to its own devices, breed's silence.

So speak and be heard. One word after the next, express yourself and put your life into context - if you find that no one is listening, be loud. Make noise. Stand in poise and be open. Hope in these situations is not enough, and you will need someone to lean on. In the unlikely event that you have no one, look again. Everyone is blessed with the ability to listen. The deaf will hear you with their eyes. The blind will see you with their hands. Let your heart fill their newsstands, let them read all about it. Admit to the bad days, the impossible nights. Listen to the insights of those who have been there, but have come back. They'll tell you; you can stack misery, you can pack despair, you can even wear your sorrow - but come tomorrow you must change your clothes.

Everyone knows pain. We are not meant to carry it forever. We were never meant to hold it so closely, so be certain in the belief that what pain belongs to now will belong soon to then. When someone asks you how was your day, realize that for some of us - it's the only way we know how to say, "Be calm. Loosen your grip, opening each palm, slowly now - let go."



Art by Ariel Martinez

by Thomas Black

What a coincidence, while seeking inspiration to write about my lack of inspiration, I decided to dig out my P.E. Summer Newsletter and see if it would perhaps provide a spark. To my surprise, in Upcoming Theme Topics was Finding Inspiration. I had found the jumpstart I needed.

Let me further explain. For a considerable time I've wanted to write about how this "system has affected me." Several times I've wanted to pick up a pen and say how I felt, but I just couldn't bring myself to begin.

Then I realized six years of this existence has taken my inspiration little by little. I have so many ideas I'd like to express, things worthy of being said! Good ideas, ways to improve this system. Things that could improve lives and help, really help! But I'm to a point where I feel, what's the use? No one will listen to me anyway. And so I write nothing, feeling depleted and defeated about my lack of motivation. It seems like there's no reason to make an effort to say what I wish to say.

I loathe to think this way! My thinking tells me, each day I sit idle, people are lost who could be saved. And because of my inactivity, many lives are being squandered, and I'm responsible. It's a heavy burden to carry.

## I ADMIRE

### Me, Myself and I by Leo Cardez

I admire... myself. Don't think me too arrogant, but if you would have known me 10 years ago you would have thought two things: 1) what a douchebag 2) he'll never change. But, here I am today, 5 years into an 18 year sentence: thriving, in arguably the best physical, intellectual, spiritual and moral condition of my life.

Prison was a full immersion that shook me out of my internal narrative. It pushed me to my mental limit making me feel utterly vulnerable: dislocated, isolated, and challenged in every way. I had no way of knowing that behind these cold hard bars and walls I would embark on a quest of self-discovery and inner recalibration, that this experience would be my life's most intense inner journey and catalyst to creating real change.

Is it too late to start over again? To sort it out and get it right? Theoretically, yes, we can start again, BUT it's going to take a superhuman effort. The reasons are too various, ranging from nature to nurture to cover here, but yes, we can shift in the middle of the game, recalibrate the balance between who we are and who we want to become. Everything around us and everything in us will pull us towards the safety of the harbor of the familiar - of who we were, what we know.

Change takes fierce motivation, patience, and repetition. The science of it almost guarantees most of us will fail. Then again, some of us won't. The reality is there are countless inmates out there challenging the very nature of their

being, constantly changing themselves for the better, and reaching all new levels of success.

As inmates we HAVE to believe in the possibility of redemption, otherwise we might as well be sunk in a barrel at the bottom of the ocean. It's a despair familiar to anyone who has ever felt helpless and hopeless; to be trapped and bound with no options, there is nothing worse.

There is still hope. Although we are capable of the worst, we are also capable of the best. We can rise above ourselves, choose what is good, and make a new start. We can take an honest look at ourselves and start on a new path of freedom from our old ways. Nothing can totally overrun our desire for what is good, true, and beautiful, or our ability to respond to God's grace at work in our lives. All people throughout the world are called to live with the dignity that is theirs -- no one and nothing can take this from us.

As for me: I'm taking self-help classes (more importantly, I'm taking them to heart), started meditating and practicing yoga, embraced my Higher Power, attend AA and SA meetings, changed my diet and exercise habits, sought out therapy, challenged myself intellectually, and practice kindness and patience every chance I get. Am I perfect? Hell, NO! I will never be a finished product. I am a flawed human being, but one who has made the commitment to self-improvement. I was once consumed by fear, shame, and loneliness. But, I have shed that shell. Today, I am merely a simple man trying to live his best life... and that's enough

### by Catherine Lafleur

My grandfather, Orin Kirkpatrick Pressley, was six foot five with green eyes and red hair. He was a man given to few words. I never heard him curse or yell. He would say "Great Day in the Morning" or "Put your shoes on, Lucy, we're coming to the city." His people were of Scottish stock hailing from North Carolina. At Clemson University, he distinguished himself by becoming the first All-American in 1929. He was a leader both on and off the football field. One of my favorite stories about him is this: in an away game, he decided to buy a banana split, but the other team members couldn't afford this treat. O.K. bought one banana split and twelve spoons.

He served honorably in the Pacific Theater during World War II as a United States Marine. An officer and a gentleman, he rose to the rank of Brigadier General. Men under him were not allowed to serve without stating a faith preference. My grandfather firmly believed that you must serve a cause and purpose beyond yourself. It didn't matter what you just, just that you did have a belief. After the war, the general served as a diplomat to China and Asia before finally retiring in the 1950's.

Grandfather was always generous with his time. I and my cousins looked up--way up--to him. He was never too busy for us. Mr. O.K. had a hobby farm, a pecan orchard, and ran a little store/gas station out of Route 9 in Merivaux, South

Carolina. He demanded my parents send me to spend summers with him. What could they do? You do not say no to the General. Because of this, I had a vacation each year from the commune where my family lived.

Mr. Jack, Mr. Homer, and Mr. Titus helped my grandfather run the farm. My cousins and I loved our chores taking care of the chickens, goats, several cows, and Servant, a mule of indeterminate age. One chore was to deliver fresh milk and small groceries to our elderly cousins living close by. Beatrice, Anne, and I would load up a small cart, attach the goats to the traces and be off to walk four miles up and down Merivaux Road. Mr. O.K. also kept a Tennessee-Walker named Soldier and three ponies Private, Sarge, and Boots. We all learned to ride and followed old country roads during the summer.

My grandfather had the gift of finding things. Mr. O.K. could dowse for water and would take us around with a forked stick or a plumb line to teach us how to do it. The way my grandfather explained it, you just close your eyes, if water is near it's like a magnetic pull. Not mystical at all mind you because he would have no truck with that sort of folderol. So if you ever need to find some underground water, my cousins and I are for hire.

Grandfather would take us to the mountains of North Carolina. We would camp. He tried to teach us field craft and a few Marine tricks but all his grandchildren were girly girls, the successes were limited. I think he was just happy we could make a fire and roast hotdogs. He could walk anywhere in the countryside and come back with treasure. We would all be walking along on a trail or just through a meadow, grandfather would stop, tilt his head to the side and veer off to the side a bit. Voila, there would appear arrowheads and pieces of pottery, sometimes coins, rings, and even bullets from the Civil War. He'd throw whatever he found in a set of boxes kept under the stairs. There was a different one for each category. When he passed away there were many, many items. Some of them lie at my uncle's house professionally mounted and set in display boxes as curiosities.

During the winter holidays, my parents were required to obey another demand for my appearance. Mr. O.K. was not one for shopping. Instead he would tie hundred dollar bills to the tree with the name of each grandchild on it. Then my cousins and I would busily paw over the tree shrieking when we found the money. The parents were all mortified but what can you say to the General?

My favorite photo is one of me and my girl cousins snuggled with him in his great chair before the fire while he reads to us from his favorite story, The Gift of the Magi, by O. Henry. I'm not saying he was perfect. He had many failings as a father and husband. But to me and my cousins he was a larger-than-life hero and the best grandfather ever. Because of him I've been spoiled for life.



## **“What I admire” by Steven Arthur**

I admire the courage to do what is right, when doing wrong is so much easier. I admire the tenacity of a flower that grows up through a crack in the asphalt. I admire women who give birth to new generations despite the personal intimate pain they must endure. I admire brilliance that is used to build up others and not belittle. I admire subjective beauty. I admire humanity's differences, which serve to make life interesting. I admire our men and women of the armed forces. I admire funny names, funny places, and smiles that have no reason. I admire you, the reader, who gives life and audience to my words.

## **ARGUMENTS**

**by Cesar Hernandez**

Think back to the last time someone criticized you. Did you start an argument? Perhaps it came from a family member, coworker, or friend. Perhaps it was totally unexpected and stung you bitterly. Perhaps even your reaction was unexpected in its harshness, pain, or grief.

We understand that we are not perfect. The criticism you received may have been accurate, and even if it was inaccurate, you can grow from the experience.

If you have had difficulty accepting criticism, ponder how you will react to such words in the future. People can use criticism or praise to mold you, but your attitudes toward both must be healthy.

When you are criticized, for the moment disregard whether it is valid. Disregard the temperament or tone of the critic. Instead, prepare yourself by thinking, could this be true? Then respond in a most disarming fashion; “Thank you very much. I appreciate what you’ve said, and I’ll consider it. Do you have any other suggestions on how I can improve?”

When you meet criticism with humility, you reveal your teachability. You won’t need to change every time, but occasionally, you will receive valid criticism. A humble heart and receptive spirit can transform a potentially ugly, abrasive moment into lasting polish.

## **Civil Discourse isn’t Dead... It’s Just Serving Time by Matt Ellington**

With this year being an election year, it seems like it’s almost impossible nowadays to be able to turn on a TV or radio without hearing words that divide a nation. Hell, well-meaning comments seem to spark contentious debates and heated spats full of personal insults and animosity. Sometimes, it’s easy to wonder if civil discourse isn’t truly dead.

Prison is supposed to have rules about stuff like this. You don’t talk to people about politics, religion, or race unless

you want to fight, the old-timers will tell you. Like most rules in prison, I’ve learned, everyone seems to break these. What truly surprises me is not merely the lack of physical altercations that result from this (though, undoubtedly, people do fight over lesser things), but also how often these kinds of conversations can help some see the similarities between themselves and others -- people who find common ground in their values and beliefs, even though they look different at first glance.

I’m reminded of a specific conversation I had with a person several months ago that turned out way differently than I thought it would. We’re not only from very different backgrounds (he’s a middle-aged, working class, white guy, and I’m a black, 29 year old college kid raised in the ‘hood), but our views on policy are markedly different. We’re watching the news one morning when a story comes on about the impeachment of President Trump. Now, I’m not gonna tell you my views because they’re not important to the story, but needless to say I was very adamant about putting them out there on this particular day. Maybe it was the coffee flowing through both of us, I don’t know, but me and this guy got into a super heated argument about this mess. One person starts to question the other’s ability to perform basic cognitive function, the other seems ready to dismiss this man as anything but one. It’s almost a knock-down, drag-out bout of verbal fisticuffs, and at one point even seems like it’ll devolve into a physical one as well.

Suddenly, in the midst of this exchange, this guy says something that makes me stop and regroup. I realize that one of the points we’ve been arguing on for like 20 minutes is something we actually both strongly agree on. When I point this out to him, he seems as surprised as I am -- the storm quickly abates. We go from there to a parallel conversation on everything from our shared sense of right and wrong to what personal responsibility means to each of us (turns out, we had a similar outlook on that, too).

In the end, we came away from this episode having gained a sense of respect for each other. Maybe our politics are different, but maybe that also doesn’t mean so much. My advice for all of you, locked up or not, next time you wind up in a similar situation: keep your eyes peeled for the things you share instead of the things you don’t. My guess is you’ll be surprised at what you see. I know I was

**by Lisa Frye**

Man, what a word, who can argue with arguments? My ex can, that’s who. Anything and everything you tell him does not exist, isn’t real, is untrue, or is your fault. I once told him he is the master debater and should work as the President’s Advocate because he could win every debate and get paid top dollar for it.

The arguments we have been through together have left lasting scars on my heart, mind, soul, and spirit. Let’s just say the years have ground me down with words. Words of

judgement, criticism, hatred, and blame. But, he would argue and say it didn't happen or it was all done in the name of love. Arguments rob you of integrity, honesty, kindness, and love, because one always feels right, so the other must be wrong no matter what the cost. Heartache, heartbreak, lies, shame, blame, and unforgiveness. These arguments take their toll, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and mentally. Sometimes it may be best to just agree to disagree. Being "right" isn't worth the cost to someone else's soul to me. You have the right to be you and I'm Freda Bee Me.

### **"Freedom" by Charles Higgen**

Arguments can be draining, harassing, and annoying all at the same time. Just as well sometimes those very same arguments can be harmful, dangerous, or even deadly at times, no matter where you are. Especially if you find yourself adverse to someone with a small mind that can not escape the boundaries that they limit themselves with.

How so? Impatience maybe. Derogatory remarks. Close minded apprehension. Whatever the case may be, the glass remains half empty, things are always half done, and nothing ever works out. Self limitations that constantly sound like a concoction for the old adage of "misery loves company." If they're miserable, why not make you miserable too.

I used to argue a lot as well, I'm no different than anyone else. Mostly over sports, but anything that I felt I was right on, even if there was no valid way to prove it right then and there. Then, I read something in a book that I have carried with me ever since, and have utilized regularly. I am grateful for it. I'll share it with you, because it may help you as much as it has helped me.

"Do you want to be right, or do you want to be free?" What a great question to ponder. Free how? Free of the hassle? Free of the stress? Free of the angst? Free of any misunderstandings? Free of the negative vibes posed by those who are just itching to argue? Freedom from shackles of bondage that have too often held most of us back! I wasn't aware that a prison of the mind even existed.

But what about them being proved wrong, so they can know they're walking afoul of themselves and learn better? What does it matter? Be free of their ego as well as your own. It took me a little longer after I read that to realize that people's choices are their own. Right or wrong. Now I choose freedom over being right or the bondage of ignorance. If they're wrong, that is their bondage... not mine. And if they're right, so what? It doesn't matter because I'm free.

If you enjoyed what you just read, then send in an entry.. Writing is a handy and available tool you have for self-exploration. This life has purpose, and your experience and your reflection on the experience is certainly part of your purpose. Don't let your present situation take you away from a primary function of your humanity. We are not about judging your writing skill, but all about opening you up to this powerful tool of discovery.

### Upcoming Theme Writing Cues

<b>Rescued</b>	<b>due 10/1/20</b>
<b>Running</b>	<b>due 11/1/20</b>
<b>Prisoners Lives Matter</b>	<b>due 12/1/20</b>
<b>The Morning After</b>	<b>due 1/1/21</b>
<b>Never Again</b>	<b>due 2/1/20</b>
<b>Neighbors</b>	<b>due 3/1/20</b>
<b>Distant Family</b>	<b>due 4/1/20</b>
<b>Twist of Fate</b>	<b>due 5/1/20</b>

**Picture Themes-** A while back we realized that for some people word cues did not spark their creativity. We have always known that a picture is worth 1000 words, so we started a monthly picture theme project. It is the same as the word theme project, but **these stories do not have to be true. You can write about whatever response you have to the image. Truth or Fantasy are both allowed.** Though a picture is worth a 1000 words we ask you to limit your story to 800.



Due 10/1/20



Due 11/1/20



Due 12/1/20



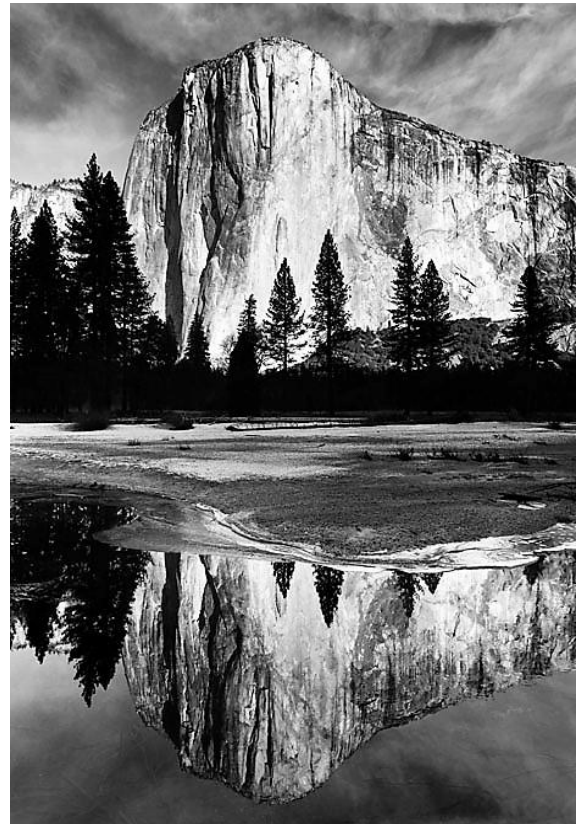
Due 1/1/21



Due 2/1/20



Due 3/1/20



Due 4/1/20

Here are some selected picture writings from the last cycle. Want to see more? You know what to do!



### **“Just Thinking” by Seth Elskan**

Ved had been stupid and left his apps running while he started thinking about his next voting cycle. Of course his opinions slipped, and he allowed his mind to wander, and next thing he knew LikeThink had updated his public profile before he could wall off his thoughts as private.

There it was: “^VedWillBearIt888 thinks we ought to have more than two political candidates - ‘free elections, where we can vote for whoever we want.’ [Like] [Block] [Report]”

This naturally solicited about 4,000 blocks, 2,000 reports, and virtually all his contacts just abandoned any social link to him. His prestige score plummeted almost instantly, and now he was frantically trying to delete the post and undo the hit to his reputation by filing a bug report, but it was too late now. He knew this.

Something bit him on the cheek and at the same instant, a loud pop sounded a foot or two from his face on the wall. After a moment’s bewilderment, he realized something had shattered some of the stucco of the wall when it impacted there. Something had been thrown at him! From the window two stories up, he spotted a kid in a green hoodie who gave him the finger and spit toward him. A bottle was spinning to rest on the sidewalk at his feet.

Ved ran. Two streets over he spotted a ThotPol team, and he knew they were after him. He tried to flee more inconspicuously. “Run casual,” he thought of himself.

PING! chimed his wearable, and a little orange pip in his upper left visual field notified him of yet another LikeThink posting. He still hadn’t disabled the app, and he was too panicked to focus on Privacy mode.

“^VedWillBearIt888 thinks Damn! ThotPol! Run casual.”

PING! “^VedWillBearIt888 thinks <@#-Family Mode Active-#@> Shut up, LikeThink! Off! Um...okay, concentrate.”

Ved paused to breathe and focus. Taking a few seconds, he shut down all social apps, disabled SafeWhere to avoid public tracking (a bit pointless, as ThotPol didn’t need privs\* to locate him, but at least he might avoid more Doxbrats\*\* throwing trash at him), and altered his fabric coloration to try and blend in when he found a crowd. He headed north, thinking to make for a public gathering.

As he came out of a narrow alley onto a backstreet, he ran smack into two ThotPol trackers. The creepy kid-sized prototypes they’d been using lately. This pair (always pairs for tracking) looked as if they’d been at some kind of dance recital or gymnastics thing, but the whip chain cable was serious business.

### **“Street Performers” by Daniel Huffman Jr.**

Two street performers stand in, wait for the next go  
For they have a story to show  
Nameless, faceless, speechless, yet full of emotion  
Every movement planned and practised with such devotion  
“Breaking The Chains” is the name of the performance  
It’s a reminder of oppression and a people’s torments  
Passersby toss coins at their feet  
They perform in the cold of winter all the way to the summer’s heat  
Some people may think it all a bit strange  
But they will continue to perform until there is a change  
So take a lesson from the street performers if you can  
There is only one race of woman or man  
We are all human, just some have a better tan

**by Nate A. Lindell**

This is a strange pic. I wonder If some psychology majors chose it so they could study our responses, because our responses will say a lot about the subconscious axes we’re grinding.

Many will fail to notice that the kids aren’t shackled but are holding the chains (As many hold onto beliefs that drag down their growth/prosperity); they won’t realize, from the unnatural/irrational setting that the kids are models, assuming that the kids are post-slavery collateral damage of racism. There will be at least three essays on slavery ... none offering constructive solutions ... holding those chains.

Rather than racism and slavery, I ask you to consider that in general the chains we’re taught to hold and the blinders we’re trained to wear since we’re born.

I could’ve written a story about this, and maybe I will (Sometimes a lesson is best taught indirectly through a story



which allows surlier pupils to come to their own conclusions.) But being busy, y'all being adults, consider these examples of chains and blinders we're taught to do as children: Santa Claus-generally, a pleasant lie, a lie that teaches us to play along with lies because everyone else is doing so.

"It's just the way it is." The excuse for endless social injustices, including prisons and post-slavery trauma-but that's not "just the way it is". It's just the way we've let it be because we let it be so. (Groups like France's yellow vests have gotten off their asses to make it be some other way, as their ancestors did on the first Bastille Day). Of course there are religious, gender, and many other chains and binders we're taught to handicap ourselves with, which have become so normal that we fail to realize that they are chains and binders.

Franz Kafka's bizarre story "Metamorphosis" is most commonly interpreted as sending the message the creator of this picture intends to send: we trap ourselves in unnatural, handicapped roles in modern society. (Y'all should read Kafka's other story, "In the Penal Colony"!)

Ironically, one chain that I held-that it's unmasculine for a man to master poetry or literature-held me back from learning about Kafka until I was in my 30s! What makes that chain doubly ironic is that, as I learned from studying the origins of English poetry and great writers like Cervantes, Edmond Rostand and Alexander Dumas. Those who built the foundations for our great Western literature were not effeminate, not weak. In fact, as exemplified in the classic, "Cyrano De Bergerac", many warriors were also poets, from the notorious Celts all into Medieval Europe and, exemplified by Ernest Hemingway, modern America.

Yet somehow-particularly in rural white America, even in the largely Celtic Blue Ridge/Appalachian areas, despite the ancient Celts prizing their poets-the false idea that being a wordsmith is a sign of weakness has taken root. Now, with texting and tweeting further crucifying our language, with technology so blinding/distracting us, I doubt many will care to sharpen their verbal swords ... which is fine by me, 'cause I'm gonna impress all the girls while the tongue tied many hold their chains.



### **"Girl Looking Through the Window" by Lance Porter**

Sometimes the world becomes too much and we have to take a time-out. Sit back, let the deadlines fade, and just watch the world grind on. This is the time to reflect on the important things in life, maybe think about those people who have been in our lives that mattered to us the most.

In this world of constant connections to social media, we need to find this time to connect to ourselves. If more people did this, I believe there would be less impulsive decisions that tend to hurt us all.

So stretch out and maybe make some pictures from the clouds like many of us did as kids. We'll be better for it.

### **"Girl Looking Through Window" by William Swiderski**

When I see this picture I think of my daughter whom I haven't heard from in quite a while. When she was writing and we were in touch, she told me she would often just sit and think back to the times we shared together, which I often do myself. I like to think that at times, even though we are not in touch, she still does that and sometimes when I'm really hurting and thinking of her or other family and friends, I like the idea that maybe at that exact moment wherever they are they might be sitting and thinking of me, too.

That type of connection keeps me going during the hard lonely times and I think the memories are some of the most important things we have and the things maybe we should treasure the most.

### **"The Box I Come In" by David Wilks**

I'm sitting here looking out over the world I was once part of and might once again join. There only remains a thin piece of glass between us. I am an "untouchable". If I join the world again, for the rest of my life, I'll have to yell out "unclean, unclean", to warn everyone I'm approaching. The glass keeps

my infection from contaminating the world. It also prevents the world from harming me.

How magnificent it is to look out over the world. The wonders of life that are just outside my box. People in love. Families going through their ever-changing states. The “normalcy” of business, shopping, and dining. Yet, here I sit in my box yelling, “unclean.”

To stay in this box has its attractive points. There are others here that would also be required to yell out “unclean”. Like modern-day lepers, there are risks and requirements to cross the glass. Here in this box, we see each other differently. We see that we are humans that love and want to be loved. Yes, our choices caused us to participate in the world’s biggest game of time-out. Here in this box, we don’t have to face the judgment of those in the world past the glass.

But to step out ... oh to step out of this box and wear clothes of my choosing. To smell the smells and wonders of life, to light a candle and drive a car. I would yell out “unclean” all the louder to lay under a tree in the grass watching the stars twinkle. I would leave this box behind with all the other modern-day lepers that are afraid of the world out there to dance at some type of “normalcy”, and to express love from a sincere heart.

I know I’ve put myself in this box. Inside this box, I’ve learned I’m frail. My past behavior was like a violent storm meant to water but instead destroyed those I loved.

This box has taught me self-control, love, humanity. I don’t know that I would’ve learned this anywhere else. Patience, kindness, humility. This is the box I come in. Yes, I’m “unclean”. So are many on the other side of this glass. The only difference is my sickness has been exposed and treated while many of theirs stay hidden. However, if they would take the chance to learn who I am, they may want to step on my side of the glass and be friends.



### **“Tiny Feet” by Eliseo German**

In that very instant, nothing else mattered. Time seemed to stop as I held and carried this precious mini-me with love and protection. The existence of that exact moment  
Prisoner Express

consumed my heart with the warmest elation I had ever felt. It was the first time that my eyes had set on this blessed creation. As I marveled him from his head to his tender little wiggling toes, I knew then that my life had just changed.

Stuck in a reverie, I became aware of how those tiny feet would first require my guidance before they would begin taking their unlimited steps into the future. Soon enough, he would be taking baby steps with a graceful balance. He would then learn to walk into the unknown of whatever interest lies ahead. As the years would pass, he would be using these feet to take him to places like school, or work. Perhaps he would be gifted with agility and speed, applying these skills into sports. How many miles would they travel in their lifetime? Do we ever know?

“But until all that even begins, I will value and cherish this very moment here”, I whispered. I held those tiny feet within the safety of my cupped hands for just a second longer...Because I knew that one day, they would begin their journey into the awaiting world -- leaving imprints on the way.

### **“Please Stop Growing” by Eliezer Almanzar**

When I left she was 6 and he was 4 and every time I close my eyes to think about them they’re the same age. They’ve not grown an inch in my head. While being here feels like time has stopped and your life is on pause, it’s also hard to accept that life outside of these razor-wired topped fences has moved. Just as years have gone by here, they’ve gone by out there.

They’re growing, but I can’t tell. My memories are from four years ago. She’s already talking about an iPhone and he learned to play Fortnite on PS4 and joined a baseball team. When did all this happen? Would you please stop growing?

It seems like a long time ago when the only place she could fall asleep was my chest, when he wanted to play with legos and PlayDoh, when I had two little monkeys jumping on the bed, and at the same time, now it feels like time’s not running at all.

If my life is on pause, I wish I could pause theirs as well. It may sound selfish, but I want to get out and pick up from exactly where I said goodbye, explaining I was going to school then work and that I didn’t know how long I was going to be gone. All I did was promise, in tears, that one day I would come back for them.

On my wall above a picture where they’re hugging I have a sign that reads: “This is Why”, for a shortened version of; This is Why I have to get out, stay problem-free, stay positive, get up in the mornings, pray at night, and stay involved in their lives.

Growing up is inevitable. Still, I wish I could find them small, beautiful, and innocent - just as I left them.

I also have to be grateful because both have amazing mothers. We don’t always agree, but it’s my job to be

supportive and understanding because any decision they make affects the kids. I can't be judgemental, or get into arguments, and risk my only line of communication. If they kill that line, it'll eventually kill me.

Sometimes I do the baby talk and Daddy's Little Princess loves it, but he doesn't. He's a "Big Boy", he says. He wants Nerf guns, rollercoasters and he made me promise we'll jump off a plane in parachutes. I made that promise. On her 6th birthday, I asked her to stay 6 forever. She said "I don't know how" and I had a cuteness attack. According to her I'm not allowed to date, and neither is she until she's 18, that's the deal. Hopefully, it lasts. She's the jealous type, I'm hers and she's mine, end of the story, and I agree. At the same time, Big Boy gives all the girls Valentine's cards, most of the classroom girls are his girlfriends, and all I can do is give him tips on being a gentleman. Another year goes by. She'll be 10 on Oct 26 and he'll be 8 on Nov. 26. They would've been born the same month, but Princess couldn't wait to meet me, I guess, and Big Boy was the best deal I got after a Black Friday. Experiencing their birth was the most wonderful thing that ever happened. There's no greater love, only the love of God for us, and He wants us to grow and learn. I'd love to tell them to stop growing, but I also want them to grow and learn; and right now, I couldn't be more proud. Should I try for parole which adds three more years, or maxes out when she'll be 19 and he'll be 17? I know the answer. In the meantime I can close my eyes and see them just as I left them; small, beautiful, and innocent.

Love is patient and forgiving, and the only thing we feel that transcends the dimensions of time and space. Time is always short for those who need it, but for those who love, it lasts forever. I'll love you Emely and Emmanuel until the end of time, and hope you love me and forgive me for missing all these years.

I invite you to find ways to stay involved, it may be hard but love finds a way. One way I've stayed involved with my daughter is by having flowers delivered to her at school on her birthday, and she absolutely loves it. With my son, I send a gift for his birthday, books that he reads to me and we keep each other updated on the hottest Reggaeton songs.

Blessings to all the fathers, stay involved, and remember- They Will Not Stop Growing.

### **"Little Feet Behind Me" by Moses Estrada**

This picture gives me a lot of joy because it reminds me of the future. There is a generation coming after us and what we do will affect their lives. Being able to hold those little feet is the greatest joy among only a few others. If I will be more careful with where I take those little feet today then one day those little feet will go to the right places. Even if I cannot hold those little feet it does not mean that I cannot be involved, because I can. There are ways I stay involved: I pray for those little feet, I write those little feet, I call those little feet, and just

as important I do the best I can where I am for those little feet. May God grant me the privilege to once more hold those little feet.

### **"My Son" by Roderic Louis Pippen Sr.**

My son, Roderic Louis Pippen Jr., born May 25, 2009. The first time I was able to see you in person was August 14, 2009. As I held you for the first time, we locked eyes and I knew I would do anything for you. I spoke no words and our family sat in silence. Until you finally smiled and I was able to smile back. The moment was perfect although our lives would never be.

That night as I laid in my bunk, in my thoughts I was able to identify a plan to get home to you. The next day when visiting was allowed my name was called. Prisoner Pippen, report, you have a visit. Fellow prisoners wished me well, as visits were hard to come by in that facility. But our family drove 9 hours and stayed the weekend up in Wasaga, Michigan. So that you could visit me at Baraga Maximum Correctional Facility.

This time when I entered the visiting area you were drinking a bottle wrapped in a blanket my mother made you. After I hugged everyone, I sat down. And for the second time, I held you in my hands. As you drank your bottle your eyes spoke to me. You told me that you needed me, and I knew then at 22 years old I was only living for you.

At the end of our visit, I felt a pain I never knew I could. I held a firm grip on my emotions, but you are mine. And I never wanted to let you go. And the reality was I had to, and I had no other choice. I kissed your forehead like I always do, and handed you to your mom. As we said our goodbyes I held on to your feet. And I promised your mom I would always take care of you.

That night, back in my bunk, I cried in frustration. Cause I had 20 months left on my minimum sentence. And no guarantee that I would be given parole. With my mind made up, I vowed to make it home as soon as possible. But I never knew how hard my past made our future.

Two weeks later I was transferred to 6 Robert Cotton Correctional Facility in Jackson, Michigan. It was an hour away from Detroit, which meant I would see you more. But at a steep cost, I was charged with four homicides. And I would now risk never seeing you outside of prison.

Over the next 18 months, I was able to see you every two weeks. As we hoped for the best and prepared for the worst. But I had a parole hearing and was given an additional 24 months. The good news was the homicide case was dropped for a lack of evidence. And I was given a release date.

December 20, 2012, I got released on parole. That night you had a big present wrapped from your dad. A video shows you ripping at wrapping paper as a toy makes the noise inside. Before you could get the box open, I jumped out to your

surprise. It's my Da-Dais all you screamed as you hugged my neck.

Until October 2, 2013, we were together almost every day. But the U.S. Marshals surrounded our house with a warrant for my arrest. I surrendered and they allowed me to sit down with you. This conversation would be the last time I held you outside of prison.

On our monthly visits now we talk to the man. And we are back where we began. With my holding you in a prison visiting room, vowing to do anything to get back to you.

### **"Holding Her Tenderly in My Heart" by Bryan Noonan**

"That's it!" my wife tells me over the phone. "We've got to get to the hospital now. My contractions are back, and something is *not* right." I jump into my car and head straight for home. Fortunately, we only live a few miles away.

It's been a long few months as my wife has been on bedrest due to premature labor. She's been in the hospital several times already, and at one point we thought we lost the baby. We've been fortunate so far, but it's been a stressful few months. It's still early, but the doctor says the baby can survive at this point. We drive as fast as we safely can to the hospital 30 minutes away. They are expecting us and get her right in.

At the hospital, the doctor gives my wife a steroid shot to help the baby's lungs develop more. An ultrasound shows that the baby is fine, but my wife is leaking amniotic fluid. The doctor is worried. He tells us that he's going to have to perform an emergency C-section first thing in the morning, but he wants to give the baby's lungs as much time as possible to develop. It's a long night as the doctors and nurses closely monitor both my wife and our baby.

Early the next morning, the doctor (or doctors) and nurses surround my wife's bed. "Are you ready?" the doctor queries. "We've gotta get you in pretty quick here. Dad, are you good with being in there with your wife?" I nod my head quickly. I wouldn't miss this for anything. I've had some emergency medical training, so the thought of blood doesn't bother me, but if I'm honest, I'm pretty worried for my wife and the baby's safety.

After my wife is wheeled into the room and prepped, I'm brought in. The nurse has already placed a stool by my wife's head so I can provide her emotional support through the birth. I can't see the doctor cutting into my wife's belly from where I'm sitting, which is just as well. I whisper comforting words to my wife as the doctors and nurses do their thing. Within what seemed a very short couple of minutes, the doctor asks me,

"Dad, you want to see your daughter enter this world?" I stand up and watch the doctor pull my daughter's tiny body from my wife's belly. Quickly, the nurse whisks her to another station to clean her up and take her APGAR scores. She struggles to breathe at first, but otherwise all seems fine.

Come on over here, dad. You want to hold your beautiful daughter?" Tears jump to my eyes as I gently cradle her in my arms. She's so tiny! Her body fits into the palm of my hand. Her hands and feet are the size of my thumbs. Too quickly, the nurse takes my daughter and brings her to my wife. She kisses her and cries over how beautiful she is, but soon our baby is whisked away again to the neonatal unit. Born two months early, she only weighs 3 lbs, 15 oz., and she's still struggling to breathe on her own.

After spending several weeks in the hospital, my daughter is finally released to come home with us. She's on a breathing monitor because she still struggles to breathe on her own, but otherwise she's doing great. The next several exhausting months fly by, and my daughter makes astonishing progress in growth. Months have now turned into years and my daughter is no longer a tiny baby. Those tiny feet are no longer piddle paddling all over the house. They no longer follow me everywhere or stand on my feet as we dance together. Today, she's a remarkable and intelligent young woman. She's an accomplished senior in high school and she's taller than most girls her age. I'd give anything to hold her tiny little hands in mine again, to cradle her tiny feet in the palm of my hand. Instead, I hold all of her tenderly in my heart.



### **"Mountain" by Teddy Lewis**

The clouds are gone and so is the rain. The beauty of the Earth is now showing itself, but you can't really see it, at least at first. Notice how tall the trees are from the ground up right?

It must be the origin of a superior architect, yet it gets better by the second, does it not? Notice the streams align the



purest water set to drop perfectly in place from a not too distant mountain ready to rain on the forest of my newly found home.

It's where the origin of all life is. You and I know it. We deserve to in the realest ways. Endlessly, I need to consider the beauty of this forest and I will. I will.

### **"Wilderness" by Giles Belcher**

Wow! What a beautiful sight to behold! The trail that I've been walking to for the past two and half hours! It's a warm and sunny day thus far. I've seen grizzly bears, elk, mules, deer, and a mountain lion! That mountain lion, I almost missed it if I hadn't slowed down at the treeline. A lot of tracks, scat, trails and such I've seen. I've enjoyed being out in the wilderness for the past 2.5 hours. I truly have! Poplar, aspen, cedar, oak and pine trees, all of which I've seen and examined. The stream bed must have been here for ages! It looks like a glistening ribbon coming down from the mountain. Some snow is still on the mountain! How many Indians and mountain men must have been here and lived their lives in this area? Are there some fish in deeper pools further down the stream? I've spotted some eagles, hawks and vultures floating on the thermals into the sky! It's hard to tell if anyone has been here taking in the view that's spectacular. The sky is blue with clouds of various shapes of dark and light hue. Is the weather possibly moving in? I might need to either turn around and go back towards safety, but I've got plenty of gear and food to stay out here for a couple of days. This peaceful and awe-inspiring wilderness is postcard-picture perfect! This is life at its best as far as I can tell! I just need to do this more often. I believe I'll be back here sometime soon! I hope I'll be able to return here and see so much more. The air is crisp and so refreshing. It's so much better than being in the city; that's for sure. This wilderness view that will stay in my mind for a long time to come... Maybe, I'll tell someone about this wilderness view. I guess I'll just enjoy what I can for the time I have! How about you?

### **"Snow Theme" by Phillip L. Rath**

Snow stream, a cold but reassuring scene of perpetuity. The moisture in the clouds turns to snow and falls to Earth. The sun melts the snow which soaks into the earth. The moisture in the earth flows downward until it collects more moisture and forms a stream through freshly fallen snow.

This is a frequent event in Northwest Nebraska, where I'm from. Snow streams are a fresh, wonderful reminder that this circle of life started millions of years ago and inspires hope that they will exist millions of years in the future.

No such freshness exists in the cities or southern United States. I pity those who will never know the experience of drinking from a snow stream.

### **"Time in Nature" by LeRoy Sodorff**

Trickling from a mountain top  
To a steady stream tree-line  
Where flora and fauna dine  
Here in the landscape of my mind.  
Where balance and rhythm  
Are in a constant motion,  
That stirs the emotions,  
Such a soothing potion.  
For this stream of consciousness  
Becomes a relentless giver  
To this life liver  
As it turns into a river.

### **"Views" by Anthony "David" Alvarado**

This place knows who I am.  
The mountains make me feel alone in a good way.  
The streams cry with me.  
Today there is a gray cloud nimbus,  
My favorite weather.  
The wind blows and feels like nirvana.  
The snow covered rocks are my dance floor.  
I belong here.



### **"The Mrs." by Loraine Bennett-Kenitzki**

There's nothing like the comfort of a warm, soft, hair dog on my lap. Love. Unabandoned. Adoration. Happiness in all capital letters.  
The wet nose.  
The soft brown eyes.  
The fuzzy face with cold ears and a warm heart filling this four-legged lover of my friendship, fills my soul with compassion.  
Has she been waiting for me all day? You bet!  
Has she laid faithfully all night at my feet when I work late- You bet!

Has she kept my spot in the bed warm while I use the bathroom in the middle of the night?

Sure!

I would have to fight her for that spot back, with a low growl, and a yielding whimper.

The short legs and long leaps on a snowy landscape.

The long runs across the grass in the Spring or through leaves in the Fall.

How about across the sandy beach in Summer where she'd dive to the bottom of the lake, or river to retrieve a rock I'd thrown in.

I remember the look on her face when she smelled the load on our first baby's diaper. She looked at me in an anthropomorphic interpretation of disgust, as if to say "I'm not allowed to do that inside."

From early on, as a pup, I will always choose you from the others of a litter.

Even today as you lay your head on my lap I try hard not to think about life without your head to pet, ears to scratch, or cold wet nose on my hand.

As I left her at the house, with the family that once gave her to mine, there's a panic in those soft, brown eyes that I shan't ever forget.

As I leave her there for the first time ever leaving her anywhere outside of our car for 9 years, I cry.

I shut the door, but I don't say good-bye.

I'd hoped to see her again in 5 years. (That didn't happen.)

For the first 2 weeks that's where she lay, by their front door.

As every car approached she would stand up to see if it was me.

When it wasn't she'd laid back down to wait.

They took her to the vet because she hadn't eaten since I left and gave her an I.V.

Soon enough she learned to love, again, the family that once gave her to mine. Loving her back while I went to prison.

### **"One Hand Will Have to Do" by Lisa Jackson**

My wife sat on our couch with her cozy winter sweater on and my head in her lap. It was our mid-week routine to shut off all electronics and reconnect with each other on a human level.

That's when she hit me with the news: she wanted a baby. Stunned into silence and barely comprehending, I nearly missed her explanation. She was lonely, the house needed some young blood, some noise, she'd already picked one out. Wait, wasn't I supposed to be part of the process, to be present to help with half of the DNA? Besides, we agreed before the wedding we didn't want kids, ever.

"It's not what you think," she was saying with a grin. Reaching for her laptop, she squeezed my face into her abdomen, laughing at my discomfort (physical and emotional). A string of keystrokes led to the website of our local animal

shelter. A small, frightened puppy of a multi-colored coat sat cowering in a cage, eyes imploring release.

And so we became a family of three. We named our "baby" Dolby, for when he barked it sounded like stereo surround sound. The only quiet time we have now is that same Wednesday ritual on the couch. Difference being Dolby is spanned across my wife's lap, in doggie heaven as she scratches his belly, eyes closed in relaxed ecstasy. All I can reach for is the only part of her not engrossed in Dolby. One hand will have to do.

### **"Old Bo" by Brian Fuller**

Nobody knows for sure the exact age of "Old Bo". I found this out when I asked the cashier:

"How old is your dog?" She laughed and said,

"He's not really our dog... he just likes it here." Old Bo has become a fixture in this town. I know his owners love him and care for him. They live just a couple of blocks away. Old Bo wants a little more excitement than his aging master can give him. So every morning he walks up here to the stone and every evening he walks back home, just like clockwork.

He's got a routine. He watches people gas up and get coffee before going to work. Then there's the lunch time rush. A little piece of corn dog on a burrito really hits the spot. But the best by far is when the kids come home from school. All those little hands scratching him behind the ears or patting his head are better than sausage.

As far as I know, Bo has never bitten anyone that didn't deserve it. He's a better judge of character than most of the people I know. There's never a need to get up and chase a bird, squirrel, or stray cat. A well timed bark usually does the trick. He's got his share of aches and pains. We all do. Every now and then I see him trying to make himself more comfortable. He'll get up, turn in a circle a few times, then lay back down.

So that got me thinking: what did he change? His position or his attitude. Perhaps it was a little bit of both. It was then when I realized that Bo had given me a lesson in life. Bo is an opportunist. When a chance comes along, he takes full advantage of it. He's got it all figured out. Life isn't going to come to us, we have to go out and get it. If we look for the good in people, we will find it. We might not always be able to change our situation, but if we change our attitude - then we've changed everything!

So if you're in town and you see Old Bo give him a pat on the head and share one of your french fries with him. You'll be glad you did.



by Heather Dowell

When I look in the mirror I see myself with a constant veil over my face, indicating a constant state of mourning over the family and children I have lost. I struggle at times to keep my head above the water and see the positive possibilities of what the future may hold for me. For the first time in my life everything here is all about me. I am here to get better and grow as an individual, and it's my turn to take care of myself instead of everyone else.

I struggle with self-esteem and undervalue myself but that is slowly changing. I am starting to notice there is more than meets the eye when thinking about myself. I am good at writing, drawing and being creative. I am really good at research and reading. I have found a higher power that enables me to focus on the here and now and not fret about what is to come. I will always have a hard life because of the choices I have made; however, with God in front of me, I will always feel love, peace and joy that will enable me to keep moving forward!

Before I came to Pocatello Women's Correctional Center I was a feeble, fallible human and although the last part will never change while I am alive, I know I am no longer feeble and I have a lot going for me because I have faith that there is a purpose for my existence and I am determined to help as many people as possible. I am unsure how I am to help others so I continue to educate myself so I am full of wisdom I can utilize in my books!

I have learned to never give up and someday I will remove my veil and be proud of the person I am. I do not know what the future holds but I have faith God will reunite me and my children when the time is right. I am eagerly awaiting for that day to come!

### **"A Dark Veil Over My Thoughts" by Brian Lowe**

I should feel sad, full of grief and sorrow. Yet, all I feel is elation that it is over. Roy was a good man, that can never be denied. However, the last year of his was a real trial. For both of us. The brain cancer, the surgery, the chemo

treatments. The burning away of everything that made him Roy. So no, I am not sorry that it is over. I am happy. Happy that his pain is over, the indignities, the fear. He is better off now. My only regret is that he didn't recover before it destroyed his brain. Too much was left unsaid. Since his mind was already gone, his passing on was the next best thing.

I take it back. I do feel sad, full of grief and sorrow. I wish it would have never happened. Roy, you are gone and I have nothing but the children left. We lost the house, the car, our income. We burned through our life savings in less than six months. I shall owe for the funeral and hundreds of thousands for the hospital bills. Roy is the lucky one. He no longer has any worries. He is not the one stressing out over how to care for our children. Why am I trapped in this situation? What sick twist of fate conspired to bring this about? What God allowed this to happen? There is no such thing as fairness in life. No justice. Just misery.

Roy Junior is four, little Amy is two. How am I to explain this to them? How am I going to provide for them? We have no insurance, no place to live, nothing to fall back on. What are we going to do? I can't do this alone. Why did you have to go Roy? Why?!? I still need you. Our children still need you. We need you. What are we supposed to do?

I am conflicted in my emotions. All I can think about is how I will be able to care for the children. What are we to do? I can't go all Yatesian, yet I can't make it on my own. God, if you are real, please help us. I am coming to you in our time of need. I am sending you my deep, heartfelt needs. I need you.

Never a response. Only more suffering. Life went on. Worked hard everyday, and put the children through school. Focused my life on the children. Made them my purpose in life. I had to find something to live for and it was my family. They are the only real thing in this life. The only thing that is worth continuity.

The children of the family are the true treasures worth living for. They are my higher power. Everything I did was for them. Not for an obsolete literary construct.

Life is hard for everyone. In order to be truly free you must live for this present life and the future of those who will follow. Then you will be living for something real and worth following. Not because you are afraid of displeasing a nonexistent superbeing, but because this life allows you to choose what is right. Choosing freely to care for your family against all odds without the baggage of centuries of fear mongering theological tyrants. This is true freedom.

### **"Woman in Black Veil" by Vicki Hicks**

People say you should celebrate at a funeral and cry at birth, this is because one is leaving the corrupt world and one is entering it. Well, my funeral came in the form of divorce papers on August 3, 2019, after 27 years of marriage. That is to say that one chapter died as a new one was born. The awful thing about all of this is that after 27 years together our life has

been reduced to paper. How sad to think about that. Some days I feel like my heart is being ripped out, others, I am just fine. I am stronger because of all I have and all I am going through. The best part of the story is that not only is he divorcing me and trying to take everything away from me, he is living with my biological sister. She sounds like me so the only thing I can think of is that he missed me and found my voice in her. The dagger to heart came when my sister visited me and acted like everything was just fine. The nail in the coffin was when he tried to convince our friends that I was okay with what was going on because I know she will hand him back when I get out. So my funeral procession continues; there truly is no celebrating or crying. I am just numb most of the time. Now I have to learn to be single and care-free when I exit this place. That will be a new chapter.

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**FINAL NOTES**-So much to say and so little space allotted for me to do so. Mailing costs limit the newsletter to 32 pages, and so I use the smallest font I can find and try to use as much space on the page as possible while still keeping the newsletter pleasurable to read. I know the way we have run PE in the past has to shift during the pandemic. I ask for your understanding if there are delays, and I ask you to keep writing and sharing your journals, art, poems, stories. We are developing more online capacity so even if we don't have as many in person volunteers to write back to you, we may generate some thoughtful mail your way by sharing your work online.

We do not have a pen pal program but as many of you know our volunteers enjoy writing to you to let you know how your writing and art have touched them. Your best way of getting mail from us is by participating in our programs.

Now that doesn't mean sign up for everything. It means pick the projects that interest you and participate. Remember I have to raise all the funds to keep this going. There is no regular source of funding for PE. It saves money and allows others to participate if you only choose what you will really take on. If you can commit to the project we want you to join, but don't just check off everything and then not follow through. I see more of you are getting access to programs like Corr Links and SmartJail Mail, and at first it looks real good, but as I examine these programs they will end up being more expensive than me printing and mailing programs. It is a shame, yet it is another example of the commodification of everything. Food, shelter, health care, electricity, telephone, internet access seem like essential services that shouldn't be part of the for profit world. I don't understand our current culture where everything is about profit. Profit is more important than family in America. Rich is good, and it doesn't seem to matter how people make their money. I look forward to a brighter tomorrow, and whether or not it happens is less important at this point than my continuing to work towards it. It is hard for any one of us to make big

changes to the structural inequality many of us deal with, but if we all do a little, change will come.

Hopefully by the time the next newsletter is mailed our nation and its' leaders will have a better understanding of the COVID pandemic and we will have a federal government that is listening to science and public health experts in making a plan to move forward. It feels like some leaders in government run on the platform that the government is inept, and will never administer programs well. They want the private for-profit sector to run things. They claim it will be more efficient because of the way the free market works. These leaders even though they work for us as government officials succeed in making their point when the government programs fail. I on the other hand see government as an instrument to unify society and make sure the least among us have basic comforts and the opportunity to advance. Basic comfort means quality food, quality education and adequate housing and accessible medical care. Those basic accommodations especially for all children should be a priority over individual wealth. I hope as a society we can eventually wake up to the need to care for one another,

**Bonus! RPG anyone? Many of you have asked for Role Playing Game material. We have a few volunteers who believe they can use free websites to download materials to help those of you who so desire to create RPG games. Jameson is heading up this initiative. If you want to get involved in this endeavor send Jameson a note letting him know of your interest. For now we are looking for experienced players who have ideas about developing a game. We hope to create something that can be used both by experienced players and beginners. This may take a while to complete but getting your input in the beginning will help shape the project.**

I read thousands of your letters and am moved by the experiences you all share with me. I know even though there is much despair, there is hope and an inborn desire in most of us to thrive. PE is positioned to help you thrive in difficult situations. While everyone will not always have a positive outcome, developing your critical thinking skills, finding meaningful things to do, helping others, and seeking purpose within whatever confines we find ourselves in, often pays dividends. The world around us can often paint a picture of doom and gloom, and yet there are also moments of ease, of balance, beauty, and being in the right place at the right time. PE hopes to help create some of those moments for you, its' members. I am going to reprint some letters I received this last year I received to illuminate how participation in PE can benefit



you. I see many of these letters, but these two seemed to jump out at me, so here they are.

Dear Volunteers,

*Hopefully, this reaches you all in the very best spirits. It has been a few years since I last contacted your group. I used to participate in many of your projects and did so over the course of several years. I am contacting you now to thank you whole heartedly for all your help. Your organization ended up causing a series of positive effects in my life. Allow me to share.*

*I am serving multiple life sentences with no possibility of [parole. When I first contacted your program, I was living in a long-term solitary confinement setting called the SHU. I was housed there for extremely destructive behavior while being incarcerated. I spent several years in that environment. While confined in that manner, I spent most of my time reading and studying, and Prisoner Express was a huge factor in providing me with all sorts of interesting packets that covered a lot of scientific, historical and literary information. Those packets kept me busy learning and, in some ways, sane.*

*Eventually due to changes in the legal system I was released from the SHU into a maximum-security yard. It was difficult for me to adjust, but I pushed through and succeeded. I still have some social problems but have adapted well enough. Over time I managed to stay out of trouble and earn even more privileges. In May of 2018 I was given a chance to take the modern GED test. I had graduated high school in 1997 but let me tell you, the new advances in high school education are pretty heavy. Still I scored very well on the tests. I earned a GED, and even some college credits. Prisoner Express actually played a large part in this. Many of the packets you sent me over the years contained data that was covered in the tests. More so the whole Prisoner Express program had motivated me to keep learning during a time in life when I had little belief in hope for anything better.*

*As volunteers I want you to understand the effort and time you spend is not a waste, especially here. The fact is you have caused a very positive ripple effect. My scores were high, I'm bragging a bit, but for good reason. The education dept. offered me a job right after I took the test, literally the next day. Since May 2018 I have been working teaching other prisoners. I've helped around 20 prisoners obtain a GED and more are testing soon. Some of those who graduated were hired by the education department to teach as well. The men who begin to study seriously, some have only a third-grade education, begin to gain confidence in many areas. Some have*

*completely quit bad habits like drug use. Some have gone on to college. Some of these guys will get out of prison with faith in themselves they hadn't had before, and some will succeed. The ripple effects them, their families, their neighbors, all society, and with luck recidivism will decrease. I'm not stating this as a grand delusion, or just to brag, but to remind you all as volunteers of how much of an impact you could potentially be making.*

*Even just on a personal level, the changes in my life over the past few years are dramatic. I went from a pit of bitterness and despair, as I was full of self-hatred that made me even more potentially violent than I had already been, to a life in prison I never thought possible. I accepted a long time ago that I'm the only person who is responsible for me being in prison. I also believe I deserve much worse than what I have been dealt. It's that last sentence that makes me realize I need to give back to society however I can. It gives me not only purpose, but a bit of pride in knowing I am doing what is right in life, what is good. Also, my life is ridiculously comfortable. I work during the week and volunteer helping teach and art class and a music class on Saturdays. I have a television, CDA's and a guitar. All my necessities in my own cell. I get paid enough to get all the hygiene and food products I need and want. It's quite nice actually. I appreciate and enjoy life now more than perhaps I ever have; I think it has a lot to do with helping others. Though this isn't the path in life I would have expected, I'm content. Thank you for everything-*  
Jonathan Holeman

Dear PE Staff,

*My name is Bobby. I have been participating in some of your programs for the past eight year or so. I have been incarcerated for nearly 23 years for robbery under the CA "3 strikes" law. I was introduced to PE through another lifer in 2012. I was very excited when he showed me one of your bi-annual publications which showcased the various types of submissions, i.e., essays, poetry, journaling etc.*

*I like almost every person serving time in a state penitentiary was raised in a hostile and toxic environment. As a result of abuse and untold childhood traumas. I emerged from adolescence a broken man. My core beliefs about myself were echoes reverberating from the scathing criticisms frothing from my fathers mouth and brutal blows emanating from his clenched fist. I was worthless, I would never amount to anything, and I was doomed to spend my life as a loner because I was unlovable*

*As I entered the world free from the oppression and tyranny of home. I did my best to fulfill my father's prophesy. By the age of 18 I had become a bitter and resentful and was in full fledged rebellion mode. I began serving my first prison term. In 1998 I received a 25 to life for armed robbery.*

*Fast forward to Jan 15, 2020. I appeared before the board of prison hearings for my initial parole hearing. 1 ½ hours later the commissioner told me. "having considered your hearing here today, all your submissions to this panel, your prison behavior, the clinical risk assessment from the forensic psychiatrist and all other relevant information, this is a grant of parole! My heart was overwhelmed with joy and tears coursed down my cheeks.*

*Why you may be wondering have I told you all of this? During the past 8 years I have submitted many essays to PE. Fortunately, a dozen were chosen for publication in the bi-annual newsletter, a joy I know other writers have experienced. I had also submitted several hundreds of pages to the journal project. For myself I used the word theme essays as a way of purging decades of turmoil from my heart. Each story I wrote was my own bitter truth and each story written was a step toward my own personal recovery. As they say, "we are only as sick as our secrets.*

*The journal project allowed me to become intimate with myself about my past by breaking down all of the barriers I had installed in order to protect myself from the baggage I carried around with me in life such as guilt, shame, pain, anger and denial. My journal allowed me to gain valuable insight into myself, and without a doubt these essays and journal were very instrumental in me being found suitable for parole. I submitted a few of my writings and I know each story had an impact in "humanizing myself to the Board of Prison Hearings.*

*I would like to share one last story with you as it relates to Prisoner Express. In January of 2019 I received a letter from a young woman from Indiana who discovered, through DNA that I was her biological father. I had only a vague idea that thirty-one years ago she was possibly my child. Anyways, after Lysette discovered my identity she "googled" me and somehow came across thirty-some odd pages of my journal from PE. This discovery gave her some insight as to who her father is/was, so again I want to thank you all at Prisoner Express.*

*I am scheduled to be released in Oct 2020. I am compelled from deep in my heart to thank you for everything. Not only the staff and volunteers but to all my fellow writers. Everyone of you has contributed to my wellbeing. I send you all my love and best wishes. And if I may give any of you some*

*advice; continue with this program. Reach deep, reach past the hurting point, share with your fellow writers the ghost of your past and how you have learned to tame them. PE has been a true blessing in my life, and I hope this blessing reaches each and every one of you as well.*

*I'll be paroling to a brand-new world. A world turned upside down for now. However, I am also paroling as a brand-new person, I am ready now and PE has helped to prepare me.*

*Thank you, Namaste, Bobby Bunderson*

These are tough times for many of us. We often sit alone in isolation due to COVID, our financial health as individuals and a nation are in question, our president doesn't seem to focus on the pressing issues at hand and instead places blame on others. More and more we hear tales of D. Trump's upbringing that remind me of the scars that Bobby B. gathered as a youth. I am torn between praying for him and being angry at his actions. What do you think? Should we pray for those who anger us? I ask that he be given guidance and love in his heart. Compassion for ourselves and others seems to be missing from many who are in constant suffering.

At PE we do not have any concrete answers to the everyday problems you face as individuals, but we are focused on providing you with information, education, and opportunities for creative self-expression in a public forum. Each of you has your own story, and your own ways of finding balance and equanimity. Our task is to help provide meaningful activities for you to explore while you are on your path. We are all in this together. While we look like many, we are all one. All of us has sprung from this single planet for a chance to dance upon the earth. Even in the slowest of days please remember it is impermanent. We will all go back to the earth. Being thankful for the opportunity to gain experience and grow, can help us get through trying times.

**Notice on the sign-up sheet to follow we are asking for your permission to post your writings online. If you do or don't want your poetry, themes, art, or journals shared on-line or in our print publications this is the time to let us know.**

This form or a letter should be returned in a timely manner if you want to sign up for programs. **We want you to respond by 11/1/20 to sign up for the current offerings.** [or as soon after as possible]. 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.

Shining light and offering a pathway of hope -Gary

**Registration Sheet** – 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 a 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, and we hope to mail the book pks this November List types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection of books. Warning, the Pandemic makes everything a little iffy Please fill in this if you order expedited books

\_\_\_\_\_ Number of books allowed  
\_\_\_\_\_ Soft cover only  
\_\_\_\_\_ Hardcover and soft covered both allowed

☐ **Poetry Project** – Please send me the next Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 24. I understand that to receive the anthology I am required to submit a poem for consideration in the anthology.

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

☐ **Chess Club** – Yes, I want to receive a packet on how to improve my chess game.

☐ **Meditation Project**- Yes I want to join Tara for meditation practices and spiritual musings

☐ **Art Knows**: Come explore the world of art with Treacy. This packet will include instructions for our next art projects.

☐ **Philosophy**- Want to consider the age old question of free will and life's purpose? Human kind has been pondering these issues from prehistory to today. Come read some ideas shared by Kylie on this subject

☐ **Mental Health Studies**-Come learn ways in which biology and mental health are connected, and gain more awareness regarding maintaining good mental health

☐ **Learn to Write a Screenplay** - -In this first lesson you will learn how to create a film treatment as a way of outlining a screenplay you wish to write, or to promote a screenplay already written

☐ **Poetry Chapbook Club**- Read the chapbook, "Did you

Know?" by author Elizabeth Wolf, learn about construction of chapbooks, and then create one of your own. We have 300 copies of the "Did you Know?" to distribute.

☐ **Computer Science Concepts** -Interested in gaining understanding of some important concepts in computer science? Learn about the pillars of programming and computational thinking?

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.

#### Prisoner Express Permissions Form

I grant Prisoner Express the right to publish, in its newsletters and website, any work including essays, artwork and journal entries,

☐ that I have sent to Prisoner Express in the past  
☐ that I will ever send to Prisoner Express in the future, unless I clearly indicate on the work that I do not want it published.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Print  
name: \_\_\_\_\_

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# Prisoner Express Newsletter Summer 2020

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

*Subscriptions are free to prisoners.*

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Art by Marcus Arcos



