

SUBMISSION FOR STREETPROSE MAGAZINE

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THE SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL VILLAGE

*The University of the Spirit*  
-Father Joe Carroll

Men and women strain  
at being gentle.  
Cast off  
by loved ones,  
they train hard,  
like athletes:

a "Good morning"  
suffers  
from too much  
enthusiasm,  
a "Good afternoon"  
blows

the hat  
from your head,  
a "Good evening"  
dents in  
your teeth.  
It's rough because

prison or the streets  
have calloused  
their hearts – and the cops  
never let them  
forget the past.  
Nevertheless, they ignore

the shove  
at the breakfast line,  
turn away  
from the curses  
at the lunch line,  
walk quickly

from the clenched fist  
at the dinner line.  
This is why  
their chewed food  
resembles  
a devastated country;

this is why  
their knees ache –  
The cost  
of unanswered prayers  
late into the night.

\*

The security guards treat  
them like convicts. Laughing,  
at their angry red faces

as they wait out in the hot  
sun for the ladle slapped hard  
against the plastic trays served

by a platoon of Christians.  
They have no say in the matter.  
One word of protest, and they're back

out on the street. So they grin  
and bear it. Some grind  
their teeth and bite clean

through their rolled cigarettes.  
Many dream of escape. Nothing  
fancy, like Steve McQueen

on a motorcycle: just a good,  
strong backpack, a cashier's  
check in the pocket, a strong

loud "To hell with ya!" that explodes  
like a grenade, as they walk  
out the front gate.

\*

*Bug Day*

270 men curling blankets, sheets –  
Crushing T-shirts into fat balls –

Palms pressing down hard on pants –  
Stubborn wrinkles folded at the knee cap,

like an amputee's trousers –  
Shoving everything down into laundry

baskets lifted, pushed into bins resembling  
torpedo tubes – The photos of loved ones

slid in between the precious underwear  
and the white socks laundered grey –

Dropped into the back pack  
that curves the spine

like a question mark – Finally,  
mattresses pulled from bunks,

metal drawers, too –  
Both leaned up against

the blue partitions –  
Then, a quick walk

out of the building, before  
the poison pries open the cupped hands.

\*

Voices surface  
during sleep and there's not a damned

thing you can do about it;  
so everyone hears the name

of the man you wanted to touch  
in the showers; everyone hears

the last curse  
you threw at the wife and kids

you abandoned.

Sometimes, a voice will cry  
out to God; and someone will answer,

“Yes, my son.” Laughter  
will rip through the darkness.

Those who feel damned,  
won’t dare open their mouths.

\*

Rows of bunk beds, divided  
by the blue partitions resembling

the mazes that drive lab mice  
crazy. 18B has the lower bunk,

18A, the top. All the A’s,  
closer to God, the long blinding lights,

and the vents that suck the wool  
from your blankets; the B’s closer

to Hell, and floors you shouldn’t walk  
barefoot on. At night, 18B likes it when the lights

go out. In the dark, he feels  
alone, private. It beats the street

with its callous neon.  
He’s grateful to the Irish priest,

who runs this place. Being catholic finally  
paid off. Grateful as well, to the Spanish

grandmother, who towed him to mass.  
Lying in his bunk, he remembers the Latin;

the holy water that trembled  
no matter how warm the hand; the old woman

with the hard moist hand to his head,  
when his thoughts strayed from God

\*

Tobacco scarred lungs cough into  
the sunlight: you imagine an old man

at the bottom of each one, pushing  
the air up; barely making it; knees bent,

veins standing up on their hind legs  
like horses with just one sprint left.

The young men, cocky, still not stooped over,  
strut about; shaved heads glistening, tattoos

dancing on rippling muscles, tobacco smoke  
trailing them, like the balloons that hold

everyone's words in a comic strip. Nodding  
in their direction, the old timers shake

their heads; smiling: they know time will catch  
up to their fresh lungs, sooner than they expect.

\*

His cock has collapsed  
into his groin like a rolled up sock.

That's why he showers in his underwear.  
No matter what the doctors give him,

the pain runs through his body  
like a restless army.

On a good day,  
he wants to jump off

the third floor balcony.  
On a bad day,

he wants to live forever;  
it's the only way he can pay God

for all the harm he's done  
to the family he abandoned.

He's had four cell phones  
stolen in the last six months;

a record for this place. He's glad.  
Now, no one can reach him with

the love that will save him.

\*

The Bully stands tall  
and muscular; black head

glistening like the eight ball  
under pool hall lights.

A staff member, he has the power  
To throw any of us

out onto the street. That's why  
he's avoided like an infection.

Don't dare ask him  
for your mail or a clean towel,

cause he'll glare at you, until  
you're tempted to act stupid.

Many pray that he loses  
job, wife, kids, everything;

like everyone else here. 18B adds  
something extra: a shiny new

coat of humiliation sprayed  
on daily; growing so thick

he can barely move from  
one damned sidewalk to another.

\*

The *Boss-Lady* is worse than the *Bully*.  
Been here many years running tired

men and women into the ground.  
Those who can't take it and snap

are tossed into the street. Doesn't  
matter if you got cancer, diabetes,

or no legs. When they hear her  
coming, they lie still as the dead

in their bunks, praying the storm  
will pass quickly. 18B hangs on to

his backpack, in case she doesn't  
like the way his hair is parted.

\*

It's the third of the month and they're dropping like  
German soldiers at the Russian front. On the

first, 11; on the second, 13. Tonight, who knows?  
18B doesn't care. At bed-check, he's in his bunk,

belt unbuckled, shoe laces untied; visible  
to the world. He's too sane for a nut check, too

young for a pension or social security, and no matter  
how hard he's tried, he just can't get Obama

to stimulate him back to work. To play it safe,  
he makes eye contact with the staffer wielding

the clip board. Just before he rolls over, he hears  
the heavy cart and the fat, black garbage bags go

*snap snap snap crack crack crack*, as they're stuffed  
with the remains of tonight's casualties.

\*

The police are on site,  
glaring at everyone.

No one escapes  
their sight. Angry,

when the men run through  
the system have

no outstanding  
warrants, they strut

about, giving hard  
shoulders to those who

ignore them, because they  
know better.

\*

Barely six months out,  
you're still an inmate;

glaring at the men  
in the showers,

your sweat threatening  
to sting them in the eyes.

Brother! No one here  
wishes you harm.

It's okay to drop your soap.  
Remember,

the angry voices you hear  
belong to men

at war with their own  
demons.

To them,  
you're barely a shadow,

within the steam scalding  
their poor, hard-

earned  
victories away.

\*

The men call them broken toys.  
You're warned: stay away. You can't.



So at breakfast, you sit across from her;  
best time of day to look into a woman's eyes.

It's early, no time yet to hide  
who she really is. Forget sex,

because if they're in this place, they're really broken;  
and you can get cut

on the sharp edge  
of the restraining order,

that barely keeps another  
beating away. If you can't feel

any compassion, walk away! Listen.  
Just listen!

Listen to her go on and on and on...  
At the moment, she's repairing herself

slowly (Maybe she wants the judge to return her kids).  
You can tell by the tobacco

stains on her teeth and fingers.  
At the end of the meal, smile;

say something nice, walk  
away, slowly. Whatever you do,

don't forget her name!  
Make believe it's so full of sunlight,

you can barely carry it, but you do,  
because it's worth its weight in gold,

to no one else but you. It's the best  
thing you can do for her.

\*

*Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*  
There it goes again: the voice gathering momentum,

reaching its crescendo; a wave breaking against

the stead-fast roar of the air conditioner. 18B

can't figure out where it's floating within a sea  
of snores; but he does know the poem

by Dylan Thomas. Maybe, its owner is a medium,  
for the poet, asked by Saint Vincent to inspire

the homeless. Maybe,  
at this very moment, arm-in-arm, they're both looking

down on this place; Thomas, pouring his words  
into the wax-cushioned ear of a broken man,

while the saint smiles. Sometimes, someone yells  
for the medium to shut the fuck up! On nights

like this, 18B is almost moved to violence. Grateful,  
the voice continues, because poems that stir men to life,

are immortal,  
and can't be silenced.

\*

94B is crying  
out for help.

Yanked from  
his bunk, his

head was  
slammed twice

against the wall,  
before being turned

over on his gut  
like an angry steak

about to be grilled.  
94B is crying out

for help, because there's no compassion  
left for his kind; because the beer cans

Security found wrapped

in his blanket won't grow

wings and fly away.  
94B is crying out for help,

because he's about  
to be expelled

from the *University of the Spirit*,  
it's the sidewalk for him, where

he'll never learn to forgive himself,  
once the handcuffs

are clicked off  
his blood-red wrists.