

# Prisoner Express News

## Summer 2022

Dear PE Members, it is time for another edition of PE News. This publication comes out every six months and it provides us at PE with a chance to update you all on our ongoing programs as well as to introduce to you the programs for the upcoming Fall 22 program cycle. In the newsletter will be a signup sheet and you can send it back to us to indicate your interest in our program offerings. This newsletter will also include a survey which I hope will give us up to date information on how to best ensure that our mailings to you are received, and if our programming is meaningful and relevant to you.

My name is Gary and I have been creating the PE project for the past 18 years. Our first newsletter was mailed in 2004. I want to encourage you to consider participating in one or more of our programs. Over the years I hear thank you from those of you who rediscover the creativity you knew was in you but had shut down since entering prison. Others of you say thank you because you have found creativity and an outlet for some part of you that you never knew existed until you started to read, write, or draw through participation in PE programs. Then again there are those of you who are always creating, and find comfort, meaning and satisfaction in your art and writing. For you we offer a venue to share yourself with our members both incarcerated and those folks in the free world who are interested in what you have to say.

I started this program through the urging of Danni Harris, a lifer in TX, who told me he stayed sane through reading and writing and encouraged me to offer programs to help others in his situation. Your words make a difference, and people are paying attention. Let me give you a few examples. I mentioned it before, but the Rattle magazine editor, Tim Green, saw some of the poems submitted for our chapbook program and decided to publish a selection of poetry in their national magazine, as well as highlight that Issue as a tribute to PE [and its poets] on the cover. In this newsletter you will have the opportunity to sign up to receive that recently released issue of Rattle. Also, in July I went to Cincinnati for an art show at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. Three PE artists had their work included in this most prestigious show. [Jerome Washington, Jesse Osmun and the late Billy Sell] I was proud to represent the artists there and made many connections with formerly incarcerated artists. I hope some of them will write in future issues of PE sharing how art provided them with meaning, enjoyment, and balance while incarcerated.

The focus of this program is not for you to be the very best artist and writer, but that you pick up a pen or pencil and write or draw. If someone want to proclaim it as great art or writing, that is certainly nice, but the real strength is the self-knowledge

you can gain from writing as well as the insight it offers the readers who are trying figure out their own path through life. I have seen truly remarkable attitude adjustments made over the years by PE members, and it all began with them picking up a pen or pencil and writing or drawing. Don't worry though if that doesn't interest you as we have a wide range of programming, including book clubs, chess, meditation, cultural and historical studies and more. We have book room full of interesting books and we create customized packages by request for incarcerated individuals. All of these programs are described in detail later in the newsletter, and you can decide whether you want to sign up for them or not.

Recently we have had our mail rejected from certain states as mailing protocols have changed. We think we have figured out how to deal with WI and NC, but it has been really hard to figure out the FL and MO mailing protocols through a company named Securus. In another section we will survey all of you on the best way to get our educational packets to you. Among other things we want to know if electronic mail and packets are better for you than paper and if it is affordable. Please fill out the survey and share your info with us? My head spins at trying to figure it out. I am sure it is very frustrating to you to not get mail, and we are doing our best to figure this out.

We aren't going anywhere. If you don't hear from us don't assume we've stopped our programs. Write us and inquire. I know our mail to FL has been hard to receive. **If you are in FL here is the one option, I have heard for how you can get our mail.** Correspondence course approval forms can be gotten from either the Education Dept or Classification Dept at your facility. Fill out the form and send it to the assistant warden for approval. Once approved PE should be able to mail your packets directly to you at the facility you are in. Please let us know once you have been approved. I am trying to find someone in administration to blanket approve us but can't seem to find someone who can do that. Resubmit the form if you move to another institution.

## 22 Fall Programming

The following programs are available to you this fall. Sign up for as many programs as you like but please only sign up for those you will do. All this costs money and to make it possible to serve everyone who wants to join we can't be wasteful. PE is a project of the Durland Alternatives Library, and the library generously allows its staff and resources to be used to make PE possible, but the libraries funds are not used to pay for PE

postage and printing costs. You can imagine how much it costs to print and mail tens of thousands of lessons every year. All of our programs are free except our Expedited Book mailing program. For that we must request funds to help with postage.

**Expedited Book Mailings** – This is the program that came before the creation of PE. We evolved to have become a lot more since we started mailing book packages 20 years ago. Danika has replaced Jameson as the book room coordinator. Jamie has gone off to law school. Below Danika explains how this program works.

*Hi Friends! My name is Danika, and I am the new book room coordinator! I'm so excited to match you all with your next favorite book. This program is designed for you to receive a customized book package chosen specifically for you, based on your interests. We do ask that you send us a donation for your participation. Packages cost \$5-\$8 to mail, but the books are free as they are all donated. Postage costs can get expensive, so we ask that you send at least \$4 to help cover the cost of the program (this can be in the form of a check made out to "Prisoner's Express/CTA" or have your friends or family contact us to find other ways to donate. Every prison has different rules on what is allowed, so please check with your institution to be sure you are allowed to receive used books from a library. I wish we could offer this for free, but we do not have the financial resources to do so. \*\*\*Also, if you would be interested in being your state's "book representative," which entails talking to me, Danika, about the rules and laws of your state's book rules, please write me a letter about your interest—this would be loads of help to me, so that I can ensure everyone gets the books they want! All books are donated— so asking for very specific requests can make it hard for me to match you with a good book. Please give us many options and topics! (Ex: science fiction, fantasy, self-help, biography, etc.). If you request only 1 kind of book, I will probably disappoint you in what I can provide. I have been receiving a lot of requests for "Manga" and chess books, which are difficult for me to fulfill, based on the books that are donated to us. Of course, if you want these kinds of books, feel free to request them, but just make sure to include some other options as well. :) Additionally, the more options you provide to me, the faster I can fill your request and send the books to you. We have lots of books donated that we can send but the titles and subjects we have available are always in flux. There is no way to send a list of what we have because books are always being mailed and new donations arrive. I ask that you be patient and have some flexibility about what you receive, as we never know how many requests, we may receive in a given month. Prisoner Express is a project of the Durland Alternatives Library at Cornell. I am hoping that I am making good matches for most of the book requests I received. We do not expect you to send the books back and encourage you to donate them to your prison library. If it has been 6 months or more and you haven't received your package let us know and resend your request giving us multiple choices (in genres/interests). Please use the*

*signup sheet at the back of the newsletter to give us information about your book request. Happy Reading!*

**Poetry Anthology** – Every six months PE volunteers create a new poetry anthology by selecting poetry that has been submitted by all of you. We are currently finishing work on Anthology # 26 and will be collecting poetry for Anthology #27 in coming months. Put pen to paper and see what words come forth! **Not everyone who submits a poem is selected, but everyone who submits a poem will have a copy of the anthology mailed to them.** We also select some poems and post them online in our PE poetry archive. From there you never know who might read your poem. We will include contact info for you so readers online can write to you if they choose. Keep your poetry coming! Please understand that not every poem can be chosen, and the choice reflects the volunteer editors' preferences. Writing the poetry is for you to get your thoughts, and feelings out and you sharing it with us is a gift. Here's a sampling of some poems submitted this previous cycle. Let us hear what's incubating inside your mind.

#### **Truth Clarified by Taj Alexander Mahon-Haft**

The truth of any scene  
Depends on the frame  
And the painter's perspective  
While rose-colored shackles  
May shift the hue  
They do little to clarify  
And ideological lenses  
Are myopic  
Economic spectacles  
Cataracts  
And faith can be  
Blinding

#### **Paper Warper by Edward Williams Jr.**

I have the power to warp a page  
Into a paper filled with rage,  
Sorrow, hate, and much duress  
First a blank page I caress  
One without a speck or spot  
Then express my pain a lot;  
Yes, I just complain a lot  
But each line contains a lot (of)  
Steam in my dead train of thought  
I like it when it rains a lot  
Cause then I can refrain from thought  
And watch the water pour.  
To add to this, I have nothing more.

*Each of us has some unique capability waiting for realization. Every person is valuable in his own existence, for himself alone... each of us can bring to fruition these innate, God-given abilities.*  
-- *George H. Bender*

### **Beautiful Around the Clock by Richard Smith**

If ever this could give  
Your ears and I could face  
My fears as I desire  
Your smile that lights a fire  
And while your lips appear  
To shine your voice I hear  
Is fine and all along  
Your eyes can sing a song  
That drives this heart to beat  
And rhyme that will repeat  
In time if love is fine  
Forever I'll have you

### **Personification by Brandon Rushing**

We are waiting,  
Where are you?  
Our spines lay stiff, unbent.  
Our stories remain untold.  
Where are you?

We are ready.  
Where are you?  
Our knowledge is still bound!  
Our pages heavy with tales,  
Where are you?

We are yours.  
Where are you?  
Our burden longs to be lifted,  
Our yoke, so easy to slip away.  
Where are you?

We are  
Your books, your tales, your tomes.  
Your many lives unlived but told!  
Our hope is in your hands  
Where are you?

### **Untitled by Wendell Duncan**

What dreams may come are dreams that fall  
When life is lived without love at all.  
Your mind may fool you into believing  
That follies of the heart aren't really worth living.  
Oh, but you listen close, and listen dear  
Peace of mind only comes when things aren't so clear.  
Seems ironic, yes I know, but clarity only confines  
As it binds the soul far from the sublime.  
The heart knows this all too well, all too true  
While the mind seeks out, "whatever must it do?"  
So follow your heart into the chaos with bliss,  
Staying true to its yearning lest you blink and miss  
That flight of fancy, of love, of peace, of happiness

Offered little by the mind with its ever-deep abyss.

### **NESA by Spencer Butler**

So here I sit in limbo at a prison known as Wyna  
A neon electric space alien  
Labels are given and called by the state  
They say transgender, gay or straight  
Maybe I'm not either. Ask and I'll tell  
I am myself and I know myself well.  
Somedays I'm Superman and some days I'm not.  
Somedays I'm Wonder Woman and yeah, I know I'm hot  
But somedays I'm neither or all of the same  
Somedays I'm a rainbow and Nesa is my name.

Neon  
Electric  
Space  
Alien

### **Ode To My Mom by Michael S. Griffis**

Though I shed not single tear  
When I learned upon your death  
I missed you in your final days  
And too your final breath  
For we had patched a mended fence  
And feelings none of grief  
For you forgave this reprobate  
When coward and a thief  
Not just once or twice or thrice  
But every time was asked  
It's not just angels far and wide  
But mothers also tasked  
And you were tasked beyond your years  
But more than earned your keep  
It's you that soothed my soul to peace  
And you that got no sleep  
And you that nursed and nourished me  
In times of thick and thin  
And you that kept the wolves at bay  
Amid the noise and din  
T'was you were there for cuts and scrapes  
With bandage and a kiss  
Your tender loving care on call  
I cherish now and miss

Reading is a must you said  
So patiently you taught  
How I learned my A, B, C's  
And how my dreams were caught  
But glitter doesn't mean it's gold  
For even diamonds flaw  
What was once a sunny day  
Turned bitter cold and raw  
You pushed and pulled and tugged and shoved

But still I wouldn't budge  
 'til I was forced to lose your hand  
 By magistrate and judge  
 And still you wouldn't quit on me  
 When hope was all but gone  
 A momma bear unto her cub  
 A doe beside her fawn  
 Heavens were moved, oceans displaced  
 But I was not forgotten  
 Sacrifice again was made  
 For thankless son was rotten  
 The years rolled by on broken wheels  
 Nothing ever changed  
 The mom who never would give up  
 Weeping and estranged

Length or width it mattered not  
 Nor did depth or height  
 Mom a beacon on the hill  
 Guiding with her light  
 Then took me in when no one would  
 And asked for not a thing  
 Hence again I found myself  
 Beneath my mother's wing  
 And not just me but me and mine  
 With nay a word of shame  
 The love was unconditional  
 A virtue man could claim  
 She gave and gave and gave some more  
 While she was being robbed  
 The more you have the more he takes  
 By reaper she was mobbed  
 The years rolled by much slower now  
 And mom was most alone  
 So many kids and kids of kids  
 Could barely find a phone  
 But mother's work is never done  
 And mom was no exception  
 The poultice never seeks the wound  
 Until severe infection

Liken to the days of olde  
 And how the addict gambles  
 I found myself a castaway  
 Again my life in shambles  
 But shine you did like Northern Star  
 The brightest in the sky  
 You came though unsolicited  
 But mothers never vie  
 Three more years of 'look don't touch'  
 The last we'd never see  
 Who'd of ever thought the day  
 No leaves upon the tree  
 It seems a hundred years ago  
 I hugged my mother last  
 It seems a hundred years ago

Went by much to fast  
 Upon my mother's head I place  
 A kiss to say goodbye  
 Mother, mentor, best of friend  
 Lift your wings and fly.

Clara Lou Bielecki June 1937 – October 2021



Brian Hindson

**Journal Project** – Grace has been coordinating the project the past year. She was in Africa for the summer working on a public health project and is now back in Ithaca to run the journal project. Below is Grace's introduction to the journal project. Consider joining. It is a good way to process what is inside of you and to get your thoughts heard by others.

*My name is Grace, and I am the Coordinator for the Journal Program here at Prisoner Express. I am a third-year student at Cornell University studying global and public health, but I also love to read and write in my spare time. The journal project was one of the first programs at PE, and we have members who have been with us anywhere from a couple of weeks to several years. There is room for all types of writers, and likewise, there is no wrong way to write. Writing can be empowering, and a source of hope and clarity. Many people who write regularly observe mental health benefits, and experience powerful breakthroughs. By joining this program, you can also share your writing with fellow members and volunteers. Volunteers at PE read the material that you send in and often write a friendly letter back to share their own thoughts with you. I love hearing your ideas and stories, and the program is a great opportunity to exchange letters with people who care about what you are thinking and experiencing. I highly encourage you to register! We will send an introduction packet with plenty of inspiration to get you started, and if you write to me about questions or ideas you have for the program, I will do my absolute best to respond. We also upload many submissions to an online archive where anyone in the United States can read and respond to your work: <https://prisonerexpress.org/read-prisoner-writing/>. This*



*year I hope to establish routine contact with members of the program, learn more about what you would like to see from the program, and recruit more volunteers. I also hope to dedicate a couple hours per week to just writing letters so that I can respond directly to as many of you as possible. Now that I am back, I look forward to responding to any correspondence from the summer! We are here to support you in any capacity we can, and I hope you will join us on this journey.*

**Meditation Project/Pema Chodron Book** – We have a new wrinkle to add to this cycle's mediation mailing. We plan to send a book as well as a newsletter from Tara. We have received word that we can have copies of Pema Chodron's book **"Taking the Leap: Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears"**. Here is a short description of the contents

***Pema Chodron shows us how to break free of destructive patterns in our lives and experience a new sense of freedom and happiness. Drawing on the Buddhist concept of shenpa, she helps us to see how certain habits of mind tend to "hook" us and get us stuck in states of anger, blame, self-hatred, and addiction. The good news is that once we start to see these patterns, we can begin to change our lives for the better.*** We hope to send a series of questions for you to ponder and respond to along with a copy of the book. If this title is not available there are other meditation/self-help books available, and we will substitute another book. Pema Chodron has insights that have helped many people, and hopefully now it is your turn to be inspired to see behind the veil of our minds to something deeper.

**Chess Project** – Robert continues to produce chess packets full of puzzles, history, strategy, and great chess games of the past. He is open to hearing what you'd like to see in future chess packets. Write him with your comments and questions by putting Attn: Chess on the outside of your envelope, so I can get the letter to him sooner.

**Advanced Spanish** – This course is for those who already feel they have some knowledge of Spanish. Last cycle we sent out our introductory "Let's learn Spanish" packet and this packet builds on the lessons of the previous packet. We will reoffer the intro course in a future cycle. We will not be mailing it out this cycle due to funding issues, so I ask you to be patient and wait for the beginning of this language module to be offered if you are a beginner and want to learn Spanish. The Advanced Spanish course was put together with contributions from Hope and Cora. Two students who have also graduated and moved on to other endeavors. Both of them have let me know how meaningful their interaction has been with all of you. Hope is now a 2<sup>nd</sup> year law student and Cora is going to school to become a physical therapist. They both gave so much time and attention to PE and it is nice that they have left something that can be used even as they have crossed the country for these new studies

**Book Club – Sentences that Create Us.** Here at PE, we believe writing can be used as a tool to both find yourself and set yourself free. We have been encouraging writing from day 1 and as I've said, I certainly see a lot of personal growth in the writers who participate in our journal, poetry and theme projects I as a reader also grow from reading what you all share. Your words once released find themselves in many places and in many minds. [Just check out all the PE poets included in the copy of Rattle offered in this cycle]. This book is described as ***"A road map for incarcerated people and their allies to have a thriving writing life behind bars—and shared beyond the walls—that draws on the unique insights of more than fifty contributors, most themselves justice-involved, to offer advice, inspiration and resources."*** This project will include a writing assignment for your joy and edification. I hope you chose to sign up. This is available to the first 500 folks who sign up

**Rattle Magazine – Tribute to Prisoner Express** and it's poets. If you read the previous newsletter you heard about our new ongoing relationship with Tim Green, the editor of Rattle Magazine. Tim read some of the poems submitted by PE members who were involved in our chapbook program, and was so impressed, he included a bunch of poems in the Summer 2022 Rattle. He is donating 500 copies of the Rattle to share with all of you. Along with the copy of Rattle will be letters from Tim and Elizabeth who led our chapbook program. Their words and insights along with the copy of Rattle should aid the poets of PE in refining their craft.

**Mental Health Packet #3** – Sara has completed a few mental health packets focused on biology and mental health. She is working on a third packet titled **The Endocrine System and Mental Health**. I have received feedback on how helpful these packets are. I am particularly interested in the endocrine system which is the name for all those important ductless glands. Important endocrine glands include the pituitary, thyroid, parathyroid, thymus, and adrenal glands. For those of you who enjoy metaphysical studies the endocrine glands are each associated with a different chakra [energy center] in the body. I don't know enough about the subject to say more, but I know many of you enjoy esoteric knowledge and learning about the endocrine system will shed more light on the subject. An example is the concept of the "Third Eye" which corresponds to the Pineal Gland. ***"The name "third eye" comes from the pineal gland's primary function of 'letting in light and darkness', just as our two eyes do. This gland is the melatonin-secreting neuroendocrine organ containing light-sensitive cells that control the circadian rhythm"*** There are other glands that contain endocrine tissue and secrete hormones, including the pancreas, ovaries, and testes. This should be fascinating! Sara describes her packet:

The next installment in the series on mental health and the body will spotlight the endocrine system and how it is intertwined with mental health. If you've been keeping up with this series, you'll remember that the first one focused on the nervous system and the second on immunology/the immune system. I hope these newsletters have given you a chance to explore your interest in how the human body works and understand how interconnected our systems are. The upcoming newsletter will look at how hormones work, where they're produced, and their effects on the body (including mental health). There will also be opportunities for you to consider your own experiences.

**Philosophy Packet** – Ethan is back to share another chapter in philosophy. Last cycle he stepped in at the last moment to share with us a history of western philosophy. Now he has time to plan the next lesson. As you may be able to tell he is enthusiastic about philosophy and is thrilled to be able to share his passion with all of you. Don't be put off by the big words he uses in the description below. I am sure after you read his packet you will understand them all. He writes in a clear and accessible way about complex ideas. Here's his brief intro to what he is planning to share.

*Dear fellow students of philosophy, I am deeply gratified to learn of the enthusiastic responses to last spring's philosophy packet, A Brief Introduction to the Western Philosophical Tradition. In light of this enthusiasm, I have begun to write another philosophy packet, which will be distributed by Prisoner Express this autumn. With this next edition, I will be doing something a little bit different. For your education and entertainment, I proudly present the forthcoming packet, which I call Battleground: Philosophy! In this packet, we will be discussing some of the great disagreements, controversies, and feuds in the history of Western philosophy. Subjects will include: "Battleground: Free Will," focusing on the differing views from determinist Baruch Spinoza and libertarian Jean-Paul Sartre; "Battleground: Time," focusing on the different theories from presentist Augustine of Hippo and four-dimensionalist David Lewis; "Battleground: Space," focusing on the debates between substantivalist Gottfried Leibniz and relationalist Isaac Newton; "Battleground: Morality," focusing on the divide between deontologist Immanuel Kant and consequentialist John Stuart Mill; and more! This packet is neither a continuation of nor sequel to the one from the spring, so you will not need to have read the previous packet to understand this one. It is important to me that the information in these packets remain accessible to everyone, regardless of how familiar you are with other works of philosophy. That being said, the context of the broader philosophies discussed in the previous packet will provide a more complete understanding of the positions of the philosophers we will be discussing in this packet, so I recommend readers brush up on the material from A Brief Introduction to the Western Philosophical Tradition, before embarking on the next stage of this journey. Happy searching! Ethan*

**ARTknows** – Treacy has been leading the PE art program for 10+ years and I know how appreciated she is for all she shares with you about art and being an artist. She has the skill of encouraging and opening doorways of perception for aspiring PE artists. Here is a brief intro from Treacy giving you a hint of what the next ARTknows packet will contain.

*Greetings on this late-August day! I hope the summer has not been too dreadfully hot where you are. Here in Ithaca, it is hot but at least on this day, the humidity is low, and I can type these paragraphs while sitting outside.*

*I just finished two days of pouring bronze this week. The first day was a light day of just pouring 160 pounds of bronze. Yesterday, my husband and I poured 700 pounds in two pours. Sometimes I am at one end of the crucible, sometimes I operate the hoist. The crucible is heavy, but we do have the help of a hoist. Yesterday I was on the task of shoveling sand. When bronze is poured, there is a method of packing the ceramic shells in sand to help in the event of a crack in the shell. The surrounding sand will stop the molten bronze from pouring out of the shells. The problem with this method, is that this sand is then dumped from the large tubs that holds the ceramic shells (now with hot bronze in it) onto the floor – about 3000 pounds of sand!! All that sand then has to be shoveled into metal buckets to use in the next pour or after the last pour, to put away and store. Yesterday we had a team of 7 people working different tasks, but all helped in shoveling the sand. Sometimes, I have the task of organizing food for the team. This week, my husband took on that task and like usual, bought much too much food.*

**Which brings me to the topic of the next ARTknows – food! "You art what you eat."**

*If you consider that food and art have gone hand in hand since the beginning of time, it is no wonder that much of art is about food. Such art consists of still life paintings of opulent fruit, cheese, and other food stuff from the Dutch painters of 1700s to Claes Oldenburg's 1976 sculpture of a curved 52-foot aluminum spoon holding a cherry – a spoon that expands a pond. Then there is the more contemporary take on food art in which food becomes the medium and not necessarily the subject of the piece. Or become both maybe as in the Erie Art Museum where the artist places candy on the floor. Or the use of M&Ms that some of you are familiar with in creating color!*

*Of course, any art that is inspired by the Artknows newsletters – whether it is this edition or the summer's*



*edition on drawing - will be considered for the traveling exhibition that is sponsored by the Story House project. [More on Story House] later in the newsletter*

*We also plan to start up the weekly sessions in which students view your art and write letters to you in support. As you may well know, COVID has run havoc on this in-person event but hopefully, COVID will be less intrusive this coming school year.*

*We continue to enjoy seeing the art that you share with PE!- Take care!-Treacy*



*Your artwork displayed outside Durland Alternatives Library*

**Story House Ithaca Project** – I have mentioned in a past newsletter that outside the library I have 2 displays that are 4 ft by 16 ft long panels full of artwork, poetry, journal entries, and random writings you all have sent in. It is an interesting way to tell the story of Prisoner Express to people who are walking through the hallway. I notice how it can stop people in their tracks, and they spend time reading your words and enjoying the art you share. Lesley and Jon were at the library and noticed the wall. They were taken in by it. They run a project Story House Ithaca that is all about telling stories and building community. They want us to build more panels of your writing and art and start displaying them in public libraries around the region. It is an exciting project and yet another way to get your voices and ideas heard by folks in the free world. We never know where these projects will lead, but it seems like a great first step to raising awareness of the humanity of incarcerated people. Of course, we know that, but for many folks, the out of sight out of mind rule holds true. We want to put you in their sightline and have them experience some of who you are. There is nothing you have to do to participate other than continue to send in your writings and art. Any artist or writer whose work is selected will receive a visual print of their piece in the exhibit. I love that the community is rallying to further support PE and give you all a platform from which to be heard. Here is their brief description of the project.

*Hello! Our names are Lesley Greene and Jon Miller, and we are the co-directors of Story House Ithaca, an organization that brings people together to share stories in all forms.*

*We are working with Gary, Treacy, and Prisoner Express to create an exhibit of art, poetry, and essays by incarcerated people. The exhibit will travel to five libraries in New York State next spring.*

*We'd love to see your work! We would also like to hear your thoughts on what art and writing mean to you. Please send your art, poetry, short stories, and essays to Prisoner Express by December 1st. If your work is selected, we will credit you in the exhibit materials and send you a print or photo of your submission as it appears in the exhibit. Please keep written work to a single page.*

*We can't wait to hear from you!*

**Blast from the Past** – You have to have been a member of PE for a while for this to ring a bell. Years ago, Prof. Dani helped create a series of basic math packets for PE. Recently Dani sent me a note asking me to include a short letter to you all about a new venture he believes could make a great difference in your life and in the world. I agreed and here is his letter.

*Dear friends,  
Some of you may remember me. My name is Dani Novak and I corresponded with you 1-1 and also was in charge of the Math program. I did not connect with you for a long time but recently I was prompted to do so. I realized that I made my own prison and was my own prison guard. Once I realized that, I became free like a bird whose cage door was opened and she flies into the blue sky. One of the instruments that helped me to realize this was James Twyman, a bestselling author and a teacher. James has a friend whose name is Baraka Norberry. Baraka had a vivid dream in which he was shown a store in a mall with a sign on top: "There Must Be A Better Way" This phrase was the motivating force behind ACIM: "A Course In Miracles" that is transforming millions of people's lives.*

*The purpose of the letter is to reach those of you who are called from within to support the idea in prisons. To become ambassadors of the idea. At this point all you need is to be willing and write a few words about yourself and how the idea resonates with you. Once you are selected to become an ambassador you will receive a book by James Twyman or Michael Brown who birthed the "Presence Process" and wrote the book by that name.*

*At this point we are not sure how many people will be admitted to the program. It depends on funding. Further information and instruction will be communicated in the next letter and through 1-1 correspondence.  
I am sending you lots of Love.  
--Dani Novak*

If you would like to hear more from Dani about this project, drop us a letter at PE and **please put Attn Prof. Dani on the envelope.** At this point it is not an official PE project as I have not budgeted the funds to ensure it will happen, but Dani believes he can get the books and financial support to get this project moving. **Dani is always on the path of self-transformation, and he wants to include all of you on his journey. Let him know you are interested by writing him a letter expressing your interest in joining him in finding “The Better Way”**

## Word and Picture Themes

*I am reprinting what I wrote in last newsletter about the theme program because I can't think of a better way to introduce it. If any of you who participate feel you want to add to this intro or write about how participating in this program has affected you please, send me suggestions/testimonials for the next newsletter. -Gary*

PE applauds the men and women who participate in the Theme Writing project, and it has been these writers who inspired the creation of the Prisoner Express Newsletter. They still provide the impetus to continue publishing the PE News. After the Alternatives Library began the book package program in 2002, we received thank you letters from recipients. Many of the letters we received stated a similar theme. The things stated were

1. “I am going crazy”
2. “I can’t show kindness, vulnerability, and other feelings as they will be seen as weakness and used against me”
3. “I dislike everyone around me, especially those who are different from me” [in race, religion, ethnicity]
4. “Mail is the most important thing in my life”

Over and over those same thoughts were expressed. As usual time and money made it impossible to write personal letters back to all who wrote to say thank you, so the idea was hatched that we will offer a monthly theme topic. If you send a submission on a topic, you receive a copy of what everyone else writes, plus a note from me or whoever is putting together the packet. As theme writers began reading each other’s writing in

the tone of the letters I was receiving from the participants changed. Their letters to PE made it clear that the writers were resonating with each other’s experiences. Men and women realized they weren’t going crazy, but rather were in a difficult environment that would disrupt anyone’s mental health. With that realization we [PE and YOU] could begin together to create activities that helped one survive and thrive in a difficult environment. Next people realized that folks of different races, religions and ethnicities felt the same way about what they were all experiencing, and that all of you have much more in common than you may have understood. Sharing our common humanity is something we can cultivate wherever we are. United we stand and divided we fall. Coming together as a community can bring strength to the individual members. Over the years I have seen the community build among the participants of PE programs just through their shared participation and reading one another’s words. Once you realize you are not alone and that you are part of a community, some empowerment is gained. Readers of the themes responded with praise for the other writer’s willingness to share authentically, letting me know that they too wanted to share their deeper feelings and emotions, and that they were inspired by what they read. I am immensely gratified by the writing that is submitted and the growing of a group-mind among the participants. It is from these writers that the whole PE program developed.

We started the PE Newsletter in 2004 to share some selected writings. We hope many more of you will put pen to paper and let your thoughts fly. Letting your thoughts out can change their direction and lead to new insights. Prior to starting these writing programs at PE, I kept visualizing you all as having thoughts run round and round in your head spiraling downward. At least that is how many letters sounded to me. I know that still must be the case for some of you, but certainly for some writers there has been a joy in creating and in uncovering a creative side of yourself that you can share with others.

We try to include every theme received in the packets we mail to those who contribute a story. We do have some limiting conditions. We do not publish themes that promote hate for various groups of people. Feel free to write about individuals who do you wrong, but don’t throw whole groups under the bus. We are not about generating hate.

**Write legibly and keep your entry to 800 words. [We can be a little flexible about this if your writing captivates us]. Make sure your name is on your writing.**

Write about the word -or picture- cue. Don’t just send in a writing and expect it to be included because you assigned it a word-cue. We have to see a connection.

**The WORD themes are to be true stories or your beliefs. No fiction. The PICTURE THEMES can be whatever you want. Fantasy or reality. You chose.**



**If we think what you wrote could get the packet censored, we will print it separately from the entire packet.** Sometimes what you think is okay can get mail censored somewhere else. Very little bothers me more than when the mail I send out is not delivered. It makes it look like we are blowing you off, and I don't have the resources to write to individuals every time I find out mail was not delivered. I fear every time I hear of mail failing to reach one of you, that it is happening many times over and I just don't know about it. Let's all do the best we can and hope the kind hearts in this world ensure that your mail continues to flow.

Every PE newsletter contains a selection of themes from the previous months. A few stories from each theme topic are chosen to share with all of you. I hope you enjoy them and can appreciate the power of sharing your thoughts.

### **Upcoming Word Theme Cues**

- **Race due 10/1/22**

- **Growth 11/1/22** *[Think about your life experiences and how they have shaped you. Were there any moments that changed your outlook on life or that shaped your path positively? If you're able to, consider how time leading up to and in prison may have contributed to personal/character growth. This is a special request topic from Sara who has been interested in compiling certain stories she receives into a booklet. She hopes you writing on this topic will generate more material for this project. Sara also creates the mental health packets.]*

- **Loneliness due 12/1/22**

- **Education due 1/1/23**

- **Mama Tried due 2/1/23**

- **Teachers due 3/1/23**

- **Challenged due 4/1/23**

- **The Circus due 5/1/23**

- **Rescued due 6/1/23**

### **Previous Word Themes**

#### **Accidents:**

**By Matthias Poteet**

There are rarely any accidents when choice is involved. I believe that when this topic "Accidents" is applied to choose it almost never happens. Why am I applying the topic "Accidents" to the decisions we make in life? Why am I analyzing it from this angle? Because our entire life course is based on the decisions that we make; and when we make decisions that we later regret, we say it was a mistake or an accident.

Failure to make a morally correct, socially accepted, or generally good decision is not a mistake. A mistake or accident is like speaking or acting too quickly to process a situation. As a criminal, I have learned through books based on the criminal personality that crimes I committed were fundamentally rooted in my extreme thinking patterns. This information did not in any shape or form justify my actions; however, it did enlighten me to the reality that there are people

who do not view the world the same way that the majority of society does. The crimes I committed were fueled by my desire to seek power, control, and excitement. My crimes were not mistakes though. They were decisions made by the best thinking of a 15-year-old. Of course, my best thinking has changed exponentially; but that is neither here nor there. There are millions of people with the label extreme thinker over their heads, however, they are not criminals. Nevertheless, it took me almost 5 whole years to stop lying to myself. I did not accidentally shoot the victim of my crime. It was a heinous act, and a very poor choice because of my ignorance.

Failing to analyze the consequences of a decision that you are going to make is also not an accident. I remember the night I got my 5-minute phone call in the Department of Juvenile Justice. I was 15 years old at the time. When I picked up the phone to call my now deceased mother, I was startled by her crying on the phone. She told me that my younger brother Brandon was set up by a friend of ours and was shot. I remember crying for the first time publicly while in jail and had no shame in that moment. My brother was 13 years old at the time. Later found out that the kid who set up my brother (who was our friend) was a 14-year-old drug dealer, and of course, a stick-up kid. I filled my heart with hate for him; and a year later, I finally found him. Now I'm here with a mandatory 25-year sentence, and I still have 19 more to go. Had I known that I would be in my current circumstances then, I am 100 percent sure I wouldn't have done what I have done. I failed to take into consideration the consequences behind the choice I made. However, it was no accident.

I made choices that temporarily damaged my life. The only accident I had though was not realizing sooner that prison is the greatest university in the world. I am surrounded by nothing but oppressors, failures, and a whole lot of books. All which I have all the time in the world to learn from. Accepting responsibility for my choices has helped me to learn, grow, and forgive myself. "Accidents" give us an escape route to avoid accountability, and we should avoid that which stunts our growth. If our life course is directed by our choices, then we should be careful not to make the mistake of learning from our bad ones.



*Patrick Bentley*

## **Accidentally Ambidextrous by Christopher Negrete**

Oddly, the insignificant details which line the periphery are what I can recall with precision. Apparently, this is not an uncommon happenstance surrounding traumatic episodes. Likewise, time protracting and elongating: everything possessing an underwater legato. This is a physiological reaction to serious danger. Perhaps this explains why details remain so vivid, hyaline, eidetic. For instance: lacking photographic evidence I could not, under penalty of death, recollect what I wore on any given day of my life- birthdays, first dates, snowball fights, etc. However, I can vouch that on July 14, 1986, I sported a black tank-top, black and white checkerboard shorts, white socks (later crimson, saturated with blood), and sneakers. That evening, my baseball team was slated to practice. I was our starting second baseman and would be upset about missing it. And the remainder of the season.

Additionally, I recall the weather- beautiful, warm. The sort of sunlight-drenched day represented in soft-focus movie flashback: saturated with yellows, greens, and the sounds of children playing off in the middle distance. Meanwhile, I'm scarcely able to recount the conditions of three days ago.

In the preceding weeks there had been unsettling images: premonitions, or visions if you prefer. Whatever categorization pleases you, I repeatedly envisaged scenarios wherein I lost an arm. These phantasmagorias featured no blood, no gore- only an abrupt loss of limb. Paradoxically, as I walked slowly toward our house, holding my mangled right arm with my left, I distinctly heard my own voice calmly repeating, "this is just a dream," while leaving a gruesome trail of claret Rorschach splotted on the bleached cement sidewalk: a macabre homage to Jackson Pollack. At no point did I cry.

There are myriad other details. My uncle, a firefighter/EMT, unwittingly, serendipitously, pulled up in a candy red Plymouth hatchback just as I was crossing the street home. Speaking of serendipity: my father, also a firefighter/EMT, had been assigned that day, entirely by chance, ambulance driving duty. Later, I was informed the official response time (from the moment a call is received to arrival of a responder on scene) to our trailer house, some 2 ½ miles distant from the station, was one minute fifty-eight seconds.

That night, on a table adjacent to my bed on the children's floor of the hospital, perched a telephone in the guise of Kermit the Frog. This unfortunate, plasticized Kermit was missing one eye. Maimed, like me.

As it turned out, despite the decimated forearm anatomy, my appendage was somehow salvageable. Though a prime candidate for amputation below the elbow, my surgeon, while conceding my right (and heretofore dominant) hand would henceforth be of dubious functionality, wished to preserve for me a modicum of normalcy, and undertook the hours-long endeavor of trying to restore my wrist and hand, a la Luke Skywalker. (Indeed, when I twitch my fingers, one

witnesses now the assorted cables and pulleys working beneath the scarred flesh of my wrist.

Regardless of potential long-term amelioration, for the nonce I became a Southpaw. Eating, phone-dialing, writing, pants-zipping: these mundane affairs became a perpetual cavalcade of vitriol-inducing moments. My left-handed motor skills were on par with an average toddler's. Suddenly, my little sister's shoe-tying was a spectacle of goddamn prestidigitation.

Onward I struggled, out of necessity, sure- also from unmitigated obduracy. Refusal to be a handicapped charity case. A child to pity. A boy who was less-than. Going so far as to reposition the components of my drum kit in a mirrored visage of the previous arrangement. From age eight I taught myself how to play right-handed. I would do likewise in reverse. Over the months and years, in fits and starts, two things happened: My left hand became adroit at various tasks, and my right- mechanical idiosyncrasies aside- regained general functionality. Fast forward to the present...

Today my hands have an agreed upon division of labor. Left: driving, eating, most of the typing, channel flipping, carrying the heavier groceries, and so on. Right: shaving, gin-pouring, crossword solving, pancake-flipping, hammering, etc. Meanwhile, hair-washing, chess maneuvers, throwing items, unlocking doors, what have you: either/or.

In youth, my hands learned an accidental lesson in adaptability. In adulthood, my brain finally caught up. Even now my hands remind me of my capacity for adaptation, evolution. Occasionally, one hand will commandeer a task usually reserved for its mate. Except unhooking a bra while making out: that's lefty, always.

## **By John James Obiols**

Life isn't an accident. I am meant to be here. Mistakes are made but great blessings are gained from the pain. I once felt I was an accident. Once I thought I didn't feel at all. I didn't want to feel because of the pain experienced by shame. Shame is the worst kind of disease. At first there seems to be no cure. It is no accident that I'm here. I found my courage here, my heart. Courage to face and reason with the shame. I found myself in the battle. My emotions, pain, my identity. I also found a gift, really a treasure: Empathy. Empathy helped me deal with my painful memories. Empathy gave me the power to experience my actions, my very self through others' eyes. To not just understand me more, to understand who I am for others, to understand. The meaning behind our shared experience. Life isn't an accident. We're all part of the meaning of life. I write this dwelling on the hurt, the betrayal I feel toward the person who sent me to prison. I don't want to hate her. I want to acknowledge her hurt and her own shame. I want to understand her to better love her. Even though she brought terrible pain into my life, I still have cherished memories with her. Even now I can see back when I stared into her eyes. Her eyes told of a story. A story about us. I can still feel her hand squeezing mine. I still feel the love. This wasn't an accident. This is my chance for life. I might never know the why, never

know her true feelings, might never be able to forgive each other. My love for her is unconditional, it is my redemption. The gleam in her eyes wasn't once upon a dream. They are a reflection of what once was, of what can be again one day, even with another. That is love. Love isn't about what we gain or possess from that person. Love is about sharing and understanding. About seeing the goodness in someone. That little piece of divinity left in us all. Love is about recognizing our shared dignity.

### **Accidents: A Part of Life by Charles Whitfield**

Some people consider accidents to be a part of life because they can be harmful. They teach us that the most important thing in our lives is what we're doing now.

The main purpose of accidents is to keep us mindful of how brief our lives are. Yet accidents provide gifts even when they're sad, for albeit the emotion of sorrow is felt, joy shines her light upon one's bruised heart.

Accidents also motivate us as we all sail our ships up the river of life and love. When the flag is unfurled, all reason is in the trumpet. Accidents, like love, teach us to dance. For it's the superfluous things of life that we all sweat.

So, accidents are a part of life just like spring rains falling on planted seeds, afterwards blooming where they were planted. Because Heaven made them, and the earth found some use for them.

### **Rocked My World by Vicki Hicks**

I used to run the track here at Camp Prisoney Land often. Nothing like the freedom of running. One Sunday morning I was going along, and my foot caught a rock that was protruding from the ground. Down I went, my face met the rock first then my hands and knees. My glasses flew off and landed quite a way away. There were only a few other people in the rec yard that day and they came to help me. One went to get the officer from the office, another one got me some wet tissue to wipe the blood running down my face. The first concern of the officer was who did this to me. I explained what happened and they did not believe me. The sergeant came over and asked, "who did this to you?" I told him the same thing and he said he was going to take me to confinement for lying to staff after I was taken care of with medical care. The nurse came to take me in a wheelchair to medical to treat me for the abrasions and swollen eye. While there, she asked me who did this to me, that I could talk to her, and it would remain confidential. I advised her that my foot caught the rock and I fell. I wrote a request to the assistant warden asking him to address the rock issue; he and the warden went out, looked, and never addressed the rocks. They are still there to this day. No one was worried about what caused the accident, they just wanted the who. Crazy how they perceive things here. Now I run where there are no rocks.



*Arnie Zepeda*

### **Success:**

#### **Success in Failing by Jonathan Holman**

The only success I've ever had is in succeeding in my failure. In every thought, in every dream, hope is a lost forlorn concept for the living. I cannot say that nothing ever works out, because in those nothings never working, I've made success in always failing.

Perhaps then, there is a hope? In the fact that I am still just trying to make one thing ever work out, then maybe I'm not failing, but just still trying. Is then trying failing, or is it succeeding in just trying?

Can we succeed if we never win? The samurai Yamamoto Tsunetomo wrote of this in his work, "Hagakure." Tsunetomo explained that "negligence is an extreme thing". He continued to describe the concept by saying "we make our logic according to what we like. But not having attained our aim and continuing to live is cowardice." He tells us that there is no shame in setting one's heart right every moment, in trying to achieve our aim, we succeed, by trying, our "...whole life will be without blame, and we will succeed in our calling"

Many great people have pondered this thought, but often I wonder, what if we don't succeed at anything, ever. If Tsunetomo is right in theory, by trying I'm a success. Yet, and yet there's always that thought, that simple dread, the idea of disheartened loathing for the hated self. Hated because I cannot get anything right, but even more so, because it is too late.

What if you fail so much, they lock you in a box and throw away the key. They tell you; you will die in your box. No matter what I do, or how hard I try, I've failed enough to always remain a failure.

There's this concept of a universal type of karma. If you're reading this, you probably understood the basics about karma, so I'll skip that. Universal karma, however, is the idea that whatever we put out doesn't just affect us, but it affects everyone, everywhere, at all times. Basically, if we do positive things, feed others, help in any way, then universal karma is improved. Then, even if we, or I, am a great success at being a



failure, if I keep trying and that is success in itself, then, could I possibly be a success, because me trying is somehow helping others on a universal karmic level?

Or does it matter? It would be quite easy to sit around with a smile on my face, and a needle in my arm. Perhaps laughter can be found in a puff of smoke, yet, love is not puffed up, someone dear to me once said. I could find happiness in some homemade whiskey. Drown myself to pain. Then I would be happy, and that helps on a universal level. Yet, and yet, then I wouldn't be trying, no, rather dying, and without trying we have failed.

Therefore, with all that in mind, to be a perfect success at failing, I'd have to stop trying, but I just can't do that. Then again, does success matter? Do I need to succeed on some grand scale? This all ran through my mind when I got sick.

I was so sick that breathing was a task, a pain. My head felt like nails were driven into it. My back wouldn't allow me to stand. My insides turned, and skin boiled. The sickness grew, and formed, and still threatens my life. Then, and only then I realized, in every moment I can become a success.

If I get out of bed. If I brush my teeth. If I do, even just one pushup. If I write this down. If I take my meds, that makes me sick. If I put on my glasses, my hearing aids, grab my coffee and look to the sky, If I am thankful to be alive, maybe those are the only successes that matter.

We can screw up our whole lives, and end up in a cage, but that alone doesn't mean we have to fail all the time. Whenever you try you succeed. Whenever you help someone else, in any way, you are a success. When you live, you choose to live, that alone is, or can be, the only success you ever need.



Hermes Cruz

## By Christopher Negrette

The concept of success would, at first glance, seem antithetical to someone locked up. In the United States being incarcerated is generally viewed (if we are to take at face value the vox populus) as the nadir of social standing. There are myriad cultural indicators to support this, not the least of which is the ever familiar admonishment of nascent ne'er-do-wells, "you wanna wind up in jail?" and it goes without saying that no child has ever replied "an inmate" in response to the mandatory question posed by all adults to small children regarding aspirations for their grown-up selves. How then do we, the imprisoned masses, reconcile the notion of success with the supposed epitome of failure?

I pose this question not as a prelude to a pedantic answer: rather, I perceive this as a quandary we all must address for ourselves. To wit: how can we attain success if we are not first able to define its parameters in the context of the situation in which we find ourselves? What success means for you is likely not the same for me. And the inverse is likewise true: the criteria by which I measure success is most likely at a remove from yours. Of course, freedom is sure to be the common denominator for all of us in an examination of what success entails for an inmate. In the meantime, while we await the realization of that freedom, we must find meanings (as well as means) to satisfy the ways in which we both define and attain our successes—in what forms they may take.

## By Darrell Sharpe

As a 62-year-old prisoner of 23 years duration, serving a (Life Without Parole) sentence, I have become acquainted with many prison volunteers from various organizations and of varied persuasions. Assuming that my role was to be a recipient of the many benefits provided by these army of volunteers who daily visited my place of incarceration, I was surprised to learn that my greatest success and satisfaction would take place when I myself became a volunteer. My first role as a volunteer began after I completed the required course for prison volunteers.

I approached the whole endeavor with more than a little hesitancy, because I felt I would never have the real patience to work with adults who couldn't read or write. I'm from the streets so I like fast learners, college students, and those who could catch on the first time that I showed them something. To be honest the thought of patiently reiterating the same instructions and lessons over and over again did not appeal to me at all. Then I met my first student who's also serving a life sentence which was already bad enough, but he couldn't read or write at all. This man's background as he began sharing had been a turbulent and very tragic one and did not include school whatsoever. The only living relatives he had were his brother and his father, both of whom were also in prison in other states. His main goal was to be able to finally write letters and also be able to read any letters written back to him. I realized teaching him would be an arduous task because he really didn't trust people and didn't like sitting still more than 10 minutes at a time. But most significantly, he didn't believe he



could learn or that he had self-worth. Changing this negative self-image was going to be even more difficult than learning words and constructing sentences. What a challenge. But because of all the hardships this man had been through, I accepted the challenge. Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months, months turned into a year. Finally, the day came when he asked me, "Do you think that I can write good enough to send my father a letter?" Without saying a word, I slid him a blank piece of paper and handed him a pen. As I sat there and watched, he painstakingly printed, "Dear Dad. How are you doing? I am well on this end. I miss you and I love you. When you can please write back to me. Love your son." Once he finished, he looked up at me and we both had tears in our eyes as we shook hands and I put his father's Address on the envelope, sealed it and put the stamp on it to be mailed. After that He held back more tears as he said, "I can't thank you enough for what you have done for me" then he headed off for the block he lived in with the precious letter clutched inside of his hand. It was in that very moment that I realized not only why people become volunteers but because of the "Success" they make it a lifelong enterprise.

#### **By Eric Stalford**

The measure of true success is ever changing and evolving as the situations and circumstances in our life change. Believe me my idea of success was vastly different pre-prison. All the pre-prison ideas of success are out the window as now my successful day includes daily striving to connect to my son, family, and friends while staying sane with the chaos around me. I never realized how chaotic people locked in cages could be. For those who haven't graced a jail or prison, to explain it would be like asking a woman to explain childbirth while in the midst of it. Every day I slide ever so slightly away into the abyss that's called prison, that's called rehabilitation. In a few years my success may be measured simply by clinging to the shreds of humanity like a runner gasp at the lung filling breath as they sprint towards the finish line. Unfortunately for me that finish line around the last corner will forever not show as I'm serving life without parole. What's success?

#### **A Measure of Success by John Loomis**

How do you measure success? Is it how much money you have? How famous, or infamous, are you? How much education have you received? When I was young, I thought success was based on all of that and more. And so, I dreamt, and plotted, and planned. I discovered a gift for writing at a young age and found visions of being a famous poet or author running through my creative mind. I began to buy the Writer's Market guide each year. Sending queries to various magazines. Seeking a literary agent for a mentor. The poems and story ideas flowed freely. A poem won a national contest and earned me \$50, bolstering my dreams. An article on Jesse James was published and earned \$100. I wrote a Snow White/popular culture parody "Sky Blue and the 7 other dwarves" that family and friends enjoyed. Wrote several Dr. Seuss inspired kids' books that my brothers loved. And still no

agent would return my letters, no publisher would even read my "unsolicited writings". It was disheartening. My typewriter began to gather dust, and my dreams went on the backburner. I did not feel like a success. I still wrote poetry and song lyrics, but I didn't really share much anymore. Felt like a failure. Fast-forward to 2021. I am a regular contributor to PE projects, send in poetry, journal submissions, and essays. I devour every packet and newsletter I get from PE. And I share my poetry with family and friends regularly. I have found my creative spark and my passion again. Also, I am almost 8 years clean and sober by choice, I have a renewed friendship with my little brother, my best friend Tiffany is back in my life, and I am mostly content and happy. Each day I strive to be a better person, to spread kindness, laughter, and encouragement to as many as possible, and to change the world in any small way I can for the better. 15 years incarcerated, and I have not let this place, or these people change me negatively. I am not cold, selfish, or jaded in any way, and hope still burns in my heart, even while serving a life without Parole sentence in a state far from home and family. So how do I measure success now? Each day I spread love, and not hate, is a success. Each day I laugh, instead of bitterly rage, is a success. Each moment I thank my Heavenly Father for life, rather than curse my existence, is a success. And each spark of creativity I get to share with my family and friends, free and incarcerated alike, is a success. Now, how do you measure success? I hope it is with light, with love, with gratitude. There is too much darkness and division in our world. And so, my next measure of success is to be a bright beacon of hope, a source of strength and encouragement, and a friendly face warmly smiling "Welcome to Success!"

#### **Holidays**

##### **By Brian Stevens**

Start fresh, the horizon is clear, as the sun rises on a New Year

Sweet dreams of being free, remembering the life of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Cupid has me thinking of you all the time, will you be my Valentine?

A magical rainbow led the way to a Leprechaun's pot of gold on St. Patrick's Day.

Colorful eggs, some with candy and money, were left behind by the Easter Bunny.

Cervezas, tacos, and chips with pico de gallo...celebrating Cinco de Mayo!

Rest in peace all who have passed away, gone but not forgotten on Memorial Day.

Dazzling fireworks light up the sky, as the sun sets on 4th of July.

Summer's ending, last chance to play, enjoy yourself on Labor Day.

Tricks, treats, and lots of screams...the fright-filled night of Halloween!

Family, food, and football make life worth living...so thankful every Thanksgiving. Hopefully Santa brings everything on your wish list, and you have a very Merry Christmas.

### By Philip Antes

It's been one year, almost to the day, that I got locked up. That means I missed my favorite holiday (Thanksgiving), my son's 12th birthday, and Christmas. It looks like I will be spending another year in lock-up, forcing me to miss another round of important holidays. Hooray for me and my bad decisions. I guess it could be worse, with zero options for parole.

The sentence I received was relatively short--just five years. Even if I serve the whole five behind razor wire, that's a helluva lot shorter than what I was prepared to do. You see, I battle depression. When my legal battle started, I spiraled into a very dark place. As time went on and there was more certainty to my outcome, I had decided to take the coward's way out. With my own obituary written in advance and printed information about discount cremation services, I sat near the edge of a nearby lake ready to... well, you get the idea. Looking out across the calm water and serene landscape, listening to the sounds of the night critters, smelling the water and gun oil, I began to sob uncontrollably. Not just any sob, but the ugly kind. The kind that contorts your face and steals your breath for (seemingly) minutes on end. The kind that usually only shows up at funerals or in my case, the cusp of my own demise and potential eternal damnation. The only words that I can muster are, "I...didn't say...goodbye...to my son." Once I regained my composure and felt I could drive my car without causing harm to myself or others, I returned home. I immediately went to my son's room to watch him sleep. I gently stroked his hair (like I did when he was an infant) and kissed his forehead. I whispered, "I love you more than air" into his ear to which he smiled and repeated the sentiment. He rolled over and went back to sleep. With a feeling of peace washing over me, I went to my bed and crawled in next to my wife. Rousing her out of sleep, her woman's intuition kicks in. She asked, "everything okay?" My response was simple, "it will be."

With Turkey Day and my son's 13th birthday just around the corner, I'm glad I get to miss the holidays this year. And the three after that (if parole deems it so). It's not ideal, but it also isn't permanent. My son has it rough enough knowing his dad is a felon. Forcing him to view me as a coward is unfair, tragic and an example of idiocracy at its worst.

That night by the lake was the first good decision I had made in a very long time. Razor wire and plexiglass may separate us, but I at least get to hear his voice. Many people, especially us felons, get depressed this time of year. Instead of looking at the negative, I'm looking to the future and ways that I celebrate the holidays post-release. No matter what, they will all be filled with lasting, positive family memories... not the

annual mourning that I almost forced my loved ones into. I will NOT miss another holiday, I will simply be temporarily absent.



Clifton Jackson

### By Lance Porter

I have been in prison since I was 20 years old. I served a 12-year sentence, was out for 4 years, and back in since 2010 to the current time.

Holidays were something I looked forward to as a kid, more so for what would come with the holidays. In prison, I find it a time that I want to go by as quickly as possible, especially Christmas where the endless stations are bombarded with ads. My blood pressure is up during this time of year because I can't escape from the reminders of the outside world.

I long for the times with my folks and family, the rest of the things which come with holidays no longer hold any interest with me. Witnessing the mobs at stores, the fighting and stampeding, even killing one another it's something that I can no longer tolerate. Holidays have lost their meaning to me.

The only good that I can find is some turkey that's real; served from the prison kitchen. Those two times a year, Thanksgiving and Xmas, that's it. I can't tell one year from the last anymore.

Though this may seem sad, it is the reality that many of us live each and every year of our lives in these environments.

### By James Bauhaus

Holidays are sad here, but I remember one that was interesting and nice. It was outside, of course, in DFW, while the cops of Oklahoma were on the chase for me. The woman at the precast place I worked for had gotten a letter from the FEDS. They told her, "This guy's name and number don't match. Send us a picture of him." She came out to the concrete mixer with a polaroid, wanting me to pose with a fake stone, for sales purposes. It was ridiculous, me as a model, grinning into the camera as if I was the Burger King with a new Whopper. It was time to drop everything and find another place to hide; make a new plan. As soon as work was over, I took my paycheck and disappeared.

My emergency hideout was the bending machine room at the airport Hilton. This is where my underground friends had

rooms to take their clients. After all of the dates dried up, usually about four AM, I could catch some sleep and a shower in one of the connecting rooms. Since this was a holiday weekend, the dates thinned out early. I was sleeping hard when I got the signal. One of the girls, Gina, was pounding on the door to her side and urgently calling my name. They don't often have trouble with unruly dates, but when they did, I'd barge in, ready to yell at somebody until he paid her. I jumped up, still dressed, laced up my work boots, and snatched up a heavy, fist-sized glass ashtray on my way to the door. You could never tell how big of a brute they brought "home," so you had to be ready for anything. Teeth barred, I crashed into her room, looking for the problem. Gina, Margie, Cindy, and Casey were there, but no date. "Where's he at?" I asked. "Do I need to chase him down? He parked out front?"

Gina laughed. The other three joined in, snickering. "You won't need that," she said, indicating the ashtray. "Help Sharon and Wayne bring stuff up from his truck. We're all going to have Thanksgiving up here together, like a picnic." They were setting out plastic cutlery and placing paper plates along the counter and table. They even had extra napkins. There was turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, KFC, and extra chairs in the truck. These sweet young women had thought of everything. I hadn't even thought of the day as anything special, having no home of my own. But my little underground friends surprised me and made it special for me. This, I will remember, every Thanksgiving.

### **Earth Day by Jacob Keiter**

The word "holiday" itself draws most towards more traditional days such as Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas. In my opinion, these days are in fact significant from their own reasoning, but there is one holiday I feel we often neglect that should in fact carry a great deal of importance. Earth Day is a day sometimes hidden in the middle of April that people often overlook. Without a doubt most of us are admiring what the Earth is producing at this time from the trees and flowers in bloom, to the air finally comfortable enough to ditch the heavy coat. But what exactly is Earth Day all about? One year my friend Lottie and I went on a mission to spread the hope, love, and message of Earth Day. In order to gain interest and gather individuals' attention, we spend days baking literally green and organic baked goods. I've come to realize food is the easiest way into somebody's heart. While handing out treats, we greeted each with a "Happy Earth Day!" and moved on to the next person. We ended up receiving way too many skeptical looks that we couldn't quite understand. It turns out we were a few days early on our celebration and ended up doing this on 4/20. If anybody knows about this day, it's unofficially the weed holiday. Probably passing out green treats on this holiday delivered the wrong message. While nobody actually came to us about it. I can only assume some people were a bit upset whenever they found out our treats weren't of the "special variety."

Additionally on Earth Day, this time the actual day, we took the time to clean litter off the sidewalks, plant pollinator friendly plants, and truly admire the natural beauty of the Earth. Like rapper Lil Dicky says, "We love the Earth, it is our planet. We love the Earth; it is our home." While Earth Day is only a single day of the year, together we can make an impact to save the Earth every day of the year.

### **A White Christmas by Paul Reed**

As a child, I loved the Christmas song, "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." I especially enjoyed Bing Crosby's version. To be sure, during the Christmas holidays, I would watch my favorite Christmas classics, "Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer," "The Little Drummer Boy," and "Frosty the Snowman." These shows nurtured a type of expectation of what Christmas was about. Besides the heightened expectation of receiving gifts, these shows created in me the longing for a beautiful, cold, and snowy Christmas- a "White Christmas."

I am, however, from Southeast Texas where there is little expectation for snow, even during our coldest winter days. What is more, Texas weather is so unpredictable that it is not surprising to wake up to a warm 80 degrees Christmas morning. Snow?!! We are more likely to get dreary rain.

Christmas season 1972 turned out to be a particularly cold week. I was five years old. My mother decided to allow me to spend the day before Christmas Eve with her sister, my Aunt Marie, so I could share time with my favorite cousin, Sabrina.

Sabrina was about six months older than me and about thirty years wiser. She was a dark-skinned, beautiful, charming girl with a gorgeous spirit. Sabrina exuded an infectious smile that brightened every setting she found herself. I loved Sabrina and looked forward to spending as many moments as I could with her. Sabrina answered, for me, questions that adults avoided. She was filled with so much enthusiasm and life, with innocence and wisdom beyond her years.

To prepare for my overnight stay with Sabrina my mother took me shopping to buy a toy to give to Sabrina for Christmas. Of course, I already knew what to get for her. I had talked to her the day before on the telephone and told her we were supposed to surprise her with a gift. She told me she wanted a black Barbie Doll.

When we arrived at my aunt Marie's house in North Houston, Sabrina was eagerly waiting for me. We watched movies and played together much of the day. That night, Aunt Marie prepared a pallet of thick blankets on the living room floor so Sabrina and I could sleep together. During the night, Sabrina became weak and tired but kept up her excitement for our time together.

The next morning, we woke up to a wonderful surprise - snow. We were excited as we begged Aunt Marie to allow us to go outside and play in the unexpected snow. We wanted to make a snowman. Aunt Marie was concerned about Sabrina's health and only agreed to allow me to go out and



play and attempt to make a snowman, while she and Sabrina watched from the living room window.

It was crisp and cold outside as I stood fully, perhaps, overdressed for the weather. The snow felt like slush and crunched under my shoes with each step. At the prompting of Aunt Marie and Sabrina, I gathered as much snow as I could into a pile, then made a miserable attempt to duplicate what I had seen on "Frosty the Snowman." No matter how I tried, I could not make a snowman. My every attempt failed, as I hopelessly looked toward the window where Sabrina made animated gestures trying to guide me. Besides my failed attempts to build a snowman, my little body began feeling the sting of the cold weather. I decided to give up and return to the warm house. As I turned toward the front door before, I could take a step, the door burst open, and there stood Sabrina, wrapped in winter coats, gloves, and a wool cap. "Here I come, Paul Ray!" she gleefully exclaimed. Immediately, my body warmed with excitement.

I continued gathering snow as Sabrina constructed our snowman. After about fifteen minutes, we had a two-foot-tall snowman. Aunt Marie came outside and placed two large buttons for eyes and half a carrot for a nose on our snowman. She then crowned our snowman with an old baseball cap. She took a picture of Sabrina and me, standing next to our little version of Frosty the Snowman before ushering us back inside.

Sabrina and I stood at the living room window drinking hot chocolate, laughing and boasting about our little shared achievement. We continued to watch as Frosty slowly melted away as the sun began warming the day. A few hours later, my mother picked me up and took me home. Sabrina and I embraced affectionately before I left.

It was the last time I ever saw my cousin Sabrina. She died four months later from leukemia.

That was forty-nine years ago. Although I can still recall almost all about that Christmas, to this day, I cannot remember what gift Aunt Marie brought me on behalf of Sabrina. Whatever it was, no matter how much I may have enjoyed it, I no longer have it with me. What I do have, however, is the wonderful gift Sabrina gave me herself through our brief time together that holiday season. First, she shared with me the only "White Christmas" I've ever experienced, although it was Christmas Eve.

Second, she gave me an even greater, more endearing gift. She taught me, through her own example, how to face life with a joyful, inextinguishable sense of wonder. No one told me Sabrina was dying (my mother felt I was too young to understand). Yet, Sabrina did know that she would not live much longer, as her health worsened each day. With this understanding, she faced each day with curiosity, courage, and gratitude. Sabrina looked Death face to face and winked.

*It's from being melancholy and having my human down experiences that I learn, that I overcome, that I transform - and these realizations I put into song. That's what I choose to put in my backpack and carry with me around the world.*

-- **Jason Mraz**



*Nitti Brockman*

## **Heroes:**

### **By Thomas Black**

When I was a child, heroes were people who served the community and country. They were people who went to work, provided for their family, and taught by example and word what was right and wrong.

Society largely has lost sight of what a real hero is. Portions of society have elevated drug dealers, pimps, and thugs to hero status. For others, it's whoever has the most money. Their moral standard is NO concern. Many consider to be heroes whoever has sexual relations with as many women as possible, and if children are born, "oh well the government will provide for them."

Young women have few examples to follow, the media and celebrities tell them they lack value except as a whore or a "baby momma." culture tells them their intelligence and talents mean little. It's about shaking their bodies while wearing as little clothing as possible.

I look around this prison and see, myself included a building full of failures. Every man here had the potential to be a hero, but we all chose to abandon that potential. It was a choice; every man knew right from wrong. There are no suitable excuses!

But it doesn't have to stay that way forever. Men can change, it's all about what you and I chose to do in the future. Go be a hero! It's not something that can be done partway. You have to carry on till the end. That's what heroes do.

### **Intelligent Inmate by Delvin Diles**

Seeing me engaged in some naughty in-cell conduct, a beautiful black woman in uniform once told me:

"If you're going to be an inmate, be an intelligent inmate."

It was the most shocking and influential response to my old, since abnegated, bad behavior of any C.O. ever gave me.



Instead of writing me up, she imparted wisdom. It's the kind of heroism this palace could use more of.

### By Lance Porter

Heroes are missing in my world. The days of those rare men and women who had a real cause and dedicated their lives to it are becoming harder and harder to find.

Where is my champion, I often say, as the days, weeks, months, and years pass on and away.

I am a human being....or at least once I was. That door has long been closed, where is my champion, I just don't know.



*Kristopher Storey*

### I Am Not the Hero by Leo Cardez

At 35, I was arrested, charged with date rape, convicted, and sentenced to 10 years in prison. At this point you may have already decided to hate me and refuse to hear me past your own righteous indignation. Okay. I respect that. But know this, any hate you feel for me pales in comparison to the utter disgust and bile inducing reaction I get every time I see myself in the mirror. So yeah, I get it. Who cares about the flurry of beat downs I have had to endure since arriving in the big house? It's the least I deserve as I struggle on the bottom rung

of the convict social order, right? Read on, I am not the hero of this story.

In every prison fight story, there is a winner and loser. To speak to any convict about their own fight story (or stories\_ you have to ask yourself, where are the losers? (Ahem) Right here.

I've been beat up so much my bruises have bruises. Once I was clotheslined coming out of the shower and knocked unconscious for 2 minutes, left ass-naked snoring in the hallway. I've been swatted across the face with a plastic food tray at the chow hall; hit over the head with a sock full of batteries; and woke up to my celly trying to choke me out with my own extension cord. Forgive me if it sounds like I am making light of these attacks, but I'm all out of tears.

I wish I could tell you I've done my fair share of fights or at least, gotten some licks in... but this isn't Hollywood. In prison, the bullies win.

Fighting is the wrong word. I don't get in fights so much as assaulted. In here, the convict code is clear, it's open season on those convicted of sex crimes. We're an easy target and fast-track to building street cred.

Most inmates are rock hard, street raised thugs who've been fighting for something their whole lives. All I ever fought was rush hour traffic. I was naive when I came into prison. I believed the movies were a true reflection of what I could expect behind these concrete walls. I was wrong.

Being a sex offender in prison is like being on an island on an island. It is lonely. It is hard. And yet we know we can't complain. That's the worst part. To know this is what you deserve, that even God cannot understand. I thought maybe if I had kept to myself, kept my head down, that I could avoid trouble, but trouble finds you in the concrete jungle. Stalks you. Hunts you. You are never safe. I thought if I fight back honorably and refuse to rat that I would gain some credibility for having heart, but nobody cares. There is no pity afforded to those that have broken the cardinal rule of prison. So, I fight. I lose. I lick my wounds and heal and then do it all over again. It's been like this for 6 years and in many ways I have been lucky. No one has tried to shank me, content to pummel me into a pile of jello and leave me to the darkness of my own thoughts. I have four years left to go. Sometimes I wonder if I'll survive four more years of this. Sometimes I consider the easy way out. The coward's solution, I know, but even a rock will turn to dust with enough pressure.

### Feet:

#### By Eric Stalford

Step after step, up and down the loose sand of the dune, smelling of the sea. The mist stinging like millions of little

needles as I traverse up and down the seemingly endless sand dunes on the Oregon Coast. My pace not fast nor trudging. A good heart working lung burning pace, sweat pouring out of every pore. Seagulls called each other, bragging that they found a bite. I cross the last rise, I see the beach, the sand hard under my feet. I turn around as I'm at my halfway point. Going back the way I came following my fresh footprints. I hear over my headphones, my watch beeping my 50 minutes are up. I slowly force myself out of my morning daydream. The smell of recycled air, the concrete walls, the metal tables bolted to the floor. I see my sweat from when I went up the 32 steps, then back down the 32 steps. My daily (well, mostly daily when we're not locked down, we get our 2 hours out) transportation in my mind. Tomorrow when I use my feet, I may go to some Swiss Alp I saw a picture of in a magazine once. Now my feet take me back to my cell.

### **The Dancing Shoes by Catherine LaFleur**

Soundtrack: Let's Dance by David Bowie

For inexplicable reasons, when I was six, my mother gave me a book of Hans Christian Anderson fairy tales. My parents were members of a strict religious cult. The only stories about magic which were approved come from the Bible.

I was fascinated. The cover illustration depicted a scene from The Red Shoes. A young girl loves to dance and admires a pair of magical red dancing shoes. Her parents refuse her again and again before giving into her vain request for the beautiful slippers. Once on, the cursed footwear tightens causing incredible pain and also forces the wearer to dance and dance endlessly. After many days, the exhausted bitterly weeping girl begs to have her feet cut off. It's always a man who does the gruesome deed. Hmmm....so many destructive messages there. What was my mother thinking? That story struck me.

Ever since then, I've had a phobia about my feet. They have gracefully curved arches with beautiful toes and pearlescent toenails. I have white skin, but shoeless and sockless, my feet glow like marble sculpted by Camille Claudell. My feet don't like to be touched. They are extremely sensitive....and ticklish. It's almost painful. I can't rub my own feet with a towel, and I can hardly bear to slide on socks or stockings.

I stepped on a cactus barefoot when I was a teenager. There's nothing like having thorns driven into the soles of your feet to reinforce your foot phobia. This is yet another reason why I'm not religious or a Christian. Everyone's getting their nails driven in....usually into the feet. I still haven't forgiven the Catholics for the concept of the Bastiano. What is wrong with all of you?

You can imagine my horror when I developed a problem with my feet. Namely bone spurs. Seven on the left and nine on the right. Don't forget the ones in the back of each heel. It's as if I'm being eternally pierced by thorns when I walk. Camp Prisoney Land does not consider this condition worthy of concern. I've gone untreated for years and given only cheap Crocs with no arch support.

Rasta Doc tried to help over the years. He's been generous with ibuprofen scripts. Some days are better than others. Because he listed my condition as chronic, I get to see him every sixty days. Rasta is in love with pamphlets. If pamphlets would take it to the next level of commitment, I'm sure they'd be married. I can't get any of the treatments detailed in the pamphlets, but I enjoy reading about them.

Poor Rasta, all his recommendations get shot down by the Dear Leaders in Tallahassee. My delicate feet continued to deteriorate until Rasta declared me deformed. Due to Department of Corrections neglect, I've officially been reclassified as a harpy. He took a video of my hideous talons and emailed it North. You would think this would be enough. It wasn't.

I'm a close relative of a person with a capital P. I had to get my uncle involved. Magically, I was granted special dancing shoes. They are silver, gray sneakers with a thick sole which gently cant the angle of my foot in such a way that I can walk and stand without feeling like I'm treading on a bed of hot spikes. They look indestructible. With these shoes I could survive an apocalypse.

Wearing these shoes, I'm elevated three inches above my natural height of 5'9. I can look tall officers in the eye now. In effect I'm wearing heels. Now I'm pain free and have my swishy strut back. When I'm walking down the compound, I'm strong and powerful styling my blue uniform dress. Sometimes I'll stop in front of my yard, if I like her. I'll go up en pointe and raise my arms to twirl. "Not everyone is able ma'am," I trill as I jeté away to the Law Library to fight the lions of injustice.

### **Feet by Christopher Negrete**

In four decades on this earth, my feet have trod countless steps, carried me places my boyhood self could have only dreamed about. These feet have taken me to view the Grand Canyon, the Spanish Moss-Caden trees of Savannah, GA; the Mountains of the Rockies (still snow-capped in July); and Boston's Freedom Trail. They have been kissed by the waters of the oceans Pacific, Atlantic, and the Gulf of Mexico. They waded into lakes Michigan and Huron, led me humbly up the stairs to the foot of the Lincoln Memorial in our Capito, and triumphantly up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in our nation's first Capital. Perhaps against my better judgment, I've let my dogs finish two full marathons—one in The Shadow of Brunelleschi's Duomo in Florence, Italy—and several half-marathons. Additionally, I've used them to pedal my bike (literally) thousands of miles around the streets of Chicago. And I certainly cannot begin to calculate the number of beats my feet have coaxed out of kick drums and hi-hats in the thirty-odd years since I first parked myself behind a drum kit and began damaging sticks, drumheads, and my hearing. But a conservative estimate is likely a half-million, baseline—no pun intended.

While I cannot know whether my toes may guide me in the future—familiar ground, untrod territory? (I've yet to



stroll down the aisle, for starters)—there is one place I will eagerly anticipate, and never forget walking. This is my footsteps leading me out of here when the time comes. I'll be ready.

### **Oh, the Places We'll Go by Jerry Varnell**

Do you remember the shoes you were wearing when you were arrested? I do and I bet a lot of y'all do too. Our feet have come a long way since then; for good or for worse. People's ideas of feet have always amused me. Some hate them, love them, or are simply indifferent. But you can tell a lot about yourself by how you treat your feet; how others treat theirs. I myself try to keep my Lamborfeeties well maintained and protected as much as I'm able to. Although, prison does make it a ludicrous challenge.

In my family, the men have a bit of a strange custom: we let the women paint our toenails. Admittedly this began from the insistence of my Pawpaws granddaughters to let them paint his rather horny and ugly toenails. Then my dad and uncle relented and allowed this perversion, and it became a thing. Personally, I've never minded and actually appreciate good looking ones. I do understand however, that there are quite a lot of horrendous feet out there.

Even my mom is utilitarian regarding her own beatific repertoire. We're all cowboys and cowgirls in my family. The girls rarely paint their fingernails because it will only be chipped away from work. But flip flops and pedicures still get implemented. Going honky tonking, we trade our work boots for shiny dress boots: ostrich, gator, snakeskin, designed, or embroidered. We all have boots that are fancy, and the cheapest pair is worth 250 dollars.

A lot of folks don't know that if your boots aren't waterproof and get soaked, they swell so much that you can't put them back on if you take them off. This ignorance has quite literally killed thousands of people, believe it or not. Another good bit of knowledge is that there is no good set of boots you can buy new for less than a hundred dollars. Looks are deceiving and cheap boots don't break in or don't last more than 6 months or so. And that's even with working them with leather conditioner and waterproofing them.

One thing that I miss desperately is the feeling of my toes in sand or grass. I'd give my left nut to be free to put on a pair of square toe cowboy boots and go shit kicking in the sticks. Hell, there was cow shit even on the boots I wore when I was arrested. I've had only two pairs of boots since 2017. I only wore each about a dozen times at Beaumont and here at V-Ville. Mostly I've had to wear orange shower flip flops. Fuck all of that noise!

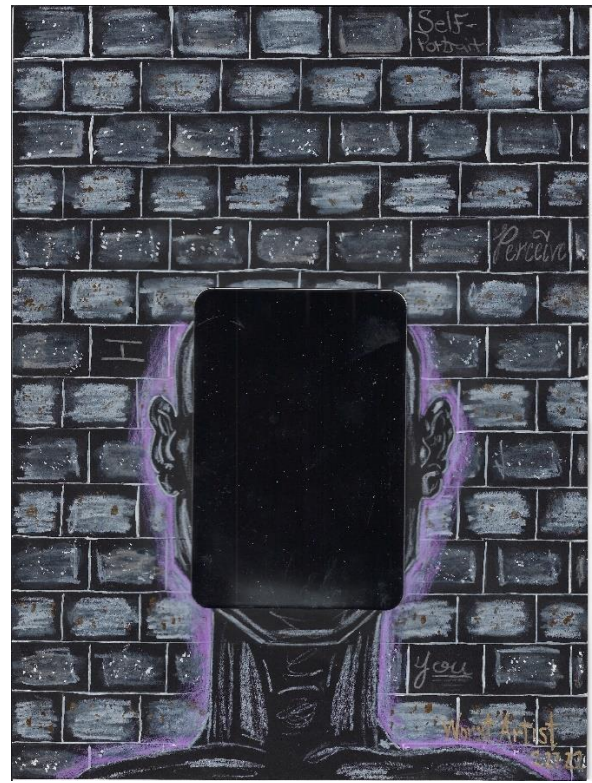
I don't know where I'll end up, all I know is that I hope I have boots on to get me there. Or be free to go barefoot. It ain't nice to be wearing flip flops and get stomped on by a 1,500-pound cow, but by God, I'd sure welcome it right about now. Bring on the sunburn, blisters, and barbed wire cuts cause mamma raised a cowboy and that's all I'll ever be. Whenever I go out, I've got my boots on.

### **Journeys by Vicki Hicks**

Tiny baby feet, big, flat, square feet, high-arched feet, awkward, clumsy, need to grow into feet. All of these feet will take us on different journeys over the course of our lifetime. At one year old, our tiny baby feet begin our life journey. We grow and somehow our feet grow faster than anything else. As little girls, we stand on our daddy's big feet to dance around and dream of the day we will stand on our own feet and dance with our daddy at our weddings. As little boys, you dream of being superheroes with magic feet that will take you to the farthest reaches of the Earth. We grow a little and begin to take journeys on our feet, journeys that sometimes lead us to the wrong place, but with a slight shift we can once again find the right path for us.

My feet have taken me on so many journeys, good and bad, but in the end, I was on the path that was intended for me. I look at journeys as chapters in our lives. Growing up, I was the middle child and had plenty of time on my hands to create these chapters. The chapters are sad until now. I look back and am glad these feet have brought me on this journey I am on right now. I am happy with this chapter. See, the good thing about chapters is you can turn the page and create a new and improved one.

Make every journey count in the chapters of your life.  
Life alone cannot give you joy, unless you really will it.  
Life only gives you time and space, it is up to you to fill it.



*Kenneth Zamarron*

***Men can starve from a lack of self-realization  
as much as they can from a lack of bread.***

***Richard Wright***

## **Censorship:**

### **Censorship by Michael Kinsey**

To withhold from me my just do?

The soul torching burden of not being able to express my creator's given nature.

Bound by unspoken words that were "never" uttered to make a difference. The comforting thought of a great woman who exists somewhere out there in the world who has a part of me without my permission to share my heart.

A gut-wrenching feeling of being alone in silent dark! One could only phantom the deep blue sea for the outcasted "great white" shark.

Simply abstract objects in the universe that tears us apart.

"Shut up & dribble." It's no secret that "we" feel like you animals belong back in the jungle or if I'm being politically correct in a national park.

Thick crimson streams that floods "Lady Justice" well-seasoned face whorl the privilege of skin once again prevails, and freedom only lies in the condemned spirit. No justice, no peace. Quick to spill my blood but fail to hear me.

"Fear" is the "truth" is why you censor me. Crimes against humanity is just prison myths because they don't make the news.

Dead to the world is what society considers you when 12 finds you guilty and you lose.

**[Irony of ironies I had to change some of the wording in these essays as I was afraid, they would be censored-Gary]**

### **By James Bauhaus**

I was planning my standard critical essay when Miss LaFleur reminded me of my obligation to write kinder and gentler. "You are kind..." and "Oh James!" was the best example of combining amazing humor and a master's impatient disapproval. That's the nicest thing anyone has done for me in ages (Thank you.) Sorry I failed at making a serious attempt at the humanities. This essay might be lame because it's about censorship, but next month, I will do much better with the topic "Partners" and a month to work on it. This is about what happened right after Grandmother Getman gave me antibiotics and too much change:

The day had gotten hotter and hotter as I'd ridden my little Yamaha to various pharmacies all over Dallas-Fort Worth. The breeze would blow the sweat off, but the vinyl seat against my old, prison-made jeans caused them to ride down, making people behind me suspect that I might be a plumber despite my being tall and thin. All day, when my favorite, custom-made, no belt-pants inches down too far as I rode, I'd stand up on the pegs, reach behind, grab a fist full of material and pull mightily while doing a little serpentine dance to break them loose from my hot, sweaty skin (No Texas men wear underwear in the summer).

The last time that I did this was on the busy, four-lane two-way that served as Downtown Euless' Main Drag. My poor abused and too-long used jeans suddenly, catastrophically gave

up via a ten-inch vertical rip. The traffic noise made me miss the sound of the tearing cloth, but there was no mistaking the sudden chill and the extra air. I sat back down quickly and cursed. Simultaneously, the truck behind me honked. In the mirror, I could see a man and his feminine companion chuckling together. They smiled and waved. I waved back. Luckily, they weren't a carload of children or a busload of nuns.

The rest of the way back, I scooted forward on the seat and leaned way back, trying to imitate some of our many macho chopper riders. Hiding the rip this way didn't work at stoplights, but no one else honked or seemed to notice.

Once I got back to my apartment house, I could shut off the engine and quietly coast around the corner into my parking slot, then dash up the stairs to get inside without anyone noticing. This was a good plan. Then, a neighbor lady had her own plan. She spotted me from across the street, gave me a friendly wave and came over much too quickly for me to avoid her. In response to her hail, the best I could do was U-turn into the next parking slot so that I could be facing her when she arrived.

We had never spoken before. Maybe we'd seen each other at the QuikTrip or the supermarket. Back then, having freshly escaped the bordering state, I was paranoid of all strangers and most acquaintances. My fake ID was paper thin. The smallest suspicion by the cops could puncture it. Even a too-curious citizen could send it whizzing away like a loose balloon. I didn't want to know anyone until I got bulletproof. She was determined to meet me. I suck at small talk. I blundered through the amenities while frantically trying to figure out a polite way to get rid of her. I must have partially blacked out from the tension. It seemed that it all went well for the first few minutes. Then it went south abruptly. This part, I remember. She was eating one of those frozen popsicles that they wrap with indestructible plastic. She was selling them and asked if I'd buy one.

Seeing this as a quick 'out', I said "Sure", thinking that I'd make my getaway while she went home to get it. Instead, she pulled out from behind her back, the same way the Road Runner might pull out a mallet to use on Wile E. Coyote. Seeing my plan foiled and seeing a small group of children coming toward us from the Family Side of the complex, I quickly reversed course, with no plausible explanation, saying, "No! I better not! Thanks, though." I had predicted that these children would get around behind me and tell me, "Hey Mister! Did you know that your pants are ripped up in the back? Tee-hee!" All I could do was grin at her, like the Cheshire Cat for a long, long moment. She stared back. Her eyes narrowed. She marched away. I had made another enemy, all in the service of censorship.

### **By Devante Thomas**

Are any of the things I write 'objectionable'?

Do I need to be censored because of the content I provide?

Why do I feel like I'm not good enough to be criticized?

It's like I've already been denied...

*"Ohh No! He's not writing what we like; Print It! But don't reply..."*



I just feel like a guy talking gibberish about nothing, but the sky...

"The sky is blue, light blue, white; sometimes purple, yellow, orange, some green – maybe red and sometimes black... when someone dies..."

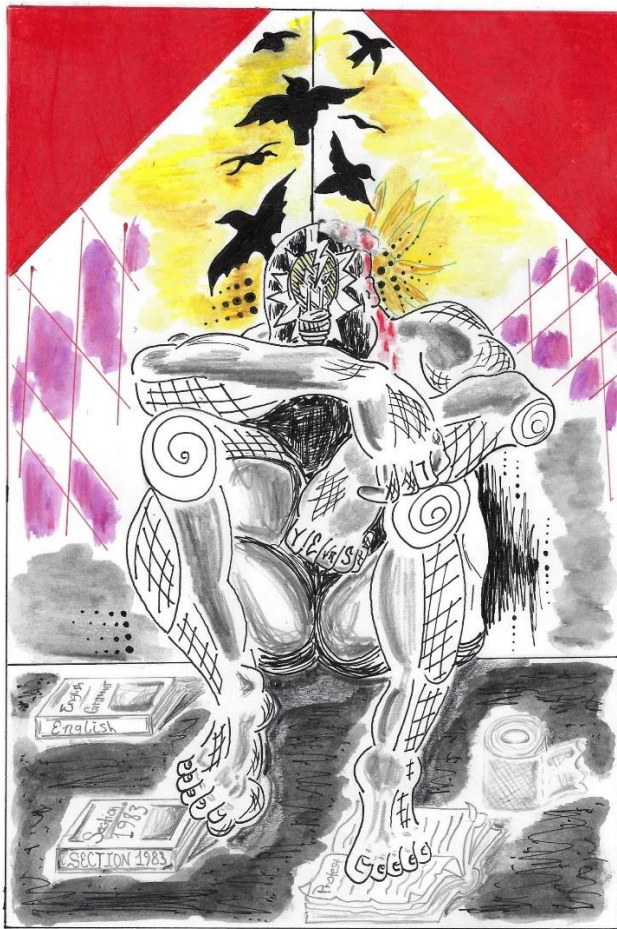
I guess I'm not provoking enough thought behind my entries.  
Maybe I AM being censored...

*"Read this; but don't put no thought behind it; it's not fit for 'public' consumption..."*

Wow!

That makes me feel like a trapped soul that feeds on something that's meant only for animals...

So, I guess only animals can relate...



**Kenneth Zamarron**

### By Christophere Negrete

There are any number of words—bewilderment, indignation, sadness, incredibility—to describe one's reaction to the knowledge that several states banned books from being sent to correctional facilities. Compounding this confidence of ill-favored sentiments is the reality that this is not Germany under the Third Reich, but nearly a century later in the self-proclaimed, "Land of the Free." And while we're at it, I submit

that our nation has lost the right to refer to itself as the "Home of the Brave" when certain of our legislators are fearful lest incarcerated human beings have access to information and knowledge via ink on paper. At a time when covid has impacted nearly every facet of life for those of us in unfriendly confines—visits, housing, rec time, court doing, etc.—and nearly all of those effects have been of detriment, apparently the salve of book banning.

In some places—I'm looking at you, Wisconsin—books are still allowed, provided they are ordered (no free reads in the badger state) from a single "approved" (read: contracted and giving/getting kickbacks) vendor. And of this vendor's state of offering is comprised mainly of Christian "literature". So, if you're serving time in the land that gave us liberation and you're Jewish, Muslim, Islamic, Buddhist, et al., and you aren't already feeling disenfranchised enough, well there's one more middle for good measure. And I'm just spit balling here. But I've got a hunch that Bertrand Russel is likewise not on the menu.

It does not escape me that there exists a certain irony here: I'm writing this to a group predicated on providing literature to inmates, and for an audience that was likely drawn to P.E. in large part because of that endeavor. So, yea, I'm fully cognizant that I'm guilty of preaching to the choir, as it were. But that neither negates nor diminishes the gravity of the sentiment or situation.

As it happens, I am an inmate in a state (Illinois) which has not (as of yet—but there are murmurings) enacted a ban on incoming books to jails and prisons. Thus far, I count myself incredibly lucky in that regard. Having been an avid reader since childhood, the prospect of being denied books is appalling. On average, I consume ten books a month. The only way I manage to satisfy this is from sources—like PE—outside these walls. Since April of 2020, when this facility finally decided that it should consider taking COVID seriously, the library has been shuttered. Reading is how I escape this charnel house each day. With no library access a ban on books would be devastating for myself and scads of others. Ergo, my heart truly goes out to those who are being subjected to draconian measures regarding literature. Even in states where there ostensibly exists an option to procure from a vendor, odds are slim that Shakespeare, Nietzsche, Camus, Orwell, Woolf, Nabokov, Mårquez, Marx, Asimov, Kafka, DuBois, or any number of vital and worthwhile authors are on offer.

The reason put forth for these bans is that drugs are supposedly being sent in this way. Meanwhile, all studies and aggregate data overwhelming demonstrate that the primary source of drugs entering the correctional system is by other methods.

But since when do facts matter in the penal system?

One of our early patriots (Franklin? Jefferson?) suggested that those who would sacrifice freedoms for security deserve neither. To that, in a place and time which daily creeps nearer the ideal of Mussolini than Madison, I say a-f\*cking-men.

## Stupid People, Telling Us What to Think by Nate A. Lindell

Not much pisses me off more than a f-ing idiot trying to tell me what to think, especially when they try to justify it by claiming "It's for your own good." That's like telling me I'm too stupid to recognize bullshit, need Big Brother to protect my fragile mind.

Where was Big Brother when I really needed protection? Where's Big Brother now, when I need protection from... Big Brother?

Just thinking about prisoncrats "protecting my fragile mind" from tainting ideas, as you can surely tell, pisses me off. But, because I want you readers to think critically, even about my ideas, don't let my passion sway you to share my disgust at censorship; instead, consider the merits of my arguments, fairly, rationally.

I have certain ideologies, beliefs, which I'm always willing to re-evaluate based on new information, new facts/evidence, which itself is one of my ideologies, beliefs, an ideology that our country's First Amendment was created to... protect, facilitate, make meaningful. Some of my beliefs might be unjustifiable, even hurtful, which I can only learn about if those with different ideas are allowed to "speak" them, which censorship prevents.

Imagine if I was a governmental official, say the warden of your prison, and I disrespected your right to critical thinking, used my authority to suppress ideas that weren't supportive of my beliefs. Imagine that I used my authority to ban books & magazines that discussed, for example, all of the murders and tortures committed by Catholics in their effort to force their religion on the world – that information is "controversial", to some (e.g. those raised under Catholic ideology), but it's historical fact, backed up by texts in the Vatican's Library (see Deceptions & Myths of the Bible, explaining this); suppressing that information will allow someone to be self-deceived, when, if exposed to that information, a "good" person might change their entire life, come out of deluded darkness and pursue genuine enlightenment.

Now, I concede that I'm using examples that are slyly intended to pry open eyes when it comes to my personal view of the evils of Monotheism, specifically Catholicism (unlike Monotheists, I'm willing to have my ideas tested, questioned, willing to prove them under penalty of having them rejected). But the principle, Free Speech, free thinking, is helpful for any belief, any ideology... that is valid, legitimate.

It's only the chicken shits with dubious ideas that hide behind censorship – they know their lies can't take the heat of critical thinking, so they censor critical ideas.

Us prisoners needn't "imagine" censorship: we experience it all the time; it's only those outside of prison who, when they learn of our experiences with censorship, who are "amazed" that prison officials actually deny things like college textbooks or religious history books.

It was, I think, either a Justice in my state's Supreme Court or for the U.S. Supreme Court who said, "Free Speech nourishes democracy", meaning that if the public doesn't know what's really going on (such as within the government's

prisons), the public can't make meaningful decisions in the voting booth. (For those who don't know, you non-imprisoned readers – those in prison will know – prisoners who dare to try & inform the public of what's going on in prisons experience myriad form of retaliation & deterrence; I've been moved into shit-smeared cells, strip searched, denied recreation, had property destroyed, threatened, because I wrote internet articles about what was really going.)

While this essay isn't crisply articulated, my point is that courageous, honorable people, genuinely intelligent people, those who value freedom and democracy, need to respect Free Speech and never condone censorship. Critical thinking, understanding the difference between sophistry and legitimate rhetoric (manipulative persuasion vs. reasonable arguments), will enable the public to spot bullshit & disregard it; censorship, on the other hand, is a necessary tool for those pushing lies and fearful that those lies will be spotted as such.

## By Donald J Warner

On 6/28/2021 the facility at which I am an incarcerated resident instituted a policy that, "all incoming mail will be copied, and the originals destroyed due to the belief that the mail is being used to introduce contraband into the facility."

Since the inception of this policy the mailroom employees have made numerous errors in carrying out this policy, letters are cut off, pages are forgotten, copies are too light, too dark, blurry. All photographs that are sent in are now photocopied into black and white. These, I argue, amount to censorship regardless of the intention.

It is impossible to correct any errors due to the policy of destroying the originals. For the most part the omitted information cannot be regained. I mean who remembers the last line, of page three, of a letter that they wrote weeks before. With the destruction of handwritten letters comes the loss of connection, warmth, love that can be felt through the paper and ink.

In regard to photographs, the effects of the censorship of color are almost indescribable. What is one to make of a gray ocean, or the mutation of grey in a scenic photo trying to show an incarcerated person the beauty of fall foliage. In the already muted world of prison, what's one more thing to lose, right? Wrong, the effects of this policy have the surreal feelings of the aftermath of a nightmare. The voiced grievances of the inmate population and their family and friends fall on deaf ears. I can make up a line of lost prose but in an already bleak, institutionalized climate, which makes up our realized world, the xerox copied pages from the bright and colorful world from which we are exiled is a tremendous casualty.

*At such moments, you realize that you and the other are, in fact, one. It's a big realization. Survival is the second law of life. The first is that we are all one.*

-- Joseph Campbell

## Picture Themes:



### Through the Blur We Find Faith by Aaryana Malcolm

As life passes by so fast. Things can look like a blur. Through the blurriness our ride through life is strong with faith. Through the rocky bumps, together we hold each up. Through the fast times. The slow times. Our faith keeps us strong even through this pandemic.

### Sinister Seduction by John Michael Loomis

Convincingly she sang to me of love and joy and hope, but it was just a masquerade to hide the hangman's rope. The snare was set, the fuse was lit, the bait was quite a beauty to readily I went, quite content, to the one it seemed to know me. She lured me in with thoughts of skin naked 'neath my fingertips and pleasures never known before spilling from her luscious lips. Beware the siren of the seas, the beauty on the jagged edge. You think she's leading you to paradise, and thus you fail to see the ledge. "Jump!" she says, seductively, "I'll teach you how to fly!" And as you plummet to the ground, too late you see the lie. So cautiously I tell thee my tale of woe and misery. My broken bones and shattered home. The only sign that's left of me. And in the shadows now I hide. Chastised and broken-hearted. Hoping she never learns that I survived. Else she'll finish what she started...

### Reality or Facade? by Gardner LaMarche

The motorcycle is an electrifying vehicle. So many things were considered in my mind when I thought about this theme. And the difficult thing for me in writing these projects is finding the right theme. I concluded that there is no right or wrong answer. And we are all on this ride together. I'd like to thank everyone who wrote in because it is an honor to express literature with you fellows. Your writings are important. They create substance. And I applaud you for staying the course. A motorcycle can pop the front tire off of the street and ride on one wheel for a duration of time. This move is a risk. I do not

want to encourage dangerous behaviors because life is a glamorous experience, and it takes respect for others in order for it to proceed properly. Without respect for each other, the world will incur hardship. But I feel that having a vigor for life is not inappropriate. A lot of people blame literature for the faults in society and this is fraudulent. All literature has a substantial base. And it is for the reader to decide what to do with that substance. If I glamorize the wheelie maneuver, then I am simply portraying what is electric. And if someone considers me evil and blames me for crimes committed, what does that prove? Because life is a risk. It has to be, because death is our reality. We are not governors of our lives. No matter how much sovereignty that we imply in our lives, the basic element of freedom will not exhumate itself from our souls. The preservation of life requires safety. We all hope to be exhilarated at some point. Remember, Niagara Falls can put a rainbow on your face. And the wind off of that snow-made river will exhilarate you. It won't leave an impression on your mind like a wheely will. One can argue that all we need is to be kissed by a rainbow. Yet I truly believe that we are riding a wheelie. If you've ever pulled down a female's drawers you've felt the rush of the engine. And that is the wheelie of life. I know that my tire will never reach the ground until I am erased from the terrains of this world. The mountains and the seas were made for me. And artists like yourselves make me courageous enough to embrace the immaculate strength of life. I am on a motorcycle. I am with the artists from Prisoner Express. Yes, I have titillated your desires. I have evoked your lusts. With stories of dares and intrigue. But only so that you can feel the breath of God in the wind as we journey. I do not want you to sin. Every movie. Every song. Every novel. Is just substance for your mind. Why express yourself with electricity when a fool will seek opportunity to feed his demonic heart? Why stare evil in the face? I'll tell you. Because we are the superheroes. The wheel on the street is pushing us. And the wheel in the air is spinning. One gets high from the love of God. Someone else from pleasure itself. Somewhere a person doesn't care. And his wheelie is pedaling him into sin. If I made you a story about him, it would be a substance. How many people will choose to be like the lunatic? If I were a virgin or a person that never had the love of a storm inside of his soul, then I'd be able to wait on the sidelines while the animals claim to the world. I cannot lie. The fervency of life has filled me with fear. And my artistic ability is my antidote. As I search my heart for cures to the Earth's diseases, the motorcycle pushes on into the pit of the night.

### The Journey by Matthew Wiseman

The journey never really ends does it. Yes, there may be an ultimate destination like freedom. But the road still goes on. Sure, there are quick exit routes like death in the form of suicide and drugs, but both pose their own problems.

Death in the form of suicide will end the journey. But it has a harsh effect on loved ones still here. It leaves those wondering at the possibilities that could have laid ahead. But with drugs, it's a temporary escape from the journey. It allows



you to escape life and not experience things but instead to numb yourself and not deal with life.

I look in the rearview mirror of my scooter and I can see where I almost succumbed to the temptation of suicide sitting in a roach infested cell 20 hours a day. And before, during and slightly after that fog I can see the parts where I ran and hid in drugs so I wouldn't have to feel the pain and disappointment of life and 5,840 days confinement at the age of 21 after already serving 2,735 days from age 12 to 21.

All of this is in the rearview mirror. In front of these handlebars, they claim are endless possibilities. But in an institutionalized mind all I see is fog. It's like not being able to see the forest because of the tree in front of you. But that one tree just happens to be the biggest damn redwood a man has ever seen. Although there are no redwoods in Ohio.

Of course, in front of that layer of fog lies a man's hopes and dreams. But as the ride progresses and the fog becomes thicker and denser, I am forced at times to pull over onto the curb and put the kickstand down and ask myself if this is even a realistic goal, realistic expectation, realistic dream? Or should I just turn this scooter around and go back to all the drugs and gang banging of my youth coming up through the prison system.

I can't answer for tomorrow. I can only answer for today. And for today I got my helmet on, my baggage behind me and will enjoy this stretch of journey that I can see.



### **Crossing the Bridge to the City by Bryant Hernandez**

What does it mean to live in a city where it's dark? No one really knows the pain you've endured until they've experienced every aspect of your life. I walked the city without knowing which way to go because darkness blinded my path. No light source to follow, therefore, I was unable to see everything that was in front of me. I took everything for granted.

We are all given choices and so as of today, I will be crossing the bridge to a better city, a better life. You see, the bridge is a metaphor for the path I should've taken when I had the chance. But one thing I don't like is living in the dark. I say this because everything in life is a learning experience no matter where you live or the people we meet. I've learned that sometimes you have to live in the darkness to appreciate the little light that you have.

It took a lot of confidence for me to move, but as I crossed the bridge I was able to see the city lights. It was night but I was finally able to see! Everything was vividly clear and bright. A colorful scenic view with lights that bright up the city as if it was Christmas every night. There's more to the world than we can ever imagine, but we will never know if we don't cross the bridge that will take us to a better direction.

As I sit on top of a hill, I have a glance of the bridge to both cities. Reflecting as I envision the future. It took me a long way to get where I'm at, but you'll learn to find a better place especially when everything you need is right in front of you.

### **by Cesar Hernandez**

I am driving north on Highway 101, just ten minutes past the Golden Gate Bridge, on my way to the Richmond Bridge in San Rafael. I plan to cross the bay and drive on north there to Antioch, where I have an important business meeting. Even though it is midday, I find myself suddenly in gridlock traffic. I think I might miss my appointment in Antioch and begin to feel anxious. I became irritated at the drivers ahead of me jockeying between lanes. Then I became irritated at the drivers I see joining the freeway traffic from entrance ramps without leaving any space for the cars already on the highway to move forward. It is looking less and less likely that I'll be at my appointment on time. I notice that my body has become tense and I am gripping the wheel. Then I look out the driver's side window and see Mount Tamalpais. I look out to my right and see Richardson Bay. I think: I am sitting between two major tourist attractions. People come from all over the world to sit exactly where I am sitting right now in order to have this view.

I sit back and appreciate the view. My hands unclench. My body relaxes. My mind relaxes. Then I have a big revelation: I'll get to Antioch when I get to Antioch. Perhaps today. Perhaps not today. Perhaps I'll be there for the meeting, perhaps not. Whatever will be will be. Me getting aggravated is not changing the situation. It is making it worse.

When traffic does start up again, I don't drive too fast, so I don't become a menace to myself and everyone else on the highway. That's the important part. We need to keep



looking for whatever perspective we can find that will transform the moment.

### **The Possible by Catherine LaFleur**

Here in Camp Prisonery Land, I've taken a lot of classes which teach bridge building through listening and communication skills. And by a lot, I mean four hundred certificates for these various programs. I am in at least one class every week. What is the purpose? Interesting you should ask. I have a serious anger management problem. It is mostly under control. I don't feel I will ever have to shoot anyone again.

Prisonery Land has made me lazy and anger drains too much energy. I won't get any kudos from the Department of Corrections for volunteering for these programs, but there are hidden penalties for not volunteering. Also, practicing meditation, yoga, the Alternatives to Violence model, and Twelve Steps makes me a happier, more secure person.

I don't have all the answers, sometimes there don't seem to be any at all. I have to remain open to possibilities outside myself. Most of the time, I have no idea what should be done or even if anything should be done at all. That is when I have to get on the bridge of communication and ask another person. Part of recovery is asking for help at least once per day... whether I need it or not.

Although I've been working in the law library for a few minutes, there are issues and legal problems which mystify me. Prisonery Land is a very small place. We can only hold 620 at maximum and currently we are under 200. What I am about to admit is very painful for me. Come closer so I can whisper this in your ear. *Sometimes, I have to ask a man to tell me what to do.*

This necessitates my supervisor calling over to the law library supervisor at Neverglades Home for Recalcitrant Men. It's a fairly large place. Recently, I had a client from another state far, far away. This apex predator came to Florida involuntarily due to what could euphemistically be referred to as her social network activities. She has timely appellate issues and research problems. I had an idea what needed to be done but my out of state research requests kept coming back denied. What to do?

Fortunately, Howard and his supervisor came to the rescue. It was somewhat difficult and I'm not sure he really understood what I was asking. The amazing news is that I followed his instructions and my next three requests on behalf of Apex came back with a huge payload. I've been able to help this native of Portlandia. So, thanks Neverglades! I learned something new and even though we all had to dance the tango to get there, you helped me. It wasn't too painful after all.

The best way to live is to be open to the possible. I read *Borderlands* by Anzaldua. It has a description of *Nepatla*. This word means the in-between, a state of suspension between possibilities. I have to remember to be open to communication from unexpected sources. I have to walk out on that bridge. I need to practice listening and be willing to try another person's solution or take into consideration what

worked for them. I think this may be part of the secret to a happy life.

### **By Kentrell Welch**

Gazing out my window, from a heightened position, how sparkly, beautiful our skyline is. Oh how many gorgeous places, exhibits, and artifacts, we can purvey. I don't see or know of any other place with the jeweled appearance, excellent architectural design, with such diverse, extreme historical significance that transcends the world influence by this city, state, and glamorous skyline, especially seen at night. VIVA New York, the Empire State of Mind.

### **N.Y.C. - Not Immune by Rolf Rathmann**

The first time I heard the 'N' word was in a New York City cab. The year was 1986 and I was traveling from J.F.K International Airport to Howard Beach. My first apartment awaited. Not to misconstrue, in reality— I'd certainly known of the word, perhaps from the television series *Roots*, maybe the movies? Perhaps derivatives of that word in literature like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? But to actually hear someone utter it, that was different, a problem just in the South, right? Of course, I was wrong.

I love N.Y.C.— its richness of restaurants, theaters, museums, and attractions. I never tired of hopping a bus in Queens, to the A, E, or F train, and upon emerging from the depths into a bustle of people and concrete, I'd feel a surge of energy rip through my body. Where else can you hear ten different languages in less than an hour? Or buy a falafel on one corner, cotton candy on the next? Haggle over the price of a fake Gucci wallet? Or listen to a guitarist strum her strings as you hurry to catch a train?

Broadway holds its allure, my first show being *Song and Dance* with Bernadette Peters. My friend Mark lied through his teeth at the cast entrance, upon which we were whisked inside as if we were somebody. We conversed with Ms. Peters, while she graciously pretended to know who we were. The second show I saw was with my mom, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, with Loretta Swit.

A family friend, Nanci— also a flight attendant— would meet me in Manhattan on her layovers, as we explored the museum scene— The Frick Gallery, our favorite find.

Traveling from LaGuardia to Los Angeles to visit family and friends, a woman next to me interrupted my reading. I knew I should've changed out of my uniform, but— not wanting to be rude, especially seeing that the uniform represented my company— I put on a smile to answer a question: "Why is the tarmac so bumpy?" Ellen was her name, eccentric as the day was long, but we became instant friends. She was a life-long New Yorker.

I turned twenty-one in that city. The first bar I chose was Uncle Charles, a now defunct gay bar. I walked up one block, and back down casing the joint, making sure it was a place for me. I mustered the courage to enter. Yes, entering my first gay bar was scary, but in I went. I ordered a *Rolling Rock* beer from this hot, swarthy bartender— half Greek, half

Italian. I flirted; he gave me free drinks. I wonder if he's still alive. AIDS was just beginning to ravage that magnificent city.

Dating in N.Y.C. holds many memories. A fifty-year-old colleague, a gate agent, took me to a Pakistani restaurant, Nirvana, overlooking Central Park. Years later, he too would succumb to that plague. I dated this one man who wrote for the theater. The world lost him as well. The Big Apple became a beacon of sadness as it absorbed the loss of so much untapped talent. I suspect the similarities between then and the height of COVID are stark.

A little over a decade later, I'd visit New York, buy a bouquet of yellow roses and place them under a photo of one of the flight attendants lost in 9/11. I didn't know her, but what else could I do?

It is a city like none other, where one can lose themselves, or be found. I suppose I did both. I became an adult in that city.

As I pivot back to my first paragraph— THAT word. I had always assumed the greatest of cities would be insulated from the vestiges of hate. Time and again I would hear either coded words, or just blatant racism. Taxi drivers, assuming by the whiteness of my skin, that I was like them, would be particularly honest with their words.

But I will say this about New York, and New Yorkers. When you meet someone, you know where they stand. They're honest— perhaps too much so, and you'll have a friend for life.

In all its imperfectness, it's still one of my favorite cities.



### **The Model Wife by Tim Strickland**

I did it all for him. The dieting, the face parties, the sex clubs, the makeup, the jewelry, the designer groups, I became what he wanted me to be, the model wife.

Some say that love is blind, others say that it is love at first sight, I am not really sure which it is, but I do know that I

loved him. I loved the way he looked at me, the way he held me in his embrace, the way he made me feel about myself, that I was special. He was the first person that had really ever treated me with respect, and I believed he loved me too.

I was barely 18 when we met, him being 30. I was just out of high school and worked as a waitress at a local diner. He came in, ordered his meal and several refills of coffee. We struck up a conversation, mainly him doing the talking and asking me the questions. No one had ever showed me so much attention like they were genuinely interested in what I had to say. Mama sure didn't, and I have only a few memories of my grandparents, never my father. Mama did her best to put food on the table and see that I went to school, but other than that, Mama's main concern was herself.

But the stranger was different, like he could see right through me, how sad, lonely and broken hearted I was. He actually had the gift of bringing a smile to my face.

So that night after my shift, he was still at the diner, waiting for me. He asked me where I was headed, I told him home. He grabbed me by the hand and looked me in the eyes, and told me, almost as a command, to come with him. I could not help but say yes.

After spending a few nights with him, I knew I was hacked, and I knew I wanted nothing less than to be in this man's life forever. It didn't take him long to ask me to marry him and to leave my small hometown and go with him to the big city. I felt I had no other choice but to say yes. Mama sure didn't object. So, before I knew it, I was married and moved miles away.

I was spellbound so everything he asked me to do, I obeyed as the model wife. I spoke the way he asked me to, I dressed, ate, performed acts, spoke when spoken to. It didn't take long for me to know my place because I was so in love. I really didn't complain.

But there came the time when he no longer looked at me like he did when we first met. I was staying more at home by myself than going to parties with him. I was his model wife; he does what I say to-wife. Obey the rules-wife. Make me happy wife. All that would change the night I discovered I wasn't his only model wife. I was one of many. That night I realized how much I loved him, and I would be his only wife.

Yes, I confess I would kill anyone who stood in the way of me and my not so model husband. Looks are deceiving, and what one does for love may never truly be understood. In the end, all these murders, I did for him.

### **Mask Behind the Beauty by Jacob Keiter**

While some hide their beauty behind the mask, others keep the mask disguised behind the beauty. The fashion, glitter, and fame are nothing more than an artificial coverup to somebody's hurt. Somebody in pain. Somebody that's broken inside.

Each and every day, men and women alike, paint their faces like a circus clown to portray themselves as something or somebody that they're not. We want to convince

the world that everything is alright. We want to shed light that everything is ok. We want everybody to believe that we're ok.

Daily, we navigate through life with an acceptable existence in fear of feeling like an outsider or a different one. We react and take action in a socially acceptable manner, in fear if we don't, we may possibly be cut out or ostracized. No matter how uncontrollable and unnatural we feel in acting this way, we do it day after day, week after week.

Once we finally get home, we wipe off the face that society recognizes us as and reveal the mask we truly are.

The mask we are happens to be the inner demons we refuse to expose to the world. People all around us are suffering from addiction, depression, and anger among a great deal of other things. We keep this hidden at our core tucked behind a mask in fear of the way people may react to our mask.

Everybody possesses a mask.

No matter how many layers of beauty are stacked across your face, underneath it all is a true you that may not be so terrible for the world to see.

So, what do you say, do you wanna reveal the mask behind the beauty?

### By Jack Jameson

She can feel herself turning. It's a pain that brings pleasure as the venom courses through her veins. Her eyes roll back into her head looking for answers she won't be able to find. Part of her feels this is what she's always wanted, what she's been looking for. The other half of her fights to hold onto who she is; not that she ever really knew.

She doesn't scream but moans as she transforms into something new. Feelings of anxiety, loneliness, uncertainty, self-consciousness, self-pity, and doubt are beginning to fade. You think she would be happy, but this frightens her more. All those feelings were how she identified with herself and now they're gone.

Replacing those feelings is a thirst, a lust, a hunger that transforms who she is. It's terrifying how strong these feelings grow; how much she craves these new sensations. They're new because of their intensity. She's never felt them before. They only resemble those words. The words are a weak comparison to what she actually feels.

As she slips her father away from who she is, she misses herself but loves what she's becoming. She dances upon the line of sanity as she tries to understand what's happening. She doesn't put up a fight, but she also doesn't go willingly. She's unsure of the pleasures, reminiscent of pain but she wants more; she needs more.

While she dances with doubt, the turn becomes complete. She's defeated but alive with new energy. She traces her fingertips across the familiar face she no longer knows. Her eyes see herself for the first time. A sparkle that seems to glow scares her. Terrified but intrigued she's turned on by her new me as she lets out a pleased scream.

### Magic by Catherine LaFleur

We have witches in Camp Prisonery Land. There are vanilla Wiccans, and a scattered few Santerians, Obeahs, and a voodooine. For the most part, they keep to themselves and are discreet about practicing.

I moved into a room formerly occupied by one of these pagans. This is no problem for me. I'm not a Believer of such fancies. Dagon was just a rock, Asherah a stick, neither Papa Legbo nor Ersulie have my psyche's phone number. However, my roommate, R, was a suspicious twitchy Christian.

The first thing R did was cleanse the room by finger painting crosses on the ceiling, walls, and floor using butter from the kitchen. That wasn't good enough. R still claimed there were evil spirits casting a fog of malignancy. Quite frankly, the only miasma I could detect was the one R was responsible for due to her diet of eggs and beans.

So, the Souled out Salvation Sisters gathered in our room to cast the devil out with spells....I mean prayers. All the screaming and glossolalia made me think they were being ridden by the Loas. Alas, it was a different Spirit. This performance only succeeded in casting me from the room. I'm not quite convinced that wasn't their intention all along. Afterward, R was much calmer. Even her own clouds of glory were less eruptive.

Spring turned into a brutal summer. The chiller broke. With no A/C in the Everglades, Prisonery Land became a pressure cooker. It was so hot we stripped to our underwear and lay on the floor belly down like dogs. R insisted on wiping down the walls of our room with bleach. She kept moving the lockers around. First, she arranged them side by side, then pushed them under the bed. Finally, she moved them back to their original position.

All this movement disturbed the plastic juju bag taped to the bottom of my locker. I was unaware of the presence of the bag. It had interesting contents which were brewing and swelling in the horrendous heat. Under the stress of R's final movement, it burst from under my locker in a splatter of foulness. Ever smelt rotting blood? Now, thanks to Santeria, I have also had this dubious honor.

I leaped off my bunk and out of the room. The effluvia was inescapable. R vaulted onto her own top bunk screaming like a woman possessed. The smell rolled out our door and fell from the second tier into the pit of the day room. The officers came running because of all the shrieking. The foulness caused them to stop like they'd hit a wall. After I stopped gagging, I girded myself to go back inside and see if I could rescue anything.

Someone brought a trash bag and gloves. R had disappeared with the Sisters. Funny how the prayer warriors all want to do spiritual warfare in the heavenlies but when the fight is



corporeal no one is eager to get down and do the dirty work. A brief description of the ectoplasm: blood (how did she collect so much?), rotten bits of meat, and blackish slimy leaves). I mopped the demonic slush with my sheets and blanket. Salvation was not possible for the contents of my locker. I had to abandon it all. I scooped everything into the trash bag. Alas, no one was available to take away the sin except me, the only goat standing. Thus, my midnight trip to the back gate (Gehinnom).

The good news is that R finally felt the room had been exorcized. Weeks went by and the room door needed some maintenance. Marina, our mechanical mage, came to fix it. As she banged the door with a hammer, seven dried pressed frogs fell out of the bottom. I quickly picked them up in a handkerchief. I stared hard at Marina and muttered, "This never happened."

### **Addiction by Vicki Hicks**

Prior to getting arrested I worked at a municipal police department as an administrative assistant police chief and saw plenty of addicts being brought in for many different reasons; either to be questioned, offered a deal to roll on someone else, or getting arrested. Since my arrest on 4/15/16, I have learned so much about addiction and how it rules your life in a way someone who had never done drugs could understand. I spent 495 days in county jail prior to being sentenced to 12 years in the Florida state prison system and had the privilege to meet some wonderful young ladies who had frequented the jail over a few years. I sat down with the frequent fliers to try to understand if there is a way to break the cycle. Some had been to rehab facilities and some had not yet sought out help. What it came down to with each of them was that the draw of the high was stronger than the love of their children

The problem was: so where are they going to go? Sebring, Florida is a very small town where everyone knows everyone so you get out and your dealer is standing mere feet from your loving family ready to give you a hit for free to draw you back in. In the eyes of someone who has never done a single drug, there is no decision to make, you choose your family, not so simple for a drug addict. They think they can choose both and end up right back in jail because they took a plea deal that gave county time with probation attached.

z How about getting them help instead of setting them up for failure and lining the pockets of the lawmakers? How about we explain to their children that the system does not care if their mom or dad is there to raise them. How sad our society had become in this area. I now understand why addicts choose their addiction over their family and I no longer judge them as I did when I was a cop. They are not just another notch in your lousy statistics, they are human with an addiction. HELP THEM!! Make life worth more than an early certain death!!



### **She Dances Through My Mind by John Michael Loomis**

When I opened the envelope and saw that sexy picture of her posing in her ballet outfit, I couldn't help but smile. She knows just how to push my buttons. We used to role play in the bedroom all the time, with various outfits and costumes and toys, etc. "The Sexy Russian Ballerina" was her favorite role, pretending to be a seductive ballerina looking for a green card. Some people think such things are vulgar and disgusting, but I've never been a prude. What takes place between two people who love each other and share passion and commitment should never be seen as anything but beautiful. There is so much hatred and anger and judgment in the world already, what's wrong with some love and joy and passion? It's funny the things we take for granted, too, until we lose them. Like physical contact and intimacy. Fifteen years in, and I constantly crave the simple act of cuddling up with my girl and watching a movie, or holding hands as we watch the sunset. Or making slow passionate love to our private playlist. And to think, I had the world in the sunset. And to think I had the world in the palm of my hand, happiness and family and purpose, and in a flash of anger, ego, and drugs I smashed it all to pieces. Before the overwhelming sense of failure swallows me alive, I close my eyes and picture her there before me alive, I close my eyes and picture her there before me, dancing just for me, my beautiful ballerina.

### **Butterfly Ballerina by Earl W. Cox**

Oh, my goodness! Such a beautiful young lady, dressed in her little butterfly tutu with her ballerina slippers. So full of grace and beauty!! Admire the strength and symmetry as her calves keep her legs firmly positioned. How many years has she practiced, hour after hour, day after day, month after month, year after year, just to build up the strength and agility to hold that pose?

Imagine the dexterity and agility necessary to hold this pose? Notice both her feet are facing inward? Look how

delicately she's perfectly balanced on her toes. Is she resting or poised to take off again? Not an ounce of sweat anywhere on her lovely lithe body.

Examine how relaxed her facial features are. Not a single shred of tension. She's passively waiting for the next boat of music or flash of light, exquisitely poised and utterly focused while totally calm.

As she rests from her flight, she could hold this pose undisturbed and unperturbed for hours on end. Time means nothing to her, as she's perfectly balanced. Look how alert she is, waiting, waiting, waiting...

In addition to being a dancer, looking at her legs it's just as easy to imagine her with the tutu replaced by a leotard, as hour after hour she practices her several gymnastics routines. Imagine this lovely young ballerina on a balance beam or dancing, jumping, and tumbling her way across the floor doing floor exercises.

Whether in a leotard doing gymnastics or in her butterfly tutu doing her ballerina number, this young woman is totally secure in her abilities. Look at the smile on her face. She's totally serene and truly enjoying herself.

She knows how lovely she is and how beautiful she looks in her costume. She's certainly comfortable in her performance and in her abilities. The only thing missing is a little tiara. Or possibly a strand of diamonds around her bun atop her head. Even without either, she sparkles and shines as the accomplished athlete she is.

Just imagine how proud her parents and her grandparents must be, as they sit in the audience, watching her perform. Think of all the rainy days, Mondays, and weekends spent year after year in the gyms and dance studios, while she practiced year after year, hour after hour, Such commitment, love, and determination, not to mention all the sacrifices, just so she could have this moment to shine. Shine she does!!

Instead of doing drugs, running with a gang, or being some boys' babies' mama, she has chased her dream and become a shining star. Imagine how proud she feels. Rightly so! Good for her!!

### **By Tim Strickland**

They say dance is an art form, but to me it is so much more; it is my freedom of expression, a way of escape, an act of worship, my gift to others, but mainly a gift to myself. I dance to remember; I dance to forget. I dance to celebrate and reflect on the here and now.

I love to dance in private, I enjoy dancing for friends, for those I hold dear to my heart. I seem to dance my best when I am on stage whether solo or with a team. Does not matter if I am performing for a small audience at a local church or a nursing home or for crowds of a thousand at a major event, I give it my all and I feel that I am being carried by angels. But the two things that make me the happiest is when I see those in the audience that I know that I love whether it be my husband, my siblings, my friends— look at me knowing that I am dancing for them, a complete stranger with a smile or

their face enjoying the movements before them. The other thing I love is encouraging others to dance. I love working with children and the young at heart. Teaching others to let go of themselves, to feel the spirit within them, to watch them give over to the passion within and make art with their bodies is one of the best feelings I know.

I have worked hard to become a dancer, to find my place on stage, and now I work just as hard to see others face the same experiences I do. I encourage others to dream, to plan, to live their realities.

So, who would have ever guessed that this girl from a poor, low-income broken home would one day be a professional dancer and own her own studio. The dance is all of us.

### **The Stories That Save Us by Leo Cardez**

"Corners," my newest celly, is middle-aged and polite— the sort of man who carries the normal toil of the world. We have a lot in common and often spend hours talking about this or that. He's easy to talk to, quick to grin with a wry sparkle in his eyes when he shares stories that are close to him.

Neither of us are much for idle chit chat or gossip, but occasionally we open up about our fears, hopes, and dreams and it can be quite powerful. I can always tell when he's getting into a story, he leans forward pinning me with the force of his words. Stories of his past life, pre-prison, are tinged with regret; nothing more so than the loss of his daughter. She's not dead, but when he came to prison in many real ways he died to her. Prison is certainly a type of death. Are we buried yet undead or are we dead yet unburied? She was only 8 when he came to prison and he still recalls her bright pink ballerina tutu and shoes she was about to outgrow in another growth spurt. In fact, he told me, there has not been a single minute in a single day since he left that he hasn't thought about her— not a moment has slid by when the world was not still oriented toward her. His words shook me to my soul. The depth of his tragic story of multi-generational addiction and abuse pinched the oxygen from the air. Yet, by all measures, it was clear to me that he had learned to use his grief as a weapon for his faith and inner recalibration.

I see myself in all his stories, it is as if I'm speaking through him, only the names and dates are different. I suppose that is the purpose of good storytelling: be tiny and epic at the same time. The best stories are local, slices of life. They concern the neighborhoods where we grew up, our closest friends, and favorite things. They are close to the bone, the flesh of our lives. And yet, they are universal too because they speak to our shared humanity; the fears and hopes we all share as sons, brothers, fathers, and friends. Stories of prison woes, I've learned, are very similar regardless of age, nationality, or culture; what has happened to one, happens to all.

Corner's story is rooted in suburban privilege, but the story arc plays out similarly around the country's prisons: an unfair criminal justice system, fear, loss, and the desperate attempt to find and hold onto hope and purpose in our cold, austere world.

It is an undeniable truth, when we open our hearts to hear each other's stories we oftentimes find ourselves in them; we realize we are not so different after all and others' experiences can become our own. I'm confident employing shared storytelling as a part of a larger restorative justice effort, connecting victims and offenders would certainly break down barriers, shatter stereotypes, and be a conduit to true healing. But, that's a bigger story for another time. "There is no agony like leaving an untold story inside of you." Zora Neale Hurston wrote in "Dust Tracks on a Road." That quote is the principle that guides my writing. As much as my writing may have a self-help angle or sense to it what I really want to impart is the human pulse of the stories. The essence of their message is that we're all in the same boat just trying to get through this harder-than-we-could-have-ever-imagined thing called life. We need, nay, we must share what we've endured as a means of catharsis and connection. I've often encouraged my fellow inmates to write their story. I believe everyone in prison has a novel inside of them waiting to bloom, if only they'd sit down to write it.

Corner's stories keep unfolding, every one as poignant as the last and as we get to know each other the recitation and exchange of these stories is where common ground begins to emerge. It is how respect and friendship are built.

My greatest fear is that my own daughter may follow in my addiction footsteps and up here or somewhere worse. I've read that young people today have the highest rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide in history. Many experts believe they are symptoms of a generation being raised during the digital revolution. As connected as the internet has the capability to make us, apparently today's youth have never felt more alone and unheard. Stories are unfolding in them and they need to express them. I encourage my daughter to seek help, if and when she feels she needs it; to talk about her feelings. And she does. She's putting cracks in the emotional walls that hold her hostage, so eventually the whole thing will fall. That's what happens with enough time and pressure, even the hardest of rocks will eventually turn to dust. But, the waiting and continuous effort needed to break down the walls is what is heartbreaking. But, that's why we must continue to share all those stories we keep hidden in secret chambers of our hearts— they are what make us, and what may save us all.



### **My Mark by Chad Miller**

I learned your history, language and rules.  
I listened to your lies, stories and attitudes.  
I watched your oppression, thieves and leaders.  
I felt your greed, pride and chains.  
I grew up, decided something you didn't choose.  
I taught myself to read, to speak and unwritten rules.  
I spoke about the truth; reality and you hate me.  
I saw your bars, money and whips.  
I experienced your hate for my differences.  
I tell you now, I am here not going away.  
I will instruct others of reality.  
I hear the next generation rising up.  
I see change on the horizon.  
I feel your fear in your diminishing life.  
I spread the word with my growing voice.  
Your fright, your might, your petty spite,  
My life you take until another knight.

### **The True Dream by David Pollard**

"And if you a Ho/You can walk out dat doe!" MC Ribb spit his line and threw the mic across the stage as his backup dancers struck poses. The crowd in Klub Kaos went wild for their latest rap superstar and the beefed up security held the throng back as MC Ribb and his crew disappeared backstage.

The green room was a haze of dank smoke and filled with his homies and twice as many scantily clad women vying for MC Ribb's attention. Alcohol and drugs littered every surface and everyone was feeling no pain as they partied through the night. Once the club shut down the entourage made its way to MC Ribb's mansion where things didn't settle down until the sun came up.

MC Ribb opened his eyes sometime after four in the afternoon. He was in his custom double king size bed and had to climb over three naked, nubile women still passed out. He went into his marble bathroom, which was larger than most



people's apartments, and got the shower streaming, getting in beneath the hot spray. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back as he let the water wash away every care and concern.

Some barely perceptible sound in the bathroom caught his attention and he poked his head out of the water's spray and opened his eyes. The steam was too thick to see more than a couple feet in front of his face.

"Hello? Who's there?"

The steam swirled as the glass shower door was opened and a figure stepped into his domain. She had caramel colored skin and straight black hair that reached all the way to her bare ass. She was smiling as she stepped a couple feet in front of him. Both nearly the same height and wearing only their birthday suits.

"Who are you?" He asked, not recognizing her from the night before.

"I'm everything you wanted, Eugene," she said simply, looking him in the eyes.

He smiled, then frowned. "Nobody calls me that but my mama, and you certainly ain't her," he said as he scanned her body down and up and back down again.

"I'm what you've done all this for, Eugene."

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Because you don't need to be MC Ribb anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

"Everything you've done, all that you've strived to become was for one purpose."

"Really? And what's that?"

"To be loved."

"I get all the love I want every night."

She shook her head. "You know that's not love. You said you'd give up everything in a heartbeat to know true love, to have that in your life, which you've never truly known."

His eyes grew wide, "how'd you know that? I never told anyone my-"

"I know. And I'm here. Take my hand, accept what you've wanted." Slowly he reached for her extended hand. The steamy mist dissipated, as did his old life, as they stepped from the shower.

She smiled at him and said, "it's okay, everyone knows MC Ribb was only for a limited time."

### **The Beauty of Life by Aaryana Malcolm**

You don't have to have thick skin to fit in.

Life is not a race.

Live for the pleasure's life can bring today.

Look around, life is too short to wear a frown.

It doesn't matter what you look like or how big or small you are.

Pick your head up and you'll go far.

You are beautiful no matter who you are.

### **Voices by Tim Strickland**

They speak to me in my waking moments, they scream in my dreams. They can be quiet, but mostly they are loud. They communicate like a best friend and then as one's worst enemy. They speak of things I know, I sense, that I have done, that I am afraid of or fearful to do, say, act or think.

I get so tired of them, yet have grown comfortable with them at the same time. Although I want them gone, to cease, what would I do or listen to if they were not there?

They have been present as long as I can remember in one fashion or another; sometimes in the forefront, other times just as background noise, but always there. At times they speak the truth but at other moments I know they are full of lies. They speak to me on my good days when I feel I am in control and they know how to show up in full force on my weak days, when I struggle just to survive.

I have heard their thought forms so many times that they almost appear as friendly, but I have a better sense than that and know they can't be trusted. Their advice is not to be heeded but avoided. But, I do admit, there are times I just want to give in and believe them.

While I know their messages are just in my head, my thoughts, it appears that others might be in agreement too. These messages come from familiar speakers such as my mother telling me to "be a good boy, don't do anything that others would think less of you for, know dad loves you but don't disappoint him or me, are you sure you should be doing or saying that?"

Some are from teachers in the past telling me I can do better, to work harder, to be more like the other boys. And all those messages from classmates, peers, and bullies calling me a goddamn faggot.

Then I became a pastor, a leader of the flock. The congregation always had something to tell me, to correct me and to give their opinion.

Then there was marriage and although I loved her so, I was unfaithful and disappointed her and so many others. I knew she was too good for me and I did not deserve her,

Then I became a father, and wondered if I could be what they needed me to be.

Things really went to hell and the voices would scream even louder when I was arrested for a sex crime and sentences to prison. Am I really the horrible monster that the media, the judge, and the prosecutor say I am? Will these voices ever be silent?

Then the opinion of the other inmates didn't help much. Before long, the daily mantra in my head is I am short, fat, bald, old, stupid, and ugly. My past wants to haunt me and

the future scares me. If I continue to listen to these pesky voices I will go out of my mind.

It has been written, "Don't believe every thought you think"

It's time for me to speak back to these voices and tell them to "shut up" and let them know I am creating my own narrative regardless of what I am hearing. I am someone I am worthy.

Maybe in time the voices will be quieted but at least I know no matter how loud they speak, I don't have to listen to them. I know as they speak to me in nightmares, they are just no use. And if I don't have to listen to the voices in my head, I can tell others they don't have to listen to theirs either.

### **Dreams Never Die by George Hesse**

It doesn't matter what other people think if you are living your dream. It really doesn't. With me, being locked up most of my life I enjoyed all the time I had when I was free. Rapping and watching girls dance while you flow is priceless. Pretty epic on my Rez growing up. 3rd world shxx. They had events and dances in towns far from the club scene in cities haha. You show up in your groups, cliques, gang, posse, family etc. Basically the watering hole with open mic. Nobody wanted to get banned plus there was security halfway through the dance. Anybody can go up with beats. Go crazy on an instrumental. I followed in my cousin's footsteps. He was 'ill'. It was a fun escape. I moved to different cities and I'd go to bars or anything open mic. I should have recorded but my drinking came first to anybody or anything. I settled for phone videos. I battle rap and all I can say is you know you win against a random group when the dude you're against swings at you. Haha, where's my frink? Now almost 7 years in prison, 7 years SOBER, hundreds of pages written in flows. I'm studying over 50 beats on my MP3. I'm studying hundreds of songs. All I do is write, flow, workout, read, study, and #1 I'm staying completely sober. I'm more open minded now and trust in God. I noticed I'm not full of the rage, hate and loneliness as I'm thinking I should be feeling. I have a 10-25 year sentence. Back home the homies I flowed with are dying or dead from drinking and car wrecks. Even my old enemies are dying or cirrhosis. My rap generation changed. I'm a proud Native American Christian. I'm even rhyming differently nowadays. Hate and violence need to go. I'm sending money out to loved ones. I got REAL with myself looking in the mirror and asked, "What do you REALLY want to do? Whatever we choose to do, we're going to go HARD. Power in choices. I can feel a supernatural presence so I'm taking that route. Took me over 30 years to figure it out. Walking the walk daily. If I'm as good at writing and flow as I think I am, why not promote hope

instead of violence in my music? It seems like the world is going through it these days. Try to save rather than instigate. I'm rewriting most of my music. I have 3 years left to draft and edit but, I don;t even think I got this, I KNOW I DO.

### **Anger by Leo Lozano**

The music I make everyone loves, because they can relate to the anger in me. I am you; you are me. Them is us, they are you and me. He, her, she, this, that, whatever. Anger is in all of, yeah you too. Let me share my pain, let it help you get over yours. Together we can share this music that connects us all. Music to help us heal, to make a difference. Let me confess the hurt we all share, help me help you. Thank you and peace out!



### **Where am I? by Tim Strickland**

When I get to where I am going, where will it be?

They say it's not the destination but it's the journey that really matters. Lord, know I am on a journey, but I want to arrive on the other side of these prison gates if not physically at least mentally.

But I know myself well...

I'm not going to have one side

I take when I can have two.

I will allow toxic people into my life when I say I won't.

I've said it all before.

I'll eat right

Sleep less/more

Stop complaining

Control my emotions.

But I always wind back up at  
the starting place

Repeating this liturgy again.

Janus, god of the gateway doors.

Both beginnings and endings.

Give me light in my darkness

And direct me on my path.

Mother Hecate, keeper of the crossroads,

Point me in the right direction.

The passageways are many.

Love door open wind,

Some slam shut.  
The question is what lays behind.  
What should I decide.  
Will it be heaven or hell.  
Will I be my past or my future.  
As above, so below.  
Let me find my way.  
May I not repeat my mistakes  
But learn from them.  
When it's all said and done may I find strength.  
Completeness and wholeness.  
Lead me to mystery!

### **Pathway to Destruction "676 North" Turn Left by David Meade**

Destiny, what a word. A derivation of the word, destiny!

Traveling through the chronicles of North Philadelphia, filled with poverty, destruction, and violence. I stumbled upon two entries. Confused about which one to enter, I chose the most alluring pathway, plus it appeared to be the shortcut to get me to my destination faster than a cheetah running after its prey. This exit was dark and filled with beautiful women, guns, drugs and party goers. This was very enticing, and the relief was like the reaching of a not-guilty verdict of a mobster leaving a courtroom.

Many of my friends were murdered taking this same entrance that I have chosen, others received life sentences and the death penalty. I myself have been shot four different times, beaten by corrupt police officers, including extortion during house raids, and the end results were me leaving a very stupendous family for a decade. Damn, now I see why this place is called the trap. It would take the writing of an encyclopedia to describe the heartaches and losses that I have endured throughout my incarceration, not to mention poor health.

Honestly, I have no regrets because it's simply our past that will always shape us into the people who we are today, plus winners learn from the past and let go of it. Losers yearn for the past and get stuck in it. This exit was all a facade designed for me and my fellow comrades to fail because surely, if you choose two rabbits, both will escape. With me now, utilizing my mental map, I have not chosen another route, the right lane that will lead me to entrepreneurship, better choices and decisions with a one-day happy wife and happy life.

I've learned while traveling through my journey that self-destruction is an act best performed in the dark, and that we must not let what we cannot do interfere with what we can do. The best way out is always through and if you are going through hell, then keep going, because every situation and problem in our lives carry a gift inside, so no matter the circumstances or predicament, just know that difficult roads lead to beautiful destinations.

### **Knowing Faith is the Way Out by Tamilyn Robertson**

This is almost like prison. For only you can see and speak your destiny. Upon gazing at this it looks like no end is in sight along with no outlet. But through faith and knowing you

are not alone for Allah-God-Jehovah-all names represent one Lord is with you and you can and will conquer this no ending in peace. For where there is a want, and a will, there will be a way. Just know if you believe that there is an opening, also know there will be a way out. Just cause you don't physically see it don't mean it ain't there. You must place in your heart and mind that a way out is coming sooner than later and speak it as if it is so and now it will happen that way. Always know we are all of the Holy Spirit the Creator and we have the power. We must learn to stand steadfast and know we have the ability to create through the spirit that lives within us. But you must first awaken it and know a spirit is within you. Always know nothing is impossible as long as you have the right mind set. And know an end is near. Just stay faithful of knowing without seeing the actual end, and it will come to past.

### **Picking Passage Ways by Troy Thompson**

Life is all about picking the right passageway or direction, do I go left or right? The safe route or risky? Sometimes our choices only affect us temporarily. Sometimes for life. That is what this picture brings to my mind.

I always try to educate myself about each option when making a big choice like what direction to take in life. Any big decision like a career, big expenses, and even relationships. One should not put themselves in a situation they haven't fully thought through or looked into, it does nothing but subject yourself to unnecessary risk. I feel those are 3 good examples of picking a pathway, I know my last relationship totally altered my life and stuck me in prison fighting 14 different charges.

I've been locked up for 3 years now, I'm still waiting for trial and I've gotten half my charges dropped. I am still fighting several domestic charges and attempted murder all based off the same incident. So needless to say relationships are a life path choice, and they have a major influence on our lifestyle, people we are around, choices we make.

### **By Lance Porter**

Split decisions

Two ways to look at things

Choices

### **Choices by James Dean**

Sometimes, our choices aren't so clean. You can approach one and see similar possibilities, similar results. But in reality, you can end up with very different results.

Consider for a moment, the two choices presented by two archways at the end of a hallway. On the surface, they are equally good; both are very nice. Great stone masonry, beautiful marble and awesome patterns. Seemingly, the only choice...is left or right...and an easy choice.



Many mistakes are made because of cursory examination of the decisions we face in our lives. Looks good either way, so hey, it doesn't matter. So, we tell ourselves, when we crash and burn...it looks good!

A closer look at our decisions may reveal details that could influence our decision making. Look again, at the two arches. I see a better choice out of the two presented. A single detail stands out. On the right, the passage is lit up by light, whereas the passage on the left is dark. Often our choices aren't so clear but if we seek out the details, we can make better choices.

The moral? The light you seek out will always illuminate the right path...James on Polunsky.

## **Two Paths by Leo Cardez**

Okay, so, I am going to share a bit about my journey. Bear with me. I will try to keep it brief and painless.

About ten years ago my life began to crumble around me. I was living – spoiler alert: was – the high life. I was in my mid-thirties, fit, healthy, and successful. I had more money than I could spend, a steady stream of Tinder dates, and a close-knit group of friends and family. And yet, night after night, I would empty bottles, black out, and wake up with random women.

I tried AA & SA (like AA, but for sex addicts). They didn't take me. I made an appointment to see a therapist – it came and went. The idea that someone who on the surface had the dream life was somehow falling about on the inside was more than I was willing to accept. I was fine. More than fine. I feared someone telling me otherwise more than I feared the darkness that was growing inside of me.

If I had not gotten arrested, I am pretty sure I would never have sought professional help. But while sitting in county jail awaiting trial in the middle of what would later be explained to me as a “mental episode” I tried to end my life. It was ugly. My poor celly, a young kid from the Southside serving ten days for a drunk and disorderly, found me half naked clutching the toilet in our cell, various bottles of chemicals scattered around me. He didn't know what was wrong and because it is hard to calm my mind when in a frantic state, I could not explain that I had bought cleaning solvents off the inmate black market and drank them. I could not tell him that I had laid down for my final nap holding a picture of my family in my right hand and a picture of my daughter in my left. I started to pray as I took a final glance at my young daughter's face... and then I regretted everything. I jumped off my bunk, dove towards the toilet and jammed my fingers as far down my gullet as I could. I deserved to die, of that I was sure, but she didn't deserve the pain. Life sucked for a couple days as I detoxed. (Later, I would learn that most jails and prisons use non-toxic cleaning supplies. I guess my idea wasn't as original and well-planned as I had believed.) So, I lived. At that point it was clear I was at a crossroads with two different paths ahead of me. I could either get help or finish what I had started.

What seems impossible for me to believe today is that even then, when I had clearly hit rock bottom, I was still hesitant to seek help. I did not want to hear that I had a mental illness. I

feared others would judge me and think me weak (a real concern in the concrete jungle with predators constantly searching for easy prey). But because I had people that loved me and I them, I finally caved. For them, I reasoned, not me. I am already cooked – looking at six to fifteen in some human warehouse – but they don't deserve the additional pain, shame, and stigma that comes along with suicide. There was also a sliver of hope I kept hidden in a secret chamber of my heart that believed I could become well enough to be of value – that was enough to drive me.

So now this nice lady we'll call Dr. Jane was asking me about my family, addictions and suicide ideation history. It was all so cliché I almost didn't return. Then something happened. I started talking. And talking. Then I really opened up. Once I talked for our full hour. Not once did she interrupt me, wince at some of the things I said (which no one would have blamed her if she did – there was some really nasty stuff in the dark corners of my mind) or look away. She kept her steely gaze, nodded her head, and simply urged me to continue. So I did. It is cliché, but there is no better way to explain it: It was as if a heavy weight had been lifted. I felt physically lighter.

A few months later, I boldly ask her, So Doc, what's wrong with me? To my surprise, she told me. She suggested I might have borderline personality disorder (BPD), a touch of OCD, and some sociopathic tendencies. Jeez Doc, don't hold back now. It turns out, I was a hot mess. But I left that meeting relieved. It explained so much: my alcohol and sexual addictions, suicide ideation and attempts, uncontrollable rage, impulsive, reckless behavior; and my black-and-white thinking. This diagnosis would eventually help me let go of the image of who I thought I was. This was by no means an attempt to shift the blame for the horrible things I had done or justify having hurt others. I am responsible for that. I own that. 100%. But now, I knew why. That's the good news.

The bad news: there is no cure for BPD. No stop being a raging d\*ckhead pill. Basically, my brain is hardwired to believe its own craziness is not crazy at all (crazy is my word, much to my therapists' dismay). My mental health problems will always live in my shadows.

Therapy wasn't enough to save my relationship with my daughter or help me avoid prison. Therapy cannot help me travel into the past and save others from myself or into the future to alleviate any suffering. But it did let me be grateful for where I am today – literally and figuratively. To know myself better; all of me, warts, and all. Warts especially. For the better part of my adult life, I had lived like an astronaut floating in space tethered to his ship by a wobbly lifeline. I was living apart, just holding on by a safety line. Now I am back on the ship and heading back to Earth. Most days are good. Some aren't. I am kinder to myself and others on the tough days. And the best part? I know I am not a finished product. My path still has many peaks and valleys ahead, but I know that because I chose the path to get and accept help, I am up for the challenge and excited to see where it leads me.

## Walk This Way by David W. Pollard

"Whoa, Gina, where are you going? We're taking this way," Jamie told her.

"Says who? I want to check this way out," Gina replied, pointing to the passage on the left.

Jamie looked at her like she was crazy. He'd already taken two steps into the passage on the right. "Gina don't start acting like this. We're going this way, now come on." He began walking but didn't hear her footsteps behind him, so he stopped and looked back to see Gina still standing at the fork in the hallway. Her hands were on her hips which was never a good sign.

He walked back to her shaking his head. "I don't want to turn this into a big argument, okay?"

"Good," she said, "Then we'll go this way."

"Gina, there's nothing down there."

"How do you know? Have you been this way before?"

"No, I haven't been that way because I know it's not the way we want to be going."

"That makes no sense at all. Tell me, Jamie, when was the last time you tried something new, did something different?"

"With you it seems like it's something new about every day."

"Real funny."

"We don't always have to be trying something different. What we've been doing has been working, so I see no need to change it up."

Gina crossed her arms and tilted her head. "So you think that just because we haven't had some big blow-out fight, that everything is working fine?"

Jamie scratched his head. "Well...yeah."

"It's not working, Jamie. And if I go down that hallway with you we're not going to make it."

Jamie looked down the hallway. "Sure we will. It's not that far."

Gina glared at him.

"Oh, you mean..." Jamie trailed off. He looked down the hallway he'd chosen and then back at his girl. "What makes you think your way is better?"

"I didn't say it was better," she said. "But it's time we tried something different. If you don't want to go—"

"Did I say I didn't want to go? It's just that," he looked back down his hallway again, "This way has always worked for us."

"Not always."

"Really? Why haven't you said something?"

"I'm saying something now."

"But...we don't even know what's down that way," Jamie said, nodding his head toward the left passage.

"Exactly," Gina said and held out her hand. "Are we going to do this?" When Jamie didn't answer right away, Gina added, "Or am I going alone?"

"You'd leave me here?"

"No, you'd be choosing to stay."

"I don't want to lose you."

"Staying here or going down the same hallway it's guaranteed. Taking this new way, we'll have to find out together."

Jamie put his hand in hers and they began down the left hallway.

**Remember-** Send in a theme writing and you will receive a packet of all the themes on the cue you respond to. It is fun and it's nice to get mail. For Picture themes you can write anything you want truth or fiction. For the word themes we only want truth. Stories of your life or the thoughts you have about life. No fantasy, sci fi or other fiction for word themes. Let any of that come out when responding to the picture themes. Remember keep it to 800 words.

### Current Picture Themes



**Due 10/22**



**Due 11/22**

Current Picture Themes Cont.



Due 12/22



Due 3/23



Due 1/23



Due 4/23



Due 2/23



Due 5/23





**Fall 2022 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. 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

Send separate note list the types of books you like. Read Danika's explanation of the program for best results

☐ **Poetry Project** – Please send me the next Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 26. 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 I may share my entries with PE. Please send me a Journal Starter packet.

☐ **Meditation Project** – Yes, send me Tara's packet and the Pema Chodron book on breaking free of destructive habits.

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

☐ **Advanced Spanish** – Sí, por favor inscribeme en el curso avanzado de español.

☐ **PE Book Club** – *The Sentences That Create Us* – I want to learn how to be a better writer. Please send me this book so I can get some new ideas about written communication.

☐ **Rattle Magazine** – Send me a copy of Rattle Prisoner Express tribute edition plus Tim's insights about what a poetry editor looks for when choosing submissions.

☐ **Endocrine Glands and Mental Health** – Come learn ways in which biology and mental health are connected. The hormones created and released by the glands in your body's endocrine system control nearly all the processes in your body.

☐ **Philosophy Packet** – Yes, please send me Ethan's new Battleground Philosophy packet that explores the different perspectives and disagreements of renowned philosophers on basic principles of existence.

☐ **ARTknows** – Please send me Treacy's latest packet focused on food in art, as art, and the artist's way.

#### 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. Please check boxes if you wish us to display your work in public

☐ 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.

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#### **ADDRESS -Newsletters/ books and educational packets**

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#### **Address for Personal mail [if different than above]**

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## Final Notes – Up Date from the Mail Room

Mailing materials into prisons seems to get harder every year. More regulations and private companies seem to be involved. Many of you now have multiple addresses to which your mail is sent, personal mail vs distance learning mail or subscriptions or books. If I was just dealing with an individual, I could figure it out, but when our mail goes to 50 different states and each state starts coming up with their own rules for how mail must be sent it gets me close to the pulling my hair and talking to myself. I'm sure some of you can relate

I need to get clear state by state what the rules are, and I know even once I know this that the rules will change again. The survey is an attempt to get clarity so your mail can get through.. Some mail systems are being privatized through companies like Textbehind and Securus and Smart Mail to name a few. I know there are a number of email tablet companies as well like Jpay and that some states are giving tablets out. Tell me about this if you can. How does it work for you? These tablets are being supplied often by for profit companies, so I am trying to figure out if using their services will be too expensive and prohibit PE from sending materials electronically or are they the way of the future. I love the idea of all of you are having access to information through tablets, and I hope it isn't too expensive for us to use.

As I write this I am already in the trenches trying to figure out how to get my lessons in to PE members in Florida and Missouri state facilities.

I know that our last two newsletters Summer 21 and Winter 22 were censored in FL. I am not sure why as it did not happen in any other state. I fear if I speculate why it happened in this next newsletter, then this edition will be censored too. I am sorry to all the FL brothers and sisters who may think we have forgotten them or stopped operating.

Missouri also has a system I am trying to figure out. As with FL our mail seems to fit in a gray area. It is not personal mail so it can't get sent to the address used for personal mail, the bound packets will not be scanned, or our packets send loose leaf are too many pages. The concern I most shake my head over is when I send a distance learning packet to say 100 PE members in FL. Do, I really have to print 100 copies and mail 100 copies to someone and have each copy scanned and sent to your prison to be reprinted. If I can send an electronic copy with 100 addresses, it would make so much more sense. I know many of you are immersed in this world of frustration and I don't want to burden you with this. I do see you all as being on the PE team and as teammates I want you to understand the situation, we are all in right now. I am sure it will be eventually figured out. It seemed like orgs like PE fall between the cracks created by these new mailing systems. The frustration is that when I try to call to find out how to fix these problems, I get very few solutions. Again, it is early in the process and perhaps once it is figured out the tablet system

will streamline lots of these issues but until then prepare for a bumpy ride.

**I welcome feedback from our NC and WI state prisoners as well. All of your mail is sent by us electronically to Textbehind and they send it to be printed at your local facility. Has that been working out for you?**

Often there is no notification of these new mail system until I find piles of packets returned as undeliverable. Many of you write to update us on the changing conditions and that is helpful.



Steve Fegan

I so appreciate the opportunity to share PE with all of you. There is so much potential for suffering in this life and my guess is prison brings to the surface much of the deep suffering underlying modern life. We are all in this together, and any change for the better will have to come through a collective effort by humanity to create sustainable connection with one another as our source of pleasure rather than the the current pattern of overconsumption and unequal distribution of the earth's resources. It is my hope that PE continues to be small contribution to making things better for us all. **Please keep sending in your theme essays, poetry and journals. Through them we come to know you!**

We are gearing up for the fall. The students have come back to campus, and I believe we will have many of them volunteering at PE. If a student writes to you and you wish to reply, be sure to write their personal number they include to you on the envelope so I can get the letter to them in a timely manner.  
Best Always-Gary

***Keep your face always toward the sunshine - and shadows will fall behind you.- Walt Whitman***



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# Direct From Publisher

# Prisoner Express News

# Summer 2022

**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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**A section of the collage outside the library**